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To cite this article: Wayne Bradshaw (10 Jul 2024): Misapprehensions of a Caustic Eye: A. D. Hope and the Failure of *Angry Penguins* as a Modernist Literary Movement, Journal of Australian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14443058.2024.2369499](https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2024.2369499)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2024.2369499>



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Published online: 10 Jul 2024.



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# Misapprehensions of a Caustic Eye: A. D. Hope and the Failure of *Angry Penguins* as a Modernist Literary Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders A. D. Hope's cutting appraisal of the group of young poets and artists from the University of Adelaide who have come to be known colloquially as "the Angry Penguins". Setting aside the influence of the Ern Malley affair on the Penguins' perceived importance, the article proposes that Hope has contributed fundamental misrepresentations about the identities of the Penguins cohort and their aspirations for Australian literary identity. Contrary to Hope's opinion, the Angry Penguins—at least in the initial phase of their development—were not purveyors of an impenetrable brand of Australian surrealism, but were, rather, a group of diverse young poets advocating for the internationalisation of Australian cultural identity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 January 2024  
Accepted 14 June 2024

## KEYWORDS

Angry Penguins; A. D. Hope;  
Max Harris; Australian  
modernism; internationalism

Discussions of the history of literary modernism in Australia are regularly forced to contend, at least in part, with the implications of the Ern Malley hoax and the severe blow it dealt to Australian perceptions of modernist literature. There are few events in the nation's literary history that have been subjected to as much scholarly attention as the mean-spirited prank committed in 1943 by James McAuley and Harold Stewart against the then editors of the literary journal *Angry Penguins*,<sup>1</sup> Max Harris and John Reed. While he was not directly responsible for the hoax, A. D. Hope emerged as an early and extreme opponent of Max Harris and the other Angry Penguins. Hope's vitriolic commentary serves as an archetypal example of his capacity for cruelty in the field of literary criticism: "An arrogant and stupid literary magazine was jointly produced by Max Harris and John Reid [*sic*] under the title of *Angry Penguins*. It aimed to be more avant-garde than most progressive theories of the day and among these Surrealism, for some time established in Europe and America, had just hit Darkest Australia. *Angry Penguins* had summarily dismissed all contemporary poetry in this country, especially that practised by McAuley, Stewart, Hope and so on as academic, out-of-date and entirely contemptible."<sup>2</sup> Hope's claims that the Penguins were the mouthpiece of an ill-conceived

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<sup>1</sup>In an effort to distinguish the group of young poets and artists that could be called the Angry Penguins from the journal they produced, I have chosen to italicise the name of the publication but not the group.

<sup>2</sup>A. D. Hope, *Chance Encounters* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1992), 91–92.

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Australian brand of surrealism were rife with misrepresentation. His attacks were driven by a combination of personal animosity for Harris, interstate rivalry and a misapprehension that the Penguins were collectively opposed to a poetic tradition extending back to the metaphysical poets. Hope all but ignored the possibility that the group's cosmopolitan approach to literature might have provided a viable model for Australian modernism had key founding members of the Penguins not been killed in the course of World War II.

The details of the Ern Malley hoax and its effect on Australian literature have already been well covered by critics.<sup>3</sup> For his part, Hope rarely missed an opportunity to provide his own account of the affair, which remained consistent over the years of retelling: "Two young friends of mine, James McAuley and Harold Stewart while in the army during the last war invented a trendy poet called Ern Malley, wrote his entire poetical works in a single idle afternoon at Victorian Barracks in Melbourne, killed the poet off and had his sister write to Max Harris's journal. Malley was hailed as a great genius! The trap was baited by a good deal of theoretical claptrap which together with the alleged poems took in critics abroad as well as in Australia, before the real authors blew the gaff and set the world laughing."<sup>4</sup> If his version of events is to be believed, Hope was an active participant in the conspiracy to deceive the editors of *Angry Penguins*. He suggested that "by 1943 the antics of *Angry Penguins* had become so absurd and its assurance so noisy, that I decided to have at them".<sup>5</sup> Like McAuley and Stewart, Hope claimed to have "planned a mild hoax on my own account under the pseudonym of an absurd advanced poetess invented by Stewart, called Nausea Bagwash".<sup>6</sup> After sending a letter to Stewart and McAuley informing them of his own intent to hoax the Penguins, Hope was informed of the significantly more elaborate hoax being concocted by his friends. From this point, Hope's role in the affair was reduced to contributing to the growing gossip that the Malley poems were fraudulent and giving "nothing away except the fact that I was in the know",<sup>7</sup> but he added a further dash of malice with his brutal review of Harris's novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, in the Autumn 1944 volume of *Meanjin*.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, at stake in the clash between the rival literary circles of Harris in Adelaide and McAuley in Sydney were competing claims to poetic and modernist mastery. Modernist verse had acted as a poetic leaven initially among ambitious Adelaide and Sydney university students, who found an appreciative outlet for their experimental compositions in *Phoenix* (the precursor of *Angry Penguins* at Adelaide) and *Hermes* (the established literary magazine at Sydney). Each group bridled at the claims by unworthy interstate rivals to have special knowledge of modernism and to represent the pinnacle of contemporary verse in Australia. Admittedly, the self-promoting and bombastic Harris had already attracted some criticism before the hoax: best-known, perhaps, was his merciless dunking in the River Torrens at the hands of jeering student peers. His

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993) remains a key text on the hoax and its implications. Also useful are Carl Harrison-Ford, "The Well-Wrought Ern", *Southerly* 54, no. 3 (1994): 84–100; Brian Lloyd, "Ern Malley and His Rivals", *Australian Literary Studies* 20, no. 1 (2001): <https://www.australianliterarystudies.com.au/articles/ern-malley-and-his-rivals>.

<sup>4</sup>A. D. Hope, *Directions in Australian Poetry* (Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1984), 24.

<sup>5</sup>A. D. Hope, *Occasional Lecture for Students' Clubs, etc.: Australia's Finest Literary Hoax: The Ern Malley Affair. Lectures and Notes on Australian Writers: Nan McDonald, Seaforth McKenzie and "Ern Malley"*, c. 1954, file 756, 2, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 2.

<sup>7</sup>Hope, *Chance Encounters*, 93.

<sup>8</sup>A. D. Hope, "Confessions of a Zombi", review of *The Vegetative Eye*, by Max Harris, *Meanjin* 3, no. 1 (1944): 44–48.

impenetrable verse, too, caused consternation, and, rather than revisiting how this fed into the infamous Ern Malley affair, I shall consider the nature and role of Harris's verse in what might be called a broader Penguins aesthetic.

In some respects, the *Angry Penguins* aesthetic has much in common with what might be called the *Phoenix* aesthetic. Cheryl Hoskin observes that “the literary, particularly poetic, upsurge wrought by the *Angry Penguins* journal began in 1935 with *Phoenix*” and the “decision of the editors to change the ‘jolly old school magazine’ format of the Adelaide University Magazine to a completely literary journal”.<sup>9</sup> Under the new masthead the journal published a wide variety of literary work being produced by the university. By 1939, “contributions included the ambitious and modernist writings of D.B. Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer and Max Harris”.<sup>10</sup> All three young men became founding editors of *Angry Penguins* the following year, ensuring a degree of continuity between the modernist tendencies of *Phoenix* and the journal that replaced it.

Hope's own interpretation of the Penguins' genealogy relies heavily on Harris's surrealist excesses and the idea that surrealism “was all the boom in the forties in Australia, at a time when it was becoming decidedly old-fashioned and a little shabby to be a surrealist in Europe”.<sup>11</sup> His assessment is factually incorrect on several counts. First, Hope arbitrarily foreshortens the international reception and artistic response to surrealism to the 1930s or earlier, whereas surrealism, dating from André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, continued to develop and spread over subsequent decades. During and after World War II, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Man Ray and many others continued to demonstrate that surrealism was by no means a spent force in either literature or the visual arts across Europe—not to speak of its growing popularity abroad.<sup>12</sup> Second, reframing the historical reception and importance of surrealism enabled Hope to present the reading public of “Darkest Australia” as largely uninformed and gullible without the supervision and guidance of a well-read academic elite. To similar ends, Hope variously describes the Penguins as old-fashioned, shabby, arrogant and stupid. In reality, members of the Sydney and Adelaide circles were comparably informed and often displayed remarkably similar tastes in a broad range of verse. Third, Hope presented *Angry Penguins* as a fundamentally “surrealist” literary magazine. Taken together, Hope's criticism of the *Angry Penguins* amounts to a gross mischaracterisation of the journal's full scope, as we shall soon see.

An important fact that is lost in Hope's account is that *Angry Penguins* was not founded as a vehicle for the aesthetic tastes of Harris (not to speak of Reed, who only became directly involved with the fourth issue of the journal) but as a collective effort by the students at Adelaide University, led by Harris and a fellow student, Donald Bevis Kerr, to maintain an outlet for their literary work. John Miles observes that “in 1939 Kerr progressed from [Adelaide University's student journal] *On Dit* to become editor of *Phoenix* for what was its last issue (until rebirth in 1946), due to the withdrawal

<sup>9</sup>Cheryl Hoskin, “A Genius about the Place”: *The Phoenix Magazine and Australian Modernism* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2013), 1.

<sup>10</sup>Hoskin, “A Genius about the Place”, 12.

<sup>11</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 1.

<sup>12</sup>Take, for example, Max Ernst's famous surrealist collage novel, *Une semaine de bonté*, which was published in 1934, a year before *Phoenix* was established at Adelaide University. It might also be worth considering the International Surrealist Exhibition, held in London in 1936, the intense popularity of Dylan Thomas in the 1930s, or even the enduring popularity of Salvador Dali beyond the 1960s.

of monies by the majority conservative faction on its funding body, the Student Union”.<sup>13</sup> As Michael Ackland points out, similar hostility to trends in literature was felt in Sydney, where “in the late 1930s Jim [McAuley] and Harold [Stewart] rallied to the defence of *Hermes* in disgust at student narrow-mindedness and the stale intellectual fare dished out at lectures”.<sup>14</sup> The picture of students rallying to defend a university publication is far removed from Hope’s depiction of a “magazine which seemed to be well supplied with funds” and could afford to print “a great deal of lively nonsense”.<sup>15</sup> As Geoffrey Dutton recalled, “a lot of us dobbed in with money, [Charles] Jury and [J. I. M.] Stewart substantially, others what they could” to establish the new journal.<sup>16</sup> *Hermes* and *Angry Penguins* therefore reflected current trends in Australian literature at their respective universities rather than the narrow tastes of any one given poet, and it should come as no surprise that, with Australian interest in modernist trends at its height, both journals demonstrated a proclivity for stylistic experimentation.<sup>17</sup>

*Angry Penguins*’ first issue, published in early 1941, represented the full spectrum of literary production emerging from a generation of young poets in Adelaide and beyond. It even included an uncharacteristically cosmopolitan poem titled “Cross-Section” by the leader of the Jindyworobaks, Rex Ingamells, in which he described “Coffee in dim exotic cafes at / extreme a.m.—post mortem of the show; / or hostess viewing easy chair where sat / the celebrated Mr. So-and-so”.<sup>18</sup> A note introducing the issue confirmed that the magazine’s founding was a direct response to the defunding of *Phoenix* and that *Angry Penguins* “will appear then an act of defiance, and indeed it is, but defiance is a dish to be eaten cold: whether good or bad the magazine itself is infinitely more important than the disturbances which lie behind it”.<sup>19</sup> In his editorial for the second issue of the magazine in August of the same year, Harris reiterated a dedication to publishing a variety of work, observing that “the work is not narrowly limited: it moves from the superbly structured and sensitively rhythmized verse of Mr. Jury with all its formal control to the nervous-dynamics of imagery in Mr. James Gleeson’s poetry”.<sup>20</sup> The title had changed to *Angry Penguins* but because *Phoenix*, too, had been notably progressive, there was no marked change in the journal’s content. The new iteration of Adelaide University’s literary journal was not explicitly tied to any specific artistic movement, but its very being, its resurrection, was itself presented as an act of defiance.

<sup>13</sup>John Miles, *Lost Angry Penguins: D. B. Kerr & P. G. Pfeiffer: A Path to the Wind* (Hindmarsh: Crawford House Publishing, 2000), 26–27.

<sup>14</sup>Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men: The Precarious Lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001), 30.

<sup>15</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 1.

<sup>16</sup>Geoffrey Dutton, *Out in the Open: An Autobiography* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 85.

<sup>17</sup>Contributors to *Hermes* were actively pursuing similar trends in criticism, too. In the 1941 volume, for instance, an essay titled “Symbolism and Two French Poets” proposed that “Rimbaud’s dynamic personality was a complete foil to the rich sensitive nature of Verlaine which in 1871 was just trying to realize itself”. See K. S. Hildebrand, “Symbolism and Two French Poets”, *Hermes* 46, no. 1 (1940): 17. *Hermes* was engaging with precisely the same kind of subject matter—here the impact of homoerotic love on the artistic contribution of Symbolist poets in the late 19th century—in the same years as *Angry Penguins*.

<sup>18</sup>Rex Ingamells, “Cross-Section”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 21. Spanning a period from dusk until dawn, “Cross-Section” frames its depiction of a metropolitan nightscape with images of nature’s indifference. The “glittering vestibules at theatres / and private homes” where “Each little mind is turned into itself / or turned into its neighbour’s little mind” are contrasted with “the harsh crows poise[d] above the lakes and creeks, / with nature’s unconcern in their remarks”. Ingamells, “Cross-Section”, 21.

<sup>19</sup>Max Harris, “Note”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 7.

<sup>20</sup>Max Harris, “The Second Angry Penguins”, *Angry Penguins* 2 (1941): 7.

At this point it is important to observe that there were, in fact, two groupings of artists that can accurately be called the Angry Penguins. The first embodied a short-lived and varied Australian response to modernist trends in literature and included among its contributors Max Harris, Donald Kerr, Geoffrey Dutton, Paul Pfeiffer, Hilda Mary Swan, Alison Hogben, Judith Murray and Max Jenkins. The group quickly established itself as a counterpoint to Adelaide University's other famous literary circle, the Jindyworobaks. Where Ingamells's group pursued a uniquely Australian literary vernacular, the Penguins took up a position that was progressive, wide-ranging and eclectic. As Betty Snowden suggests, "The truth is that the origins of *Angry Penguins* lie equally with a group of dedicated Adelaide University poetry students, male and female, and with Charles Jury the journal's patron."<sup>21</sup> The second phase of *Angry Penguins* was more notable for advancing the sensibilities of John Reed and Sidney Nolan in the visual arts than for any serious contribution to modernist poetry. It began with the transitional fourth volume of the journal in 1943, in which Harris observed that "both in function and set-up [*Angry Penguins*] has ceased to be a literary anthology, and is becoming a literary and art journal proper."<sup>22</sup> The transition represented Harris's own growing interest in modernist art and the growing influence of Reed as patron of the journal. While both phases of *Angry Penguins* were ostensibly led and edited by Harris, there is little similarity between the two periods beyond the continued use of the masthead. When the Malley hoax took place, Harris was the only founding member of the Angry Penguins associated with the selection of material for the journal, and it is deeply unfair to judge the literary merits of the earlier phase of the Penguins by the embarrassing mistakes made by the latter.

The modern conception of the Angry Penguins as a movement led by Harris, associated with artists from the Heide group, funded by the Reeds, and more notable for its contribution to Australian art than to literature obscures the scope, membership, aims and aesthetic production of the initial Penguins cohort. Dutton has suggested that the principle that united the Penguins was not surrealism—although it had been "a particular enthusiasm of Max's"<sup>23</sup>—but internationalism: "For us internationalists, gum trees in poetry or art were a noxious weed. Magpies and kookaburras were shot on sight. It was not that we wanted to substitute oaks or nightingales, though we liked reading about them in English or German poetry, but that we wanted to speak an international language in an idiom untainted by local imagery or conventional form and poetic diction."<sup>24</sup> In brief, the Penguins stood in specific opposition to the conventional forms of Australian poetry. Dutton remarked that "we stayed with Yeats and Eliot and Auden, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Rilke and Lorca, and left Lawson and Paterson to the Jindys."<sup>25</sup> Dutton's comment gives a poor account of the Jindyworobaks—who possessed a radical and perhaps avant-garde "concern for what [Ingamells] called 'environmental values', a phrase that implies both the nationalistic basis of his project and the Aboriginalism of its execution"<sup>26</sup>—but it gives a good sense of the Angry Penguins'

<sup>21</sup>Betty Snowden, *Max Harris: With Reason, Without Rhyme* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 63.

<sup>22</sup>Max Harris, "Transition Number", *Angry Penguins* 4 (1943): 1.

<sup>23</sup>Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 85.

<sup>24</sup>Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 86.

<sup>25</sup>Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 86.

<sup>26</sup>Peter Kirkpatrick, "Jindy Modernist: The Jindyworobaks as Avant Garde", in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, ed. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), 119–20.

perceptions of themselves in relation to Ingamells's group. One might rightly add key metaphysical poets such as Donne and Marvell to Dutton's list of shared influences on the *Angry Penguins*, at least on Kerr and Pfeiffer, as well as a selection of Romantics, including Keats and Blake, on Kerr, Pfeiffer and Harris alike. It should be evident at this stage that the reading habits of the original Penguin contributors were not as "shabby" as Hope has implied, and that they were as eclectic as any group of young scholars who shared little more than institutional affiliation and a love of verse.

Beyond a collective interest in the internationalisation of Australian literature, it is difficult to identify any unanimity of artistic vision across the first iteration of the *Penguins*.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more intellectually diverse selection of young poets than those responsible for editing the first volume of *Angry Penguins*, established under the patronage of Charles Jury, "with D.B. Kerr and M.H. Harris as editors" and "P.G. Pfeiffer and G. Dutton ... as subeditors".<sup>28</sup> In her biography of Harris, Snowden adds that "Misses M. Swan, A. Hogben and J. Murray" were also assigned roles as subeditors for the first volume of the journal, hinting at a degree of gender equity remarkable for a publication based at a conservative university in the Australia of 1940.<sup>29</sup> The variety of poetry produced by this coterie of young artists from Adelaide brings Hope's apprehensions about them into sharp relief.

Even after he was killed in 1942 during World War II, Kerr's input as a founding editor of *Angry Penguins* reverberated through the journal in the years preceding the Malley hoax. Dutton's elegy, "For Donald Kerr", appearing in the journal in the same month as his death, is a touching example of the range of poetry published in the magazine. It moves deftly between conventional and experimental imagery, and—particularly by the standards of today's free verse—is surprisingly committed to rhyme and rhythm:

At this junction of the cloudbase and the earth  
I see you also where a dark bed found you  
Lying for a Christmas of no birth.  
Like a stockwhip memory curls around you

And the air explodes on nothing. Softly as a knife  
Slips into flesh the unknown image of desire  
Where circumstance manoeuvring with the hawk  
Rides a green acre on a pistol's fire.<sup>30</sup>

A eulogy for Kerr in the same volume of *Angry Penguins* reports that "the late Pilot-Officer D.B. Kerr was killed in operations on December 15th, 1942. In his death we record the loss of one of Australia's greatest poets".<sup>31</sup> The unnamed author of the piece, presumably Harris, locates Kerr "in the avant-garde of contemporary poetry, for although his imagery was more polished, less impulsive than that of some of the other 'Angry Penguin' poets (which journal he founded, incidentally), on the other hand it

<sup>27</sup>It is important to note here that a dedication to cosmopolitan modernism did not come entirely at the expense of an investment in national identity. As David Carter observes, "Imperialism carried its own kind of internationalism. The imperial connection did not mean only that local culture was provincial. It could also mean cosmopolitanism, a sense of near simultaneity with literary and intellectual issues in London, Europe and America." David Carter, *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), 17.

<sup>28</sup>Miles, *Lost Angry Penguins*, 27–28.

<sup>29</sup>Snowden, *Max Harris*, 62.

<sup>30</sup>Geoffrey Dutton, "For Donald Kerr", *Angry Penguins* 4 (1943): 41.

<sup>31</sup>"Donald Kerr", *Angry Penguins* 4 (1943): 30.

knew its range”.<sup>32</sup> This statement could equally be applied to most of the founding members of the Penguins, whose poetry was avant-garde insofar as it challenged contemporary standards for Australian poetry—particularly the ballads of Paterson, or even Lawson—but it was far from being as impenetrably obscure as suggested by their opponents, including Hope.

Certainly, by no stretch of the imagination could Kerr’s own verse be labelled surrealist. His poetry is, however, undoubtedly modernist insofar as it is willing to part with standard expectations of metre and rhyme and to incorporate often complicated layers of competing imagery. Take, for example, these lines from “Reverie of an Old Man”, appearing in the first volume of *Angry Penguins*:

I have seen the eastward sun  
Set down the kingfisher, the bird  
Measure like the delicacy of light  
What it touches. And continually  
The corruption of desire, orders given, and submission.<sup>33</sup>

Hope would certainly not have approved of the total absence of metrical consistency or unorthodox use of line breaks in Kerr’s poem, but its contrasting depiction of a man in the final years of his life reliving the sensual experiences of his youth—portrayed through metaphor—is not the kind of “lively nonsense” described by Hope. Kerr’s experimentation was not in blind subservience to some perceived avant-garde aesthetic, and elsewhere in *Angry Penguins* we see other approaches to verse. On the very next page of the journal, in “If You Should Go”, Kerr’s Romantic influences are on full display:

What ripening fair thy beauty  
In me bears must fortify the core,  
And stay a rampart where  
False lights naked signals I ignore;  
But might be shaken from me as a fire  
If all beggars prisoners you restore,  
All willing traitors you have captured there.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the high praise meted out by his colleagues after his death, Kerr’s writing nevertheless represents the juvenilia of a talented young poet killed before he had a chance to hone his craft. He did not survive long enough to fall victim to the scheme concocted by McAuley and Stewart. Yet he was a crucial—and founding—member of the Penguins’ inner circle, and his contributions to Australian poetry have been undermined by the persistent myth that the journal was narrowly the mouthpiece of Australian surrealism.

When compared with the modest experimentation of Dutton and Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer’s poetry can seem quite conservative in its approach to style and subject matter. Miles singles out Pfeiffer’s “admiration for the Romantics Keats and Wordsworth, in addition to the Metaphysicians” as major influences on his writing.<sup>35</sup> Pfeiffer’s love of the metaphysical poets is certainly self-evident—in choice of subject matter if not style—in “Motif

<sup>32</sup>“Donald Kerr”, *Angry Penguins* 4 (1943): 30.

<sup>33</sup>D. B. Kerr, “Reverie of an Old Man”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 41.

<sup>34</sup>D. B. Kerr, “If You Should Go”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 42.

<sup>35</sup>Miles, *Lost Angry Penguins*, 156.



from Marvell”. The poem itself seems to suggest a greater stylistic debt to the efforts of Eliot and Pound:

Darling, in a handbreadth hurl  
Your body’s beauty  
Upon night  
Hung in her velvet out;  
Be inevitable  
As the tree foiled moon  
Hymeneal to a star.<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere, we can see Pfeiffer take various other approaches to his verse. In his essay for the first volume of *Angry Penguins*, the magazine’s patron, Charles Jury, gave his own impression of Pfeiffer’s poetry, suggesting that “he shows a highly developed sense of form; his matter is at his command, his expression is clear and austere, and his way of thought, though it is not exactly simple, is not unduly hard to follow”.<sup>37</sup> “Song”, which also appeared in the first volume of *Angry Penguins*, is a perfect example of the clarity of expression that Jury described. Pfeiffer’s controlled approach to metre and rhyme makes a mockery of the idea that the Penguins were consistently aligned with Harris’s own tastes and views:

Behold my hyacinth star  
where mignonette nor nettle mar  
her morning beauty, bowed to love  
self-born past pitch of need.<sup>38</sup>

The unifying qualities of the Penguins were that they were colleagues at Adelaide University, they were roughly the same age, and they all advanced the cause of cosmopolitan internationalism in literature and a view of national identity grounded in “a sense of contemporaneity with literary and intellectual issues in London, Europe and America”.<sup>39</sup>

Other contributors to *Angry Penguins* came both from within Adelaide University and from without, bringing further diversity to the magazine’s publishing habits. One of those who submitted to the journal from interstate was the C. J. Dennis prize-winning poet from Brisbane, Brian Vrepon. Among those from within Adelaide University, Hilda Mary Swan was the most productive of the women associated with *Angry Penguins*. Like Harris, it is well within reason to identify Swan as a surrealist in both her verse and prose. She frequently incorporated psychological theories into her writing—particularly related to communal and individual experience—in a tendency that she also shared with Harris:

On this framework of unwoken flesh  
is stretched a web of tenuous thoughts  
that the absurd and mountainous train  
has struck to a unity.

Your unity invading spreads  
like curls of water; the pattern  
of the train ravel and tangles.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup>P. Pfeiffer, “Motif from Marvell”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 35.

<sup>37</sup>C. R. Jury, “Two Poets”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 9.

<sup>38</sup>P. Pfeiffer, “Song”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 35.

<sup>39</sup>David Carter, “Critics, Writers, Intellectuals: Australian Literature and Its Criticism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 262.

<sup>40</sup>H. M. Swan, “Poem Sequence”, *Angry Penguins* 2 (1941): 37.

Swan's technique is generally more successful in her prose than her verse, such as in "A Puff for a Penguin", where the psychoanalytical-cum-surrealist implications of her work are at least given more room to develop. Here, women's "singing mingled with the sea's sound" can become transformed into "an impersonal song resounding against the azure membrane of the sky".<sup>41</sup> Together, Harris and Swan were responsible for the most impenetrable—and at times nonsensical—writing to be found in *Angry Penguins* and provided the strongest justification for the line of criticism the magazine received from its opponents.

While there is ample evidence that Harris cultivated an arrogant and opinionated persona—perhaps no less than Hope himself—he also had a remarkable talent for bringing sympathetic artists into his orbit and for promoting his convictions. This is not mentioned in current commentary and was explicitly denied by Hope in his lecture *Australia's Finest Literary Hoax: The Ern Malley Affair*. There Hope described "a young man called Max Harris, not without some literary talent but one of those people to whom to be in fashion is not enough", who "also had the gift of losing friends and antagonising people by the simple process of pouring scorn and contempt on anyone or anything that was not in the intellectual swim, as he saw it".<sup>42</sup> The final lines accurately reflect the response of the Sydney poets to Harris's barbs but not necessarily his actual practice. In fact, creative student peers were drawn by his warmth, knowledge and enthusiasm, leading Dutton to recall that "Max was then genuinely interested in the work of young writers, and he read my poems and made helpful criticisms in his abrupt way. 'This is crap, Dutts', he would say about one offering, and then talk for ten minutes about the next one".<sup>43</sup> Another contemporary compared Harris to Ezra Pound, suggesting that "Pound was a boy from the prairies who went to Europe intending to be the leader of the intellectual fashion in Britain" while Harris "came up from Mt Gambier to be a scholarship boy at Saints".<sup>44</sup> By all accounts, Harris was blunt and at times imperious, but he was not, as Hope has suggested, contemptuous of approaches to poetry that differed from his own.

Compared with the other major contributors to *Angry Penguins*, Max Harris was unambiguously surrealist, vocal in his opposition to literary convention and openly hostile to the mainstream of Australian literature. As Jury observed, "Paul Pfeiffer and Max Harris are both poets; otherwise they are so unlike that a comparison between them has the charm of coincidence, and its odiousness will be forgiven."<sup>45</sup> If Kerr, Dutton and Pfeiffer provided examples of the Penguins' capacity for a restrained and accessible approach to modernism, Harris's contributions captured the farthest extent of their capacity for self-indulgence. His poems represented precisely the kind of free verse singled out for derision by Hope. David Carter and Roger Osborne rightly observe that for Harris "the keys were psychic rather than social—creativity, originality and experimentalism as the conditions for culture".<sup>46</sup> The quintessential example of Harris's particular brand of surrealism is, without doubt, "The Pelvic Rose". Dedicated

<sup>41</sup>H. M. Swan, "A Puff for a Penguin", *Angry Penguins* 2 (1941): 49.

<sup>42</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 1.

<sup>43</sup>Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 84.

<sup>44</sup>Snowden, *Max Harris*, 32.

<sup>45</sup>Jury, "Two Poets", 9.

<sup>46</sup>David Carter and Roger Osborne, "Case Study: Periodicals", in *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005*, ed. Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006): 245.

to Salvador Dali, this is a self-declared “philosophic rather than lyric poem” purporting to describe “the nature of the institution of the church and its ritual” and “a spiritual attitude which owes much to the thought of Miltonic Arianism, to Aldous Huxley’s essay on Pascal, to Sigmund Freud, and to *The Golden Bough*”.<sup>47</sup> Responding to the clear allusions in his choice of title, Harris was perhaps a little too quick to point out that accusations of “sexual prurience” are “too silly to refute”.<sup>48</sup> The entire poem, and its preceding primer, are at once the height of surrealist excess and a calculated attempt to provoke the ire of Harris’s opposition.<sup>49</sup>

“The Pelvic Rose” does at least attempt to accomplish what Harris sets out in his introduction, amounting to a biological and psychoanalytical examination of love, procreation, guilt and sin. Nevertheless, he must have known that accusations of indecency were inevitable, given the explicit nature of his approach to the subject matter:

But now the vision changes and the rose is blown,  
petals spiralling the labia to the light  
and where was but the keyhole and the night  
the cord of the belly strangles the bursting  
breasts of delight with light and unknown  
flame writes the epic horror, fiercely states  
“through the ages the old old man masturbates”.<sup>50</sup>

In truth, the themes Harris engaged with in “The Pelvic Rose” were not altogether unlike those regularly explored in the poetry of Hope. In “Imperial Adam”, he famously meditated on similar connections between Christian myth, biological procreation, guilt and sin. Nevertheless, where Hope depicts the outcome of the primordial act of copulation with “the first murderer lay upon the earth”,<sup>51</sup> Harris locates destructive forces instead within tradition, invoking a call to “destroy the murdering churches and the strangling crucifix! / Let love be a unity, acute scattering over the earth, / dying in the rose, and dying into birth”.<sup>52</sup> There remains a productive dialogue to be uncovered between these two poets, one which has been silenced by mutual animosity and the tragic aftermath of the Malley affair.

The intellectual and philosophical conflicts between the Angry Penguins and the literary circle containing Hope, McAuley and Stewart were dramatically magnified by the personal animus that existed between Harris and the Sydney poets. Harris’s bombastic declarations about the wider Australian literary scene ensured he was a singular target for attack. On the other side of the state divide, there was no shortage of comparable egotists spoiling for a fight, and Ackland suggests that “arrogant self-assurance coupled with withering contempt for the abysmal level of Australian cultural life was de rigueur among McAuley’s university set”.<sup>53</sup> Tensions were further exacerbated by a perception—in

<sup>47</sup>Max Harris, “The Pelvic Rose”, *Angry Penguins* 1 (1941): 22.

<sup>48</sup>Harris, “The Pelvic Rose”, 22.

<sup>49</sup>Harris’s fondness for venturing into realms incoherence and turbidity could also cause the consternation of his friends and colleagues, and Geoffrey Dutton suggested that “Max in those days had a lovely lyrical gift, which he later tended to smother in turgid profundities or tangles of surrealist imagery”. Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 84.

<sup>50</sup>Harris, “The Pelvic Rose”, 25.

<sup>51</sup>A. D. Hope, “Imperial Adam”, in *A. D. Hope: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Brooks (Rushcutters Bay: Halstead Press, 2000): 19.

<sup>52</sup>Harris, “The Pelvic Rose”, 27.

<sup>53</sup>Ackland, *Damaged Men*, 53.

Sydney at least—that the Adelaide poets had garnered a degree of public approval. At the very least, *Angry Penguins* seemed to be faring better than its Sydney-based sibling, *Hermes*. In his editorial for the 1941 volume of *Hermes*, Jock Marshall conceded that he had overseen production of “the best issue that has appeared for years—but it is still bad. In it there is first rate work but it has to be admitted that with 4059 potential contributors, the magazine of the undergraduates of the University of Sydney contains material that could not get into an outside unsubsidised publication”.<sup>54</sup> Harris responded to Marshall’s admission in typically incendiary fashion, suggesting that “*Hermes*, Sydney University’s literary organ, rightfully complains of the standard of University literary work. Indeed, little of *Hermes*’ work is worth publishing in a mediocre school magazine”.<sup>55</sup> He used the attack to launch into a tirade about conservatism of the Australian university system: “The universities themselves are to blame for the feeble standard they produce. The original *Angry Penguins* could receive only one antagonistic review in all the university papers. This is not, as can be seen, a students’ product, but is culled from amongst the most vital literary talent in the Commonwealth. It is merely a welcome exception that the magazine is student-sponsored by the Adelaide University Arts Association.”<sup>56</sup> In the face of such arrogance, an escalation of the interstate rivalry into open warfare was inevitable. An opportunity for literary solidarity was squandered due to Harris’s penchant for grandstanding.

In Sydney, the papers certainly seemed to side with Harris’s interpretation of the Penguins’ importance to the future of Australian poetry. The *Sydney Morning Herald* published reviews of the first two volumes of *Angry Penguins*, and they were remarkably laudatory. In an article titled “Poets of Two States”, the reviewer stopped short of declaring the journal an outright success but conceded that “in this collection there is, one would say, evidence of a renaissance of Australian poetry and a foretoking of some greatness”.<sup>57</sup> The review of the second volume, published around the same time as the emerging tensions between *Angry Penguins* and *Hermes*, must have added insult to injury for the likes of Hope and McAuley. Called “Penguins Vocal”, the article commented that “the echoes of Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce, and the rest ... will perhaps strike the reader most ... The technique of the contributors is, nevertheless accomplished—much above the average of undergraduate production”.<sup>58</sup> From Sydney it must have seemed like Harris and his cohort had already triumphed in the court of public opinion.<sup>59</sup> In the minds of Hope, McAuley and Stewart, the Penguins had become hawks.

Back at home in Adelaide, however, the reviews were not as kind, and the group of young poets based at Adelaide University were the target of substantial mockery. The initial reviews in the Adelaide papers were humiliating, with the *Mail* stating that “only a proportion of ‘Angry Penguins’ contributors are arts students at the University”

<sup>54</sup>Jock Marshall, “University or Diploma Factory?”, *Hermes* 47 (1941): 3.

<sup>55</sup>Harris, “The Second Angry Penguins”, 8.

<sup>56</sup>Harris, “The Second Angry Penguins”, 8.

<sup>57</sup>“Poets of Two States”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 1941, 8.

<sup>58</sup>“Penguins Vocal”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1941, 10.

<sup>59</sup>Hope described his scathing review of Harris’s only novel *The Vegetative Eye* in 1943 as “the bunnies ... daring to bite back at the hawks who had taken over”. Hope, *Chance Encounters*, 92. In hindsight, it is hard to sympathise with Hope’s description of an established 36-year-old critic directing the full extent of his considerable venom at the debut novel of a 20-year-old writer from Mount Gambier.

and “obscurity is the keynote of most of the contributions”.<sup>60</sup> The second volume received a complete drubbing. The *Advertiser* jeered, “Some of the poems by D.B. Kerr and P. Pfeiffer are at least pleasingly intelligible though this can hardly be regarded as a measure of artistic success”.<sup>61</sup> At least one reviewer struck upon the governing principle of the Penguins as a movement, though as if by accident, noting that “Australia, the land they set out to culturise, is, with the exception of a poem by D.B. Kerr (surely this is not Doris Boake Kerr), entirely neglected, the majority of the poets bleating impassioned love songs and odes to spring, not forgetting to mention the fact that there are flowers still called ‘pansies’”.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the triumphant front portrayed by Harris, *Angry Penguins* was beleaguered from all sides: World War II was devastating their numbers; funding had evaporated once more, leading Harris into financial and intellectual partnership with John Reed; and the group was the subject of ongoing ridicule in the local press.

Hope’s acrimony was channelled into his criticism of Harris and the other Penguins. His personal resentment contributed to his insensitivity both to the diversity of writing the group produced and their cosmopolitan approach to an Australian literary identity. Hope’s engagement with the Malley affair provides an important frame for his wider criticisms of literary modernism “from the mumbo-jumbo of *The Waste Land* to the incantatory logorrhoea of the Surrealists”, as well as his own place in what might be considered an Australian modernist canon.<sup>63</sup> In his Ern Malley lecture, Hope proposed that the hoax “was something more than a clever practical joke” and that McAuley and Stewart “chose Max Harris as their victim not because he was stupid but because he was a man of real critical and creative ability”.<sup>64</sup> He argued that the hoax demonstrated it was impossible to distinguish the literary production of surrealists or Apocalypitics from forgeries: “They wanted to show that the sorts of critical assumptions on which not only surrealism, but all the poetry of chance collision of images as they call it, is based, meant in fact the end of poetic discrimination altogether, that it became impossible to detect the difference between genuine poems or rather bona fide poems by Dylan Thomas, or Andre Breton, or George Barker and a clever amalgam of chance scraps of poetic image put together by a trickster or even mechanically assembled.”<sup>65</sup> In the light of the Angry Penguins discussed above, it becomes immediately apparent that the line of argument Hope advanced is nonsense. The Malley hoax said nothing of the poetry of a wider Penguins movement because the movement—at least in terms of a contribution to Australian poetry—was already over. Kerr was dead. Pfeiffer died before the hoax became public and had no role in it. Dutton was absent due to the war.<sup>66</sup> The women involved with *Angry*

<sup>60</sup>“Difficult Collection”, *The Mail* (Adelaide), 29 March 1941, 7.

<sup>61</sup>“Presented as the Art of Here and Now”, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 27 September 1941, 10.

<sup>62</sup>“Angry Penguins No. 2”, *The News* (Adelaide), 20 September 1941: 2. This was certainly not the only instance of homophobic slurs being directed at contributors to *Angry Penguins*, or to poets across the country who failed to produce work comparable to “Australian bards of high degree, such as Cassidy, Quinn, Paterson, Jack Barr, and Randolph Bedford”. “Angry Penguins No. 2”, 2.

<sup>63</sup>A. D. Hope, *The Cave and the Spring: Essays in Poetry* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1965), 15.

<sup>64</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 10.

<sup>65</sup>Hope, *Occasional Lecture*, 10.

<sup>66</sup>Dutton spent much of 1942 in jail after participating in a joy flight which resulted in the destruction of a plane and the death of two pilots. He recalled that “while I watched, the aircraft suddenly flipped and went straight down into the ground, crumpling like yellow foil and bursting into flames, black smoke surging up above the drab green of the tea-

*Penguins* at the outset—Molly Swan, Alison Hogben and Judith Murray—had already moved on. The opinions of literary critics from Adelaide University, such as Jury, Stewart and Brian Elliott, were all but ignored in favour of the observations made by Reed and the artists of the Heide circle including Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker. The Penguins as a literary force was utterly spent by the time that McAuley and Stewart made a public mockery of Harris.

The central flaw of Hope's criticism of the Angry Penguins is that he consistently treated the group's literary production as synonymous with the literary production of Max Harris. In turn, he allowed his personal antagonisms with Harris to cloud his critical judgement about the group's poetry.<sup>67</sup> Hope's habit of treating Harris and the Penguins as one and the same began with his prodigiously excoriating review of Harris's surrealist novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, in 1944 and persisted in every assault on the Penguins to follow. At times, his eagerness to erase the existence of an Angry Penguins group beyond Max Harris reaches comical heights: "*The Vegetative Eye* reminds me of a one-man band. It is about Max Harris, the well-known manager of the Educated Womb, written by Mr Max Harris, published by Mr Max Harris, and advertised with fearless praise by Mr Max Harris in Mr Max Harris's journal *Angry Penguins*. Nearly all the characters in the book turn out to be Mr Max Harris, too. Apart from that the book owes very little to Mr Max Harris."<sup>68</sup> Hope later admitted that his review "was partly in the nature of repayment of an old grudge" and elaborated that "my vanity had been wounded by a report that Mr Harris had dismissed my poetry as 'academic' or 'academic exercises'—I have forgotten the exact phrase—and it was in any case reported to me at second hand".<sup>69</sup> The perceived slight ensured that a fair appraisal of the Penguins' poetry would be subsumed by Hope's desire to cast aspersions such as "the plain fact is that Mr Harris cannot write" and "the frequent passages in capital letters in *The Vegetative Eye* could just as well have been written by an educated cockroach as by anyone".<sup>70</sup> Locked in combat with Harris, Hope was unable to consider the common ground between himself and many members of Adelaide's internationalist movement such as Kerr, Pfeiffer and Dutton.

If Hope had been able to approach the wider oeuvre of the Penguins with an open mind, he may have recognised that they shared many of his attitudes about productive directions for literature in Australia. As Kevin Hart writes, "Critics often call Hope a traditionalist, though they might just as accurately call him an internationalist, since in this case, the two words point in the same general direction."<sup>71</sup> There was, for both Hope and the Penguins, a living tradition of verse which spanned both history and the globe. For all the avant-garde experimentation Hope decries in the Angry Penguins of his imagining, it

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tree to the blue sky". Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 100–01. He went on to "spend sixteen months of 1943 and 1944 at No. 7 Elementary Flying Training School, teaching pupils how to fly Tiger Moths". Dutton, *Out in the Open*, 107.

<sup>67</sup>It is far from the only time that Hope's personal tastes diminished his otherwise considerable capacity for objective judgement. This is, after all, the critic who once suggested that "free verse has not died out. It is, I believe, happily on the decline, and few serious poets now bother with it". Hope, *The Cave and the Spring*, 38.

<sup>68</sup>Hope, "Confessions of a Zombi", 44–48.

<sup>69</sup>A. D. Hope, "Max Harris", in A. D. Hope: *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Brooks (Rushcutters Bay: Halstead Press, 2000): 206.

<sup>70</sup>Hope, "Confessions of a Zombi", 46–47.

<sup>71</sup>Kevin Hart, *A. D. Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57.

is clear from the examples provided above that Kerr, Pfeiffer and Dutton all shared Hope's belief in an Australian literature that should exist in dialogue with a wider geographical and historical tradition.

For his part, Harris also expressed regrets about the part he played in the shaming of the Angry Penguins. In 1963 he reflected on the period in an essay published by McAuley's own magazine, *Quadrant*, where he reiterated that the aim of the group had been to widen the experiences of the Australian public rather than narrowly advancing the cause of surrealism. Harris wrote that it had been "the great age of the gum-leaf poem", when "poetic forms were predominantly of the thumping, banging ballad variety, or the latter-day exploitation of the least desirable Tennysonian poetic dictions".<sup>72</sup> The Penguins had recognised that "it was time, indeed overdue, for an aggressive outburst of internationalism, to break through the Deep South isolationism of our culture, and to familiarize ourselves with Mallarmé, Proust, Faulkner, Lautréamont, Kafka, Braque, Miro, Klee, the writings of Croce, Herbert Read, the 21-year-old prodigy Dylan Thomas, and so on".<sup>73</sup> While Hope, McAuley and Stewart might have had differing opinions about what an internationalist Australian literature might look like, they were all aligned in opposition to a narrow, slavish parochialism which denounced the academic and the experimental poet alike. Nevertheless, Harris admitted that "as with any experimental movement there were excesses, absurdities and intolerable posturings among the *Angry Penguins*; and they were manifested by people like myself and Nolan and Tucker, leaders of the movement. We were open-game for Professor McAuley's notable and complex jest".<sup>74</sup> The absence of the group's other founding poets from Harris's list is telling.

The best summary of Hope's role in the shameful debacle was provided by Dutton in a retrospective written for *Overland* after Harris's death in 1995. Dutton observed that the "deepest wounds to [Harris's] literary sensibility and public image" were "A.D. Hope's review in *Meanjin* of *The Vegetative Eye*, and the Ern Malley hoax".<sup>75</sup> The damage to the Penguins' literary legacy was far greater: "Max's uncontrollable ego helped to lead him into both disasters, although in fact he deserves sympathy in the matter of Hope's vicious attack on a very young writer of great abilities, whose first and only novel was a failure but at least full of ideas and devoid of kangaroos. Hope never showed any remorse, and in fact allowed his diatribe to be reprinted; McAuley, if not Stewart, came to regret that Ern Malley had been not just a literary experiment but a rallying-call for Philistines and reactionaries."<sup>76</sup> With the benefit of time, the victory of reactionaries has become almost total. The writings of the Adelaide Penguins have become a footnote in the grand joke that was the Ern Malley Affair. Ironically, McAuley and Stewart—in writing Ern Malley's oeuvre—have perhaps become Australia's most well-known modernists, although it has come at the expense of poets such as Kerr and Pfeiffer. In Hope's vision of Darkest Australia, it appears that one can rely on the continued success of a cruel joke.

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<sup>72</sup>Max Harris, "Angry Penguins and After: A Contribution to Our Literary History", *Quadrant* 7, no. 1 (1963): 6.

<sup>73</sup>Harris, "Angry Penguins and After", 6.

<sup>74</sup>Harris, "Angry Penguins and After", 7.

<sup>75</sup>Geoffrey Dutton, "The Public and the Private Max", *Overland* 139 (1995): 57.

<sup>76</sup>Dutton, "The Public and the Private Max", 57.

## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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