

**Susan Lever. *A.D. Hope: A Life*.
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The portrait on the cover of *A.D. Hope: A Life* by Susan Lever captures the biographical subject in his late sixties, about to enter the last third of his life. With pen in hand and the accoutrements of authorship nearby, the author seems caught in the very act of composition or revision, gazing at the viewer in a moment of interruption. We might think of Susan Lever's biography of Alec Derwent Hope as an assembly of such moments, each moment arresting the subject and fleshing it out with a biographical narrative that guides the reader through not only the life of the author, but also the literary cultures the author lived through as both a poet and a critic. Lever assembles her version of Hope's life with productive readings of archival materials that are enhanced by perceptive readings of his published works to produce a comprehensive portrait of a twentieth century man of letters, for readers of the twenty-first century. After seeing several planned biographies of Hope fall by the wayside, Lever has taken on the job to position Hope more firmly and clearly in cultural memory and, in the process, make an argument for the value of doing so.

In building the idea of the man who would become the poet and critic we know as A.D. Hope, Lever demonstrates the value of the archive that informs such a construction. This is certainly true of the opening chapters of the biography, and Lever maintains a lucid connection with archival evidence throughout. The opening chapters trace Hope's early education and his struggles with the part that organised religion would play in his life, a struggle that would, ultimately, see him make his own way. Lever locates this in Hope's epistolary memories of his childhood, describing an 'initiation into poetry as an almost mystical moment, part of a delight in the physical world that gave him a sense of vocation as a poet' (23). The seed of Hope's later preoccupations were sown in the experiences of his rural childhood, leading to a sensuality that was 'clearly at odds with Presbyterianism' (23). Drawing on Hope's own memoirs in conjunction with correspondence and evidence of his early poetry, Lever traces the development of Hope's poetics as these were tested first at school and later at the University of Sydney. As a young man at the latter, Hope published his work in university periodicals and the Sydney *Bulletin*, building a reputation as a poet with a satirical bent. Reputation and chance served him with a travelling scholarship to Oxford, and while this postgraduate experience was culturally rich, Hope failed to live up to expectations, returning to Australia with a third-class degree. Despite this disappointing result, Lever demonstrates that Hope's prolonged engagement with the English literary tradition at Oxford, and his growing estrangement from the Christian faith, was another formative trajectory that would guide the poet and critic as he sought to find his place in Australian society and literary culture.

With little chance of an academic position after his return to Australia, Hope found work in a variety of occupations and continued to write the poems that Lever draws on to assist in her portrayal. Considering this period through the lens of the poems included in *Collected Poems* (1966), Lever shows that the poems of the 1930s held little value for the older poet looking back on his works, meaning that Hope's curated idea of his poetic development began in 1940. Nevertheless, it is during this time that Lever shows Hope finding his voice through the sometimes-lengthy composition of early poems and through his experiences with literary instruction as a teacher at the Sydney Teachers College. Like his time at Oxford, Hope continued his literary education and poetic development through participation in literary culture, this time the literary culture of Sydney. Alongside the slowly developing oeuvre of poems, Hope was building his reputation as a contributor to private and

public discussions about an emerging Australian literature, particularly with younger poets such as James McAuley and Harold Stewart who infamously sprung the Ern Malley hoax on Max Harris's *Angry Penguins*.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Hope moved between Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne, taking up a variety of administrative and teaching positions that would lead to his appointment, at the close of the 1940s, as chair of English at the Canberra University College (now ANU). During this time, he also developed a reputation as a critic unafraid to call out what he saw as the limitations of newly published volumes of poetry. For instance, he took aim at Max Harris's collection of poetry *The Vegetative Eye* with sentences like: "The plain fact is that Mr Harris cannot write" and "when he has to depend on himself he has no style at all" (103). Lever's analyses of Hope's criticism clearly depict the acerbic personality that emerged in his published work of the 1940s, a personality balanced by the more friendly and generous voice that was broadcast on the ABC, a medium through which he became more widely known to the general public. Without a book publication to his own name until *The Wandering Islands* (1955), Hope's poetic output was restricted to privately circulating pamphlets and publication in a variety of student and literary magazines. Looking behind the published output, Lever deftly draws on private correspondence from, to, and about Hope, combining this with readings of his published poems and works in progress to explain the hesitations to publish the more sensual poetry that contributed to his literary and personal reputation as "phallic Alec." Hope was fifty-five and had been the chair of English for five years when *The Wandering Islands* was published, signalling a moment of arrival at the end of a thirty-year prelude of poetic and professional development.

From this point, Hope became better known for his poetry, enjoying a reputation that saw his poems taught in schools and anthologised by international publishers. This is the period during which the photograph used as the cover image for this biography was taken. It is a suitable hinge to think about Hope's later life following the high point of his literary reputation in the 1970s. He continued to write criticism in the style he adopted in the 1940s, at odds with the academic style expected of a university professor. He also continued to work on critical and poetical projects after his retirement from the university, during which time his life intersected with the life of his biographer. Throughout her construction of the life of the poet and critic, Lever writes candidly about Hope's strengths and weaknesses, but with a sensitivity that introduces the reader to the humanity of her subject. We see aspirations, challenges and disappointments in Hope's poetic and professional life. Lever creates meaning out of these moments that reveal the literary and institutional cultures that either presented barriers or opened doors for Hope to make a life for himself as a poet and a critic in the shifting field of Australian literature in the twentieth century. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, this biography provides a firm foundation for a re-evaluation of Hope's status in Australian literary culture, but it also provides a touchstone for biographies of other twentieth-century figures that make the most of archival sources and published works in bringing the biographical subject to life in the minds of readers. Susan Lever's *A.D. Hope: A Life* provides the reader with so much more than this brief review can address. It will be an indispensable text for future studies of Australian literature and the literary culture through which A.D. Hope lived.

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