

**Paul Eggert and Chris Vening, editors. *The Letters of Charles Harpur and His Circle*.  
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This volume is an expansive contribution to our understanding of Australia's colonial literary culture through the medium of letters exchanged between a community of writers (and their family members), publishers, and literary intellectuals. The poet Charles Harpur is the centre of this lavishly annotated set of correspondence. The collection can be read, as the editors assert, as a kind of biography of Harpur, "in fragments" (xvii). As such it supplements and updates *Charles Harpur, an Australian*, the biography of Harpur by Great War veteran, pacifist and communist, J. Normington Rawling, published in 1962. But the aim of this edition is more than biographical, its "documentation" illustrates the "various dimensions of an evolving print culture" in colonial New South Wales, including the "role of informal literary coteries and friendships in encouraging the writing of poetry, essays and literary criticism" (xx). To this end the edition presents 200 manuscript letters by Harpur and his correspondents from the trove of documents of more than twice that number that has been uncovered relatively recently.<sup>1</sup> Included are nearly all the surviving letters Harpur wrote to contemporaries and many of their replies. The earliest is from October 1839, from Harpur to James Raymond, the Postmaster-General of New South Wales, and the last from Mary Araluen Baldwin, Harpur's daughter, in August 1947 to Cecil Walter Salier (1880–1949), a member of the Australia First Movement who took an early scholarly interest in Harpur's work. That first letter sets the tone for the collection in more ways than one. Writing to the Postmaster-General, from where he was living with his sister in the Rocks, Sydney, Harpur announces his resignation from the postal service because of his "declining state of health"—he is twenty-six at the time—and mentions his struggle with the demands of regular attendance at work. He also asks Raymond to recommend him for a "situation in the country requiring less confinement," a "situation in the interior." The affective theme of wellbeing, subsets health and employment, is prominent throughout all these documents in colonial literary history.

The colonial world of Charles Harpur that these letters provide a window onto is a distant but recognisable one. We know from literary history just how difficult the life of a writer in colonial Australia could be, although that awareness tends to be defined by spectacular examples of defeat and despair from the second half of the nineteenth century: Adam Lindsay Gordon's suicide by rifle the day after the June 1870 publication of his *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, Barcroft Boake's bankruptcy and suicide by stock-whip in May 1892, Henry Lawson's sardonic advice in his 1899 article "The Pursuit of Literature in Australia" to any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognised, to either leave the country or shoot himself.<sup>2</sup> We are also aware now how this literary historiography is gendered; it overlooks the fact that women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century like Mary Gilmore, Catherine Helen Spence, Mary Fortune, Ada Cambridge, and Rosa Praed, as Elizabeth Webby points out, lived longer and were generally more financially successful than their male compatriots, whatever the vicissitudes of their personal lives. The archaeological stratum of these letters of Harpur and his circle, though, is a reminder of the exclusive, homosocial precursor to the later male literary world of economic struggle and personal tragedy. The stratigraphic profile of colonial society revealed in these letters, the world of Charles Harpur, Henry Parkes, Henry Halloran, Henry Kendall, Nicol Drysdale Stenhouse, and Daniel Deniehy, includes influential wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and widows. But there is no awareness by the writers of these letters of any contemporary women writers, like, for example, Eliza Hamilton Dunlop or Emily Manning.<sup>3</sup>

Centred on Harpur, these letters are everywhere inflected by his particular character and life history. A member of the first native-born colonial generation, born only twenty-five years after first settlement, at Windsor, Harpur was lucky enough to have a government schoolmaster as his father, Joseph Harpur, and probably, access to wealthy squatters' and other personal libraries, through the patronage enjoyed by his father. But given his family's emancipatory background—both his father and mother were pardoned transportees—and the rudimentary educational and library system of the colony, Harpur's mode was necessarily autodidactic. He didn't have the social and parental resources of a William Charles Wentworth that could support an English schooling and higher education. His writing is a testament to the diligence and insight of his reading in what must often have felt like a randomly selected textual version of European and British culture transported and implanted with first settlement. Nevertheless Harpur was able to adapt, in powerful and individual ways, English and classical poetic forms to multiple local realities: frontier violence, ecological and environmental encounters, Indigenous society, antipodean Romanticism, political critique, intimate emotions. He was also able to translate oriental and dream vision narratives into his own versions of those hyper-eurocentric genres. He built an identity for himself out of the knowledge of the English language and its literary institutions that he taught himself, even if he must have felt a world away from its centres of life. That identity was also shaped by the locally inflected, colonial contentions that were constitutive of the transportation and embedding of an Anglophone literary culture. One important consolation, though, was his sense, as he wrote in 1851 in a notice in the *People's Advocate* addressed "To My Literary Countrymen," that his intellectual mission was the "advancement of our National Literature" (57–58). This mission was bound up with his desperate desire for a published volume of his collected poetry, which he had already planned, and titled, *The Wild Bee of Australia*. It was his work with poetic language that allowed Harpur, born into and growing up in an invasive penal colony, to imagine a free nation of the future. The first poem of his prospective collection was "A Song of the Future" (58). He even quotes a paragraph from the preface he had written for this planned volume in that *People's Advocate* article, with its rhetoric of destiny: "I have launched upon the stormy waters of the world, my poetical Argo . . . it is in my destiny, if I *will* it, to do something worthwhile for the mind and heart of my country, and for the intellectual advantage of man" (58). In reinforcement of this sentiment, Henry Kendall wrote to Harpur in 1862 about the "rising generation of Australians, who are far more intellectual than their predecessors, and *must* turn to you, as I have already done, with the love and reverence which is due to their national poet" (122).

While poetry was a form of literary expression favoured by the publishing outlets, mostly newspapers, of the colony, they tended to publish popular verse of local and topical interest, or reprinted overseas poetry and other literary material. Harpur's contributions were exceptional in the range and scope of their poetic expression and he was a prolific presence in colonial newspapers, with more than 900 publications during his lifetime, mainly in Sydney newspapers, "but also in those in the country areas in which he lived, including Maitland, Braidwood and Moruya and also . . . in Melbourne, Geelong, Adelaide, Tasmania and New Zealand" (xlii). A lot of Harpur's correspondence is taken up with his negotiations, sometimes via his *de facto* agent Henry Kendall, with the editors and proprietors of the newspapers he published with. A large part of the struggle of writers like Harpur was in fact to do with the deficits of a nascent print culture in the first half of the nineteenth century. First of all, Harpur was not paid anything, ever, for his published poetry. He had to make a living in other, variously precarious and antipathetic ways: as a temporary schoolteacher, a journalist, a sheep farmer, and a government administrator on remote goldfields. He sometimes had to beg for financial assistance: in 1855 he asks Henry Parkes to loan him £100 or £150 to help set up a sheep farm (80), in 1860 he asks Nicol Drysdale Stenhouse to loan him £50 for three months (117). He is

often having to chase up colonial government officers about allowances and payment arrears. And his life as a farmer was subject to the uncertainties and extremities of the Australian climate. In September 1857 he writes a detailed and vivid letter to Parkes's journal the *Empire* about being flooded out in the Hunter Valley. And after his move to the south-eastern coast of New South Wales he is devastated by floods on the Tuross River in April 1867. This is after the death of his son Charley in a shooting accident. The floods even sweep away Charley's mare, "the one he rode on his death-day" (196). His position as Assistant Goldfields Commissioner on various southern goldfields was subject to government funding, and while it allowed him to build a house, "Euroma," for his family near Eurobodalla, in June 1866 he was retrenched, after nearly seven years in the job.

But the main issue for Harpur was having to publish in journals that didn't share his literary standards, or his commitment to what he referred to in 1851 as the "forming literature of Australia" (57). The carelessness of newspaper editors and printers was more than a minor annoyance to Harpur. In one letter to the *People's Advocate* in April 1855 he goes on at length about a compositor's error: "If the compositor *would* only stick to his 'copy' as closely as the cobbler *should* to his 'last,' the publishing of one's things in a newspaper would be a much pleasanter matter than it is" (85). As the editors note, resolutions like this in 1847—"you will never see a line of mine in a Newspaper again—not at my own instance"—litter Harpur's correspondence (30). But he was more incensed by the issue of the quality of the poetry in newspapers. As he wrote in a long, furious letter to Samuel Bennett, editor of the *Empire*, but probably not sent because of Kendall's intervention: "To publish such poetry as mine, or like it, in any such paper as the *Empire*, or even the *Herald*, is in some sort to profane it: papers that seem to delight—that seem to find their mission in the publication of the veriest trash" (208). Earlier, in 1846, Harpur fought with Richard Thompson, editor of the *Spectator*, about reports on Robert Kirkwood Ewing's lectures on "Modern Poetry" and his mention of Harpur and "Colonial Poetry." As he wrote to Thompson: "I am much interested in the general issue of the question 'What is Poetry?' which this Lecturer [Ewing] has attempted to answer with so much self sufficiency, and in which attempt he has so signally failed; and I would assert therefore, in its beha[lf], that he is most manifestly an incompetent authority" (21). There were other squabbles with writers and publishers Frank Fowler and Joseph Sheridan Moore. Even the back-handed praise of Harpur's poetry by George Burnett Barton, in his anthology *The Poets and Prose Writers of New South Wales* (1867) and in *Literature in New South Wales* (1866) attracted Harpur's strangely expressed contempt: "What *man*, having a dinner independently of literature, would subject himself by writing, to even the chance of having his claims manipulated by a donkey like this!" (209). Harpur wrote in that same letter to Kendall of 1867 that he would have "nothing farther to do with any of the Sydney Journals or Journalists" (209).

For Harpur, the connection between newspaper publication of poetry, literary reputation and livelihood all hinged on the possibility of book publication. And that is a dismal story of this correspondence. Apart from his many poems in newspapers, Harpur published a few pamphlets during his lifetime: *Songs of Australia, First Series* (1844), the 16-page *Thoughts: A Series of Sonnets* (1845), *The Bushrangers* (a play and 19 poems, 1853), the 4-page "Rhyme" and "Coleridge's Christabel," (1861), *A Poet's Home* (1862) and "The Tower of the Dream" (1865).<sup>4</sup> But throughout his writing life he held out the hope of a major volume of his poetical works that would allow him to overcome the petty annoyances of colonial newspaper publication, and bring his work to the attention of the powerful centres of the Anglophone literary world. At first he hoped for this to be published in New South Wales, but when that failed, he hoped for publication in England. The only way for such a volume to be published in colonial Australia was by subscription, as his earlier *The Bushrangers* had been, although that led to difficulties with the subscribers, including Henry Parkes (81–83). A plan for an edition of Harpur's poems by subscription organised by Nicol Stenhouse and John Dunmore

Lang came to nothing. A generous undertaking by the wealthy colonial businessman Thomas Sutcliffe Mort, an admirer of Harpur's poetry, to take with him a collection of Harpur's poetry to England to explore English book publication, also didn't happen. As Mort wrote to Harpur in 1867: "[Y]ou may rest satisfied of my willingness to do all in my power to promote your wishes, and thereby give to the *old* world some of those poems, which you have scattered amongst the people of the *new*" (217). But Mort decided against the trip to England. Poignantly, in anticipation, Harpur had written to Moxon and Co, publishers of Lamb, Shelley, Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne, with his expectations about his book's production, if it was accepted, insisting that his poems be "printed *verbatim*, or exactly as written: except, of course, where it is evident that some mere slip of the pen or clerical error has occurred" (218). This was all in the last year of Harpur's life.

It is only after Harpur's death in 1868, another attempt at subscription, and the financial support of Mary Harpur's Doyle relatives—cousin James Henry, uncle John and especially John Kennedy Howe—that the first collected version of Harpur's poetry, *Poems* (Melbourne: George Robertson) is published, in 1883. The tangled story of this controversial volume is also told in these letters. There is the correspondence between Henry Parkes and Mary Harpur about the financial planning of the volume, including Parkes's intervention with the publisher George Robertson in Melbourne. The lead-up to the eventual production of the volume in August 1883 is detailed in the letters between Mary Harpur, her cousin James Henry Doyle, Parkes, Robertson, Kendall, and the person who ended up editing the volume, Henry Maydwell Martin, an old friend of James Henry Doyle. These correspondents all have different perspectives on the literary value of Harpur's poetry: Mary Harpur, understandably, felt herself to be the guardian of her husband's papers and his literary legacy, while Maydwell Martin had his own, ill-educated, opinions about how Harpur's work was to be edited. For example, he excerpted only the "descriptive portions" of "The Creek of the Four Graves," a poem about settlers killed by Aborigines, for publication, rather than publishing the poem in full. In her reading of Harpur's publishing history, Judith Wright reads this particular editorial intervention of Martin's as censorship. Nor does Martin's edition include any of Harpur's epic "The Kangaroo Hunt," which had appeared in various colonial newspapers, from 1843, in instalments, and which Harpur worked on in three different versions for more than twenty years, and which Mary Harpur included in her list of poems that should be published in "one volume" (251).<sup>5</sup> Martin didn't even keep Harpur's own appealing title of *The Wild Bee of Australia*.

Paul Eggert and Chris Vening identify Martin's older sister, Annie Montgomerie Martin, as a likely collaborator on the editing of *Poems*. Martin writes in a letter to Mary Harpur's cousin, that "I believe I could get [the revision of the MS] better done (and still exercise a control) by a literary friend and relative" (254). Martin repeatedly bellyached about having to write the preface for the volume and reveals himself in correspondence with Mary Harpur's cousin as a repellent character, with all the strategies of the misogynist: "In regard to correspondence with ladies, do not allow yourself to be entrapped. If you feel compelled to reply at any time to anything of a doubtful tenor—admit nothing, deny nothing, assert nothing, suggest nothing" (291). Martin was probably wanting to short circuit the criticism from Mary Harpur about his editing of the *Poems*, with her cousin James Henry Doyle. When he did write to Mary Harpur, as in a letter of October 1883, justifying his editorial practice, the tone is unbearably condescending (286–89). Mary wrote to Doyle in the same month relating how she was trying to get Harpur's original manuscripts back from Martin and that "I could never think of allowing Mr M. [Martin] to edit any thing of C. Harpur's works, for notwithstanding *your instructions*; mine; and the *Poets written orders* . . . Mr M. has destr[o]yed and weakened *all* published by *alterations* even leaving out whole *verses* and putting in *his* words in other poems *always* to the *detriment* of the poem" (290). Later in the same letter she says that "Mr M. does not answer my letters . . . instead of feeling grateful to Mr M. I am indignant at his not acting

according to your instructions as well a mine own" (290). No doubt the italics of this published version of her letter represent the underlined fury of Mary Harpur's writing. But Martin was adept at locking Mary Harpur out of correspondence about the book's production. He wrote to his old friend James Henry Doyle ("Jim") in 1882 about a woodblock engraving of Harpur that Mary Harpur had written to him about, but he decided not to reply to her: "If I once open communication with the widow, my freedom of action may be interfered with" (269)—a reference to his editorial control of Harpur's manuscripts. So this particular episode in colonial book history is a case study in manipulation and disappointment. It is also an instance of textual history where a poet's work is misrepresented and diminished by his editors.

A noticeable theme in these correspondences has to do with relationships of male writers. Perhaps because they are often isolated or distant from each other these correspondents are constantly referring to the state of their friendships. They do so more frequently than letter-writing conventions might suggest. Often these concerns are framed in terms of the writers' physical complaints of various kinds and in queries about their correspondents' and their mutual friends' health and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> This is Harpur to Henry Parkes in March 1844: "[A]ccept again my pledge of friendship, and allow me to solicit yours" (7). Harpur to Henry Kendall in June, 1866: "If you knew how lonely I am here, I think you would write to me somewhat oftener than you do" (181). And Kendall to Harpur in June 1867: "You must not give way to your sorrow as indicated by our last poem. I wish I could see you face to face in order to impart to you in some measure the equivalent sympathy intellectual and otherwise, which you have not known since the death of poor Deniehy" (201). Harpur's relation to Henry Parkes is perhaps the most complex of these bromances. Their virtual friendship began in about 1842 when Parkes read a series of poems by Harpur in the *Australasian Chronicle* and wrote an admiring sonnet to Harpur. But then they met, in Sydney, and while he continues to admire Harpur's poetry, as Parkes wrote to Henry Halloran, "I could wish I had never known him other than by his poetry, —I have often had occasion to blame his conduct, and I have done so more severely to himself, than I need do, to others" (16). It's not clear what Parkes's problem with Harpur's "conduct" was but twenty years later, in 1866, and after a lengthy silence between the two, things had become cross-hatched with further tensions. Harpur writes to Parkes in February 1866, "You say in your kind note to me, that you have long thought that for some cause or other you had forfeited my friendship" and he includes a revised sonnet of 1844 "To Henry Parkes" (178). But his previous letter, of the same month, was all about Parkes's political ascendancy, to Colonial Secretary (on his way to Premier) and Harpur's record of hard work in the government service as goldfields administrator and magistrate in Nerrigundah, and his "terror" of "*Reduction*" or retrenchment (176). A couple of days later Harpur is writing again to Parkes that for "many months past I have kept away from you in order to avoid suspicion. I repeat again let me be your friend without regard to profit" (180). He also writes angrily to Parkes defending himself against slanders by "informers and self-constituted spies" about "freaks" of character in his behaviour as administrator and magistrate. Nevertheless his position is abolished at the end of June, when Parkes also informs Harpur, tactfully, that he has "no claim" upon the government Superannuation Fund (182). This letter of Harpur's, which sounds bitter, includes a puzzling P.S.: "As this is the last letter but *one*, which it is likely I shall ever write to you, perhaps you will do me the favor of answering it" (183). No doubt this history between Harpur and Parkes goes a long way to explain the ambivalent meteorological figuring of friendship in this poem by Harpur:

Friendship is but a word inscribed upon  
The unclouded face of Fortune's morning sun;  
Hence if inclement vapors intervene  
And clear not off at length, —no more it may be seen.

These letters reveal the sputtering emergence of what Katie Hansord, in her reading of women's colonial poetry, has described as "masculine nationalist values" in colonial Australia, but it is a troubled and incoherent prehistory (18). That masculinist complex was to become increasingly prominent later in the nineteenth century, but in the sedimentary layer of these letters, that complex is hardly triumphal or even assured. It is precarious in fundamental ways, shaped by damaged subjectivities, educational deficits, the vagaries of patronage, lack of cultural depth, aesthetic contentions and economic obstacles. Against those abstract perspectives on colonial history, appropriate to summary literary history, these letters are vivid and painful traces—often allusive and inexplicit—of these writing lives: Harpur's life-long financial struggles, his family tragedy, and long battle with tuberculosis; Daniel Deniehy's disillusion with political life, the loss of a son, and descent into alcoholism; Henry Kendall's bankruptcy and family tragedies and estrangements, committed at times to the Hospital for the Insane at Gladesville, narrowly avoiding jail for forgery, and like Harpur, dying from tuberculosis. Henry Parkes, another self-taught writer, might seem like the most successful member of this coterie, wrangling his way through the political system of colonial New South Wales until he became Premier in 1872. An eventual force behind federation, he was the "largest figure of nineteenth century Australian politics," and published four books of poems, as well as other writings, but struggled financially his whole life, and was bankrupt three times.<sup>7</sup> These letters belong to an archive that is currently being uncovered and expanded and that was produced through the medium of colonial newspapers and a coterie of literary friends and associates. At the centre of that coterie is Charles Harpur, the prolific poetic voice of white settlement, a voice that we wonder about—how it came into existence, and how it flourished. As with all published manuscript letters, which are not realist texts, the reader encounters the human complexity of these writers' and their correspondents' lives at every moment. They remind us in forceful ways how bloodless critical terms like "print history," "print culture" and "textual history" have a human dimension, and in the case of Charles Harpur and his circle, it is a sad, moving and often tragic dimension.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This edition of letters is an "offshoot" of the Charles Harpur Critical Archive (CHCA), 2019–, accessible online at <https://charles-harpur.org/Home/Site/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Webby, "'The Laurels in the Pit Were Won': Authorship in Colonial Australia," in *From Convict Printers to Book Arcades: a History of the Book in Australia 1788-1890*. Vol. 1, edited by Wallace Kirsop, Elizabeth Webby and Judy Donnelly, Ancora Press, Monash University, 2024, pp. 139–47. Lawson's article appeared in the *Bulletin* for 21 January 1899.

<sup>3</sup> Even though Eliza Hamilton Dunlop and Henry Parkes were known to each other; as Katie Hansord points out, Dunlop wrote to Parkes when he was editing the *Empire*, complaining of the "bias towards nationalist poetry" in that journal. (Katie Hansord. *Colonial Australian Women Poets: Political Voice and Feminist Traditions*. Anthem, 2021, p. 18).

<sup>4</sup> See CHCA for details of these publications.

<sup>5</sup> See Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver, *The Colonial Kangaroo Hunt*. Melbourne University Publishing, 2020, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> The actual mental and physical state of these writers is detailed in the footnotes to these letters.

<sup>7</sup> A. W. Martin. "Henry Parkes (1815–1896)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/parkes-sir-henry-4366>.