CHARLES HARPUR 1813 - 1868

by Noel Warry

At Eurobodalla, at the foot of the steep hill there is a memorial stone commemorating the life of the poet Charles Harpur. On the grave on the hill above, on what was his farm, Euroma, there is a steel plaque which simply says "Sacred to the Memory of Charles Harpur 'Poet' Died June 10th, 1868".

By many people Charles Harpur was, and still is, considered the first poet to speak with a genuine Australian voice, although from 1810 onwards quite a few people living here had written poetry about Australia. Some, like W.C. Wentworth, were Australian born, but until Harpur none of them had captured the slowly evolving, truly Australian ethos. They saw the country and the people through European eyes.

Born at Windsor, NSW, in 1817, son of two convicts, Harpur died at Eurobodalla in 1868, husband of Mary, father of two daughters and two sons living and one son deceased. He was six feet tall, of fair complexion, with a pleasant, often serious and thoughtful expression. He was of sinewy build, brave, adventurous, with a commanding presence. He was well read, and had a wide correspondence with politicians, writers, poets, philosophers both in Australia and overseas - the thinkers of his time.

During his short life he was many things - poet, farmer, Gold Commissioner, Magistrate, political satirist, respected commentator on events of the day, philosopher, historian, prolific letter writer. He could quell rowdy mobs, organize and lead a posse to track bushrangers, create and run a farm, give advice to the Premier when asked and write poetry of tenderness and of strength. One night he swam his horse across the flooded Tuross River on a stormy night, a feat which took five hours of battle with heavy weather and strong currents.

He was a leader. As Gold Commissioner and as Magistrate he was admired for his judgements, his fairness, his justice, his strength of character. When he first took over as Gold Commissioner for the Nerrigundah Field the situation was grim. Claim jumping, robbery, bullying, rioting, and disregard for the police, the law, were rife. Those in charge had made no impression.

After his first decision on a claim jumping case the crowd grew menacing. Harpur took off his coat and offered to 'settle this once and for all in the old fashion'. One gold digger accepted his challenge but after four rounds he gave in. Harpur then stood up and said "Gentlemen of the Field, is there another amongst you dissatisfied. If so I am ready to take him on". No-one came forward. After that his decisions were never challenged.

He did not ever recover from the loss of one of his sons, Charles Chidley, who was killed during a duck shooting accident. He was devastated - we would say to-day that he went into depression from which he never really recovered.

Charles Harpur admired the American George Washington, whom he considered the father of freedom. This admiration was such that he named his first born son Washington. He named one of his daughters after the place where he lived, Araluen, because he thought it a most beautiful sound.

As much as a white Australian of that era could, he understood and admired the Aboriginals and their culture. He knew them well and abhorred the attitudes of many of his contemporaries. One of his best loved poems is about an Aboriginal mother grieving for her son.

There were many sides to Charles Harpur. Although important, his poetry was only one.

Previous articles in the March. June 1996 issues of this Journal have dealt with different aspects of Charles Harpur's life you may like to read these articles as well.

Three very different poems by Charles Harpur

An Aboriginal's Mother's Lament (Version 2)

Still farther would I fly, my child,
To make thee safer yet,
From the unsparing white man,
With his dread hand murder-wet!
I'll bear thee on as I have borne
With stealthy steps wind-fleet,
But the dark night shrouds the forest,
And thorns are in my feet.

O moan not! I would give this braid—
Thy father's gift to me—
But for a single palmful
Of water now for thee.

Ah! Spring not to his name—no more
To glad us may he come!
He is smouldering into ashes
Beneath the blasted gum!
All charred and blasted by the fire
All charred and blasted by the fire
The white man kindled there,
And fed with our slaughtered kindred
Till heaven-high went its glare!

O moan not! I would give this braid—
Thy father's gift to me—
But for a single palmful
Of water now for thee.

And but for thee, I would their fire
Had eaten me as fast!
Hark! Hark! I hear his death-cry
Yet lengthening up the blast!
But no—when that we should fly,
On the roaring pyre flung bleeding—
I saw thy father die!

O moan not! I would give this braid—
Thy father's gift to me—
For but a single palmful
Of water now for thee.

No more shall his loud tomahawk
Be plied to win our cheer,
Or the shining fish-pools darken
Beneath his shadowing spear;
The fading tracks of his fleet foot
Shall guide not as before,
And the mountain-spirits mimic
His hunting call no more!

O moan not! I would give this braid—
Thy father's gift to me—
For but a single palmful
Of water now for thee.

The Voice of the Swamp Oak

Who hath lain him underneath
A lone oak by a lonely stream;
He hath heard an utterance breathe
Sadder than all else may seen.

Up in its dusk boughs out-tressing,
Like the hair of a giant's head,
Mournful things beyond our guessing
Day and night are uttered.

Even when the waveless air
May only stir the lightest leaf,
A lowly voice keeps moaning there
Wordless oracles of grief.

But when nightly blasts are roaming,
Lowly is that voice no more;
From the streaming branches coming
Elfin shrieks are heard to pour.

While between the blast on-passing,
And the blast that comes as oft,
Mid those boughs, dark intermassing,
One long low wail pines aloft.

Till the listener surely deems
That some weird spirit of the air
Hath made those boughs the lute of themes
Wilder, darker than despair.

Darker than a woe whose morrow
Must be travelling to an end—
Wilder than the wildest sorrow
That in *death* hath still a friend;

Some lonely spirit that hath dwelt
For ages in one lonely tree—
Some weary spirit that hath felt
The burthen of eternity.

An Anthem for the Australasian League

Shall we sing of Loyalty
To the far South's fiery youth?
Yea—but let the pæan be
Of loyalty to God and Truth:
To Man, to progress, and to all
The free things, nobly free,
Of which their loved Australia shall
The golden cradle be.

Hark! her star-eyed Destinies
Pour their voices o'er the seas—
Hither, to the Land of Gold,
All who would be free!
Here a diadem behold
For immortal Liberty!

Not for Old World queens and kings,
Villain Slavery's outworn things!
Shall we sing of Loyalty
In this new and genial Land?
Yea—but let the pæan be
Of loyalty to Love's command,
To Thought, to Beauty, and to all
The glorious Arts that yet
In golden Australasia shall
Like chrysolites be set.

Information on Charles Harpur and many of his poems as well as his play The Bushrangers can be found at:
http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/H/HarpurCharles/index.html
Reference
The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur by Elizabeth Perkins. A&R

Things They Used to Do!

Charles Harpur would frequently add comments to his poems. This comment is from his Poem
"To A Black Swan."

The last line of the poem is-
"Egad! I'll git the gun, and dress his leather."

Comment:
"This we literally do, whenever we have the luck to shoot a swan. That is, after plucking away all the feathers proper, which are dark, so as to leave on the white down, we flay the bird, and then dress the skin with arsenical soap, or some such preparation, to cure it and fix it down. The skin, thus dressed and cured, is a beautiful commodity – an ample sheet of snowy down, that is quite a love of a present for the ladies, who (of course) apply it in various ways to the decoration of their own Habiliments, and those of their juveniles."
C.H.

Notes on the Black Swan

From
http://home.it.net.au/~austecol/swan.html

The first European to see a Black Swan is believed to be the Dutch sailor Antonie Caen who described the species during his visit to the Shark Bay area in 1636. Later, the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh captured several birds on the Swan River, Western Australia in 1697, but many people in Europe did not believe him, as at that time it was believed that all swans were white. Three of the captured birds were taken to Batavia, where they lived for some time. However, the species wasn't reported again until the arrival of the 'First Fleet' in 1788. The Black Swan was first described scientifically by Dr. John Latham in 1790.