

Charles Harpur (1813-1868) 'Bard of our Country'

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The great philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) made intelligible how the wilful creative processes of the Human Mind necessarily tend upward into participation in the Divine, and that this process is completely knowable and accessible to every single human being—that this is the source of true joy, to the extent that we actually choose to embark on that road, and that all this is a matter of faith.

This concept was fully understood by our own national poet Charles Harpur, and for that reason alone he stands out not only on the Australian stage, but on the stage of all of human history, as a true genius! How fortunate are we that he has made himself known to us and speaks directly to us now with the survival of our nation and the entirety of human civilisation in jeopardy! We must know with absolute certainty what it is that either condemns us as a “little people” incapable of preventing our own extinction, or alternatively, what qualifies us to live on and evolve to create our own destiny. The answer lies in whether or not we choose to be truly human—and in so doing, act, not for ourselves alone, but for mankind as a whole and for our nation.

Charles Harpur, who was born 200 years ago (in January 2013), grappled with these questions probably more determinedly than any other Australian before or since. In fact in March 1848 after having his patriotic poems criticised, he wrote: “I can allow no-one, great or little to kick with impunity against that class of my production. . . . I am doing more, and am missioned to do more, for the intellectual future of my country than any other writer it possesses either by birth or adoption.” He was consumed with how to ennoble his fellow Australians to fight for the Common Good, how to secure a true Republic and defeat that brutish monster called British Imperialism, but he also knew that the secret lay in understanding Man’s relationship to the Universe and to the Creator of that Universe.

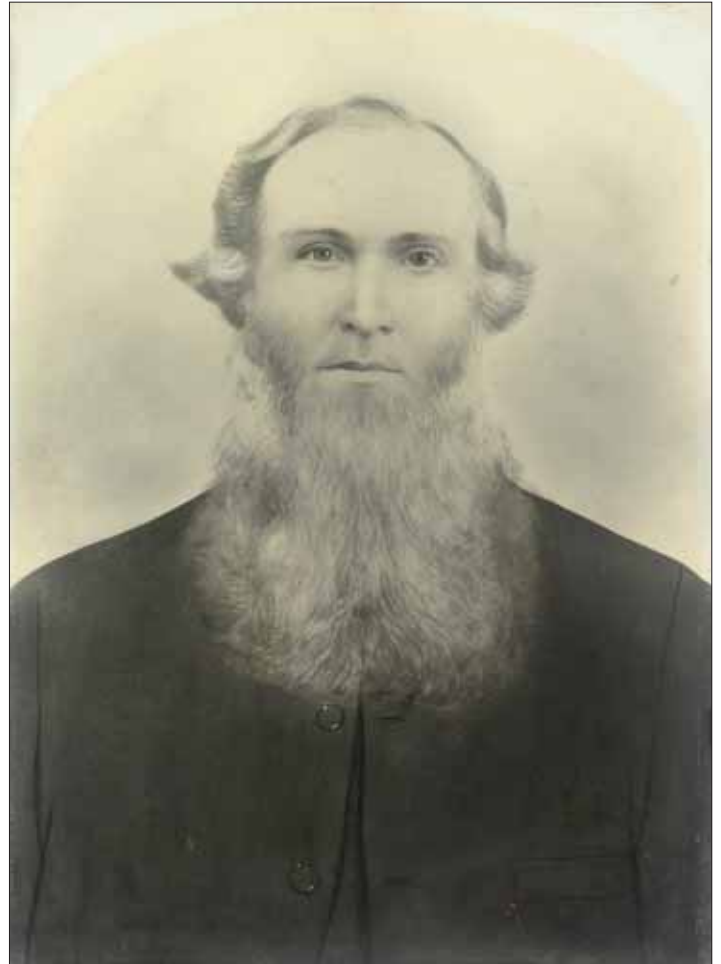
So today, we will look at three things:

- His Mission and calling as a poet
- His conception of Man’s relationship to God and the Universe
- His political interventions and rally call to the nation

Harpur’s Mission and calling as a poet

Charles Harpur was the second son of convict parents, a Currency Lad born at Windsor in the Hawkesbury Valley when the colony was only 25 years old. He spent his early working life in Sydney but hated it and by 1842 (at age 29) returned to the Hunter to settle at Jerrie’s Plains. The following year he met his future wife Mary Doyle but they did not marry until seven years later in 1850. He was considered too poor by her family, but he never gave up, writing dozens of sonnets in her honour.

After they were married he had to balance financial security and the happiness of his family and this was a struggle for him his whole life. At first he took up teaching; then to appease Mary and her family, he spent seven years working with sheep, which he hated; later in life he was appointed Gold Commissioner in Araluen northwest of Bateman’s Bay.



Sonnet

By Charles Harpur

She loves me! From her own bliss-breathing lips
The live confession came, like rich perfume
From crimson petals bursting into bloom!
And still my heart with the remembrance skips
Like a young lion, and my tongue, too, trips
Drunken with joy! While every object seen
In life’s diurnal round wears in its mien
Smiles that all recollected smiles eclipse!
And if all common things of nature now
Are like old faces flushed with new delight,
Much more that consciousness of that rich vow
Deepens the beautiful and refines the bright,
While throned I seem on Love’s divinest height,
With clouds of visioned bliss purpling around my brow!

One of many sonnets Harpur wrote for his wife Mary.

Charles Harpur (1813-1868)–‘Bard of our Country’

They had five children, the first-born named Washington in honour of that great Republican, and Charles had high hopes (perhaps too high) for him, writing “if God spares me to watch over his education, he shall be morally as perfect. I will devote him to great and magnanimous principles. He shall believe that to live for them is religion—and that to die for them is something diviner still.”

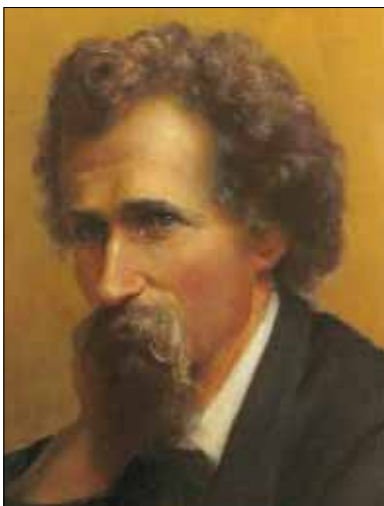
The family endured both floods and grinding poverty with precious few good years in between, but the blackest day of all came in March 1867 when their second son Charlie died in a shooting accident. Charles never really recovered from the crippling grief and by then was already growing ill himself.

But he had a very happy family life. It was the loneliness of his mission and the fact that he had nobody to converse with, on things that mattered, which frustrated him most. He was incapable of making small talk and his poet friend, Henry Kendall said of him, upon meeting him in person for the first time, just six months before he died: “One could not be ten minutes in his society without having cognizance of his genius. He had fitful flashes of enthusiasm, during which he never failed to give utterance to memorable things.”

Regarding his appearance, Kendall said: “The man was a noble ruin—one that had been scorched and wasted, as it were, by fire. His face looked as if it had been through the hottest furnaces of sorrow.”

Harpur continued to write, all the time trying to get his works published. He complained: “That such things should have to beg their way into print in so hard a fashion is a fact I think which is peculiarly antipodean.” But despite his frustrations, and much to the horror of his political enemies, dozens of papers and journals did print his works, broadcasting them over the whole Colony, making his name known to tens of thousands.

Almost to the last day of his life Harpur worked on copying and grouping all his poems into manuscripts which he numbered. He copied his last poem on 9th June 1868, the day of his death. His wife Mary lived another 30 years and saw to it that her husband’s poems were published.



Thomas Henry Kendall (18 April 1841–1 August 1882)



River Hawkesbury near Wisemans Ferry by Conrad Martens 1801-1818.

embarked on his inspired journey, let me read a paragraph from his *Lecture on Poetry* presented in 1859 to the School of the Arts in Sydney.

“The creations of poetry may be said to stand in such relation to ordinary life, as dreams do to the condition of slumber. When the tone of this state is healthy, these are cheerful, full of promise, beautifully fantastic. When diseased, on the other hand, they are ugly boding, full of horror, monstrously incongruous. So is it, speaking broadly, with the creations of poetry, according as the individual minds in which they are produced, and the social soil on which they are intended to operate, are morally healthy or otherwise. And, to continue the analogy in the better part of its agreement, her winged things of love are also, in their forward flight—like dreams, or what we may suppose of dreams—sometimes prophetic. Like these, too, in a salubrious sphere, they beautify the common; nay, they transmute deformity into loveliness, and the terrible into the attractive. They annihilate distance, as with the ‘wings of the morning,’ and set captivity at large, as by unchainable memories of the breezy liberties of the mountains. In fine, they recall the past, enchant the present, and realize the future—restore the lost, renew the changed, enrich the poor, and reunite by an immortalizing picture-power, the living and the dead. And upon the merits of this analogy, fanciful as it may be, I venture to affirm that a society which has no high place for poetry, like a mind that is not lively enough to dream well, is worse than rude, and almost worse than bad, for it is most miserably dull.”

For this noble conception of his calling, Harpur was often ridiculed and attacked. In 1866, just two years before he died, G.B. Barton published a book, *Literature in New South Wales* and dismissed Harpur saying he had “some true poetry in him” but had only “written two or three pieces which deserve to live on.” He added, “The idea of a man declaring himself, as Mr. Harpur does, ‘A Monarch of Song in the Land’, is something new to literature. If Mr Harpur is entitled to that royal designation, he is in the unenviable position of a Monarch without subjects.”

Needless to say, Harpur had a rather different view of such matters. Of the effect of his own poetry upon himself and on society, he wrote:

The Dream by the Fountain

By Charles Harpur

Thought-weary and sad, I reclined by a fountain
At the head of a white-cedar-shaded ravine,
And the breeze that fell over the high glooming mountain
Sang a lullaby low as I gazed o’er the scene.

Long I’d reclined not till slumber came o’er me,
Grateful as balm to a suffering child:
When a lofty-souled Maiden seemed standing before me
With a lyre in her hand—O so sounding and wild!

Bright was her brow, not the morning’s brow brighter,
But her eyes were two midnights of passionate thought;
Light was her motion, the breeze’s not lighter,
And her looks were like sunshine and shadow inwrought.

Never before did my bosom inherit
Emotion so thrilling, such exquisite awe!
Never such wonder exalted my spirit
Before, as did now, through the vision I saw.

Robed for the chase like a nymph of Diana,
Her ivory limbs were half given below—
Bare, that the pure breath of heaven might fan her,
Bare was her bosom of roseate snow.

Then lifting the lyre, and with every feeling
Sublimed as with love, she awakened the strings,
Bliss followed—and half into being came stealing
The motion and light of angelical wings.

Divine were the measures! Each voice of the wildwood
Seemed gathering power in their musical thrills—
The loud joy of streams in their strong mountain childhood,
The shouting of Echoes that break from the hills;
The moaning of trees all at midnight in motion,
When the breezes seem lost in the dark, with a rare
And sweet soaring spirit of human devotion
All blended and woven together were there.

Ceased then the strain: and as soon as were flowing
Around but the accents that people the wild,
The Lyrist, subdued by her rapture, yet glowing,
Adjusted her mantle, approached me, and smiled:

Smiled with a look like the radiance of morning,
When flushing the crystal of heaven’s serene,
Blent with that darkness of beauty adorning
The world, when the moon just arising is seen.

And repressing, it seemed, many fonder suggestions,
Calmly she spake;—I arose to my knees,
Expectantly glad, while, to quiet my questions
The wild warbled words that she uttered were these:

“I am the Muse of the evergreen Forest,
I am the Spouse of thy spirit, lone Bard!
Ev’n in the days when thy boyhood thou worst,
Thy pastimes drew on thee my dearest regard.

“For I knew thee, ev’n then, wildly, wondrously musing
Of glory and grace by old Hawkesbury’s side—
Scenes that spread recordless round thee, suffusing
With the purple of love—I beheld thee, and sighed.

“Sighed—for the fire-robe of Thought had enwound thee,
Betok’ning how much that the happy most dread,
And whence there should follow, howe’er it renowned thee,
What sorrows of heart, and what labors of head!
“Sighed—though thy dreams did the more but endear thee—
It seemed of the breeze, or a sigh of thine own!
I would sweep then this lyre, gliding viewlessly near thee,
To give thy emotions full measure and tone.

“Since have I tracked thee through dissolute places,
And seen thee with sorrow long herd with the vain;
Lured into error by false-smiling faces,
Chained by dull Fashion though scorning her chain.

“Then would I prompt, in the still hour of dreaming,
Some thought of thy beautiful Country again;
Of her yet to be famed streams through dark woods far-gleaming—
Of her bold shores that throb to the beat of the main.

“Till at last I beheld thee arise in devotion,
To shake from thy heart the vile bondage it bore,
And my joy gloried out like a morning-lit ocean,
When thy footfall I heard in the mountains once more!

“Listen, below’d one! I promise thee glory
Such as shall rise like the day-star apart,
To brighten the source of Australia’s broad story,
But for this thou must give to the future thy heart!

“Be then the Bard of thy Country! O rather
Should such be thy choice than a monarchy wide!
Lo! ’Tis the land of the grave of thy father!
’Tis the cradle of liberty! Think and decide.”

“Well hast thou chosen.” She ceased. Unreplying,
I gazed, mute with love, on her soul-moulded charms:
Deeper they glowed, her lips trembled, and sighing,
She rushed to my heart and dissolved in my arms!

Thus seemed she to pass—and yet something remaining,
Like a separate Soul in my soul seemed to be:
An aching delight—an extension, that paining
My spirit, yet made it more strength and free.

She passed—but to leave in my brain a reflection,
A fore-visioned blaze of prophetic sway;
While tones that seem gushings of mystic affection
Flow through me by night, and around me by day.

And since, or in cities or solitudes dreary,
Upon the lone hill or more lonely sea-sand,
No matter how few in my wanderings cheer me,
I know that ’tis mine ’mid the Prophets to stand!
No matter how many that blame be anear me,
I feel like a Monarch of song in the Land!

Charles Harpur (1813-1868)–‘Bard of our Country’

“I should opine that it will operate healthily upon the heart of my Country, and chiefly for good. I have never been so pure-minded, nor so correct in my conduct, as when in frequent communion with the spirit of its inspiration, either composing, revising, or re-perusing it. Moreover, I may



Left. William Shakespeare. Right. John Dunmore Lang.



truly say of it, ... that it has been to me upon the whole, its own exceeding great reward. And it has been such, because it has never been a mere art with me,—a tuneful medium of forced thoughts and affected passion; but always the vehicle of earnest purpose. Nay, rather might I say, that it has always been the audible expression of the inmost impulses of my moral being—the very breath of my spiritual life. And there is no purer and more sufficing joy without the pale of heaven, than that which the true poet feels, when he knows he is securing an immortal conception to his kind, by inorbing it with beauty, as with the vesture of a star.”

Even in his most melancholy moments, Harpur never ever lost his faith and joy in his mission and the legacy that he was bequeathing to future generations. In *To an Echo on the Banks of the Hunter* published in 1843 he wrote that no matter what else happens, one hope remains:

—Tis that, when o'er
My country shall have swept the ripening days
Of centuries, her better sons shall prize
My lonely voice upon the past;—but, more,
That to her daughters, as with glowing eyes,
Bathed in the splendour of these self-same skies,
They'll gaze upon my page—even then my name,
Unheeded now, responsive to the swell
Of their full souls, and winnowed of its blame,
From the dim past (an echo) thus shall come;
And wheresoever Love and Song shall dwell,
To live and die in sweet perpetual doom
Upon the flood of ages—still the same....
And in this hope the recompense is great
For much that I may lack, for more that may annoy,
Crowning me oft 'mid these dark days of fate
With joy—even joy!

This sense of joy came, as Harpur well knew, from devoting himself to his mission. He was quite emphatic that every man *must* have a mission. In a piece of prose entitled *Charity* he wrote:

“I speak boldly. But every man has or should have his Mission in life; and mine is, I believe, to endeavour to break away from the heart and mind of Man as many of its old-world fetters, as the intellectual insight of my nature, and the concurrency of my opportunities, may enable me to ascertain to be such, either absolutely or in effect: in the first place, by the fearless promulgation of liberalizing and suggestive ideas; and

in the next, by the doing of deeds correspondent to them, whenever and wherever the circumstances of the times shall so far concur with me as to make a fitting occasion. And with this conviction forever at my heart, why should I fear to speak out boldly and to the purpose?”

But where, you might ask, did Harpur, a lonely colonial boy, son of a convict, acquire this ennobled and sublime sense of mission? From the earliest age, he studied the “immortals”—and I mean *studied!* He read and translated Homer, he studied the Bible at length, and here's how he described his relationship with Shakespeare:

“For more than a year of my youth, Shakespeare was nearly my whole reading—was in fact (and luckily) almost the only book my means could at that time command. At first I perused him rapidly right through, in order to take, in one mighty draught, his entire spirit. Then I re-perused him with minute attention—that is critically underlined every beauty I could perceive even to a happiness of phrase. I next reconsidered the whole, committing to memory as I proceeded almost all that I had previously underlined. After this, I again read him attentively through with an eye to punctuation alone and yet again for the sole purpose of testing the progressive steps in his versification.”

So it was with other great poets including Burns, Milton, Shelley, John Keats, Edgar Allen Poe, and others. But especially, he loved those who upheld true Republican principles and ideals, who believed that the common man must realise his God-given potential.

At age 40, Harpur referred to himself as a “Red Republican” meaning a *thorough* Republican—“men whose convictions of the political necessity of republicanism is unshakably founded upon the God-designed sovereignty of the people; and who are prepared, therefore, whenever a true occasion offers, to champion its advent at all hazards, and in all places.” So it was that he rallied around John Dunmore Lang's call for “Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia”. And whilst vehemently opposed to war, he said it is sometimes the case that we can be “too tamely baptized into Independence.” This is reminiscent of King O'Malley's admonition that Australians sleep on. “If only the people would realize what they own; what is theirs by the grace of God! Trouble is it came to them without a fight!”

But Harpur knew that such a love of mankind and love of one's nation, derives from what Nicholas of Cusa would call, “participation in God”. So, let's look at Harpur's understanding of man's relationship to the Creator of the Universe.

To be continued...