

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

This is Part 3, that concludes a serialised transcript of the presentation by the same title delivered to the June 23, 2012—CEC Candidates Workshop  
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### Harpur's political interventions and rally call to the nation

Now, let's listen to a recitation of one of Harpur's poems in which he poses a very personal question to all of us about the choices we make in life.

#### The Heavenly Voice

By Charles Harpur – 25 July 1846

Through the discord and din of Error and Sin,  
And down through Time's dubious shadow, there falls  
A Voice as of one to another that calls;  
And I know it is Love's by the words of the song—  
"Why must You tarry in darkness so long?"

'Tis the question of Love as she singeth above,  
By the River of Bliss that eternally rolls  
The mirror of happy and purified Souls;  
There she is singing, and this is her song—  
"Why must You tarry in darkness so long?"

In the depths of Despair her voice, even there,  
Pleads still, like a mother's when warning her child,  
Round the heart grown defiant and faithless and wild;  
But charged are its tones then, and listen, they say—  
"Ah, will You wander forever away?"

So why do we tarry in darkness so long when we are being called to a "Holy" fight?

If our sense of identity is not to be defined by the temporal, often crumbling and despairing world around us, but rather by that divine nature within us, then we must take up the political fight for what Harpur called the Public Good! This is what it means to be a patriot and is synonymous with developing the minds of the people. This theme runs constantly through all of his poetry. Here are a few examples:

#### In *Is Wentworth a Patriot?*:

A patriot is one who hath no aims  
Dividual from the Public Good; whose heart  
Is of his Country's a fraternal part;  
Whose Interest on that country's altar flames.  
A Patriot is one who hath no Self  
Dividual from his People.

#### In his *War Song for the Nineteenth Century*:

They see us wield no weapon,  
But in our front shall find  
The artillery of the intellect—  
The thunder of the Mind.

#### In *Finality*:

Why pile we stone on stone, to raise  
Jail, Fane, or Public hall;—why plan  
Fortress or Tower for future days;  
Yet leave unbuilt, to wrong or guilt,  
The nobler pile—the Mind of Man?

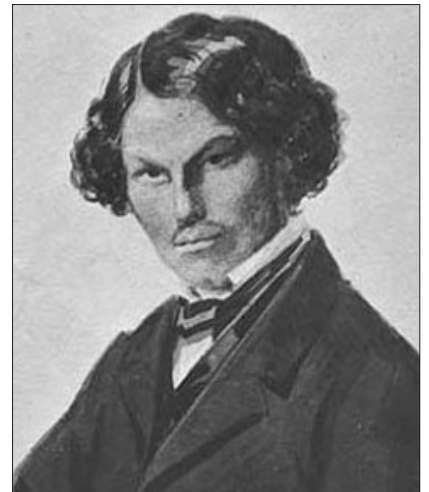
*With finer wool the land to dower,  
Behold how strongly we are moved!  
Even while a Nation's thinking power,  
Unvalued yet,—unnamed, we let  
Grow bestial—because unimproved!*

In his essay *The True Finality* Harpur states that the "best condition for the development of the full majesty of man, were one in which the personal freedom and sovereignty of savage life should co-exist with all the artistic beneficences and moral security of civilised society.... Hence 'the greatest good to the greatest number' is not a final principle of human community, and is fast giving place to another that is: namely, 'the greatest good to each and all'. Hence too, men can be no longer the creatures of Governments: these can no longer mould them characteristically into masses; ... individual education upon the most liberal and adaptive scale must be speedily resorted to; so that all men ... may become more and more, to the destined extent—each and all of them, Governments in themselves." With this conception of the elevated role of each citizen, regardless of their station in life, you can see why Harpur was (and still is) feared and ignored both by the Establishment, as well as an oppressed population beleaguered with the convict-mentality.

In this context, Harpur defined his task as a poet, "to illustrate whatever is virtuous in design, and glorify all that is noble in action; taking occasion also, at the same time, to pour the lightning of indignation upon everything that is mean and cowardly in the people, or tyrannical and corrupt in their rulers."

This he did, beginning his political activism in the Hunter Valley around 1842. Now this may say something historic about the residents of Maitland, and it may dismay some of you, but Charles and his brother Joseph honed their political organising skills, by leading the local Tee-totallers organisation. Through his impassioned speeches Charles recruited hundreds of new people to join TT's. But needless to say, neither of the brothers stayed loyal to that cause forever. There were bigger fish to fry.

Already back in 1826 when Charles was just 13 years old, there was agitation in the Colony by the Emancipists who wanted representative government, trial by jury, and land for the Native Youth. The ruling establishment expressed their disdain in *The Monitor* of July that year: "The people of New South Wales are a poor groveling race... their spirit is gone—the scourge and the fetters and the dungeon and the Australian inquisition have



Daniel Henry Deniehy (18 August 1828–22 October 1865) was an Australian journalist, orator and politician; and early advocate of Republican ideas in colonial New South Wales.

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reduced them to a level with the negro—they are no longer Britons, but Australians!” And a week later it reiterated that “they have lost their English spirit and have degenerated into Australians.”

Thirty or so years later in 1857, following Daniel Deniehy’s famous lecture on the poetry of Charles Harpur to the Mechanics School of the Arts, little had changed. The *Herald* newspaper also went wild, attacking both the poet and the lecturer viciously. The author of the criticism in that case, was an honoured contributor to Sydney’s so-called leading newspaper and was speaking for the high and mighty who thought that the colonials, “numbering less than half the population of an English provincial town”, were no longer exhibiting the desired subservience. They were possessed, he said, of “a gross egotism and over-weening self-confidence.”

This growing self-confidence notwithstanding, the immigrant intelligentsia of Sydney whose “success” seemingly gave them the right to control the intellectual direction, as well as the politics of the country really got up Harpur’s nose. As Normington-Rawling, the author of Harpur’s biography put it: “It was the day of ‘gentlemen’ and ‘men’. Harpur was a ‘man’ and therefore beyond the pale, especially as he was a ‘colonial’.”

Harpur didn’t hesitate to call down the wrath of heaven on politicians, place-hunters, and profiteers. He particularly despised William Charles Wentworth and the free-trader Sir Charles



Sir Charles Cowper, KCMG (26 April 1807–19 October 1875) was an Australian politician and the Premier of New South Wales on five different occasions from 1856 to 1870.

Cowper (Slippery Charlie). Harpur wrote of Cowper: “When flies shall have sufficient ken To comprehend a mountain’s magnitude, Thou shalt be fit to legislate for men As well as sheep—but, Cowper; not till then . . .”

In 1846 the population began to mobilise against the resumption of transportation, and against the power of the squatters and land laws. The “operatives” which was the contemporary name for the workers, started to form what came to be called the radical movement and newspapers were launched to speak for them. One of these, the *Citizen*, urged the workers to form a trades union of all trades. And

by 1848 lots of groups including J. D. Lang’s Australasian League had joined the battle. Under the passage of the *Waste Lands Occupation Act* in the British Parliament in 1846, pastoralists gained a virtual monopoly over land. Charles Harpur took up his pen to object.

### The New Land Orders

By Charles Harpur

I long did hope the soil of this bright clime,  
Being unfeoffed to Oligarchical sway,  
Was a meet cradle for the birth sublime  
Of just Equality at no distant day:  
The which, when once its truthful beauty’s ray  
Maturely shone, should southward draw the prime  
Regard of th’ world, thence wiser for all time,  
And studious more to join the harmonious lay  
Of Perfect Freedom perfectly begun:  
But now this Hope is shrunk into a Fear!  
England’s misgovernment its worst hath done  
To sow the seed of splendid evil here!  
In Sheepshanks we behold a destined Peer,  
And Oxtail’s stockmen shall ‘my lord’ his son.



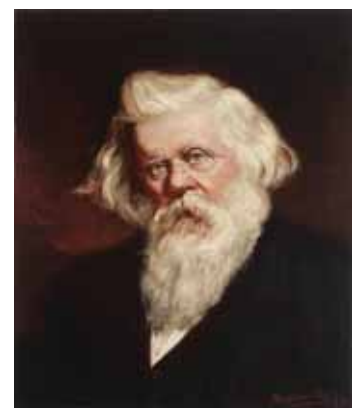
The new reading room at the Sydney Mechanic’s School of Arts.

During this time Wentworth referred to the opponents of transportation as democrats, socialists and levelers. The squatters were successful in having Transportation resumed to NSW but the population would have none of it. On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1849, a day of drizzling rain, when two ships bringing the first batch of convicts arrived into Sydney, the shops were shut and 7,000 - 12,000 people gathered to what became known for many years as the Great Public Meeting. There was talk of another Bunker’s Hill. A compromise was reached and the convicts were allowed to land but not to stay. No more convicts ever came to NSW.

Harpur never ran for election, (probably because he was always too poor), but he was both a friend to, and an enemy of many who did. Amongst his closest friends he counted fellow son-of-the-soil, Daniel Deniehy (1828-65) and amongst his opponents, Sir Henry Parkes (1815 -1896). But Parkes had not always been his foe.

In 1843 Harpur received a gift from Parkes that sent him into raptures. It was a set of the six volumes of Percy Shelley’s poems together with a pen. This was the first time Harpur had read any of Shelley’s poetry.

Parkes ran an ivory and toy manufacturing business and in 1847 had also begun to trade in ideas. The parlour at the back of his shop became the meeting place of the radical intelligentsia and budding politicians of the future. But populist politics changes people and the youthful Henry Parkes after winning the Sydney seat in the Legislative Council vacated by Wentworth in 1854, adulated his former opponent saying: “I have been elected the successor of the greatest man who ever trod this country” and “you have made me by your votes the most distinguished commoner in the land”. Harpur wanted to vomit! He publicly rebuked Parkes seeing in his remarks, opportunism, sycophancy, and political opportunism.



William Charles Wentworth (1790–1872). Sir Henry Parkes 1815–1896)

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



Squattocracy. Squatter of New South Wales, Monarch of more than all he surveys, 1863, by Samuel Thomas Gill.

It was the end of their friendship.

Harpur clashed again with his former friend in April that same year, when Parkes supported Britain and France in their launch of the Crimean War against Russia. Harpur pulled no punches in expressing his attitude to war. This is the first stanza of a lengthy poem simply entitled *War* and is a timely admonition to all those today who are planning the greatest war of all time:

### War

By Charles Harpur

*He who in battle slays his fellow man  
Without first having duly weighed the cause  
Of quarrel, and derived the approval thence  
Of his own heart as to the part therein  
By him to be sustained—he is indeed  
Strictly a murderer! And though this stern truth  
Should sound distastefully to many—those  
Especially who trade in national madness  
And brutal glory: magnifying so  
A rag inscribed with some stale jugglery  
Heraldic, far more than they honour God...  
'Tis time the voice of Truth, in all things, should  
Be lifted clearly, and sent ringing forth  
Even like the startling spirit of a trumpet!  
For herein had her simple test been taught  
From the beginning, what lagoons of blood  
Had so been spared Mankind! What desolations,  
What infamies, prevented!*

By 1866 Parkes had risen high in the political world and well and truly sold his soul. He took office for the first time as Colonial Secretary in James Martin's second ministry, which Harpur again considered an act of betrayal. After all, Martin was one of the "Sticklers for the rights of cattle" and "Sneerers at the rights of man" referred to in his *War Song for the Australian League*.

By contrast with Parkes, Daniel Deniehy who had arrived back in Sydney at age 16 from touring England, Ireland and Europe, was the intellectual equal of Harpur, and he also shared his Republican spirit. They first met in 1852 and from that time forth Harpur always referred to him as "Little Dan Daniehy" (due to his short stature).

Harpur wrote sonnets in his honour and Deniehy reciprocated his admiration, lecturing on Harpur's poetry at the School of Arts, which he had now wrested control of from the bigoted immigrant intelligentsia.

Deniehy said of Harpur and his poetry, not only is it "exquisite poetry, a rare and delicate imaginative loveliness; but, above all, an impress of character noble and masculine as the profile of a Roman coin—the stamp of a free, self-dependent and self-moulded intellect, which, taken as a type of the growing native mind, must exalt every hope for the grandeur of our national destinies."

But it was Deniehy's moment to shine, when in 1853 the Constitutional Committee, including the traitors Wentworth, Macarthur, Cowper, Martin, and Murray, proposed that the upper house in NSW be composed of members of a hereditary aristocracy. The proposal created an uproar and Deniehy made a name for himself with two brilliant speeches directed against this proposed house of lords—including this gem:

"It was the good pleasure of Mr. Wentworth and the respectable tail of that puissant Legislative body, [that] we are to have an Upper House and A Constitution cast upon us, upon a pattern which should suit the taste and propriety of political oligarchs who treat the people at large as if they are cattle to be bought and sold in the market... Here we all know the common water mole was transferred into the duck-billed platypus, and in some distant emulations of this degeneration, I suppose we are to be favoured with a bunyip aristocracy... But there is an aristocracy worthy of our ambition... That is God's aristocracy. That is an aristocracy that will grow and expand under free institutions, and bless the land where it flourishes."

The speech made him famous as an orator, but it also made him enemies. He and Harpur, convinced that "It is not in the nature of things that men brimful of Englishism can ever do us any real national good", were unfortunately in the minority by around 1857.

But Harpur and his circles remained relentless in their political agitation against the British imperial interests, and in 1858, NSW eventually joined Victoria and SA in adopting voting by secret ballot. For over 100 years it had been talked about it, but now it was referred to as the Australian method of voting. Also as a result of their persistence over many years, a Land Reform bill was eventually passed in the Parliament, but it did hold for long. By 1861 the *Free Selection Land Bill* was passed into law which favoured, you guessed it, the Squattocracy once again.



Portrait of military officers, free settlers, soldiers, emancipists and convicts in Colonial Australia.

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So is it any wonder that Harpur saw fit to pen this *War Song for the Australasian League*, calling on all Australians to fight on.

### War Songs for the Australasian League

By Charles Harpur

Up Australians! Hark, the trumpet  
Calls you to a holy fight!  
Round the Evergreen, your standard,  
Gather, and as one unite!  
Shall the Monarchists condemn us  
Into slavery and shame?  
Or shall Truth endiadem us  
With the stars that write her name?

Shall yon bright blue heaven, enroofing  
This green golden land, afford  
But a wide and splendid dwelling  
For the villain and his lord!  
And not a great dome for merit—  
Not an open region be  
For the outward marching spirit  
Of immortal liberty!

Down with Wentworth! Down with Martin!  
Murray, Marsh and all their clan!  
Sticklers for the rights of cattle—  
Sneerers at the rights of man!  
We were slaves—nay, we were viler!

Soulless shapes of sordid clay,  
Did we hound not from our Councils  
Wolves and foxes such as they?

But their doom is sealed! All vainly  
Fools against the Right may band!  
Hark to scorn's loud-hissing tempest  
How 'tis brewing in the land!  
Aye, and it ere long shall sweep them  
Like uprooted weeds away—  
Like a dull obscuring vapour  
From the pathway of the day!

By the equalising glory  
Of the cause with which we start!  
By the blood of honour thrilling  
Through each patriotic heart!  
By the majesty of manhood  
Righteously and nobly free,  
We will pause not, till Australia  
All our own—*our own* shall be!

Harpur, even with his health failing, was defiant to the end of his days. In August 1867 he wrote to Henry Kendall: "I am still very bad and do not think I shall ever again be much better. Still, I am content. All this would be nothing to me, if I but found the men and things about me less of brutes and less brutal. Still, never mind. I shall live long enough. So long as I have any essential thing to do I shall not die. No man can."

**The end.**

Daniel Deniehy was a young Catholic revolutionary, who, like his older friend and mentor John Dunmore Lang, was elected to the NSW Legislative Council in 1853 and again in 1857. During that time he wrote a series of seminal essays and editorials on subjects including "Our country's Opportunity", a brilliant policy document on the development of a true political economy and "Australian Freedom and Independence".

Like his friends Lang and Harpur, Deniehy was a "heart and soul" Republican and many of his essays and speeches, reflect the ideas of the great Americans, Benjamin Franklin, Tom Paine and John Adams.

Deniehy was above all, however, a true poet—an enlightened lover of ideas—always seeking the idea of the Beautiful and devoted to the noble and necessary task of universal education. He helped establish the "Mechanics Institutes" in Australia, primarily for adult education. He gravitated to a fundamental notion held by many American writers, that democracy is susceptible to mob rule, and therefore necessitates an intelligent and informed populace.

For Deniehy the entire future of the nation depended on nurturing and developing the highest qualities of statesmanship and leadership. His following words are eerily relevant to us today as we experience an unprecedented dearth of intelligent, moral leaders for our nation and world in a crisis:

*"Our colony has been cursed with bad legislators and bad laws, and unless constituencies are reminded of the duties that they owe to themselves and to the state, we see no prospect of change for the better. The country requires at this juncture, men of enlarged views and of statesmen-like abilities. She stands sadly in need of patriots, true lovers of her soil, of her climate, and of her worth; such who know what she would be capable of under a genial rule, and who would, without one selfish desire, shape her destiny. She does not need the mere demagogue 'whose unthinking rage, Maddens for a moment and expires' but those men of progress who, utterly and unreservedly despising the abominations which have disfigured her government, retarded her power, and stunted her growth, are ready and prepared to lay the axe to the very root of imbecility and corruption."*

