



A.D. Hope

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One day, legend has it, when Sophocles was well into his 80s and totally bald, he went walking, against advice, in the midday sun without a hat. There was a small eagle in Greece which used to swoop on tortoises, then soar to great heights and drop them on stones, so as to smash their shells. On this day, the eagle picked up a tortoise and, mistaking Sophocles' head for a stone, dropped the tortoise on his head, killing Sophocles instantly . . .

YOU CAN HEAR HIM FIRST, the old man, as he comes shuffling down the hallway, swaying slightly from side to side as if he might either totter over or come to a creaking halt. His head, bald except for a few random silver wisps, is buried in a hardback notebook. He looks up from the pages to avoid crashing into the furniture, sits down, checks himself, and then, in a voice resonant but slightly slurred, begins to read:

*What about Sophocles?
What about him?
Never grew senile
Mind never dim
Turned out a masterpiece
Every few days
Up to his final year
Ten dozen plays
What about Sophocles?
What about me?
Still in my 80s
Hale as can be*

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*Who would his end foretell
Thinks to live on
Waits for a tortoise
Dropped on a stone*

It's not that the old man is anticipating death, far from it. It's just that at the age of 81, in the midst of his 'second childhood', he believes it's only natural to apprehend a universal truth and ask of himself 'What about me?'

Like Sophocles, Alec Derwent Hope has no idea of when the big sleep will begin. He only knows that his legs are crumbling first and that there is much work still to be done.

HOW DO YOU INTRODUCE A legend? By concentrating on the astonishing virtuosity of the man described once by an American critic as the greatest 18th-century poet living in the 20th century? Or do you quote from the poems that scandalised the nation and the reviews that burnt holes in authors' hearts?

Of course, one could list the countless awards and accolades showered on him and the volumes of poetry, critical reviews and essays written over a lifetime. One could mention that at eight he had written a 52-stanza poem for his mother on the virtues of Christianity or that a year later he was already so familiar with the works of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats and Shelley that he likened them to 'familiar friends'. By the age of 10 he had read Milton and tackled Byron, by 12 he had written a novel; and by 14 his first poems had been published.

You see, talking about A.D. Hope is very different from talking to him. For one thing, he prefers to let his work speak for him. For another, you need to shout to overcome his deafness and a poor hearing device.

HOW DO YOU START A POEM, PROFESSOR HOPE?

It seems an appropriate question to ask the grandfather of Australian literature, a man who was awarded an OBE in 1972, a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1981 and numerous other prizes for his outstanding contribution to Australian literature. After all, he pioneered the study of literature here when others were still saying 'What literature?' He founded the first such course at the Canberra University College, later to become incorporated into the Australian National University, and in 1968 was made emeritus professor of English there. In 1974, they named a building after him.

Then there are his millions of words already published. Last year he

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finished his first comic play. Next year he hopes to have a collection of 80 or 90 new poems published. Look to the dusty shelves of his library at home and there are also partly completed prose narratives which he intends turning into novels 'in the next 150 years'.

However, for the moment, he's in the middle of translating the works of three poets—Camöens, a 15th-century Portuguese; Krylov, an 18th-century Russian; and Catullus, a first-century BC Roman. (Alec Hope reads 11 languages including Old Icelandic.)

So, how do you start a poem? They never told you at school. They simply said, 'This is what he meant when he wrote' . . . And most of the time you believed your teacher because he was invested with that sort of authority. But now you are sitting in front of the Patriarch himself, remembering the first time you had to study *Australia* or *The Death of the Bird* and how the teacher told you that one was anti-nationalist and the other isolationist. Now you can ask him yourself.

'Oh yes, that poem that I wrote in a disgruntled mood when I came back from England called *Australia*. It follows me round like a bad smell.'

*And her five cities, like five teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores
Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilisation over there.*

'People say, "How could you abuse your own country so much?'" Hope continues. 'I say: "Did you read to the end of the poem?" It leads up to a conclusion where I say in fact it is a place I would like to live. People always assume that everything you write applies to your views on the whole of life. I wouldn't dream of writing the same poem today. It's quite a different country. I feel I fit into it a good deal better than I did in that time.'

And what about *The Death of the Bird*, described by Dr Bob Brissenden, writer and former chairman of the Australia Council's Literature Board, as 'one of the great poems of the 20th century'? Hope chortles as he remembers the letters he used to get from schoolchildren asking, 'What does the poem symbolise?' He nods his head like a sage. 'I used to write back and say, "It doesn't symbolise anything. It is just about a bird. That sort of thing happens to birds."

'But they were partly right, the kids. I hit on it later on. I changed my

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reply then. I said, “The famous poem *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose* is just about the poet’s girlfriend. But you are perfectly justified in applying it to your girlfriend.” The emotion in the poem is the same for anyone in love. But don’t make the mistake of saying the poem is meant to symbolise something or other. All sorts of things will fit.’

Ah, Professor Hope. What was my teacher saying? Like others, he tried to tell me what you must have been thinking. Just like the literary critics who attempted to label you.

AT FIRST A.D. HOPE WAS the ‘unknown’ poet and then the ‘un-Australian’ poet, mainly because the only times he seemed to be writing about his country were when he was disparaging it.

They called him a satirist who peddled salacious and inflammatory verse. They said he was like a modern Manichee obsessed with sex and sin. When he became the first Australian to have a poem published in *Playboy*—a poem that for years had flourished in the underground—they thought it was the appropriate place for his work. They didn’t realise *The Ballad of Dan Homer* was both lewd and scholarly.

But then they changed, and instead of calling him a radical he became a conservative, a classicist, really, who worshipped at the altar of rhyme and formal verse. Others, of course, preferred to hedge their bets. They turned him into a romantic rationalist, a rebel with traditions.

And now the mirth catches in his mouth as a half cackle and half cough before he finally says: ‘I am basically conservative in most matters and would agree with all the other things that people say about me.’ But let’s face it, it was what A.D. Hope said about others that really got them talking. For example, he said of young Max Harris’s first novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, that Harris was ‘morally sick’ and that he couldn’t write. Understandably, Harris remembers it to this day. Hope went in for the kill, he says, almost like ‘going around shooting baby rabbits in their burrows’.

As for Patrick White, what a mugging Hope gave *Tree of Man*. White refused to comment for this article, perhaps because he’s not well or perhaps it’s because, as Professor Leonie Kramer says, ‘Patrick has never forgiven him.’ Hope wrote that White had three disastrous faults as a novelist. ‘He knows too much, he tells too much and he talks too much.’ The book, he said, is ‘pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge’. David Martin’s selected poems copped a hiding, too. Hope described them as ‘crude and debased art’. As for Mary Gilmore, her verse was likened to ‘a daily batch of scones’.

Talk about living up to his motto: ‘Smite and spare not.’ They called

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it the 'Hopean scourge' and they were right. He was unrelenting, brilliant and cruel. But was it deliberate cruelty or was it, as writer Brian Matthews said, the 'unrestrained effusions of someone intoxicated with his own wit'?

Looking at him now in his living room, dappled in the pale Canberra light, it's hard to imagine a less cruel man. He offers another glass of wine and then begins to speak about Norma Davis, the young writer he demolished for her efforts in *Earth Cry in Poetry* 43 years ago. She died shortly after the review, which is when he stopped reviewing. It is clear he still blames himself, in part, for her death. 'I was much too harsh on her. I didn't realise it was her first production. She lived only just in time to see my unfortunate commentary and some friends of hers found it had been a bitter blow. That, I think, is the thing that I most have on my conscience now, because it is irreparable.'

You ask what else plagues him and he looks at you with his cool blue eyes and says, 'This is not a confessional.'

ALEC HOPE WAS BORN IN 1907 in Cooma, NSW, to a teacher mother and Presbyterian minister father. At the age of four his family moved to Tasmania where he lived until he was 14. Hope remembers he was a 'poetic child' but that, one day, around the age of 10, it dawned on him that poetry would be his vocation. He was 'sitting in an old wicker chair in the garden between a japonica hedge and the tankstand' reading Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* when poetry cast its spell.

It is not certain when Alec Hope finally emerged as Australia's most outstanding poet. This was due, in part, to the fact that he was 48 before his work was first published in book form. Nevertheless, the torch was passed to him more than 20 years earlier, around 1932, by another great Australian poet of the European tradition, Christopher Brennan. Their encounter in the toilet of the Mansions Hotel in Kings Cross was as bizarre as it was brief. Brennan died shortly afterwards.

Hope was standing in the cubicle when Brennan loomed up beside him. Hope tried to engage the ageing drunkard in conversation and when that proved futile, he pulled out a pencil and began writing on the wall one of the inscriptions from the Pompeii Wall: FUTUITUR CUNNUS PILOSSUS (The Hairy Cunt).

'Brennan took the pencil out of my hand and finished the quotation,' Hope says. Brennan wrote: MULTO MELIUS QUAM GLABER (Fucks Much Better Than The Plucked One).

'He didn't talk about the contents at all. He gave a fascinating short talk about the metre. He said, "You know it's a septenarius, of course."

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[His talk] only lasted five or six minutes. And he slumped away again and I had my pee and came back to find him . . . collapsed. That was the only time I met him.'

JUST PICTURE IT, AN 81-YEAR-OLD man dancing up and down on his failing knees with a naked three-year-old girl. The man is grinning from ear to ear and his partner is shrieking with delight. There is no music playing and the old man wouldn't hear it even if there were.

Dr David Brooks, lecturer in English at the ANU, enters his home bearing a vegetarian pizza to discover his mentor hopping with his daughter. 'It was like a storm breaking,' says Brooks now. 'Alec was starting to come back after his wife's death.'

Alec and Penelope Hope had celebrated 50 years of living together just before a sudden, massive heart attack took her from him in July 1988, four months short of her 80th birthday. The books she was reading—her husband's—are still at the end of her single bed.

According to Brooks, she was a great foil for Hope's genius, an 'independent, intelligent' woman who viewed university departments of English with a healthy scepticism. Her death, and that of their daughter, Emily, in 1979 from cancer, are the two greatest blows Hope has endured.

Even those who have known the emeritus professor for years claim that despite being a great conversationalist and dear friend, he likes to keep a cordon around his heart. He has even written, with what appears to be primordial fear, of the 'archaeologist' who 'surveys my ruins'. And with the death of many of his poet friends—James McAuley, David Campbell and, most recently, Vincent Buckley—the cordon has tightened perceptibly.

But you pry anyway, half expecting him to dismiss you with those famous lines of his: '*The journalist with his marketable woes . . . Of fatuous, flatulent, Sunday-paper prose.*' He doesn't, of course. He's far too polite for that and so he considers the question: What do you feel passionate about now?

'Nothing, really,' he says eventually. 'I am not attached to any political party or view. I don't like getting into fights, apart from baiting Patrick White now and again. I prefer a quiet life.'

Why bait Patrick White? 'I am afraid he goes off very easily. He has not got much sense of humour, I think. On the other hand, what I said about *Tree of Man*—Patrick's subsequent novels have all been ones about which I would make no exception at all. He has settled into a very formidable prose style which I can enjoy very much.'

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Hope once said he would like to read the 'bunyip of Australian literature'—the great Australian novel—before he dies. Has he read it yet? 'Ah, I would think that Randolph Stow has got pretty close to it in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. I think it was the great West Australian novel. I would think that Patrick White could lay claim to having written it in several different ways but the whole thing is a bit of a joke, of course.'

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR DREAM workers, Professor Hope.

'Well, if I'm going into that I better have another drink. There should be another flagon in there,' he says, pointing to a kitchen cupboard. The shadows have left the room now and the face of Christ, painted many years ago by Emily, hangs in reverence from the opposite wall. Abyssinia, the 120-year-old cat, brushes past the professor's leg.

'A great many poems all my life have come at first or second remove from dreams,' he says after taking a sip. 'A good example is a poem about places in the far future in which I had a dream—somewhere in the north of Siberia where they had just discovered a lost remnant of the white race which had disappeared from the world. I reconstituted the dream, putting the narrative in the voice of the daughter of somebody who had gone up to report on them. What began as a dream pure and simple was now organised into a poem that brought in biological information from other sources. I know the actual title came to me in the dream—*The People of the Pale*. It was a long time afterwards that anything happened and it got in its final form. [But] it's fairly typical of the way dreams combine with waking thoughts and the final result.'

*Yesterday—was it only yesterday?—
We came back from the People of the Pale.
The compound where they live is hidden away
So that few now have heard of their strange tale.*

*'They were a turbulent folk and, in the end,
Destroyed themselves and half the world by war,
The Dark Age followed. Well, we don't pretend
To know much of what went before . . . '*

The old man toddles back from his bedroom, tilting as if out of control. He is holding the notebook with his new, unpublished poems. There's also a note there to himself commenting on a story written about him by an Italian journalist who likened Hope to T.S. Eliot and Robert Graves—

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poets whom Hope says in his notebook, 'I dislike, deplore and have, for the most part, criticised as perverse or second-rate.' Even in his own notebook he wields his infamous 'scalpel and bludgeon'. And yet he remains first and foremost a poet whose handiwork is as much the satire and muse as it is the ballad and dirge or elegy and verse.

How would he like to be remembered? For the depths of doom that he has taken his reader to, or for the joyous heights? 'I wouldn't care if I wasn't remembered at all,' he says, 'except in the way Chaucer and Shakespeare are remembered—a few meagre facts about their lives and no details about the person at all.'

Are you scared of dying?

'Don't think about it much. It depends on what circumstances. There is a story about Swift in his old age pointing to a tree that was beginning to go brown at the top. "I shall be like that tree," he said. "I shall begin to die at the top." And so he did. He went mad and he knew he was going mad and that is something that one has a horror of. I am pleased that my legs give way and the top end seems to be all right so far.'

The old man opens the notebook and clears his throat. He tells you this one is called *Card Game* and that it should be published early next year.

*Club, diamond, heart and spade
Under these the game is played
Warfare, wealth, love and death
Dominate our every breath
Players are not free to choose
Suit assigned nor hand refuse
Dealt them careless of their skill
Shuffled blindly, well or ill
Wealth I had no talent for
Lacked all aptitude for war
Death at most might set me free
Hearts were always trumps to me*

Postscript

Almost 10 years to the day after this story was published I went looking for A.D. Hope. I was told by the poet Anne Fairbairn that far from death having set him free, he was in the grip of a 'tragic, drawn-out horror'.

Unable to walk, completely deaf and suffering from diabetes and advanced dementia, this grandfather of Australian literature was in early 1999 sharing a

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room with a Croatian man on the second floor of a nursing home in Canberra. His life was devoid of conversation, books, music or poetry, except that which might be heard inside his own head. He also had few visitors, save for people like Fairbairn and one or two other reverent friends.

Fairbairn said she liked to try to see him regularly. She would come armed with a bottle of white wine and recollections of their trips at sunset to Lake Burley Griffin. She would do the talking and, on a good day, he would nod and smile and utter a word or two in reply. She felt sure there were sparks of recognition still left in him.

On a sweltering January day we went to his house in Arthur Circle, now being rented out as a yoga and meditation school, and stood under the pear tree in a garden wild with weeds and honeysuckle. Fairbairn remarked darkly that the garden was now a metaphor for A.D. Hope's mind. 'In disarray but still evocative.'

We then drove to the nursing home and as we walked up the stairs, and along an antiseptic corridor lined with French impressionist prints, she warned that I might be in for a shock.

Alec Hope was lying in a recliner chair in the dining room, his skeletal legs poking into a pair of ugh boots. He was staring at the ceiling and his face, a face that had once been so brimming with life and quizzical mischief, was cadaverous and vacant.

'Alec, this is David,' Fairbairn said with a tender squeeze. 'He's come to see you.' And then, turning to me, she said: 'Go on, talk to him. I'll be back.'

We were left together with the ambient music piping out of the walls and the sun beating down mercilessly on the roof. A woman stood nearby in the corridor calling for someone who wasn't there. Another sat clutching a fluffy, white teddy bear, leafing through her private papers.

'Are you comfortable, Professor?' I ventured after a minute. The milky, blue pools of his eyes grazed mine before turning back towards the ceiling. 'Do you know what is happening?' I said, bending towards him.

'Are they treating you well? Do you remember you wrote to me about Sophocles?'

(Some weeks after my story appeared I had received a letter from Hope attesting to an error he had made about Sophocles. It hadn't been Sophocles, he said, that had died from the tortoise being dropped on his head. It had been the Greek poet Aeschylus. 'It goes to show,' he wrote, 'that one should check everything, especially what you are told by retired professors with memories like sieves.'))

Hope lay there saying nothing. After 10 minutes, I stood to go and as I touched his arm I could have sworn I saw the flicker of a smile dance across the wreck of his face. A vague rumbling began in his mouth, and ended just as quickly.

Anne Fairbairn and I drove together to the lake to see the black swans and the Brindabellas shimmering in the heat haze. We took refuge under the willows as

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the carillon bells burst into song. Fairbairn turned to me and said they must be ringing for Alec. At that moment I truly believed her.

*On Aspen Island we drink to poetry
watching the Brindabellas claim the sun.
As fiery skies ignite the sleeping lake,
flocks of birds drawing water skirts.*

*You ask, 'How have you managed this miracle?'
'We held a dawn meeting,' I reply,
'These birds are paying homage to you, Alec.'
'No,' you smile, 'they're here to say goodbye.'
The lake soon sleeps again, the birds take flight
We raise our glasses to the coming night.*

*Now, months later, you are with those ghosts
that haunt the heart's possession, tidily
alone, quietly cared for, out of sight.*

Anne Fairbairn, With A.D. Hope at Sunset