Morag Fraser review of Susan Lever, *A. D. Hope: A Life*

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Rediscovery can be exhilarating. When, in 2025, the National Gallery of Australia exhibited paintings and ceramics by early twentieth-century artists Ethel Carrick and Anne Dangar as part of their 'Know My Name' initiative, familiar works from faded NGA postcards were injected with new vitality. Deft curation and contextualising, augmented by savvy catalogues, can be as effective as skilled restoration in bringing works of art back to vivid life. Suddenly, that odd black earthenware jug with cubist slip decoration acquired an intriguing historical provenance, a 'how, where, and why' of its making, to enhance its intrinsic lustre.

Poets are not so easily rescued from cultural forgetfulness. Poetic fashions change. New names write themselves over past icons. When A. D. Hope, once Australia's best-known poet, died in July 2000, his pre-eminent position had long been assumed by new generations of poets. His biographer, Susan Lever, acutely conscious of that cultural shift, is assertive about its causes and consequences:

> Though Hope has retained many admirers, his reputation has not recovered from persistent dismissals by younger poets and critics in the last decade of his life. The Australian critical obsession with literary modernism, with its trust in experimental art as progressive both artistically and politically, renders Hope's poetry as regressive, old-fashioned, part of Australia's rearguard action against the major art movement of the twentieth century. (p. 3)

What might precipitate a twenty-first century reassessment? 'The evidence of his life', argues Lever. And she proceeds to provide it, in a biography that conjures a century of Australian literary, academic and social history, in eloquent, sometimes confronting, though never salacious, detail. This is the life of a poet-academic, not a tell-all biography of a public figure. Hope himself had resisted exposure: 'It is my general principle to cheat the gossip mongers if I can—no letters, no memoirs, no biography—to leave simply a body of verse to speak for itself' (p. 6).

Lever defies the letter of his injunction, but, I would maintain, honours its spirit: 'Until now a biography has not eventuated, perhaps because of Hope's careful efforts to hide his personal life. He enjoyed the attention of women all his life' (p. 6).

So, no 'scandalous revelations', but a frank, deeply incised portrait of a multifaceted man, sensual (he delighted in nude sunbathing) and astringent by turns (see his more acerbic criticism, of, for example, Patrick White, who referred to Hope as the

'great panjandrum of Canberra'). It is one of Lever's virtues that she gives context to the thrusts of these rhetorically accoutred men rather than leaving their barbs in anecdotal limbo.

An allied strength of the biography is Lever's way of incorporating Hope's poetry (135 poems referenced) without clotting her narrative. Poems and life run in parallel, never one 'behind' or 'explaining' the other (always a delusion) but illuminating by proximity. The result: Hope's poems come alive; they beckon and startle in their timeless pertinence. Forget Australian poetry's divisions or style skirmishes and savour the poignant beauty of, for example, 'Moschus Moschiferus', or the chiselled outrage of 'Inscription for a War' and 'The Mayan Books' (anthologised in *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse*.)[1]

Who was he, this scholar who professed poetry? Alec Derwent Hope was born in Cooma, New South Wales, in 2007, son of a Presbyterian minister and a teacher. When the family moved to Tasmania, Florence, his mother, undertook to educate Alec (called 'Sonny Jim') at home. Hope retained habits of self-education throughout his life (at 80 he was translating Catullus). He also retained some ingrained Presbyterian caution, even after relinquishing religious belief. At the University of Sydney he was influenced (as were many) by John Anderson, the Scottish professor of philosophy. Hope credited Anderson with exercising 'a continual pressure on my thinking' (p. 30). Lever adds:

> Under Anderson's influence, Hope developed the suspicion of doctrines and belief systems—political, religious or literary (including, at times good taste)—that recurs in his poetry and his criticism—in a sometimes contrarian, often satirical, style. (p. 30)

Lever does not duck controversial aspects of Hope's life or poetry. She honours the complexity of his marriage and the intellectual depth of his affairs. She details regimes of censorship and publishing that constrained his more Rabelaisian instincts. She does, convincingly, depict Hope as a passionate man, intent on a poetics of serious thought, employing formal structures to apprehend and give memorable expression to the mysteries of human experience, most crucially, of love.

Hope lived for 92 years—a long life. 'A very tame affair' (p. 259) he called it. In that 'tame affair', he experienced academic success in Australia and failure at Oxford (a third marked him, as perhaps it did three other Oxford dropouts, W. H. Auden, John Betjeman and Stephen Spender). He studied psychology and taught (including sex education). He met witty, wry Penelope Robinson, married and had three children with her. He became an ABC broadcaster, playing 'Anthony Inkwell' to aspiring Argonaut poets (Jeffrey Smart was Phidias, art mentor). He made friends of James McAuley and Harold Stewart, and was a bystander at the Ern Malley Affair. In 1951,

1 Peter Porter, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

he was appointed to the chair in English at (the then-named) Canberra University College. There he introduced and championed the teaching of Australian literature, distinguishing Canberra's offering from that at the University of Melbourne.

And all while he wrote poetry.

Hope did not really believe in literary 'research', and juggling academic and poetic demands proved arduous. Publication of his verse came relatively late, 1955 for his first book, *The Wandering Islands*. His work was more favourably received in the clear air of international literary commentary than at home. Lever's explanation of the phenomenon is intriguing, and, I believe, convincing.

When Hope and Lever became friends in the 1980s, no 'Life' was contemplated. Forty years on, Lever acknowledges the personal connection but does not allow it to obtrude. If anything, her brief reminiscences add clear-eyed, piquant testimony to a fascinating biography that does justice to Alec Hope's life and to the great hoard of poetry that is his enduring legacy.

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