

LESLIE (“LES”) ALLAN MURRAY AO FAHA

1938–2019

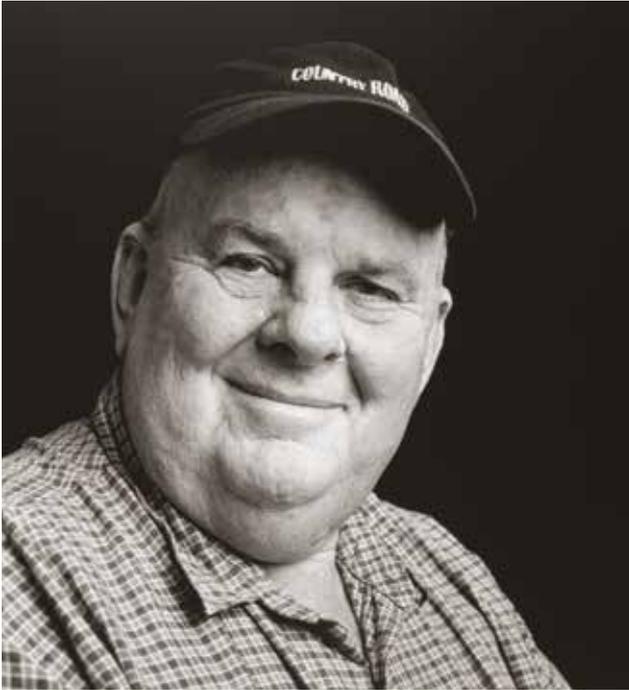


PHOTO: LES MURRAY, 2003 BY NORMAN MCBEATH. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, CANBERRA.

When Les Murray died in April 2019 at the age of 80 there was an outpouring of recognition and sentiment in the Australian and international media. There was the sense that Australia had lost one of its defining cultural figures. The headline in the *New York Times* referred to Murray as Australia’s ‘Unofficial Poet Laureate’ (2 May 2019). *The Australian* obituaries followed the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s lead, eulogizing Murray as the ‘leading poet of his generation and possibly of this country’s history’ (29 April 2019). Many of the honours he had won during his life were listed, Australian and international literary awards, Officer of the Order of Australia, the T.S. Eliot Prize (1996), Honorary Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the 1998 Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry. David Malouf described his work as ‘undoubtedly the best poems anybody has produced in Australia’ (*The Guardian*, 29 April 2019), while Nam Le described Murray’s *Collected Poems* published not long before his death as a ‘magisterial’ volume. In June 2019 New South Wales gave Murray a State Memorial Service.

In tandem with the smiling public man, there had been the poet who wrote with extraordinary subtlety and originality about the world around him, about the

history of his country, and about the many hurts and angers of his life. He was scarred by the tragic early death of his mother, by schoolyard bullying, and by the unhappy history of his father’s farming experience. He endured growing up in rural poverty, haphazard work experiences as a young man, and later in life long bouts of depression. He wrote about this mental illness in *Killing the Black Dog* (1997; 2009), a book that connected with many sufferers from this disability. But he never wavered in his commitment to writing poetry, to exploring the consolations of the language art. He was also one of Australia’s most accomplished essayists. As a writer he was sustained by his wife Valerie and their five children, by the love of his native region, the Central Coast and hinterland of New South Wales, and by the support of his adopted Catholicism. Most of his later books were dedicated, simply, to the ‘greater glory of God,’ and in his essay ‘Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia’ he speculated on the different positions of religious belief, including what he saw as an Australian version of Shinto. An expansive idea of poetry provided Murray with a way of understanding human existence, including spirituality, as well as a pathway through history and culture. The claims he made were unashamedly partisan; an essay titled ‘Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment,’ for example, begins: ‘humans are not rational, but poetic.’ In this essay and others about poetics he argued for the poetic experience as essentially and distinctively human – that which poetry exists to provide. Poetry, for Murray, was a fundamental mystery, an antithesis of the secular and utilitarian tendencies within Western culture, or narrowness of thinking and speaking in all their forms. It was the source of another of his audacious claims, that even ‘religions are poems.’

From his vantage point in Australia Murray conceived a narrative about the Western literary tradition that was designed to prise open the unexamined assumptions of the cultural capitals of the northern hemisphere and their relegation of country and provincial life. What he named the Boeotian-Athenian axis was prompted by a debate with the expatriate Australian poet Peter Porter as a way of characterising the centuries-long duality of rural and metropolitan versions of art, and of his own genealogy as a national poet. In 1975 Porter had written a poem ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Hesiod’ where what jumps out at him from reading Chapman’s translation is not so much Hesiod as ‘something strange/

And balking – Australia/ my own country'. Porter goes on to critique the pastoral tradition in poetry and his native land's role in representing a contemporary version of that tradition. The poem is sometimes sardonic in tone but at the same time acknowledges the strange attractions of Australian agrarian life and writing. Murray is a barely veiled presence in Porter's poem, he clearly feels the power of antipodean, non-metropolitan poetics. But it ends with his praise for the city where 'home is just a postmark/ And country wisdom clings to calendars,/ the opposite of a sunburned truth-teller's/ World.' Murray's response to this poem, an essay from 1978, 'On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter's Boeotia' dilates upon the long literary succession, beginning with Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 'coming down through Theocritus and Virgil and the high vernacular poetry of the Middle Ages to Wordsworth and Frost and a hundred more in modern times; most recently, in Australia, it surfaces in David Campbell's own *Works and Days*.' Very generally, Murray asserts, the Athenian tradition is characterised by conflict and resolution, while the Boeotian is interested in 'celebration and commemoration.' This strand in Murray's thinking, a kind of settler aesthetics, would run through all his later work, growing sometimes more stridently critical of urban elites and defensive about the distinctiveness of Australian culture's laconic, bush influences.

Murray's imagination, then, both political and literary was full of grand contradictions. The Boeotian strain in his writing, for instance, includes many poems about the myriad faces of the Australian landscape and topography, full of delicate observations of plant and animal life, as well as about the lore and cruelty of farm life, and the effects of ecocide. In later years, his role as cultural warrior, a *Quadrant* stalwart, involved moralising on various sides about the social antagonism between country and city, and about modernity and its values. Yet in the late 1970s he articulated an idea of the Vernacular Republic, which has at its centre an understanding of common life and language, and a sense of Australian independence in the face of self-denigrating, colonising tendencies in Australian society and history. Part of the development of this idea included a response to the voluntary exile of various Australian artistic figures, like Peter Porter, some of them Murray's contemporaries, who in the 1950s and 60s felt they had to leave Australia for the cultural capitals of the northern hemisphere. Murray's 1986 *Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, in its inclusiveness of folk and popular verse is a kind of complementary project, to the *Vernacular Republic* essay, of national mythologizing. These few lines from the 'Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle' emblemise Murray's localised language of social equity:

In the country of memorial iron, on the creek-facing hills there,

they are thinking about bean plants, and rings of tank water, of growing a pumpkin by Christmas;

rolling a cigarette, they say thoughtfully Yes, and their companion nods, considering.

Fresh sheets have been spread and tucked tight, childhood rooms have been seen to,

for this is the season when children return with their children

to the place of Bingham's Ghost, of the Old Timber wharf. Of the Big Flood That Time.

That idea of the vernacular republic may look outdated now, given discussion in recent decades of the history of settlement and Indigenous sovereignty, but the idea of an Australian republic remains necessarily linked to any thinking about the constitutional and spiritual settlement of Australia.

In 2001 the leading journal *Australian Literary Studies* devoted a whole issue to Murray's work. The editors Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross explained that the reason for the collection of critical essays was that there was a 'disparity in Australia between Murray's acknowledged stature as the leading poet and the relatively small amount of criticism of his work.' They attributed this situation to the 'distracting effect of a complex combination of cultural politics and biographical circumstances' that meant that critical reception of his work in Australia was far outweighed by his overseas, particularly European, reception. And it was true, Australian critics have been generally reluctant to acknowledge the cultural narrative of Les Murray as more than just a 'national' poet, rather than as one of the transnational 'New Barbarians,' along with poets like Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, and Joseph Brodsky, poets who arrived from the formerly colonised margins to take command of the Anglo-American centres of the English language and to renew it in their own distinctive styles.

While the power and richness of Murray's writing is widely recognized some of the formal and thematic aspects of his work have proved difficult for Australian critics and readers to come to terms with. The Indigenous provenance of his much admired poetic sequence, 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle,' for instance, and the affective and historical origins of his epic-length poem *Fredy Neptune* (1998) in the Armenian genocide remain challenges, sometimes controversial ones, for readers interested in the evolution of poetry in Australia. Yet Murray's prolific poetic oeuvre is full of memorable and striking linguistic effects, ones that have delighted readers across a broad spectrum. As Peter Goldsworthy wrote, in one of the many eulogistic assessments of Murray shortly after his death: 'we see more things for the first time, and see more familiar things renewed, in his

poetry' (*The Saturday Paper*, 4–10 May 2019). In this sense Murray's affinity is perhaps most with Gerard Manley Hopkins, with his emphasis on sight and hearing of the world with a synergy of poetic animation. A poem like 'Bat's Ultrasound,' for example, creates an astonishing human equivalent to an aspect of animal behaviour out of linguistic sound effects:

Sleeping-bagged in a duplex wing
with fleas, in rock-cleft or building
radar bats are darkness in miniature,
their whole face one tufty crinkled ear
with weak eyes, fine teeth bared to sing.

Few are vampires. None flit through the mirror.
Where they flutter at evenings a queer
tonal hunting zone above highest C.
Insect prey at the peak of our hearing
drone re to their detailing tee:

ah, eyrie-ire, aero hour, eh?
O'er our ur-area (our era eye
ere your raw row) we air our array,
err, yaw, row wry – aura our orrery,
our eerie ü our ray, our arrow.

A rare ear, our aery Yahweh.

His poems are also full of witty imagistic simile, like this from 'Second Essay on Interest: the Emu,' a poem which leads into moralising about war and peace in the modern world, but which begins in arresting observation of a 'bygone' bird that has become heraldic of a nation:

Weathered blond as a grass tree, a huge Beatles haircut
Raises an alert periscope and stares out
Over scrub.

Often the accuracy of Murray's observation is a product of the precise, even arcane word, whose presence and effects as word, slightly precedes the image, as here in a late poem, 'Goths in Leipzig':

Goths of half Europe,
Clad in gilet and swart ruff.

As Murray wrote in an elegiac piece about Philip Hodgins, the Australian poet who died young of leukemia, 'no poet likes their achievement to rest on the facts of biography.' What he meant, of course, was that it is the body of work that is the sign of any writer's achievement. Chances are that rather than the resilient attempts to articulate overarching versions of Australian history and nation, or his wrangles with modern morality – however interesting these are as a writer's expression of individuality – it will be the electric conjunction of observation and language in his poetry of country and nature that will be the most sustainable facet of Murray's work.

PHILIP MEAD FAHA

Les Murray published the poems 'When Two Percent Were Students' and 'The Care' in *Humanities Australia*, No. 6, 2015.