
UNIT 1 NINETEENTH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN POETRY : AN INTRODUCTION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will study the development of Australian poetry from its inception to the end of the nineteenth century. To understand the distinctive features of Australian poetry published during the nineteenth century, we will examine its predominant thematic concerns and modes of articulation. This survey of nineteenth century Australian poetry will equip you better for comprehending the significance and the historical context of the individual poets and their poems which will be analysed in the subsequent units.

1.1 A SURVEY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN POETRY

You must remember that though Australia existed as a landmass since the pre-cambrian age, it did not have human population for a considerable period of time. Its earliest inhabitants were nomads who migrated from South-East Asia about forty thousand years ago. They developed an indigenous culture of their own though they did not have any written dialect. They were designated as Aborigines by the white people who discovered the route to the island continent in the late eighteenth century. In 1770, **Captain Cook** (1728 - 79) discovered the route from England to Australia, landed at Botany Bay, named the whole of the east coast of Australia 'New South Wales' and took possession of it for Britain.

On 26 January 1788, **Captain Arthur Phillip** (1738 - 1814) unfurled the Union Jack on the shore of Sydney Cove. The day is celebrated as Australia Day. He was appointed the first Governor-General of the British Settlement which began as a penal colony with convicts and jailers transported from Britain. Hence, in the eighteenth century there was no Australian literature. In this respect **Judith Wright** has observed :

If there were men of a poetic turn among the convicts and soldiers of the first settlement, they had probably no time or inclination to exercise the gift. Mere survival, and a fair share of the rum, perhaps filled the early ambitions of most. (1964: 58)

Ironically as well as perhaps appropriately, the first 'poet - laureate' of Australia is **Michael Massey Robinson** (1744 - 1826), a convict who landed in Australia in 1805. In 1811 he obtained pardon. He composed and published odes in *Sydney Gazette* to celebrate the birthdays of George III and Queen Charlotte (1810 - 21). In *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, it is observed :

In 1818 and 1819 he (Robinson) was repaid ' for his services as Poet Laureate ' by a grant of two cows from the government herd, probably the first royalties to a poet in Australia . (595)

Next poet in Australia is **Francis Macnamara** (1811 - ?), another convict who is known ' as a composer of cheeky extempore verse. ' (Wilde : 451)

Along with convicts, some officers also penned verses. Notable among them is **Barron Field** (1786 1846), a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. In 1819, the first book of Australian verse was published. Field chose the title *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* for the book to emphasize its primacy and historical importance. **Wright** points this out :

.... it (*First Fruits*) has the merit of being the first (and for a long time the only) verse produced in Australia which shows any interest in the local productions of flowers and animals. (59)

W.C. Wentworth (1793 - 1872) is ' the first native-born Australian to publish any verse' (Wright : 60) . While at Cambridge in 1823 he composed the poem *Australasia* which was a significant entry for the Chancellor's Prize for that year.

However, the first book of poems to be published in Australia by a poet born in Australia is entitled *Wild Notes, from the Lyre of a Native Minstrel* (1823) . The poet is **Charles Thompson** (1807 - 83) .

The most important of the early versifiers of Australia is **Charles Harpur** (1813 - 68) who was the son of convict parents. He is the first Australian poet to take up the vocation of a poet seriously. He is the first poet who felt the moral compulsion to write Australian poetry. His published works include *Thoughts : A Series of Sonnets* (1845), *The Bushrangers : A Play in Five Acts and other Poems* (1853), *The Tower of the Dream* (1865), and several smaller works, a broadsheet, *Songs of Australia, First Series* (1850), pamphlet containing two poems, entitled *A poet's Home* (1862), and a four-page booklet, *A Rhyme* (1864) . The first Harpur collected edition was the posthumous *Poems*, edited by H.M. Martin in 1883. According to *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Harpur's ambition was to be Australia's first authentic poetic voice. (318)

Next important poet is **Henry Kendall** (1839 - 82) . One significant fact about Kendall is that ' he was virtually the only Australian-born poet of his generation ' (Wright : 69) . He signed his poems ' H. Kendall. N.A.P.' - the initials standing for ' Native Australian Poet.' (Wilkes : viii)

Kendall published three volumes of poetry, *Poems and Songs* (1862), *Leaves from Australian Forests* (1869) and *Songs from Mountains* (1880) . His descriptive lyrics made Australia emerge as a tangible landscape in English poetry. **Geoffrey Serle** comments :

It remains to be said that he was probably the best nineteenth century Australian poet, who earned inclusion in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and *The Oxford Book of English Verse* . (33)

Australian lifestyle is reflected in Australian poetry much more perceptibly by the expatriate poet **Adam Lindsay Gordon** (1833 - 70) . He arrived in Australia in 1853 and remained there till he committed suicide in 1870. In 1864 he published the ballad *The Feud*. In 1867 he published *Astaroth*. His poetic reputation, however, rests on the poems published in two volumes, *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (1867) and *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (1870) . **Brian Elliott** points out :

Nothing in all Colonial poetry matches in importance Gordon's signal achievement, the fixation of the Australian image. (Serle : 34)

With the launch of the most significant Australian literary journal, *Bulletin* , in 1880, a movement for nationalism in Australian literature was initiated. The impact of this is most felt in the poetry of **A.B. Paterson** (1864 - 1941) . Paterson is also known as 'Banjo ' as he used that pseudonym for his early contributions to the *Bulletin*. His first volume of poems entitled *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* (1895) sold out in the week of its publication, and it went through six editions in six months. His ballads about drovers, teamsters, bushrangers, picnic race meetings and animosity between squatters and drovers made him a very popular poet. His other books of poems appeared in the twentieth century. **H.M.Green** highlights the signal contribution of Paterson :

Paterson more than any other balladist, more indeed than any other Australian writer of verse, conveys to us the atmosphere of the Australian countryside and its inhabitants . (405)

You must know that nineteenth century Australian poetry included feminist voices. The most notable Australian woman poet of the century is **Ada Cambridge** (1844 - 1926) . She published her most important book of poems *Unspoken Thoughts* (1887) anonymously. **Patricia Barton** mentions the themes of her poetry :

Unspoken Thoughts expresses indignation at social and sexual injustice, longings for love and sexual expression, explorations of motherhood, fear of death and the agony of illness, and a challenging of conviction and orthodox beliefs . (139)

The span of one hundred years of the nineteenth century witnessed not only the growth and proliferation of western civilization in the newly found continent of Australia but also the development of poetry in English in a new landscape wherein a new civilization gradually matured. Australian poetry started under marks of inheritance from British poetry but gradually absorbed the Australian themes from the nature and people of Australia and simultaneously developed a matching Australian idiom and poetics. Thus nineteenth-Century Australian poetry offers an interesting scope for studying the growth of a new kind of poetry. The various aspects of the same will be studied in the following sections.

1.1.1 Impact of British Poetry

Judith Wright has rightly commented :

The history of Australian poetry from the First Settlement in 1788 until the end of the first world war is largely a study in the adaptation of the European (and specifically English) poetic consciousness and tradition to entirely new, and apparently hostile, conditions. (58)

The adaptation of English poetic diction of Britain is markedly apparent in the poetry of the early versifiers of Australia. For example, the following lines by **M.M. Robinson** immediately echo the metrical rhythm of the heroic couplets used by Pope and other poets of the eighteenth century in Britain :

While his proud Navies aw'd the Subject Main,
And now Discov'ries mark'd his glorious reign :
Reviews the Smiling Dawn of opening Youth,
When mutual Virtue pledg'd connubial Truth.

(Elliott and Mitchell : 13)

English and Irish ballads also made an impact on Australian poetry. For example, **Frank Macnamara** wrote a ballad about a convict Bold Jack Donahoe which is reminiscent of Robert Burns's ballad style . Many anonymous ballads were composed and later published : they imitated the ballad style prevalent in Britain. The following lines from such a ballad is quoted below for illustration :

you'll have no chance for mischief then;
remember what I say,
They'll flog the poaching out of you,
out there at Botany Bay.

(Inglis More : 3)

At this stage of discussion of the impact of British poetry, it will be in the fitness of things to remember what **Wilkes** has pointed about the early verses of Australia :

For almost fifty years after the arrival of the First Fleet , Australian poetry was under the influence of eighteenth-century modes One did not sit down to write " poetry " ; one sat down to attempt an ode, or an elegy, or a satire, and paid attention to the laws of the genre (thus observing the principle of "decorum "). (i)

Thus we find Wentworth's poem *Australasia* is a ' public poem ' in the eighteenth century manner, and it observes the decorum of the ode. A few lines from the poem will illustrate the point :

Lo! thickly planted o'er the glassy bay,
Where Sydney loves her beauties to survey,
And ev'ry morn delighted sees the gleam
Of some fresh pennant dancing in her stream

(Wilkes : ii)

Thompson's volume *Wild Notes* contains odes and elegies which, being apostrophic, ponderous in tone and ornate in language, was largely influenced by the British poetic tradition of eighteenth century. His poem ' Black Town ' is illustrative of the mode.

Ill - fated Hamlet ! from each tott' ring shed,
The sable inmates perhaps forever fled,
(Poor restless wand'ers of the woody plain !
The skies their covert -nature their domain)

(Wilkes : 9)

Wilkes points out :

" Black Town ", styled an elegy, belongs also to the genre of the " local poem ", like Pope's " Windsor Forest " or Goldsmith's " Deserted Village ". (i - ii)

Through the poetry of **Harpur**, British Romanticism makes its first appearance in Australia. **Wilkes** observes :

In his poem ' The Dream by the Fountain ', Harpur declares his love of motherland Australia through an imaginary encounter with the Muse :

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.

(Wilkes ; iii - iv)

In the Australian poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century, perceptible marks of the influence of British Romantic poetry are traceable. **Wilkes** further remarks :

If **Harpur's** main affinity among the Romantics is with Wordsworth ,
Gordon is closer in temperament to the melancholic and reckless Byron , and
in literary predilection to Scott as a writer of ballad and narrative verse . (vi)

About Kendall , **Wilkes'** observation is appropriate ;

Kendall is the foremost exemplar of the Romantic treatment of Australian
landscape in nineteenth-century verse ... Like Harpur , he was influenced by
the Romantic conception of the poet as a solitary dreamer ... (ix)

Thus the poetry of Harpur , Kendall and Gordon bears the imprint of the British
Romantic poetry in various ways. This will be illustrated in detail in the subsequent
units.

1.1.2 Flora and Fauna of Australia

However , despite the marks of imitateness , as pointed out in the preceding section,
what redeems the Australian poetry of the nineteenth century is the attempt on the
part of the poets to assimilate into English language the names of the Australian flora
and fauna. The emotional imperative of both the expatriate and native-born poets of
Australia of this period find a literary reflection in the re-oriented vocabulary and
idiom of this innovative poetry . Distinctively , the flora and fauna of Australia as
reflected in the poetry give it an indigenous colour and flavour.

Wer tworth's *Australasia* mentions and depicts the local space , as in the following
lines , but does not incorporate the typical Australian flora and fauna :

Here lowing kine, these bounding courses graze,
Here waves the corn, and there the woody maize ;
Here the tall peach puts forth its pinky bloom
And there the orange scatters its perfume.....

(Wilkes :5)

Barron Field mentions Kangaroo as ' the spirit of Australia '. **Judith Wright** observes:

'Botany Bay Wildflowers' (Field's poem) is appreciatively of the flora of the
sandstone near Sydney, which had sent Banks into professional
ecstasies.....(60)

Harpur's vow to be ' the bard of thy country ' manifests itself in his vivid description
of the land. Though he made efforts in his poetry to recreate the landscape.
Australian solitude and desolation are very sensitively evoked in the following lines :

Not a bird disturbs the air,
There is quiet everywhere:
Over plains and our woods
what a mighty stillness broods.

(Wilkes :15)

His long poem 'The Creek of the Four Graves' is full of description of the natural landscape. However, he did not try to incorporate any typical Australian flora and fauna. Though 'Lost in the Bush' mentions Kangaroo and bidawongs. About Kendall's poetry, **G.B. Barton** wrote in 1866 :

One striking merit of Mr. Kendall's poetry is, that its colouring is strictly local, and that he has endeavoured to give voice to the majestic scenery of his native land. (Barnes :5)

Kendall's ballads recreate the flora and fauna of Australia. His lyrics and ballads are, however, infused with a note of melancholy that cast on the Australian landscape a cloud of gloom.

Gordon's ballads often recreate the smell of the Australian earth. In his Dedication poem in *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, Gordon gives a vivid picture of eucalyptus :

When the gnarl'd knotted trunks Eucalyptian
Seem'd carved like weird columns Egyptian
With curious device, quaint inscription
And hieroglyph strange.

(Wilkes :62)

His ballad 'The Sick Stockrider' is famous for its vibrant images of the Australian horses and horsemen. Serle writes :

He (Gordon) was the poet of the horse - and the horse was all - important in nineteenth century Australia. (34)

Not only the horses and the horsemen but also the Australian flowers enchanted the poet :

Let me slumber in the hollow where the wattle blossoms wave,
With never stone or rail to fence my bed;
Should the sturdy station children pull the bush flowers on my grave,
I may chance to hear them romping overhead.

(Wilkes : 86)

In his ballads Paterson immortalized the horsemen, particularly in the poem 'The Man from Snowy River'. Thus phase by phase, the nineteenth century Australian poetry acquired the Australian stamp through the gradual incorporation and ethos and milieu.

1.1.3 Colonial Setting and Sentiment

During the nineteenth century, Australia was a British colony. Hence, the poetry that was written during the century in Australia bears the mark of colonial lifestyle and colonial temperament. The adoration of the British empire, the kings and queens, the British colonial officers, the transplanted culture and the upholding of the white civilization permeate the themes and attitudes expressed in the colonial poetry of Australia.

Wentworth's poem *Australasia* epitomizes the glorification of Britain and the celebration of the colonization of Australia in the following lines :

And Australasia Float, with flag unfurled,
A new Britannia in another world!

(Turner: 19)

Gradually, however, the tendency towards nationalism gathered force, and by the end of the century, Australian poetry got rid of inferiority complex and moved towards a robust sense of pride in the country, her people and their achievements, Paterson's poetry registers this change.

1.1.4 Australian Identity

Homesickness, initial surprise and disgust with the strange and uncouth landscape and seasonal variations of the antipodes (while it is summer in Britain, it is winter in Australia) and sense of alienation and displacement gradually gave way to the development of a growing sense of attachment to the land. People of different states came together, and formed the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. During the whole of nineteenth century, the process of integration and development of Australian identity was under way. The identification of the Australian flora and fauna, the bushlife, mateship, horsemanship and other features that characterised the Australian identity find a continual reflection in the nineteenth-century Australian poetry. The poetry of Harpur, Kendall, Gordon, Paterson and Cambridge reflect the development of Australian identity.

1.2 MAJOR THEMES AND STYLISTIC FEATURES

From our discussion of nineteenth century Australian poetry in the preceding sections it appears that Australian poetry focuses on certain themes; to get a closer view of the characteristics of nineteenth century Australian poetry, we will identify the recurrent themes in the nineteenth century Australian poetry in the following sections. Since the themes can be embodied only through words and patterns of verbal representations, a brief study of the stylistic features of nineteenth century Australian poetry will be included in this unit. There could be some repetition; but repetition, in distance education, is - you must remember - for reinforcement.

1.2.1 The Land and the People

For the pioneer Australian poets, the land and the people of Australia were a tantalizing subject matter of utmost curiosity and interest. The landscape encountered by the Australian poets appeared strange and uncouth to them. But gradually they accepted the landscape, and made it a recurring theme of their poetry. Of the first poets to encounter the strangeness of the land, **Barron Field** is most articulate and straightforward in his perception as revealed in the first stanza of the poem 'The Kangaroo':

Kangaroo, Kangaroo !
 Thou Spirit of Australia,
 That redeems from utter failure,
 And warrants the creation
 Of this fifth part of the Earth,
 Which would seem an after-birth,
 Not conceived in the Beginning
 (For GOD bless'd His work at first,
 And saw that it was good),
 But emerg'd at the first sinning,
 When the ground was therefore curst ;
 And hence this barren wood !

(Ackland 1993 : 14)

With the passage of time, a different mode of perception developed. Instead of disgust, a sense of wonder at the manifold grandeur of Australia's natural setting emerged in the poetry of the poets born in the land itself. **Emily Manning** (1845 - 90), born and educated in Sydney contributed many poems under the pseudonym 'Australie'. Her exquisite description of the landscape of Australia is found in most of

her long poems. Her book of poems *The Balance of Pain and Other Poems* was published in 1877. All her poems contain cameos of Australian natural scenery imbued with deep affection for the Australian landscape. I quote below a passage from her poem 'From the Clyde to Braidwood' to illustrate the gradual shift in the perception of Australian landscape from Field to Manning :

Now a barren length
Of tall straight eucalyptus, till again
A babbling voice is heard, and through green banks
Of emerald fern and mossy boulder rocks,
The currawong dances o'er a pebbly bed,
In rippling clearness, or with cresting foam
Splashes and leaps in snowy cascade steps.

(Kramer and Mitchell : 79)

Charles Harpur celebrates Australian landscape in all its minutiae. However, he finds in all the particularities of the Australian scene a universal design and pattern. For example, the concluding lines from the poem 'Dawn and Sunrise in the Snowy Mountains' provide an illustration of the same :

As if the Spirit of Light,
Advancing swiftly thence, and eastward still,
Kept kindling them in quick succession till
The universal company of cones
And pyramidal peaks, standing burning all
With rosy fires, like a wide ranging circ
Of God - great altars, - and even so announce
The Sun that now, with a vast flash, is seen
Pushing his rim above yon central height.

(Ackland 1993 : 22)

In the poetry of Kendall, the sights and sounds of the Australian landscape become a source not only of joy but also of solace. The concluding stanza of his poem 'Bell-Birds' clinches this perception of identification with the Australian flora and fauna:

Often I sit, looking back to a childhood,
Mixt with the sights and the sounds of the wildhood,
Longing for power and the sweetness to fashion,
Lyrics with beats like the heart - beats of Passion ;
Songs interwoven of lights and of laughters
Borrowed from bell - birds in far forest - rafters ;
So I might keep in the city and alleys
The beauty and strength of the deep mountain valleys ;
Charming to slumber the pain of my losses
With glimpses of creeks and a vision of mosses

(Ackland 1993 : 24)

The white pioneers of Australia have been immortalized by Gordon and Paterson through their ballads which have become a part of Australian national heritage, namely Gordon's poem 'The Sick Stockrider', and Paterson's 'The Man from Snowy River'. Since both the poems will be discussed in the subsequent units, no line from the poems is quoted here. The horsemen, the bush rangers and bushmen permeate the Australian poetry of the nineteenth century. Thus the land and the people of Australia are absorbed in the entire corpus of nineteenth century Australian poetry which presents a poetic chronicle of the history of the land and her people.

1.2.2 Estrangement and Alienation

Parallel to the theme of the assimilation of the landscape in Australian poetry is to be found the theme of estrangement and alienation. Again, the phenomenon of encounter

with the bizarre landscape of Australia, and the reminiscences of the British homeland bred in the first poets a deep sense of estrangement and alienation which the later poets gradually overcame. The agony of estrangement and alienation receives an intense verbal articulation in the lines of the three stanzas quoted from the middle of a poem entitled 'The Female Transport' by an anonymous poet :

To hurt my heart when on a coach I my native town passed by ;
 To see so many I did know, it made me heave a sigh ;
 Then to a ship was sent with speed along with many more,
 Whose aching hearts did grieve to go unto Van Diemen's shore.
 The sea was rough, ran mountains high, with us poor girls 'twas hard,
 No one but God to us came nigh, no one did us regard.
 At length, alas! we reached the land, it grieved us ten times more,
 That wretched place Van Diemen's Land, far from our Native shore
 They chained us two by two , and whipped and lashed along,
 They cut off our provisions if we did the least thing wrong ;
 They march us in the burning sun until our feet are sore,
 So hard's our lot now we got to Van Diemen's shore.

(Ackland 1993 : 87)

To the first white occupiers of Australia , who were mostly convicts, the land represented punishment , hence it became a symbol of torture and penalty. So the mental associations of the country were gloomy and forbidding . **Francis Macnamara's** poem 'A Convict's Lament on the Death of Captain Logan' embodies a deep sense of estrangement and alienation. Two stanzas from the poem are reproduced below :

I am a native of Erin's island
 But banished now from my native shore ;
 They tore me from my aged parents,
 And from the maiden I adore.
 In transient storms as I set sailing,
 Like mariner bold my course did steer,
 Sydney Harbour was my destination --
 That cursed place at length drew near.
 He said : ' I've been a prisoner at Port Macquarie,
 At Norfolk Island and Emu plains ;
 At Castle Hill and cursed Toongabbee --
 At all those places I've worked in chains :
 But of all the places of condemnation,
 In each penal station of New South Wales,
 To Moreten Bay I found no equal,
 For excessive tyranny each day prevails

(Ackland 1993 : 89)

1.2.3 Mateship

After the penal colony came to exist as a reality, with more and more shipments of convicts from British shores, Australia witnessed the emerging phenomenon of bushmen and bushrangers -- in the early phase, mostly escaped convicts ranging in the bush. After lonely travels in the daytime through the dry land, the bushrangers settled for the evening and met the fellow - travellers, camped in the bush, and gradually developed a sense of mateship among themselves .

The mateship gradually became a cult phenomenon in the nineteenth century Australia. It acquired the mark of national identity of Australians. Particularly the ballads of Australia celebrated this mateship among bushrangers and horsemen. The sense of mateship permeates the Australian poetry of the nineteenth century : and perhaps this accounts for sympathy and admiration for the escaped convicts who later

were idolized as cult figures. One example is the ballad 'The Wild Colonial Boy' which will be discussed in detail in the next unit. The 'Chorus' stanza of the ballad indicated the first hint of mateship :

Come, all my hearties, we'll roam the mountains high,
Together we will plunder, together we will die.
We'll wander over valleys, and gallop over plains
And we'll scorn to live in slavery, bound down with iron chains.

(Davis : 17)

Mateship is further associated with the identification with the Australian flora and fauna, as illustrated by the first two stanzas of the ballad, 'The Dying Stockman':

A strapping young stockman lay dying,
His saddle supporting his head ;
His two mates around him were crying,
As he rose on his elbow and said :

Chorus : ' Wrap me up with my stockwhip and blanket,
And bury me deep down below,
Where the dingoes and crows can't molest me,
In the shade where the coolibahs grow.

(Davis : 18)

The concept of mateship gradually enlarged itself into the sense of solidarity among people of the community. The commitment to the community gradually developed into a comprehensive craving for national identity among Australians. This gave birth to the publication of the *Bulletin* whose editors gave a clarion call for writing about Australia. Hence the concept of mateship is important and relevant to the growth of Australian poetry in the nineteenth century.

1.2.4 Women's Voices

Mateship, as it developed among the bushrangers, was a masculine phenomenon. But the nineteenth century Australian poetry has a history of women's participation as well. This was not recognized earlier but with recent scholarship in the women's literature in Australia, more facts about women's contribution to the growth of Australian poetry during the nineteenth century has come to light.

Louisa Lawson (1848 - 1920) articulates women's sufferings. Her poem 'Lines Written During a Night Spent in a Bush Inn' not only expresses women's exclusive sufferings but also exhibits women's attachment to the countryside of Australia, as in the last three stanzas quoted below :

And some one among them, with grief in his breast,
Might register roughly the place of my rest
By carving in letters cut deep on its bole
These plain words ' A Woman, May God rest her soul.
In ground that is hallowed let happy folk lie,
But give me a grave in the bush when I die.
For have I not lived, loved and suffered alone ?
Thus making it meet that my grave be unknown
The sound of the stockwhip away on the hill.
Ah, God ! It is day, and I'm suffering still

(Ackland 1993 : 173)

Ada Cambridge's book of poems *Unspoken Thoughts*, as pointed out in an earlier section, articulates woman's protest against male domination in the Australian society. Her poetry will be discussed in a subsequent unit. However, as an

illustration of Cambridge's forthright and daring style which projects the spirit of rebellion in woman, the following four lines of her poem 'An Answer' are quoted below :

Thy love I am. Thy wife I cannot be,
 To wear the yoke of servitude - to take
 Strange, unknown fetters that I cannot break
 On Soul and flesh that should be mine, and free.

(Ackland 1993 : 209)

1.2.5 Australian Poetics

As pointed out earlier, Australian poetry in its initial phase depended on the poetics of the British poetry of the eighteenth century. The narrative style, the ornamental rhetoric, rigidity in verse pattern and heroic couplets of the eighteenth century British poetry left their indelible stamp on the poetics of early Australian poetry. But at the same time, the simplicity and colloquial diction of British ballads, many of which reached Australia with the convicts and other settlers who came from England, Scotland and Ireland, found its way into the evolution of the Australian poetic diction of the nineteenth century. With the passage of time, a traceable impact of the style of Romantic and Victorian poetry is also discernible in the later evolution of Australian poetic style. The poetry of Harpur, Kendall, Gordon, Paterson and Cambridge exhibits a fusion of all the strands mentioned above. However, what transformed the poetic style of Australia during the nineteenth century is the infusion of the images and metaphors culled from Australian flora and fauna, local place-names and the gradual evolution of the ethos of the Australia milieu. The poets gradually adapted the British poetic style to the local situation, and a new distinctive style indigenous to Australia gradually evolved, and gave to Australian poetry a distinctive mode of articulation reflecting the Australian temper.

The specific aspects of the Australian poetic style will be noticed and commented upon in the subsequent units where the texts of several Australian poems of the nineteenth century will be analysed in detail.

The above sections of this unit give you a general overview of the nineteenth century Australian poetry, and draw your attention to certain singular features that characterize this poetry. However, while reading the specific poems, analysed in the subsequent sections, and the reference books mentioned in the Bibliography, you may draw your own conclusions, thus making your new acquaintance with the nineteenth century Australian poetry more interesting and rewarding.

1.3 LET US SUM UP

Australian poetry is a literary offshoot of the British colonization of Australia which began in the late eighteenth century. During the one hundred years of the nineteenth century, there developed a new kind of poetry in English in the new environs of Australia. The white convicts and jailers and other settlers who kept on coming to Australia as well as their offsprings dwelt in Australia and built a new western civilization in Australia. As a part of the cultural life that developed among the new generations of white people living in Australia, Australian poetry gradually took a new definitive shape and colour. The smell of the Australian earth, water and sky and the flavour of life lived in the Australian landscape found a palpable embodiment in the Australian poetry that was written over the period of one hundred years during the nineteenth century.

Gradually, the Australian poetry shed its marks and features of imitation of the British poetic mode and style, and developed an indigenous tradition incorporating

local mores. During the nineteenth century there have been numerous poets starting with convicts and jailers, and concluding with a list of illustrious native-born Australians like Harpur, Kendall and Paterson. One interesting feature of the nineteenth century Australian poetry is that some poets who came from Britain and settled in Australia also contributed a great deal to the growth of nineteenth century Australian poetry. Among those, the most outstanding are Gordon and Cambridge. The growth of Australian poetry is not only a literary phenomenon but also a historical and cultural phenomenon of Australia as it chronicles the historical events and cultural aspects of Australia and Australians of that period of time. You must have realized by now that the study of nineteenth century Australian poetry is rewarding as you have come to know more about Australia and her people and their culture.

1.4 QUESTIONS

Some questions are given at the end of each unit. By attempting these questions, you will be able to clarify your understanding about the various aspects of nineteenth century Australian poetry.

1. When did the colonization of Australia begin? What impact did it have on the country and her culture and civilization?
2. Did Australian poetry begin as a freak? Or was it an offshoot of the historical and social events taking place in Australia during the nineteenth century?
3. Are there marks of distinction between the verses of the early versifiers and the poetry of the later poets writing in Australia during the nineteenth century? Attempt identifying those marks of distinction.
4. Mention the poets who, according to you, built the basis of Australian poetry during the nineteenth century. Attempt this question with illustrations from the poems by those poets.
5. Do you think that the nineteenth century Australian poetry has certain distinctive themes? Classify them with illustrations.
6. Is the nineteenth century Australian poetry, in your opinion, entirely masculine as the Australian poetry society of that period was patriarchal? Substantiate your answer if you discover women's voices in Australian poetry during the nineteenth century.