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## UNIT 4 HENRY KENDALL

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### Structure

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the last unit, you've learnt how Harpur contributed to the growth of Australian poetry by writing verses on Australian landscape and people, and by modulating English language for projecting the Australian images and reflecting an urgent commitment to the development of the Australian nation. Harpur was followed by Henry Kendall. In this unit, you will study two poems of Kendall.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Kendall was born when Charles Harpur was twenty six years old. In 1862 Kendall's first volume of poems *Poems and Songs* was published. Kendall confesses in a letter to Harpur:

I feel already deeply indebted to you for the great good and large comfort. I have derived from your writings. There is no living author to whom I could turn and say as much. This may be a necessary result of my Australian birth and education. But, strangely fascinated by almost everything you have published, I have always looked upon you as the man who alone could express what I had so often dimly thought. (Harpur: 159)

The relation between Harpur and Kendall enshrines a phenomenon of succession in the field of Australian poetry during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Kendall strengthens the position of Harpur through his admiration of Harpur's poetry.

In this unit, we'll examine the nature and quality of Kendall's poetic efforts, and the contribution of the same towards the growth and development of nineteenth century Australian poetry. Kendall continues with the love and admiration of Australian landscape, and enhances the commitment to the projection of Australian lifestyle. However, it may be noted that Kendall developed much more fluency and command over English metrics and rhythm but the enchantment created by his verbal music sometimes reduces the depth and profundity of his poetic portraits. Still Kendall is quite notable for perpetuating the Harpurian tradition till Gordon and Paterson appear on the Australian poetic scenario.

By the time Kendall had attained maturity of youth and met Harpur and got acquainted with his works, Australia, as a country of white settlers, was more than sixty years old. Australia started producing quality wool, gold and other minerals, its population had increased, and people's sense of isolation diminished. Australia was on her way to nationhood, as Harpur had hoped. But still the country was in her transitional phase. Kendall's poetry reflects this stage of transition through his portrayal of the landscape, the people and the society. Even his poetic craftsmanship involving a manipulation of the British poetic tradition for projecting the land of emus, peacocks and kangaroos reflects the phase of transition in Australia. Kendall is an important Australian poet since his poetry mirrors the transition period in Australia.

It is Kendall who recognized and celebrated the importance of the poetic talent of Harpur, and valued his supremacy among the poets following in his footsteps. A few lines from his poem addressed to C.H. are quoted follow:

I would sit at your feet, for I feel  
I am one of a glorious band  
That ever will own you and hold you their chief  
And a monarch of song in the land!

(Wright 1966:21)

In his poem on the death of Harpur, Kendall pinpoints how the Australian landscape has found a permanent image in Harpur's poetry:

Strange words of wind, and rhymes of rain,  
And whispers from the inland fountains,  
Are mingled in his various strain  
With leafy breaths of piny mountains.

(Wilkes:88)

Through his admiration of Harpur's poetry, and his emphasis on certain features of Harpur's poetry, Kendall betrays his own predilections. Kendall too was a poet of Australian landscape and had assimilated the influence of the Romantic and British Victorian poetry of Britain.

Kendall spent his impressionable boyhood in the coastal districts of Illawara in the South and the Clarence river in the north. Their cool moist rainforests, deep shadowed gullies and lush pastures are evocatively portrayed in Kendall's best-known poems, the landscape lyrics such as 'Bell-Birds', 'September in Australia', 'Araluen', and 'Narrara Creek'.

Kendall spent his childhood among the mountains. The death of his father brought misfortune to his family but, while it seems to have made a lonely wanderer of him, it brought him into contact with a landscape which was to dwell with him all his life. At the age of fifteen he went to sea for two years on a whaling cruise, as cabin boy in a ship owned by his uncle.

Returning to Sydney, he found commonplace employment and began to write verse. The fluency of his verses at once brought him to the notice of a small circle of literary personalities in Sydney. Henry Parkes published some of his verses in *The Empire*, and by 1861 there were proposals for the publication of a volume. *Poems and songs* appeared in 1862. Although generously received by local and some British critics, the volume failed to sell its first edition of 500 copies. Beset by debts and personal problems, including a growing dependence on both literary patronage and alcohol, Kendall sought a new life in Melbourne after his marriage in 1868.

Kendall's second volume *Leaves from Australian Forests* was published in Melbourne in 1869. The failure of the Melbourne venture which led to increasing poverty, alcoholism and the death of his daughter Araluen, brought him back to Sydney in 1870, where the rapid disintegration of his personal and literary life continued.

This painful period, described by him as 'The shadow of 1872', brought alienation from his wife and periods of treatment for addiction in the Gladesville asylum. He was restored to health and sanity, and cured of alcoholism, by the extraordinary kindness of the Fagan family, timber merchants of Gosford and Sydney, who for two years 1872 - 75, looked after his rehabilitation in their home near Gosford.

In 1876 Kendall was reunited with his wife and family when he began a new life at the Fagan timber mill at Camden Haven on the north coast of New South Wales. His return to writing was signalled by his winning the *Sydney Morning Herald's* International Exhibition poetry competition in 1879, and by the publication of his final volume *Songs from the Mountains* in 1880.

In 1881 he was appointed Inspector of Forests by Sir Henry Parkes, his long - time patron. But Kendall's health deteriorated under the strain of the travelling and work associated with his new position. He died in 1882 in Sydney of phthisis when he was only forty - three.

Henry Kendall, like most of the other Australian colonial poets, fell into partial eclipse from the 1920s until the 1950s when the revival of interest in the colonial phase started. But like Harpur he can now be seen quite clearly as an important and impressive poet in his own right. There is still perhaps a slight tendency to underestimate his work and his value but there can be no doubt that *Leaves from the Australian Forests* and *Songs from the Mountains* are two of the most important books of the Australian colonial poetry, books which, whatever the merits of the individual poems, have a total impact greater than their parts.

Green has made an accurate estimate of Kendall's position as an Australian poet. It will be most appropriate if we conclude this section with an excerpt from Green's assessment of Kendall :

Kendall is much more than merely a landmark in Australian poetry ; Harpur was that and a little more as well, but Kendall is one of Australia's leading poets, and a landmark besides : his limitations are as evident as his qualities, but his position is unassailable, in its own kind, has not been surpassed here, and in the poetry of the English-speaking peoples also he has a definite place, if not a high one. The two strands that have come together to form Australian literature were for the first time interwoven in Kendall's second book of poems, *Leaves from Australian Forests* ; in 1869, eighty years after its beginnings, the young literature has produced a book that was Australian in a sense in which no other book has been: with this, therefore, Australian literature, in the narrower sense of the word, may be said to have begun; the rootlet had not merely struck, it had produced a bud. This fact was early recognized in England as well as Australia; besides the *Athenaeum's* praise, Wilde in a by no means favourable review of Sladen's *Century of Australian Song*, which contained some of Kendall's best work, spoke of his marvellous music and said that his poetry was " full of beautiful things"; and some of Kendall's poems were included by Palgrave in his *Golden Treasury* and by Quiller-Couch in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

Then, in the words of **Bruce Bennett**, 'Kendall's work has had substantial critical support from scholars. (60)

## 4.3 CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF KENDALL'S POETRY

Henry Kendall

Kendall will be remembered for presenting the images of Australian landscape in lilting rhythm. His pictures of the natural sights and sounds of Australia are suffused with a sadness emanating from his heart that was often burdened with a sense of melancholy. Some critics regard his melancholy as a mark of weakness that even affects his craftsmanship. Perhaps it is the colonial environment in which he had to live and write poetry that led to the sadness and listlessness in his character and poetry.

In *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, it is rightly pointed out :

Kendall's literary reputation, extraordinarily high in his own lifetime and immediately after his death but never at the same peak in this century, still rests chiefly on his lyric poetry. 'Bell - Birds', 'September in Australia', and 'The Song of Cattle Hunters', with their elaborate word pictures, extravagant melody and haunting melancholy, endeared themselves to succeeding generations of Australian readers and established Kendall as a favourite school room poet. (384)

The *Companion* mentions other types of poetry written by Kendall as well:

Kendall's affectionate though tart commentaries on the colonial outback types, e.g. 'Bill the Bullock Driver' and 'Jim the Splitter' are now seen to have anticipated Henry Lawson's and A.B. Paterson's portraits of similar bush characters .... His love poetry, especially 'Rose Lorraine' and 'At Nightfall', which tell of his lost love for Rose Benett, and the poignant 'Araluen' and 'On a Street', which reflect his guilt over the years 1869 - 72, are powerful statements of the problems of his troubled life. His patriotic verse, such as 'The Fair Future', which attempts to create new loyalties and new hopes ; his public poems, written for important occasions such as the 1879 International Exhibition in Sydney ; his memorial verses for Charles Harpur, James Lionel Michael and Adam Lindsay Gordon, and his attempt in the fragmentary 'The Australian Shepherd' to begin the first Australian rural epic, all support the claim that Kendall was the most substantial poet of the Colonial period. ( 385 )

The importance of Kendall's contribution to the growth of Australian poetry is now established beyond doubt. Despite certain blemishes that are detectable in his treatment of his themes and general craftsmanship, Kendall's poetry is memorable and significant. Green points out the salient features of his poetry :

Kendall's verses are filled with the music of falling water : he was possessed by the rich soft shapes and colours of the coastal foliage, the smooth curves of the coastal boys and hills, their rainy mists, their glimmering woods , the delicate dew - dropping ferns, of their " deep green gracious glens", the bright voices of their birds, their golden blossom, the murmur of their waves and falling streams, by their " great dark hills of wonder " , and by the " silver sleeping seas " , the " lights and thunders " of the waves along their shores and the storms that come from the Pole. The best of his work is possessed by this sort of loveliness and by that of the smooth-sounding native names, Araluen, Mooni, Orara, which he knew well how to weave into his verse : drawn outward by sympathy with the explorers or the pioneers, he could tell of " swarthy wastelands , wide and woodless " , of " stark desolation and a waste of plain " , and of the desert " glaring like a sea of brass " ; but one feels that these are for him excursions, in which except for a

few lines, he is not near his best . And his talent was almost wholly lyrical and descriptive, not so much of the objects he observed but of the moods they evoked in him . ( 162 )

The points of strength and weakness in Kendall's poetry in general, and in workmanship as well as the obvious marks of influence of Romantic and Victorian poets on his choice of themes and his stylistic devices are dwelt upon in great detail by Green. **Green's** relevant comments are quoted below :

Kendall was a " nature poet " only in the sense that he found in natural scenery moods of the human spirit, using woods and mountains, streams and birds and trees as symbols of the emotions that he wished to express : Wordsworth reinforced his reverence towards the most solemn of these moods, but here is something of Shelley in his " aerial perspectives " and in the intensity rather than the serenity of his connection with the natural world; and in such lines as " the light that is love to the flowers " there is an obvious Shelleyan reminiscence . Shelley meant much more to Kendall than to Harpur, but unfortunately encouraged in him a tendency to wordiness that he possessed already ; still his verses are suffused with very human emotions even when they stay closest to the natural features that are their symbols, and these emotions, which are intense if gentle, are always ready to flow out in sympathy with men and women, even if he cannot enter into their personalities sufficiently to enable him to characterize them individually. The influence of Tennyson also is everywhere in Kendall, but especially in his blank verse; there are occasional Swinburnian phrases, and the influence of Swinburne shows markedly in his alliteration and in some of his rhythms ... (163 - 164 )

Our concluding observation on Kendall's workmanship and our final impression of his poetry may best be put in the words of Green :

The general effect of Kendall's rhythms is of flowing music that is sweet rather than strong, full rather than concise : the frequency of light syllables makes for wordiness, and now and in the longer lines it is obvious that something has been added to fill up the measure. This is perhaps the worst fault in Kendall's workmanship, though there are also other faults, the result of imperfect taste or sheer carelessness; his fondness for pairs of adjectives such as " rose red " , " soft sweet " , " grave mute " ( see the "Ode on the Sydney International Exhibition" ) and the alliteration of which he makes such effective use are overdone sometimes ; he takes queer liberties with phrase and rhyme ; and sometimes his lack of humour betrays him : he has no marked power of self - criticism. Kendall's images are as characteristic as his rhythms. The best of them are not merely beautiful ; they show how he, as well as greater poets, was able some times by intuitive contemplation to work upon what he observed, to saturate it with his mood, to marry the two and translate them into sound and rhythm, until the result conveys, in drops of light and music, something that one feels is not only beautiful but true, because it could not have been different : something that is of the essence of poetry. ( 165 )

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#### **4.4 'BELL - BIRDS' : TEXT**

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By channels of coolness the echoes are calling,  
And down the dim gorges I hear the creek falling :  
It lives in the mountain where moss and the sedges  
Touch with their beauty the banks and the ledges.  
Through breaks of the cedar and sycamore bowers

Struggles the light that is love to the flowers ;  
 And , softer than slumber , and sweeter than singing ,  
 The notes of the bell-birds are running and ringing.  
 The silver - voiced bell-birds, the darlings of daytime!  
 They sing in September their songs of the May - time;  
 When shadows wax strong, and the thunder - bolts hurtle,  
 They hide with their fear in the leaves of the myrtle;  
 When rain and the sunbeams shine mingled together,  
 They start up like fairies that follow fair weather;  
 And straightway the hues of their feathers unfolden  
 Are the green and the purple, the blue and the golden.  
 October , the maiden of bright yellow tresses,  
 Loiters for love in these cool wildernesses;  
 Loiters , knee-deep, in the grasses, to listen,  
 Where dripping rocks gleam and the leafy pools glisten :  
 Then is the time when the water-moons splendid  
 Break with their gold , and are scattered or blended  
 Over the creeks, till the woodlands have warning  
 Of song of the bell-birds and wings of the Morning.  
 Welcome as waters unkissed by the summers  
 Are the voices of bell-birds to thirsty far-comers.  
 When fiery December sets foot in the forest,  
 And the need of the wayfarer presses the sorest,  
 Pent in the ridges for ever and ever  
 The bell-birds direct him to spring and to river,  
 With ring and with ripple, like runnels whose torrents  
 And toned by the pebbles and leaves in the currents.

Often I sit , looking back to a childhood,  
 Mixt with the sight and the sounds of the wildwood,  
 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.

(Wilkes : 102 - 103)

#### 4.4.1 Discussion

The poem 'Bell-Bird' is illustrative of **Wilkes'** general appreciation of Kendall's landscape poetry :

Kendall is the foremost exemplar of the Romantic treatment of landscape in nineteenth century verse ... Landscape suffused with feeling is the characteristic of Kendall's poetry : nature for him is a source of consolation to the human spirit. ( viii - ix )

Kendall's treatment of nature in this poem is extremely evocative. The writers of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* attach great importance to this poem by Kendall when they observe: ' The bell - bird and its bell - like notes have been immortalized in Henry Kendall's poem ' Bell-Birds'. ( Wilde : 84 )

In 'Bell - Birds', one of his most characteristic poems , Kendall creates an enchantment with rhyme, rhythm and word music that reproduces the spellbinding harmony generated by the bell-birds, the Australian birds who keep on singing during the Australian spring in the months of September and October. The typical Australian

mossy arbours and woodlands where bell-birds' music echoes incessantly are recreated by Kendall in a series of words, images and rhythms that perpetuate the poet's perception of the Australian landscape suffused with his memories of his childhood and adolescence. Nature and man are fused into the poem that attains the position of a landmark in the evolution of Australian poetry during the nineteenth century. This poem is representative of the stage of progress achieved in the development of Australian poetry by the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

In parts, the poem may appear alliterative more than once, and thus forced and artificial to some extent but when read as a whole, the poem's strength manifests itself in the poet's ability to recreate the Australian landscape echoing with the music of birds. But this does not appear to be an imitation of Wordsworth. The poem bears Kendall's distinctive stamp. Its mellifluous arrangement of words and images heightens the effect of evocation. Does the music of the following two lines mark the beauty of the image?

And straightway the hues of their feather unfolden  
Are the green and the purple, the blue and the golden.

Not at all. Maybe crisp and concise phrasing found in Wordsworth's or Shelley's poetry is not noticeable in the quoted lines. But we must remember Wordsworth's or Shelley's poetry was written in England as a part of the British poetic tradition which was more than twelve centuries old. Kendall's poem belongs to an Australian poetic tradition which was only about sixty years old. The flaws in the poem, therefore, need not be attributed exclusively to Kendall the individual poet but rather to the infancy and weakness of the poetic tradition in Australia.

Certain phrases leap out of the text of Kendall's poetry as outstanding, and sometimes they appear quite unexpected in the context of a nascent literature. For example, an expression like 'the leafy pools glisten' lends to the whole poem an aura of bright natural beauty. Hence, whatever weaknesses there may be, the brighter aspects of Kendall's poetry definitely enhanced the growth of Australian poetry. And this poetry may not be stigmatized as colonial poetry alone. It might have been written during the period which is called colonial in the historical context but what redeems this poetry is the poet's effort to advance the Australian poetry beyond the limitations of the colonizer's culture. The shadow of the colonizer may be there but the verbal embodiment of the indigenous phenomenon of Australia speaks of Kendall's poetic progress towards the formulation of the Australian culture:

The silver-voice bell-birds, the darlings of daytime;  
They sing in September their songs of the May-time.....

The context of Australia with all her own peculiarities is set and evoked in the fourth stanza. December is the hottest month in Australia, and the bell-birds, with their music, take the 'far-comers' and 'wayfarers' to spring and river:

With ring and with ripple, like runnels whose torrents  
Are toned by the pebbles and leaves in the currents

The last line wouldn't be found in an anthology of British poetry. It is Kendall's poetic lines that enhance the beauty of blossoming Australian poetry.

The last stanza further individualizes the poem. The poet spent his childhood in the countryside but later during his youth, he went to Sydney and Melbourne in search of livelihood. While studying his life which is given in an earlier section, you'll notice that Kendall spent an unhappy life in the urban setup. In the cities, however, the memories of the songs of the bell-birds, as mentioned in the last stanza, reduce 'the pain of my losses/ with glimpses of creeks and the vision of mosses'. Thus the appeal of the poem is on both the levels of the personal and the universal. The charge of

generalization against Kendall's poetry does not always hold good. 'Bell-birds' epitomises Kendall's remarkable achievement as a poet in the context of nineteenth-century Australian poetry, and it also indicates the magnitude of his contribution to the growth of the same.

Henry Kendall

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#### 4.5 'AFTER MANY YEARS' : TEXT

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The song that once I dreamed about,  
    The tender , touching thing,  
As radiant as the rose without--  
    The love of wind and wing--  
The perfect verses to the tune  
    Of woodland music set,  
As beautiful as afternoon,  
    Remain unwritten yet.  
It is too late to write them now,  
    The ancient fire is cold :  
No ardent lights illumine the brow  
    As in the days of old .  
I cannot dream the dream again;  
    But when the happy birds  
Are singing in the sunny rain ,  
    I think I hear its words.  
I think I hear the echo still  
    Of long forgotten tones,  
When evening winds are on the hill,  
    And sunset fires the cones.  
But only in the hours supreme  
    With songs of land and sea,  
The lyrics of the leaf and stream,  
    This echo comes to me.  
No longer doth the earth reveal  
    Her gracious green and gold:  
I sit where youth was once , and feel  
    That , I am growing old.  
The lustre from the face of things  
    Is wearing all away:  
Like one who halts with tired wings,  
    I rest and muse today.  
There is a river in the range  
    I love to think about :  
Perhaps the searching feet of change  
    Have never found it out.  
Ah ! Oftentimes I used to look  
    Upon its banks, and long  
To steal the beauty of that brook  
    And put it in a song.  
I wonder if the slopes of moss  
    In dreams so dear to me --  
The falls of flower and flower - like floss -  
    Are as they use to be!  
I wonder if the waterfalls,  
    The singers far and fair  
That gleamed between the wet green walls,  
    Are still the marvels there!  
Ah ! let me hope that in that place  
    The old familiar things



To which I turn a wistful face ,  
Have never taken wings.  
Let me retain the fancy still  
That , past the lordly range,  
There always shines, in folds of hill,  
One spot secure from change !  
I trust that yet the tender screen  
That shades a certain nook  
Remains , with all its gold and green,  
The glory of the brook!  
It hides a secret , to the birds  
And waters only known --  
The letters of two lovely words :  
A poem on a stone.  
Perhaps the lady of the past  
Upon these lines may light :  
The purest verses and the last  
That I may ever write.  
She need not fear a word of blame ;  
Her tale the flowers keep;  
The wind that heard me breathe her name  
Has been for years asleep.  
But in the night , and when the rain  
The troubled torrent fills,  
I often think I see again  
The river in the hills.  
And when the day is very near,  
And birds are on the wing ,  
My sprit fancies it can hear  
The song I cannot sing.

(Wilkes 124-126)

#### 4.5.1 Discussion

Kendall is to be remembered for his lilting lyricism, haunting vignettes of Australian landscape, description of nostalgic memories of passing time and burden of unfulfilled dreams. Full of the above-mentioned qualities, 'After Many Years' is a poem from his last volume of poetry , *Songs from the Mountains* . The lyric exhibits a maturity in craftsmanship and a rare restraint on Kendall's natural verbosity. The poem is important as it discloses with superb verbal restraint and suggestiveness the inner world of Kendall's poetic dreams and aspirations. It also hints at the inadequacy of the then Australian poetic idioms for verbalizing the dreams and aspirations of Australia and her people. When Kendall speaks of his as-yet unwritten poetry, he actually articulates the vision of the poetic activities that would take place in future in Australia.

'After Many Years ' projects the vision of the future. Though tinged with sadness, the poem indicates the poet's relation with the land , how the land kindles in him a hope for the future:

I cannot dream the dream again;  
But, when the happy birds  
Are singing in the sunny rain,  
I think I hear its words.

The relation between the land and the poet is not only a romantic lyrical infatuation but also represents at that point of time the close bond developing between the land of Australia and the white settlers. The relationship is, however, embodied in a very

moving manner through a few words only. Kendall's mastery over the medium of poetic communication expressed itself in a very effective manner :

Henry Kendall

Ah! oftentimes I used to look  
Upon its banks, and long  
To steal the beauty of that brook  
And put it in a song.

The last stanza of the poem marks a new beginning in Australian poetry. The art of economy in verbal expression reaches a climax in the stanza quoted above. Kendall holds the hope for the future poets of Australia, and indicates that what could not be achieved by him would be attained by the future generations of poets in Australia :

And when the day is very near,  
And birds are on the wing,  
My spirit fancies it can hear  
The song I cannot sing.

Kendall might have been a derivative poet on certain occasions but in his most remarkable poems like the two poems discussed in this unit, he strikes a note of originality. Along with Harpur, Kendall introduced Romantic lyricism into Australian poetry but he also struck a new path to be followed by the future poets appearing on the Australian poetic scenario.

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#### 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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Harpur's poetic innovation and practice in Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century was followed by Kendall who regarded Harpur as his master. Kendall perpetuated the Romantic strain of Harpur's poetry. Kendall's signal contribution is, however, to be traced in his love and admiration of Australian landscape. He also brought in more flexibility in versification and metrical patterns. His nature lyrics are soothing but tinged with a touching sadness. Hence Kendall's poetry is to be admired, and his poetic efforts appreciated for their signal contribution to the growth of Australian poetry. You must have read and analysed the poems of Kendall. Do you agree with us on the conclusions we are arrived at?

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#### 4.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Do you think Kendall furthered the progress of nineteenth century Australian poetry? How did he do it?
2. Do you think the romantic strain brought in by Kendall into Australian poetry during the third and fourth quarters of nineteenth century did have any salutary impact on the progress of Australian poetry?
3. Analyse and comment on two poems of Kendall of your choice, indicating why you prefer them.
4. Can you make a comparative study of nineteenth century Indian English poetry and Australian poetry, and identify some Indian English poets whose poetry may be compared with Kendall's poetry?