

Book Launch

*The Heart of James McAuley*

by Peter Coleman

with comments from

Tony Staley

Tony Abbott &

Peter Coleman

Institute of Public Affairs  
August 2006



## The Hon. Tony Staley

I am surprised and delighted to have been invited to launch this book account of one of Australia's great big men of the 20th century, by Peter, one of Australia's most distinguished intellectuals.

Peter has drawn from the ideas and ideals in which he has believed and can now be seen to have been on the right side of history.

When I was in full time politics, first as a member of parliament, then as a minister, and finally as Liberal Party President, which wasn't strictly a full time job, but awfully close to it, I was asked "Tony, how do you keep in touch with the real world?" I answered, 'by reading poetry'; you can imagine the looks on their faces!

In the 'real' world of political belief and action, James McAuley's poetry had a huge impact on me. When I had some big and lonely decisions to make, James McAuley's work inspired me, and gave me the courage to act.

One example of this is when I made the decision, entirely on my own, to resign as assistant to Billy Snedden, the Leader of the Opposition, and begin the campaign to make Malcolm Fraser, (the then Malcolm Fraser!) leader of the party, and ultimately, Prime Minister. Two McAuley poems gave me the courage to do what I had to do. One of which was "Innocent by Definition", the other, the savagely satirical, "Letter to John Dryden", in which he coins phrases like "democracy has become democratism", amongst others.

His railing against obsessive materialism without conviction or values is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it many years ago.

Most of his life he was torn between hope and despair, between joy and sadness, concerned with matters of good and evil, and the meaning, or lack of meaning, of it all.

He was a great warrior for his beliefs, as can be seen in "Letter to John Dryden". However, he could also write with intimate poignancy about the human condition. He wrote these words about his mother and his father

My father and my mother never quarreled.  
There were united in a kind of love  
As daily as the Sydney Morning Herald  
Rather than like the eagle or the dove  
I never saw them casually touch,  
Or show a moment's joy in one another  
Why should this matter to me so much?  
I think it bore more hardly on my mother  
Who had more generous feelings to express.  
My father had dammed up his Irish blood  
Against all drinking praying fecklessness  
And stiffened into stone and creaking wood  
Her lips would make a twitching sound, as though  
Spontaneous impulse must be kept at bay  
That it was mainly weakness I see now,  
But then my feelings curled back in dismay.

Small things can pit the memory like a cyst:  
Having seen other father greet their sons  
I put my childish face up to be kissed  
After an absence. The rebuff still burns.

My blood. The poor man's curt embarrassment  
At such a delicate proffer of affection  
Cut like a saw. But home the lesson went  
My tenderness henceforth escaped detection.

**But James himself was capable of writing with joy and tenderness:**

Wet mirrors covering soft peat.  
Swag-bellied graceful mares in foal.  
Red-umber bulls on plashing feet  
With mild white face and curly poll.

Crutching time; each heavy ewe  
Is trimmed and slides off down the chute.  
The mountains are cut out in blue.  
An opalescent sky is mute.

Ducks loiter. Children play before tea.  
In the home paddock a lone goose  
Follows the cows for company.  
It is a world of sense and use.

**But then, finally, a more atypical and pessimistic note**

Christ, you walked on the sea,  
But cannot walk in a poem,  
Not in our century.

There's something deeply wrong  
Either with us or with you.  
Our bright loud word is strong

And better in some ways  
Than the old haunting kingdoms;  
I don't reject our days

Peter, we are deeply in your debt for your extraordinary comprehension of the life and times of a great Australian. Your work is a timely reminder of James McAuley's convictions, commitment, and his values, and I am proud to launch this book.

## The Hon. Tony Abbott

The publication of a new edition of *The Heart of James McAuley* testifies to the continuing significance of our foremost poet/advocate and also to the lasting quality of this 1980 essay. The writer is a former member for Wentworth in the Commonwealth parliament, leader of the NSW opposition, state minister of the crown, editor of *The Bulletin* and *Quadrant* magazines and author of at least six other books but this extended essay still stands out among the many achievements of Peter Coleman's crowded life.

Like another author/MP, Sir Paul Hasluck, Coleman was an under-estimated politician, perhaps because he sought to be judged on his merits rather than his self-assessment. It's worth mentioning that on the last occasion Coleman contested party preselection someone who is now spoken of as a potential future Prime Minister came second! Coleman entered politics without ego and left without rancour. He is one of the very few former party leaders never to have made a hero of himself by taking pot shots at his successors. In every sense, he has been an adornment to our public life.

Today's launch is an act of fealty to some of the great ideas and individuals that have shaped our society and formed our lives. It is the acknowledgment of a cultural indebtedness for which we should be grateful rather than resentful. This is the kind of debt that makes us rich not the debt that makes us poor.

Whether as a conservative Catholic raging against the world, an indulgent radical tearaway, a poet of soaring emotional power, or a sympathetic student of development in the third world, McAuley is a modern man for all seasons. The combination of passion and reason, poetry and politics, faith and sin, conservative instincts with total immersion in the contemporary world should keep his life instructive and interesting to new readers, especially those who are, as Robert Stove says of McAuley in his muscular introduction, "never quite comfortable . . . inside (their) own skin".

Reading biography is, of course, one of the principal ways in which the living pay tribute to the great departed. It can also help successive generations avoid making at least some of their predecessors' mistakes. It is a sound conservative instinct with a good practical outcome. A living person's life is largely what he makes of it. It is his possession. A historical figure's life belongs to the world. In this way, the glorious dead can sometimes be more effective inspirations and role models than the people who might forget to return our phone calls. In this sense, the communion of saints can be no less necessary than the company of the living.

McAuley must have done much right because the

academic left is still trying to exorcise his ghost, most notably in a book called *The Devil and James McAuley*. The reissue of the Coleman essay is an overdue antidote. Coleman has enough on each aspect of his story to whet the appetite for a full biography. He has a good ear for the poetry which is at the heart of McAuley's life and struggle and, no less important, a clear sense of what the poet really meant.

From the McAuley tapestry, permit me to pick one thread of particular relevance to the current debate about religion and politics.

Doe Evatt's 1954 denunciation of the industrial groups did not just lead to a fight inside the Labor Party but also to a fight inside the Catholic Church. Essentially, it pitted those (like McAuley) who believed that the Church should back activists inside the party against those (like Archbishop James Carroll) who thought that the Church should back the Labor Party itself. Eventually the Vatican decided that Church organisations could not be involved in politics and that political organisations could not be endorsed by the Church. In Rome, the Church resolved the matter by reiterating the full separation of church and state. In Sydney, the Church hierarchy continued to regard itself as the religious wing of the ALP, leading McAuley (in his epic poem *Captain Quiros*) to describe a cardinal whose "right hand blessed the victims of his left".

McAuley and his allies swiftly discovered that their crime was not to bring religion into politics but to ally religion with the wrong side. The groupers had plenty of reasons to oppose communist influence in the union movement, reasons which had nothing to do with religion. Their mistake, in seeking the bishops' blessing, was to give people the impression that their motivation was primarily religious. For their part, the groupers' critics failed to appreciate the difference between religious arguments and arguments by people who happened to take religion seriously. They failed to notice not only that the groupers' arguments had nothing to do with religion but also that the groupers' religion explicitly precluded them from claiming religious validation for their position.

At least since the great social encyclicals starting with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, it has been an axiom of the Church to keep religious arguments out of political debate. Catholics in politics were encouraged to promote Catholic social teaching not because it was taught by the Church but because it conformed to the best human reason; not because it was religious but because it was right. A dictum attributed to Cardinal Newman is that if truth and Catholicism appear to be in conflict, it's not really Catholic, it's not really true or there's no real conflict.

Deep down, I suspect that the nervousness towards religion-in-politics is about the concept of truth as much as religion. People could respectfully reject, for instance, the “Catholic position” on human cloning but tend to react with furious indignation when what they regard as a mere religious construct is presented as a universal truth; when the ethical objection to human cloning, for instance, is presented as a truth binding on all, not just on Catholics.

The modern world is not comfortable with notions of truth that are not attended by sets of inverted commas. It is especially uncomfortable with any truth that a venerable institution (rather than sovereign individuals) might have discerned over centuries of observing human folly and refining human values. The critics of religion-in-politics have largely failed to notice that in making universal claims for its moral teaching the Church has explicitly abandoned any reliance on religious revelation. Like *Quadrant* under McAuley’s editorship, the Church’s social teaching is designed to “command respect even from the dubious”. It is the argument that counts, not the fact that the Church is putting it.

The fact that 63 per cent of Australians (according to a very detailed Swinburne University study) are uncomfortable, and 30 per cent “profoundly uncomfortable”, with scientific research using cloned embryos suggests that the Church does not just make these positions up.

Something the anti-groupers failed to notice in McAuley’s time (and has equally escaped contemporary worriers about religion-in-politics) is the centrality of religious inspiration to our most cherished secular values. The idea that each individual has inherent rights and intrinsic dignity, along with the injunction to treat others as you would have them treat you, are at the heart of modern western society. Both propositions are central to Christian social teaching although they can also be discerned from human reason alone.

In Chapter three, Coleman well summarises the light touch of Christianity on politics:

. . . There is no particular Christian form of government but a requirement that, whatever form it takes, it respects the moral law and the rights of the person; no peculiarly Christian commerce but an insistence on honesty and justice; no Christian biology but a requirement that the soul and the unity of the human race are not denied. Within such limits. . . the institutions of society are left free to develop according to their own principles and traditions. Not to understand this and the freedoms involved is not to understand Christianity and the West.

It’s no accident that the chief features of the modern polity: freedom under the law, welfare systems for people struggling to cope, impartial public administration, and

so on all developed first and most fully in societies under strong Christian influence. The West’s modern version of human rights is almost inconceivable without the insights of Erasmus, Thomas More and the other Catholic humanists.

The Enlightenment was, in part, a reaction against religious dogmatism but many of its leading thinkers were personally devout. Christianity eventually accommodated its lessons and also helped to temper its excesses. It can hardly be a coincidence that the values of the Enlightenment took root in Christian countries. After all, it was not Rousseau but Jesus who first proclaimed “love your neighbour as you love yourself”. Indeed, this second commandment flowed from the first because everyone was equally God’s creature.

As Hobbes recognised, in a state of nature there are only two rules: might is right and look after your own. Those concerned about religion-in-politics should also pose the alternative question: what might a polity without any Christian inspiration actually look like? This is not to say that explicitly Christian values should dominate public life let alone that the best politicians are self-consciously Christian. Political debate should turn on human values not religious teaching. It’s just that, in this sense at least, the keep-religion-out-of-politics brigade and the Church are in furious agreement.

The modern challenge is not a surfeit of religion in politics but whether “love thy neighbour” political pluralism can survive without the religious values that spawned it. Religion doesn’t make people perfect but it usually improves them. Rather than worry obsessively about the “religious right” commentators might more often pause to consider whether business ethics, family life, or personal motivation is likely to be improved in a society with less Christian consciousness. They should ponder the loss of Kevin Rudd and Tim Costello, as well as that of Brian Harradine and George Pell, before seeking to exclude religious believers from our public space.

It was McAuley’s fate to be the advocate of traditional values throughout the time Francis Fukuyama has dubbed “the great disruption”. Perhaps the social consequences of the permissive society might soon prompt the conclusion that there’s something to be said for traditional values after all. As McAuley put it in a poem thought to have been inspired by the experiences of his friend, BA Santamaria:

Nor is failure our disgrace:  
By ways we cannot know  
He keeps the merit in his hand,  
And suddenly as no one planned,  
Behold the kingdom grow!

## Peter Coleman

One of the first things that struck you about Jim McAuley was his sense of fun. The world remembers him as poet, critic and editor. He was indeed a serious poet -- tragic, sentimentalisch. But he was a very funny man too. Only a great humorist could have written Ern Malley's poems. How can you help laughing as you read Ern's preposterous nonsense?

Princess, you lived in Princess St.,  
Where the urchins pick their nose in the sun  
With the left hand.

Another of Jim's sallies that deserves to be better celebrated was his project of setting up Poets Anonymous, modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous. It would help the clapped-out poet who has nothing to say but who just can't beat the demon verse. Every day he reaches for the pencil, no matter what pain his addiction inflicts on family or friends. But at a meeting of Poets Anonymous, he will hear fellow sufferers, who have conquered the habit, stand up and declare frankly: "I am a poet. One small lyric is too much for me, and one endless epic is not enough. I used to write sonnets, two, three or even four a day. Then odes, then epics. Then I found Poets Anonymous..." Jim said he was also having talks with Treasurer Bill McMahan about giving grants to poets who undertake not to write a word for the period of the grant. That might help them give up the addiction.

Still, it is Jim McAuley the poet I want to talk about today. When I began writing *The Heart of James McAuley*, Jim had only recently died—in October 1976. His legend was fresh in memory and he was widely and deeply honoured. My contribution to the obsequies then was to bring out a memorial issue of *Quadrant*.

Looking back on it now—*Quadrant's* March 1977 edition—it confirms the general goodwill towards Jim at that time. It begins with a tribute by his friend, the poet A.D.Hope:

Standing on this late promontory of time,  
I match our spirits, the laggard and the swif:  
Though we shared much beside the gift of rhyme,  
Yours was the surer gift.

It ends with a note by Douglas Stewart, another poet and literary editor, on the Requiem Mass held for McAuley at St John's College at the University of Sydney. "How well the Catholic Church can do these things!" Stewart wrote.

No Catholic himself, and perhaps more humanist than Christian, he was, he reminded his readers, something of a connoisseur of funerals—he had attended the services for Hugh McCrae, Mary Gilmore, Kenneth Slessor, Norman Lindsay and many others. McAuley's was, he said, the most beautiful service, the most perfectly in keeping of them all. This was because McAuley's poems—read by

Ron Haddrick and Peter Steele—and his hymns pervaded the whole event.

Between these tributes—Hope's and Stewart's—were the homages of other poets (Vivian Smith, Peter Skrzynecki, Les Murray); old New Guinea hands (Harry Jackman); political collaborators (Richard Krygier, Bob Santamaria); and a number of friends and critics (Donald Horne, Peter Hastings).

There are too many to list them all, so let me mention a couple. The scholar Grahame Johnston described his desolation at what he and our country had lost by McAuley's death. Behind the poetry, Johnston felt the pressure of all that Europe and Western civilisation meant and still means. The poet Gwen Harwood, in a different mode, wrote of "the simple, generous and compassionate man that I came to love", the friend who knew it was better to be vulnerable, and wounded, than to hold oneself aloof in critical reserve. The composer Richard Connolly wrote: "Ah, James McAuley. Strange, great, loving, knowing, lonely man. I shall have other friends, but none will remotely resemble you. I think I shall not know another man remotely like you. Vale. Pax tecum".

All that was barely thirty years ago. But—and this is the point—what an extraordinary transformation a New Dunciad has wreaked on McAuley's reputation in those few years!

Today it is the received view among most OzLit scholars that he is a poor poet, of reactionary politics, and of bad character: no calumny is too gross but someone will pass it on. He is, they tell us, deservedly forgotten—while at the same time they produce a library of books and articles that keep his memory vibrantly alive.

Why these bitter attacks? Where do they come from? One squad of critics is the modernists and postmodernists still seeking revenge for the enormous success of the Ern Malley hoax—played on them by Jim McAuley and Harold Stewart.

Having licked their wounds since 1944, they now pretend that Ern's forced rhetoric, absurd bathos and banal ideas are not only advanced high art but McAuley's (and Harold Stewart's) best work. They republish or anthologise it and sponsor magazines devoted to its genius.

The hoax can be read at several levels. At one level is the great joke at the heart of the affair. Only the humourless can fail to laugh at Ern's demented Faustian. At a deeper level there is the hoaxers' self-purging. The real target of the hoax is McAuley himself and the sort of poetry he used to write at a younger man. Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair* overlooks this essential point and even disposes of McAuley's key to the hoax, his *The End of Modernity*, in one dismissive sentence.

At another level still—and this is a lasting



achievement—Ern’s story, as told in the poems and in the letters of his sister Ethel, is one of the great creations of Australian fiction: the tragic-comic tale of the dying, despairing bohemian poet nursed by his loving sister as he coughs out his last masterwork, sixteen spasms of gibberish. The modernists miss all these readings.

A second cohort of campaigners against McAuley has been the liberal humanists, the freethinkers of Australian Orthodoxy. Early in the 1950’s McAuley abandoned the anarchist secularism of his youth and returned to Christ. Worse still, he even wrote poems about it. But as Les Murray warned us all, the non-god of Australian atheism is a jealous absence, and the unbelievers will smite the Christian faithful, hip and thigh.

They may tolerate Buddhism or Islam or any superstition from astrology to scientology to the Da Vinci code... but not the faith of our fathers. Michael Ackland, for example, in his *Damaged Men*, writes with sympathy of Harold Stewart’s unworldly Buddhism but shows no sympathy for McAuley’s unworldly Christianity.

When McAuley, for example, published his Letter to John Dryden with its appeal, deep in the heart’s abyss, to the ground-plan of the Christian mystery, the godless were furious. Some remained unforgiving. Jack Lindsay, Amy Witting and A.D.Hope ridiculed him in song and ballad. His old collaborator, Harold Stewart, the other half of Ern Malley, called him a “Popish pomposity.” Max Harris alerted *Quadrant* readers to the tell-tale detail that McAuley was rumoured to contribute to a Jesuit journal. These poets form a sort of “unity ticket” with those “smorgasbord Christians”, the liberals who pick and choose among doctrines as their fancy suggests. McAuley had satirised them in his 1963 poem “Liberal or Innocent by Definition”:

Unbiased between good and evil...  
They can never be convicted,  
They have no record of convictions.

A third and vociferous cohort of the New Dunciad is political. McAuley was one of the few Australian poets, perhaps the only one, whose life’s quest comprehended not only poetry and religion but also politics and social life. He was for over fifteen years deeply involved in the crisis in New Guinea and wrote some of the most enduring essays in the literature of decolonisation. When he then moved to academia, he wrote wisely and urgently on the crisis in our schools and universities.

His polemics provoked controversy. But the most furious critics of all have been the Left, enraged that McAuley’s anti-Communism turned out to be right all along. He was one of the very few Australian writers who engaged with the great theme of his age -- the totalitarian temptation that gave the world Auschwitz and the Gulag. At every stage of his life from youthful anarchist to ALP

pamphleteer to DLP cold warrior to self-styled “friend of the Liberal party”, he left behind poetry and polemic of permanent value.

In his last public statement, a sort of dying declaration, he was able to say:

I am now fortunate enough to be able to say that never in my life have I been an advocate or an apologist for movements or regimes that trample systematically on liberal principles and human rights and are essentially based on murder and lies. I have never defended the misdeeds of any terrorist organization or dictatorial regime of any complexion. I have never been a retailer of propaganda made in Moscow or Peking or Hanoi or any other centre devoted to the subversion of free countries like Australia. I have never blurred the distinction between free and unfree systems or exalted an unfree system above ours. I have never denied that offensive action by a totalitarian power is aggression; I have never stigmatized defensive action by the victims as provocation.

For some leftists—Cassandra Pybus in *The Devil and James McAuley* is a recent case—this merely demonstrates what a neurotic Cold Warrior he was. He must have been, she thought, a repressed homosexual. Such critics set the tone.

There have been exceptions. One is Dame Leonie Kramer’s *James McAuley*—her selection of his poetry and essays and her perceptive commentary on them. Another is Lyn McCredden’s *James McAuley*. Her style is, for my taste, too burdened with the arcane argot of poststructuralism but she responds to the beauty of McAuley’s poetry and communicates this to readers.

In writing *The Heart of James McAuley*, I set out to do what Graham Johnston had called for in the 1977 memorial issue of *Quadrant*, that is, to do justice to all aspects of Jim’s work - his poetry, his politics, his religion: the whole man. I am grateful that Anthony Cappello decided to republish it after some 26 years. My hope is that it will do a little to combat the dunces who are determined to devalue or nullify the work of one of Australia’s greatest poets, perhaps its greatest.

But I do not want to close on too combative a note. It is time for reconciliation. Time for Jim’s partisans to recognize that he was sometimes too dogmatic, even abrasive. Time for Jim’s critics to acknowledge his greatness. So let me end with a story from an eyewitness (me) of the first meeting of those old combatants, Jim and Max Harris, many years after the Ern Malley hoax but while the passions, rage, and hatred it had aroused still reverberated. (Remember Sid Nolan’s venomous painting of Jim.)

The meeting was in the old *Quadrant* office. Each of them had been putting out feelers to the other. Jim plainly had respect for Max as a critic. What would be the point of hoaxing a fool? Still, the tension was tangible as we waited.

Finally Max strolled in, large as life in bow-tie and cane, looking like Bunyip Bluegum in *The Magic Pudding*. Jim looked a bit like Rumpus Bumpus the Poet.

Max stood in the middle of the office, silent. Work stopped. Jim looked up. Each caught the other's eye. Jim nodded "Hullo Max". Max nodded "Hullo Jim"... and they settled down to discuss the article Jim had asked Max to write for *Quadrant* on the achievement of Max's magazine *Angry Penguins*. Each recognized the other's integrity. There's a lesson there for all of us.

**Institute of Public Affairs**

Level 2  
410 Collins St,  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
t: +61 3 9600 4744  
f: +61 3 9602 4989  
e: [ipa@ipa.org.au](mailto:ipa@ipa.org.au)  
w: <http://www.ipa.org.au>

Designed and typeset in Adobe Garamond

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