Ethel’s Storm in a Teacup

Alister Kershaw

Michael Heyward
THE ERN MALLEY AFFAIR
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WELL, I’M DAMNED! Ern Malley of all people! It’s been fifty years since I last laid eyes on him. Seeing him again recalls my vanished youth as nothing else could. Angry Penguins, Cecily Crozier’s valiant Comment magazine, the ‘social realists’ upbraiding everyone like so many Marxist Savonarolas, the Jindyworobakians quarrelling with the ‘cosmopolitans’, the Contemporary Arts Society quarrelling with itself—stirring times! But Ern was the epicentre of our cultural storm in a teacup.

Probably it’s only Old Kaspars of my generation who will be aware of the astonishing hullabaloo provoked by Ern. For the benefit of any Little Peterkins who may want to know, I’ll do my best — mumbling through toothless gums — to recall the genesis of the business.

What happened was that a couple of mad wags called McAuley and Stewart, poets both of them and pretty good in their own way, decided to take the mickey out of the ‘modern school’ of poetry, represented pre-eminently at that time by Max Harris and his Angry Penguins magazine.

For this purpose, they dreamed up a fictitious ‘Ern Malley’, who was supposed to have died some years previously, composed what they later insisted were deliberately absurd verses in his name, and had his equally non-existent sister Ethel submit them to Angry Penguins. Max accepted them, accepted them what’s more with the generous enthusiasm that was always one of his most endearing characteristics. Ern’s poems, he proclaimed, were undoubted works of genius. His co-editor, John Reed (whose opinions on poetry were about as deserving of attention as mine on the Arian Heresy) concurred. Sid Nolan was inspired, if that’s the word

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I'm not as confident as Mr Heyward seems to be that Ern’s begetters were in fact motivated solely by disinterested anxiety to reassert traditional values. Max was pretty brash in those days — we all were, but Max was more conspicuous than the rest of us. Me, I liked and admired him. I still do. A lot of people didn’t. I’d guess, although I’ve no evidence, that McAuley and Stewart were among them. Mr Heyward quotes a statement which they gave to the press, and I think I detect a note of personal spite. He also quotes a letter from A.D. Hope (who was in on the joke from the beginning), and it is unashamedly malevolent in its references to Max.

Until I read Mr Heyward’s book, I wasn’t aware that Max and John Reed had briefly entertained the notion that my friend Adrian Lawlor and I might have concocted Ern’s work. Mr Heyward cites certain resemblances between Ern’s poems and my own to account for this conjecture. But if there was no more to it than that, why should Adrian have been considered as a possible fellow conspirator? I think I know. There had been a proto-Ern called Mort Brandish, a fake poet invented by Adrian and myself. Unlike McAuley and Stewart, we were not out to prove a point or put the skids under anyone. Mort was simply an invention designed for our own amusement. I must have told Max about this innocent bit of whimsy, and hence his momentary suspicion that we were perhaps repeating the performance in the guise of Ern Malley.

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Alister Kershaw’s review first appeared in the September 1993 issue of ABR. UQP was the original publisher of The Ern Malley Affair.