

## Hugh Anderson (1927–2017)

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The Victorian Education Department's report on Hugh McDonald Anderson's teaching performance is, year after year, glowing in its praise. But there is one early entry—for 1947—that particularly caught my eye. Anderson, it said, is 'a strong individualist'.<sup>2</sup>

What summed up Anderson as a teacher applied similarly to his work as one of the leading folklorists, literary scholars and social historians of his generation. Anderson had the ability, industry and confidence to steer his own course. He did not isolate himself from other scholars, but neither did he allow himself to be blown off course by the latest twist or turn in academic fashion. The result is a body of writing famously formidable in quantity, but also in its originality, variety and quality.

Anderson was born on 21 January 1927 at Elmore in central Victoria. His father had a boot-shop but with the onset of the Depression, his mother took on a job in the post office to help the family make ends meet. Unlike his two more academic brothers who went to high school, he attended the Bendigo School of Mines, where a teacher fostered a love of literature and music, and introduced him to socialism. Anderson worked for a time as a surveyor with the Victorian Forestry Commission, subsequently studying at the Bendigo and Melbourne Teachers' Colleges.

On completion of his studies, Anderson enrolled part-time in a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne, but his real education in literature—especially Australian literature—came from the widening circle of friends and connections he developed through his involvement in the Communist Party, which he joined at sixteen, and 'progressive' literary circles and organisations such as the Realist Writers group. His writing on literary topics and friendships with an earlier generation of authors, such as E.J. Brady and Bernard O'Dowd, formed a bridge between the literature and politics of the 1890s and the radical nationalism and folk revival of his own time.<sup>3</sup>

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1 With assistance from Warwick Anderson, Stuart Macintyre and Nicole McLennan.

2 Teacher Record Books, Hugh McDonald Anderson, Public Record Office Victoria 13579/P1, 37970.

3 Warwick Anderson and Frank Bongiorno, 'Prolific Keeper of the Australian Flame', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/prolific-keeper-of-the-australian-flame-20170503-gvxyk3.html>; Stuart Macintyre and Joy Damousi, 'Hugh Anderson HRHSV FAHA 1927-2017', *Australian Academy of Humanities, Annual Report 2016-17*, p. 24.

Anderson produced much of his writing and won an enviable scholarly reputation while working as a teacher—specialising in special needs education—and later as a school principal. He did not enjoy the advantages of an academic post. Anderson wrote at nights—sometimes all night—on weekends, and during ‘holidays’, in time snatched from an already busy life as a professional, husband and father. It would be fair to say that Hugh sometimes reminded those of us who did have better opportunities for research and writing of how much they should be cherished, but it was a message never delivered with conceit, bitterness or rancour. He would pretend to be appalled at the very good wicket that younger scholars seemed to be batting on, the implied comparison being the more treacherous twenty-two yards that he had negotiated during his career.

He made his mark as an authority on convict broadsides and colonial ballads, on Victorian gold rush history, and on Australian literature.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Anderson deserves to be considered a pioneering Australian social and cultural historian, alongside his better recognised achievements as a major folklorist. Here was a highly creative scholar who could build, on the story of the tragic fate of an Aboriginal gumleaf musician whom he had noticed in the streets of 1950s Melbourne, a larger story about the role of Indigenous people in making Australian folk culture.<sup>5</sup> Neither a humble Sydney street poet such as Paddy Collins, nor a bush-worker, poet, songwriter and musician such as Simon McDonald, should be overlooked.<sup>6</sup> Their stories were as worthy of telling as those of better-known Australians such as John Pascoe Fawcner (1962), another of Anderson’s subjects.<sup>7</sup>

Anderson was a prolific contributor to student, cultural and literary publications from the late 1940s, but one of the earliest fruits of his lifelong interest in ballads and broadsides ripened in 1955, with *Colonial Ballads*.<sup>8</sup> *Farewell to Old England: A Broadside History of Early Australia* came in 1964. The book’s opening is brilliantly composed: you can immediately see, hear and smell the streets of Victorian London. (I was reminded of the ‘Who Will Buy?’ scene in the stage-musical *Oliver!*, a comparison that this historian of popular song might have appreciated.)<sup>9</sup> *Folk Songs of Australia and the Men and Women Who Sang Them*, written with John Meredith, appeared in 1967 and has been reprinted and reissued on several

4 A bibliography of Anderson’s works can be found at: Robert James Smith, ‘Hugh Anderson: A Bibliography’, *Australian Folklore*, 22, 2007, pp. 5-11.

5 Hugh Anderson, ‘Lost in the Streets: A Gumleaf Requiem for Bill Bull’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 44, March 1995, pp. 22-37.

6 Hugh Anderson, ‘“Paddy”, the Sydney Street Poet’, *Labour History*, 82, May 2002, pp. 137-152; Hugh Anderson, *Two Axe Mac: The Story of Simon McDonald*, transcriptions by Dawn Anderson, Red Rooster Press, North Melbourne, 2011.

7 Hugh Anderson, *Out of the Shadow: The Career of John Pascoe Fawcner*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962.

8 Hugh Anderson (ed.), *Colonial Ballads*, Rams Skull Press, Ferntree Gully, 1955.

9 Hugh Anderson, *Farewell to Old England: A Broadside History of Early Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1964.

occasions. The authors emphasised the oral and the national characteristics of their selection, each seen to be a marker of authenticity at a time when the word ‘folk’ was, in their view, being thrown around with too little discrimination.<sup>10</sup> Anderson’s monumental *Farewell to Judges & Juries: The Broadside Ballad and Convict Transportation to Australia 1788-1868* (2000) crowned a lifetime of collection, research and scholarship in a field that he had done so much to define.<sup>11</sup>

To separate Anderson’s work as an historian from that on Australian folklore is inevitably an artificial business since, as Graham Seal has argued in this journal, Anderson pursued an historical approach to folklore that was also followed by Meredith, Russel Ward and Edgar Waters, among others.<sup>12</sup> When he studied broadsides and folksongs, Anderson invariably began with the folksinger and the milieu that had shaped their creation. It was an approach he extended to his consideration of literature more generally. At a time when literary critics in the universities were moving towards the close reading of texts and, eventually, to critical theory, Anderson’s method remained determinedly historical and biographical, but never antiquarian or hagiographical. He understood that if you wanted to write literary history, you needed to study the written word, but that there was also something to be said for going to the horse’s mouth—that is, the authors themselves.

The volume and variety of Anderson’s output is astounding. There were local histories, of the Ripon Shire (1969), near Ballarat, and of Ringwood (1974), now a Melbourne suburb. There were school textbooks, bibliographies, anthologies and document collections. Anderson was also a prolific biographer. He wrote more than a dozen entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, as well as books on Charles Thatcher (1960), Bernard O’Dowd (1968) and John Shaw Neilson (1972), the latter co-authored by Les Blake, with whom he also collaborated on a mammoth three-volume centenary history of Victorian state education, *Vision and Realisation* (1973).

His biography of Squizzy Taylor, published as *Larrikin Crook* in 1971, was republished a decade later and given a new lease of life by the Underbelly television series, with a further edition in 2011. ‘In the early years of black and white television in Melbourne’, Anderson explained in the most recent edition of the book, he had seen many crime films such as *The Untouchables*, set between the wars. ‘I remember asking with a

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10 John Meredith and Hugh Anderson, *Folk Songs of Australia and the Men and Women Who Sang Them*, Ure Smith, Sydney and London, 1968 [1967], pp. 7-9.

11 Hugh Anderson, *Farewell to Judges & Juries: The Broadside Ballad & Convict Transportation to Australia, 1788-1868*, Red Rooster, Hotham Hill, 2000.

12 Graham Seal, ‘Hugh and Dawn Anderson’, *Australian Folklore*, 22, 2007, 1-4.

nationalistic fervour: if we want crooks, why not Australian ones?’<sup>13</sup> Anderson showed that Squizzy Taylor was indeed a ghastly crook; while capturing his celebrity and charisma, he resisted romanticising him. But the urge to tell Australian stories, in an Australian way—without gum-nut parochialism but rather the ‘relaxed erectness of carriage’ that Arthur Phillips offered as an alternative to the cultural cringe—was always there.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson was active in the folk revival of the 1950s and, more generally, among folklorists at home and abroad. He established connections in Britain, such as Roy Palmer; in the United States, notably Kenneth Goldstein; and in China, although the upheavals of 1989 disrupted developing connections and projects.<sup>15</sup> Part of his influence came through his activities as a publisher: Red Rooster Press, which derived its name from the convict Frank the Poet’s motto (‘And while I live, I’ll crow’), published many of Anderson’s later books and booklets but also much else that would not otherwise have seen light of day in the fields of folklore, history, memoir and literature.

In the mid-1980s he chaired the Hawke Government’s remarkable Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia. While its recommendations were sadly neglected in Australia by a Labor government increasingly addicted to nationalism of the glossy and corporate kind, the work of the committee—comprising Anderson, Gwenda Davey and Keith McKenry—and its fine report, *Folklife: Our Living Heritage* (1987), have a respected place in international folklore scholarship.<sup>16</sup> These developments led in 1988 to the formation of the Australian Folklore Association, in which Anderson was active; he served on the editorial board of its journal, *Australian Folklore*, and contributed to it regularly.<sup>17</sup> More generally, he took a keen interest in the community of folklore scholars, both within and beyond the university. I recall putting him up in my flat while he was visiting Armidale, as well as attending with him the opening session of a folklore conference run by John Ryan of the University of New England in the early spring of 2000. We must have been among the very few Australians that evening who were not watching the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. Such devotion to scholarship!

Anderson’s efforts were not confined to the Anglo-world. He travelled to China in 1981 as part of a writers’ delegation that also included Nicholas

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13 Hugh Anderson, *The Rise and Fall of Squizzy Taylor: A Larrikin Crook*, Murdoch Books, Sydney, 2011, p. vii.

14 A.A. Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’ [1950] in *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*, F.W. Cheshire Melbourne for the Australian Book Society, Melbourne, 1958, p. 95.

15 Seal, ‘Hugh and Dawn Anderson’, p. 4.

16 *Folklife: Our Living Heritage: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987.

17 Macintyre and Damousi, ‘Hugh Anderson FRHSV FAHA 1927-2017’, p. 25.

Hasluck and Christopher Koch. He would later, in collaboration with Sinologists, produce bibliographies and edited collections on Australian writing in Chinese and modern Chinese writing, and he participated in exchanges between Chinese and Australian folklore scholars. With his wife Dawn, he was both a generous host to Chinese literary visitors to Australia, and a regular visitor to China. Even when close to home, Hugh liked nothing better than a good Chinese meal with friends. He did much to promote the cultural and literary potential of a bilateral relationship that has now become our most significant, and yet whose spruikers often struggle to envisage as anything more elevated than an opportunity to make money.

It was fitting that when *Australian Folklore* presented an issue to mark Anderson's eightieth birthday, it was dedicated not to Hugh alone but to Hugh and his wife Dawn (née Main), whom he had married in 1952, as 'distinguished Australian folklorists'. This pair were a power couple long before anyone had started using that term. Dawn had a distinguished career as a teacher, educationist, author and editor in her own right, but she was also a collaborator with Hugh, and a fellow-traveller on many journeys, a point, incidentally, that ASIO's busy cold war spies managed to pick up.<sup>18</sup>

Anderson brought great ingenuity to crafting his own career, just as he was a scholar of genuine originality and creativity. It took a while, but the academic establishment eventually woke up to the magnitude of his achievement—finally sending his way the formal honours he deserved, such as an honorary D.Litt. from the University of Melbourne in 2008 and an honorary fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2011. In 1974 he had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, recognition of his under-rated achievements in the field of history. While Anderson's perspectives included the local, the regional, the national and the international, few scholars have done more to establish and nurture the field of Victorian colonial and state history as worthy of attention in its own right.

Anderson celebrated his 90th birthday early in January 2017. No one who attended was quite able to work out on that day just how many books he had written, but all could agree that it was very many. Anderson worked almost until the end of his life, completing a light opera, *The Operatic Servant Girl*, based on Charles Thatcher's music.<sup>19</sup> He died in Melbourne on 3 March 2017, survived by Dawn, their children Warwick—himself an eminent historian—and Marcia (and her husband John M. Davies), their

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18 'Records Check—Hugh Anderson, Applicant for Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship', Hugh McDonald Anderson, ASIO File, National Archives of Australia, NAA: A6119, 3355.

19 Anderson and Bongiorno, 'Prolific Keeper of the Australian Flame'.

grandchildren Ian, Claire, and Hugh Davies, and Hugh's brothers John and Ray.

There was at the heart of Hugh's scholarship a basic generosity. In much of his writing, he seemed to be saying to his reader: 'Look at what I found. This is what I've learned about it, but you read it yourself. Sing it if you like. Tell me what you think.'

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