



Book cover

In the 1940's, Angry Penguins was a magazine for the Australian literary and artistic avant-garde movement published by the surrealist poet **MAX HARRIS**. It had a strong focus on publishing modernist poetry. Before the Second World War, **JAMES MCAULEY** (who later worked at Middle Head) and **HAROLD STEWART** had been part of Sydney's Bohemian arts world. They decried the evolution of early Modernism to later forms that could best be described as incoherent messes. They lamented the loss of craftsmanship and of meaning in poetry.

So they decided to hoax Harris and his co-editor **JOHN REED**. They constructed a fictional biography for 'Ernest Lalor Malley' a poet who it was claimed had died at the age of 25. Then in one afternoon, they penned an entire body of work (to be ascribed to Malley) - seventeen poems of a page or less each. They called the works - The Darkening Ecliptic. They subsequently reported that they wrote down the first things that came into their heads.

A splash — the silver nymph
Was a foam flake in the night.
But though the careful winds
Visited our trembling flesh
They carried no echo.
Night Piece 2

Hilarious hoax

Poets

'Ern Malley'
James McAuley
Harold Stewart

Editors

Max Harris
John Reed

McAuley and Stewart then sent Harris their work and a letter under the name of **Ethel Malley** (Ern's supposed sister). Harris was ecstatic, deeming Malley in the class of **Dylan Thomas**. His fiends agreed. He then rushed out a special edition of Angry Penguins. Not all were convinced. An article in the Adelaide University student paper suggested that Harris had penned the poems as some form of elaborate hoax. Subsequently, Harris hired a private investigator to find Ethel Malley. Later the Sydney Sunday Sun reported that the poems had been written by McAuley and Stewart.

The Ern Malley hoax had long-lasting repercussions. The Australian movement for modernistic writing received a severe setback. The conservatives were strengthened.

It was reported that prominent artist **Sidney Nolan**

credited Ern Malley with inspiring him to paint his first Ned Kelly series "it made me take the risk of putting against the Australian bush an utterly strange object".

The poet who
never lived but
who lives on ...

The world's
greatest
literary hoax