

Arthur. H Adams, 1872 – 1935

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Arthur H. Adams occupies an important place in New Zealand's literary history as a pioneer of a diverse range of literary forms. Starting his literary life as a lyricist for light opera, Adams published four volumes of poetry, one collection of short stories, one collection of plays and eleven novels in his lifetime. He was also a journalist and used his position as literary editor to the *Bulletin* and the *Lone Hand* to advance the careers of Australasian writers and promote a literary culture in Australian and New Zealand society. At their best, Adams' poems and novels display a distinctively New Zealand sensibility and an unsentimental pride in the nation's cultural identity. He is capable of evoking landscape, character and mood with spare lyricism and rhythmic force and delights in the original and unorthodox. Adams' early promise was never fully realised, perhaps because of his tendency to experiment with a succession of new styles and genres. A sense of disillusionment and wasted talent pervades his later work.

A three week snowstorm coincided with the birth of Arthur Henry Adams on 6 June 1872 in the Central Otago town of Lawrence. He was the second son in a family of six born to Charles William Adams and Eleanor (Ellen) Sarah Adams, nee Gillon. Born in Tasmania in 1840, Charles Adams' family background was English. Family legend held that one of his ancestors was the head of Wadham College and another the tutor of Dr Johnson. A surveyor by profession, he arrived in New Zealand in 1862 and married Ellen Gillon in 1870. Ellen was of Irish descent, but was born in Douglas, the Isle of Man, where she lived until her family immigrated to Dunedin in 1851. Her mother, Sarah Gillon (nee Heron) was well educated and widely read and tutored Ellen and her brother Edward at home.

Charles Adams was the geodesic surveyor for the South Island in the Survey Department at the time of Arthur's birth. Arthur's early years were marked by his father's astronomical and geological findings. In 1877 Charles Adams discovered the accurate position of the star Alpha Centauri and in 1879 re-measured Mt Cook using triangulation observations. In 1882 the family moved to Wellington, where Charles Adams established an observatory at Mt Cook. Arthur attended Wellington Boys' College for the next three years. While in Wellington, Arthur came into contact with his maternal uncle. Edward Thomas Gillon was the manager of the United Press Association and became the editor of *The Evening Post* in 1884. He was recognised as one of New

Zealand's best Shakespearian scholars and instilled in his nephew a love of the English literary tradition.

In 1885 the Adams family moved back to Otago. During the sea voyage to Dunedin Arthur kept a navigation book with meticulous calculations of the latitude and longitude equations pertinent to the journey, evidence of his father's influence. For the next six years Arthur completed his school education at Otago Boys' High. His excellent academic record earned him a scholarship to Otago University and he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1894.

From the early 1890s Adams' interest in the arts became apparent. In 1890 he had a poem published in *Zealandia: A Monthly Magazine of New Zealand Literature*. 'The Examination [From a New Point Of View]' humorously reveals the speaker's impatience for the examination day so that he can 'sit for three hours, all work scorning;/ With nothing at all to be done!' (1 January 1890). This was followed, in the May issue of the periodical, by an autobiographical comic sketch detailing his failure to see an eclipse because of his hunger for buns. Adams was also a talented pianist and in the early 1890s two of his compositions – *Twilight Chimes Galop* (1890) and *Polish Patrol* (1891) – were published in Melbourne. His next literary ventures combined his love of words and music. In 1893, during a trip to Wellington, Adams met the musician Alfred F. Hill. After studying composition and performance in Leipzig, Hill had returned to his Wellington birthplace where he became the conductor of the Wellington Orchestral Society. Adams and Hill were both devotees of Gilbert and Sullivan and decided to write a comic opera in the tradition of their heroes. Their 1893 composition, *The Whipping Boy*, was never performed but it gave Adams experience in writing libretto and Hill the opportunity to extend his composition skills. The opera revolved around a satirical reflection on the Governor's receptions.

The Adams and Hill collaboration continued in 1894. Their cantata for choir, orchestra and baritone, *Time's Great Monotone*, was performed on 1 October of that year, the opening night of the second New Zealand Musical Festival in Wellington. The event was a resounding success, *The Evening Post* reporting that during the festival week 'the Opera House had been crowded to excess – not only every seat being taken, but passages and standing room being blocked...' (8 October 1894). *Time's Great Monotone* was favourably received, Adams being praised for his skill as an Australasian balladeer.

Adams continued his studies at Otago University during this time, enrolling in a law degree. However, he found the study of law uncongenial and, as he later declared, 'eagerly relinquished this profession for a chance as a junior reporter' in Wellington (Obit. *Evening Post*, 5 March 1936). While his father strongly disapproved of Adams' change in career, his mother encouraged him and his maternal uncle gave him a position with the *Evening Post*.

1895, the year of Adams' move to Wellington, was also a significant one in terms of his literary development. In February he had his first publication in the *Sydney Bulletin*, a newspaper with a respected reputation as a commentator on things literary which provided an important starting point for many Australian and New Zealand writers. 'The Anarchist' is an original and atmospheric poem about an agitator confronting execution on the guillotine. Adams demonstrates a daring socialist sympathy for the title character, arguing that oppressive capitalist ethics destroyed his family and left him with little choice but to battle tyranny. In the moment of his death the anarchist is comforted by God with a vision of a world reborn in which 'Reason rings the knell of grief and pain.' The strong narrative drive and rhythmic rhyming patterns of the poem are hallmarks of much of the young Adams' writing, as is the depiction of human suffering and struggle from a humanist, socialist viewpoint.

In March a further three poems were published, 'On the Plains', 'A.D. 1895' and 'In the Train', and in December 'Maoriland' appeared. This is a much anthologised poem that is unique for its time in its insistence that New Zealand, not England, is home and 'mother'. What Adams values about his birthplace is the beauty of the indigenous landscape. He delights in the 'silent lakes', the forests lit by 'rata's red fire spangled', the 'liquid call' of tuis, the 'geysers [which] hiss and seethe' and the 'tussocked plain[s]'. Yet the beauty is not that of a picture postcard, under the sunlit skies 'all winds whisper one word,/ "Death!" '. This pervading melancholy and intimation of mortality is evident in much of Adams' poetry.

Poetic success failed to meet with paternal approval, Charles Adams comparing Arthur unfavourably with his elder brother (Charles Edward) who held a secure position as a surveyor. However, Ellen Adams was proud of her literary son and treated him to afternoon tea in her favourite tearoom on Lambton Quay whenever he had a poem published in the *Bulletin*. She was similarly supportive of the artistic aspirations of her daughter Eleanor, who became a well-regarded landscape painter under her married name of Eleanor Spicer.

During 1895 Adams and Hill also began work on a new cantata, *Hinemoa*. Based on the Māori legend of the beautiful Hinemoa who swims across Lake Rotorua to be with her lover Tutanekai on Mokoia Island, the cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra was first performed on 18 November 1896. At the party after the performance Adams and Hill toasted the success of their work in champagne and Adams announced that he hoped to turn the work into an opera. Although this ambition was never realized, *Hinemoa* was greeted with popular approval and positive reviews. Adams' lyrics were hailed by the *Triad* as 'graceful, musical and in places even poetical' (20 November 1896). The work was performed again on 2 December 1896. Adams missed this because he was out reporting the upcoming election, but was cheered in his absence. At the 18 December performance several hundred people climbed on the grandstand roof of the Industrial Exhibition Hall in order to hear the work. *Hinemoa* then began a nation-wide tour of the country with the Musin Company, before traveling to Australia where it met with similar popular and critical acclaim.

The work is an important one in New Zealand musical and cultural history and was revived for performance in Wellington in 1992. Music historian John Mansfield Thomson credits Adams and Hill with changing, to some extent, the colonial perception of Māori as a dying race and with initiating an interest in Māori tradition. Contemporary anthropological scholar, Edward Tregear, wrote to Hill declaring that he 'could not have believed that any European music could have so well interpreted the genius of Māori feeling' (20 November 1896).

Meanwhile Adams increasingly found his day job uncongenial. His colleagues at the *Evening Post* did not think highly of his skills as a reporter, believing him to be too emotional and sensitive for the journalistic world. Chief Reporter Jack Gibbons often complained to Adams' friend Thomas Mills, 'Why, dammit Tom, Arthur wouldn't know a [story] if it hit him as he walked along Lambton Quay'. After Edward Gillon's death in 1896 it was thought that Adams would find himself without a job. However, the new editor, 'Big Man' Lukin from Queensland, was 'delighted to find on his staff a genuine *Bulletin* man' and Adams retained his position due to his reputation as a poet (Mills, 1-3).

Increasingly it was as a serious, 'dramatic poet', rather than a journalist, that Adams defined himself (Mills, 9). This perception was fostered by the praise of A.G. Stephens, the editor of the *Bulletin's* Red Page. Stephens

admired Adams' poetry and urged the publishing company Angus and Robertson to include Adams' poems in their 1897 Snowy River series.

Believing that Australia offered more artistic opportunities and support than New Zealand, Adams approached the Sydney dramatic entrepreneur J. C. Williamson in 1898 about the possibility of a job. Williamson was impressed with *Hinemoa* and engaged Adams as his literary secretary at the salary of two hundred pounds a year. A condition of employment was that any dramatic writing Adams completed would be the property of the theatrical firm Williamson and Musgrove. In 1898, the year of his arrival in Sydney, Adams wrote *The Forty Thieves: A Pantomime in Three Acts*, which Williamson staged.

Alfred Hill had moved to Sydney shortly before Adams to take up the conductorship of the Sydney Liedertafel. He regularly included songs penned by Adams on the programme, the part-song 'The Anvil' being a particular favourite. In 1899 Adams and Hill began work on another collaboration, a full-scale opera entitled *Tapu*. The plot was based around the adventures of an Australian politician visiting New Zealand in the hope of persuading New Zealand to join a Canberra based federation. The duo's love of Gilbert and Sullivan-esque humour and improbable events was evident in the entrance of four ladies from the Australian Emancipated Women's league on bicycles and the last-minute rescue of the politician from a tohunga's cooking pot. Adams and Hill tried to interest J. C. Williamson in the opera, but he was not encouraging.

For Adams, however, 1899 was most memorable for the publication of *Maoriland and Other Verses*. The volume is dedicated to 'The Best of Women, My Mother'. Adams thanks her for her support, but also declares that it is time for him to shape his own life. The collection is diverse both in terms of subject and in terms of style. The poems range from narrative-driven ballads, to mawkish and sentimental love poems, to a medieval drama in one act 'The Minstrel'. MacD. P. Jackson points out that in spite of this divergence Adams' affection for the unorthodox provides a connecting strand in the volume, Adams taking 'a Māori perspective on the coming of the Pākehā' in 'The Coming of Te Rauparaha', looking forward to the equality of 'The New Woman' and imagining 'a wife and paramour quarreling over a corpse' (*Oxford History*, 418).

The most memorable poems are those which meditate on New Zealand's cultural and geographical identity. 'Written in Australia' employs the favourite

Adams' trope of national contrasts. Alienated from his homeland in the 'haggard continent' of Australia, he yearns for the 'brimming rivers', 'riotous breezes' and shady forests of New Zealand. Likewise, in 'The Brave Days To Be', the New Zealand of the future, a 'lusty land', 'hilarious and radiant with youth', is contrasted with the 'grey old crone' who is England. In this poem and in 'The Dwellings of Our Dead' the New Zealand landscape is delineated in an anti-romantic manner surprising for its time. Adams conceives of the geothermal area of the central North Island as 'writh[ing] with a scrofula of quivering sores' and imagines the dead lying 'unwatched, in waste and vacant places'. *Maoriland* was warmly received by the critics, particularly the poems featuring Adams' ballad-like rhythms. G. B. Barton, writing for the *Bulletin's* Red Page, raved about Adams' 'originality in thought and expression, combined with so much force, pathos and melody' (ATL MS-2739).

In 1900 Adams experimented with a new genre, arranging two volumes of *Nursery Rhymes with Music*. This venture proved popular with children and Adams published several more collections of nursery rhymes in subsequent years. Later in 1900 Adams again embarked on a new journalistic venture. He was sent by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to report on the Boxer Rebellion in China and his articles were published in several Australian and New Zealand papers. Initially Adams was full of anticipation at this expansion of his horizons. However, illness and the brutal reality of war soon undermined the glamour of adventure. Adams was forced to return to Sydney in 1901 due to a severe case of enteric fever. When he recovered, he toured New Zealand lecturing on the Chinese situation, before departing for England in 1902.

Adams left for England in the hope that he would make a name for himself as a man of letters. Initially his dream seemed realisable. He responded with delight to the cultural opportunities London provided, such as seeing Melba perform at Covent Garden, and secured a publisher for *The Nazarene: A Study of Man*. As the title indicates, this long narrative poem insists on Christ's humanness and is the fullest expression of the young Adams' agnostic outlook. Adams feels that Christ the man has been obscured by the accoutrements of religion, the 'waving of fine priestly hands' and the 'incense smoke', and declares:

I will not have his human story dimmed
And shadowed over by his divinity.
He was of us, all human, brother, friend;
He strove, was vanquished, strove and won – a Man.

Christ's story is told from a succession of different viewpoints, including those of his mother Mary, Judas and Mary of Magdala. All of these individuals love Christ as a man, not as a God, and Christ himself craves such love. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Adams' agnostic humanism, the volume met with a muted contemporary response. More recent reappraisals have been much more positive. MacD. P. Jackson admires the poem's spare blank verse and argues that it is 'one of the most vital religious poems written by a New Zealander' (*Oxford History*, 419).

However, Adams was quickly disillusioned with life in London. He obtained only insecure employment as a freelance journalist and lived for the next three years in biting poverty. The London years were marked by unhappiness and a longing for the antipodean homeland.

The critical response to Adams' libretto for *Tapu*, which was finally staged in Wellington on 16 February 1903, did not help when they reached Adams in London, particularly as his contribution was seen as the one weak aspect of the opera. Comments in the *New Zealand Mail* are typical: 'the dialogue reveals in many places the want of dramatic experience' (17 February 1903). In contrast, Hill was praised for his artistic judgement and graceful melodies. Audiences were captivated by the exotic setting of the Pink Terraces and the Māori poi dance and haka. Tom Pollard's Opera Company, which had staged the opera in Wellington, then took *Tapu* on tour in the South Island. J. C. Williamson later revised Adams' libretto and successfully mounted the work in Auckland, Sydney and Melbourne in 1904, although the dialogue was still criticised.

In 1904 Adams' first novel, *Tussock Land: A Romance of New Zealand and the Commonwealth*, was published. The novel is a *künstlerroman* with autobiographical resonances, including a troubled relationship between father and son. It centers on King Southern's quest for identity as an artist and a New Zealander. He gives up everything, including his love for Aroha Grey, in order to leave southern New Zealand and travel to Australia. This departure does not result in a full realisation of his artistic ambition and the novel is laden with a sense of artistic disillusionment, perhaps the product of Adams' troubled time in England. King ultimately relinquishes his painting, declaring that such dreams are the province of youth. He leads a productive and happy life, but the reader is left with a sense of waste and diminishment. Adams' ideas about cultural identity, expressed in poems such as 'Maoriland', are also developed in this novel. Aroha, part Māori and part English, is seen as a model of vigorous nationhood:

She was a New Zealander. This land and she were kin...A hemisphere separated her from her father, a dying history cut her off from her mother. She began another race, belonging to a newer people, a nation that had no past. (34)

Significantly, King, of purely English heritage, has more difficulty in finding his place in the world. When he eventually settles in Waiatua his homecoming comes at the cost of his art. Adams himself chose to pursue his artistic ambitions away from New Zealand, but always defined himself as a New Zealander and was frequently plagued by a sense of homesickness for the land of his birth. *Tussock Land* is an important novel in the New Zealand literary oeuvre, one of the earliest to give a sense of an authentic New Zealand landscape.

In spite of favourable reviews for *Tussock Land*, Adams' position in the London literary scene remained tenuous and in 1905 he returned to New Zealand and worked briefly for first the *Evening Post* and then the *New Zealand Times*, where he developed new skills as assistant editor. In 1906 Adams returned to Sydney to succeed A. G. Stephens as the literary editor of the *Bulletin's* Red Page.

In the same year Adams' third volume of poetry, *London Streets*, was published. In keeping with Adams' unhappy experiences in London and his long-standing insistence on the merits of his New Zealand homeland these poems exhibit none of the usual colonial fascination with England as 'Home'. Throughout, the volume is damning of the 'fog', 'din', 'glittering emptiness' and 'gaunt factories' of London. Here people lead 'wearied lives' in their 'grim' dwellings 'packed tier on tier'. There are moments of charm and respite as the poet wanders through famous streets, but the overall impression is of London as a web of 'Great Greyness' which has 'shrivelled and long sucked dry' Adams' 'alien heart'. In a striking metaphor of both the gloomy smog-laden atmosphere and the poet's sense of disillusionment Adams describes the city as 'gloved fingers' which 'smudge the sun away'.

A renewed zest for life and passion for literature emerged once Adams was settled in secure and congenial employment at the *Bulletin*. In 1907 he proposed a zoological system for classifying and grading literature. Fiction was to be labeled 'F' and given a grade between one and four. Adams used this system when writing reviews, for example awarding Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and John Galsworthy the top ranking of F1.

Issues relating to New Zealand literature and culture featured strongly on the *Bulletin's* Red Page under Adams' editorship. New Zealand authors were frequently reviewed, such as W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie's 1906 anthology of *New Zealand Verse* which Adams praised for its 'distinctive national appeal and high standard' (24 January 1907). G. B. Lancaster was a favourite of Adams, awarded a creditable F2 on his zoological classification system for literature. In April 1907 Adams wrote an essay entitled 'The Maori, White and Tanned' which referred to books by Edward Tregear, John White, George Grey, S. Percy Smith, J. A. Wilson, and F. E. Maning in its discussion of Māori origins. Adams continued to uphold his belief that it was through her 'priceless heritage of Māori and South Sea legend' that New Zealand would 'find its unique place in the world' (24 January 1907).

On 30 September 1908 Adams married Lilian Grace Paton at a service at Neutral Bay. They settled into one of the first houses on Cremorne Point, calling their home 'Manama'. This was Adams' home until his death. The marriage was a happy one and during the next decade a son and two daughters were born to the couple. Adams was so devoted to his wife and children that he was ridiculed by some of his literary colleagues. He remained unabashed and dedicated his 1913 collection of poems to his wife, thanking her for 'all the love [she] give[s]' and promising that she lives 'in [his] heart' to such an extent that it would be a travesty to write a poem about her.

A 1908 review of Adams' literary career, 'From Maoriland', by David McKee Wright was critical of Adams' 'arrested development' (*Bulletin*, 9 July 1908). Adams was searching for new creative stimulus and in 1908 he turned once again to the excitement of live performance, this time experimenting with theatre. His career as a dramatist began with a one-night performance of *The Tame Cat: A Somewhat Colonial Comedy in 4 Acts* by the Sydney Muffs. This was praised for its wit by a review in the *Bulletin*, but censured for its lack of structure. The play dramatises in light comic form some of the issues Adams had explored in *Tussock Land*. At the center of the play is an indecisive hero who is torn between the attractions of a London femme fatale and a desire to return to 'Maoriland'.

In 1909 Adams succeeded Sir Frank Fox as the editor of the *Lone Hand*. His vigorous advocacy and determined publication of Australasian writers in this publication furthered his respected reputation within the literary community. Adams also continued to advance his own literary career, publishing a collection of short stories, *The New Chum and Other Stories*, in 1909. These had all been previously published in the *Bulletin* and they are an

eclectic mix of backblocks humour ('The New Chum'), romantic interludes ('Honi Soit', 'The Girl in the Punt', 'Kowhai Blossom') and serious reflection ('The Affair of the Lutai Forts'). 'The New Chum' sets up a typical Adams dichotomy between the stagnant traditions of urban England and the freedom of a young, largely rural land. 'The Affair of the Lutai Forts' is a rarity in the Adams' canon, a wholly serious meditation on the brutality of war. Drawing on his experiences during the Boxer rebellion, the clearly autobiographical narrator witnesses a bungled raid on the Chinese held Lutai Forts. Arriving in London six months later the narrator sees the mother of slain Midshipman Quaif indulging herself in a round of gaiety. Having 'looked with unshrinking eyes upon the reality of life in the rough', he is filled with rage at her callousness (161).

1910 was an important year in Adams' literary development. The publication of his second novel, *Galahad Jones*, was a new departure with its wholly Sydney setting and its fusion of the fantastic and the everyday. The title character and his wife Em have lost the sparkle with which they started life and have settled into a repetitive, soul-destroying routine of work and suburban life. Yet Galahad continues to long for '[r]omance and adventure, wonder and illusion' (12). His encounter with Sybil Beach, a damsel in distress, frees him from 'the sordid shackles of the prosaic' (29). This resurgence of romance within him opens his eyes to the way life has calloused his relationship with Em and the couple reaffirm their love. The closing scene of the two surfing on Manly Beach is symbolic of the injection of spontaneity that has illuminated their lives. Well-received by contemporary reviewers, *Galahad Jones* is regarded by more recent critics as one of Adams' most successful novels.

Adams also continued to experiment with theatre and his play *The Wasters* was performed in Adelaide on 27 August 1910. This is a light society drama in the tradition of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. The Dangar family is rent apart by an accusation of embezzlement against the son of the house. Guy is rescued by his mother's revelation that his accuser, not her husband, is actually his father.

From 1911 to 1917 Adams was the editor of the *Sydney Sun*. This coincided with a particularly productive period in Adams' literary career. In 1912 he continued his fictional mix of romance and reality in *A Touch of Fantasy: A Romance for Those Who Are Lucky Enough to Wear Glasses*. This is a more melodramatic companion piece to *Galahad Jones*, revolving around the device of a pair of magic spectacles which soften the harsh edges of the

world. Here Adams warns of the dangers of illusion and excess romance. The protagonist, Hugh Robjohn, must ultimately learn to live without the glasses and accept the realities he sees around him, particularly the imperfections of his wife Nancy.

Heartened by favourable reviews and fairly substantial sales of his fiction, Adams announced his abandonment of poetry for fiction in the foreword of his 1913 *Collected Verses*. He declared that he 'no longer possess[e]d the best equipment, nor the right attitude of mind' for the 'joyous adventure' of poetry, which he was happy to leave to 'the shouting army of Youth'. The collection itself is an expanded version of *Maoriland*. The additions to the earlier volume are a series of narrative poems on Māori legends and some philosophical 'interrogations'. The latter embody the high point of Adams' agnostic humanism. Adams' God is no longer the compassionate rescuer of 'The Anarchist' or the divinely human Christ of *The Nazarene*, but a 'Yoked God', '[c]aught in the cobwebs of the cosmos He has spun'. It is up to 'Man', Adams' 'Supra-God', to take the 'half-hewed' 'universe crude' and 'build and complete' a better world. The most vociferous of the poems is the 'Ballad of Judgment Day', in which a criminal indicts God for his flawed creation. In spite of Adams' abandonment of poetry, his lyrics remained popular with song writers, Alice Forrester setting 'Lullaby' to music in 1913.

Another of Adams' mock-heroic Australian romances, *The Knight of the Motor Launch*, was published in 1913. His connections with the Sydney dramatic community were also strengthened, with Alfred Hill, becoming part of the Dramatic Committee for the Repertory Theatre. Adams was hopeful that this connection would provide a natural avenue for his own plays, but was disappointed. The preface to his 1914 publication *Three Plays for the Australian Stage* communicates his frustration at the lack of support for Australasian dramatists, claiming that 'there is no Australian stage.' The three plays included in the volume are *The Wasters*, a dramatic version of *Galahad Jones*, and *Mrs Pretty and the Premier*. There is no evidence that *Galahad Jones* was ever performed, but *Mrs Pretty and the Premier* was finally staged in Melbourne at the Repertory Theatre in 1914. The play is a situational comedy about politics and the power of love. Self-made Labor Party Premier William Power realises that there is a dimension missing in his life when he meets the widowed Mrs Pretty.

Throughout World War I Adams periodically used his literary talents for patriotic ends. Shortly after the outbreak of war Adams published *My Friend Remember! Lines Written On Reading Lissauer's Chant of Hate* which exhorts

readers to remember that Germany is an implacable, hate-filled enemy. The same year Adams wrote an 'Australian National Song', which was set to music by Theodore Tourrier. This was awarded first prize when it was entered into the Commonwealth competition conducted by the Musical Association of New South Wales. In 1916 one of Adams' poems was included in the collection *In Memoriam: Anzac Day April 25th 1916*. 'The Veteran' brings home the horror of Gallipoli through an undercutting of sentiment. The title character has seen unspeakable things, but is 'only nineteen now – and *such* a kid.'

A different facet of Adams' character and literary skill is evident in his risqué satires of romantic idealism written under the pseudonym Henry James James. Of these *Double-Bed Dialogues* is typical. This first appeared in 1914 as a serial in the *Bulletin* and was then published in London as a novel entitled *Honeymoon Dialogues* in 1916. The following year it was reissued in Australia under the original title of *Double-Bed Dialogues*. For its day, *Double-Bed Dialogues* has a pornographic tinge. It features several scenes in which the female form is seen partially clad in open-work lingerie or in the act of disrobing. These scenes work to demystify marriage and romance, the male protagonist cursing the painful hooks and eyes he is asked by his wife to undo. As in Adams' Australian romances, life is depicted as a mundane reality occasionally leavened with an ephemeral romantic sparkle.

A new romantic escapade in the tradition of *Galahad Jones* appeared in 1915, this time set on a Pacific Island. *Grocer Greatheart* is the most contrived of Adams' romances and employs his standard trope of a middle-aged, prosaic protagonist who blossoms in an unusual situation. In this instance the title character, a grocer from Woolloomooloo, has his life transformed when he is shipwrecked on a Pacific island. Here he becomes the leader of the survivors, foils a treasure hunt by armed desperados and falls in love with a circus girl who roves around the island astride an elephant clad in silver spangles and accompanied by her pet tiger. Adams is unable to reconcile these exotic elements with everyday life and the grocer and his beloved remain in their Pacific paradise at the close of the novel.

In 1917 Adams returned to the *Bulletin*, once again editing the Red Page. A brief selection of Adams' poems appeared in a 1919 collection *Nature Poems* edited by Mary E. Wilkinson (Melbourne: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1919). This is typical of the publishing history of Adams' poems which have never been republished in their entirety, but are regularly anthologized.

In 1920 another frothy James James offering, *Lola of the Chocolates* (first serialised in the *Bulletin* in 1918), was published. This was followed the next year by the final James James frippery to appear outside the *Bulletin*, *Guide Book to Women*. The most significant feature of this novel is that it is the only of Adams' diverse literary works to be published solely in America.

A much more substantial publication was Adams' 1920 novel *The Australians*. This revolves around the adventures of a lively young English actress stranded in Sydney through the dishonesty of her agent. Adams satirises social, political and artistic pretensions. The novel has divided critics since its publication. David McKee Wright wrote a hostile review entitled 'As We Are Not' in the 22 March 1920 issue of the *Bulletin*, while Vance Palmer praised the novel in his 1923 essay 'The Missing Critics' which called for 'serious estimates' of Adams' work. (26 July 1923).

Throughout the 1920s Adams continued to use the Red Page as a forum for expressing his views on literary matters. In November 1926 he wrote an essay on 'Drama and Film', which argued that film should be taken seriously as an art form. He was also vocal in his defense of 'The Billabong School' of Australian authors, insisting that urban and suburban life was an appropriate subject matter for fiction (5 May 1927). Adams worked hard throughout his career to promote the establishment of an authors' organisation, but was hostile to the concepts of patronage and prize competitions.

Adams traveled to London, via New Zealand, in 1927 in order to promote his plays. The enduring legacy of his father's passion for numbers and measurements is seen in a manuscript notebook preserved in the Alexander Turnbull Library. This contains detailed calculations of the distance between Auckland and Newcastle and estimates of the length of time the Koromiko would take to reach England. Although *Mrs Pretty and the Premier* had been performed in London in 1916 under the direction of Arthur Bouchier, Adams was unsuccessful in raising interest in his plays. His London publisher, Everleigh, Nash, was happy to bring out his novel *The Brute*, but once again England failed to live up to Adams' artistic expectations and he returned to Australia.

In 1928 Adams was delighted at the inclusion of his 'The Affair of the Lutai Forts' and 'The Rendezvous' in a collection of the *Best Short Stories* edited by E. J. O'Brien. Two years later his comic sketch 'The Last of the Moas' was included in the 1930 collection of *New Zealand Short Stories* (the first of its kind) edited by O. N. Gillespie. However, his disillusionment with the literary

establishment and sense of his own talents being wasted is apparent in his 1929 autobiographical novel *A Man's Life*.

Stylistically this is the most innovative of Adams' novels. Adams uses the flashbacks of a dying man to give an insight into the key moments in the hero's life. The autobiographical vignettes of past experiences, which have no chronological order, are linked by the recurring themes of rebellion against a stern, puritanical father, the shaping of the artistic mind and sexual awakening. Childhood rebellions anticipate the hero's rejection of his father's religion and consecration to a new faith – art: 'In a moment of glorious and Godlike comprehension ...[he] knew himself for the anointed and consecrated disciple of poetry' (135). Departure for Australia brings mental freedom and sexual adventures, but lasting happiness only comes with his marriage. As he matures, the hero's ardent agnosticism mellows to a humanist acceptance of difference, just as his youthful artistic fervour is tempered by the practicalities of life. Early critics did not warm to *A Man's Life*, Charles Brasch describing it as a 'poor, empty book coming at the end of a man's life' (ATL MS-2739), but more recent commentators view the narrative innovations, spare style and unsentimental treatment of theme with favour.

A Man's Life marked the end of Adams' serious creative output, the 1930s resulting in only one new venture, an arrangement of *Favourite Singing Games* (1932), and the publication the *Vocal Score of Hinemoa* (1935). Adams contracted septicemia and pneumonia in 1936 and was treated in the Royal North Shore hospital. He died on 4 March 1936 and was cremated with Anglican rites. His estate of £435 was left to his wife and children.

It is as a poet that Adams has largely been remembered. Poems such as 'Maoriland', 'The Brave Days To Be' and 'The Dwellings of Our Dead' are frequently anthologised. Along with Blanche Baughan, Adams is credited with being one of the first truly indigenous Pākehā poetic voices. His unsentimental evocations of the New Zealand landscape and challenges to orthodoxy and complacency have ensured his enduring appeal. Adams had an influence on one of New Zealand's first major poets, R. A. K. Mason, who shares with his predecessor an agnostic humanist sensibility. More recent reappraisals of Adams have also emphasised the importance of his two New Zealand novels. Both foreground issues crucial to colonial and early-provincial New Zealand society and both employ motifs – such as the rebel artist figure, the puritanical parent, the compelling power of landscape and the escape to Australia – that later authors were to borrow. *Tussock Land* is unique for its time in its recognition of a bicultural heritage and its vision of an indigenous national

identity. While Adams' own sense of his unfulfilled potential is largely accurate, his place as a New Zealand literary pioneer and commentator is secure.

LINKS

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[Timeframes image](#)

[Australian Dictionary of Biography](#)

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Collections of some of Arthur H. Adams' manuscripts and biographical material, reviews and letters relating to him are in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington.