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Henry Dearing

Decentering Australian Art

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Henry Dearing: Decentering Australian Art

Anthony White,[1] University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract: The paintings and drawings of Henry Dearing came to the attention of the art world in 1944 when the artist's depictions of country life appeared in the Australian literary journal "Angry Penguins." Since that time, there have been several exhibitions and scholarly examinations of Dearing's art. However, ingrained attitudes of artists, curators, and writers have obscured the works' deeper significance, artificially restricted the scope of Australian art history, and ignored the broader questions posed by Dearing's work about the categories habitually applied to discussions of modern art. This essay seeks to address these issues by presenting a new interpretation of the artist's work.

Keywords: Henry Dearing, Angry Penguins, Australian Art, Modernism, Outsider Art, Cycling

Introduction

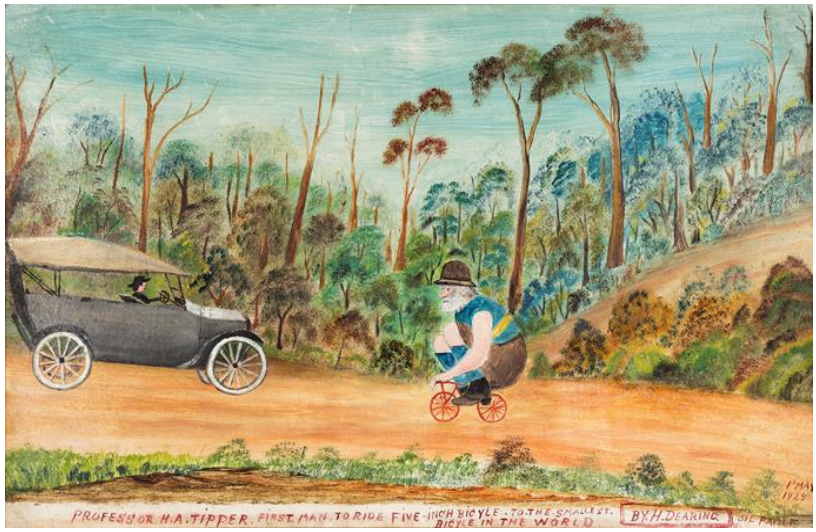

Figure 1: Henry Dearing, *Professor H. A. Tipper, First Man to Ride a Five-Inch Bicycle…*
1925, oil on cardboard, 30.5 x 46.5 cm
Source: Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; purchased from John and Sunday Reed 1980

Henry Dearing came to the attention of the artworld in 1944 when the artist's depictions of settler colonial life in rural Australia were published in the modernist literary journal *Angry Penguins*. Since that time, there have been a number of exhibitions and scholarly examinations of Dearing's work, and several more works have come to light. Despite this, the artist remains relatively unknown and his work understudied. Moreover, ingrained attitudes of artists, curators, and writers have obscured the works' deeper significance, artificially restricted the scope of Australian art history, and ignored the broader questions posed by Dearing's work about the categories habitually applied to discussions of modern art. Dearing's paintings, which feature the itinerant laborer and trick cyclist Alfred Tipper, were interpreted during the 1940s by members of the *Angry Penguins* circle—including the artist Albert Tucker and editor John Reed—as inherently primitive, innocent, and natural. In this way, Dearing's work was excluded from any

[1] Corresponding Author: Anthony White, Room W209, West Tower John Medley (Building 191), School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3010 Australia. email: a.white@unimelb.edu.auu

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meaningful comparison with the work of contemporary, professional artists. In 2014, the art historian Nancy Underhill argued that Dearing's works were part of a hoax perpetrated by members of the *Angry Penguins* group, including the artist Sidney Nolan, thereby disconnecting the works from their origin in the lived experience of itinerant labor in rural Australia. In opposition to this double exclusion, I argue that Dearing's depictions of labor are a profound artistic commentary on the opportunities and hazards of rural life in twentieth-century Australia. Furthermore, I show that, in their celebration of the activities of Tipper, Dearing's works were closer to the aspirations of the *Angry Penguins* artists than has previously been allowed.

Henry Dearing: The Works and the Artist(s)

The thirty-two known paintings, drawings, and watercolors attributed to Henry Dearing are divided into two groups (Harding and Morgan 2014, 2015). One group, comprising six oil paintings which were first published in 1944–45, focus upon the cycling exploits of Alfred Tipper. They bear titles such as *A Day in the Country: Professor Tipper's Miniature Bicycle Buckjumping Show* (c. 1920) and *Professor H. A. Tipper, First Man to Ride a Five-Inch Bicycle* (c. 1925), both of which are now held in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. The other group, twenty-six works on paper donated to the Heide Museum of Modern Art in 2013, deal not with Tipper but with a variety of subjects, including farming activities. They show harvesting (*No Work*), cattle rearing, and dairy farming (*Milk Time*); land-clearing (*Jim You Got Three Miles to Goe*); greyhound racing; gold mining (*This Young Man Got Luck He Found Gold*); and fishing (*Badger River, Healesville*).

Figure 2: Henry Dearing, *Jim You Got Three Miles to Goe* c. 1935, watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper, 20 x 25 cm
Source: Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; purchased with funds donated by Barbara Tucker 2013

This latter group of drawings and watercolors has been dated between 1935 and 1939. Although the medium and subject matter of these two groups of works are distinct—with the paintings portraying the achievements of Tipper's cycling career and the works on paper depicting more conventional, bucolic subjects—when viewed together, it is clear that the two groups have

much in common. Unlike the works of more professionally trained Australian artists in this period such as W. B. McInnes—which are characterized by subtle gradations of tone, complex articulations of anatomy, and highly structured compositions gradually leading the viewer's eye from foreground to background—Dearing's works all feature unmodulated areas of color, rudimentary depictions of the human figure, and relatively shallow spatial depiction or sudden changes in scale (Haese 1981). In this sense, the artist's work belongs to a tradition of Australian folk or naïve art that stretches from some of the earliest practitioners, including the convict artist Charles Henry Theodore Costantini, whose mid-nineteenth-century depictions of the landscape rely upon painstaking detail, abrupt spatial transitions, and wooden figures to more recent artists including Selby Warren, whose ruggedly painted portrayals of rural existence from the 1970s display little regard for the formal procedures learned in art schools (Hackforth-Jones 1977; Shelley 2017). Another shared feature is the placement of human activities within a natural setting in locations such as Gippsland, Healesville, or North Queensland. Furthermore, aside from one painting set in central Melbourne, *Approach to Princes Bridge* (c. 1925) and a group of works on paper from the 1930s depicting a variety of subjects, including a portrait of Robert Baden-Powell and the activities of the Salvation Army, there is another significant commonality across the oeuvre. These are works concerned with forms of labor, including farming, mining, and—in the case of the works about cycling—sport and entertainment, which take place in the Australian countryside. What are we to make of the depiction of labor in these works?

Before answering this question, it is important to acknowledge that Dearing's works present several challenges to the art historian. There is no existing documentation of the artist's identity; his work came to public knowledge without the direct involvement of the artist, and some of his works have gone missing and can no longer be examined. Furthermore, Nancy Underhill has argued, based on observed stylistic inconsistencies between different works and within single works, that there was more than one creator involved (Underhill 2014, 2015). Several of the works were discovered in June 1944 by Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan, painters who formed part of the *Angry Penguins* group of modernist artists and writers, in the deceased estate of the cyclist Alfred Tipper (Reed 2001). Contemporary photographs of Tucker's studio show that *A Day in the Country*, which, like the other paintings in the group, was "somewhat the worse for wear," subsequently went from being unstretched to stretched (Reed 2001, 344). During this time, it is certainly possible, if Underhill and others who have perceived several hands at work are correct, that Tucker, Nolan, or someone else retouched the works.

In the light of this, Underhill (2014, 2015) contends that some of the paintings—at least in part—were works by Tucker or Nolan masquerading as an amateur painter. In support of this, she cites several factors. First, Underhill argues that some areas of the works are too well painted to be the product of an untrained artist. Second, she claims that the discovery of Dearing's work in a shop window re-enacted the circumstances of Pablo Picasso's earlier discovery of the naïve painter Henri Rousseau, thereby raising suspicion that the find was not entirely genuine (Underhill 2015). Third, Underhill (2015) observes "compositional debts" in Dearing's work to photographic vista cards of the Victorian countryside, images that were available to the *Angry Penguins* group of artists in 1944. Fourth, as is discussed further below, the discovery of Dearing coincided with the so-called "Ern Malley" hoax, which saw the *Angry Penguins* group publish the writings of an unknown poet who turned out to be the creation of two authors intent on a parody of modernist literature (Heyward 1993; Rainey 2009). John Reed wrote to the poet Max Harris about the discovery of Dearing's works—on the very same day in June 1944 that the Ern Malley poems were definitively exposed as a prank—that "We couldn't miss this, especially after Malley: another hoax!" (Reed 2001, 237). Put together, Underhill (2014, 2015) argues, this evidence raises significant questions about the authorship of the Dearing works.

Although the authorship of these works is a complex affair, I argue that we should be wary of attributing the *Angry Penguins* group too much agency in the creation of the works. To begin with, the aforementioned Dearing paintings *A Day in the Country*, along with *A Country Drive with*

Foreign Friends, and *Approach to Princes Bridge*—all of which depict the cycling exploits of Alfred Tipper—are clearly recognizable in a 1936 photograph advertising Tipper's activities (Penney 2019). These three works could well have been altered by someone other than the original artist during 1944–45; but as this photograph shows, they existed long before the *Angry Penguins* group announced their 'discovery.' Furthermore, when Underhill (2014, 2015) observes that the paintings refer to photographs and promotional material about Tipper which Tucker and Nolan likely discovered among Tipper's effects after he died, she cites this as evidence that the *Angry Penguins* artists may have confected the paintings. She does not contemplate the idea, however, that another artist—Dearing—could well have had access to the same promotional material. As we know from newspaper reports of the time, photographs, postcards, and press cuttings of Tipper circulated in regional centers as they were frequently handed out and exhibited by the cyclist himself and published in local periodicals (*Dubbo Dispatch and Wellington Independent* 1910; *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* 1915; *Daily Advertiser* 1932).

The question of who was responsible for the creation of these works may never be answered fully. However, it can be observed that the distinctive form of handwriting that appears on some of the works also appears on some of the objects that feature in photographs of Tipper (Underhill 2014). Entirely in capitals, and peppered with grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, it is remarkably unchanging across the various mediums. If—as is commonly accepted today—Tipper and Dearing were distinct individuals, a question remains as to how identical lettering came to appear on objects in Tipper's possession and on Dearing's artworks (Reed 2001). This shared feature demonstrates that the artist had more in common with the famous cyclist than has been allowed in much of the recent literature on the works. What I take from this finding is that Dearing's oeuvre needs to be viewed neither as a hoax by modernist artists nor as relating to the experience of one single person. Rather, it needs to be understood as drawing upon a body of knowledge relating to a broader population of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia. If we abandon the search for precisely who the individual author of the works was and focus on their style, content, and meaning, we can open a new vista into what their significance might be and decenter an art history that obsessively bolsters the reputation of already established artist figures.

Henry Dearing and Itinerant Labor in Australia

In discussing how labor is depicted in these works in what follows, the intention is to embark on a new reading of Dearing's work paintings and drawings, one which tracks down the actual lives and histories that are documented therein and reorients how the works have been interpreted in the art historical literature to date. The worker that these artworks portray was an itinerant laborer who constantly moved throughout the countryside in search of livelihood. This population of swagmen, shearers, land-clearers, shepherds, as well as traveling clergy and circus performers, played a significant role in Australia's economy and society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As Prue Laidlaw (2009, 29) has demonstrated, even though they "occupied important social and economic niches in rural Australia," itinerant workers usually did not formally document their lives; as a result, their experiences have been significantly under-represented in historical writing. What is also under-recognized about these workers is the significant role that cycling played in their labor. The bicycle was a central part of the rural economy from the late 1890s to the mid-twentieth century, a period which encompasses the dates of Tipper's greatest renown and the years in which Dearing's works were created (Fitzpatrick 2015). The historical records show just how significant the presence of the bicycle was, which is not surprising considering that the itinerant laborer Joseph Jenkins, one of the very few to keep a written record of their lives, noted in the 1880s that one could travel to a workplace in the countryside in a third of the time it would take to walk (Solomon 2013).

The key role played by the bicycle in this phase of Australia's economic development may have been underplayed because, as Jim Fitzpatrick (1978, 346) suggests, the "poor man's horse" was used frequently by union organizers throughout Australia and constituted "a material element as well as symbol in the 'class struggle.'" Moreover, as the representation of early settlement in this country has tended to favor the seemingly more noble figure of the horse-borne stockman or drover, "the appearance of the bicycle—however utilitarian or ubiquitous—struck an incongruous note" to generations of historian, poets, and writers (Fitzpatrick 1980, 237). As a result, Fitzpatrick (1978) concludes, the history of Australian rural culture has been significantly distorted. In this sense, while the images of Tipper on his bike which appear in many of these works may strike the viewers as unusual or contrary to expectation—and this may be what appealed not only to the *Angry Penguins* group but also the artist himself—they record an everyday element of working life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural Australia. In this sense, Dearing's work is an important document of how working-class people in Australia lived and worked in this period. It shows a different version of history to that which was frequently represented in mainstream art and historiography, determined as they are by the prerogatives of the more economically privileged classes of society.

The primary subject of Dearing's paintings, the cyclist Alfred Tipper, revealed in the numerous newspaper reports about his activities that he traveled extensively throughout Victoria and New South Wales in search of work. In addition to being an accomplished cyclist and entertainer—talents for which he achieved fame across south-eastern Australia but also internationally—he worked in a range of itinerant, rural occupations, such as land-clearing, hut building, and mining, and had experience of unemployment (*Cootamundra Herald* 1895; *Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser* 1896). His cycling exploits were sometimes directly connected to these activities of rural labor. While demonstrating his expertise in the use of the bicycle, he displayed his skills in towing heavy loads and in endurance riding. Such talents, while impressive and noteworthy in and of themselves, were crucially important to the life of a bike-borne itinerant worker, who had to travel long distances carrying considerable amounts of luggage. One such feat was depicted in the painting *A Country Drive with Foreign Friends: A Bicycle-Drawn Sulky* (c. 1925), in which, as a 1944 reviewer of Dearing's work commented, Tipper "pedals steadily on, harnessed between the shafts of a trap, in which sit a gentleman with a top hat and…an Indian prince" (*Herald* 1944). Before analyzing this work further, it is important to emphasize how it reinforces the territorial dispossession of the country's indigenous inhabitants.

By including an Aboriginal person in the foreground but choosing to represent a child rather than an adult and relegating him to a minor role in the composition compared to Tipper and the so-called "foreign friends," the painting participates in an aesthetic strategy of subordinating the rightful owners of the colonized land to the perfunctory role of staffage. In this sense, Dearing must be understood as part of the long-standing, Australian tradition of excluding First Nations peoples from the landscape both literally and figuratively and, in so doing, reinforcing the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, which argued that the country was uninhabited upon European invasion (Allen 1997). This now repealed but, nevertheless, persistent mythology continues to shape settler understandings of the Australian nation—and Dearing's perspective, although not exceptional for its time, is nevertheless one of many steps along a path that have led to this invidious situation.

To return to the principal subject of this painting, it drew on accounts of Tipper's actual activities, including a 1904 newspaper story with a photograph showing Tipper pulling a boy and a bag of chaff in a sulky (*World's News* 1904). Another newspaper journalist recalled that around the turn of the century, Tipper pulled a bale of lucerne weighing more than two hundred kilos over one hundred yards and that he had pulled "a sulky, containing butter, bacon, cheese etc., equalling the weight of two men" over eight miles in five hours (Sprag 1932).

Figure 3: Henry Dearing, *A Country Drive with Foreign Friends: A Bicycle-Drawn Sulky* c. 1925, oil on canvas on cardboard, 63 × 76.5 cm
Source: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; gift of Albert Tucker 1979

Even further, in the 1890s, Tipper once challenged competitors to beat his time riding from Sydney to Melbourne on a penny-farthing with seventy pounds of luggage and chop 128 cubic feet of wood en route (*Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 1898). This was a period when the cyclist accumulated a range of largely self-generated sobriquets that connected cycling to the rural environment and to the well-known identities of itinerant workers, such as the "tramp on wheels," the "swagman who travelled on a bike," and "the champion cyclist from the Australian bush" (*Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser* 1896; *Cootamundra Herald* 1895; *Daily Telegraph* 1912). The publicity that helped to produce the legend of Tipper, which lasted well into the 1930s, included deliberate references to the rural labor, industries, and environments to which his life was connected. The fact that these subjects also appear frequently in the group of works on paper that do not feature the famous cyclist shows that the works by Dearing—an artist that Underhill (2014, 5) described as "an itinerant artist working in the bush"—point to the commonality of experience between the two bodies of work. Moreover, those works portraying Tipper's remarkable exploits depict forms of entertainment of a kind with that provided by traveling performers, including acrobats, minstrels, and boxers, another type of itinerant laborer who traveled across rural and regional Australia. The straightforward depiction of the figures, who are not so much located within the landscape, as would be the case as in a more professionally produced painting, but rather situated in front of it as in a theatrical set, links the form of the work to the ostensible content and purpose of the painting—to publicize the cyclist's unusual accomplishments in the manner of a painted advertising hoarding accompanying a circus.

Figure 4: Henry Dearing, *A Day in the Country: Professor Tipper's Miniature Buckjumping Show* c. 1920, oil on canvas on board, 79.5 × 96.2 cm
Source: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; gift of Albert Tucker 1979

The work known as *A Day in the Country: Professor Tipper's Miniature Bicycle Buckjumping Show* (c. 1925) was described by a reviewer in 1945 (Bulletin 1945) as showing the cyclist "camped by the roadside with his firebox in what looks like a Gippsland landscape, with cyclists, de-afforested hills, Noah's Ark cows grazing in paddocks, dead gum-trees populated by koalas and (possibly) kookaburras." What appears as the focus of this complex picture is the scene of an actually existing form of entertainment in which Tipper set up opportunities for children to ride and race miniature bicycles, such as took place at The Society of Fingalians Highland Gathering in Geelong in 1919 (*Geelong Advertiser* 1919). Furthermore, as we know from a 1931 *Nowra Leader* newspaper, Tipper was "a well-known figure in most country towns, where, with his interesting tales, bicycles and pets, he is always popular." The depiction of Tipper's cycling feats in the group of better-known paintings are therefore not inconsistent with the subjects dealt with in the works on paper attributed to Dearing; on the contrary, they are fully commensurate with the human experiences to which the latter relate.

These works are characterized by an economy of depiction—such as the summary strokes of paint which render a cloudy sky, the stippled application of a loaded paintbrush to depict the variegated forms of Australian foliage, or the rudimentary way in which the details of human anatomy are conveyed. Furthermore, spatial articulation is often limited or inconsistent, and the focus of the picture is often unclear, leading the eye to concentrate on a range of small incidents and figures across the surface. In this way, the artist has attempted to convey the idea behind the work—the extraordinary nature of Tipper's achievements and the broader context to which they belong—in an economical and direct manner that does not omit important details in the interests of aesthetic harmony. This style has by no means hampered Dearing's eloquence in conveying the opportunities, diversions, and hazards of rural Australia. These works present no simple pastoral vision; in the suite of works on paper dating to 1935, the challenges of Australian rural life are acknowledged and recorded, including natural disasters *(Bushfire in Gippsland*), the

experience of unemployment (*No Work*), the hazards of working in the bush (*Jim don't Get Cross*) and the arduous experience of rural labor (*Jim You Got Three Miles to Goe*), as well as the frugal living conditions of itinerant laborers (*Washing Day in Camp*).

Figure 5: Henry Dearing, *No Work* c. 1935, watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper, 20 × 25 cm
Source: Heide Museum of Modern Art; purchased with funds donated by Barbara Tucker 2013

There is a continual tension in the works between the individual's capacity to prosper and attain goals and the limits imposed by the natural environment, the physical capabilities of the human body, and the rural economy. When twinned with the depictions of Tipper's feats of cycling prowess, as a whole the works speak to individual qualities of hardiness, self-reliance, and endurance, which are demonstrated not only through conventional forms of rural labor but also through athletic feats on a vehicle that, far from a novelty, was at one time central to the success of Australia's agricultural economy. Because of the way in which it focuses on this unusual theme, and in a manner that emphasizes the directness of the depiction rather than through a more sophisticated aesthetic representation, Dearing's work introduced new dimensions to twentieth-century painting and drawing in Australia. Indeed, in drawing attention to an artist whose work speaks to a lived experience far removed from that of more mainstream artists, including the pastoral vision encountered in the work of landscape artists like Arthur Streeton, as well as the burgeoning sense of urbanization encountered in the modernist paintings of Grace Cossington Smith, the existing narrative of Australian art is decentered (Allen 1997).

Henry Dearing and the *Angry Penguins*

Having addressed the nature of the works by Dearing considered in and of themselves, I now turn to discuss how the *Angry Penguins* group of Australian modernist writers and artists put them to use from mid-1944 onwards. The modernists cherished aspects of Dearing's works such as naïveté and innocence, which they felt distinguished them from their own, more professionally oriented practice, as will be demonstrated below; however, there were many points of similarity between the rurally-based origin of the works and the aspirations of this metropolitan collective.

Angry Penguins, founded in 1940 and edited by Max Harris and John Reed, published modernist literature; articles about contemporary poetry, music, and sociology; and strident debates about the social role of art (Haese 1981). It is principally famous today for the hoax perpetrated by the writers James McAuley and Harold Stewart, who in 1943 submitted pastiches of modernist poetry under the name of Ern Malley with the intention of exposing the journal's editors to ridicule (Rainey 2009). Although the publication of these poems in *Angry Penguins* the following year was one of the factors leading to its demise, the journal had an enormous impact on Australian arts and letters during this period. The discovery of Dearing's works by Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan, and their subsequent publication in the journal during 1944, took place against the background of these events.

The fact that the painter Sidney Nolan—one of the principal members of the group—was a keen cyclist who had undertaken long-distance bike rides, piqued his and the group's interest in the subject of the works (Adams 1992; Underhill 2015). As the group's editor and patron, John Reed noted soon after Tucker brought the paintings to his attention, "Being an ex-bike fan, Nolan remembered Tipper quite well as he used to attend all big functions" (Reed 2001, 344). However, aside from the decision to privilege the works depicting the deceased cyclist by publishing one in color on the cover of the December 1944 issue of *Angry Penguins*, and reproducing others—including several enlarged details—within its pages, this commonality of experience between Tipper and Nolan did not strongly inflect the group's attitude to his work. Their approach to the paintings was not particularly concerned with the details of the human experience recorded in the paintings. The fact that Tipper was deceased and Dearing was unknown meant they could write about this work without fear of contradiction. Bearing in mind that they were unaware of Dearing's works on paper and only had access to the paintings featuring Tipper, the group's understanding of the works needs to be grasped as a separate issue to the nature of the paintings themselves. As I argue in what follows, Dearing served several interrelated purposes for the members of the *Angry Penguins* group.

From the moment of their first encounter with the works, the group were enthusiastic about Dearing. Reed wrote to Max Harris in July 1944:

> The pictures themselves are really delightful, with the naïve and bright colourful approach of the true primitive. All of them figure Tipper in one way or another, and the one we have chosen has him in the centre with a penny-farthing bicycle set in a bush scene, complete with a little stream and house and a winding path that, to go up-hill, leaves the ground completely. Perspective is of course ignored but there is a lovely over-all harmony with the little incidents and figures picked out with devoted attention. (Reed 2001, 344)

In this passage, Reed draws attention to those aspects of Dearing's works that are common features of early twentieth-century modernist art, such as high color and flatness, while attributing to their creator characteristics such as naïveté that were considered typical of untutored artists. It is significant that the observation regarding the skewed perspective in the image selected for the magazine's cover is accompanied by the words "of course." For Reed, the class of art to which Dearing's work belongs inherently overlooks the requirements of academic skill, pointing to the editor's preconceived way of looking at the works.

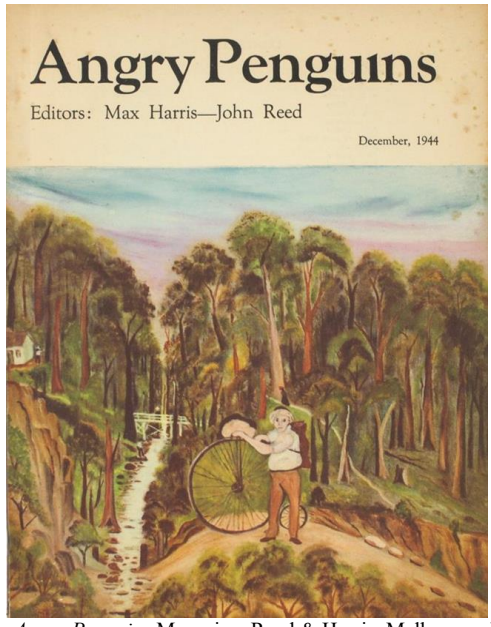

Figure 6: Cover, *Angry Penguins* Magazine, Reed & Harris, Melbourne, December 1944

Later that year, in an editorial authored with his co-editor Max Harris for the issue of *Angry Penguins* in which the Dearing images were reproduced, Reed described the artist as an "unknown Australian Primitive painter" and praised "the essential 'innocence' of the artist's approach, which cannot be looked for in the recognition of any new contemporary painter who springs, so to speak, from the midst of the struggle in which we are also closely involved" (Harris and Reed 1944, 2). In this way, Reed and Harris argued that the artist was completely remote from the concerns affecting present-day artists.

Albert Tucker, in an article for the same issue of *Angry Penguins*, stressed Dearing's "indifference to the artificial demands made by society on his personality with its coercive and restrictive framework of conventions, styles and judgements," writing that the artist was "unsophisticated," a "natural artist," and had a "cheerful disregard for everything but the demands of his own vision" (Tucker 1944, 25). Furthermore, Tucker (1944, 25) observed "a startling sense of life expressed through an unfaltering sense of form, pattern, texture and colour" in the artist's work. The appeal of Dearing's work for this member of the *Angry Penguins* circle was the extreme liberty that his approach signified, the artist's freedom from the normal routines of academic training, manifest in an exceptional liveliness and formal resolution. This language, which was borrowed from attacks on aesthetic convention leveled by earlier twentieth-century avant-garde artists, does not give evidence of a deeper engagement with the nature and content of the works themselves and the experience they speak to.

The precise sources of this language, which had its origins in the northern hemisphere, were readily available to Australian readers. Prominent advocates of a modernist appreciation of untutored art, such as the New York-based curator Alfred Barr and the Italian-born artist and bookseller Gino Nibbi in Melbourne, had recently had their writings published in Australia. Barr, in an article which featured in *Art in Australia* in 1942, was quoted as describing the "Modern Primitives"—including the American artist Morris Hirshfield—as self-taught painters, who were free of tradition, and who expressed the "straightforward, innocent and convincing vision of the common man" (Barr 1942, 44). Similarly, in a 1943 issue of *Angry Penguins*, Nibbi lauded Rousseau for his innocence, intuitiveness, and lack of irony (Nibbi 1943). Tucker's concept of the "natural artist," who is untrammeled by artistic professionalism and spontaneously expresses a heartfelt vision of the world,

was a mythical construction which permeated the thinking of this global avant-garde. The promotion of Dearing was part of a coordinated strategy by the *Angry Penguins* group to unite their work with a major tendency in international art, thereby proving the group's pre-eminence within the Australian context. As Barr (1942, 44) had argued, the "Modern Primitives, though each developed in personal isolation, seem international in character…All share the common denominator of Western culture at its most democratic level." The *Angry Penguins* group were keen to associate their work and activity with this self-same international quality.

Another factor crucial to the reception of Dearing by the *Angry Penguins* group has been identified by Roger Shelley. In his study of the self-taught Australian artist Selby Warren, he argues that in Australia

> the work of self-taught artists was used by modernist movements to exemplify a past which *proved* the country had a culture of its own.…Self-taught artists were paraded almost as mascots of the late-modernist's crusade to connect with the past—to them they were emblematic of the construction of Australia's cultural past foundation. (Shelley 2017, 24)

Although Shelley's argument is aimed at explaining the reception of artists in Australia during the 1960s, to a certain extent it holds true also for the *Angry Penguins* group in the 1940s. Although they did not greatly emphasize the connection to Australia's past in their accounts of Dearing, when Reed and Harris stressed how the artist's work could never be connected to that of new, contemporary art, they implied that Dearing's paintings were a relic of history. Moreover, Tucker (1944, 25) stressed that the works possessed a "strong and unmistakable Australian flavour." The evident closeness of Tipper to the archetypal figure of the Australian swagman, that itinerant laborer celebrated in the country's earlier literature, is particularly significant given the importance of that figure's role in the self-construction of Australian identity (Ward 1988).

It is important to emphasize that this construction was exclusively male and saw few roles for women despite the important contributions made by women to Australia's history. This masculinist emphasis was likely one of the appeals of Dearing's paintings to the men in the *Angry Penguins* group, whose "'heroes' have tended, as they do in classical mythology, to be mostly male figures inscribing male stories," despite the important, contemporary role played by women in the formation of the modernist milieu to which they belonged, including Sunday Reed and Joy Hester but also Margaret Preston (Duggan 2003, 161; Gray, Jordan, and Hooper 2020). Interestingly, the suite of works on paper by Dearing that came to light in 2013 contains several depictions of female figures, including an enigmatic study *Motherhood, Girlhood, Childhood* of 1935 showing women of various ages, standing under a Salvation Army flag, staring directly at the viewer. Works such as these by Dearing counterbalance the otherwise very masculine view of rural Australia that is presented in the earlier-discovered paintings by the artist. The fact that the works on paper were not available to the *Angry Penguins* group, and that the paintings they saw in 1944 contained very few references to women, certainly lent itself to a reinforcement of this strongly male focus on the part of artists like Tucker and Nolan.

Finally, promoting an artist such as Dearing was a means of demonstrating interest in the so-called "common man," an identity dear to the left-wing cast of the *Angry Penguins*' political beliefs, in conformity with the democratic quality of untutored art identified by Barr (1942). This was quite distinct, however, from the kind of "people's art" that was defended during the 1940s—including social realism—by other contemporary Australian artists such as Noel Counihan. Indeed, the promotion of Dearing's paintings of Tipper was the avenue for putting forward another, rather different set of values that the *Angry Penguins* also subscribed to. These include the rugged independence conventionally associated with the figure of the Australian itinerant worker but also other human capacities such as entrepreneurship and canny self-promotion. The latter, which was clearly evident in the cyclist's many advertising efforts, were also key to the broader publishing and exhibiting activity of the *Angry Penguins* group.

In promoting Dearing's paintings of Tipper, the *Angry Penguins* group were concentrating on works which depicted someone who may have been eccentric and an outsider but also quite like themselves. These were men skilled in making a splash in an unusual profession who had aspirations of both cultural and economic success. Tipper's constant efforts to achieve both national and international notoriety were qualities he shared with artists like Tucker and Nolan. As Glenn Barkley (2011) has pointed out, one of the likely attractions of Dearing's work for the *Angry Penguins* was its focus on Tipper's self-mythologizing. Tony Moore—who is skeptical about the professed political beliefs of the *Angry Penguins* group—argues that in spite of their claims to produce a genuinely democratic art, they were largely motivated by the desire to develop notoriety among wealthy art patrons interested in international modernist culture: "Despite the rhetoric, Harris and Reed proved to be less the cultural revolutionaries than cultural entrepreneurs, bringing talent and money together in projects for which they garnered maximum publicity" (Moore 2012, 166). Another function that Dearing served for the group was that the promotion of his work established their tenacity in locating and publicizing the work of undiscovered geniuses. This seemed especially important after the last genius they had promoted, Ern Malley, had turned out to be an elaborate hoax. As Reed wrote to Max Harris on July 3, 1944, "the Tipper (primitive painter) idea seems more essential than ever as a powerful challenge and vindication of our aesthetic judgement" (Heyward 1993, 179). Days later Harris replied, contending that it demonstrated that the group were "full of fight, and not retracing our steps from the path of vigor and originality one iota. I absolutely unreservedly commend any moves to present another genius" (Heyward 1993, 179). This was a sign that the group was not taking a step back and that they were doubling down on what appeared to many to be a strangely unorthodox taste.

Another way of looking at this, however, is that what the *Angry Penguins* group admired in both Tipper, and by extension Dearing, was that he was both an entrepreneur and revolutionary. They identified with the enterprising, individualist qualities of the underprivileged rather than the more collectivist spirit often encountered among those advocating for social realism. As Tipper once boasted in one of his many self-promotional efforts, he achieved his cycling feats "on a bicycle of his own manufacture" and "by myself and without help from Government or private person." (Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum 2021). In this sense, when Max Harris wrote in 1986 that "From Tipper we all learned that Australia was a landscape which only had any meaning through our being in it—our mythical or fantasy selves projected or mirror-imaged," he could well have been talking explicitly about the *Angry Penguins* group's attitude to Henry Dearing (Harris 1986). Although the urban-dwelling *Angry Penguins* group's social circumstances, and their modernist vision of Australia, were in many ways distinct from the lived experience of the itinerant rural workers eulogized in Dearing's art, in Tipper's exploits, however briefly, the two quite different cohorts found common ground.

In conclusion, this article has argued that the work of Henry Dearing has been subject to a double exclusion in the art historical literature. Characterized by modernists as the work of a primitive painter with an innocent eye, on its first publication, Dearing's work was removed from its important context within the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century itinerant labor in Australia. Later described as part of a hoax perpetrated by the same artists, the lived experience that the works speak to was effectively erased. By reconnecting the work both with the social world from which it emerged and the history of labor that it documents, I have sought to decenter the history of Australian art by bringing back into focus elements of Australian history that artists and art historians had obscured. At the same time, I have demonstrated, despite the perceived distance between the urban-based modernist milieu through which the works were brought to national attention and the rural exploits of the figure who is a principal subject of the works, that Tipper, Dearing, and the *Angry Penguins* shared an intense interest in unique, artistic modes of self-promotion.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony White: Associate Professor, School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia

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