Remembering Melinda Kendall
By Peter Knox.

A WASTED LIFE
A wasted life! This sad refrain
Comes surging through my ears again;
There’s no escape from thee, though fiend;
Thou art borne to me on every wind –
A wasted life! A wasted life!

By day or night, no peace for me;
Still, still before me I can see
The fragments of the dear dead past,
Which I (Oh! fool) from me have cast –
A wasted life! A wasted life!

I’ve tried to drown in lethean drain
This ruthless voice; but all in vain;
It comes with ten-fold force again,
And brings remorse to swell and strain –
A wasted life! A wasted life!

From out this deep dark Stygian sea,
While vainly struggling to be free,
I look above, and pray that I
No more may hear that awful cry –
A wasted life! A wasted life!

This poem by Melinda Kendall was published on April 8, 1884, and represents for the twenty-first century reader a plea that her life will be remembered. Her “Lethian drain” could be interpreted as the river of forgetfulness that has overseen her descent into obscurity, as much as the alcohol she is purported to have imbibed during her life as the mother of Henry Kendall, the celebrated nineteenth-century Australian poet. Her struggle to be free of the “Stygian” murk that has settled upon her memory in the intervening 121 years should not have been in vain.

To remember the Melinda Kendall who wrote this poem, and the other thirteen poems and three prose pieces retrievable from extant copies of nineteenth-century Illawarra newspapers,¹ it is necessary to extract a clearer version of her than the one that exists
in the margins of Henry Kendall’s story. It would be too easy (and unfair) to simply reinforce the Melinda Kendall who emerges from Henry’s biographies, and thus participate in the process that has made her virtually invisible. For an informed reading of what she has written, it is important to make her visible.

Who, then, was Melinda Kendall, who appears so briefly yet significantly throughout the life story of her more famous son, Henry?

Any reconstruction will encounter the initial problem that her biographical details as Henry Kendall's mother are confused and contradictory, while her life story before she became Henry’s mother, and after his death, is virtually invisible. The most easily retrievable clues are her published works, which started appearing after Henry died.

What is known from surviving archival evidence is that she was born Melinda McNally at Pitt Town NSW, on the shores of the Hawkesbury River north west of Sydney, in 1815, only twenty seven years after the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay. How Melinda’s father Patrick McNally and her mother Judith McDermott came to be at Pitt Town in 1815 is still open to investigation, though the General Muster of New South Wales from 1814 shows Patrick arriving in Australia as a ticket of leave convict and Judith as a free settler (on different boats). More than one researcher believes Patrick was assigned to his own wife as a servant. Many of Henry’s earlier biographers perpetuated the myth that Melinda was the granddaughter of Leonard McNally, infamous eighteenth-century Irish playwright and British Government informer. A search of genealogical records proves this not to be the case.
There are no surviving records to show when Melinda’s mother died, but, as was fairly common after the death of a mother, by 1828 she was in the foster care of the Reverend Richard Hill and his family, living in Castlereagh Street, Sydney. Henry believed his mother’s maiden name to be Hill, as that’s how she appears on his marriage certificate.

Her next appearance in available archival material is on her marriage certificate, August 1, 1835, when she became Mrs Basil O Kendall, after supposedly meeting her future husband at a dance in Sussex Street Sydney the night before. The string of fictitious names she produced for the occasion has created confusion ever since, and her reasons for doing so are open to conjecture. I offer this extrapolation:

Melinda, then twenty years old and not legally allowed to marry without parental permission, and Basil meet at a dance in Sussex Street, Sydney in 1835. They are both fond of a drink and so, under the heavy influence of alcohol they challenge the nineteenth-century taboos associated with sex outside of marriage. A possible consequence of this premarital dalliance is a stillborn daughter, Melinda, born prematurely eight months later. Melinda and Basil wake up next morning and, realizing their transgression through the haze of two mighty hangovers, I hazard to guess, or still intoxicated from drinking all night, head for the nearest church that will marry them with the least amount of formality or documentation. Somewhere in the midst of this haste, Melinda produces a string of fictitious names and parentage, perhaps so her real parents (or the Reverend Hill) can’t be notified. Basil is none the wiser about the deception, as he’s met this woman only the night before. It’s also possible, because Melinda was raised by the Hill family, that in her alcohol-affected
state she couldn’t remember her real parents’ names and so concocted a new identity on the spot. The scenario can not be borne out by evidence, but it is a logical extrapolation from the available clues.

By the legal standards of today and the nineteenth century, the marriage certificate is not a bona fide document, and the resultant seventeen-year de facto relationship would also not have been recognised as a legal marriage in the nineteenth century, though no comment is made about it by Henry’s biographers.

On April 18, 1839 at Milton near Ulladulla in the southern reaches of the Illawarra region of New South Wales, 165 kilometres south of Sydney, Melinda gave birth to twin boys: Edward Basil and Thomas Henry Kendall. Both of them, like all of Melinda’s children, were called by their middle names.

Between the time of his first published poem in 1859 and his death in 1882, Henry Kendall became a celebrated Australian poet, and Melinda Kendall was relegated to the margins of his story. She became simply Henry Kendall’s mother, and is portrayed in his biographies as everything from a drunken embarrassment to her celebrated son, to a colourful, unconventional eccentric. Henry himself alluded to her “sickness” in his letters (Clarke, pages not numbered).

A stronger, less contradictory, biography of Melinda Kendall is important for a meaningful reading of her work. Each factor in this equation – the life and the writing – will inform the other, in the search for connections between her personal and narrative realities, and though there can be no ‘definitive’ reading of Melinda Kendall
or her work, the version of her created by Henry’s biographers is unsatisfactory, and up to now there has been no detailed analysis of her writing.

To extract a clearer version of Melinda Kendall from the numerous biographies of her son, it is necessary to move back beyond the confusion of later major investigations; back beyond Michael Ackland in 1993 & 1996, H. P. Heseltine in 1981, Lorna Ollif in 1978, Joseph Jones in 1976, Kramer & Hope in 1973, Charles Swancott in 1955 & 1966, T. Inglis Moore in 1957, T. T. Reed in 1966, the Agnes Hamilton-Grey biographies that began in 1926, Bertram Stevens in 1920, A.G. Stephens in 1919, Alexander Sutherland in 1882 & 1896, Douglas Sladen in 1888 and Francis Donohue in 1882, all the way back to G.B. Barton in 1866 – the earliest extant Kendall biography. Even as far back as 1866, when Henry was alive and the facts were verifiable, there are numerous errors of fact – the beginning, perhaps, of a process in which many of the later texts seem to be quoting or citing one another in succession, with small but crucial details mutating in the process.

Along with other exclusions that have affected Melinda Kendall’s status in Australian literature, she has further suffered from the fact that much of the mythology surrounding her was perpetuated by her daughter-in-law Charlotte, who provided Alexander Sutherland with much of the material for his Kendall biographies. Many of Henry’s biographers suggest that Charlotte was a hostile witness and therefore the material she supplied biographers after Melinda’s death cannot be relied upon. Certainly, any material on Melinda from Charlotte would be heavily influenced by the antagonism the two women seem to have had for each other. The picture of Melinda drawn by Sutherland is therefore tainted by this animosity.
In less academically-rigorous times, when a bibliography of references was not a compulsory requirement, writers like Sutherland could get away with shoddy research and fiction-as-fact. With no proof of where the information came from, and no clues about where to verify the assertions, the modern researcher experiences the Sutherland and Barton biographies of Kendall as hurdles; barriers beyond which any real-life version of the facts may not be discernable.

The unreliability of the Hamilton-Grey biographies is clarified somewhat by researcher Jill Dimond. Some time around 1884, Mrs Hamilton-Grey was living not far away from Henry’s widow in Redfern. She became a frequent visitor to Charlotte, but it was Henry’s two sons, Frederick aged 13 and Frank aged 10, who provided the majority of the biographical material, and Hamilton-Grey did not begin writing her first book on Henry Kendall until 1920 – thirty six years later – relying on all the notes she had taken from Fred and Frank Kendall.

Though Charlotte and the two children may have been able to volunteer reliable information about the personal life of Henry, their ability to offer the details of Melinda’s life that appear in the Hamilton Grey biographies is doubtful. A further complication in Hamilton-Grey’s research methods was her belief by 1920 that she was in contact with the spirit of Henry Kendall, who prompted her to write the first biography. Her journals suggest that for extra material she consulted her notes from lectures she had given on Henry Kendall’s poetry nearly forty years earlier, preparation for which consisted of “borrowing a copy of Kendall’s Leaves from Australian Forests, reading a review by Alexander Sutherland, and writing to her
brother … who … had known Kendall in his later years … [her brother] copied out a sample of Kendall’s unpublished prose and poetry for his sister, and sent her his own copy of Poems and Songs.” (Dimond, 342).

Family connection is, furthermore, no guarantee of authenticity. Henry’s son Frederick Kendall’s accounts can’t be relied on either. Many details can be proved wrong – he gets the Leonard McNally connection wrong, and Henry’s birth year, as well as his grandfather Basil’s year of death, so it can be assumed he, too, was relying on earlier biographers, or confused oral accounts. Except for his own direct involvement (and then only as a small child), everything else seems to come from second-hand accounts. It would be reasonable to expect a family member to be a reliable source of family details, but Frederick couldn’t possibly remember details from before he was born. He has obviously tapped into family myth (most likely via Charlotte, his mother), as well as Barton, Sutherland and other early accounts, in particular regarding Melinda’s details. The fact that Frederick as a child was a major source of information for Hamilton Grey, yet he had to rely on other biographers for his own writing in adulthood, speaks strongly against the reliability of the Hamilton-Grey accounts.

Similarly, Marjorie Kendall, who married a great grandson of Melinda and is presently living on the property “Kendall Dale” just north of Milton and only a kilometre or so east of Henry’s supposed birthplace, relies on much previously-published biographical material for her 1980 article on Melinda, though her genealogical research is thorough. 
Even Henry cannot be entirely trusted for reliable biographical material. The detailed account of the financial woes instigated by his mother and sisters in his 1869 letter to Dr Neild, for instance, may be a deliberate exaggeration designed to elicit the sympathy of Neild in a bid to borrow money. (Ackland, *Correspondence* 219).

There are other places where mentions of Melinda Kendall should be available, including Illawarra histories or bibliographies of nineteenth-century Australian writers. It would be reasonable to approach the various histories of the Illawarra with an expectation that Melinda Kendall, as the mother of a famous Australian and also a long-time resident of the region, might make an appearance, or that clues to her situation may be offered, to assist with the construction of a version of her separate from Henry’s story. These texts could potentially suggest verifiable times, places and events as motivation for her writing. An examination of these histories, however, reveals that the historians’ main agenda was to record governmental and industrial statistics. Melinda Kendall’s writings and life don’t get a mention, except in a brief tacit acknowledgement that somebody must have given birth to Henry. Just as frustratingly, the major bibliographies of nineteenth-century Australian literature do not cover material that appeared in regional newspapers – from where all of Melinda Kendall’s writing is so far available – and so offer no clues to her work.

The pages of nineteenth-century newspapers, however, have proven to be fertile ground for the recovery of Melinda Kendall’s verse and prose. In particular, Illawarra regional newspapers such as the *Illawarra Mercury* and *Kiama Independent* have yielded much of this material. Early newspapers can, nevertheless, also make the search frustrating. The *Wollongong Argus*, for example, which would have been an
ideal target for Melinda Kendall whenever she was residing in the Illawarra, published a lot of poetry, but most of it appeared anonymously. Even the “Letters” section, which also might have been fertile ground for Melinda’s prose, used noms de plume. Though at this stage it is doubtful that Melinda Kendall wrote long prose fiction, this cannot be either ruled out or verified because most of the novels that were serialised in newspapers like the *Wollongong Argus* appeared with no author’s name. Perhaps a detailed analysis of the verse that appeared in the *Wollongong Argus* needs to be carried out, to see if the style and/or content of any poems suggest authorship by Melinda Kendall. Even with such an analysis, however, the difficulty of verification would remain. Other regional newspapers present similar challenges.

*The Maitland Mercury* was the closest newspaper to the Clarence River district in the years between 1845 and 1852, when Melinda Kendall resided there. There were no newspapers being published in the Clarence River district in those years, so if she submitted material for publication, the *Maitland Mercury* would have been the most convenient journal for her to target. This newspaper yielded no material that can be connected to Melinda Kendall, however, for the same reasons as the *Wollongong Argus*. Verse appeared regularly, but with no obvious clues to authorship, except for a series of poems by Charles Harpur. Once again, clues in the style and/or content of the writing might not be enough to claim Melinda Kendall as the contributor, and there is no reference to the authorship of the poetry in the rest of the writing in this newspaper.

There is a need to situate Melinda Kendall in a time and place of verifiable events, as a foundation upon which a life might be reconstructed, a life that functions as an
informing backdrop to her writing. The implied author of this body of writing can be viewed as attempting to write herself away from the character portrayed in the lives of Henry Kendall. Much of her writing presents a moral and philosophical position at odds with that portrayal, as for instance, in the pro-temperance stance and religious fervour found in these lines from the poem “A Song”:

When the cold scales of selfishness fall from our eyes,  
And the wellsprings of love in our hearts shall arise,  
We then may be able, with both heart and hand,  
To aid the good cause of the Temperance Band.

This is reinforced by the mention of “the cursed tree of intemperance” in the prose piece “Brooker’s Nose”, the moral sermonising in the prose piece “Present and Past,” and the fervent support for the Christian work ethic in the poem “Better Than Gold” These examples imply a very different Melinda Kendall beyond the gaze of her son’s biographers.

A number of biographers, perhaps citing precursor texts, state that Melinda Kendall may have written and self-published a small volume of poetry in her younger days. The search continues for this volume – her early poems could certainly shed light on the direction of poetic influence between mother and son later on, if indeed there was any. However, the first of her poems to be published in an Illawarra newspaper under her name appeared in the Kiama Independent just over a year after Henry’s death, on October 16, 1883. This poem is an ode to her dead son, titled simply “Henry Kendall”, with, in parentheses beneath, “by his mother”, a statement that offers a powerful reason for the poem’s publication, while at the same time relegating its author to the position of Henry’s emotive chronicler.
“Henry Kendall” conforms to the conventions of nineteenth-century ‘in memoriam’ verse, a genre that found a popular place in newspapers of the time. It presents a potted overview of Henry Kendall’s life in a series of biographical glimpses, from the myth-like beginnings of the path that led to poetic genius: “He was taught his first letters in sand”, to the inevitable final chapter of all life stories: “But now he is quietly sleeping.” Though much of the content of the narrative itself can be gleaned from the work of other chroniclers, the whole poem is invested with a certain intimate value because of the maternal viewpoint, which the sub-title “by his mother” steers us to recognise. In between, the biographical landscape traversed includes some deconstructions of the Henry myth, as well as some confirmations – or, at least, some versions invested with authority by the statement “by his mother”. According to the narrator of this poem, the Illawarra as an informing influence for Henry’s landscape verse – a dominant (and much debated) focus in most analyses of his work – began from the moment “He was born at the foot of the mountain,” though being one of the few people at the actual event does not privilege “his mother” with the knowledge of Henry’s poetic influence. The mystical properties of genius, however, are romantically reinforced.

There is an inevitable connection to “the silvery tinkling of bell birds” in reference to the best known of Henry’s poems, but perhaps more interesting are the tantalising hints of the personal. Of Henry’s thwarted first love, “his mother” has this to say:

Then came to his heart a great first love
Which could never be conquered by time;
Hence his muse was oft draped in sadness,
And she wore it oft times in his rhime.

A first disappointment is bitter,
And may bring in its turn many woes;
Though it seems but a trifling matter
To be baulked in just plucking a rose.”

The alcoholism that was very likely shared by mother and son appears variously as “the curse of all curses most cursed,” or ‘the madding cup,” though these are descriptions that could be equally applied to a writer’s creative urge. Henry’s dark months of depression in 1872 are powerfully conveyed in the single line “Then like Dante he trod the ‘Inferno’”. However, as Henry had left home long before this time, the maternal viewpoint on this period can hold no more authority than any other biographer’s. In the final stanza, “his mother” likens Henry to the prophet Elijah, but more tellingly offers the hope of an Elisha to succeed him. Melinda, perhaps, believed that it would be she who would “write his grand epic at last”.

After this initial mainstream publication, another eight of Melinda Kendall’s poems appear in print in 1884, including a rewritten version of the first publication, renamed “The Late Henry Kendall”. The narrative position of this second version of the poem represents a movement away from the “mother” narrator and her attendant authority. Significantly, the sub-title “by his mother” is absent, and this can be construed as part of a deliberate shift to narratorial independence – there is certainly no mention of “by his mother” in any of the writings in between, or in any of the other works published after that. We can assume, however, that a majority of nineteenth-century readers would have recognised Henry Kendall as one of the “boughs” the narrator is referring to in the 1884 poem “Bellambi’s Lake,” in the line “My boughs have been gradually lopped one by one.”
There has been much work done on the re-remembering of nineteenth-century Australian women writers, and there is a strong case for Melinda Kendall’s inclusion in that activity of re-remembering, as a way of extracting her from Henry’s story. Her exclusion so far from the re-remembering process points to the fact that an alternative canon, in which the same small group of nineteenth-century Australian women writers appears, is being reinforced by numerous studies. What began as a challenge to an exclusionary, androcentric canon, now participates in a comparable act of exclusion. The difficult groundwork of recovering these forgotten writers, some would say, has already been done, and later studies rely on the earlier primary research. The recovery of writers who are not already on the small canonical list is fraught with difficulty, but the challenge must be taken up to steer us away from falling into exclusionary habits.

Melinda Kendall and her work deserve a re-remembering for similar reasons as Ada Cambridge, Louisa Atkinson, Catherine Martin, Mary Theresa Vidal, et al – a window to a nineteenth-century Australia may be opened to us, that reveals aspects of that time and place not presently available through mainstream historical texts. More important, however, from a literary perspective, is the emotive representation of that particular nineteenth century that Melinda Kendall’s writing can offer.

In an investigation of Melinda Kendall’s position as the mother of a more famous male poet, the life stories of women such as Louisa Lawson, mother of later Australian writer Henry Lawson, are important. Louisa Lawson has been treated to much scholarly focus in recent years, and in the process of recovering Melinda Kendall from behind the glow of Henry’s celebrity, it is helpful to look at the detailed analyses of Louisa Lawson’s writing that have proven valuable in her retrieval from
the shadow of her famous son. Olive Lawson admits that the primary reason for Louisa Lawson’s place in history is not necessarily her poems. “Inevitably,” she writes, “they interest us because she was the mother of Australia’s best-known and most loved writer, Henry Lawson” (Lawson, 216). As much as this may relegate Melinda Kendall to an undeserved subsidiary position, her writing is also of interest to twenty-first century readers because – as with Louisa Lawson – she was the mother of a famous poet.

Though Louisa Lawson was born later in the nineteenth century than Melinda Kendall and therefore was able to participate in the “boom” of Australian literature in the late 1800s, by which time Melinda Kendall was an old woman, there are other obvious parallels – other than the fact that they were both mothers of famous male writers – that can be drawn between the two women. In the process of finding those parallels, as well as connections between Melinda Kendall’s personal and narrative realities, Louisa Lawson’s poetry is an example worth noting. Olive Lawson notes “Many of [Louisa’s] poems quite clearly refer to a particular biographical occasion. ‘To My Sister’ (Dawn, April 1895), was written in memory of Louisa’s sister Elizabeth, who was born on 30 November 1853, and died on 19 March 1861 …” (Lawson, 220). The biographical connections in Louisa Lawson’s poetry were important clues for the numerous reconstructions of her life, and a similar process of connection will hopefully assist with a reconstruction of Melinda Kendall’s life using her writings.

Melinda’s poem “The ‘Home of Hope’ for the Friendless and Fallen, Sydney,” for instance, describes an institution established by the Central Methodist Mission in 1885. The fact that this poem was published in May 1884, suggests either that she was
aware of the Home before it was officially opened, or the history of the Wesley Mission needs correcting.

It is possible that she heard about the Home of Hope before it came into existence from evangelist William George Taylor, who was instrumental in its formation. Her name, therefore, may appear on the attendance roll of the church in York Street, where Taylor may well have talked of the planned institution before it was officially opened. His diary fixes his first service at the York Street church as Sunday, April 13, 1884, exactly a month before Melinda’s poem was published. Though the attendance roll has yet to be sighted, in the Uniting Church archives there are numerous Wesleyan Methodist Society Class Books, or rolls of quarterly church subscribers who were issued with membership cards so they could attend any Methodist church in New South Wales without further payment. In the 1884 Class Book a “Kendall (Mrs)” appears twice and is shown as having paid ten-shilling subscriptions for the April to June and July to September quarters. Investigations continue into this possible placement of Melinda Kendall at Sydney Methodist Church services in the month before the publication of the poem.

By 1884, it would appear from her writing, Melinda was no longer (if ever she was) the “indiscreet alcoholic” described by Lorna Ollif (43) and the “embarrassing vagaries and indiscretions” sketched by Joseph Jones (15) were replaced by a commitment to the alcohol-free Temperance philosophy, during a period of intense writing activity.
As with the case of Louisa Lawson, other clues to Melinda Kendall’s personality may be extracted from her poetry. “Of the greatest importance to an understanding of Louisa Lawson’s verse-writing is the realisation that her poems were always personal; they tell us what her values were. Their great value, historically, lies in what they reveal to us of her character” (Lawson, 216). Similarly, tantalizing glimpses of Melinda Kendall’s thoughts and attitudes can be gleaned from her writings. The anti-patriarchal voice of “A Dream In Illawarra,” for example, published four years before Louisa Lawson’s first-wave feminist articles began to appear, and the sorrow of remembering her dead husband and sons in “Bellambi’s Lake,” reveal aspects of Melinda Kendall’s character not available elsewhere. There are obvious comparisons between Louisa Lawson’s poem “A Life’s Dream,” “which ends neither in the recognisable here-and-now nor beyond, but in a dream realm peopled by liberated female forms” (Ackland, A View 214) and Kendall’s “A Dream In Illawarra,” in which the narrator dreams into existence a British Cabinet filled with female parliamentarians.

If we are tempted to find a reason for Melinda Kendall’s exclusion from previous investigation of nineteenth-century Australian writers in the volume of her published work, we need only remember Barcroft Boake. This early contributor to the masculine Australian myth produced only a “small and imperfect output” of poems originally published individually in the Bulletin in the late 1800s (Wright, 67). His total published output of twenty-five poems resulted in only a single collection after his death, “Where the Dead Men Lie,” published in 1897, yet he is remembered alongside other much more prolific nineteenth-century Australian writers. Melinda Kendall’s viewpoint of Australia in the nineteenth century is at least equally worthy of recovery.
Or, if a lack of retrievable details about her life is seen as grounds for Melinda Kendall’s exclusion, the fact that “little is known of Fidelia Hill’s life” needs to be acknowledged (Webby, 49). Similarly, with Catherine Martin:

“… little is known of particular periods of her life, notably of her formative years. Few personal papers have been discovered; only a handful of letters and a notebook-diary covering a short period of her old age are extant. No autobiographical writings have been discovered, but perhaps such a piece exists, awaiting the researcher in some archive or publication. Recent discoveries have extended her list of known publications. It is likely that she published much more in Australian newspapers and periodicals … What is written here must necessarily give only a partial picture of her life and her production” (Allen, 152).

This hasn’t stopped people remembering these writers, and facilitating their emergence from the shadows of history that exist away from the centre of the gazing spotlight. The research journey described here will hopefully widen the beam of that light and encourage further research, so that the life and writings of Melinda Kendall can also emerge from the Stygian murk of obscurity, and she can be counted amongst the nineteenth-century Australian women writers who have been granted a deserving place in Australian literary history.

Postscript: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are elements from a number of critical practices that could be helpful in an analysis of Melinda Kendall's work.

New Historicism, for instance, might be valuable as a framework for linking the non-literary texts from the empirical research, with the literary texts of Melinda's writings,
thus allowing a flow between one and the other so that they inform or interrogate each other.

An affiliation with New Historicists in their quest to deal closely with specific historical documents, attempting, in an almost archaeological spirit, to recreate the 'state of mind' of a particular moment in history is apparent in this investigation in relation to the writing of particular works and their informing influences.

New Historicism seems to privilege the non-literary material over the literary, so strictly adhering to that particular framework might prove restricting in an analysis of Melinda's creative material. New Historicism, however, could legitimise the empirical research conducted so far.

Cultural Materialism could highlight the contextual position of Melinda Kendall’s writing in nineteenth-century Australia and the limitations presented by historical circumstances. It could also offer an appropriate framework for recovering the histories of her texts. However, it may be of limited use because of its commitment to the critical analysis of mainly canonical texts which continue to be the focus of massive amounts of academic attention, and which are prominent national and cultural icons.

“Cultural Materialists tend to concentrate on the interventions whereby men and women make their own history” (Barry, 185). This kind of intervention could certainly have been the intention of Melinda Kendall’s act of writing, though in her case a re-making of her history might be a better description. A Marxist reading of her
poem "The Colliers' Strike Song" might be appropriate because of the text's obvious political allusions. It is, after all, a call to arms for the working class of the day.

“New Historicists tend to focus on the less than ideal circumstances in which [men and women make their own history] that is, on the ‘power of social and ideological structures’ which restrain them” (Barry, 185) - in Melinda Kendall’s case, the patriarchy of her time and the mechanisms of canon formation. Aspects of both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, then, will be useful for an academic investigation of Melinda Kendall.

A postcolonial reading of Melinda's work could, of course, be valuable in recognition of her place in the colonizing culture and her unconscious acceptance of assertions about nineteenth-century Australian society in relation to the indigenous culture it was dis/replacing. However, only one of her poems clashes overtly with Australian Aboriginal culture.

A postcolonial reading of this particular poem would be valid, as would an analysis of the "fairies" in the poem "Fairy Meadow" (related to the notion of evoking or creating a precolonial version of their own nation by writers whose own position is postcolonial).

Postcolonialism will come in handy in considering some of Melinda’s work from the point of view of genre and form, rather than strictly content. But an overall postcolonial reading of her life and entire writings might be simply moving the focus to a less valuable arena.
Narratology could be utilized when talking about Melinda's 'authorial persona' (for example, the shift from "by his mother" in the poem "Henry Kendall", to narratorial independence in her other works, as part of a development towards the "Elisha" who inherits Henry's mantle in her poetic imagination).

And, of course, a feminist/gynocritical reading of Melinda as a previously-excluded nineteenth-century woman writer is extremely valuable and appropriate.

The feminist ideas about the "feminine" (culturally constructed) and the "female" ("a matter of biology" – which could also be challenged in regard to nineteenth-century patriarchal wisdom about the "natural" traits of the female) are also relevant. So is the feminist notion of "exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy" (Barry, 122), especially for a reading of Melinda's first wave feminist material.

ENDNOTES

1 See Works Cited for list of works so far retrieved. There are hints available that suggest there is more of her published work to be recovered.

2 Bertram Stevens writes “Mrs Kendall, grand daughter of Leonard McNally, a Dublin notable of his day, was a clever, handsome woman with a strong constitution and a volatile temperament” (Stevens, xv). Lorna Ollif writes, “The parents [of Henry Kendall] had a love of learning and a mutual affection, but they, too, drowned their
troubles in alcohol” (Ollif, 42). By 1868, when Henry married Charlotte Rutter, according to Lorna Ollif, Melinda was a “hopeless alcoholic” (Ollif, 43), and by 1869 was possibly complicit in a series of underhanded dealings that plunged her son into long-term debt and swindled him out of belongings he felt were rightfully his. “… her volubility was not strictly conventional, though ‘very natural.’ Her limited means, probably, caused her to be somewhat shabby in her appearance. Civil servants, in those days, were somewhat prone to snobbishness. They saw a shabby, excited old woman as the mother of Henry Kendall, the poet, hence they laughed at, they ridiculed the poet’s mother – and as a consequence, the poet himself.” (Hamilton Grey, Cradle 293) T. Inglis Moore offers a slightly different angle to Melinda Kendall’s visits to Henry’s workplace: “His mother developed dipsomania and embarrassed him by coming drunk to his office” (Moore, x).

3 See list of Works Cited for details of these publications.


WORKS CITED


---. *Poet Kendall: His Romantic History (from the Cradle to the Hymeneal Altar)*. Sydney: John Sands, 1926.


