

## DENNIS HASKELL: "My rather tedious hero": A Portrait of Kenneth Slessor

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Any astute reader who can allow "Observation, with extensive view" to survey Australian literature will remark on the absence of quality biographies. Works such as Axel Clark's on Brennan and Henry Handel Richardson or Brian Matthews' on Louisa Lawson stand out like upshoots of growth on the One Tree Plain. For this reason Geoffrey Dutton's *Kenneth Slessor* (\*) is especially welcome, like a guest at a sparsely attended Slessorian dinner. Slessor is unquestionably one of the most important poets Australia has produced so he is a key focus of attention for anyone interested in Australian literary biography. However, the only previous attempt was Douglas Stewart's *A Man of Sydney*, an altogether 'nice' book which fragments into intellectual wishy-washiness. Dutton's *Slessor* is far more probing. He has read the Slessor papers, pored over the poems, interviewed a wide range of people who knew Kenneth Slessor, and writes excellent prose. Dutton is himself a poet who lived through most of the period of Slessor's life, and met Slessor on a number of occasions. It shows. Dutton has an acute ear for Slessor's poems, knows his subject thoroughly and writes about him with a combination of enthusiasm and stern judgement. It seems to me that if we are to get a better biography of Slessor it will only be when more papers are discovered or released.(1)

At the same time it must be stated that Dutton is left asking "Will the real Kenneth Slessor please stand up" and believing that he won't. Slessor, Dutton concludes, "remains an enigma, but also a very subtle master of the mask" (p.330). Slessor was such an intensely private person that even his friends found him impossible to know, or else knew him in one role only - as journalist or as *bon vivant*, for example. Like Wallace Stevens, many of his colleagues at the office never dreamt that he was, or had been, a great poet. As Dutton declares:

*The life he shared with anyone else is scarcely ever allowed to emerge in his poetry; he kept no journals; he wrote hardly any letters; almost no-one ever dared to speak to him about his private life. (p.104)*

Slessor sounds like a biographer's nightmare, and to some extent he is. Fortunately, Slessor was a bower bird with papers; some of his family and friends are still around; and towards the end of his life his poetry was sufficiently recognised for him to receive attention from interviewers, literary critics, and students who encountered him as subject matter. It is possible to see many aspects of Slessor, or to view him in a number of different roles. Putting the roles together, however, seems impossible - the great poet with an extraordinarily sensitive ear for language, the raffish *Smith's Weekly* journo who loved vulgarity, the heavy boozier in the pub, the meticulous dresser, and the fifty year old father-to-be delighting in babies.

Slessor at different stages of his life is seen as extremely energetic or as lazily having too little to do. One striking fact which emerges is that his poetry was written when he had too much to do, not when he had too little.

The sketchiest part of the book, understandably, is that dealing with Slessor's early life. Very little has been publicly known about it until now. Dutton rightly pays great attention to a portrayal of Slessor's father, Robert, whom Slessor revered. Born in England, of German Jewish parents, Robert Schloesser (who changed the family name to "Slessor" during the Great War) was a surprising man of humane intelligence and an international sweep of mind. Much of Slessor's sophistication and intellectual tolerance must have been learnt from him. Dutton sees him as making Slessor "immune both to the cultural cringe and its opposite, xenophobia" (p.3). Slessor's father was a mining engineer, and visits to mines provided Slessor with some of his earliest memories. In a diary of Kenneth's, not quoted by Geoffrey Dutton, the poet notes that "Father's

books travelled in wooden gelignite or mining explosive cases, which could be stacked as bookshelves".(2) These explosive book cases were not just for mining textbooks; amongst the authors included were Darwin, Herbert Spencer and Maeterlinck. Robert Slessor was a liberal man of ideas.

The Slessor who grew from this background was a man who liked England but not the English, who enjoyed the rough and tumble world of journalism in a city (Sydney) which he clearly loved, who had what Dutton describes as a "robust sense of humour" (p.115) which balanced his philosophical scepticism, and whose personal relationships, except with a few mates, were always troubled and often disastrous. In some ways he related more readily to Sydney than to individuals in it. At times Dutton is able to sweep elements of Slessor's character into admirable summary:

*He enjoyed vulgarity, was amused at the indignities forced on human beings by fate, and he admired the ability of ordinary Australians not only to put up with them but to turn them into comedy. (p.115)*

Slessor was profoundly Australian (but anti-nationalist in literature), and this earthy sense of the comic is apparent in poems such as "A Bushranger", "Lesbia's Daughter" and much of what is generally designated his "light verse". In one late poem, not quoted by Geoffrey Dutton, Slessor imagined the manager who decided to swap around the "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" toilets in the *Sun* office building:

*... he, unlike the vulgar herds  
Who think that crowds are funny,  
Dropped only rich, superior turds  
In some exclusive dunny,  
Some private, padlocked, holy nest  
Reserved for Lord and Master,  
Where none but Sacred Bums may rest  
On thrones of alabaster.  
("Lines Written on the Occasion of the Transposition of the Ladies' and Gents'  
Lavatories on the 9th Floor") (3)*

As Dutton demonstrates, Slessor's early journalism was full of this democratising vulgarity which brought the pompous down to size. It is, of course, a deeply Australian urge.

Dutton points to Slessor's lack of sexual fulfilment and the unhappiness in his relationships with women. The book explores both Slessor's marriages, and Dutton's detailing of Slessor's affair with Kath McShine is a revelation. Dutton is undoubtedly correct in claiming "how good Slessor was at summing men up" (p.185); but what a contrast it was with women! It is, in fact, startling to realise how barely present, in the biography and in Slessor's papers, are the women in Slessor's early life. Dutton notes that "little is known of Marian Schloesser" (p.2), Slessor's paternal grandmother, and we know considerably less about Slessor's mother, Margaret, than about his father. She was a strict Scottish Presbyterian, like John Shaw Neilson's mother and some of the relatives of Les A. Murray. (Does this diehard ethic somehow provoke poetry as a reaction?!) Little impression can be gained of the personality of Slessor's sister, Maud, who died in early adulthood. As far as one can tell, Slessor seems to have got on well with her, but Dutton shows how he fought with his mother. While Slessor's mother and father seem to have been complementary temperaments, Slessor probably inherited his red-headed temper from his mother's side of the family, and he could be at his most abrasive and petulant with women.

Slessor's petulance is also shown in his role as Australia's Official War Correspondent during World War II. Here Slessor's disrespect for authority and, as Dutton shows, his association with *Smith's Weekly*, got him into trouble. When Slessor was selected as War Correspondent *Smith's Weekly* saluted him in an article, "Take Kenneth With Our Blessing", and commented that "in these later days, a War Correspondent is damned by censorship, so little being allowed to him to talk about".(4) This comment was to prove prophetic. This section is one of the finest of Dutton's biography, as he patiently analyses the evidence and draws on considerable knowledge of the events of the war. Slessor retired from the job in 1944 before being sacked, and Dutton tries to judge the debacle fairly, seeing faults in army censorship and administration but also in Slessor's temperament, military inexperience and his traipsing after his wife Noela, rather than the

Australian army, in the Middle East. Dutton's early comment is the crucial one: "The main problem with Slessor's post, and it was to haunt him, was the lack of definition of his duties" (p.180). Reading Slessor's *War Diaries* and *Despatches*, Slessor appears to me to have been a more successful war correspondent than Dutton and those he interviews, such as Ian Fitchett and David McNicol, allow. However, assessment depends on what is sought in the writing. Slessor didn't provide, as McNicol says, "the stuff that breaks the headlines" (p.253) but, as time goes on the headlines cease to matter and the "beautifully written... contemplative stuff" (McNicol again, pp. 252-3) comes into its own. The literary qualities of Slessor's war writing are undeniable, and history may yet be on his side. I write as someone born after the War, and no doubt this affects my perspective. Whatever conclusion is drawn, Dutton writes about this period in Slessor's life with great authority.

Dutton also handles with tact and intelligence the touchy subject of Slessor's editorial writing for the conservatively biased *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* newspapers. Slessor appears as the dispassionate, professional writer, claiming to present the views of the management and editors-in-chief without injecting ideas of his own. Of course, Dutton is too sensible to accept this idea completely, and he argues that on the *Sun* "whatever the policy of the paper", Slessor could "engage major issues with humanity and wisdom" (p.275). By contrast, "Slessor's leaders for the *Daily Telegraph* are usually adequate but of no further interest, except those that touch on the same subjects, Aborigines, censorship and divorce, which had stirred him on the *Sun*" (p.305). Slessor kept copies of the leaders he wrote and they are housed in his papers in the National Library of Australia. Dutton is right that on the *Sun*, particularly, the leaders could be very engaging. The subjects covered range from the licensing of Sydney fruit barrows to the arms race, from conditions in mental hospitals to test cricket team selections. The editorials show the strong awareness of international concerns and of international perspectives on Australia which Slessor always held. He is always fervently anti-censorship and for efforts to create racial harmony, in favour of efforts to improve the conditions and dignity of Aborigines, and speaks up for the little man against misuses of power by governments, unions or the police. The leaders urge more liberal liquor trading hours (a subject close to Slessor's heart), speak up for the monarchy and immigration, and against compulsory unionism, socialism and communism (especially in Asia). They are, like all newspaper writing, very much of their period - in their attitudes towards the Queen, for example, or in their neglect of women's issues. Within these constraints Slessor could be sarcastically witty. On 14 November 1956 he wrote in reference to the Suez situation:

*The first instalment of the United Nations "police force" has now arrived in the Middle East - 200 fighting men from Norway, Denmark and Colombia, all armed to the teeth with preambles and protocols and wearing the dreaded blue and white armbands of the UN junior reserve debating team.*

Slessor took a degree of scepticism into every walk of life.

The comparative drabness of Slessor's editorials for the *Daily Telegraph* partly reflects a decline in the quality of newspaper writing generally - clearly apparent when compared with Slessor's journalism on the *Sun* in the 1920s - and partly reveals Slessor's retreat from caring about the world behind what Geoffrey Dutton aptly calls a "stoic exterior" (p.254). This retreat included Slessor's retreat from writing poetry. It is the most famous abdication in Australian literature, possibly our greatest poet quitting more or less at the height of his powers. Slessor wrote what is generally believed to be his greatest poem, "Five Bells", between December 1934 or January 1935 and 1937, wrote two poems while a war correspondent (including the great "Beach Burial" in 1942), and thereafter published only one more poem, "Polarities", in 1948. It is, by any account, an intriguing silence. Dutton believes that "there is no answer to the problem" (p.336) but is inclined to explain it in terms of self-doubt, loneliness, running out of things to say, and, above all, the lack of a receptive audience for his work. Undoubtedly all these factors played a part, but it is difficult to know which are the carts and which are the horses. As Dutton shows throughout his book, modesty and a certain lack of confidence were always there in Slessor's personality. They are normal characteristics in most people, and certainly in most poets. Not writing poetry may be a cause of self-doubt, as well as an effect of it, and Slessor was certainly able to overcome such a barrier early in his life. His quiet dedication to poetry began as a young child, growing up in a cultured home and writing rhymes to his parents.

Of the other factors, loneliness can be a great stimulus for poetry, and every poet knows that you find things to say just by trying to improve your craft. One can see this effect at work in Slessor's early poems, as in the juvenilia of most poets. As regards the lack of audience, there is no doubt that a wide readership came too late, when Slessor had settled into a life of comfortable, journalistic bachelorhood involving a great deal of indolence. The difficult thing is to decide how large an audience Slessor required to keep him going. T.S.Eliot said about poetry generally that "it matters little whether a poet has a large audience in his own time.... But that a poet should have the right, small audience in his own time is important".(5) Slessor in a 1939 letter to R.D. FitzGerald commented:

*I find in my own case that it is difficult to write anything without conjecturing you or Hugh McC[rae] or Ken Mackenzie or Norman [Lindsay] or a few others as the only readers.... personally I wouldn't care much whether anyone else appreciated the stuff, or detested it.(6)*

Dutton comments, "This is bravado. He felt desperately the lack of an audience..." (p. 160). Dutton may be right, but a written reply that Slessor gave to Rex Ingamells in 1952 should not be ignored. Ingamells was preparing an article on Slessor and sent him a series of questions. In response to the question, "What do you consider your most important literary association or friendships?", Slessor declared:

*In the sense of "literary association", undoubtedly the greatest stimulus and assistance I have enjoyed has come (and still comes) from Norman Lindsay, who has been my friend for more than 30 years. It has been said - I think rightly - that every artist must have a hypothetical audience at least, but that this audience need be no more than one person. In my case, Norman Lindsay has been all the audience I have needed.(7)*

By 1952 Slessor's poetry publishing well had dried up. This statement may be bravado too, but it is a careful, considered response, not an impulsive or sudden one.

In his youth Slessor was certainly dedicated to the art of poetry, and in his own way was quite ambitious. In an era in which many poets, or at least highly competent versifiers, were employed by newspapers, Slessor's profession of journalism aided his poetry rather than hindered it, and he published many poems in newspapers and magazines during his teenage years and early twenties. The Angus and Robertson archive in the Mitchell Library, only recently catalogued and not quoted in *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography*, reveals how close he came to book publication while still a young man. At the age of eighteen Slessor wrote to "The Manager, Publishing Dept., Angus & Robertson":

*I should be obliged if you would inform me whether you are prepared to read and consider verse for publication.*

*I have lately finished a narrative poem of topical Australian interest, dealing with the "Sea-Wolf", the enemy ship which laid mines around the Australian coast. The subject is of appeal at present, as the story is concerned with post-war German colonisation in the pacific.  
(8)*

Angus and Robertson immediately sent back a refusal. Slessor tried again the following year, in September 1920:

*Would you kindly let me know whether you are prepared to read manuscript verse, with a view to publication?*

*I have about 20 short poems (mostly with an Australian appeal) and one of 300 lines, on an island topic, which I would like you to consider for a collection.(9)*

Whether the long poem "on an island topic" is the "Sea-Wolf" poem is not known, as his papers include no record of any such writing.(10) It is interesting that in each letter Slessor felt the need to stress the "Australian appeal" of his poems. This time he received a more favourable response. "Please send the verse along," wrote Angus and Robertson,(11) and Slessor, like a young production manager, sent twentyfive poems, saying "Should you think this number too small to warrant publication, I can supply more at short notice, as what I send is merely a selection of my work".(12) The reader's report was favourable, even though a profit on the book was unlikely:

*The most promising stuff I've seen for many a long day. He has the gift, even though (like all young verse-makers) he runs to exuberance and occasionally to preciousness. If he has a fair amount of this quality, a creditable book can be made.*

*I am not considering the monetary value of its publication. It would need a good deal of booming, I expect, to be profitable... what were the Victor Daley sales apart from Archibald's and other eulogies? But as an essay in literature it's worth publishing, if he has enough.(13)*

*Plus ça change.* The reply Angus and Robertson sent to the promising poet must have seemed to him bitter-sweet:

*Our Reader recommended us to publish your "Poems" - but on due consideration we have determined to turn them down. Our hands are already very full....(14)*

With admirable persistence Slessor wrote again in July, 1921, this time enclosing thirty-five poems, noting that the ten not sent before were "mostly Australian in topic and appeal".(15) With a fickleness that would make any poet shake resignedly, the same reader reported:

*I don't remember ever recommending publication for this matter; but quite probably I said nice things about it, because it exploits a vocabulary exceptionally varied for an Australian production and shows glimpses of a real style. But there is not really much sound stuff in it: the author gets a subject and showers words on it (occasionally slobbers them over it) without getting any further.*

*Suggest polite refusal on the ground of expense, &c.(16)*

Polite refusal was what Slessor got, Angus and Robertson bemoaning the publishing situation and saying, "our hands are now so full of work - so overful, in fact - that we shall be unable to take on any more for twelve months at least".(17) Slessor must have wondered where that work was coming from, since he was always being refused solely because of it! The correspondence makes clear how restricted were the book publishing opportunities for a poet at the time. In the event, all Slessor's individual collections of poems were published by enthusiastic friends with small presses. Angus and Robertson did not publish him until 1944.

In considering the issue of Slessor's eventual poetic silence, it is worth turning to an interview with Craig McGregor published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 30 October 1965, which Geoffrey Dutton quotes from in another context. In the interview Slessor gave a number of reasons for ceasing to write poetry:

*Why, I asked, had he stopped writing poetry after the last war?*

*There was a complex of factors involved, Mr Slessor said. The transition from war to peace, the need to return to the bread-and-butter business of journalism... and the death of his first wife after a long illness, marked the break.*

*But these were the formal reasons rather than the real cause, which was that he found he had run out of things to say.*

This accords with a comment which Dutton reports from Christopher Koch. To Koch Slessor said, "Unless you have poems that need to be written, don't write, be silent" (p.315). The odd thing is that Slessor's interview with Craig McGregor ends:

*"I hope to get back to writing more poetry. The field for comment for poets in Australia has not been scratched yet."*

*He stubbed out his cigar and called for the bill. "Some day."*

This suggests that Slessor did have things to say but somehow could not say them in poetic form.

Dutton sees Slessor's self-doubt as heightened by his relationship with his first wife, Noela, especially during the Second World War. Dutton ventures "a guess" that, "humiliating himself for the sake of Noela." Slessor's "confidence was undermined" (p.336). Noela, in fact, is portrayed as one of the two villains in the book - the other is Norman Lindsay - and she gets a pasting, especially when compared with the treatment of Kath McShine, with whom Slessor lived after Noela's death, and Slessor's second wife, Pauline. The alcoholic Pauline is seen as "unfortunate" (p.316) and treated with admirable compassion. Noela, by contrast,

is a "vain, frivolous and selfish woman" who nevertheless "occupied a shrine in Slessor's heart where she appeared as a goddess" (p.258). This last comment is an instance of overwriting, but it does demonstrate that although Noela may have been "vain, frivolous and selfish" - and I believe she probably was - there must have been more to her than that. Certainly Slessor remained devoted to her, throughout his subsequent relationships, indeed throughout the twenty-six years he lived after her death (from cervical cancer) in 1945. Dutton portrays Slessor as giving in "to Noela not only because she was domineering and he was not, but to keep the peace" (p.330). The word "domineering" comes from Ron Maslyn Williams and Dutton finds it "painfully confirmed in her letters from Cairo to Slessor after his return to Australia" (p.220). I confess that I see her and the relationship a little differently.

Noela joined Slessor in the Middle East and this undoubtedly interfered with his work as Official War Correspondent. Slessor's *War Diaries* often reveal him to be anxious about her but to my mind they do not convey a sense of domination or humiliation, not even when, it seems, she had a brief affair with John Hetherington. About the affair it must be said, firstly, that its occurrence is deduced from Slessor's only partially readable shorthand and, secondly, that Slessor seems always to have found it difficult to express his own sexuality. Kath McShine's comments on their own relationship ("We had separate rooms. I think it had been like that with Noela" [p.279]) make Slessor seem a pathetic sexual partner. For such an apparently dramatic event as the affair with Hetherington, Slessor and Noela seem to have become reconciled extremely quickly afterwards. But who can fathom such things? Peter Porter used to quote a friend of his to the effect that "all marriages are opaque". No-one outside can see into the relationship. This certainly seems true of Slessor's marriage to Noela.

Dutton reports her, accurately, as having "an inexhaustible appetite for shopping" (p.212), but Slessor, whose poems are full of closely observed and often exotic objects, seems to have enjoyed these outings just as much. Noela's fastidious tidiness was another obsession that he shared. Noela does seem to have been something of a social climber, but one could hardly blame her for staying completely out of Slessor's macho world of journalism, where he worked from afternoon until late at night, leaving Noela (as later, Pauline) alone for hours on end, day after day. Ray Lindsay reported that "Noela used to fly into crazy, hysterical tantrums" but also that Ken was "damnably temperamental".(18) Certainly Noela and Ken's relationship was tempestuous but, as Dutton makes clear, so were Slessor's relationships with Kath McShine and Pauline. Noela may have been doing no more than giving as good as she copped.

The military brought Slessor back from the Middle East in January 1943 so that he could cover the war in New Guinea, but Noela had to wait for months before securing a civilian berth. Dutton describes Noela's letters to Slessor during her wait as "pathetic" and "mostly grizzles about her boredom and lack of money" (p.238). As I read them, the letters are indeed "pathetic", but in both senses of the word, and far too full of feeling to be dismissed as "grizzles". They are anguished letters, expressing loneliness, ill health and fears for Slessor's safety. "It makes my heart ache," she writes on 19 February 1943, "to see all the suffering, and I hope and pray that you are safe and well, and that the war will be over soon".(19) Noela was working as a voluntary Red Cross helper in Cairo hospitals. In the same letter she commented, "often I feel quite ill and faint at what I see". Another letter, on 17 April 1943, ends: "Try and write to me soon telling me how you are, as I worry a lot about you. All my love and loving thoughts, Your affectionate wife, Noela".(20) In her psychological and precarious situation it is small wonder that her letters sound plaintive.

We will probably never know the truth about Slessor and Noela's relationship, but the conjectures and gratuitous comments in *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* are difficult to accept. Jack Lindsay doesn't mention meeting Noela in Melbourne, so Dutton superfluously asks, "Had she already begun her infidelities?" (p.104) Did Lindsay just not mention it? Did he forget? Was she out shopping? Similarly, Dutton says of a draft parody of Elizabeth Barrett Browning ("How do I hate you? let me count the ways...") that these "enigmatic lines... may refer to Noela" (p. 132). Of course they may refer to Slessor's mother or the woman next door or, more likely, no actual woman at all. At one point Dutton admits that such conjectures are "only supposition" (p.136). A biographer of someone as private as Slessor is bound to conjecture, but such conjecture must be kept within bounds.

It must be remembered that Slessor's happiest years were spent with Noela, and virtually *all* his poetry was written while they were together. Amongst the factors behind Slessor's ceasing to write poetry is one neglected in the book but mentioned in the interview with Craig McGregor: "the death of his first wife".

When Noela died Slessor was devastated and had an immediate premonition that his writing life was over. Noela died on 22 October 1945, and on 4 December Slessor wrote to H.M. Green: "I'm finding it hard to adjust myself to a new way of living.... Plenty of routine office-work is a help, though I don't know when I'll have the heart to write poetry again".(21) In May 1946 Slessor wrote to Guy Howarth: "Thanks for your remarks in Brisbane - I wish I could share your optimism about my future. At present I feel in such a state of emotional desolation that I doubt if I'll ever do much again".(22) Slessor apparently made a similar comment to Hugh McCrae, for McCrae wrote to him in May 1947, in typically sexist fashion:

*Silly genius: imagining you'll never write again. To give your balls a rest is better than raping the Muse: remember she has her periods, too - and you may be sure she'll reward you (for allowing her her natural rest) with such a belly-bumping harvest as you've never known before.*(23)

Four years later Kenneth Mackenzie asked Slessor if he had any new poems which could be used on an A.B.C. programme Mackenzie was preparing. Slessor replied regretfully on 2 April 1951:

*... I can't help you with any fresh work. I've written nothing except unsatisfactory fragments since Beach Burial. As you know, the disruption of everything in 1945 when Noela died paralysed writing for years, and although I'm now tranquil enough to start again, it doesn't come easily.*(24)

It never came easily again. Amongst the factors preventing Slessor from writing poetry the death of Noela is, it seems to me, the most important. Slessor was devoted to Noela, and his poetry died with her.

Although Dutton paints Norman Lindsay as also having a deleterious effect on Slessor's writing throughout his career, Slessor kept, I think, more distance between himself and Lindsay than the biography at times allows. Dutton is willing to grant that "Lindsay is always full of surprises" (p.271) and that he was "a genuine lover of poetry" (p.272). Lindsay, I believe, was a more credible thinker than this book, and Lindsay's current intellectual reputation, allow. It took more than charisma and energy to influence Slessor and so many other Australian writers.

Dutton notes "how often the word 'frozen' appears in relation to Lindsay-like images in Slessor's early poems" (p.85), and this is one of many original insights he offers in reading Slessor's poems. Dutton writes appreciatively about Slessor's light verse, which has received little critical attention, and is surely correct in asserting that "no-one has described Sydney better than Slessor, in prose as well [as] in verse" (p. 128). With exactitude, he points out that the tree "Meryta Macrophylla" in "Elegy in a Botanic Gardens" should be "Mertya Macrophylla", and displays a fine ear for the music and poetic technique of Slessor's poems. Still, there are bound to be some disagreements in the interpretation of a range of poems. The images and rhythms from "Adventure Bay" and "Undine" which Dutton instances as Lindsayesque faults (pp.66-7) seem to me to constitute very fine lines. Dutton asserts that "there are no links between 'The Old Play' and the poems Eliot had written up to 1932" (p.157), but surely the lines, "It is not like this at all / Never, never like this" in section V owe a great deal to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "'That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all" (published 1917). Dutton claims about "Five Bells" that Joe Lynch "would hardly be likely to be depressed with his pockets full of booze" (p. 176), only to comment on the following page, "What could be more awry or unstable than Joe Lynch!" Hugh McCrae's poem, "Creative Effort" (first published in the magazine *Vision*) which is described as "a tangled nine lines" (p.63), seems to me an interesting, intricate piece of writing. Altogether *Vision* is much more important, to Slessor's career and to Australian literature generally, than the biography allows.

Still, *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* has so many incisive and witty comments on Slessor and his work that they swamp such disagreements: "It was a kind of blindness for him not to be Turner" (p.49); "from his earliest poems, Slessor wants to go beyond the noise and busyness of men, to reach beyond time to some ideal of beauty or nature" (p.102); by staying in Australia Slessor "had chosen 'a passage into the dark', like Cook" (p.162); "Elegy in a Botanic Gardens" is "one of his most remarkable poems, where the dry rattle of words in a dead language has overcome those fragile but passionate moments when no words were necessary" (p.149). Dutton has a keen eye for "the eighteenth-century side of his character, the amused awareness of human inadequacies" (p.135) which has largely been ignored in analyses of Slessor's work.

The biography does include some typographical errors: in the poem "The Uncharted" (quoted on p.28) "foam-crest" should be "foam-crust"; Slessor's final selection, *Poems*, is said to contain 109 poems (I count 103); the notes refer to a Julian Russell file MSS 4829 in the Mitchell Library, but this is an incorrect reference; and I happened on a couple of errors in the otherwise very useful index. One typo is marvellous. Slessor praised the "astonishing influx of pure poetry" which Hugh McCrae's *Satyrs and Sunlight* brought into Australian poetry. In transcription this has become the "astonishing flux of pure poetry" (p.65). Many readers of McCrae would say a quiet "Amen" to that. *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* has a colourful, idiosyncratic Molnar cover which I think Slessor would have enjoyed, and superb inside covers.

Reviewing the book in *Voices*, Chris Wallace-Crabbe remarked that "there was, I am sure, a creative passion in Slessor which Geoffrey Dutton has not managed to characterise".(25) This is a tough criticism given Dutton's opening admission about Slessor's impenetrable masks. In his poem, "To Myself", Slessor began, "After all you are my rather tedious hero", and in the poem's best stanza asked himself:

*Have you not poured yourself, thin fluid mind,  
Down the dried-up canals, the powdering creeks,  
...  
Whose fabulous cataracts none can find  
Save one who has forgotten what he seeks? (26)*

A biographer cannot forget what he or she seeks. If Slessor hid his "fabulous cataracts" of passion behind an assortment of masks it is to Dutton's credit that the book offers us a far from tedious hero. A courageous speaker on matters such as censorship, a failure as a husband and parent, generous to other writers, especially the young, Slessor might at times have seemed to hide all his philosophical and personal doubts behind a mask of sartorial elegance - but for his sense of humour, vulgarity and "great capacity for enjoyment of life" (p.254). Dutton presents all these Slessors, and if the sum of them does not add up to the cataracting source of "Five Bells", the problem lies with Slessor rather than his biographer. It is a sobering thought, but this is as close to the real Slessor as we are likely to get. NOTES

\* Geoffrey Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography*. (Ringwood: Viking, 1991), 377pp.

1. Slessor's papers are held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney (ML), and the National Library of Australia, Canberra (NLA). The bulk of the papers are in the NLA. Files relating to Slessor's divorce from his second wife and his income tax are restricted, and those relating to his work on the Commonwealth Literary Fund and the National Literature Board of Review are closed until 2001. For a brief description of the NLA collection, see Dennis Haskell, "'Five Bells' and the Milkman's Bills: The Slessor Archive in the National Library of Australia", *Voices*, Autumn 1991 (Vol. 1, No. 1), pp.21-2.
2. MS 3020/2, NLA.
3. MS 3020/21/184, NLA.
4. MS 3020/14/33, NLA.
5. "The Social Function of Poetry", *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), p.21.
6. MS 7334, NLA.
7. MS 3020/8/5, NLA.
8. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f. 270, ML.
9. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f. 273, ML.
10. In *A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor*, (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977), Douglas Stewart refers to "'The Mine Errant', a long unpublished poem written when he was eighteen years of age" (p.99). Stewart says that the poems are among Slessor's "manuscripts and notebooks at Canberra" but no such poem is in the NLA collection now.
11. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.275, ML.
12. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.277, ML.

13. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.279, ML.
14. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.281, ML.
15. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.283, ML.
16. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.285, ML.
17. MSS 314 (CY 1761), f.287, ML.
18. *A Letter from Sydney*, ed. John Arnold (Melbourne: The Jester Press, 1983), p.51.
19. MS 3020/9/72, NLA.
20. MS 3020/9/101, NLA.
21. H.M. Green papers, Box 2, NLA.
22. MS 1085, NLA.
23. MS 3020/1/91, NLA.
24. MSS 503 (8-203B), ML.
25. "A Shilling Life Will Give You All the Facts", *Voices*, Autumn 1991 (Vol. 1, No. 1), p.97.
26. *Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), p.64.

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