

A. K. Thomson: From Kenneth Slessor: An Essay in Interpretation

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Journal: UQP

Imprint: 1997, Mead, Philip (ed) Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings, Chapter 6, Pages 77-112

In the section 1919-1926, preserved, without the dates, in the final edition, *Poems*, there are twenty-three poems if we regard the suite "Music" as one poem, and twenty-two if we regard "The Man of Sentiment" as a dramatic sketch. Twelve of the poems deal with books, pictures, or music. Four of them deal with love, and six with natural surroundings. The most outstanding feature of the poems is their originality, both of subject-matter or theme and of manner or technique. Slessor is one of the few poets who, at this period of time, wrote naturally out of an urban environment and his feat is the more impressive if it is placed against the background of the English poetry that is being written at the same time.

This is not perhaps surprising when Slessor's reading and knowledge is considered. Slessor knew about Eliot and Donne long before they were fashions or shibboleths. His love poetry especially shows this. His mastery of form is also in line with the interest that was being shown in words, rhythm, and metre. The legitimate criticism that his brilliant mastery of technique is too good for the matter it conveys has an historical justification best expressed by Eliot, writing of contemporary poetry in 1917:

One of the ways by which contemporary verse has tried to escape the rhetorical, the abstract, the moralising, to recover (for that is its purpose) the accents of direct speech, is to concentrate its attention on trivial or accidental or commonplace objects.

Slessor was a well-read man and his reading was up-to-date. At the time of leaving school he was, according to E.L. Shepherd, interested in the series of Georgian poetry anthologies edited by E.M. Marsh, a series which started in 1912 and ended in 1923. It is vitally important if one is to do justice to Slessor not to look at the fashionable notions about Georgian poetry today and apply them to Slessor in 1919 to 1926. Actually the Georgian anthologies from the very first represented the first change in a static literary scene, and they were the precursors of the development of modern poetry. Slessor knew about the periodical *Wheels*, which appeared annually from 1916 to 1920, and he had read the experimental work of Graves, the Sitwells, and Aldous Huxley. It is not true that "in subject-matter, conception, and technique Slessor is to a large extent outside the tradition of Australian poetry — and even of the English poetry of this century". Very few, if any, Australian poets have been as close to the contemporary English scene as Slessor.

It was precisely because Slessor was so close to the contemporary English scene that he seemed so out of place in Australian poetry. What Slessor did was to insist on the place of imagination in Australian poetry, and on the whole later Australian poetry has followed Slessor. Hope made a list of Slessor's subjects; to make a list of Hope's is to show what Slessor has done for Australian poetry.

The Australian accepted poetic paraphernalia is familiar; the drover, the aboriginal, the gum tree, the dingo, and so on. Judith Wright was fortunate in being born on a great station, probably the most romantic place in the accepted Australian scene. Her subjects were, for the most part, easily recognised as being poetic. She wrote out of her immediate environment, as most good poets do, and she wrote poetry because she wrote well. Slessor did something perhaps more difficult. He made poetry out of chessmen, out of mangroves, and out of books and music because these were part of his environment, just as Sydney and the Harbour were part of his environment. He did these things in the period we are considering, 1920-1927, and Slessor himself has made the harshest, because the justest, criticism of the poems of this period. Of the *Vision* poems he writes that they were greater in number than FitzGerald's but "were even slighter and just as juvenile".

He also suggests that the poems were written at an age when most young writers are “tempted to put rubies in their turbans” and “on the advice of Keats, to load every rift with ore”.

The suite “Music” deserves more serious consideration than has been given to it. Most of the criticism does little more than repeat what Slessor himself has said of it in “Writing Poetry: the Why and the How” and in “Modern English Poetry”. The poem, while it may be granted that it is something in the nature of a technical *tour-de-force*, is nevertheless one of the best poems of its kind and a treatment of it will be found in an appendix.

Before we consider the poems in the section 1927-1932 it might be well to consider Slessor's own account of his reading at this time. In September 1931, Slessor gave an address on “Modern English Poetry” to the Australian English Association in Sydney. It is difficult at the present to realise how advanced the paper was and how up-to-date Slessor's reading and knowledge was. He referred to e.e. cummings, Edward Shanks, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Harold Munro, Aldous Huxley, Amy Lowell, Robert Bridges, Chris Brennan, Sacheverell Sitwell, James Joyce, George Darley, Wilfred Owen, Frank Kendon, Jack Lindsay, Humbert Wolfe, Edith Sitwell, A.E. Housman, James Elroy Flecker. Even if it is likely that he knew the work of some of these poets from anthologies only, his remarks nevertheless show that he had much more than an anthology knowledge of many of them, and that he had at least studied his anthologies thoroughly. His remarks on Eliot are acute: “T.S. Eliot obtains his most powerful poetry by a simple inflection or variation of the standardised pentameter” and “ ‘The Waste Land’, indeed, is filled with the most splendid and haunting rhythms of anything written in our century.” In view of what many critics say of the influence of Eliot on Slessor, what Slessor says in another place should be remembered: “It was not until 1927 that I first came into contact with any of Eliot's major work, in the second edition of *Poems 1909-1925*. Until then, all I had known of Eliot was a few bleak anthology pieces, such as ‘La Figlia che Piange’ and ‘Sweeney Erect’, which I heartily disliked.”

Of Owen, Slessor said: “I regard Owen's experiments as easily the most promising of this century, but no one has yet carried the idea on.”

The section 1927-1932 in *One Hundred Poems* contains the poems in *Cuckooz Contrey*, a volume which was published in Sydney in 1932 by Frank C. Johnson and which contains a reproduction of an etching by Norman Lindsay. Slessor has changed the order of the poems in the later edition and has changed the title of the poem “Sentimental Soliloquy” to “To Myself”. Two pages of notes in *Cuckooz Contrey* have been dropped in *One Hundred Poems*.

The note to “Captain Dobbin” is one sentence: “ ‘Captain Dobbin’s debt to Herman Melville will be plain.” In the note to “Five Visions of Captain Cook” Slessor writes: “ ‘Five Visions of Captain Cook’ is founded on literal fact, according to the narratives of Cook and the sailors who accompanied him. For an excellent marshalling of these details, the author is indebted to Captain F.J. Bayldon, of Sydney.” Captain Bayldon, the uncle of Slessor's wife, Noela, was a retired sea-captain; he lived in Sydney on the Harbour; he had a splendid nautical library of which he made Slessor free. A possible reason for “Captain Dobbin” being the first poem in 1927-1932 is that Captain Bayldon introduced Slessor to certain books and charts and to ways of enlarging his knowledge of the sea and of the men who sail on it. As we said before, Slessor is a man of independent mind and he learned from Captain Bayldon because he and the captain had similar interests. In the 1962 interview with John Thompson Slessor said: “I haven't gone to sea, but I've lived next to water almost all my life. I shall always have Sydney Harbour fixed in my skull. Also, I had the fortune and privilege when I was younger of knowing an old, retired sea-captain, who had an astonishing knowledge of nautical things — sailing-ships — he'd been an old sailing ship master, and also he had a magnificent library of nautical books.”

Thompson remarked: “That sounds rather like Captain Dobbin himself, doesn't it?” and Slessor replied: “Well, yes. In some ways he was Captain Dobbin.” The qualification “in some ways” should be noted. Captain Bayldon may have suggested by his person the poem, “Captain Dobbin”, but it would be rash to attempt to equate Captain Dobbin with Captain Bayldon and rasher to attempt to equate Captain Dobbin with Kenneth Slessor.

It is a great tribute to Slessor's art that so many critics reading "Captain Dobbin" should be moved to describe the Captain Dobbin that has come alive in their minds, a Captain Dobbin that certainly does not live in Slessor's text. Charles Higham says that Dobbin has become "a pink and rounded shell of a man" and alliteratively warming to his reconstruction sees him as "ruminant and rubicund". This has no basis in the text. He also writes: "Dobbin stacks up mementoes of the sea in the form of maps, flasks of seawater, ships in glass bottles; as hopeless a snatching of flotsam from the jaws of oblivion as you could find." What the text says is:

*the sweet dangerous countries
Of shark and casuarina-tree,
Stolen and put in coloured maps,
Like a flask of seawater, or a bottled ship,
A schooner caught in a glass bottle ...*

The flask of sea water, the bottled ship are similes not furnishings.

Higham also refers to the "Eliotic picture of the retired seaman". *Cuckooz Contrey* was published in 1932 and Slessor could only have been influenced by early Eliot poems if at all. It is difficult to see how Dobbin resembles in any way Prufrock, Gerontion, Sweeney or any figure in "The Waste Land". There is no basis in the text to suggest that a retired sea-captain with the recognised fortune of the day, #5,000, and a house on the Harbour is unhappy.

Max Harris states with Harris self-assurance, "Slessor's personal identification with Captain Dobbin is self-evident" and "Slessor, in the person of Captain Dobbin, retreats from the world of immediacies almost completely." There is no basis whatsoever for identifying Dobbin with Slessor and to do so not only shows a misunderstanding of the kind of poem "Captain Dobbin" is, but also adopts a critical procedure that has been completely discredited. The implications of Slessor's statement in 1947 should be considered: "I don't propose to discuss the 'Why' — that is to say, why poets write poetry, why men and women read it and respond to it. That would be an excursion beyond psychology into the springs of life of which I am not capable."

A.D. Hope, whose essay shows what is rare, a careful knowledge of Slessor's text, and what is even rarer, a knowledge of the critical climate of the period 1927 to 1932, writes: "'Captain Dobbin' and 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' are his outstanding successes, in what is very close to the art of Browning, the Browning of *Men and Women* and the dramatic monologues."

Slessor's note to "Captain Dobbin" is: "Captain Dobbin's debt to Herman Melville will be plain." The book Slessor has in mind is *Omoo*. *Omoo*, published in 1847, makes it perfectly clear that there was a close connection between American seamen and Sydney and that Cook, Bougainville, Vancouver and such great voyagers were household names in the South Seas. Three quotations from *Omoo* will make this plain.

It is a curious fact, that these people (the Island people) young and old, will tell you that they have enjoyed the honour of a personal acquaintance with the great navigator: and, if you listen to them, they will go on and tell anecdotes without end.

The orange of Tahiti is delicious — small and sweet, with a thin, dry rind. Though now abounding, it was unknown before Cook's time, to whom the natives are indebted for so great a blessing. He likewise introduced several other kinds of fruit ... Thus, after all that has of late years been done for these islanders, Cook and Vancouver may, in one sense at least, be considered their greatest benefactors.

American sea captains, in the Pacific, are mortally afraid of these Sydney gentry; who, to tell the truth, wherever known, are in excessively bad odour. Is there a mutiny on board a ship in the South Seas, ten to one a Sydney man is the ringleader. Ashore, these fellows are equally riotous.

Omoo had an effect on the diction of the poem and many of the exotic words in "Captain Dobbin" occur in *Omoo*.

*he felt the barbèd rush
Of bubbles foaming, spied the albicores ...*

... we bowled along; gliding up and down the long, slow swells, the bonettas and *albicores* frolicking around us.

*Who filched their swags of yams and ambergris
Birds' nests and sandalwood, from pastures numbed
By the sun's yellow,*

With a native crew, we would take turns cruising over the tranquil Pacific; touching here and there, as caprice suggested, and collecting romantic articles of commerce — *bêche-de-mer*, the pearl oyster, arrow-root, *ambergris*, *sandal-wood*, coco-nut oil, and edible *birds' nests*.

*the fabulous leaves
Of Hotoo or canoe-tree or palmetto*

you may see the beautiful flowering *Hotoo*; its pyramid of shining *leaves* diversified with numberless small, white blossoms.

*Broke into dozing houses ...
With rusty cannon, left by the French outside,
Half-buried in sand,
Even to the castle of Queen Pomaree
In the Yankee's footsteps, and found her throne-room piled
With golden candelabras, mildewed swords,
Guitars and fowling-pieces, tossed in heaps
With greasy cakes and flung-down calabashes.*

The place is the private property of the queen, who has a residence there — neglected and falling to decay among the trees ... Behind the parapet are ranged, at wide intervals, a number of *rusty old cannon* ... They are mounted upon lame, decrepit-looking carriages ... two or three have given up the ghost altogether, and the pieces they sustained lie *half-buried* among their bleaching bones ...

Pushing aside one of the screens we entered ... The whole scene was a strange one; but what most excited our surprise was the incongruous assemblage of the most costly objects from all quarters of the globe ... decanters and goblets of cut glass ... gilded *candelabras*; ... richly mounted sabres and *fowling-pieces* ... *greasy calabashes* ... They were more or less injured: the fowling-pieces and swords were rusted ...

Slessor shows great skill in the construction of his poems. He makes use of his sources intelligently and skilfully. Not only are the various pieces of what we might call the plot skilfully assembled but the shifts in imagery are logically accounted for. We might deal with the second point first. The first section ends with Captain Dobbin

*having observed from bed
... the Comorin
Going to sea, will note the hour
For subsequent recording in his gazette.*

Dobbin observing from bed leads to the dead lovely woman of the opening of the second section, and the love similes follow naturally old letters, salt tied up in bundles or pressed flat which pass to the similes of Dobbin's loved companion, the sea. The whole imagery follows a logical pattern. Now and again we are reminded that Dobbin is Australian by an Australian figure of speech like:

Like mica scratched by gully-suns

which immediately follows a description of Pomaree's castle, suggested by *Omo*. But the brilliant touch is “gully sun”: “gully” is also a Scotch word for a large knife. Slessor, by the way, knew his Empson.

The setting of the poem is an extraordinary blending of Dobbin's travels from *Omoa* and Cook's *Voyages*, with Sydney Harbour closely and lovingly observed. It is easy to overlook the brilliance and fidelity of

stoned with a white glitter

where “stoned” conveys the impression of polished like steel and

*bony with mist
And ropes of water*

where “ropes of water” accurately describes the long streaks of very smooth water often seen on the approximately smooth surface of the sea's expanse.

Max Harris's “schoolboy romancer”, by the way, and his “it was only rarely that Slessor's imagination abandoned the schoolboy's world of exotic adventure, romantic people, and faraway places” derives from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and not from Slessor's Herman Melville or a life-time's observation of Sydney Harbour.

Captain Dobbin is the main character in the poem of that name. He retired in 1900, which made him the proper age to have taken part in the events referred to in the poem, a successful captain with “a cask of pearls”, and “five thousand pounds in the colonial funds”. He lived in Laburnum Villa overlooking the Harbour which allowed him to over-look the shipping. He had “an eye of wild and wispy scudding blue”, and when he was roused “he would be fearful to look upon and shattering in his conversation”. The hard life of the sea goes on, but Dobbin, who has obtained a competence and leisure, sits peacefully reading about the past events of the sea. There is nothing in the text to suggest that Dobbin was disillusioned, unhappy, or retreating into the past. Dobbin is closer in time to Richard Mahony than to today, when retirement and competence made a man a gentleman.

The poem is in seven paragraphs, and one and seven, the opening and the final paragraphs, deal with the Harbour which is like “a fog against the glass” or “like a fog rubbed up and down the glass”. The repetition of the phrase draws attention to the contrast. Paragraph one describes the Harbour seen by Dobbin and the ships towed out to the open sea. It is seen from the inside. Paragraph seven describes the ships at sea sailing over the dead men and the harsh work of the sea is symbolised by the labouring stokers: this scene is contrasted with Dobbin reading at peace. It is seen from the outside.

Paragraph two describes Dobbin's library and charts. Paragraph three describes his reconstruction of a voyage from his examination of a chart. Paragraph four describes Dobbin telling how chanties should be sung while the photographs of companion captains look approval and assent from the walls. Paragraph five tells how his thoughts would turn from himself and his fellow-captains to the great navigators. Paragraph six deals with Cook, Bougainville, and Magellan's companion, Juan del Cano.

The division of the poem into seven paragraphs would suggest that Slessor wants to describe the kind of life Dobbin led in addition to describing the kind of man Dobbin was. In this way Dobbin has to share the spot-light with his companion captains, and Cook, Bougainville, and del Cano.

The brilliance of some of the descriptions diverts the attention from the subject-matter of the poem to the illustration of the subject-matter. The whole is neglected while the detail compels scrutiny. The photographs, for example, are to introduce the fellow captains from Knuckle to Baggs, but the brilliance of the description of the old photographs with their “cigar-hued in various spots by the brown breath of sodium-eating years” turns the attention of the reader to a contemplation of old photographs in general, and old photographs in general are more vivid than the old captains they portray.

“Five Visions of Captain Cook” is a poem of the same genre as “Captain Dobbin”. It is more successful than “Captain Dobbin” insofar as it keeps attention focused at all times on Cook, the protagonist.

Section I is in two paragraphs. The first paragraph describes Cook as he appeared to common sailors. It also conveys, at the outset, the apparently supernatural powers of the navigators who ventured into unknown seas. In this first paragraph there is mention of “the evil eye”, “casting nativities”, “sortilege”. The seamen

are bullied by “devils' fists” and the captains are “daemons in periwigs”, and they “dole magic out”. The language is highly metaphorical and is not, of course, to be taken literally. The second paragraph deals with the significance and the danger of Cook's decision to sail west. “Devil's mouth” is an expression for the dangerous unknown: it links up with the reference to “the winds' teeth”, and fitting in with the imagery of the first section contributes strongly to the unity of Section I.

Section II introduces Banks and the Barrier Reef. The section is in two paragraphs. The first paragraph refers to Banks and the beauty of the Reef. The second paragraph refers to the dangers, which are used to convey the tremendous confidence felt by the entire complement in Cook and shared, incidentally, by Cook himself. “Cook snored loudest himself.”

Section III deals with the chronometers, which made accurate navigation possible and in whose use Cook was a pioneer.

Section I saw Cook as a god, Section IV shows him as a man through the eyes of his midshipmen.

Section V describes the death of Cook as narrated by a sailor who had sailed with Cook and who had written one of the “most lucid accounts of the affair that has been preserved”. It also shows us Cook as seen by a fellow-officer.

Much of the criticism of this poem is based on interpretations that the text won't bear and inevitably there are comparisons with works that are fashionable rather than relevant. It was inevitable, for example, that Cook should be contrasted with Captain Ahab, while it is also perhaps significant and instructive that Melville should not have been mentioned in connection with “Captain Dobbins”.

Max Harris writes:

Slessor's image of Cook as a man challenging the devil and inevitably choosing to venture into the unknown country of the devil is more a verbal conceit than an insight carrying conviction. For all the thaumaturgical associations with which Slessor surrounds the great sea-captain, there is nothing of Captain Ahab about him. So, too, Cook made choice, Over the brink into the devil's mouth.

“The devil's mouth” is a metaphor for a place of great danger and is not to be taken literally.

Max Harris also considers these two lines “an anti-climactic observation”.

*So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout,
So men write poems in Australia.*

These final two lines of the section are a magnificent summing-up of the consequences of Cook's historic choice and are close to his *Journals*:

It was resolved upon leaving this coast to steer to the westward until we fell in with the east coast of New Holland, and then follow the direction northward, or whatever direction it might take us, until we arrive at its northern extremity.

The sixteen lines of the second paragraph of Section I with their references to Tasman and Bougainville are not only good poetry, they are also excellent history, making indirectly but effectively the point that Australia has been English since the beginning, whereas it could quite easily have been French or Dutch.

Harris also writes:

*In the second section of “Five Visions”, Slessor, if not an intellectual cripple, was intellectually lame. And lame, too, is the conclusion of the second vision:
... It was the spell
Of Cook did this, the phylacteries of Cook.
Men who ride broomsticks with a mesmerist
Mock the typhoon. So, too, it was with Cook.*

The conclusion is not lame. Slessor's account of the voyage through the intricacies of the Reef in the most dangerous waters in the world is good poetry and good history. Slessor is brilliantly contrasting the dangers with which sailors and officers were surrounded, with the magnificent confidence they had in Cook's skill. The conclusion is effective and the concluding metaphor is fine.

It is easy to write, as Charles Higham does, that “this poem is as harsh a statement of fatalism — hedonism's inevitable aftermath when the pleasures of youth and health have gone — as we are likely to get in poetry”, but it is a statement difficult to prove or disprove. A great deal of this moralising comes from attempts to make poetry important by setting it up as something it is not or by comparing it with other kinds of poetry with which it has little if anything in common. To apply a term like “hedonism” to Cook, Banks, or Home, is simply nonsense.

“Captain Dobbin” is a work of fiction, but “Five Visions” deals with a famous historical personage and while it can take certain liberties with history, it cannot alter essentials. It could not, for example, alter the place or the manner of Cook's death. What it aims to do is to build up a convincing picture of the kind of man Cook was and the picture will be the more convincing the closer it sticks to an interpretation based on historical facts. It will also be impressive in relation to the completeness, number, and scope of the historical facts on which it is based. Slessor was in a good position to get access to primary historical material through Captain Bayldon, a great Cook authority, and the owner of a magnificent library now in the Mitchell Library. How great an authority Bayldon was may be seen from Professor G. Arnold Wood's tribute to him in *The Voyage of the Endeavour*, published in 1927. Wood writes, “In using these plans (of the *Endeavour*) I have had the help of my friend Captain Francis J. Bayldon, who has drawn the picture of the *Endeavour* which you see on the front page, and who has run me over the ship so often that he has made me believe that I am myself a nimble seaman.” Slessor even had access to a manuscript journal of Captain Alexander Home.

Slessor gives his poem the title “Five Visions of Captain Cook” and he gives five visions or aspects of Cook and wherein lay his greatness. He pictures the man as seen from different points of view by different people and in different sets of circumstances and indicates his achievements. The more carefully we read Cook's *Journals* the more impressive and convincing Slessor's reconstruction becomes and also the more unlikely it appears that Slessor was attempting to depict himself. Slessor also displays his great skill in marshalling the material that seems to him significant and it must be pointed out, especially in Slessor's case, that this marshalling and handling of significant material needs both skill and intelligence.

It is true that the history does not make an historical poem a poem. It is the poetry, the poet's handling of language, that does that. It is, however, also true that the history in the poem contributes in no small measure to the worth of the poem, and it is not too much to expect that the critic will be reasonably familiar with the subject-matter of the poem he criticises. That the raw material of history in the poem is dealt with in some considerable detail here has been made necessary by the fact that the history in the poem has been for the most part almost entirely neglected hitherto.

We have pointed out that the references to Bougainville and Tasman are excellent history, but even apparently minor references are rooted in history, and there are too many of these references for them to be attributed to chance.

*Slessor refers to
sailors wild with dreams
Of English beer ...*

There are many incidental references to beer in the *Journals*, but the following from the 1778 voyage is the best known to Cook enthusiasts and it gives point to the adjective “English”, although “English” is applied also to “mariners” and “iron”.

*Having procured a quantity of sugar cane and had upon trial made but a few days before,
found that a strong decoction of it made a very palatable beer, which was esteemed by every
one on board, I ordered some more to be brewed, but when the cask came to be broached not
one of my mutinous crew would even so much as taste it ... My self and the Officers continued
to make use of this beer whenever we could get cane to make it; a few hops, of which we had*

on board, was a great addition to it: ... though my turbulent crew alleged it was injurious to their healths.

“Iron” had a special significance for the navigator-explorers and there are references to it in Cook's *Journals* and in other primary material Slessor used.

*a knife of English iron,
Forged aboard ship, that had been changed for pigs,*

Cook writes:

The only iron tools or indeed pieces of iron seen among them, which they were supposed to have before our arrival, was a piece of hoop iron about three inches long ... and another edge tool which was supposed to have been made of the point of a broad sword ... It therefore cannot be thought an extraordinary thing for part of such wrecks with iron in it, to be now and then cast upon islands, scattered about this vast ocean; the distance is no argument whatever against it; but even if it was, it would not destroy it, as many things containing iron may be thrown out, or lost from ships that have made passages across this ocean, such as the loss of a mast and many other things which must be obvious to every one.

“Iron” in this context is, among other things with which we shall deal later, a symbol of the white man's presence and of his superiority in the islands.

The selection of “iron” and “pigs” is not fortuitous; the words are consciously and out of knowledge selected, and their use and that of others like them contribute in no small measure to the total effect of this historical poem. Small details like “over the brink ... with four months' food” and “Cook snored loudest himself” are all derived from Cook's *Journals*, Banks, or other sources.

I have heard Sir Joseph Banks describe his (Cook's) habit of nightly making all the arrangements, and giving all the orders which he deemed necessary when running along an unknown coast, and having a lee-shore under his bough. After the usual direction to call him if anything occurred, he would then calmly undress and go to bed, satisfied that all precautions had been taken for every event which could be foreseen or conjectured, and he was immediately asleep. Upon that trying occasion (the Endeavour on the Reef) he was upon deck in his drawers as the second blow was struck, and he gave his orders with his wonted coolness and precision. — Brougham.

The five sections of the poem advance in time and follow chronologically. Section I deals with Cook and indicates the consequences of his sailing west and also indicates why Tasman and Bougainville did not follow this course. It shows us how Cook appeared to his seamen and makes reference to his treatment of scurvy. It is likely there is sly humour in

*Used medicines that only gods could know
The sense of, but sailors drank
In simple faith.*

Alexander Home writes:

It was his practise to Cause great Quantities of Green Stuff to be boiled Amongst the pease soup and wheat and Care'd Not Much whether they were Bitter or Sweet ... and it was No Uncommon thing when Swallowing Over these Messes to Curse him hearty and wish for gods Sake that he Might be Obligated to Eat such Damned Stuff Mixed with his broth as long as he lived. Yet for all that there were None so Ignorant as Not to Know how Right a thing it was.

This section deals with Cook's first voyage in the *Endeavour*. Section II deals with Banks, who sailed with Cook on the *Endeavour*, and in it Slessor uses Banks's *Endeavour Journal* and allied material. Section III, which deals with virtuoso skill with the chronometers, moves on to Cook's second voyage in the

Resolution. Cook, who was a surveyor as well as a sailor, carried the Kendal chronometer and an Arnold chronometer and was entrusted with the accurate checking of them by the Board of Longitude. The section also refers to Cook's apprenticeship with Mr. Saunderson, grocer and haberdasher. The *Endeavour*, by the way, did not carry a chronometer.

Section IV belongs to the third voyage. It is based on a prose account and a poem written by James Trevenen who was an eighteen-year-old midshipman on the *Resolution*. Cook was viewing Nootka Sound.

I with several other Midshipmen attended Captain Cook in this expedition, in which we rowed him not less than 30 miles during the day. We were fond of such excursions, although the labour of them was very great, as, not only this kind of duty, was more agreeable than the humdrum routine on board the ships, but as it gave us an opportunity of viewing the different people and countries, and as another very principal consideration we were sure of having plenty to eat and drink, which was not always the case on board the ship on our usual allowance. Captain Cook also on these occasions, would sometimes relax from his almost constant severity of disposition, and condescend now and then, to converse familiarly with us. But it was only for the time, as soon as we entered the ships, he became again the despot. — Trevenen.

This gives point to the seemingly fortuitous use of “hungry” applied to schoolboys.

*Oh Genius superior, in forming whom Nature
Had an eye to the moulding of a great navigator;
And tho' towards thy Mids thou wert not very nice,
Declaring thoudst have no more cats than catch mice —*

*Sometimes a shooting, and sometimes surveying,
With pleasure still watching, with pleasure obeying,
Through gulf, creek and inlet our jolly boat forcing,
As if the old Devil himself had been coursing;
Till pleased with our efforts thy features relax
And thou givst us thy game to take home on our backs
he clothed in good nature his looks of authority,
And shook from his eye brows their stem superiority.
Trevenen*

This points to the source of “‘Cats to catch mice’ before they purr”.

In Section V the death of Cook on his third voyage is described and the effect his personality had on a fellow officer. With a writer as skilful in construction as Slessor within the limitations imposed by historical material, it cannot be chance that Cook as seen by a midshipman is followed by Cook as seen by a captain, any more than it is chance that Slessor uses the most human description of Cook we have followed by the most careful and complete account we have of his death. Trevenen, the Cornish midshipman, was a devoted admirer of Cook, a vivid writer of letters and notes and a very bad poet. Alexander Home wrote:

*I was not present in this Fray being Sick So this Account is entirely from the Mouths of others
who were present. But these Differed greatly in their Relation of the same Matters So that
what I have here said I do not Aver to be the Real truth in Every particular although in
General it may be pretty Nigh the Matter.*

His was the most careful account and because of this Slessor uses him.

Judith Wright considers that “it is like Slessor to end the poem with the Vision seen of the Captain by his old shipmate, blind and derelict, pensioned on half-a-crown a day —

*This was the creek he'd run his timbers to,
Where grateful countrymen repaid his wounds
At half-a-crown a day. Too good, too good,*

*This eloquent offering of birdcages
To gulls ...*

The remaining two lines, which Judith Wright does not quote, are:

*and Greenwich Hospital to Cook,
Britannia's mission to the sea-fowl.*

The two lines are a masterly example of Slessor working with and within his historical material. In August 1775 Cook applied to be one of the Captains of the Royal Greenwich Hospital and his request was granted. Seven days later Cook wrote to his friend, John Walker:

Months ago the whole Southern hemisphere was hardly big enough for me and now I am going to be confined within the limits of Greenwich Hospital, which are far too small for an active mind like mine. I must however confess it is a fine retreat and a pretty income, but whether I can bring myself to like ease and retirement, time will shew.

When Slessor writes

*Bougainville had heard
The voice of God, calling him prudently
Out of a dead lee shore*

he is using Bougainville's words, which he could have found either in his reading of the Sir Joseph Banks literature or in Bougainville himself. Banks wrote in a letter to the Comte de Lauraguais

Along this coast we sailed often carrying to an anchor, generally in very fine Harbours, till on ye 10 of June we struck upon a Rock in Latié 15 S nearly about ye same place where Mr Bougainville heard the voice of God ...

Bougainville wrote in his *Voyage autour du monde*,

Cette derniere rencontre étoit la voix de Dieu et nous y fumes dociles. La prudence ne permettant pas de suivre pendant la nuit une route incertaine au milieu de ces parages funestes, nous la passames à courir des bords dans l'espace que nous avions reconnu le jour, et le 7 au matin, je fi s gouverner au Nord-Est-quart-Nord, abandonnant le projet de pousser plus loin à l'Ouest sous la parallele de 15 degrés.¹

Captain Dobbin is the chief character in the mainly historical poem of that name and Cook is the chief character in the historical "Five Visions of Captain Cook". Some critics have equated Slessor with Dobbin and Home with Dobbin.

Max Harris writes that "Captain Dobbin has become now Captain Home, old, blind, and living still in the dead days of discovery".

Charles Higham writes:

"Five Visions of Captain Cook" takes up the theme of man's efforts to face the oblivious maw which lies ahead; the nobility and final futility of striving against the sea, which has now become almost synonymous in Slessor's verse with the flow of destiny itself. Cook, a romantic figure sailing into the unknown darkness of mapless seas, becomes a symbol of ripe moral courage in the face of an empty future, mesmerising his crew into ignoring or mocking the dangers ahead. But in counter-point to this Quixotic presence is the blind, Scotland-bound Alexander Home, telling his futile tales of Cook, living by a dead hearth and dreaming of tropic seas.

"The oblivious maw which lies ahead" is presumably the fact that all men die and Cook's being "a symbol of ripe moral courage in the face of an empty future" is presumably the fact that Cook dies. To apply the epithet "Quixotic presence" to Cook argues not only a very slight acquaintance with Cook literature

generally but also ignores the poem itself. To refer to Cook as “a symbol of courage in the face of an empty future” is an odd way of referring to one of the greatest, if not the greatest, seamen who ever lived, secure in his growing fame and in his greatness. It is even odder to refer to Home's “living by a dead hearth” when one remembers his six children and that noble but brisk wife, Elizabeth.

In Section V Slessor describes the death of Cook using the best account available, Home. With his accustomed skill in construction Slessor uses Home when he is blind and when he is in his native Scotland. Slessor does not invent Home, he uses the historical facts about Home. Slessor criticism for the most part equates age and retirement with disillusion and misery. This is not universally true and a close reading of the poem does not indicate that either Dobbin or Home were disillusioned or miserable. Home was fired with a splendid vision, vivid even in age, of the places he had visited and a glowing hero-worship of his great captain. If the brisk young wife is a Slessor invention it is a good one and makes an effective contrast between the old Home with his imagination and the practical young woman with her concern for the immediate present. There is also an effective contrast between Cook's violent death at fifty-one and Home's living to be an old man in Scotland, which latter fact at the same time implies a contrast between the warm climate of the South Seas and the harsh climate of Scotland. This multiplicity of contrasts is a mark of skilful construction.

It has been pointed out that Slessor in this historical poem works within the historical framework and, therefore, it is a help in the appreciation of the poem and of Slessor's workmanship to know what the historical framework is. It also becomes quite evident that Slessor's knowledge of his subject is remarkably wide and comprehensive.

Beaglehole in his monumental and definitive edition of Cook's *Journals of the Resolution and Discovery*, published in 1967, writes:

We may feel we know better Alexander Home of the Discovery if we read the spirited, admiring, libellous and anonymous book by his son (Memoirs of an Aristocrat, 1838) in which he is the conventional sea-dog, retired: jovial, reminiscent, respected; half-blind and growing blinder from his adventures with powder and shot, his exertions for his country, as he waits on his starveling Berwickshire farm for triumph in his claim to an earldom.

Alexander Home was born in 1738. He was quartermaster and later master's mate on the *Discovery*. He was forty-one years of age when Cook died in 1779. The following year, 1780, his sight was damaged in the American War and he retired on half-pay in 1783, aged forty-five, to a small farm in his native Berwickshire. He was a claimant to a Scottish earldom and died in 1823, aged eighty-five.

Slessor works closely within Home's text. In Home's *Ottihiti* we find:

The spirit of Desertion began now to make its appearance ... Upon the discovery of this spirit of desertion Captain Cook Turned his men up and made a long speech on that head. He made use both of Entreatys and Threats and with a deal of Art and eloquence, for he could speak much to the purpose but this was one of the Smallest Accomplishments of that excellent man. Amongst other things he told them they Might run off if they pleased. But they might depend upon it he would Recover them again ... His authority would bring them back; and Dead or Alive he'd have them.

*“Then Captain Cook,
I heard him, told them they could go
If so they chose, but he would get them back,
Dead or alive, he'd have them ...”*

Judith Wright considers that the following three lines have “a half-farcical, half-ironical note that makes us recall Slessor's own disillusion and his denial of the city of humanity”.

*a knife of English iron,
Forged aboard ship, that had been changed for pigs,
Given back to Cook between the shoulder-blades.*

The principal article of barter was an iron spike, from eighteen inches to two and a half feet long, made in the form of the natives' wooden dagger or "pahooah". Previously the natives had been given iron worked into small adzes. Clerke records on the day of Cook's death:

The major part of the pahooahs with which many of the natives are now armed and is their most deadly weapon, were furnished them by ourselves ... we troubled ourselves very little about the use they proposed them for. Old Terre' oboo (the chief) got two from Captain Cook and one from me no longer ago than yesterday evening.

Slessor refers to "the trumpety springs of fate". Clerke moralises on the death of Cook. Cook had called in for the second time at Kealakekua Bay because of trouble with the fore mast of the *Resolution*.

Had not that misfortune happened to the Resolution's fore mast, which occasioned our second visit, these people must have been looked up to as patterns of hospitality and benevolence; how they will stand in the eye of the world now I cannot presume to say, but I have related the various transactions between us with all the clearness and perspicuity I possibly could, and must leave it to superior judgments to settle the secret springs and original causes of action, with once more observing that the unhappy catastrophe which befell us I do think appears by no means the effect of premeditated intention, but of an unfortunate string of circumstances tending to the same unlucky point, one action irritating another till they terminated in the fatal manner as had been represented.

It is clear Slessor has a wide and intimate knowledge of the Cook literature and that he ranges in it at will, selecting information widely and skilfully to build up an impressive picture and to make, to the initiate, an impressive display of learning and competence in this particular field. It is hardly too much to say that Australian poets excel at this particular kind of writing and that here they have made a contribution of value to English poetry. FitzGerald's "The Wind at Your Door", which is a variation of this genre introduced by Slessor, is virtually a new kind of poem, a close-to-history dramatic monologue.

There is, as in most of Slessor, a deal of quiet humour in the poem. At times it is quite evident. This is so in Section III and is present in the metre, in the rhyme, and in the diction. The final stanza is beautifully inexorable in its rendition of the passage of Time. The humour is also evident in Section IV. Effective humour always presupposes an effective control of language and imagery of the kind shown in the phrase, "stone of Caesars turned to flesh". It is not only Caesar becoming human, it is a statue of Caesar becoming human. This ingenuity is contrasted with the simplicity of the phrase "things like this" applied to what important topics exercise the serious minds of midshipmen. The final stanza is a brilliant summing-up of the section; and the handling of the poem's final rhyme and near-rhyme contributes to the overall humorous tone of the section.

Section II is quietly humorous in tone. Part of this comes from the description of the great Reef in homely English country terms. The reef is "a coral hedge". The crystal twig of coral dies "like a cherrybough". The officers yawn, hold a pencil, put eye to lens, are languid in gilt and buttons. The rhythm also contributes, as in the colloquial:

*The sailors didn't ask,
Nor Joseph Banks. Who cared?*

and the colloquial summing-up of the section: "Cook snored loudest himself." There is also the effective control of language and imagery in:

*Men who ride broomsticks with a mesmerist
Mock the typhoon.*

The warlock not only mesmerises his sailors, he carts them off on his broomstick. Much the same kind of control is seen in:

*Tagged by the horrid Gorgon squint
Of horticulture.*

A close reading of Section V, from which derives most of the accusations of bitterness and emptiness against the poem, shows a pity which always attends the sight of a man who has done great things in his prime and is now old. The description of Captain-in-the-Corner talking to the empty chairs is good-natured and the tone of the first paragraph is set by the play of words in

*After the candles had gone out, and those
Who listened had gone out ...*

Elizabeth's word play on Cook is not necessarily ill-tempered. It can bear the interpretation of the exasperated wife still fond of her man, and the possibility of this interpretation is strengthened by the rhythm and diction of

*That was his wife,
Elizabeth, a noble wife but brisk,
Who lived in a present full of kitchen-fumes
And had no past.*

It may be worth pointing out that what is complained of in the first two paragraphs of this section is not that Home's stories of Cook are boring, but that they are tedious with all the tediousness of tales much more than twice-told. They have in Slessor's witty description:

*the sticky, drugged
Sweet agony of habitual anecdotes.*

There is a good deal of wit in this section of the kind that is shown by the phrase "deal with chairs" and the transferring of the chafing of the listeners from them to their chairs.

*he'd had to strike a deal with chairs,
Not knowing when those who chafed them had gone to sleep.*

There is wit, too, in

*Too good, too good,
This eloquent offering of birdcages
To gulls ...*

and brilliance and wit in

Britannia's mission to the sea-fowl.

The use of "mission" with its overtones is perfect in its suggestion of niggard charity.

The diction of the poem is simple. The endings of Sections I, II, and V are simple and effective. In Sections I and II there is some parallelism.

*Cook was a captain ...
When sea captains*

occurs three times in Section I, and there is the simple variation: "That was the captain Cook was".

In paragraph 2 of Section I there is the repetition of "choose" three times and then the repetition of "So Cook made choice", "So Cook sailed westabout", "So men write poems in Australia". This is picked up in the final sentence in Section II, "So, too, it was with Cook". There is also the simple variation in Section II of "Flowers turned to stone" and "Stone turned to flowers".

There are the typically brilliant Slessor turns of phrase, but the attention of the reader is never diverted from the narrative to linger over the phrase. The best example of this is the vivid description of the chairs in Section V.

with rubbed nails

And leather glazed, like aged serving-men ...

The idea of precious beauty is cleverly conveyed in spice, diamonds, gilt, and duchy's seal in

*spice-tree boughs, and water diamond-green,
Beaches wind-glittering with crumbs of gilt,
And birds more scarlet than a duchy's seal.*

Slessor's command of the possibilities of language is shown in his use of "last office", the rites due to the dead:

*the old floundering sea,
The old, fumbling, witless lover-enemy,
Had taken his breath, last office of salt water.*

Many of Slessor's poems arise directly from his reading and in some instances he directs our attention to his source by a note. "The Nabob" and "The Country Ride" are examples of this.

"The Country Ride" is an attractive lyric displaying the Slessor command of word and phrase and the Slessor virtuoso handling of metre and rhyme. What he takes from Pepys is contained in less than half the poem, his comments fill the remainder. He arranges the Pepys episodes, as Pepys himself does, so that they open with a song and end with an execution.

*riding by,
Whistling his "Go and Be Hanged, That's Twice Goodbye"?
There came Captn. Allen, and he and I withdrew and sang a song or two, and among others
took pleasure in "Goe and bee hanged, that's goodbye." —Pepys
the black and faceless bale
Of gallows-flesh that had not girl nor ale!
Mrs Anne and I rode under the man that hangs upon Shooter's Hill, and a filthy sight it was
to see how his flesh is shrunk to his bones. — Pepys*

Shooter's Hill is a hill on the Dover Road, a notorious haunt of highwaymen. Here was a gibbet where the criminal hung till his bones fell to the ground.

The rest of the episodes he rearranges, as a comparison of the verses with the *Diary* shows:

*But where is he ...
Who such a frolic pomp of blessing made
To kiss a little pretty dairymaid ...
And country wives with bare and earth-burnt knees,
And boys with beer, and smiles from balconies ...
The greensleeve girl, apprentice-equerry,
Tending great men with slant-eye mockery:
"Then Mr Sam says, 'Riding's hot,' he says,
Tasting their ale and waving twopences ..."
Among other things, I got my Lady to let her maid, Mrs Anne, to ride all the way on
horseback, and she rides exceeding well; and so I called her my clerk, that she went to wait
upon me. I met two little schoolboys going with pitchers of ale to their schoolmaster to break
up against Easter, and I did drink some of one of them and gave him twopence. By and by we
come to two little girls keeping cows, and I saw one of them very pretty, so I had a mind to
make her ask my blessing, and telling her that I was her godfather, she asked me innocently
whether I was not Ned Wooding, and I said that I was, so she kneeled down and very simply
called, "Pray, godfather, pray to God to bless me", which made us very merry, and I gave
her two-pence. In several places, I asked women whether they would sell me their children,
but they denied me all, but said they would give me one to keep for them, if I would. — Pepys
The rhyme scheme in the poem is in effect a play on words:
light delight*

made dairymaid

There is another play on words, more subtle, within the poem. Sam is envisaged as a “pick-purse”, a “bush-ranger”, “cropping” the offerings. Mrs Anne who rode on horseback is a “greensleeve” girl, and “greensleeve” is the name given to an inconstant lady-love and also recalls the old ballad. Mrs Anne is an “apprentice-equerry” and an equerry is an officer of the royal household, charged with the duty of occasional attendance on the sovereign, in this case Mr Sam.

There is a touch of charming extravagance about the whole poem, and if

*cells that under tents of horn had slept
Rose dancing*

means that the fingertips tingled with horror at the sight of the dangling highwayman, then the extravagance of the conceit is in keeping with the extravagance of the poem as a whole.

Sometimes Slessor lifts a line from another poem and usually the poem he writes or uses it in exhibits some variation from or modification of the theme in the original poem. This can be a source of confusion when the original poem loses its popularity. When Slessor wrote the sequence, “The Old Play”, Arthur Waley's translations from the Chinese were well known and three collections, *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, *More Translations*, and *The Temple* appeared between 1918 and 1923. “Poem VII” in “The Old Play” begins,

“Shang Ya! I want to be your friend” —

and the line is taken from the second poem or stanza of “Oaths of Friendship”, which begins

*Shang Ya!
I want to be your friend
For ever and ever without break or decay.*

A head note to “Oaths of Friendship” reads,

*In the country of Yüeh when a man made friends with another they set up an altar of earth
and sacrificed upon it a dog or a cock, reciting this oath as they did so.
The poem “Oaths of Friendship” follows. This explains the lines
Though in Yüeh it is usual
To behead a cock and dog,
Such was not considered binding
In our bloodless decalogue.*

This first poem of “Seventeen Old Poems”, which is the next poem but one, refers to a “life-parting”, and a footnote explains this is “the opposite of a parting by death”. Slessor in his poem takes the first line from this poem.

*On and on, always on and on
Away from you, parted by a life-parting.*

Slessor repeats the two lines he has borrowed from the two poems in the final stanza of his “Poem VII”.

*On and on, driven by flabby whips,
To the Nine Lands, to the world's end,
We have been scattered by the sea-captains of ships,
Crying no more with bright and childish lips,
Even if we wanted to pretend,
“Shang Ya! Let me be your friend.”*

Slessor's original note printed in *Cuckooz Contrey* was not particularly helpful to those who were not familiar with *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*:

The Old Play —

The line “Shang Ya! I want to be your friend”, is from an “Oath of Friendship”, in One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems, translated by Arthur Waley. No. 1 of “Seventeen Old Poems” contains a fuller allusion to the Life-Parting, “the opposite to a parting by death”.

Two poems, both Australian in subject matter, are “A Bushranger”, and “Wild Grapes”. Slessor's own note to “A Bushranger” reads,

Jackey Jackey, whose right name was William Westwood, became an almost fabulous hero amongst the old hands. The most incredible feats were attributed to him in the mythology which spread round his name, and the least of these were his power of travelling at an unearthly speed, his kissing of a Commissary's wife in the latter's carriage, and his reported conversation with the Governor in the most inexplicable and intellectual language.

George E. Boxall's *Story of the Australian Bushrangers* was first published in London in 1899. Angus & Robertson published an edition in 1916, and a further edition was published by Cornstalk, Sydney, in 1924. “Wild Grapes” deals indirectly with John Lynch, “A Bushranger” deals directly with William Westwood. “Wild Grapes” is a beautiful poem of atmosphere describing an old orchard, “A Bushranger” is a humorous, brilliantly written poem. It is perhaps significant that Chapter V of Boxall deals with John Lynch and Chapter VI with Jackey Jackey, the Gentleman Bushranger.

John Lynch was one of the most brutal Australian murderers. Slessor does not mention him in the poem. He gives the name of Isabella to the murdered Mulligan girl and his poem deals with a time long after the murders were committed, so long after that all the details have been forgotten. By a brilliant stroke he links the dead girl, Isabella, to the grapes growing in the ruined orchard. His description of the Isabella grapes has the brilliance of perception and the vivid word and simile typical of Slessor at his best.

*... wild ones, Isabella grapes they're called,
Small, pointed, black, like boughs of musket-shot.*

The qualities of the Isabella grapes are transferred to Isabella, the girl.

*Isabella grapes, outlawas of a strange bough,
That in their harsh sweetness remind me somehow
Of dark hair swinging and silver pins,
A girl half-fierce, half-melting, as these grapes,
Kissed here — or killed here — but who remembers now?*

The poem “Wild Grapes” owes nothing to the account of Lynch, but “A Bushranger” owes something to the account of William West-wood in Boxall.

Boxall recounts Westwood's conversation with the keeper of the tollbar on the Parramatta Road. “Ain't you afraid of being took?” asked the tollman. Jackey laughed. “I'd like to see who'll stop me while I have these little bull-dogs about me,” he said, tapping his pistols.

*He can shoot off hats, for to have a bit of fun,
With a bull-dog bigger than a buffalo gun.*

Boxall pays tribute to Westwood's eloquence.

Although he appears to have been of humble origin he is credited with having been highly educated. This point was especially insisted upon by his eulogists among the old hands. By them he was always represented as being “able to hold his own”, in conversation, with “the best of them”. I remember one old fellow telling me that when Jackey Jackey met Governor Gipps (of which meeting, however, I can find no record) the governor and the bushranger had a long conversation and parted mutually pleased with each other. “You and me”, said the old chap, “couldn't have understood what they said though it was all English; but they talked grammar.” — Boxall

[...] "Poetry is a record of the happiest and best moments of the best and happiest minds." Eliot described something like it in:

Why for us all, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? ... such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer.

In "Five Bells" Slessor deals with a succession of such memories dealing with a friend who died untimely. The chief criticism against the poem is that it is a poem without hope.

Charles Higham writes of it:

Yet in what way does the poem rise above the simple and personal utterance; does it, in brief, reach the level of a masterpiece? Perhaps the question will have to be left unanswered for a time; there is something about its character which leaves "Five Bells" for this generation at least, an isolated and indefinite poem. And its isolation and lack of definition in Australian literature spring from Slessor's own philosophy of negation, of transience and futility, which are summed up in this, his last and absolute declamation in verse. He has moved, in his poetic life, from vitalism to fatalism, and thence to a total extinction of the poetic gift.

Judith Wright in summing up Slessor's work writes:

For Slessor, in the end, experience is rendered meaningless by its discontinuity, and communication between human beings is momentary, limited, and corrupted by time and death. Only the moment's world can hold beauty and freedom and changelessness; and the moment is no more than a moment; it is not, as it is for Eliot, the guarantee of anything beyond itself.

This would presuppose that "Four Quartets" is a better poem than "The Waste Land" because the "Four Quartets" is a Christian poem and "The Waste Land" not. If Slessor can make poetry out of the moment being no more than the moment, a critic cannot legitimately criticise the poet because he is not more optimistic. If Hopkins is a better poet than the author of the "Rubaiyat" the reasons will lie in the poetry and not in the theology.

It is perhaps significant that Buckley does not make these charges against "Five Bells". Of it he writes: "It may not be claiming too much to say that 'Five Bells' is one of the two or three best poems written in Australia." He sums up: "For all his joy, there is in all his poetry a faint background of distrust with life. In 'Five Bells', this has been brought forward as an open protest against life. No poet of Slessor's kind can do more than this — make his preoccupations public. This is what *he* has done; but it is not what we expect of an 'intellectual' poet."

"Five Bells" is an elegy and, in that sense, it is the same kind of poem, though it does not use the same kind of machinery, as "Lycidas", "Adonais", "The Scholar Gipsy", and "Thyrsis". In such poems the place of belief, especially religious belief, is important in any critical appraisal. The question is complicated, but central. In the first place it is difficult to see what justification there is for considering "Five Bells" as Slessor's final and considered statement about death or immortality. "Five Bells" is a statement made by the speaker in the poem at a particular time and in a particular set of circumstances. Most poetic truth is truth in a particular context. In the second place, considering belief in general, it may be well to consider the statement of I.A. Richards:

When, through reading "Adonais", for example, we are left in a strong emotional attitude which feels like belief, it is only too easy to think that we are believing in immortality or survival, or in something else capable of statement, and fatally easy also to attribute the value of the poem to the alleged effect, or conversely to regret that it should depend upon such a scientifically doubtful conclusion.

“Five Bells” is, in some ways, the same kind of poem as “Captain Dobbin” and “Five Visions of Captain Cook”.

“Five Bells” starts from a person Slessor knew. In this it differs from “Captain Dobbin” which deals with a fictional character, and “Five Visions of Captain Cook” which deals with an historical character. Both “Captain Dobbin” and “Five Visions of Captain Cook” are impersonal: in them Slessor does not speak in his own person. “Captain Dobbin” is written throughout in the third person, “Five Visions of Captain Cook” is Cook as seen by other people. “Five Bells” is written in the first person.

We know who Joe was from Slessor himself and from Philip Lindsay's *I'd Live the Same Life Over*. Philip Lindsay writes:

Joe was a giant, lean and powerful, with red upstanding hair, and the most amiable of grins: but once he had fallen down, a habit he had when very drunk, he would lie contentedly on his back with a gentle smile and grin up at you while you tugged at shoulders, arms, and legs, and he softly explained that the whole police force with an elephant to help couldn't shift him an inch; and I'm afraid he was right. A splendid fellow, Joe, who was to disappear from life magnificently. I shall never forget the night of his death, for I was working late, seeing a newspaper to bed, when a drunken pal, Frank, staggered, weeping, into the office to announce the tragedy. We were damnably busy, on the point of going to press, but these tidings were so appalling that I snatched at telephones and rang the morgue, the police, the harbour authorities, all without result. We decided that Frank must have been imaginatively drunk, and threw him out of the office. Every paper to which he staggered took the same attitude, and therefore on Sunday, not a single rag proclaimed the end of one of our finest young black-and-white artists.

Loaded with bottles, he had been off to some North Shore party with Frank when, tiring of the slow progress of the ferry — or, perhaps, of life itself — he had sprung up, saying that he'd swim there quicker, and, fully dressed, dived overboard. A deck-hand had leaped in after him, and life-belts had been thrown. They saw Joe, Frank said, wave cheerily and strike out for Milson's Point; then he vanished in the moonlight. Perhaps a shark got him, or a mermaid — as some said — or the load of bottles in his greasy old rain-coat tugged him to the fishes: no one can tell, for the body was never found.

Slessor described Joe Lynch for John Thompson:

Joe Lynch. He was a black-and-white artist, whom I first met when I was working for a magazine called Punch in Melbourne in 1925. We became friends then. I liked his mad Irish humour and his mad Irish rages. We did talk about blowing up the world, as I think it's somewhere mentioned. I really didn't want to blow up the world, but he was quite serious about it. We little realised, of course, that it wouldn't be very long before men did devise means of blowing up the world. Then after Punch had finished, I met him again in Sydney when he returned there. He eventually fell off a ferry-boat and was drowned. Or at least, he was assumed to have drowned. His body was never found, I believe.

We know that the death of Joe Lynch was the occasion of the poem, but whether the Joe Lynch of the poem is, in all or any details, the actual Joe Lynch is unimportant and irrelevant. The poem is beautifully articulated and possesses a close unity that neither “Captain Dobbin” nor “Five Visions of Captain Cook” possesses. This unity derives, in the main, from three things. The theme is simple and there are no digressions. The imagery arises from, and belongs naturally to the nature of the subject matter. The picture of Joe is rounded and complete.

The time and the circumstance of “Five Bells” is stated precisely. Five bells is half past two in the morning. It is rung out in two strokes, two strokes, one stroke:

*the double and the single bell
Of a ship's hour ...*

The poem is in three paragraphs, and *fi ve bells* is repeated three times. The time, five bells, is rung out in three bursts — 2, 2, 1. The strokes are made by metal on metal:

coldly rung out in a machine's voice ...

The place is above the Harbour:

the dark warship riding there below ...

In the night and in the darkness and on the edge of the water all sense of direction is confused, and it is difficult to tell up from down:

*the Harbour floats
In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.*

The night and the water seem to have rushed together and mixed:

*Night and water
Pour to one rip of darkness ...*

At the dead hour and in the darkness the poet suddenly thinks of Joe, long dead. To think of Joe he has gone backward in time; for him Time is

the flood that does not flow.

The poem is, in essentials, a lament for Joe. The whole life of Joe moves through the mind of the poet in the tolling of the five strokes of the bell:

*this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.*

The elegy is an elegy for a nobody. The poet, who knew the dead man, is alive. He was his friend but he remembers him only fitfully, and everyone else has forgotten him entirely. The very name of Joe recalls nothing, and the simplicity of the statement adds to its poignancy and finality:

*You have gone from earth,
Gone even from the meaning of a name ...*

The pitiful possessions he left are:

*All without meaning now, except a sign
That someone had been living who now was dead ...*

And yet in some ways Joe with his great dreams was important if the poet could only find the answer, and if he found the answer he might hear the voice of Joe from the darkness:

*If I could find an answer, could only find
Your meaning, or could say why you were here
Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath
Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?*

The repetition of “meaning” is only one indication of the superb construction of the poem.

Joe comes alive in the poem in a number of details all significant. He was an Irish drunkard, the self-claimed descendant of the kings of Ireland and well aware that no Englishman could be trusted:

*raging tales
Of Irish kings and English perfidy ...*

He had a wide acquaintance with publicans, especially those from Darlinghurst:

*dirtier perfidy of publicans
Groaning to God from Darlington.*

We know what Joe looked like, and this is not common in an elegy, but the description is such that it makes vivid the character of the man:

*looks and words
And slops of beer; your coat with buttons off,
Your gaunt chin and pricked eye ...*

Slessor builds his picture with great sureness and great economy. “Pricked eye” is magnificent. Joe's eye is pricked, alert as a pricked ear is alert.

A mark of the modern elegy is its honesty, its avoidance of the pious platitude. A good example of this is Auden's elegy to Yeats with its:

*You were silly like us; your gift survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself ...*

Slessor's poem was written between August 1935 and January 1937, some years before Auden's poem.

There is, of course, not one picture of Joe in “Five Bells” but a succession of pictures. The first picture is Joe, drinking and talking, aspect and clothes wild, with fiery words and fiery eye. The next picture is Joe in the darkness and the rain, talking. No detail in this poem is superfluous. Joe is a radical, a socialist. Among the gods of his idolatry are Milton, who wrote a tractate on Divorce, and *Areopagitica* on the Freedom of the Press, and had a hand in the beheading of a king; and Tom Paine, who wrote *The Rights of Man* in answer to the conservative Burke, and who went on to fight in the French Revolution. Joe was also a fiery liver and had been to Tahiti.

*A voice that spoke beside me in the bush,
Loud for a breath or bitten off by wind,
Of Milton, melons, and the Rights of Man,
And blowing flutes, and how Tahitian girls
Are brown and angry-tongued ...*

The next picture is of Joe in Melbourne grown gentle because he was old or ill or both. Slessor thinks Joe's journal to hold such important secrets that it needed a lock and Joe's promptly losing the key so that he had to saw off the lock:

Your journal with the sawn-off lock ...

Joe knew how to right the wrongs of the world, he couldn't look after a key and he couldn't spell:

*Guns, photoes of many differant things
And differant curioes that I obtained ...”*

The phrase “sodden ecstasies of rectitude” has given trouble. Max Harris writes:

*Slessor is also led astray as often by his alliterative instincts as by his imagery-creating —
The sodden ecstasies of rectitude
sounds fine. But surely here is Swinburnian vagueness. Neither “ecstasy” nor “rectitude”
suggest soddenness, but rather the opposite. Slessor has let the sense lapse here in order to
indulge this facile alliterativeness.*

T.J. Kelly in *The Focal Word* links the phrase with the “leech” and “sponge paws” and comments:

*Melbourne has showed his bones, infected him to the bones with,
The sodden ecstasies of rectitude.*

*What was worse than the climate to the bohemian Joe was the respectability on which
Melbourne used to pride itself — to them a sodden ecstasy.
And showed your bones, that had been sharp with rage,
The sodden ecstasies of rectitude.*

“The sodden ecstasies of rectitude” is in apposition with “rage”. The antecedent of “that” is “mind”. Joe, when he was in drink, was extremely vocal and out to right all the wrongs of the world. The “rectitude”, the certainty that he had all the answers, was especially strong in an alcoholic ecstasy. “Showed your bones” has the meaning “your bones showed”, as in a phrase like “his bias showed”, where “showed” means “was evident”.

The next picture of Joe is in Sydney; here it is clear that Joe is older and living in the past. Joe is going to build a better world by blowing it up. Here we learn about Joe's father. He was a graveyard mason. Joe, lost in Sydney Harbour, graveless, had a father who made his living carving gravestones for other men. The son was lost in the dark, the old father moved in the darkness of the blind.

There is the contrast between Joe, undisciplined and drowned, and the disciplined in life, disciplined in death:

*the bosoms of a thousand men
Staked bone by bone ...*

There is also the implication that the men whose bosoms are burdened “with fair monuments/And tablets cut with dreams of piety” will be remembered no longer than the graveless man in the Harbour.

Just as the pictures of Joe are so constructed and placed in the total construction of the poem that they add up to the picture of a man, foolish, unlearned, but yet alive to the wrong in the world, and in that respect not negligible, so the circumstances of each of his appearances add to the impression of his first appearance. Everywhere there is water and difficulty of speech. Joe, when he first comes to the poet's mind, speaks or tries to speak from the darkness of a night in which darkness and water appear intermingled.

Joe at Moorebank tries to speak out of storm and darkness and thunder amid the talons of the rain. Rain and noise snatch away his words. Joe in Melbourne has been gentled, not by the talons of the rain, but by the soft archery of summer rains. He does not speak and his mind is snailed by the slow damp. The time for ecstasies has gone. All that speaks is the pathetic journal. In Sydney there is the suggestion of water in the “aquarium-flare of penny gaslight”, and “pink” is repeated in the “pink wallpaper” and “the seapinks bend”. The talk is of blowing up the world, but the mind of Joe is with his father, long dead.

Slessor tells us that Time for him is “the flood that does not flow”. Neither did it flow for Joe. As Joe moves forward in the Time marked by bells and wheels to become old, he moves backward on the “flood that does not flow” till:

*they were living, all of them, those frames
And shapes of flesh that had perplexed your youth,
And most your father ...*

The imagery in the poem arises from and belongs naturally to the subject matter. Most of the imagery comes from or is associated with the sea. The moonshine is “ferried” down. The image of the anchor whose flukes of thought drag up profitless lodgings from Time is a typically brilliant Slessor metaphor which shows at the same time his brilliant command over words and his ability to use a word in a new setting so that it becomes virtually a new word. “Lodgings” is such a word, and “anchor” has, of course, to do with the sea. Joe, or something, cries against the “port-holes” of space. The figure is repeated, with variations, in speechless “panes” and “glass”.

The more the imagery is examined, the more of a piece the poem becomes. “Voice”, for example, occurs six times in the poem, and by the use of the word, the heard “voice” of the machine,

*Five bells
Coldly rung out in a machine's voice ...*

is contrasted with the unheard “voice”, and the poem ends:

*And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,
Five bells ...*

Associated with “voice” are the references to “mouth”, the difficulty of hearing, and “ear”. This gives point to:

*And fifty mouths, it seemed, were out that night,
And in each tree an Ear was bending down,
Or something had just run, gone behind grass ...*

The sea imagery is preserved in the pygmy “strait” that separates Death from Life. “Tahitian girls” connotes a voyage to the Islands. The reference to the Labassa tower also connotes a voyage.

The bodies of the graveyard are “staked side by side” and astonished at the “cargoes” they had never thought to bear. The graves are private “berths” of dissolution laid.

The description of the waves in this poem, quite apart from their organic part in the theme, will bear comparison with any description of the sea in English literature. The “diamond quills” describe perfectly the way feathers fit together in, for example, a wing, and “the comb of light” is a perfect description of the narrow white top of a wave seen at night. There is an element of surprise or audacity, the sense of getting the utmost out of words, in the swift movement from “quills” and “combs” to the arching of “mackerel-backs”.

There is nothing in the poem to suggest that it is a profound meditation on Time. The poet feels free to range forwards and backwards in Time, but he knows that the fidget wheels of Time progressing bear Joe and him away. The poem is a moving lament for human beings “who have no memorial”, whose memories do not even survive the lives of their friends. It is also a moving description of the human condition which agonises to reach some meaning, some purpose in life.

The poem forms a splendid unity. Joe, his death, the various memories of him, together with the integrated imagery, and the fitting diction, form a perfect mode for the discussion of the doubts and fears of the poet, and they are all integrated with and form an essential part of the coherent structure of poetic meaning.

Slessor has, for the most part, been denied the title of an intellectual poet, whatever that may mean. He has, however, written a war poem, “Beach Burial”, that for workmanship worthy of its subject matter, for its wisdom, and for its tolerance and sympathy is worthy to be placed alongside the finest war poems written in English.

Notes

This last encounter was the voice of God and we submitted ourselves to it. As it was imprudent to steer in these fatal parts an unfamiliar course at night, we spent the night sailing along the coast in the passage that we had recognized by day and on the morning of the seventh, I set course North-East by North, abandoning the idea of travelling on further West along the fifteen degree parallel.

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