GRAEME KINROSS SMITH: Kenneth Slessor

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I saw Time flowing like the hundred yachts
That fly behind the daylight, foxed with air;
Or piercing, like the quince-bright, bitter slats
Of sun gone thrusting under Harbour's hair.
So Time, the wave, enfolds me in its bed,
Or Time, the bony knife, it runs me through.
"Skulker, take heart," I thought my own heart said,
"The flood, the blade, go by-Time flows, not you!"
(from "Out of Time")

Kenneth Slessor was the poet of time, of "the cold fact of time", as he said in describing the genesis of his magnificent poem "Five Bells". His poetry holds a music, a verbal polish, a perfection. In one of the rare moments when he spoke about his own work he told his friend Alexander McDonald that in the first two lines of "Out of Time" he consciously chose the old English word "foxed", meaning "a bit tipsy" to describe the sails of yachts on Sydney Harbour. "I had the idea of sails being just a bit drunk, you know-drunk on air," he said.

Again, Kenneth Slessor was the poet of Sydney, and particularly of its Harbour. He spent only six years of his adult life away from it. The country inland from the coast held no magic for him at all. His few poems about itones like "Country Towns", "Night Ride", "Crow Country" and "Talbingo"often have the edge of cruelty and disdain to them. But for Sydney and his particular living-places, Elizabeth Bay and King's Cross, he has warm and magical words, whether he writes of them in prose or distils them further into poetry. For in fact, when he wrote of these places he was writing of something that he knew in all its moods and in all his own and yet yearned to know better. That goes a long way to explaining why he presented Sydney with such verbal magic and sharp visualization.

"Once I lived in the sky over Sydney, seven stories higher than the top of William Street, eating, sleeping, loving, arguing, sausage-frying and head-scratching in a small room of stucco, wall paper and brick, on top of a layer of steel in a structure of cement. From this perch in the air I could see, whenever I watered my window-box, the complete history of the sun which came up over North Head and disappeared fairly regularly on the other side of Hyde Park." So wrote Slessor in a book about Sydney in 1952. He went on to touch gently the features which made Sydney a distinctive city-the sparrows in the spouting; "the grumble of the flying boats climbing down to their nests in Rose Bay"; the crowds in the streets of King's Cross waiting for the strokes of midnight to ring in the New Year; Macquarie Street and its brass plates; MacLeay Street; Potts Point; St. James' church in King Street, "riding aloofly on the clouds, its lovely scales of verdigris giving the copper a green like tarnished snow, an old, dim, decayed, peeling almond-green, but indubitably green, as if to honour its 18th century architect, Mr. Francis Greenway". And at the end of every side street, as Slessor noted, was the Harbour and its Bridge elbowing into view ("... 20 miles high, weighs 736,000 Persian Yakmans... is 142 miles, 17 rods, 23 poles, 5 perches in length," he wrote facetiously; "carries everything from rickshaws to electric buggies, and feeds on paint.") Slessor can turn from this to a beautiful capturing of the essence of Sydney's ferries-"The ferry boat, built by practical men to pay practical
dividends, is not meant to be a fairy boat. But at sunset, when the Harbour is glazed with pebbles of gold and white, and the sun is burning out like a bushfire behind Balmain, the ferry boats put on their lights. They turn into luminous water beetles, filled with a gliding, sliding reflected glitter that bubbles on the water like phosphorous..." In his way Slessor was to Sydney what V. S. Pritchett has been as interpreter to New York and Dublin. Without Slessor, Sydney would not have quite the same understanding of itself.

As a writer Kenneth Slessor led two lives. He was a journalist. Immaculate in bright shoes, pressed shirt, dark suit, he wrote, and paced, and spoke with a constant cigarette or cigar planted between his lips. But he was no ordinary journalist. He sent back moving dispatches to the Australian press as war correspondent in the Middle East and New Guinea from 1940 until 1944. He was a noted leader-writer, editor, literary editor and book reviewer for Sydney and Melbourne papers; and at the same time wrote entertaining, fanciful and humorous articles. He was President of the Sydney Journalists Club from 1956 until 1964. From 1953 the Club had become his second home, with its rules and etiquette, its club dinners and speakers, and later, its poker machines. All his life journalism was the first call on Kenneth Slessor's time. But with it all, writing in the period from the early 1920's until his sudden stop in 1947 at the age of 46, Slessor also became one of the most accomplished and influential poets in the whole stream of Australian poetry.

Kenneth Slessor was born at Orange, New South Wales, in 1901. His father was an English mining engineer and metallurgist, an unconventional man fairly constantly on the move from country town to country town. Slessor's mother was a Scotswoman who was strong in the Presbyterian church. Mowbray House, a preparatory school in Chatswood, Sydney, provided Kenneth Slessor's early education. In 1908 he visited England with his parents to meet his forebears there. Then he followed on to Sydney's North Shore Church of England Grammar School. At "Shore" he edited and produced a small and unofficial magazine, Printer's Pi. When he was fifteen his first poem appeared in the prestigious Bulletin.

Slessor liked to write; his essays at both his schools were held up as examples of style. He finished his leaving Certificate and scuttled off to join the Sydney Sun as a cadet reporter, revelling in the police court reporting and his first stints in Parliament. He was soon graded and had a parliamentary column of his own - "Potted Parliament".

It was not long after, married to his first wife, Noela Senior, and living in a flat in Darlinghurst, that Slessor first felt the galvanizing influence of the Lindsay family. He met the three brothers-Jack, Ray and Phillip Lindsay-in the early 1920's. Although he was surrounded by the Bohemian world of Sydney at the time, he had committed "the unpardonable offence and got myself a job at ~4/10/- a week, which put me beyond the pale", he recalls. He saw himself as "I have lived in, or on the margin of, King's Cross for more than forty years. The Harbour has never been out of my window..." Kenneth Slessor, writing in 1963. This is the view from the window of his Elizabeth Bay flat at 18A Billyard Avenue. the amused and detached observer, rather, of the Dionysian urgings of Norman Lindsay in art and Norman Lindsay's friend Hugh McCrae in poetry. But then he acted. With Jack Lindsay, Norman's son, he founded in 1923 the magazine Vision, destined to survive only a year, but wedded to the idea of providing an opportunity for writers who wanted to write from their Australian background in terms other than the bush patriotism, romanticism or bush dourness of Paterson and the other balladists. Vision's aim was "to liberate the imagination by gaiety or fantasy". The first issue, with a Norman Lindsay cover showing Pan, longhaired, chasing a butterfly, carried a poem by Hugh McCrae and Slessor's poem "The Thief of the Moon". Exuberance, joy in life were the keynotes. Years later, in 1962, Slessor looked back on the magazine as he spoke to John Thompson in an ABC television interview: "It was a very odd mixture of Nature and Greek mythology and all kinds of thundering pronouncements, and a lot of it I never agreed with. I did agree on one point of dogma. I agreed very earnestly. That was our insistence on the concrete image in art and our hatred of the abstract image. That has been my attitude to poetry, at least, ever since."

Slessor, like many others, felt the stimulus of Norman Lindsay-"... an overflowing and inexhaustible spring of energy... creative fury..."-and went on to produce more poems for subsequent editions of Vision, for the anthology Poetry in Australia 1923 that was compiled from the magazine, and eventually for his own first book, Earth Visitors, which appeared in 1926. Slessor remembered his debt to Lindsay, remembered his garden, his nymphs in sculpture, his infectious talk in the quiet of the mountains at Springwood, and dedicated the title poem of Earth Visitors to the artist. That first collection showed a poet who had broken from the ballad, who still respected the traditional forms, but was committed to experimentation, who could
conjure up details and objects with memorable sharpness in pictorial poems-poems like "Pan at Lane Cove", "Winter Dawn", "Thieves Kitchen", "The Night Ride"-which at the same time gave an otherworldly half magical cast to familiar scenes. There was a hint of a new modernism in Slessor's poetry. One literary critic likened the impact of Slessor's early verse in Australia to the unexpected, jarring and stimulating effect that T. S. Eliot's verse first had in Europe. Slessor, in the meantime still the journalist, had spent more than a year in Melbourne, associated with Melbourne Punch and writing features for the Melbourne Herald. In 1926 he returned north as special writer for the Sydney Sun. In 1927 he transferred to Smith's Weekly - he wrote numerous articles, could turn his Liand to anything, even wrote a series of light, rumbustious verses for the paper - one a week - under the title "Darlinghurst Nights".

But in his more serious moments Slessor was writing the poems that were to make his second volume of poetry, Cuckooz Contrey, which appeared in 1932. Foremost among them were the poems "Captain Dobbin" and the famous "Five Visions of Captain Cook". Slessor's earlier poems had come from his reading, from history, and from a sense of mystery and other-worldliness beyond the surface boredom of human affairs. These new poems built on that and added a fascination with the sea and things nautical. In that collection are poems of impressions and exotic detail like "The Atlas"; others like "The Bushranger" or "Elegy in a Botanic Gardens" are whimsical or lighthearted. Then there is the sensitive portrait of a sea captain in "Captain Dobbin" and Slessor's greatest poem to that time, "Five Visions of Captain Cook".

"The whole work," Slessor wrote of "Five Visions...", "owes a great debt to a remarkable man whom I was once privileged to know and visit, Captain Francis Bayldon, who lived at Darling Point in the '20's and who died in 1948." Captain Bayldon, an uncle of Slessor's wife, had been a seaman on the clippers and on steamships, had compiled charts and was the founder of the Sydney Nautical School. He had made a valuable collection of sea charts, nautical books, diaries and maps. "I was allowed to browse through this collection on my weekly visits," Slessor recalled. "Over a glass of sherry I was encouraged to ask questions, and his enthusiasm, his scholarly gusto and his astonishing knowledge of unfamiliar details soon infected me with his own worship of Cook..." Slessor's poem pictures Cook, the old-style sea captain, as he was seen by his crew, by midshipmen like Trevenen, a schoolboy officer, and by Alexander Home who had kept a journal of his voyage with Cook-Slessor had seen the manuscript of it in Captain Bayldon's library. The poem captures the stubborn, almost divine character of Cook and the whole sweep of Australia's destiny which he opened up:

.. How many mariners had made that choice
Paused on the brink of mystery! "Choose now!"
The winds roared, blowing home, blowing home,
Over the Coral Sea. "Choose now!" the trades
Cried once to Tasman, throwing him for choice
Their teeth or shoulders, and the Dutchman chose
The wind's way, turning north. "Choose, Bougainville!"
The wind cried once, and Bougainville had heard
The voice of God, calling him prudently
Out of the dead lee shore, and chose the north,
The wind's way. So, too, Cook made choice,
Over the brink, into the devil's mouth,
With four months' food, and sailors wild with dreams
Of English beer, the smoking barns of home.
So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout,
So men write poems in Australia.

And after it all there is the death of Cook at the hands of natives in Tahiti, the beach a scene of boiling-over violence and confusion:

... Wild, childish faces, killing; a moment seen,
Marines with crimson coats and puffs of smoke
Toppling face-down; and a knife of English iron,
Forged aboard ship, that had been changed for pigs,
Given back to Cook between the shoulder-blades.
There he had dropped, and the old floundering sea,
The old, fumbling, witless lover-enemy,
Had taken his breath, last office of salt water.

By 1936 Slessor became associate editor of Smith's Weekly. In 1938, living in a balcony flat overlooking Elizabeth Bay, he became editor. It was here, and at his later flat not far away where he lived for 18 years - at 18A Billyard Avenue, Elizabeth Bay - that Slessor wrote his greatest poetry. Much of it arose from his feelings for King's Cross, for the sea, and for Sydney Harbour that he looked out upon. The old house he lived in, with its conical turret rising above the water, is still divided into two flats. It is much as Slessor knew it, with its gardens of dense shade running down steps and rock to a swimming pool at the water's edge-all once part of the larger grounds of historic Elizabeth Bay House only fifty yards up the slope. "I have lived in or on the margin of King's Cross for more than forty years," wrote Slessor, looking back in 1963. "The Harbour has never been out of my window."

There, before the war, Slessor wrote his poems "Out of Time" and "Sleep", the beautiful piece about the mystery, the selflessness of falling asleep. He wrote "South Country", about the rounded hills and dairy farms and gullies of deep vegetation along the coast south of Sydney, where

".. The monstrous continent of air floats back
Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black
Bruised flesh of thunderstorms..."

As a city-lover he wrote his poem in celebration of William Street, that thoroughfare alive with light that runs up from the city to King's Cross. And he wrote his long elegaic poem "Five Bells" about his memories of a friend, Joe Lynch, a black and white artist, who was drowned one night in the early 1930's, when he fell from a ferry ploughing away from Sydney across the dark harbour. But as Slessor points out, the poem is as much about the compression of memory in time as it is about Joe Lynch, beer bottles weighing down his coat pockets, who disappeared never to be found. Slessor hears the first stroke of five bells as they are rung for 10 pm by the watch on a warship that rides below him on the lightsprinkled harbour. The memories of his friend and the grim harbour waters sweep over him with their indication of time's relentless washing onward-and the memories are complete with their sense of loss as the last bell rings out:

I looked out of my window in the dark
At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand
In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze,
And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,
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. Five bells coldly ringing out.

('Five bells')

Within a year of the publication of his third book of poems, *Five Belts*, Slessor had been selected as Official War Correspondent and was eating the bitter dust and smoke of withdrawal before the Germans with the Australian forces in Greece, scurrying for cover from the German bombers that attacked the stream of traffic on the road back to Athens. "At first we too leapt for cover in clods of earth," wrote Slessor in dispatches for the Australian press, "but later we found it quicker and less exhausting to take a chance, keep right on and pass the halted traffic in front." Slessor wrote from Alexandria, from Cairo, from the merciless mountainous spine of Crete and from Syria. Then it was Jerusalem, Haifa and the grim fight for E Alamein. His dispatches, in those days before television, were graphic, suggesting the huge and murderous deployment of men and materials:

> Yard by yard along this road to ruin, air-power has written the terrible testament of what bombs and bullets from the sky can do to men fleeing on the earth. You go past tanks that have been split open, their metal curled up with the heat, like smoke-blackened cans. You see what at first seems to be a line of traffic filing down a sidetrack, then realize with a shock that none of these silhouetted trucks is moving. All are still, dead and broken, stopped in their tracks. Vehicles are halted everywhere at all angles just as their drivers abandoned them to explosion and flames when they leapt for cover. Some are mere shapeless tangles of calcined wire and metal, reduced to such a confusion of ash that it is impossible to guess what they were. Some are just a blackening of the earth, a charred stain on the desert's face, surrounded by tiny scraps of iron.

It was at E Alamein that Slessor watched dead sailors from torpedoed ships drift in to shore. He watched their simple burial in the sand. His dispatch about these "unknown seamen", friend and enemy interred side by side, later brought forth his much-anthologized war poem, "Beach Burial", with its inexorable, moving opening:

> "Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come.
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under
But morning rolls them in the foam..."

In 1943 Slessor was reporting the Australian and American campaigns in Bougainville and Finschaven in New Guinea. The Army tampered with his account. Slessor wrote: "I am bitterly disappointed that I am now forced to give up to the struggle to tell in my own way the story of Australian fighting men for whom I have such a deep admiration." He resigned his commission.

The Sydney *Sun* welcomed Slessor back as chief leader writer and literary editor in 1944. In that year he collected his most valued poetry and published *100 Poems*. He sank back into the life of the city he loved-back to his leisurely lunches at a Greek terrace restaurant; his chess evenings at Billyard Avenue, he and friends like Hal Porter and Douglas Stewart warmed by claret punch; his winter Saturday afternoon pub crawls; his fascination with old houses, old hotels, old books, old china and glass; back to his impish practical jokes, to his playing of music, to his circle of acquaintances-eccentrics, actors, writers, artists, professors-all of whom held him partly in awe. Urbane, majestic, peppery, impish, indolent-these were the words that Douglas Stewart, a great friend of Slessor in later years, called up to describe the poet.

Slessor used to write his prose at night-often from 11 pm until nearly dawn-at his small desk in the Billyard Avenue flat. His dictionaries and reference books close to his hand, his orderly handwritten notes in
front of him, he would pick away at the typewriter. Poetry, though, was another thing. Poetry for Slessor was not yet tainted by the 9-em English that journalism had often to resort to. Poetry was the last and loveliest colour of the spectrum of literature for Slessor. "It points to something beyond itself," he said. "The rest of literature points to poetry." In poetry, as in other things, he was fastidious, a perfectionist. Douglas Stewart describes once seeing a draft of a Slessor poem with "little towers of words here and there above and below the lines wherever, doubtful of his original choice of language, Slessor had written in alternatives and synonyms, so that he could study them at leisure". He might carry a manuscript about with him for weeks, considering it. Before starting to write, Slessor revealed, he used to shave, shower, change his clothes, eat a good dinner without too much wine, and then sit down to his bare and tidy desk.

In 1947, two years after the death of his first wife, Slessor suddenly ceased producing poetry. He had said all that he had to say for the time being, but confided, "If I could get away for a year or so, I'd resume writing poetry." He never did. He remarried in 1951 to Pauline Wallace. Their son Paul was born in 1952. As early as 1931 Slessor had given lectures on modernism in poetry. Now, although caught up in his work for the Sydney Journalists' Club, he again began to give lectures on poetry at Sydney University. And again his homage to other poets was made clear-Tennyson, Wilfred Owen, e. e. cummings, Marianne Moore, John Shaw Neilson. They were choices to exemplify his feeling for the magical rather than the intellectual element in poetry, and for the "considered breaking of rules" to achieve effects with the colour and texture of words and their sounds.

From 1956 until 1961 Slessor served as part-time editor of the literary magazine, Southerly. In 1957 he moved from the Sydney Sun to the Daily Telegraph and produced his final verse collection, Poems. It went to six reprintings and his work was set for courses in schools and Universities. That surprised Slessor. "I'm only a small poet," he told Douglas Stewart; "only a small poet."

In the 1960's Slessor moved to a flat on the Pacific Highway at Chatswood. There, before the Norman Lindsay water-colours on the walls, he was still the doyen of Sydney journalists, the connoisseur of wines and whiskies, the urbane host. Almost ten years earlier he had been awarded an OBE for his services to Australian literature. Now, in 1968, he was called to the National Literary Board of Review, where he often sat silent through the meetings, and on other occasions insisted on reading aloud his reports on literary projects.

In 1969 Slessor left the Daily Telegraph. In 1971 he died, just a year after Douglas Stewart had inveigled out of him his prose writings, made a selection from them, and published it as the fascinating book Bread and Wine. The death of Kenneth Slessor took his friends by surprise; but time had caught him, as he knew it must. His passing reminded them of his life-affirming early poems, but also of his statement as a more mature poet: "Later, when one grows older and obtains the sweets and sours of existence and has the first hand experience of life, it's no longer necessary to draw from the experience of reading." One could imagine Slessor, after his last years of acceptance, almost of boredom, quoting again the line from Tennyson that he admired above all others:

"Man comes and tills the soil and lies beneath..."

That, Slessor would say, sums up the whole of human life and time in one line.