Review
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NOT ONLY for Australians, but also for Americans who have become increasingly interested in the literature of the “Land Down Under,” Clement Semmler’s meticulously edited and creatively crafted The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor is among the most important books published in Australia in recent years. For Australians, preparing for the Bicentennial next year of the first European settlement on their continent (at Sydney Cove), Diaries, composed under pressure, but written, for the most part, in prose of the highest order, often startlingly beautiful in its lucidity and imagery, contains the memories of which came those impulses which changed forever Australian society and Australia’s place in the world community.

Diaries also reminds many Australians, the elderly who still hold yellowed newspaper clippings of Slessor’s war dispatches and the young who later studied his poetry in the classroom, with a treasurer they had had in this remarkable journalist-poet.

But for Americans, especially members of the new American Association of Australian Literary Studies, the publishing of Diaries may be looked upon, with advantage, as primarily a literary event of some significance. For though it is appropriate that the book be launched, as it was last year, at the Journalist Club in Sydney (of which Slessor was president for many years), and that the Diaries be read with anticipation as the work of a highly skilled and creative journalist, it is particularly pleasurable to read the Diaries with Slessor, the poet (one of Australia’s greatest), in mind. Doing so, we come away from them frequently astonished and exhilarated by a quality and power of language rarely seen in journalistic writing. (Chris Wallace-Crabbe once wrote eloquently of this aspect of Slessor’s strength. That power is in evidence throughout the Diaries, which are clearly organized and annotated in five sections, beginning with England (May 1940-January 1941) and ending with Australia and New Guinea (February 1943-April 1944), with Egypt (January 1941-March 1941), Greece (March 1941-April 1941) and The Middle East (April 1941-January 1943) in-between. (How easy it is simply to list these places and times; how deeply affecting it was to read about them!)

These points about language are made more felicitously by Clement Semmler in an excellent introduction to the Diaries which offers not only biographical information about Kenneth Slessor, as well as several pages dealing with Slessor’s appointment as “Official War Correspondent,” but also discusses the diaries in detail.

Slessor, Semmler says, was a superb journalist who “…believed in the integrity of his calling” and for whom “…truth in reporting was all-important.” (The thwarting of that truth by the censors was later to force him to resign his post.) But Slessor added to these journalistic beliefs the poet’s “…capacity for observation and an eye for detail.” The Diaries, Semmler says “abound” with illustrations where “the journalist and poet became one” and where “…even the prosaic…is invested…with a sense of the magical.”

Thus, Slessor describes his first glimpse of Africa in the voyage to England: “the African mountains stuck up, dark and fabulous, on the sea-rim, lit behind with low streaks of amber light. They grew gradually into huge and menacing tooth-like crags, dipped in heavy shoals of clouds.” Thus, Slessor responds to the tropical landscape of Papua, New Guinea (where Australia was fighting for its survival): “bruised indigo moun-
war despatches which the University of Queensland Press will also be publishing and making available to Americans, as is The Diaries, from its New York office.

1 Also to be edited by Clement Semmler and published by the University of Queensland Press.


Herbert C. Jaffa, Professor Emeritus at New York University, published in 1971 the first full-length study of Kenneth Slessor, Australia's pioneer modernist poet. He also edited the invaluable research tool in Australian studies, Modern Australian Poetry (Gale, 1979).

POETRY

A. D. Hope
The Age of Reason

PAUL KANE

IN A FINAL poem, "Of Mere Being," Wallace Stevens writes: "You know then that it is not the reason/ That makes us happy or unhappy." An old poet, in his evening efflorescence, will always turn to what he loves most—we think of Yeats and Auden and Stevens—and here, in his latest volume, it is not the reason that makes A. D. Hope happy, or unhappy, nor even his fondness for that century we designate "of Reason," rather it is age itself which, with its privilege of indulging in what pleases, in its sunset vision of merely being, provides the occasions of joy and sorrow for these poems. As he puts it in 'Spatlese,' from A Late Picking (1975):

Young men still seek perfection of the type;
A grace that lies beyond, one learns in time.
The improbable ferment of the overripe
May touch upon the sublime.

It is worth recalling that A. D. Hope was born in the same year as W. H. Auden, 1907, that he is of the generation of Robert Penn Warren and Samuel Beckett, for to place his work in the context of those eighty years is to sense the cumulative weight of a history which is our burden still. We work in the context of those eighty years is to sense the

farcity, energy, control, nobility, frankness. So the problem may not be that we have neglected Hope, but rather that we have failed to defamiliarize him. And yet, what could seem more familiar than this latest book: a collection of eleven narrative poems in Augustan heroic couplets, by turn witty, learned, playful, intent—all stumped with the Hope embossing? Moreover, they are set in the eighteenth century, "one of my favorite periods of history" (vi) he tells us in the Preface, in case we didn’t know. "I have aimed at narratives," he says, "of a minor sort, chosen mainly for amusement or irony, mostly related to actual persons and events, but treated with a certain degree of fantasy" (vi). Does this not sound like the "middle flight" that Hartman claims he is "rarely subdued to"? Is it not the neo-classical, old-fashioned Hope many now think him? Such questions, such perceptions, turn upon the way we read the poems. But, of course, we read with the blenders of prior perceptions, and in the case of Hope, this self-reinforcing circularity often gets us nowhere. I am certainly not alone in suspecting the received opinion of Hope.

To begin with, we need to throw out the notion that Hope is some sort of refugee of the Enlightenment—what we might call a weak misreading. For all his admiration of the eighteenth century and his use of heroic verse, his sensibility is thoroughly modern and his poetry contemporary. Hope, it is true, has clouded the point by insisting on his affinity with the period, but it is by now a commonplace to point to romantic features in his poetry more than classical ones; and, with regard to his poetics, there is no lack of long narratives in formal verse these days: witness James Merrill, Vikram Seth, Alfred Corn, and Les Murray, to name a few. From the perspective of poetic continuity, what we have in Hope is the expression of a tradition that never stopped, one that certainly wasn’t ended by Modernism—a movement, indeed, we now think of as part of a much larger historical continuum. Hope is often described as anti-modernist and anti-romantic—and his more polemical critical piece would appear to bear it out—but I think we can see him as working in the same arena and working out some of the same problems that the high romantics and those late romantics, the modernists were engaged in: an emblem of which might be (from "Sir William Herschel's Long Year"):

As in the world of science, so in the heart.
Light ringed by darkness has its counterpart,
And all things lost, forgotten by mankind
Live on in the dim caverns of the mind.

And it comes as no surprise that his verse technique owes more to Byron than to Pope, more to Clough or Browning even than to Dryden or Swift. Its informality in the midst of form gives the impression of a poet with his sleeves rolled up: at times it may seem almost too easy and expansive, but Hope, like other poets working now in this mode, seeks to recover some of the ground lost to prose, to ease back into the recumbent posture of story and yarn. The Age of Reason is a book that can be read with pleasure; its primary demand is that it be read in the spirit of its own delight (for, by the same token, any dour critic is free to savage it). Its range is more horizontal than vertical, its reach commensurate with its grasp, for it ranges over an historical period and pulls in a cast of what, colloquially, we would call "characters." Swift's Gulliver corresponds with William Dampier; Defoe's Friday takes leave of Crusoé (a poem many will already know); the Devil takes tea with John Wesley; Anna Seward looks to marry Erasmus Darwin; Joshua Reynolds vies with a patron; Joseph Banks takes the transit of Venus (planet and goddess); and so on. Not since Richard Howard's Untitled Subjects, have we had so entertain-