

# 'CITY OF SIGHS': THE POETRY OF JOHN SHAW NEILSON

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To read through the body of Neilson's poetry – and to read the autobiography and correspondence on top of that – and then to turn to criticism of it is, in my own case at any rate, enormously irritating. The problem begins as early as H. M. Green in his pioneering *History of Australian Literature*. In the ten pages that he devotes to Neilson's work in the first volume of that book (two less than Hugh McCrae receives), he says, among other things, 'Neilson is in fact a mystic, perhaps the most notable of all Australia's mystic poets: that he is not a mystic merely, that he did not call himself a mystic, and that he may very likely have known nothing about mysticism is nothing to the point' (483). Neilson, as it were, has mysticism thrust upon him.

He goes on, 'The range of Neilson's verse is narrow. He wrote three kinds of poem', we are told (486), the purely lyrical, the ballad-like, and the satirical. Green strongly implies that it was necessary for A.G. Stephens to help knock the poems into shape and he goes on to say, 'and, since on the one hand he lacks the balladists' matter, and on the other hand his contemplation is mainly emotional, for as a rule he does not so much think as perceive and feel, his verses are apt quickly to run thin . . . he cannot develop a theme or a thought or an emotion' (488).

Green was writing many years ago, of course, but it is interesting that in the revised edition of his book his widow, the late Dorothy Green, sees it unnecessary to add very much to this judgment: '*Witnesses of Spring*, consisting of previously unpublished poems of Neilson's, does not add much to one's assessment of his achievement, though it contains several interesting poems' (491).

This is the tone of most Neilson criticism, into at least the late sixties and early seventies, and it persists still – witness Dorothy Green – though the splendid scholarship of Cliff Hanna has done something, at least, to initiate a rethinking of attitudes. James Devaney's biography reinforces the myth of the 'uneducated rhymers'. James McAuley (who does at least recognise the complexity of Neilson's religious upbringing and something of the effect it has on his work) says of him that ' . . . at each re-reading one is confronted again with the weaknesses and limitations which have to be admitted, but one's perception of a rare true quality is confirmed. The great drawback with Neilson is an imperfect control of language' (235). Here, too, is Dennis Douglas: 'Despite his proneness to sentimentality, despite his emotional excesses, despite the essential narrowness of his range, [there are a lot of 'despites' here], his achievement remains an enduring one' (23). And finally, there is Judith Wright: 'We cannot feel with Neilson, for there is nothing in him of the everyday tortures of individual consciousness . . . There are no agonies of thought or decision; no doubts or mental crises, no mention of the responsibilities of our solitary selfhood' (128).

Judith Wright's devotion to Neilson is unquestionable and she sees many fine things in the same essay but, however well meant, this is the most patronising and de-personalising of the comments on him. It reduces him to the status of an artless, asexual singer of life, an untroubled lyricist of the beautiful who makes up for the harshness of

his life by what he calls 'the recompense of song'. Even in recent times Neilson has not always fared much better, with Ken Goodwin seeing him as a Blakeian 'possessed mystic' (86) and Chris Wallace-Crabbe seeing him as, in the title of his article, 'Struggling with an Imperial Language', taking pains to write in 'correct' English, rejecting Australian use of the language.

It's not hard to see how this view came about. There is the long neglect of Neilson's papers and manuscripts, redressed only after years of hard work by Cliff Hanna, who described Judith Wright's *Witnesses of Spring: Unpublished Poems by Shaw Neilson* (1970) as 'one of the most textually inaccurate collections of verse ever produced in this country' (1990, xxviii). There are the editorial efforts of A.G. Stephens. To read H.M. Green is to believe that Neilson was hardly capable of putting the poems together without editorial assistance whereas the truth is, as Judith Wright says, that 'As for Stephens's judgements on his work, though he knew them to be sometimes unsound, he accepted them with gentle humility' (116), largely out of the obligations of friendship and gratitude, to say nothing of necessity.

However, there are also inherent problems in many of the poems themselves. Take, for instance, one of Neilson's most popular and best known poems, 'Love's Coming':

Quietly as rosebuds  
Talk to the thin air,  
Love came so lightly  
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as lovers  
Creep at the middle moon,  
Softly as players tremble  
In the tears of a tune;

Quietly as lilies  
Their faint vows declare  
Came the shy pilgrim:  
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as tears fall  
On a wild sin,  
Softly as grief's call  
In a violin;

Without hail or tempest,  
Blue sword or flame,  
Love came so lightly  
I knew not that he came.

This is the kind of poem which gave Neilson the emasculated reputation he has found so hard to shake off, even now. 'Love' in the poem is personified; 'he' arrives while the speaking voice in the poem – most of Neilson's poems are written in the first person – is oblivious of 'him'. The statements are carefully generalised, left unspecified, even ostentatiously vague. The adjectives and adverbs all verge on the effete, certainly on the timid: 'Quietly', which begins the first four of the poem's five stanzas, 'lightly' (twice), 'Softly' (also twice, 'faint' and 'shy'). Similarly with the verbs, like 'Creep' and 'tumble'. The only hint of passion in the poem is associated with its one use of colour, 'Blue sword or flame', which seems to indicate some kind of violence (blue is usually associated with

power in Neilson), or in this case its absence. There is a tremulous, dying quality in the cadence of the poem's music which is attractive but in a pallid kind of way, rather like the early Yeats.

There is no denying that Neilson did write many poems of this kind. He can also be capable of the most appalling kinds of sentimentality, especially when he was writing about children, as he often did. Look, for example, at a poem like 'Dolly's Offering', about a dumb and blind girl, in which the apparent attempt at counterpoint through a rollicking rhythm does not conceal the basic tawdriness of the material. It is also true that some of even Neilson's best poems, such as 'Song Be Delicate' or 'The Orange Tree', do involve slightly fey qualities and risk the faults that his lesser poems exhibit. And yet even these poems are never far away from an awareness of tragedy and sorrow.

'Song Be Delicate', for instance, would seem to be a poem of unequivocal celebration, as well as Neilson's own poetic manifesto, a declaration of the kind of poetry he wanted to write and what he wanted to appeal to:

Let your song be delicate.  
The flowers can hear:  
Too well they know the tremble  
Of the hollow year.

And yet the slight intimations of fear and emptiness suggested in the words 'tremble' and 'hollow' here are confirmed in the last two lines of the poem, where the mood is shattered: 'Death is abroad . . . Oh, the black season!/The deep – the dim!', where 'dim' means something quite different from its usual associations in Neilson's poetry. It is an ending reminiscent of the despair of Thomas Hardy's 'In Tenebris' poems.

Similarly, even the famous 'The Orange Tree' is a more disturbing poem than is generally allowed. Its beauty is unquestionable and its use of colours – orange, blue, white, gold, green, – shows the poet at his best and most typical. Its theme of the essential mystery of things, the futility of attempting to understand anything by reason, as embodied in the man's querulous suggestions, and its final retreat into silence, are also typical of Neilson.

What perhaps is not so often noticed is the essential darkness of the poem. The images of Nature are strikingly beautiful but often also associated with some kind of constraint or pain. Fatality and duress are conjured up in 'fear', 'pain', 'affrighted love' and in the images of Nature suggested in 'goaded by the green' and the 'compulsion of the dew'. Most of the questions that the man asks, too, involve failure, disappointment or fear of some kind; this is especially true of the later stanzas. The notion of love is evoked, but it is a love that is at best vulnerable and perhaps destructive or even fatal.

Even here, in other words, Neilson is a darker, more complex and more disturbing poet than he is often given credit for. Cliff Hanna has pointed to the stresses and tensions within Neilson's view of God and love, what he calls 'the dual nature of Shaw Neilson's vision' (Hanna 1972), and notes the grave problems he had with his God, the mixture of pagan and Christian in his work.

All this is true, and very much to the point, but even this is to de-politicise and de-radicalise Neilson's poetry. The Jindyworbak poet Victor Kennedy said after meeting him that he 'found him remarkably well-informed and intellectually aware', 'steeped in the current philosophies – rationalism, evolution, the labour movement and Australian poets and poetry' (*Oxford Companion* 513). And if, in fact, we turn to his *Autobiography*, we find a radically different voice from that of the lyric poems for which he is most

famous. The work shows him not only to be a capable and assiduous labourer but also a man with a keen awareness of social questions and, despite the explicit rejection of materialist values in poems like 'The Poor Poor Country', one with not only a deep compassion for the poor but a sound understanding of *why* they are poor. When a strike is called he is invariably one of the first to go out, whatever his financial situation, and he shows himself aware of the exploitation of the poor and workers generally. Without making a song and dance about it, he dictates quietly the following statement in his letters: 'I think it is pretty common knowledge amongst the working class, during the last thirty years, that the Contract System is always in favour of the Employer' (*Autobiography* 35). These radical, socialist elements in his poetry, both his best work and his inferior poems, are more prevalent than has been assumed, and it is possible, by constructing a different canon of Neilson's work, to see a poet with quite different and larger concerns.

Let's start with some inferior but thematically significant poems, the so-called 'lost child' sequence, which appears in A.R. Chisholm's selection of Neilson's poems but not in Hanna's. In these three poems, which Chisholm titles 'The Child Being There', 'Child of Tears' and 'The Child We Lost', there is a strong note of protest, a tone recalling not the mystic Blake but the social critic Blake as well as Dickens, even in their melodramatic or formulaic elements. In 'The Child Being There', the situation is that an erring mother who has presumably conceived a child out of wedlock only to have it die on her – 'a great sinner – ill-spoken – unwise', as the poem describes her with heavy irony – hopes and prays that she will have at least a glimpse of heaven because that is where her child will have gone.

The poem is frankly melodramatic, which is no doubt why Hanna excluded it, but it is significant in at least two respects. One is the pointed and deliberate note of social criticism in the fourth of the poem's five stanzas: "'Tis hard that they have all the riches!' she says in despair: / "I helped in the making of Heaven – my child being there"'. The tone of protest at social injustice could not be more pointed. Then the second point to notice is the one stanza that really, if only momentarily, comes alive, the final one:

Poor though her body be, still it is goaded of Love:  
 – This that can hasten the tiger, and moan with the dove:  
 This that can make God a shadow. She says: 'I will dare!  
 I will look for a moment in Heaven! – my Child being there'.

The refrain is predictable, mechanical even, but the key word is 'goaded', with its suggestions of duress, of compulsion; sensual love is a powerful force in Neilson's world and invades and permeates both the social aspects of that world and the spiritual.

'Child of Tears' is perhaps related to this poem and certainly seems to spell out the same situation but the note of social criticism is even more explicit and savage, devoid of sentimentality or self-pity. Addressed to a young child who has gone to his grave, son of a similarly erring mother, it seems both to exonerate the mother and to castigate the world of conventional piety which rejected her. The opening two lines – 'Impetuous as a wild-winged bird/Your mother could not be a slave' – suggest that the child was born out of an impulse towards freedom and feeling. In contrast to this is the attitude of 'The people of the market-place' and 'The worshippers to chapel', surprisingly familiar targets in Neilson's poetry.

Again, it is a less than wonderful poem; the dichotomy is rather too simplistic to be convincing and the reactions of the conventional people are very crudely portrayed: 'His mother's heart was false and black/So as his mother he shall be'. What is striking,

however, is the explicit social criticism of the privileged faithful, the same kind of criticism we see in 'The Millionaire'.

Social protest, then, is one common strand in Neilson's poetry. Hand in hand with it goes a quite explicit anti-imperialist and often anti-English stance, particularly striking given the militarist attitudes of other poets of the time such as Christopher Brennan and Henry Lawson. In 'The Ballad of Remembrance', for instance (which again does not appear in *Hanna*), the young and ingenuous narrator praises everything English – England's political achievements (that is, its imperialism), its legal system, the English character itself even. He raves on about these qualities to a man met 'out Bathurst way', who is carefully established in the opening three stanzas as the best and most quintessential kind of Australian bushman: 'His knowledge was not of the kind that is with scholars found', Neilson tells us approvingly.

After listening for a long time to the narrator's panegyric, the bushman finally begins to contest his views. He talks for a while about his father – 'And he said, "I can't believe that God is bitter like a man"' – before revealing in stanza 14 of this quite long poem the depth of feeling about England and English custom:

"Twas in your England that he starved and he would not dare to kill,  
He knew the law, and the law it said, his mouth he must not fill.  
All wisdom came from God, he heard, and the hunger was His Will'.

The father, we learn, was eventually sent to Australia for poaching a hare.

This poem burns with a fierce hatred of oppression – in this case specifically English oppression – and a consciousness of the inequities upon which society is constructed and which it institutionalises:

The rich men owned each inch of earth and the riches underground;  
They would have owned the soul of man had such a thing been found.

The narrator of the poem continues to protest and argue, mainly it would seem from the poem's point of view, so that the bushman can reinforce and elaborate on his criticisms of English society. It turns out that as well as being transported for a trivial offence, the father was also unjustly and viciously flogged. The poem ends, not on a note of Christian reconciliation, but with the man's statement, 'Some things there are that never can be healed'.

Closely related to the themes of social justice and anti-imperialism is Neilson's hatred of war, and scepticism about the value of the causes for which it was fought. In its complete rejection of the notions of valour and glory in favour of the sorrow of war, his ballad 'The Soldier Is Home' could well have been written by Wilfred Owen. It has the characteristically closed, repetitive structure of most of Neilson's poems, with each stanza basically restating the essential theme. Here, for instance, is stanza three:

He was caught with the valour of music, the glory of kings,  
The diplomats' delicate lying, the cheers of a crowd,  
And now does he hate the dull tempest, the shrill vapourings -  
He who was proud, and no beggar now waits for his shroud!  
Oh! yes, the soldier is home!

Another form that Neilson's social criticism takes is the humorously and sardonically satirical poems, especially the poems that deal with the city, which to the end of his life

he hated. Although the degree of satiric seriousness varies from poem to poem they are again more ubiquitous than one might be led to believe. They range from the playfully parodic – ‘The Sundowner’ – through the urban criticism in the portentously titled ‘Stony Town’ to the satirically comic ‘To a Blonde Typist’ where the rhymes and comically elongated endings emphasise the genially humorous but nevertheless satiric tone:

Gently with dolls not long since you were playing,  
But you must come the old hard laws obeying:  
Come where the old Ass Business leads the braying.

Business is like Apollyon, somewhat sooty;  
Child, you are heavenly, and it is my duty  
Here to give salutation to a Beauty.

Britain, your speech is all too mild in cursing,  
Who is this Thief we keep on reimbursing?  
Who is this Tyrant we persist in nursing?

The dislike of big business – Mammon – is clear and the poem goes on at considerable length to continue its satirical attack, likening Business in turn to a vicious serpent, a Tumour, a Dragon and a foe of Nature and the good life.

All these aspects, then, of Neilson’s thinking – the note of social protest, the hatred of imperialism and militarism, of materialism and the city – are central to his work. To them could be added the deep note of sensuality that runs through his work, even his most spiritual poems. Unconsummated sexual energy may be expressed as religious fervour and there is a curious connection between eroticism and spirituality. God, Nature and the sensual constantly converge in his work. In the not a-typical ‘Dulcie’, for instance, the poet addresses the pubescent girl (‘Almost a woman, half awake’), in a tone of mingled reverence and sexual excitement. Religious reverence, a worship of Nature and moments of sensual arousal co-exist in a curious kind of way.

The poem in which this occurs most strikingly announces itself in the title: ‘Surely God was a Lover’. It is an unabashedly sensual celebration of the presence of God in Nature, and the images it employs are plainly sensual ones. The feeling towards female sexuality is ambiguous, as it often is in Neilson’s poetry, but the power of that sensuality is undeniable: Summer is ‘a woman thirsty and unconsolated’ and there is reference to ‘the madness love will bring’. Love is often associated in Neilson’s poetry with conditions of duress, compulsion, or derangement. Summer and winter are dreaded conditions and seasons for the poet, and reconciled as here only by spring, in which most of his happiest poems are set. If winter is foreboding and menacing, summer, as here, annihilates meaning altogether.

This sense of the mingling of the sensual and the spiritual moves us towards the final radically disturbing element in his work, one of which Cliff Hanna has given some account, and this is the note of metaphysical anguish. The poems of reconciliation such as ‘The Gentle Water Bird’ and ‘The Crane Is My Neighbour’ are wonderful but comparatively rare. In a minor poem such as ‘The Hen in the Bushes’, for example, ‘Love’ is apostrophised, as it often is, but is seen uncharacteristically in terms of unequivocal hostility. The situation – one that is too banal finally to carry the poem – is that the hen sits on her nest to hatch her chickens out of love, but love is referred to in a series of predatory and destructive images; it is ‘the Old Tyrant’, it destroys peasant lads

(the tone here almost resembles that of Housman), it will 'most gladly / Burn women away', it conjures up 'Cities of sighs', which might well be an epigraph for Neilson's poetry. At the end of the poem, the reason for this hostility towards Love is explained:

Soon will the thin mother  
With her brood walk;  
Keen is the crow – and keen,  
Keen is the hawk.

Love, in other words, conjures lives into existence only to have them destroyed by the predatory forces at work in Nature.

Much of the poetry I have been discussing belongs among Neilson's lesser work but in one poem, in my view among his very finest, these diverse and opposed strands of feeling – the social and the spiritual, the Christian and the militant socialist – come together. This is 'The Poor Can Feed the Birds':

Ragged, unheeded, stooping, meanly shod,  
The poor pass to the pond; not far away  
The spires go up to God.

Shyly they come from the unpainted lane;  
Coats have they made of old unhappiness  
That keeps in every pain.

The rich have fear, perchance their God is dim;  
'Tis with the hope of stored-up happiness  
They build the spires to Him.

The rich go out in clattering pomp and dare  
In the most holy places to insult  
The deep Benevolence there.

But 'tis the poor who make the loving words.  
Slowly they stoop; it is a sacrament:  
The poor can feed the birds.

Old, it is old, this scattering of the bread,  
Deep as forgiveness, or the tears that go  
Out somewhere to the dead.

The feast of love, the love that is the cure  
For all indignities – it reigns, it calls,  
It chains us to the pure.

Seldom they speak of God, He is too dim;  
So without thought of after happiness  
They feed the birds for Him.

The rich men walk not here on the green sod,  
But they have builded towers, the timorous  
That still go up to God.

Still will the poor go out with loving words;  
 In the long need, the need for happiness  
 The poor can feed the birds.

Despite the composure, even the certainty, of belief although the specific nature of that belief is carefully and deliberately left undefined, it is impossible to de-politicise this poem or to ignore the stark realities of the dichotomy between rich and poor and the various practices and forms of behaviour they engage in. The poem opens in a manner which is unusually uncompromising, even by Neilson's standards, with the pointed contrast of rich and poor. Both rhythmically and syntactically, the emphasis on the disparity could hardly be greater, symbolised as it is by the buildings the rich erect to God as a kind of insurance policy – 'the hope of stored-up happiness', with its explicitly mercantile images of hoarding. In the almost violent directness of the juxtaposition it recalls the poetry of William Blake, but again the militant Blake of 'London' and 'The Garden of Love' rather than the mystic.

Such juxtapositions continue throughout the poem. Repeatedly, the rich are shown to construct their monuments to God out of fear and calculation, rather than love. In the most direct juxtaposition of the two, Neilson plays on different meanings of one of his favourite words, 'dim'. 'The rich have fear, perchance their God is dim' – they fear that they won't have access to God. The poor, on the other hand simply *assume* in their humility that God is inaccessible – 'Seldom they speak of God, He is too dim' – but engage in any case in their ritual of feeding the birds, a ritual that attains a sacramental significance. And they do this not with calculation but 'without thought of after happiness'. The action of the poor is associated with naturalness and spontaneity as against the contemptibly 'timorous' calculation of the rich.

As often in Neilson's poetry, the birds are seen as symbols of the divine, or emissaries of God or both. They are the mediating force between earth and heaven, man and God, who remains unknown and even unknowable. In this poem the intimation of the divine presence is deliberately clouded and ambiguous: he is 'dim', there are 'the tears that go/ Out *somewhere* to the dead'. But there are, nevertheless, deliberate echoes of the Bible in the image of scattering the bread.

So, the religious and numinous quality in Neilson's vision – itself a deeply ambiguous one – is inextricably tied in many of his poems to his perception of social justice and inequality. Faith in many poems turns to scepticism and even unbelief, or subtly undermines itself. In all but a handful of poems fear and doubt force their way in. And lest one should doubt the intensity of the darker elements in his vision, I conclude by quoting one of his shortest but most unrelievedly desolate lyrics, titled 'From a Coffin':

Wrapt in the yellow earth  
 What should I fear?  
 Sour hate and shallow mirth  
 Never come near.  
 Shape me no epitaph!  
 Sugar no rhyme!  
 I had the heart to laugh  
 Once on a time.

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