

Kenneth Slessor and Bertha Blither: Two Sides of an Australian Writer Between the Wars

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‘Old Ships and the Tales They Tell’, an uncredited article published in *Smith’s Weekly* on June 29 1929, described central Sydney by night as ‘a gulf of misty light between black cubist cliffs that glitter with opaline fire from a thousand sky-signs.’ The piece detailed a meeting of ex-naval men ‘strangely incongruous to the life of the city’ and was almost certainly written by Kenneth Slessor. There are several elements that link it to Slessor’s contemporary poetry. ‘Captain Dobbin,’ completed two months beforehand, posits a very similar relation to that established in the article between the ‘illusion’ of ‘ordinary’ modern life and the ‘reality’ of ‘thoughts that wander in strange lands and in years long past’. The pointed use of ‘cubist’ to describe the urban landscape animated by ‘the spirit of here and now’ also recalls the modernist awareness evident in Slessor’s poetry from the period. Like several of those poems, moreover, the article deals with sailors of a bygone era and uses the action of water as a metaphor for the temporal conditions governing human life; the city’s ‘rivers’ are ‘fed with the restless force of human energy’ and ‘flow forever on, teeming with men and women that dart along like shoals of hungry fish, or linger by the banks, or strand like flotsam in the backwaters.’

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that any general or necessary correspondence pertained between Slessor’s poetry and his work for *Smith’s Weekly*. Indeed, a detailed investigation of Slessor’s career at the paper reveals a very different side to the writer widely considered ‘the first renovator of twentieth century Australian poetry.’¹ This essay will explore an important aspect of Slessor’s journalism that shows him to be a popular entertainer whose product was defined by narrow commercial and cultural considerations. None of the material examined here has received scholarly

¹ Mead, P. ‘Kenneth Slessor: A Lyric Poet in the Age of Modernity’ in P. Mead (ed), *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings* (St Lucia: UQP, 1997), p.9.

attention, despite the light it throws on the divisions and contradictions in the work of one of Australia's most celebrated writers. That omission is scarcely surprising given the piecemeal fashion that critics have treated the relationship between Slessor's poetry and his journalism.

While it is generally acknowledged that Slessor wrote his best poetry while working at *Smith's Weekly* between 1927 and 1939, the creative implications of that circumstance remain obscure. Commentators from the 1950s and 60s, such as Max Harris, Vincent Buckley and Judith Wright, regarded Slessor's involvement in the 'unpoetic rat-race of journalism'² as simply irrelevant to his major work. The severity of that approach mellowed with time. In his 1990 biography of the poet, Geoffrey Dutton asserted 'the uninhibited atmosphere' of *Smith's* 'liberated' Slessor but the effect such freedom had on his poetry was not made clear. In fact, Dutton effectively sidestepped the issue by claiming, 'there is total integrity, no evasion, in all his dealings with words.'³ A less reverential note was struck by Adrian Caesar in 1995. Caesar argued it is Slessor's 'deep conservatism that is the common denominator between his poetry and his journalism.' Linking the 'sexist, racist, and thoroughly elitist' influences on Slessor's poetry to the 'brutal leaders' he wrote for the *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*, Caesar endeavoured to critique the 'apolitical' stance adopted by the poet and many of his critics. Oddly, the main focus of Caesar's interrogation was the post-war period when Slessor had completely stopped publishing poetry; the relations between *Cuckooz Contrey* (1932), *Five Bells* (1939) and the tenure at *Smith's Weekly* were addressed with greater uncertainty by Caesar. Despite alluding to the 'complex of conflicting impulses' Slessor was heir to, Caesar could only reconcile the 'populist' ethos of *Smith's* with the 'elitist' poetry through their shared 'conservatism', a category not granted clear definition by the critic.⁴

Although Caesar's approach was an often uncomfortable mixture of literary and cultural studies, it reflected a theoretical move towards contextualisation that has continued to influence Slessor criticism. Both Peter Kirkpatrick and Philip Mead have sought to establish links between Slessor's serious poetry and discrete aspects of his work for *Smiths*. According to Kirkpatrick, the light verse Slessor wrote for the paper between 1928 and 1933 can be seen as 'a bridging medium between the poet's earlier

² Harris, M. *Kenneth Slessor* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963), p.42.

³ Dutton, G. *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* (Ringwood: Viking, 1991), pp.141–178.

⁴ Caesar, A. *Australian Writers: Kenneth Slessor* (Melbourne: OUP, 1995), p.2.

Vision phase and the later more mature collections'.⁵ Mead views Slessor's film criticism for *Smith's* as crucial to an understanding of his poetic development: "Five Bells" could not have existed ... without his (and Australia's) specific historical experience of film and the cultural apparatus of the cinema.'⁶ Neither critic considers the ways in which the broader culture of *Smith's Weekly* mediated and shaped Slessor's writing for the paper. Mead conceives of Slessor as possessing a high level of agency as a journalist: 'Even though Slessor's film writing occurs within (a) melange of popular press forms,' he maintains, it is nonetheless free of 'dumbing down or cultural snobbery' and 'wasn't just a professional round' but 'a way of negotiating his way through modernity.'⁷ In more measured terms, Kirkpatrick views Slessor as 'an innovative popular writer' who found his 'ideal metier' in the 'relaxed, creative atmosphere of *Smiths*.'⁸

In contrast to the above positions, this essay will consider Slessor's writing as essentially duplicitous and view the relationship between his journalism and poetry as dissonant rather than supportive. Edgar Holt, Slessor's colleague at *Smith's*, implied such dichotomies when he noted that attempts to combine journalism and poetry are 'almost impossible' as 'the two states of mind are so utterly different.'⁹ Slessor emphasised that disparity for creative as well as professional purposes. He believed that poetry should concern itself with 'eternal simplicities and mysteries' rather than with 'ephemeral' social or political matters.¹⁰ Journalism, on the other hand, was a 'bread and butter scuffle' in which there was 'little demand for style or a fixed point of view.'¹¹ Slessor was at pains to keep the two areas of his writing life completely separate. As another contemporary, Elizabeth Riddell, asserted, he was 'split down the middle' between 'artist' and 'craftsman' and 'never had a problem with two lives.'¹² The degree to which Slessor's imagination was fired by this incongruity has been underestimated by critics. His mature poetry was driven by an anxious need to define a place

⁵ Kirkpatrick, P. 'When Skyscrapers Burst into Lilac' in Meade P. (ed) *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings*, pp.176–177.

⁶ Meade, Philip, *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), p.34.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.60.

⁸ 'When Skyscrapers Burst into Lilac', p.191.

⁹ Edgar Holt interviewed by Mel Pratt, <http://nla.gov.au/nlaoh.un735133>.

¹⁰ Slessor, K. 'Spectacles for the Fifties', *Southerly* No 3, 1952.

¹¹ Slessor, K. Introduction to *The Giraffe's Uncle* by Les Robinson, Sydney, 1933.

¹² Address by Elizabeth Riddell: *Recollections of Kenneth Slessor Poet and Journalist*, 25 May 1991. Sound recording, nla.oh-2688-0000-0004 Reel A.

for artistic purity amongst the crushing materialism of the modern world. An obsessive concern with boundaries and intellectual dislocation first came to the fore in the maps, shorelines and ‘riven earth’¹³ of *Cuckooz Contrey* (1932). But his preoccupations with definition and integrity extended beyond ‘the countries of the mind’¹⁴ charted in that volume. Norman Lindsay once wrote of Slessor that he ‘dodged all association with the literary elect and consorted only with journalists.’¹⁵ The key word is ‘dodged’; there is an elusive quality to Slessor, a propensity towards subterfuge and disguise which emerges as a motif in his serious poetry and animates his work as a newspaperman. In a sense, Slessor’s entire career as a journalist was a cover for his ambitions as an artist. Certainly, during his most productive period as a poet, Slessor was able, as he remarked of Les Robinson, ‘to daub his face with alien chalk and join the chain gang of the clowns.’¹⁶

The sophisticated and deeply personal poems collected in *Cuckooz Contrey* were written from 1927 to 1931 alongside a stream of journalism consciously attuned to the ‘assumptions and biases’¹⁷ of a white, male and middle class readership. Philip Mead claims that film journalism was Slessor’s ‘main published contribution for the paper’ and enabled him to adapt the cinema’s ‘new structures of feeling and experience’ to his poetry.¹⁸ In fact, Slessor only became Smith’s chief film critic in March 1931 and pursued varied roles for the paper before and after that date. In *Remember Smith’s Weekly?* (1966), George Blaikie referred to Slessor as ‘Smith’s Jack-of all-trades’: ‘He was the regular understudy for Jim Donald, the famed fight writer, and also the official office poet, leader writer, film reviewer, special writer, satirist and doer of anything else the gods wished to dump on him.’¹⁹ Most of Slessor’s signed prose in *Smith’s* before March 1931 broadly adhered to the style of humourists like Reg Moses or Lennie Lower. Even when reporting from the Stadium as ‘Jim Donald’s Understudy’ he adopted a droll persona: ‘First Van would hit Anderson, and then Anderson would hit Van. And what could be fairer than that?’²⁰

¹³ Slessor, K. ‘Crow Country’, in Kenneth Slessor, *Selected Poems*, Angus and Robinson: North Ryde, 1988, p.82.

¹⁴ Slessor, K., ‘Dutch Seacoast’, in *Selected Poems*, p.60.

¹⁵ Lindsay to John Hetherington, August 1964.

¹⁶ Slessor, K. Introduction to *The Giraffe’s Uncle*.

¹⁷ Kirkpatrick, P., *The Sea-Coasts of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney’s Roaring Twenties* (St Lucia: UQP, 1982).

¹⁸ *Networked Language*, p.35.

¹⁹ Blaikie, G. *Remember Smith’s Weekly*, Sydney: Rigby, 1966.

²⁰ Slessor, K. ‘When the Gong Goes’, *Smith’s Weekly*, January 26, 1930, p.4.

Contrary to accepted critical opinion, humour was the form with which he was most closely associated during the 20s and 30s. When Slessor was appointed Australia's Chief War Correspondent in 1940, a contributor to *Smith's Weekly* foresaw that Slessor's despatches from the front would 'break up' the war cabinet and leave the Prime Minister 'laughing helplessly.'²¹ Strangely, Blaikie made no mention in his book of a notorious and popular comic character associated with the paper nor of Slessor's role in her creation.

The top of the page containing 'Old Ships and the Tales They Tell' is dominated by a striking banner headline: 'Bertha Blither Advises Wife to Cut Husband's Throat (Cheers!)'. Further down the page the reader is informed:

At enormous expense, and tremendous risk to the susceptibilities of its male staff, 'Smith's' has enlisted the services of beautiful Bertha Blither. Bertha will answer queries from love-lorn flappers, young ladies contemplating marriage (companionate or permanent), downtrodden wives, and picture show usherettes. No fee is charged, but where photo is enclosed the Editor's decision is final.²²

A cartoon by Joe Jonsson accompanied this résumé and showed Miss Blither seated stoutly at a desk with a pipe clamped in her mouth. In contrast to the gamine-like 'girls' drawn by Virgil Reilly as decorations for Slessor's light verse, Bertha is endowed by Jonsson with a robust and manly bearing; huge hands sit heavily on the desk beneath a boozy, grizzled face little softened by the flowers protruding haphazardly from her short and rumpled hair. A telephone at her elbow and an overflowing wastepaper basket complete the picture of a hardworking, hard-bitten, journalist dispensing the good oil on 'how to do it, and when, in words of one syllable.' The only touches of femininity are a dress and high heeled shoes, both mostly obscured by the desk, and discrete frilly cuffs extending from the sleeves of her bulky cardigan. Bertha does not appear unfriendly, however; she gives the world a slightly befuddled glad eye through her monocle as she writes her 'daily dozen answers to correspondents.'

²¹ 'A "Smith's" Humourist at the War', *Smith's Weekly*, 20 April 1940.

²² 'Bertha Blither Knows Best About Everything', *Smith's Weekly*, June 29, 1929, p.11.

As the headline suggests, these answers tend towards the reductive if not the brutal. In response to ‘Bewildered Betty’'s suspicion that her husband had arrived home drunk (‘He insisted on kissing me and raised my allowance to £2 a week’), Bertha retorted:

Well, what of it? He had to come home somehow, didn't he? If he hadn't come home at all, and was still sober, where would be the sense in that? ...I'd let him come home drunk once a week for £2 or 5 nights at a cut rate of £7/10/- and a set of lingerie.²³

This relaxed attitude towards alcoholic excess and an insistence on women holding the whip hand in domestic matters became hallmarks of Bertha's style. Most commonly, Bertha was called upon to assist a wife in modifying some habit or characteristic of her husband judged to be unacceptable. ‘Tangled Truda’, married to an ex-fighter whose nocturnal breathing exercises made sleep impossible, was advised to ‘wait until he has his chest fully expanded, then push a butcher's skewer through the soft ribs. Repeat this until he is fully deflated.’²⁴ ‘Innocent Imogen’ was disturbed in bed by her husband's bow legs and adenoids; Bertha was highly sympathetic: ‘When he's fast asleep, tilt him sideways and iron out his legs with a heavy iron and a damp cloth. You might file the adenoids with a nutmeg grater.’²⁵ Bertha was not above invoking federal legislation to support her pronouncements. ‘Lively Lizzie’ was told:

I think the laws of this land are simply made for girls who find their husbands unbearable. It's so simple. Just nag at him...If you keep it up long enough he'll go away altogether, and then you'll be able to take out a maintenance order against him...If he doesn't pay up you can GAOL him.²⁶

While two Blither columns were credited to Reg Moses in 1929 and 1930 the balance of the work by ‘*Smith's Domestic Diplomat*’ was published anonymously until 1932. During an interview in 1987, Jim Russell made some revealing comments about Slessor's position at the paper and his connection to Bertha:

²³ ‘Bertha Blither Knows Best.’

²⁴ ‘Bertha Blither Brightens Up More Homes’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 20, 1929, p8.

²⁵ ‘Everybody's Laying Their Problems at Bertha's Big Feet’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 13, 1929, p11.

²⁶ ‘This is Big Bertha Blither's Page’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 6, 1929, p11.

He was just one of the boys. He liked to write humour, rough and tumble sort of stuff. He wrote, created, a character after Dorothy Dix, which he used in *Smith's Weekly*—what was her name again? Bertha Blither! Bertha Blither, he used to write answers to letters he wrote, of course, to himself. Bertha Blither would answer.²⁷

Bertha's rough and tumble approach had much in common with the hard edged comedy of contemporary Americans like Groucho Marx and W. C. Fields. But Slessor's involvement with Bertha also suggests other international points of comparison. Nathanael West, a Hollywood hack and brother-in-law of Marx Brothers script writer S.J. Perelman, imagined a male agony aunt with an 'almost insane sensitiveness to order' in his 1933 novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*. For *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the 'harsh' and 'raw' sounds of the modern city defy significance: 'no repeated grouping of words would fit their rhythm and no scale would give them meaning.'²⁸ A similar mood of alienation from traditional representative modes pervades Slessor's 'Last Trams,' where human beings are 'dumb presences' amongst new, unyielding forms of urban expression:

That street washed with violet
Writes like a tablet
Of living here; that pavement
Is the metal embodiment
Of living here

Both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Bertha Blither* were produced by modernist writers intimately involved with a mass culture that was erasing the conditions which made high art meaningful. Another figure beset by that contradiction was Brian O'Nolan, who maintained that 'a male writer should include in his impostures a female pen-name.'²⁹ Like Slessor, O'Nolan combined journalism with 'serious' writing and assumed a number of authorial personae, among them Count 'O'Blather and Flann O'Brien. And like Slessor, O'Nolan was admonished by critics for wasting his gifts on

²⁷ Jim Russell interviewed by Geoffrey Dutton, 13 October, 1987, NLA MS7285, Box 71, Series 28, Folder 15.

²⁸ West, N., *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (London: Farrer, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p78.

²⁹ Murphet, J., Ronan McDonald, Sascha Morrell (eds) *Flann O'Brien and Modernism*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

newspaper work. Hugh Kenner's ponderous witticism that, by the 1950s, 'a great future lay behind' O'Nolan was given focus by a tart enquiry: 'Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the column?'³⁰ Martin J. McGuinness noted that 'after 1945 most of (O'Nolan's) talent was spent on articles for the *Irish Times* as Myles na Gopaleen and alcohol was becoming more of a problem.'³¹ Likewise, Max Harris sniffed the air of the Journalist's Club during the early 1960s and pronounced: 'In this hard drinking, hard bitten club, with the incessant racket of the poker machines in the background, Slessor expends his creative energies.'³²

Yet Slessor was also a very different kind of artist to West or O'Nolan. His journalism involved an immersion in popular culture more absolute and unabashed than anything suggested by the commercial work of those writers. West may have made a living in the dream factory but, like Tod Hackett in 'The Day of the Locust', he mainly used its 'truly monstrous' commodification of 'the need for beauty and romance'³³ as the inspiration for modernist art. O'Nolan was given a free hand at the *Irish Times* to determine what he wrote and the style of *Cruiskeen Lawn* was not dissimilar to that of his novels. Slessor, on the other hand, worked as part of a team at *Smith's Weekly* and his prose writing for the paper was often indistinguishable from the work of other staffers. His position on the *Smith's* assembly line is perfectly illustrated by the compositional history of Bertha Blither.

Slessor's by-line did not appear on a Blither piece before 1932 and authorship was also attributed to Moses, Jack Gell and 'G.D.' after that date. An article from July 1, 1933—'Bertha Blither Casts a Horoscope'—was co-signed by Slessor and Moses. There is no reason, however, to dispute Jim Russell's attribution of authorship to Slessor. Several of the paper's cartoon characters were invented by one artist and then became the property of several. The Aboriginal stereotype Jacky, for example, appeared in cartoons by Stan Cross, Joe Jonsson and Frank Dunne; the comic strip 'You and Me' was originated by Cross and later inherited by Russell. A similar cooperative spirit existed among prose writers at *Smith's*. Ronald McCuaig asserted that 'everybody would make suggestions' for his column during staff meetings at the paper; his job was 'to get all these suggestions and put them

³⁰ Quoted in Allan Barra, 'Flann O'Brien: Tall Tales, Long Drink', *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2011.

³¹ McGuinness, M. *Fortnight* 264, Jul-Aug 1988, p.20.

³² *Kenneth Slessor*, p.5.

³³ *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*, p.262.

together.³⁴ Bertha was unique, however, in that her pungent personality could find expression in joke blocks or columns of text; she was both a visual and a verbal character, a condition offering a possible link to Slessor's idiosyncratic status on the paper. At *Smith's*, Russell maintained, Slessor was 'as much a part of the artists as he was a writer' and actively participated in the weekly artist's conferences.

As a collaborative journalist, it is unlikely that Slessor was able to exercise the sort of intellectual autonomy suggested by Mead: 'in some ways his position at *Smith's* was similar to Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, both journalists in the 1920s, who wrote about popular culture, especially film.'³⁵ Leaving aside Slessor's genuine interest in cinema as an art form, this assessment vastly overstates the degree to which his journalism pretended to a detached view of contemporary culture. The style and subject matter of his work for *Smith's* mark him very much as 'just one of the boys', a jobbing writer who largely suppressed his own cultural sensibilities in the interests of corporate newspaper production. According to Ronald McCuaig, Slessor obeyed a simple maxim as a journalist: "'You're their man"—meaning that when you go to work for the Packers or the Fairfaxes you belong to them.'³⁶ There is little in Slessor's output for *Smith's* at odds with a managerial philosophy that encouraged a simplistic celebration of the national character and deep suspicion of deviations from the norm. Central to this vision was the mythic concept of the 'Digger' which, as Peter Kirkpatrick asserts, the paper was 'instrumental in helping to consecrate during the twenties.'³⁷ When Slessor characterised this figure in April 1928, he imagined an 'ordinary chap' who 'hates trumpets and top hats':

So, if you don't mind, in greeting this man of the week, we'll merely say, 'Good-day, Digger' and ask him how he got on at Randwick, or how the Nasturtiums are doing and, if possible, we'll drink some beer with him.³⁸

The word 'ordinary' is repeated twenty-four times in the space of fifteen hundred words. Thus *Smith's* presented an idealised image of its average reader, a resolutely 'ordinary chap' pursuing a suburban life spiced with the masculine consolations of drinking and gambling. Paradoxically, the

³⁴ Ronald McCuaig interviewed by Peter Kirkpatrick, 29 March, 1990.

³⁵ *Networked Language*, p.56.

³⁶ Ronald McCuaig to Geoffrey Dutton, October 15, 1987, NLA MS 7285

³⁷ *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*, p.78.

³⁸ Slessor, K. 'The Man of the Week', *Smith's Weekly*, April 28, 1928, p.13.

digger's quiet refusal to parade his heroism, and therefore distinguishing himself from his fellows, is the very quality which identifies him as extraordinary.

The other people considered extraordinary by *Smith's* were its own staff, a number of whom achieved a kind of stardom through the relentless self-promotion of the paper. In 1930 Virgil Reilly's talent for inducing titillation in *Smith's* male readership received Tennysonian tribute by an anonymous poet, probably Kenneth Slessor:

I salute thee, 'Smith's' own, Virgil,
I that loved thee since thy day began,
Creator of the cutest darlings,
Ever longed for by the lips of man³⁹

'Ode to Virgil' was accompanied by illustrations, drawn by Reilly himself 'with characteristic modesty,' which showed the artist hard at work with an easel and models in various states of undress. Typically, this eulogy highlighted the technicalities of Reilly's vocation ('Thou that limnest/With a crayon deft and neat') just as an opportunistic reference to Moses and Stan Cross in the same edition points out they are 'professional humourists' who have 'to think up something funny for this week's issue' despite their failure to see anything amusing in the current economic climate.⁴⁰ It is significant, therefore, that Bertha Blither was 'employed' by *Smith's* as a journalist specialising in affairs of the heart, a topic foreign to a 'purely man's paper', which, George Blaikie asserted, 'just did not know what it was dealing with' when it came to women.⁴¹ On July 6, 1929, under the headline, "'Smith's'" New Lady Help Takes up Her Pen Again,' it was announced that Bertha 'has helped so many readers towards their soul's desires that 'Smith's' has put her on the permanent staff.'⁴²

It was soon clear, however, that Bertha's tenure at the paper was not going to be without hiccups. Her seventh appearance, on August 10, 1929, was headlined 'Australia Bemoans the Temporary Slipping of Bertha Blither.' A cartoon sequence showed why 'Bertha's diplomatic services have perforce been withheld from "Smith's" this week'; a false step on a wet

³⁹ 'Ode to Virgil', *Smith's Weekly*, November 8, 1930, p.22.

⁴⁰ 'Stan Cross and Mo Fail To See The Great Depression Joke,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 8, 1930, p.10.

⁴¹ *Remember Smith's Weekly*, p.211.

⁴² 'This is Big Bertha Blither's Page'.

pavement had led to Bertha receiving first aid in the form of gin proffered by a kindly passer-by. A succession of fainting spells were treated with repeat doses until a policeman was forced to make a desperate telephone call: 'Send ambulance—lady has fainted 15 times!' A caption to the cartoon observed, 'She drinks gin and she is game to admit it. Most girls won't.'⁴³ One who would, apparently, was 'Larynxless Lucy' whose query as to 'the best thing to drink as a chaser' with neat gin received a monosyllabic response from Bertha: 'Gin'.⁴⁴ By October 1929 Bertha had been compelled 'into temporary retirement again' after 'an elaborate personally conducted wake' for 'the disaster suffered by her old intimate friend Mr Bruce.'⁴⁵ The following month a 'penitent Bertha' was begging forgiveness from readers 'for making such a show of myself last issue'⁴⁶ when she had rampaged in an increasingly drunken condition throughout the pages of the paper ('we lost sight of Bertha since page 16 and this is the state she turns up in! Page 19 only makes it worse.')47 Despite these mishaps, *Smith's* was proud to declaim that 'to Bertha nothing is insoluble. Some things are soluble in whisky, some in sloe gin, others demand O.P. ether. Whatever the solution, Bertha will find it.'⁴⁸

On one level, Bertha's spectacular conduct and drinking were a grotesque parody of liberties enjoyed by Flappers in the popular imagination. As Liz Conor asserts, 'more than any other type of the Modern Woman, it was the Flapper who embodied the scandal which attached to women's new public visibility'.⁴⁹ But the Flapper also symbolised the putative transgression of young women into areas that were traditionally the preserve of men. In 1930 Slessor hailed Amy Johnson, 'the fundamentally pretty girl' whose solo flight had caused a sensation, as 'the flapper who led them from lipstick to joy stick'. Johnson had 'invented a new type of history', Slessor maintained, that 'begins in 1930 A.D.—Amy's Defiance':

⁴³ 'Australia Bemoans the Temporary Slipping of Bertha Blither', *Smith's Weekly*, August 10, 1929, p.10.

⁴⁴ 'There's Nothing Undreamt of In Bertha Blither's Philosophy', *Smith's Weekly*, August 31, 1929, p.10.

⁴⁵ 'Lest we Forget', *Smith's Weekly*, October 26, 1929, p.9.

⁴⁶ 'Penitent Bertha Tenders Apologies', *Smith's Weekly*, November 16, 1929.

⁴⁷ *Smith's Weekly*, November 9, 1929, p.18.

⁴⁸ 'Bertha Blither Says a Word for Mothball-Munching,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 23, 1929, p.11.

⁴⁹ Conor, L., *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2004), p.209.

There may even be women explorers and pioneers who will open up the world's wastes, and when they have subdued the wilds, send back for their menfolk to come and open up the tinned soup⁵⁰.

Bertha's scandalous behaviour was contingent on a similar breakdown of distinctions between the domestic and public spheres; her anarchic energies refused to be contained within the feminised space of the home and erupted outwards into areas of male exclusivity. Although Bertha was touted for her expertise in solving 'home problems'⁵¹, she displayed scant interest in domesticity; 'what about doing the housework for me?' she suggested to a job-seeking reader⁵² and commiserated with another's concerns about her baby's weight by saying, 'We women are never without our troubles. If it's not the S.P. cove it's the tax on beer.'⁵³ On the other hand, Bertha was always eager to venture away from the hearth. When 'Bowser Brigid' complained that she had married a 'wowsers' who 'won't take me round the pubs', Bertha told her, 'You're a girl after my own heart. Meet me at The First and Last and we'll do the Cross, 'Loo and Hills pubs in time to get in some of the fights.'⁵⁴ In response to 'Thirsty Theresa's' criticism of the beer tax, Bertha claimed, 'I am registering my own protest against this iniquitous tax on necessities by drinking in the public bar.'⁵⁵ It is worth remembering that such privileges were not granted to Australian women until the 1970s.

Bertha's physical appearance made that audacious trespass seem plausible. Over time her features became increasingly lean and masculine. When she 'resumed duty' in July 1930, after six months spent in the care of 'alienists at the reception house', Bertha was sporting a shirt and tie beneath a white jacket that nicely set off her five-o'clock shadow. From the waist down, however, she achieved a kind of slovenly femininity, with stick-like legs encased in wrinkled stockings protruding from a dress that might have

⁵⁰ Slessor, K. 'The Flapper Who Led Them From Lip-Stick to Joy-Stick,' *Smith's Weekly*, May 24, 1930, p.3.

⁵¹ 'Bertha Blither Knows Best.'

⁵² 'Bertha Blither Follows in Melba's Footstep,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 5, 1929, p.10.

⁵³ 'Bertha Blither Joins Issue with Trudy King,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 19, 1929, p.8.

⁵⁴ 'Sailors Don't Care—Neither Does Bertha Blither,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 12, 1929, p11.

⁵⁵ 'Bertha Blither Joins Issue with Trudy King.'

been a pair of bloomers.⁵⁶ Although Bertha was not a ‘fundamentally pretty girl’ - as distinct from Charles Hallett’s ‘Flapper Sisters’ and other black and white projections of male desire that flitted through the pages of *Smith’s* - her uncertain gender played to contemporary anxieties about Flappers and ‘The Modern Woman’. According to Billie Melman, the androgynous look of the Flapper, with its ‘tube-like’ and ‘emaciated and curveless’ contours was considered ‘unnatural and immoral—a lapse, as it were, from the ideal masculine and feminine shapes.’⁵⁷ Bertha was certainly curveless and a cartoon from 1931 suggested that her appearance was the result of hard living rather than genetic predisposition. She is shown entering a beauty parlour and emerging ‘three hours later’ completely transformed. Svelte, chic and poised, Bertha walks off with great style, only to pass a hotel which she enters after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Three hours later’ she emerges again as her old self. The caption reads, ‘Beauty Is Only Gin Deep.’⁵⁸

To the modern eye, Bertha’s mannish clothing and behaviour (‘that’s not very gentlemanly of you’, she is admonished by another character after an aggressive outburst)⁵⁹ might suggest pronounced lesbian tendencies. As Laura Doan argues, however, the ‘meaning of clothing in the decade after WW1, a time of unprecedented cultural confusion over gender and sexual identity, was a good deal more fluid than fixed.’⁶⁰ Bertha’s monocle, for example, did not necessarily signal affinity with noted lesbians of the period, such as the English novelist Radcliffe Hall, but symbolised more general, if ‘perverse’⁶¹, assertions of female independence. In 1920 the *Border Morning Mail and Riverina Times* reported the ‘mad’ and ‘idiotic’ nature of the ‘latest fashions’ had recently been demonstrated at a race meeting outside Paris: ‘80 per cent of the women wore monocles, jauntily stuck in the right eye’ and several ‘carried parrots on their left shoulders, held captive by tiny gold chains.’⁶² Similar sightings were not recorded at the Albury Jockey Club but Bertha would have been more at home in that setting than among the *beaux monde* at Autene. And like the ‘monocled brides’ gracing London

⁵⁶ ‘Bertha Is Back On The Job Again,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, July 5, 1930, p4

⁵⁷ Melman, B. *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), p.22.

⁵⁸ ‘Bertha’s Back Again—Full of High Thoughts & Low Intentions’, *Smith’s Weekly*, March 21, 1931, p.10.

⁵⁹ *Smith’s Weekly*, November 2, 1929.

⁶⁰ Doan, L. ‘Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s.’ *Feminist Studies*, 24,3, 1998, 664.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 673

⁶² *The Border Mail and Riverina Times*, 19 June, 1920, p.4.

in 1930⁶³, Bertha was definitely heterosexual in orientation. While admitting to being 'Joe Jonsson's morganatic wife,'⁶⁴ she openly advocated 'freer love' on the front page of *Smith's* in November 1935: 'Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I've got refined ideas ... any gentleman with two or more children who wants to take me to Fairy Bower has got to produce his marriage-lines.'⁶⁵

Melman asserts that 'derision had always been one of the most efficient weapons of the opponents of women's rights'. Bertha was an utterly ridiculous figure whose transgressions against propriety were intended to inspire laughter rather than critical thought. To that extent she was a typical product of *Smith's* 'satirists', as Blaikie termed them, a group of verbal clowns bent on 'poking fun at anything or anyone in the sacred cow category.'⁶⁶ The general imperative here was to reduce complex issues to crude simplicity and to affirm the conformist values of the *Smith's* readership. There is often a kind of deadening, jeering quality to this humour, even when it takes an ingenious form. In 1928, Slessor contemplated 'the menace of the Basso Profundo' after two rival grand opera companies advertised their seasons simultaneously: 'the Commonwealth will be shattered right and left with cannonballs of Puccini, Rossini, Boccherini and Cherubini, not to mention Mussolini and Martini'. Slessor suggests that the Australian way of life is threatened by this assault from high culture: 'Grand opera itself is harmless enough. It's when it starts to leak out onto the streets that steps should be taken.' The piece goes on to forecast a situation where 'people will start singing at the slightest provocation' and where even a two-up school would take its cues from Gounod:

Bass two-up player (excitedly): A dollar he heads 'em.

Tenor two up player: A dollar it's tails!

Baritone two-up players (at a loss for words): Pom, pom, pom-tiddy, pom, pom-pom!

Bass two-up players (more intelligent): We, at any rate, know where the music's from!⁶⁷

⁶³ 'Latest Craze In London,' *Goulbourn Evening Post*, 21 March 1930, p.2.

⁶⁴ 'What Happened when the Chorus Girls Washed their Lingerie?' *Smith's Weekly*, August 17, 1929, p.10.

⁶⁵ Slessor, K. 'Freer Love! Now Husbands Can Be Fiancés,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 7, 1936, p.1.

⁶⁶ *Remember Smith's Weekly*, p.125.

⁶⁷ 'Kensless,' 'Getting the Grand Opera Habit,' *Smith's Weekly*, January 21, 1928, p.9.

It is questionable if that knowledge was shared by many of Slessor's readers. Even if it was, however, the humour of the piece is predicated on the idea that opera and Australian life are incompatible, that an 'epidemic' of the former is a 'menace' to the latter. Despite its arch references to European culture—'Far better the Grand Guignol plays' - the piece actually reinforces the petty, isolationist mindset identified by John Williams: 'a need to deny and decry all that was seen as confronting and potentially contagious, whether within or outside the frontiers of the nation state.'⁶⁸ Slessor succeeds in highlighting his own superior cultural credentials while pandering to the perceived prejudices of his audience.

Anything genuinely confronting about Bertha, on the other hand, was mitigated by her command of the Australian idiom and her enthusiasm for drinking, an interest shared by many of the *Smith's* readership and most of its staff. A cartoon sequence from 1936 entitled 'Behind the Scenes at "Smith's"' shows 'Mr Slessor' seated at his desk with an angel's wings and halo while a search is carried out for him in places including 'the Assembly hotel and across the road at the Tudor'. The reader is told: 'The paper was late to press once because Ken Slessor was in his room, and consequently couldn't be found.'⁶⁹ Slessor was editor of *Smith's* at that point. In the same year, Bertha 'disclosed to Ken Slessor' plans to open a bar of her own: 'I suppose,' she mused, 'practically every Australian with a dreamer's imagination and a poet's soul has lain awake at night picturing the ideal bar. Well here it is.' She asked readers to notify her 'by bottle post' if she had missed anything out and 'I'll bung it in'. There is an ironic poignancy about the words 'poet's soul'. Slessor's poetic output had become a trickle by 1936 and was on the verge of petering out altogether; here he wilfully equates his avowed 'magical' art form⁷⁰ to vulgar fantasy: 'the more beer you can drink, the more credit you can have'. Bertha's 'splendiferous new beereteria', where the time is 'always five minutes to six', provides further evidence of the gap between Slessor's private sensibilities and those of his targeted audience:

The menu will be simple but satisfying. I shall merely throw out a few random selections such as cotelletes d'agneau aux pointes d'asperges, filets de sole Mornay, maquereau grille d'maitre d'hotel, vol-au-vent de ria de veau, and so on. For

⁶⁸ Williams, J.F, *The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism, 1913-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.5.

⁶⁹ 'Behind the Scenes at "Smith's",' *Smith's Weekly*, October 21, 1936, p.8.

⁷⁰ Slessor, K. 'The Quality of Magic,' *Southerly*, Vol. 31, No.4, 1971, pp.249–256.

those whose taste demands the more sophisticated sausage,
there will be an endless belt of saveloys revolving around a
silver windlass on the counter. ⁷¹

Perhaps Slessor did not consciously associate the image of ‘an endless belt of saveloys revolving’ with ‘the day after the year after, terribly returning’, his bleak projection in ‘To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae’, but the echoes in that shift from the sublime to the ridiculous are intriguing. Both formulations suggest an eternity defined by entrapment in punishing repetition; the ‘endless’ circulation of the ‘sophisticated sausages’ no less terrible than the visions in a ‘harsher glass’ to a gourmet like Bertha - or her author. It is little wonder that Slessor became an early admirer of Barry Humphries whose comedy also elevated the mundane to levels of mock poetic intensity.⁷² Like Humphries, Slessor manipulated demotic conventions while inhabiting the persona of a crass and domineering woman to comic effect. Such role playing was fundamental to Slessor as a writer. In a late unfinished poem he wrote:

Once I was a hundred men
And a few girls too ⁷³

The poet who claimed in ‘Five Bells’ he had ‘lived many lives’, and who imagined a process of metempsychosis enabling him ‘suddenly to become John Benbow’, was also a multifaceted performer on the stage of *Smith’s Weekly* capable of slipping between, and behind, categories of identity and gender. It was clearly a self-conscious performance. When Slessor presented a sub Swiftian report on ‘the secrets of Bertha Blither’s boudoir’, he described surprising the ‘charming chatelaine’ at her ‘*table de toilette*’: ‘It gave me a bit of a jolt myself as I watched me gradually appear behind her vivacious features in the dressing table mirror.’⁷⁴ Here, one of the ‘proud masks’ that symbolise the ‘act’ of human life in ‘The Old Play’ is seen to slip in a very different context; the ‘jolt’ of self-recognition is caused by the dissolution of the boundary between the writer and his ‘vivacious’ alter-ego.

⁷¹ Slessor, K. ‘The Splendiferous New Beereteria,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, January 11, 1936.

⁷² Dutton, G. *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* (Ringwood: Viking, 1991), p.310.

⁷³ NLA MS 3020/27/178

⁷⁴ Slessor, K. ‘The Secrets of Bertha Blither’s Boudoir,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, May 1, 1937, p.4.

It is a fleeting moment, however, and completely incidental to the rather laboured humour which is the *raison d'être* of the piece.

By the mid-30s Bertha was not only a gourmet but an 'expert on everything.' Her remit had broadened beyond agony aunt to encompass tax problems (August 16, 1930), veterinary science (June 6, 1931), test cricket (Feb 4, 1933), architecture (June 30, 1934) and mind control (August 17, 1935). In 1930 Bertha had signed on as 'private secretary to J.T. Lang', that most reviled of political figures in the pages of *Smith's* (a measured headline from 1931 informed readers that 'soviet government has arrived in New South Wales' and that a 'reign of terror and spying had commenced' under Lang⁷⁵). She started her own political party in 1931, the Bertha Blither Battalion, which stood for 'anything with a kick in it' and 'God Save the King',⁷⁶ before opening her 'campaign for suffering womanhood' in June 1932, declaring herself a 'representative of the one and only working class—the women of Australia, Tasmania and parts of New Zealand.'⁷⁷ Following the *Sydney Morning Herald's* aerial expedition to the Northern Territory in late 1933, Bertha led *Smith's* 'own exploring party' to the top end. Slessor took the opportunity to promote Bertha as a paragon of *Smith's* unvarnished approach to newspaper reporting:

Those who prefer fanciful pen pictures or flamboyant metaphor will no doubt find all they want in 'The Sydney Morning Herald's' dispatches. The plain facts about the Northern Territory written in plain English by a plain woman in a 'plane are to be found herewith. Miss Blither leaves fancy writing to others. Hers is a cold and unemotional scientific chronicle.⁷⁸

Bertha, in fact, embodied important aspects of the 'irreverent' and 'raspberry blowing' attitude which George Blaikie saw as essential to *Smith's* 'free-swinging style of journalism.'⁷⁹ Her status as a 'woman-journalist' allowed Bertha to channel criticism of *Smith's* competitors while giving Slessor the opportunity to vent some of his pet peeves. The prospectus of Bertha's own newspaper was published by *Smith's* in 1935:

⁷⁵ *Smith's Weekly*, March 31, 1931.

⁷⁶ 'Join Bertha's B.B.B. Army,' *Smith's Weekly*, April 18, 1932, p.2.

⁷⁷ 'Bertha Blither Opens Her Campaign for Suffering Womanhood,' *Smith's Weekly*, June 4, 1932, p.10.

⁷⁸ 'Slessor Wants a Backer to Help Him Back Bertha Blither,' *Smith's Weekly*, December 28, 1933, p.3.

⁷⁹ *Remember Smith's Weekly*, pp.1–5.

No expense is to be spared in setting up the newspaper with every modern refinement. Special arrangements have been made for the hire of an infinitive-splitting gang from the 'Sydney Morning Herald' and the use of the words 'who' and 'whom' will be the special care of experts selected from the staffs of the 'Age' and Sydney 'Telegraph' whom will supervise the work of whoever the paper employs.

The article is unsigned but 'Kenneth Sappho Slessor' is listed as a director of The *Daily Blither* and a cartoon of the inaugural shareholder's meeting shows him keeping 'order with a gun.'⁸⁰

It was, indeed, a compulsion to maintain order in his writing which spurred the creativity that Slessor enjoyed during his first years at *Smith's Weekly*. The paper allowed him enormous latitude to explore the divisions in his own psyche that shaped the world of his best poetry. *Smith's* was also a means to present himself as an 'ordinary chap' in a society which treated artists with philistine contempt. To that extent, whether or not Slessor agreed with the paper's policies is less important than his acquiescence to them. The material covered in this essay provides evidence that Slessor largely conformed to cultural imperatives which militated against the acceptance of modern art in Australia. Far from being irrelevant to his poetry, however, Bertha Blither represents a previously ignored aspect of a writer whose complex legacy has not been properly understood within its historical context. The incongruous relationship between artist and craftsman defined Slessor as a writer and, for a short period during the 20s and 30s, inspired some remarkable poetry. It also encouraged the kind of authorial role playing that produced 'the immortal Blither,' as she was once characterised by her better half in a moment of Miltonic transport.⁸¹

Bertha appeared less frequently in *Smith's* as the decade wore on. This was partly due to the departure of Reg Moses from the paper in 1935 and the subsequent promotion of Slessor to editor-in-chief. But Bertha's brand of vulgarity, and her identity as a kind of anti-flapper, were perhaps unsuited to the more austere atmosphere of the late 1930s.⁸² At least one segment of the Australian population had always voiced distaste for her antics; Jim Russell claimed Bertha 'was so offensive to Melbourne people that they got the

⁸⁰ 'A Real Newspaper at Last!!!,' *Smith's Weekly*, June 22 1935, p.6.

⁸¹ NLA 3020/19/4.

⁸² *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, p.146.

Melbourne editor, Vince Kelly, and asked him if they couldn't have it cut out of their edition.'⁸³ Elsewhere in the Commonwealth, however, Bertha had clearly struck a chord, assuming a life beyond the pages of *Smith's* and achieving the status of folk heroine. In 1933, the *Cairns Post* relayed the information that 'the much discussed Bertha Blither was officially married last night, at a dance held in the Drill Hall.'⁸⁴ Bertha was also 'noticed' at the 'fancy dress birthday party' of Jack Rumball of Berri in 1935, among guests including 'right hand men of Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, Don Bradman, Mae West and Sandy McNab.'⁸⁵ These beefy excursions into drag (the *Maitland Daily Mercury* assured its readers that 'Bertha Blither (Wes Young) looked anyhow in her red frock of crepe-de-chene' at the Thornton 'Presentation Ball'⁸⁶) signal the degree to which Slessor's creation entered the national consciousness. It would take another decade, and the social and cultural changes wrought by the Second World War, before his poetry received any general recognition at all.

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⁸³ *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography*, p.126.

⁸⁴ *Cairns Post*, 17 November 1933, p.3.

⁸⁵ *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record*, 7 February 1935, p.14.

⁸⁶ *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, 3 September 1938, p.3.