

THE GUEST OF THE SUNLIGHT

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John Shaw Neilson was born in Penola, South Australia in 1872 and died in Melbourne in 1942. Five books of his ballad and lyric poems were published in his lifetime.

The eldest child of Scottish parents he received little formal schooling. He farmed with his father and brothers in the poor soil of the Wimmera in Victoria and, when failed crops and creditors drove them from the land, they became itinerant rural workers. In 1928 he moved to Melbourne where he worked as an interdepartmental messenger for the Country Roads Board until a year before his death.

He is the subject of several biographies and plays and his poetry remains in print and continues to provide composers with delicate lyrics for musical settings among them 'The Orange Tree', 'Love's Coming' and 'Song Be Delicate'.

Coleridge believed that: 'Christianity is with a man, even as he is being gifted with reason; it is associated with your mother's chair, and with the first remembered tones of her blessed voice'. Neilson scholars and biographers have expressed concern over the negative effects of the rigid Presbyterianism enforced on the Neilson family, particularly by his mother. The humble intimacy of a family at worship portrayed by Robert Burns in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' may not be too far removed in spirit from the devotions in the Neilson household, although an element of unrelenting and dogmatic authoritarianism in the family's religious observance is more than hinted at in Neilson's negative poetic images of

children ‘standing under a heavy psalm’¹ and driven to ‘trampling on the holy things’².

A reaction against his parents’ faith and an aversion in adulthood to perceived hypocrisies of the Church and the braying of the Salvation Army which swept across the Wimmera during the eighteen nineties, produced doubt and guilt enough to fuel a lifetime of wrestling and reflecting on the known and unknowable. Drawing on a time-honoured metaphor for the Creator, and the establishment of order out of chaos, Neilson concludes in his view of ‘The World as a Rhyme’: ‘I know not the Rhymer / I know only part of the Rhyme’.³

A positive aspect, overlooked by Neilson’s biographers, is that the religious discipline enforced on him as a child, ensured a familiarity with the language of the King James Version of the Bible. This tool of language, in the service of the New Testament’s revolutionary pattern of living, incorporating harmony with both nature and one’s neighbour, is so valued by Neilson that together they become the creative apparatus for his greatest poetic themes. Neilson observed that ‘October is a wonderful month out of doors in Australia. It seems hard to write a good lyric without bringing in the idea of God’. This exuberance shines in the lines from ‘You and Yellow Air’: ‘God in His glad October / No sullen man could find’.⁴

In recognizing that elements of his religious upbringing enriched and enlivened his poetry, we need to consider also

¹ ‘Out to the Green Fields’, Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 100.

² ‘The Sacrifice’, Chisholm, ed., *SN*, p. 163.

³ verse (also rhyme: ‘persistent metaphors for divine Creation, for bringing order from chaos’ p.33 and also Rosalie. L. Colie: ‘Logos in the Templer *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966), p. 218 Patrides, C. A. e. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Everyman, Dent, 1974 (1990)

⁴ Devaney, James. *Shaw Neilson*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, p. 208. Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 52.

the impact of church attendance where the liturgy of the Presbyterian faith placed an emphasis on congregational participation. It was only natural the young Neilson would become steeped in the stories, language and imagery of the Bible through regular responsive reading, the drumming in of the *Shorter Catechism* with its Scriptural Proofs and the singing of hymns and *Metrical Psalms and Paraphrases*. In the absence of an organ, singing was unaccompanied and ‘lined out’ by a member of the congregation using a pitch pipe or tuning fork. A line of text on a vague melody of the precentor’s own choosing, often elaborately graced yet always circling about the dominant note, introduced the congregation’s antiphonal response. Such melodic improvisations are ‘welcome as little warblings in a rhyme’ by Neilson in the reflective poem ‘Some Thievery of Old’ written not long before his death.⁵

The conversion of the Psalms to Metrical Psalms and selected parts of the Bible into Metrical Paraphrases provided a ready model for a young poet. The reshaping of biblical texts into the four-line common, long and short measures of the ballad form proved most influential. For example, Neilson’s ‘He Never Touched the Earth’ containing an amazing image, employs the 8,6,8,6 common measure:

Had God been looking out the sky
 He would have shook with mirth,
 For the poor lad was in a dream –
 He never touched the earth . . .

In ‘The Bitter Moon’ the long measure 8,8,8,8, is used:

It is no music of the night,
 ‘Tis but a parody of calm.

⁵ ‘Some Thievery of Old’, Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 151.

There is impatience in the white
And a rebellion in the psalm.⁶

The biblical text from Isaiah 42:3: ‘He shall not cry, nor lift up / Nor cause his voice to be heard in the street’ reads like Neilson’s description of the blue crane in ‘The Gentle Water Bird’ when metrically transposed into Paraphrase 23: ‘Gentle and still shall be his voice/ no threats from him proceed’.

These qualities refer of course to the ‘Suffering Servant’, an Old Testament type for the coming Messiah. Neilson returns to the theme some years later exploring and refining the metaphoric possibilities of ‘The Gentle Water Bird’ in one of his finest poems ‘The Crane is My Neighbour’. The title answers the question ‘Who is my Neighbour?’ posed by the young lawyer to test Jesus’ knowledge. Jewish law states a neighbour is one who stands in need of help.⁷ Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan, Neilson with a poem about a water bird.

When considering structural characteristics common to Hebrew writing and Neilson’s poetry we need look no further than the design of ‘The Crane is My Neighbour’ which recalls the shorter psalms of praise to God such as Psalms 8 and 70. It begins with an introductory exaltation; the main section deals with the crane’s worthy attributes; a refrain reiterates the theme ‘the bird is my neighbour’, and the conclusion winds back to the concerns of the introduction. The personification of the crane develops through the use of parallelism, a parallelism which does not depend on metre and rhyme but on a balance of thought conveyed by a corresponding balance of sentence. A feature common to oral traditions and written into the

⁶ Chisholm, ed., *SN*, p. 182. Judith Wright, ed., *Witnesses of Spring*, p. 47 (hereafter *WOS*).

⁷ Proverbs 3:27–9

books of the Bible,⁸ it is easily transferred between languages. An example of synonymous parallelism, where the same sentiment is repeated in different but equivalent terms, is found in Psalm 2:4 : ‘He that dwelleth in Heaven, I shall laugh them to scorn / The Lord shall have them in derision’. Neilson adopts this kind of parallelism to define the qualities of the crane: ‘He moves as the guest of the sunlight / He roams in the sky’ or ‘He bleats no instruction / He is not an arrogant drummer’.

Climactic parallelism occurs in the repetitive build-up of the crane: ‘The bird is my neighbour’; ‘The bird is a noble’; ‘The bird is both ancient and excellent, sober and wise’ and ‘He is patient’; ‘He is not arrogant’; ‘He is the guest of the sunlight’.

When asked about the composition of ‘The Orange Tree’ Neilson recalled orange picking at Merbein, Victoria where he noticed ‘the very beautiful light on the trees in the afternoon’.⁹ I would suggest that at another level, the story of Moses and the Burning Bush contributes not only to the imagery and tone of the dialogue in the poem¹⁰ but also provides the model of the three phases common to divine manifestations recorded in the Bible, which Neilson introduces into a number of his poems.

First, there is the dramatic revelation, often a fire or a bright light associated with purification. This is followed by the call and then the induction of the task. With this in mind, Neilson’s evocation: ‘There is a light, a step, a call / this evening on the Orange Tree’ is analogous to Moses’

⁸ Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 1985 provides an extensive examination of parallelism and poetry in biblical and linguistic studies which goes far beyond the original work of Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, translated from the Latin by G. Gregory (Lond.), 1787, NY. Garland Pub., 1971 and Matthew Arnold, *Isaiah of Jerusalem*, Macmillan, Lond. 1883, p. 4.

⁹ JSN-JD 28.x.1934 NLA MS 1145/68HFCC

¹⁰ Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 82.

epiphany elucidated in Exodus 3. After hearing so many questions from the perplexed poet, even the impatient tone of the young girl in the final stanza of ‘The Orange Tree’ recalls God’s exasperation at Moses’ failure to see that God would provide all the answers. Nor is it surprising that Neilson should write in the same poem: ‘Plague me no longer now, / for I am listening like The Orange Tree’, when we consider the subsequent involvement of Moses and Aaron in a series of plagues!

A graphic representation of the burning bush was used in Scotland as an emblem for the Established Church in 1635 until it was taken over in 1843 by the Free Church. It appeared on all published material, was used in the decoration of church interiors and occupies a place on the wall above the communion table at St Andrew’s Established Presbyterian Church, in Penola, where I have no doubt it fuelled the imagination of the young Neilson.

An inspired variation of this illuminating three-fold pattern is in ‘The Poor Can Feed the Birds’ where Neilson celebrates ‘The feast of love – it reigns, it calls /It chains us to the pure’. He is moved by the sight of a poor mother and child ‘In the Street’:

Slowly into our hearts there crept
I know not what; — it flamed! it leapt!
Was it God’s love that in us slept;
I saw the mark
Of tears upon her, as she stept
Into the dark.¹¹

The influence of formulaic word pairing which occurs throughout the Bible can be found in Neilson’s combining of the words ‘honey’ and ‘gold’. The latter is symbolic of all that is superior and it is an essential element in

¹¹ Chisholm, ed. *SN*, p. 127.

descriptions of ultimate spiritual illumination. That which is sweet, pleasant and sustaining is likened to honey which was the sweetest tasting foodstuff known in ancient times and a golden colour. Together with manna it is a metaphor for Christ.

In Psalm 19 [7–10], it is written of the Law of the Lord and his Statutes: ‘More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honey comb’.

The value of gold and honey is comprehended in the example of antithetic parallelism in Neilson’s poem ‘The Emperor’:

He had no trumpeters,
Cannons or battleships,
But gold was on his hair,
The honey on his lips.¹²

When Neilson for one reason or another rejects a stanza the intended pairing is lost. There are several discarded stanzas in ‘Song be Delicate’ and in two there are the lines ‘the touch of gold’ and ‘perils in gold’ which relate to a retained image ‘the bees are home / All their day’s love is sunken / Safe in the comb’.

Honey and gold are again thematic when biblical and classical imagery merge in the composition of ‘O Player of the Flute’. Little has changed since Aristotle’s declaration in *Politics*, VIII that the flute is not an instrument with a good moral effect, for in Neilson’s ‘golden time’, the poet, in company with the flute player, becomes intoxicated with wine, women and song and declaims: ‘I am assailed here

¹² Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 64.

with spices, honey spilling / Hunger is here, and an imperious thirst'.¹³

Paradoxically, honey is also associated with carnal pleasures and it is significant that Yahweh, the God of the Jews, forbade it as an offering on His altar because of its use in sacrifice by heathens. In a discarded stanza, Neilson addresses 'every girl adrift in a red city' – 'Thou art so young, and yet thy voice is old. / Old as light and shade, heavy as honey, / Bright as a woman webbed about with gold'. Clearly he is drawing on imagery from *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, depicting 'the great whore Babylon' – 'And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abomination and filthiness of her fornication.'

Neilson's rich and curious vocabulary can be traced to the Bible and hymnals when, for example, he writes 'There did I see you to hate you first / you with the frown',¹⁴ or recalls his childhood before God's nature was revealed to him through a 'gentle water bird' – 'In the dim days I trembled, for I knew / God was above me, always frowning through / And God was terrible and thunder-blue.'¹⁵ At the sight of 'the frown' one is reminded of Isaac Watts' severe image of God in 'Lord We Adore Thy Vast Designs': 'Now thou arrays't thine awful face / In angry frowns without a smile.' Olyney hymn writers, John Newton and William Cowper also drew on this tradition. Newton in 'Thunder' asks: 'Will sinners bear to see his face / Or stand before his frown?' whilst the gentle Cowper reassures sinners that 'Behind a frowning Providence / He hides a smiling face'.¹⁶

¹³ Here he may also be conscious of the warning in Proverbs 25:1: 'Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it'.

¹⁴ 'You with a Frown', Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 135.

¹⁵ 'The Gentle Water Bird'. Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 95.

¹⁶ *Olyney Hymns*, 1799 includes Cowper: 'God Moves in a Mysterious Way'.

Similarly the context for, and the use of ‘climbing’ in many of Neilson’s poems recalls the lines by George Herbert in ‘The Sacrifice’. Drawing on the *Improperia* or *The Reproaches for Good Friday*, in the section entitled The Church from his major work, *The Temple*, it is a reference to the voluntary sacrifice made out of compassion and humility by Christ, the second Adam, ascending the cross to atone for the Fall.

O all ye who passe by, behold and see;
 Man stole the fruit, but I must climbe the tree;
 the tree of life to all, but only me:
 Was ever grief like mine.

Believing that much of the biblical language used by Neilson dates from 16th, 17th and 18th century usage and also that he would be familiar with the imagery of climbing into God’s kingdom as expounded in the passages in *Joel*, *Amos* and *St John*,¹⁷ I find it exciting to see how he develops this concept. In ‘The Men who Play’ he asks:

Why make they merriment of all our sins
 These men who play the unfed violins
 When they would fall, ‘tis then they start to climb

At the first halting of the Summertime.¹⁸

In ‘Prayer for a Change’ the Creator is petitioned:

I would have all the pure honey upon me that
 honeybirds know,
 And the lovers so close to my feet would be living in
 honey below.

¹⁷ *Joel* 2:7 and 9; *Amos* 9:1-2; *St John*, 10:1 Climbing References to climbing and the thief are relevant to Neilson’s ‘Some Thievery of Old’.

¹⁸ ‘These Men Who Play, Hanna, ed. *JSN*, p. 136.

I would have all the sweet longing to live and to climb
Right into the purple of heaven to reach me a rhyme.¹⁹

Neilson's frequent use of words like 'dim', 'dark', 'eyes', 'eyelids' and 'seeing' are set in a metaphysical context relating more to awareness, knowledge and interpretation than to his problematic eyesight. In biblical terms they map a human perception of the closeness and distance of a relationship with an all-seeing God as outlined in I Corinthians 13:12. In the Metrical Paraphrase 49 this text reads:

Now dark and dim as through a glass
are God and Truth beheld.
Then shall we see as face to face
and God shall be unveil'd

Neilson's use of 'eyes' and 'eyelids' can be traced to the Psalms: 'The Lord's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try the children of men. The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked... his soul hateth'.²⁰ In the poem 'Rob me No More' he expresses anger and tears of frustration provoked by an ever-present, trying image of God: 'Burn well the eyelids / And leave the heart sore, / Now fall away over the skyline / And rob me no more.'²¹ Elsewhere, he creates an awesome picture of 'The Emperor': 'Did but his sweet lips move / Or his white eyelids stir, / All tremulous we said / "It is the Emperor".'

White symbolizes grace, divine mercy, and peace. 'White seems to stand for innocence and truth' Neilson wrote to his friend, James Devaney.²² It is appropriate therefore that 'the Emperor with gold on his hair and honey on his lips'

¹⁹ 'Prayer for a Change', Wright, Judith, ed. *Witnesses of Spring*,

²⁰ Psalm 11:4-5.

²¹ 'Rob Me No More', Hanna, ed., *JSN*, p. 101.

²² Neilson-Devaney, 4.xi.1934.

should have ‘white eyelids’ to represent the site of justice and loving kindness.

An examination of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, reveals similarities. Both poets work with traditional lyric subjects: love, nature, death and God. Having rejected their religious upbringing, which for Dickinson meant the fervour of New England Revivalism, they bring their shifting religious attitudes to the spiritual conflicts they are dealing with through their poetry.²³ Both poets share certain technical irregularities and prefer the ballad form, although Neilson’s work is not confined to this stanzaic pattern. Their imagery is elusive and local, yet unselfconsciously turns the particular into the universal. Both are intrigued by, and speak in, riddles, the stock in trade of the poet-storyteller and also common in the Bible.²⁴

Dickinson muses: ‘Can I expound the skies? / How still the Riddle lies!’ and Neilson ponders Love, ‘His ominous riddlings were so deep’; and he ponders Life, ‘The green is the nest of all riddles’. Both use capital letters to elevate important nouns and an extraordinary collection of titles for a higher being or God with whom they claim familiarity and, at times, denounce. Where Dickinson speaks of the Inquisitor, Banker, Visitor, Our Old Neighbour God, Neilson, refers to the Riddler, the Challenger, the Controller, the Mountebank, the Foreman and yet, they share a mediating Christ figure in the Emperor and the Guest.

Neilson considered the qualities expected of and extended to a Guest were like those for a Neighbour: tender love, unconditional acceptance, and the kind of fulfilling relationship which in Neilson’s terms ‘leaves not a claim

²³ T. H. Johnson, (ed.) *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. 1951, and *Emily Dickinson, An Interpretive Biography*, Harvard, 1955.

²⁴ The Riddle of Samson, Judges 14:14-19.

for a sigh'. Emily Dickinson acknowledges a valued relationship in 'The Soul that hath a Guest' and concludes with a reference to 'the Emperor of Men'.

It has been suggested Neilson may have read some of Dickinson's poetry, published by the *Bulletin*, in April 1906. This may be so, however, I would maintain that both had the opportunity to absorb similar sources, the Bible, the Psalters, Hymnals and the religious writings and poems of Bunyan, George Herbert, William Cowper, Henry Vaughan and John Byrom, all available in Dickinson's devout Congregational household. Indeed the *Bay Psalmbook* was used extensively by the compilers of the *Scottish Psalter* of 1650. Through a shared common matrix both poets would have been familiar with the New Testament meaning of a Guest and its subsequent appropriation in many poems including one of John Byrom's (1692–1763), which became a well-known hymn when set to the tune St. Cecilia. It begins: 'My Spirit longs for Thee / Within my troubled breast / Though I unworthy be / Of so divine a Guest...'.