

KINGS CROSS: A SACRED AND PROFANE LITERARY SITE

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In the 1920s, the old days of Sydney bohemia, journalists from *Smith's Weekly* used to play a literary game in the pub. One drinker started off a poem with a line of lewd verse and the next drinker wrote the next, and so on. An entire ribald ballad might result. Adam McCay, successful journalist, alcoholic, and my great-uncle, wrote the first line of one notorious verse:

The loveliest whore in Darlinghurst is in the family way

and another drinker capped it with

In spite of her diamond pessaries and jewelled whirling spray.

The rest of the bar-room ballad is not printed in George Blaikie's memoir of *Smith's Weekly*, though he assures us it is hilarious.¹

McCay's line is good old ballad metre, sexist attitudes jostling with a bit of fun about the euphemism "family way". The one that follows it is infinitely more sophisticated. Because Adam McCay and Kenneth Slessor were good friends who both worked at *Smith's*, and because that second line is metrically perfect, witty in its detail, and in its tone both a generation younger than the first and in keeping with *Darlinghurst Nights*, I've always liked to think of it as by Slessor.

Kings Cross and Darlinghurst appear in Australian literature as the very opposite of suburban virtue. Whores, drug users, standover men, pimps, loan sharks, ratty landladies and corrupt police dominate the depiction of this inner city area in novels, films and verse. The opening lines of the *Smith's* drinkers' bawdy ballad probably capture the Kings Cross of popular imagination quite well. Yet the place has its virtues. In the words of Jacqueline Huie, author of *Untourist Sydney*,

If you were seeking to identify one area as having both the very worst and very best of Sydney, you would probably settle on Kings Cross.

Here you will find a complete patchwork of demographics. There are the dignified dowagers of Potts Point trying to ignore the drunks and addicts who have passed out by the El Alamein fountain in Fitzroy Gardens; there is a sideshow of prostitutes on their beats at the hire car end of William Street; there are gawking backpackers... there are sleazy middlemen operating around the many bars and Adult Shows... the cappuccino journalists at Bar Coluzzi and a tableau of disoriented Aborigines up from the 'Loo. Occasionally you even see small children.²

Kings Cross is seen both as a place of self-discovery, self-renewal, diversity, sexual possibilities, liberation, love, passion and fun, and as a place of violence, horror, degradation, sin, self-destruction, betrayal, crime, despair and the occult. It is both *sacred* (as in "regarded with reverence", or "entitled to veneration by association with divine things") and *profane* ("characterised by irreverence for God or sacred things; unholy; heathen; pagan; common or vulgar"): Kings Cross fits most of the meanings given by the Macquarie Dictionary).

I will argue from memoirs and fiction that Kings Cross is sacred to the memory of various identities once associated with the place. In finding intimations of the sacred in texts about Kings Cross, I am stating my opposition to what I regard as the tedious, unimaginative view that the sacred comes primarily from the landscape ("beaches, mountains, deserts and bush" in the tourist-brochure list given by Chris McGillion in a recent article³), and asserting that the sacred has everything to do with people. If this is true, the source of the sacred can just as validly be found in the built environment, even in the most densely populated parts of our cities. My discussion of these points will draw on Slessor's *Darlinghurst Nights* and a handful of more recent texts.

I am encouraged, incidentally, by views put forward by Evelyn Underhill in her book *Mysticism*, in particular her description of the "illuminated apprehension of things, this cleansing of the doors of perception [which] marks the self's growth towards free and conscious participation in the Absolute Life".⁴ Underhill writes of beauty as "Reality seen with the eyes of love... The London streets are paths of loveliness; the very omnibuses look like coloured archangels, their laps filled full of little trustful souls."⁵ None of the writers I will consider is quite so hilariously

rhapsodic about Kings Cross – we're a nation of ironists, after all – but my point remains: if the sacred can be found in a London omnibus or streetscape, why not a Sydney tram, the streets of Kings Cross or the lights of William Street?

The profane comes, I would argue, from being irreverent on principle, or shocking the suburban bourgeois on principle.

In a 1952 essay, Kenneth Slessor put Adam McCay's name at the head of a short list of friends who had stimulated him and coloured his work.⁶ Slessor's poem "To a Friend", dedicated to Adam McCay, ends with the words "in your Abbey of Theleme / Enrol me as a serving brother." The implicit reference is *Gargantua*, the classic satire by French priest and occult student Francois Rabelais: Theleme is shorthand for libertinism and sexual permissiveness. The Theleme motto, "Do what thou wilt", is very much the motto of Kings Cross and of bohemia in general. Slessor's concluding line is a conscious profanity: Theleme's serving brothers are proud to flout holy things, rules, convention and respectability.

So just where, geographically, is Kings Cross? Slessor's definition, from his essay "My Kings Cross" will be mine:

Literally, I suppose, the Cross is where the five streets cross at the top of William Street. But, in the geography of the post office, letters addressed to Kings Cross may go to Darlinghurst, Elizabeth Bay, Potts Point, Woolloomooloo, or even the fringes of Rushcutters Bay. It is a term rather than a place. People who "go to the Cross" or "live at the Cross" may mean anywhere from Taylor Square to Wylde Street. This doesn't matter. They are expressing a state of mind, just as the Cross itself is perpetually expressing a state of mind.⁷

That state of mind, as I've argued, could be expressed in the words *Do what you like*, or *Do what thou wilt*. Slessor wrote this essay in 1952. For him, the good old days of the Cross seemed long past, and he looked back nostalgically at such characters as

Chris Brennan shambling to his lonely bed-sitting room in Rockwall Crescent; Bea Miles, then like Lil Abner's girl, shapely and brown in shorts long before their time; Arthur Allen, the rich solicitor, floating past in his transparent electric buggy; Mary Gilmore gazing out from her flat in Darlinghurst Road... Bad Bill Quinn, self-appointed guide to the underworld; Dulcie Deamer, inextinguishably vivacious in leopardskin after the Artists' Ball; Geoffrey Cumine with his blue beret, pea-green shirt, brass earrings and a butterfly tattooed on his face; Driff, the black and white

artist who hired a taxi to take his white cockatoo for a drive around Centennial Park – hundreds more in the procession.⁸

None of these people would seem out of place in the Cross today: indeed the earrings and tattoo have become a uniform. For Slessor, Kings Cross remains sacred to the memory of the writers, whores, eccentrics, office girls and other characters associated with the place.

The sacred meal of Kings Cross, enjoyed by ladies of the night and chauffeured dowagers alike, is either a selection of cold or canned food from the delicatessen or something fried from a takeaway shop, or Harry's Cafe de Wheels. Cartoonist George Sprod writes that many landladies banned all appliances, even electric jugs and toasters.⁹ Sprod gave his memoir the deliberately profane title *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

In more recent times, Kings Cross has acquired other sacred sites, notably Victoria Street, site of the struggles of 1973, a martyred saint, Juanita Nielsen, and a secular shrine, the El Alamein fountain. Coffee drinking has become so revered a communal activity in that it has taken over most of the Darlinghurst Road pavement. The fountain and the coffee bars epitomise the Cross's acceptance of diversity – the stoned and the sober, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the criminal and the law-abiding, the newly arrived and the local, the transvestite and the straight, those dripping with success symbols and those who have nothing. Nuns and prostitutes embrace in clear daylight.

The profane? Kings Cross, quite apart from its famous witch, Rosaleen Norton, is often a shorthand term for depravity, decadence, self-indulgence, every type of addiction from heroin to sex, and of descents into nightmares of degradation and self-destruction. The underground train station reinforces these images in some recent fiction. Janette Turner Hospital in *The Last Magician* likens it to *The Inferno*.

One of Slessor's more romantic Darlinghurst verses, "Gardens in the Sky", includes the delicious rhyme Neon/Villon, and an interesting use of the word "heaven":

Where the stars are lit by Neon,
And the fried potato fumes,

And the ghost of Mr. Villon
 Still inhabits furnished rooms,
 And the girls lean out from heaven
 Over lightwells, thumping mops.
 While the gent in 57
 Cooks his pound of mutton chops

The reference to heaven is semi-satirical, of course, but those upper-storey glimpses of the city skyline and in particular, the neon signs of William Street and the top of the Cross, appear again and again. In an essay, "Portrait of Sydney," Slessor specifically links the incandescent neon lights with imagery from Coleridge:

At night, after the rain has fallen on it, turning the roadway to a long, black mirror, William Street comes out like a beautiful adulteress. It is dressed in Neon signs, the blazing arrows and the alphabets of light, in mandarin-yellow, tangerine red, emerald and white, like the witch-fires of the Ancient Mariner, "about, about, in reel and rout." In the water silvering the pavement, people walk on their reflected heels. Their flesh is green or carmine or fluorescent blue as they move from one radiance to another, and in the juke-box bars the intense light exposes them as nakedly as if they were sliced and stained and gummed between slides for a microscope.¹⁰

The Ancient Mariner says of the shimmering sea-snakes that bewitch him, "I blessed them unaware." Slessor is perfectly aware, for all his determined insouciance.

The jauntiness of the light verse is often accompanied by a sombre undercurrent, as in "The Green Rolls Royce":

Where the black Marias clatter
 And peculiar ladies nod
 Where the flats are rather flatter
 And the lodgers rather odd,
 Where the night is full of dangers
 And the dangers full of fear,
 And eleven hundred strangers
 Live on aspirin and beer,
 Where the gas-lights flare and flutter
 And the phonographs rejoice,
 Like an archduke in the gutter
 Goes the green Rolls Royce.¹¹

In "Choker's Lane", the presence of danger and death is even more explicit, with lines such as "The soft, unhurrying teeth of Death / with leather jaws come tasting men."¹² Darkness, fear, and the risk of violence that haunts

prostitutes, are often mentioned. "William Street" ends with a note of great tenderness and empathy for girls on the street, a virtual benediction:

The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze,
(Death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)
Ranging the pavement of their pasturage
You find it ugly, I find it lovely.

(Death is more literally "at their elbows" in these heroin days than it was when Slessor used the term). In "City Nightfall", Slessor uses a conscious piece of religious imagery:

Night, the old nun, in voiceless pity bends
To kiss corruption, so fabulous her pity.

For Slessor, the combination of darkness and the unconventional setting of Kings Cross frame in acceptance and love what others would regard as ugliness or corruption. Slessor, renowned hedonist or misanthrope or whatever else other commentators have made him out to be, heaped blessings on the residents of Kings Cross and their lives.

In 1988 Katharine Thomson based a musical play on *Darlinghurst Nights*, and the recent ABC documentary, Tony Moore's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, also drew on it extensively. Its title is echoed in the 1997 novel, *Red Nights* by Louis Nowra, better known for his plays. *Red Nights* is set in the same geographic territory delineated by Slessor, with a few excursions along Oxford Street into the gay bars of the 1980s and 1990s. The red nights of the title are fabulous, knock-em-dead parties given by the shady hero, Nelson Taylor, when rich. (His name echoes Taylor Square, but I have no way of knowing whether that is a conscious reference). The novel vividly shows the excesses and joys of full-on success, wealth, sex on tap and party-party-party lifestyle enjoyed by Taylor at his peak. It also shows the speed with which the successful can fall from that pinnacle, the shallowness of many of the so-called friendships, and the utter decay and desolation of drug-fuelled despair that follows drug-fuelled ecstasy.

Early in the novel, Taylor has to speak at a friend's funeral. Only about twenty or thirty people are present in the church, and none of them is familiar with the service:

"Let us say together," intoned the Reverend, and Nelson, like the others, read in a murmur, as if confronted by a new language. "Mother of us all, in your son, Jesus Christ..."

Years ago, two years ago, this church would have been filled. It shouldn't be so formal. Joe would have hated this. When I die: a party, champagne, Marvin Gaye singing "What's Going On" and "Let's Get it on," finishing with a garage band doing "Louie Louie", my ashes scattered in the harbour, Barbeica's bow slicing through my bobbing dust. You can't sink me...

"And the resurrection to eternal life through eternal life to your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

There was a flicking noise of paper as people raced ahead to see what was next and so to try to avoid more embarrassment.¹³

In this fantasy, Nelson's high camp funeral is free from the awkwardness and hypocrisy of the funeral he's taking part in at present, and more fun for the mourners. Marvin Gaye singing "Let's get it on" at a funeral is as clear an expression of the profane as anyone could hope for.

Kings Cross is often written of as a place where anything goes sexually – prostitution, threesomes, cross-dressing, gender bending, homosexuality, leather, sado-masochism, voyeurism, child abuse and any other variety the tapestry of life has to offer, including – given all those studio flats and single rooms – celibacy. One of the most exuberant memories of sexual discovery in Kings Cross comes from the rock'n'roll singer Billy Thorpe who got his big break at Surf City, Darlinghurst Road, in the early sixties. When not singing for the stomping throng, Billy Thorpe was having an exciting home life in a *menage-a-trois* with girls called Pepper and Natalie:

Other times I'd be sitting on the couch watching television and out they'd vamp without warning, dressed in some new skimpy lace outfit or another. They'd slow dance erotically together until none of us could stand it any longer. I'd often come home from rehearsal to find them both dressed in lingerie, stockings and heels, either making dinner or just sitting reading the newspaper like it was perfectly normal. There's not a straight man alive who wouldn't swap ten years of his life for one month of the experience I was having. Money definitely can't buy the real thing. This kind of *menage a trois* is every honest straight man's deepest fantasy and I was living it twenty-four-seven! I was seventeen years old and in Hormone Heaven.¹⁴

The total obliteration of consciousness in "living it twenty-four-seven" is nothing short of ecstasy, even if the ecstatic is reached by different means from the fasting, prayer and contemplation of the visionary saints. Drug addicts are often searching for the same all-or-nothing knock-out joy. (Sadly, in time their brain chemistry loses its capacity for lesser joys.)

If Billy Thorpe depicts youthful sex as pure joy – heaven – in his memoir, fiction often sees it in darker guises. Gabrielle Lord's *Whipping Boy* is about the corruption of boys by older homosexuals; in *The River Ophelia*, most of Justine Ettler's sex scenes involve either S&M, drugs, group sex, or imaginative types of degradation such as group sex with a tampon. The intention is apparently satirical, but much of the satire is lost on me. The worst writing is often the funniest, not necessarily by design. Thematically, though, *The River Ophelia* is very much in the Abbey of Theleme tradition.

In Kathleen Stewart's *Spilt Milk*, living in Kings Cross brings renewed life and hope to one desperately unhappy character, Sylvia Manilla, and total degradation to her ex-husband, Joe Manilla. Joe leaves Sylvia and their baby; Sylvia abandons the baby to her own mother and the suburbs, and both Sylvia and Joe make their separate ways to the Cross. Joe finds hell, but Sylvia goes from grief and guilt to a kind of redemption. She sees Kings Cross as normal life turned upside down:

I think of the suburbs occasionally. Calmly now, having escaped. All fear, all sense of suffocation, long gone.

I think of the quiet night streets, and the frenetic garden bustle on Sundays, and the metronome-like fall of morning papers. I can almost hear the sound of revving engines, warmed to the right degree before starting off, and the tick chug of traffic. I remember the sweaty men in suits trying to look as if they live there, although it is clear they don't. I recall the wan faces of the women; and the ghastly tans and tennis muscles of those who will not give in.

It's all reversed in the street where I live, up here in the Cross. It is all upside-down and back-to-front. Here, at night, the pale faces come alive. Cars toot and people shout. The streets throng with embarrassed, excited-looking men in business suits. Men and women in heavy make-up and stilettos strut the sidewalks.¹⁵

For Joe Manilla, the Cross is all descent, a living hell:

The sliding stink of the pavement still fresh in my nose, I descend into the broken-tiled misery of Kings Cross Station. Where a man can't take a leak, the doors having

been locked against an avalanche of overdosing junkies. Oh, well, we all have our crosses to bear, as Monica Beaver once said.

I ride the escalator, right down into the neon-lit tunnel. You can't get any lower.

Poor fucks in suits hang about and wait for the city-bound train. You can almost hear their jaws grind... A drunk in an overcoat, stinking of urine and cheap wine, lurches past. A couple of tarts in little spike heels weave by, too close to the edge of the platform, full of pills. Any time, night or day. Kings Cross. All the ground-in despair you could ask for.¹⁶

There is no redemption for Joe, but by the end of the book Sylvia is able to say: "Now it is time for something new."¹⁷

The Cross has its real-life saints, who also crop up in fiction from time to time. The film version of *Lilian's Story* makes extensive use of Kings Cross as a setting, although this is not a big feature of Kate Grenville's novel. Lilian, a Bea Miles figure, is a kind of saintly outsider, befriended by other rejects of society and cast out by pillars of respectability such as her father (actually a child abuser and a sadist). This is highly consistent with Kathleen Stewart's depiction of Kings Cross turning suburban expectations inside out.

The hero of Robin Eakin Dalton's *Aunts Up the Cross* is not Great-Aunt Juliet, killed off by a bus on page one, but her father, Dr Jim Eakin, the Kings Cross GP. Much of the humour of Eakin's affectionate memoir comes from siting a portrait of a loving family amid the turmoil of Darlinghurst Road. Her father, repeatedly called at night to patch up drunken sailors or bashed prostitutes, took his small daughter with him on housecalls.

Then there is the saint of Victoria Street. Mandy Sayer's *The Cross* is a novel commemorating Juanita Neilsen's disappearance and murder. Last sightings of the colourful "Gina Delgado" abound, and theories about her disappearance have rival adherents. Neilsen, a crusader against the developers of Victoria Street, is also remembered in John Clare's memoir, *Low Rent*. Sayer's telling of the story involves eleven voices and nearly three hundred pages, but Clare disposes of it in three sentences:

Soon after the evictions, Juanita Neilsen, the editor of a Kings Cross advertorial rag, disappeared. It is accepted wisdom in the underworld that she was killed because she had announced her intention of spilling the beans in her paper on various Kings Cross identities, including some associated with the Victoria Street development. The late Detective Sergeant Krahe was said to be the killer, and it was generally believed that she had been later cut into pieces and fed into a disposal unit.¹⁸

For all the detachment of this summary, Clare writes that the Victoria Street battle, which lasted six months, was like two years of normal life. His book – *Low Rent* is one of the most beguiling of recent memoirs – also portrays life in Elizabeth Bay in the late fifties and early sixties. For Clare, the coffee bar El Rocco, birthplace of cool jazz in Sydney, is a place of sacred memory. Clare remembers Kings Cross witch and artist Rosaleen Norton as a gentle, ageing woman, worried about domestic matters and kinder to the ironic bystanders (including himself) than they probably deserved. Inez Baranay's novel *Pagan* is based on Norton but does little to keep the legend alive. George Sprod remembers her art and how she helped establish the early coffee palaces:

I mean, how could anyone take seriously all those portrayals of naked women in the grip of enormous spiders, of epicene bugaboos slanty-eyed and green of face, of succulent succubi caught in *flagrante delicto*, and snakes, snakes, snakes crawling over everything?

With the highbrow galleries closed to her Rosaleen, in order to make a quid, had to exhibit her stuff in coffee bars – the Arabian and the Kashmir are two that come to mind – bohemian dives and similar artistic haunts. This in fact, did them no disservice for somehow they spoke more succinctly in an atmosphere of *laissez aller* and contrived naughtiness.¹⁹

Christopher Koch also uses the Cross as a site for the occult. However, in *The Doubleman*, the initiation into the wisdom of the psychic adept is begun while the narrator is still a Hobart schoolboy. Kings Cross is, for Koch's hero, a "place of refugees", a "Dormitory of Displaced Persons," a "capital of deviance":

Back in the twenties and thirties... this had been Bohemia, a southern hemisphere Monmartre. In the summer of 1964, when I first came there, it still wrapped itself in the tatty dressing gown of these pretensions like one of its own landladies. By now it was a teeming rookery of male and female prostitutes, show people, failed artists, successful criminals, and the wrecked and displaced flung to Australia after the war: people like my landlord, Bela Beaumont.²⁰

Koch links the Cross's lack of innocence with Europe's loss of innocence, the upheavals of war, death and tragedy that sparked the century's great waves of migration. For him, Slessor's Kings Cross has become a tatty memory.

Writers are often tempted, as Koch is here, to distinguish the apparently mundane Kings Cross of the present from the Kings Cross of romantic memory, always seen as more Bohemian, more authentic. I suspect that in the next century some researcher or writer will get nostalgic about the Kings Cross of the 1990s. The constants of Kings Cross remain its diversity, its knack of being a resting place for people on the run from their own pasts or Europe's, and its acceptance of people's right to do what they want. Kings Cross has served in Australian literature both as an image of the profane and, more interestingly, as another possible source of the sacred.

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