Introduction to Maps and Mapping in Kenneth Slessor's Poetic Sequence The Atlas

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Abstract

This is the first of seven articles comprising a book-length treatment of The Atlas by the acclaimed Australian poet and journalist Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971). His reputation as Australia's first modernist poet and pioneer of her national poetic identity began with his 1932 collection Cuckooz Contrey, which opened with one of the most original interpretations of cartography in verse: the five-poem sequence The Atlas. Faced with maps and navigators' tales, Slessor began each poem with the title of a map or an atlas by a cartographer prominent during Europe's "golden age of cartography," and then alluded to that particular work throughout the poem. The sequence celebrates the cartographic achievements of the seventeenth century while imaginatively recreating the worlds portrayed in very different maps, including Robert Norton's plan of Algiers ("The King of Cuckooz"), John Ogilby's road maps ("Post-roads"), Joan Blaeu's plan-view of Amsterdam ("Dutch Seacoast"), John Speed's world map ("Mermaids"), and a map of the West Indies, supposedly by Nicolas or Adrien Sanson, featuring buccaneers and a seafight ("The Seafight"). Yet none of these maps appears in Slessor's collections or critical studies of his work. Nor have his poems been juxtaposed with the atlases, maps, or rare catalogue of maps that inspired them.

I plan to fill these gaps in six future issues of Cartographic Perspectives. Five will begin with an Atlas poem—reprinted in its entirety and in the order of its appearance within the sequence. Analysis of the poem's content will be followed by discussion of its introductory quote or epigraph, which Slessor (as his poetry notebook makes clear) found in the map catalogue. Next comes an examination of both the cartographer and the map highlighted in the epigraph. By reproducing the map as well as the catalogue's description of the map, each article will uncover the cartographic connections between Slessor's published poem and its manuscript versions, its map(s), and the map catalogue. An Epilogue will round out my series by exploring the unique atlas-like structure of Slessor's sequence and identifying the likely author of the catalogue that Slessor creatively transformed into The Atlas.

My Introduction, the only part of the series published in this issue, provides the background for what will become the first extended examination of The Atlas. Opening with a brief biography of Slessor as poet, journalist, and man-about-Sydney, it surveys Cuckooz Contrey before turning to The Atlas, which debuted in 1930. The effort that Slessor lavished on his sequence and on mastering the period in which it is set are revealed throughout the poem. The sequence celebrates the cartographic achievements of the seventeenth century while imaginatively recreating the worlds portrayed in very different maps, including Robert Norton's plan of Algiers ("The King of Cuckooz"), John Ogilby's road maps ("Post-roads"), Joan Blaeu's plan-view of Amsterdam ("Dutch Seacoast"), John Speed's world map ("Mermaids"), and a map of the West Indies, supposedly by Nicolas or Adrien Sanson, featuring buccaneers and a seafight ("The Seafight"). Yet none of these maps appears in Slessor's collections or critical studies of his work. Nor have his poems been juxtaposed with the atlases, maps, or rare catalogue of maps that inspired them.

Keywords

Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971); Cuckooz Contrey (1932); The Atlas sequence (ca. 1930); poetry—twentieth-century; poetry—Australian; poetry and maps; Norman Lindsay (1879–1969); Raymond Lindsay (1903–1960); James Emery (d. 1947); Hugh McCrae (1876–1958)

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Refbacks

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Slessor is a master of sound and meaning and believed sound was inseparable from meaning. This poem starts with a subdued tone elicited by long slow, soft sounds (softly, humbly, convoys, sway, wander, under, rolls, foam pluck, shallows, burrows) lulling us into a false sense of calm, then by understating the enormity of the calamity we slowly realise that we are talking about dead soldiers. As war correspondent, during the North African campaign in the early forties, Slessor writes sympathetically about the death of young people. “Beach Burial”, written at El Alamein during the war, significantly, has similar themes as “Five Bells” - the drowned man - the fading communications.