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Abstract

Written by the acclaimed Australian poet Kenneth Slessor, “Post-roads” is the second poem of his sequence The Atlas and of his collection Cuckooz Contrey (1932), in which it debuted. Like the other four Atlas poems, “Post-roads” begins with a quote from a prominent seventeenth-century map-maker; in this case, John Ogilby (1600–1676)—the celebrated British publisher, surveyor, and cartographer. Slessor not only transformed Ogilby’s work (and portrait) into poetic images, but made Ogilby’s “tireless ghost” the central character of his poem. This article, part of the first full-scale examination of Slessor’s ambitious but poorly understood sequence, begins by reproducing the poem and tracing the poem’s development in Slessor’s poetry notebook. To reconstruct his creative process, it details the poet’s debt to the ephemeral catalogue of atlases and maps in which he discovered his title, epigraph, central character, and a possible source for the colorfully named coaches and carriages that conveyed passengers not only throughout London and Britain beginning in the early seventeenth century, but also throughout Australia from around 1800 to 1920. After comparing poet and cartographer, we consider the poem’s relationship to two of Ogilby’s atlases: the monumental Britannia (1675) and the posthumous, if far more accessible Traveller’s Guide (1699, 1712). Both reveal how Ogilby—even from the grave—helped passengers like the poem’s “yawning Fares” trace their routes. Finally, after offering reasons for Slessor’s choice of “Guildford” out of all the place-names along the roads through England and Wales, and proposing literary inspirations for “Post-roads,” the paper returns to Slessor’s hero/artist.

Keywords

Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971); Cuckooz Contrey (1932); The Atlas sequence (ca. 1930); "Post-roads"; poetry—twentieth-century; poetry—Australian; poetry and maps; cartography—seventeenth-century; John Ogilby (1600–1676)

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