

Toby Davidson. *Good for the Soul: John Curtin's Life with Poetry.*

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‘Prolonged interactions between poetry and Australian politics are as rare as they are peculiar’ (374), writes Toby Davidson in this well-researched and in many ways ground-breaking book. That’s not strictly true, though, as John Curtin’s own experience as an editor of union journals would attest. Davidson amply documents how left-wing politics at the turn of the twentieth century energetically cultivated a balladry of protest alongside Shelleyan hymns to liberty, as well as scurrilous parodies of famous poems, directed at opponents. While he was in the Victorian Socialist Party, Curtin was friends with Bernard O’Dowd, whose metrical treatises were influential on his thinking and often quoted by him. But I imagine that what Davidson means by ‘Australian politics’ is the narrower, professional sense of that meretricious trade carried on by our elected officials, one whose ingrained cynicism would seem at odds with those verbal arts not primarily dedicated to worldly power and influence.

In fact the only poetical allusion by an Australian prime minister that I can recall is the obvious one: Sir Robert Menzies’s invocation of Thomas Ford when regaling Elizabeth II at a state dinner in 1963, ‘I did but see her passing by / Yet I shall love her till I die’—a trimming which leaves the fat off a racier lyric. According to political historian Mark Rolfe,

Menzies remembered thousands of lines of Wordsworth, Shakespeare and many other poets whom he quoted in speeches. Our second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, had a similar predilection. Our first prime minister, Edmund Barton, liked to pepper his early parliamentary speeches with Greek and Latin quotations that he learnt in a degree in classics and English literature at Sydney University. (28)

More recently there have been PMs who could generate the odd figurative spark: Paul Keating, most famously, among whose *bons mots* was his reference to Opposition leader John Hewson as a ‘feral abacus’; or Gough Whitlam, with his 1975 put-down of Malcolm Fraser as ‘Kerr’s cur.’ Former New South Wales premier and federal foreign minister Bob Carr is one of very few conspicuously bookish polities, but favours history and fiction. In the digital age, it can sometimes seem that political oratory has atrophied to mere sound bites, leaving room only for that species of flatlining would-be witticism which Shaun Micallef has identified as the *zinger*. *Good for the Soul* reminds us that it was not always thus.

Davidson’s interest in Curtin is directly personal, since he is not only a poet himself but one of Curtin’s great-grandchildren. I suspect it’s also connected to what is hinted in the title, for Davidson is the author of *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* (Cambria Press, 2013). But what does it mean to say that poetry is ‘good for the soul’? The phrase is of course idiomatic, and applied to all manner of more-or-less contemplative activities outside workaday life, from forms of yoga and meditation, to hobbies such as keeping bees or tropical fish, as well as to the arts. And it’s the *soul*, suggesting an older, more religious context than the present day where the word *spirit* has largely taken over—*spiritual* proving a more mobile term by crossing boundaries not only between faiths, but between the sacred and the psychological.

Though raised a Catholic, Curtin was not a religious man but a secular socialist whose beliefs were infused with hope for a new kind of world to replace this one—a dream not unrelated to

Christian millenarianism. He briefly played the cornet in a Salvation Army band but, as Davidson tells us, ‘from 1904 he was marching to the beat of a different army for whom salvation meant revolution’ (19). Bound up with political salvation, poetry worked in conjunction with the cause by helping the workers to achieve more spiritually fulfilled lives. Glossing one of Curtin’s articles in the *Socialist* journal from 1909, Davidson writes: ‘Here, themes of spiritual transcendence are blurred with those of working-class liberation and purging the sin of capitalist “Vice.” Decades before Curtin’s wartime austerity drives, poetry was an agent of moral austerity as well as being good for workers’ minds and souls’ (378). In many ways, this belief in the virtues of ‘culture’ is much the same at that held by his political opponents, including Menzies, except that conservatives saw its benefits trickling down from above. Curtin and his comrades, on the other hand, felt that, with the right kind of proselytising, it just might burgeon from below. He was a grassroots unionist, but as a literary activist Curtin was part of a cultural elite that sought to educate the newly literate masses about the correct values to hold. According to one journalist, Curtin even looked ‘more like a uni. professor than a leftist politician’ (95).

Much of *Good for the Soul* deals with Curtin’s career-long promulgation of poetry, firstly as editor of the *Timber Worker* and the *Westralian Worker*, and then as a politician and prime minister. As his own handful of light verses show, the kind of original poems that Curtin published were more concerned with the rough and tumble of labour movement politics than with spiritual transcendence. Those loftier odes that did appear and exalted the brotherhood of man generally excluded brown and black people—for purely economic reasons, as Curtin would argue of the White Australia policy. (Perhaps fearing that revelations of racism and gender bias from Australia’s greatest prime minister might lead to him being cancelled, Davidson is a little too inclined to wring his hands by way of expiation over common past bigotries.) The fact is that union journals then operated in a milieu in which poetry—at least verse, if a distinction must be made—remained a genre of everyday life. Most newspapers published topical verse which carried political debate, social satire and humour, and recitation was widely practised on the vaudeville stage and in the family parlour. Things would gradually change with the advent of radio and talking films but, as the immense success of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* shows, poetry was genuinely popular and frequently performed in Australia before the Second World War. Davidson shows how that War brought a fresh patriotic wave of it. Mary Gilmore became a serial pest of Curtin’s prime ministership when, following the success of ‘No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest,’ she continued to rain down new war hymns on Canberra from her flat in Kings Cross. Curtin’s genial politeness in the face of Gilmore’s barrage should surely be counted among his more stalwart achievements.

For all its many virtues, Davidson’s book is too long and, for this reviewer, a little too personally invested in the family connection. As this is not exactly a spiritual biography of Curtin’s reading—his taste appears to have been fixed quite early—I’m not sure why it follows a chronological trajectory when a more thematic arrangement might have been more appropriate. Chapter 3, ‘Dante as Political Mentor,’ is given over to Curtin’s copies of Longfellow’s translations of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* because they’re the most annotated of all the poetry books in his library. Here is Dante very much pre-T.S. Eliot: ‘Mental, physical and spiritual poverty, the suffering of the industrial working class, the need for agitation, solidarity and education are all prominent themes in Curtin’s marginalia’ to the *Inferno* (47). This reading of a fourteenth-century vision of the afterlife in terms of the class struggle is striking—Dante was himself highly political, of course—but what does it say about the way Curtin read poetry in general at this early stage of his career? Milton, we’re told, was a ‘declared favourite’ (41), so does Dante’s chief significance ultimately lie in the possibility that he ‘may have led Curtin to

Milton' (42)? If so, why give over a whole chapter to him? Could more have been said about Curtin's reading of *Paradise Lost*, which was presumably also in terms of political allegory rather than as Christian fable? Certainly in later life Curtin invoked Milton's *Areopagitica* when matters of censorship arose. In contrast, was his attitude to the poems more personal than political?

Referring to the literary section of the *Westralian Worker* which Curtin conducted himself, Davidson writes: 'Each poet featured in Our Bookshelf is evaluated, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of their artistic, linguistic and didactic value to Australian working-class men and women' (136). What this means in critical terms is unclear, as the direction of discussion is towards Curtin's notion of the poet-prophet—something he got from Bernard O'Dowd (via Carlyle and Emerson)—and the significance of Shelley, Swinburne and Whitman as the editor's favourite poets of revolution. But how exactly did Curtin distinguish between the artistic, linguistic and didactic in this column? Throughout *Good for the Soul* there is a mass of intricate and informative detail about the poets that he read but no close consideration of the ways in which he read them. How to square his activist readings of classics with his love of the 'fireside poet' James Russell Lowell, Curtin's 'favourite American poet besides Walt Whitman' (196), or indeed Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a poet now associated with greeting card verse, four of whose poems he republished in the *Timber Worker*? In a 1942 essay on Kipling, George Orwell would call the work of such highly popular writers 'good bad poetry' and 'almost a shameful pleasure, like the taste for cheap sweets that some people secretly carry into middle life.' The literary ecology of the early twentieth century was very different from what came later, and one of Davidson's major achievements is in bringing forgotten aspects of it vividly to life. But some further reflection on how the high consorted with the low, the political with the popular, would have been helpful. Davidson writes that 'it is hard to ignore the overall impression that very few poets after Kipling and O'Dowd resonated quite like their predecessors' (3). If so, how very different was Curtin from the average poetry lover who reached maturity in the first decade of the twentieth century, and whose taste also stopped just short of modernism? Curtin also enjoyed western novels and Hollywood movies.

Not surprisingly, by far the longest portion of *Good for the Soul* deals with the Second World War, which is broken into three chapters leading up to Curtin's exhausted death in office. There follows a long chapter on 'The Curtins and Dame Mary Gilmore' which makes the fascinating point that, when she wasn't badgering him with anthems, his friendship with the ageing poet gave the prime minister an opportunity to affirm, not only his own literary credentials, but also the role of poetry in the national space. Curtin's connection with Gilmore bookends an intellectual life that began with that other socialist versifier, Bernard O'Dowd, only now the relationship plays out in the media, and as propaganda for an Australian democratic tradition that Dame Mary increasingly, and also very self-consciously, embodied. Coming after Curtin's crowded final years, however, the chapter almost seems an afterthought, and I wondered whether its contents might have been better incorporated in the War chapters under different structural arrangements.

Davidson has written a genuinely innovative book: the poetico-political biography of a major historical figure—or should that be a politico-poetic biography? Curtin believed poetry to be good for his own soul, and also good for the soul of the nation he served, but how these two faiths more precisely informed one another is ultimately left to the reader to judge. In his tendentious study of the religious beliefs of Australian prime ministers, *In God They Trust?*, Roy Williams draws on circumstantial evidence to suggest that Curtin never entirely lost his faith and during that time of national and personal crisis which forged his legacy, seems to have

regained it—sort of. To lose one's belief in God in favour of the redemptive power of art was once a common enough career move for poets, especially lapsed Catholics. Curtin wasn't a poet—except very fleetingly—but did he maintain faith in a transcendental spirit with which art communicated, or was he driven to Christian rhetoric when prime minister simply because the moment, and the audience, demanded it? Given how much of his narrative was played out in public, I dare say a neat balance between the story of Curtin's career and his poetic interests may have been difficult to achieve, but I was curious to know more about how he understood his inner life in connection to them.

It's difficult to write a crossover book within literary studies that historians and the general public might want to read. While Davidson is careful not to retell his great-grandfather's biography in detail, and defers to other authorities such as David Day and John Edwards, there are occasional gaps that left me wanting more information. For example, I don't recall mention of Curtin's reaction to the October Revolution in Russia—surely the stuff of poet-prophets—or to the formation of the Communist Party of Australia, and how these events might have been treated in the *Westralian Worker*, either poetically or prosaically. (With two indexes, one general name index and one partitioned off for poets, some attention could have been given to topics and events.) More broadly, the pattern of Curtin's life from the end of the First World War and his election to federal parliament is a little vague here. A chronic over-worker, Curtin suffered from nerves and had problems with alcohol, but we don't learn much about things that were bad for the soul in this book: aspects of the subject's character that were surely part of his literary personality and aesthetic outlook. He was evidently a devoted family man, finding redemption in his home life and a shared practice of reading. His poetic preferences were what we might now, in this over-managed age, call 'public-facing.' We learn a lot about these in *Good for the Soul*, and it is useful to know them. The more private applications of Curtin's love of poetry are harder to ascertain, though. Davidson quotes Menzies's strangely clerical affirmation that 'Poetry keeps the mind in order' and immediately adds: 'If, in 1939, [Curtin] felt the same way, he would soon need poetry more than ever' (199). Halfway through this intriguing study, what are the implications of that 'If'?

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