Herbert C. Jaffa, 1920–2013
A Sheaf of Remembrances

THE MAN WHO LOVED AUSTRALIA

Herb was a hero in large matters—he was one of the brave men who saved Australia in World War II from Imperial Japanese aggression, and made the war memorials that stud the streets around the Australian Defence Force Academy, where I was when I heard of his death. He was first stationed in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria (a year before Peter Carey was born there), then in Northern Queensland, about which he wrote compellingly; then in the fall of 1943 served in New Guinea, in the Markham Valley west of Lae. But Herb was also a hero in small matters. He was of pivotal help in setting up his organization and to successive editors of Antipodes in editing the journal.

After the war, Herb attended Columbia, where he studied under Joseph Wood Krutch. By then, he had met his wife, Edith, herself highly creative and intelligent, and a wonderful companion to him. He worked as a journalist for a bit, then settled down to a long career at New York University where he taught largely in the adult BA-granting program, and watched as both it and NYU itself grew by leaps and bounds, a process which his diligent and dedicated work helped move along. Through all this, Herb kept an eye on Australia, traveling there several times during the 1970s and writing major works on Kenneth Slessor and on Australian poetry in general, while also contributing to The New York Times after Patrick White won the Nobel. He directed the first dissertation on White in the US (Marian Arkin’s) and with his colleague, NYU’s library humanities bibliographer George Thompson, helped build up the library collection from which I and many others later benefitted.

Herb and Edith then retired and moved to Madison, Connecticut, on the shore some miles east of New Haven. Herb regularly consulted the Yale University library and also purchased Australian books at Madison’s well-known independent bookstore RJ Julia. (Herb loved the Russell Drysdale painting that adorns this cover, but I also appreciated the nice touch of its having been owned by the former president of Yale). I do not know whether Herb was from New England originally—he had somewhat of an old-style New England accent—but he seemed to very much enjoy his later years in the region, where he lived for a quarter-century.

Much of his activity in those years pertained to Antipodes. He was one of our best book reviewers, and someone whose concern was always for the organization...
as a whole and for the good of Australian literature. He kept up with Australian literature to the end—he was aware of the various permutations of the Rudd/Gillard fracas, and his last phone call to me concerned the science fiction of “Lian Hearn,” which a young neighbor of his had recommended.

Herb was the last of my friends to have served in the Second World War, and the last in our organization. With him goes our final living link with a war that more than any other event forged the amity and familiarity between our two nations. He was one of the people who made global Australian studies possible. He introduced me to David Rowbotham, Tom Shapcott, and Vivian Smith. I will miss him more than I can say. I admired and revered him, and cherished his counsel.

As Herb makes clear in his novel-memoir, *Townsville at War*, he fell deeply in love with a local woman named Dorrie, and his love for Australia was, in this and other senses, a lifelong love. Herb is the ultimate example of so many Americans who gravitated to the study of Australia, who did not do so for cultural capital, tenure, and promotion, or prestige—studying Australia brought none of this. They did so, in complex and over-determined ways, for love.

Herb’s great passion was the poetry of Kenneth Slessor, so I will end with this, Slessor’s last poem, about Herb’s war, although on another front (El Alamein).

_Beach Burial_
Kenneth Slessor

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs  
The convoys of dead sailors come;  
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,  
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire  
Someone, it seems, has time for this,  
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows  
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,  
Bears the last signature of men,  
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,  
The words choke as they begin—

“Unknown seaman”—the ghostly pencil  
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men’s lips,

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

—Nicholas Birns

A WARM GENEROSITY

An obituary of Herbert Jaffa, “Professor Championed Australian Verse,” appeared in the national newspaper, the Australian, this year (28 January 2014), written by a former press officer for the Australian consulate-general in New York (John Coleman). This is unusual but appropriate for an academic who promoted Australian culture throughout his long life. Coleman referred to Jaffa as “arguably America’s foremost exponent of Australian poetry and literature long before the chair in Australian studies was established at Harvard in 1976.” His contribution to a graduate program was celebrated at a New York University symposium in 2009, where he was referred to as “the dean of Australian literature.”

Jaffa’s “love affair” with Australia began after he had enlisted in the US Army (signals) at the age of 21, following Pearl Harbor, and was sent to Australia, initially to a training camp at Bacchus Marsh near Melbourne, in Victoria where, incidentally, Peter Carey grew up. Jaffa recalls, “I read my first Australia verse there” in 1942. “We were to have ten days there before starting northward to war, and when we weren’t writing ‘V’ letters home, drinking the fine Australian beer, or exploring the beautiful clumps of green hills with white sheep, some of us discovered ‘a jolly swagman camped by a billabong / Under the shade of a Coolabah tree’” (Preface, Slessor 1971). Jaffa continues: “We were to meet the jolly swagman of ‘Waltzing Matilda’ many times during the next few years, often in verses other than those composed by A. B. (‘Banjo’) Paterson and not always appropriate to the family dining room. We listened to and sang the ballad as we moved northward—from Townsville, North Queensland, along the Great Barrier Reef, to Port Moresby in New Guinea, over the Owen Stanley Range into Buna, Dubadura, Markham Valley, and Lae.” From these circumstances, “colored by memory, came the impulse years later to study the literature of Australia. The present volume (on Kenneth Slessor, 1972) is one expression of that study” (Preface).
In retrospect Jaffa saw that early contact with popular Australian poetry “had not only given me some idea of the spirit which still touched the Australian people, but also had led me to the poems of the more serious and imaginative Australian poets,” the most significant of whom was for him Kenneth Slessor.

Jaffa was posted to Townsville, a tropical military town in far northern Australia from April to December 1942. His experiences there are evoked in a brief memoir serendipitously occasioned by his revisiting Australia and this city in 1980. (It is a small booklet awkwardly entitled, Townsville at War: A Soldier Remembers [1992], issued as part of a lecture series). Because of his published work on Australian literature he had been invited to give lectures, as part of an annual series organized by the Foundation for Australian Literature at the city’s post-war James Cook University. As a sensitive, vivid evocation of a particular place and time and also providing a personal record of a visiting American serviceman’s experience of Australia, it is to my knowledge without parallel. The phenomenon of the influx into a sparsely populated Australia of thousands of Americans, constituting a substantial “presence”—both as welcome, friendly war allies and yet as challengingly “different” and something of a social threat—has received limited attention in Australian post-war fiction, notably in novels by Xavier Herbert and the partnership of Dymphna Cusack and Florence James. But it has attracted no substantial cultural study. One wonders about such unused sources as the hundreds of letters home to America, and records of experiences of “war brides.” These must involve interesting impressions by and of the visitors. And where, one may wonder, are the relevant reminiscences of Australians? Probably mostly unpublished and hidden away in libraries. It was not until Moorhouse in the 1970s, representing a later generation of the Vietnam War years, that American influences (independent of World War II) enter seriously into Australian literature as a major agent of change (see The Americans, Baby, 1972, and The Electrical Experience, 1974).

Ida Leeson, Librarian of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, with the largest holdings of Australiana in existence, wrote to Hartley Grattan in 1944, “You may be interested to know that American servicemen who have visited [. . .] and seen our galleries and some of the special manuscripts have been most appreciative.” Yet the effects of this openness of Americans to Australian culture have gone unstudied, perhaps because they were so diffuse.

Jaffa’s Townsville memoir combines the heightened circumstances of the time with a love affair with an Australian girl to whom he became engaged. Unhappily, she terminated the relationship when she contracted a terminal illness, though they corresponded until her death in 1955. Accordingly the memoir blends an elegiac tone with fond memories of an early love (perhaps first love) in what was for him a startlingly new setting. Slessor, elegiac poet of memory and loss and Jaffa’s muse, is invoked in the epigraph from “Country Ride”: 
In the sharp sky, the frosty deepnesses,
There are still birds to barb the silences,
There are still fields to meet the morning on,
But those who made them beautiful are gone.

It is not too fanciful to see a poignant personal connection between Jaffa’s Australian experience and his subsequent devotion to Australian literature, whose first fruits was a pioneering monograph on Slessor, “a poet of power and beauty.” Jaffa aimed to introduce and discuss the poems of a “remarkable poet” thereby indirectly commemorating some of his own formative experiences in a new country, of “the beautiful” which had “gone,” but for him still lived on. Jaffa saw Slessor as “a spokesman for the modern movement, particularly as it relates to the liberation of Australian poetry from parochialism,” paralleling perhaps his own liberating Australian experience. But his “primary purpose . . . is to introduce and discuss a remarkable poet who is completely unknown in the United States,” and also outside Australia, he might have added if he had not been so modest.

It is important to remember the context of Jaffa’s Slessor study (1972) and his later *Modern Australian Poetry, 1920–1970* (1979). The books appeared at a time when what came to be known as “world literature in English” (WLWE), or alternatively “postcolonial studies,” were opening up, mainly in Britain, the US, and commonwealth countries, especially in Australia. The Australian Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) began in 1977; the corresponding American Association in 1986; the Journal of Commonwealth Literature (UK) in 1966; and WLWE Newsletter in the US in 1967. *Australian Literary Studies* (ALS), the journal that helped pioneer the tertiary of Australian literary study, began only in 1963.

Jaffa’s *Slessor* appeared as one of the early ventures in this general development. The Gale Research Guides and introductory author studies, the vehicles of Jaffa’s work and published in the US, began to appear at this time, the general editor being Joseph Jones of the University of Texas. Jaffa’s *Slessor* and his *Modern Australian Poetry* were accordingly at the forefront of this worldwide literary expansion. While the latter theoretical revisionism stimulated by postcolonialism has tended to consume the limelight, an important part of developments was the gathering, ordering, and interpreting of information that had not previously been available, giving a new impetus to literary history, a method which in the process underwent continuous revisioning.

As I put it on a recent memoir of editing *ALS, 1963–2001* (2013) it was intended “not only as a journal of literary criticism but of information,” of record and documentation. Jaffa’s contribution is partly of this general kind and of an introductory nature, an essential step in the opening up of a new field. He saw his work as a way of developing an appreciation of authors who had not received their due. Accordingly, in his *Slessor*, he aimed to include “biographical and historical
information” to “place” Slessor in the contemporary scene as well as to provide the background of the Australian literary tradition. Together with literary analysis, he added, this information “is subordinated to serve the poem,” to “help reveal the poem and allow the poem to reveal itself.” Indeed, Jaffa’s work was generally in this mode of “service,” acting as a guide to readers, not making claims for himself. He did though, as he pointed out via a reference to Lionel Trilling (an influence on Australian literary criticism of the time) believe that his work bore his individual imprint: “Aware of Lionel Trilling’s caveat that comments do not constitute criticism [. . . I am] nonetheless confident that [my] close reading of the poet, combined with [my] ability to discriminate that which represents the reviewer’s best thoughts [. . .] serves the poet and thus, ultimately, the student.” Jaffa added, “That is ultimately what this guide to modern Australian poetry is all about” (Introduction).

Jaffa’s books were sometimes reviewed by Australian writers themselves, often poets, who were aware of his publicizing role in the US and were warmly appreciative of his contribution. Though they did note that as an outsider he might occasionally miss nuances that depended on an insider’s knowledge of Australian culture, as the poet Douglas Stewart put it, “on the whole Jaffa [on Slessor] will be found useful to the student and satisfying to Slessor’s admirers” (Southerly, 1971). The most rigorous critic of Modern Australian Poetry, academic Martin Duwell, himself among the younger generation of critics and champion of the “new” young poets, was inclined to see the book as “almost designed for students overseas for whom Australian poetry might be an elective subject they have slid into.” But Duwell drew back from taking “an unnecessarily surly view” because “it is a task that no one has undertaken and one is thankful for its existence. It will always be a valuable aid, particularly for beginning students.” And it had other advantages, as in the description of the Angry Penguins and the Jindyworobaks as “broad intellectual movements” (ALS, 1981). Duwell pointed out that, because of its publication timing, Jaffa’s “coverage of younger poets was thereby limited, but relative newcomers Vivian Smith and Thomas Shapcott praised it for supplying information not available elsewhere.

Ronald McCuaig, himself a poet, noted that Jaffa’s work appeared at a time when “Australians put a high value on overseas English experts’ opinions of Australian poets,” untouched by prejudices of Australian nationalism. Yet McCuaig ironically found Jaffa to be at a consequent disadvantage as an outsider because “he contracted a liking for Australia when he served here during the World War II, and has lectured, broadcast and written on Australian poetry. All that can be urged in his favour,” continued McCuaig, “is that he never met Slessor” (ALS, 1971). But Jaffa noted in his Preface that they had corresponded with one another, and he ended with a simple acknowledgment of Slessor’s “graciousness.” Stewart commented that the book “increases our debt to [Jaffa], the Chief protagonist of Australian culture.
in he USA,” concluding, “I should add here, in case he didn’t get round to saying so himself, that Kenneth Slessor was pleased with it. He told me so not long before he died, adding with characteristic modesty (and reflecting perhaps an equally characteristic reluctance to put pen to paper) that he meant to write to Herbert Jaffa about it but was so embarrassed by his praise that he didn’t know what to say.” In his work, Jaffa wrote with a corresponding modesty and also with a warm generosity in his dedication to illuminating the neglected literature of Australia. That he provoked such recognition from two of Australia’s leading poets is an indication of his achievement, and his reward.

—Laurie Hergenhan (September 2014)

INSISTENT AND FORWARD LOOKING

Herb sent me a memorable letter in 2004—memorable now because it was one of the last handwritten letters I’ve received, but Memorable even at the time because it was so generous. I had just finished wrangling the AAALS conference in New York, with Peter Carey and John Kinsella as readers and the banquet in Chinatown, and I had just ended my term as president of the organization. Herb did not attend, but he had heard it went well, and he added a few nice things about service to the field. I took the whole thing to heart. His letter was not overly long or fulsome, but it seemed to me a kind of welcome to a seniority I had wanted to achieve from the first meeting of AAALS in 1986.

Among the academics who gathered at Columbia that cold March weekend were those seniors who were adding Australian literature to the topic areas in which they had already established their careers, and those more junior who were trying to make careers at the same time as the emerging national and postcolonial fields of study were gaining recognition, slowly and often grudgingly. Among the former, who in my calculation included Robert Ross (the charismatic founder), Phyllis Edelson (the efficient organizer), and Henry Albinski (the shadow government), Herb from the start declined positions of power. Instead, he chaired sessions, he led discussions, but most of all he emphasized our responsibility for rigorous scholarship in what might, in those early days, have stagnated either as an appreciation society or as a self-enclosed club. Robert, for example, in the early days of Antipodes, would not run a negative book review—and that was probably a good policy for establishing the new journal as a place where Australians could count on appreciation of their work. Herb, on the other hand, argued emphatically for hard-nosed critique—and that was good, too, in establishing the credibility of the journal.
I have a letter from Robert in advance of the second AAALS conference, at Penn State. Herb, chairing the section on Australian poetry, had rejected a paper proposal, apparently on the grounds that its topic was not significant enough. The would-be presenter was miffed, and Robert was concerned. The group was very new, and it was not as if we were swamped with potential contributions. Really, at this point Americans still confused Australia with Austria, to paraphrase Tom Keneally, and the corps of US Australianists, however enthusiastic, resembled the crowds of people mashed into a Russell Drysdale painting. Yet here was Herb rejecting a paper for reasons that he considered essential to our integrity, and especially to our reputation in the making. Robert asked me to accommodate the writer of the proposal with a different topic in another session, and I did; looking at the seniors then, and hoping eventually to become one myself, I was impressed with Robert’s dedication to the viability of the group, but I felt that Herb’s ideals of scholarship pointed to a higher ground that we might eventually occupy.

At Columbia in 1986, the entire organization seated itself around a large conference table. Quite a few of those chairs are empty now, but the losses are softened by the honor that an organization nearly thirty years old can extend to the early planners. Among them, Herb stood out in particular for his insistent and forward-looking vision of what AAALS could be.

—John Scheckter