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Good for the soul: John Curtin's life with poetry

Public lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr Toby Davidson on 30 April 2014.

The text of Dr Davidson's lecture is available on request from jcpml@curtin.edu.au.

Lecture reflection by Professor David Black, JCPML Historical Consultant

'That reddish veil which o'er the face
Of night-hag East is drawn...
Flames new disaster for the race?
Or can it be the dawn?

On 27 December 1941 this short extract from *Dawnward*, a poem written early in the twentieth century by Bernard O'Dowd, an Australian born poet of Irish descent, was used by then Prime Minister John Curtin to open what was arguably his greatest rhetorical piece and most significant published article 'The Task Ahead' often also referred to as the 'turn to America statement'. In similar vein less than three weeks earlier Curtin had concluded his historic broadcast in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and Australia's declaration of war on Japan with the words of Swinburne

'Come forth, be born and live
Thou hast help to give...
Hasten thine hour
And halt not til thy work be done.

These extracts formed a centrepiece in the 2014 JCPML Visiting Scholar lecture on 30 April under the title 'Good for the Soul: John Curtin's Life with Poetry' presented by Dr

Toby Davison, an award winning Australian poet and lecturer at Macquarie University in Sydney and a great grandson of John Curtin.

Over the years since the 1990s the JCPML Visiting Scholar programme has resulted in the production of a number of notable and valuable publications including David Day's John Curtin: A Life published in 1999. In that year JCPML Historical Consultant David Black was Visiting Scholar and wrote Friendship is a Sheltering Tree: John Curtin's Letters 1907 to 1945 in the course of which references to Curtin's love of poetry were made from time to time. Subsequently, in 2004 Dr James Curran presented a lecture on 'A Crisis of national meaning: Prime ministers and the dilemma of Australian nationalism' arising from his earlier studies on prime ministerial rhetoric and Australian nationalism. This year's lecture, however, focussed directly on Curtin and his 'life with poetry' and Toby Davidson provided abundant evidence to justify his assertion that Curtin was a 'passionate and voracious reader who held poetry in particular esteem'.

This is the less surprising when taking into account the fact that although Curtin's formal education ended in his early teens he became by profession a journalist who over the years edited and wrote numerous articles for trade union newspapers as well as the West Australian during the years in the early 1930s when he was out of Parliament. Curtin did not himself write poetry (as had his father-in-law, daughter and in recent years Toby himself) but it played a crucial role in his life, fascinating him as a small child and subsequently playing a central role in having 'allowed him to socialise...and to reinforce ties, friendships, aims, credos and loves'. By the age of nineteen when he had 'effectively switched religions from Catholicism to socialism' poetry came to play a large part in his life and it was in this period for example that he was drawn to the works of an array of Australian and international poets. These included O'Dowd himself of whom he spoke in terms of veneration but Toby comments that 'initially, Curtin's engagement with non-Australian poets proved the stronger'. All this must be seen in a wide array of activities and interests for Curtin during his Victorian Socialist parties including drama, novels, choirs, orchestras, socialist scouts and football (including the Ruskin Football Club for which Curtin 'often laced up his boots'.

One fascinating aspect of Curtin, the socialist's, involvement with the poetic world, was his preoccupation with Dante's *Inferno* which led Curtin to ruminate—'a faith is first feared and then embraced. Today the world is afraid of socialism, Tomorrow it will desire it'—and to underline an excerpt with associated commentary indicating 'Remorse seems to me the heaviest punishment. We cry out[sic] Ah if I but had that chance again how different would I act'.

Linking these kinds of comments Toby is able to draw various conclusions as to where Curtin stood in his desires for and fears concerning the political world and perhaps crucially his belief that logic rather than bluster was the key to oratory. The active involvement of the Needham family in the world of poetry was crucial to the nature and success of Curtin's marriage with literary references abounding in his correspondence with both Abraham Needham and Elsie. These led to Toby's conclusion that the 'network of socialist bibliophiles' was 'deeply immersed in poetry' and when Curtin became editor of the *Westralian Worker* far from diluting 'his ties with poetry' it had 'at least for the 1920s...the opposite effect. This also left open the question as to whether Vigilant the pseudonymous book reviewer for the *Worker* and Curtin himself were in fact one and the same person.

Finally, when moving to Curtin's political career Toby considers poetry—one hour's poetry every Sunday became the ritual—and contends that poetry served the twin purposes for Curtin—to rouse and to console. In wartime this was especially apposite and in this regard Curtin was acutely aware that the minds, as well as the bodies, of the next generation were being sacrificed. That this should be so reflected the fact that poetry was 'a lifelong companion for John Curtin' whether as a young socialist; the activist 'scouring Dante's *Inferno* for pragmatic moral teachings'; the unionist in love with a poet's daughter who shared his affinity with words; the newspaper editor who ran (and more than likely wrote) some of the most sophisticated poetry interpretation then available in Australia...[and] the politician and statesman...depicted throughout Australia by the newspapers as a symbol of the Australian citizen, whose only idiosyncrasy [sic] was that he quoted poetry. The handwritten annotations in the various books of poetry and other literary works in Curtin's collection contained frequent (marginally) misquoted excerpts which only

served to confirm that they were written from memory thus reflecting an aspect of Curtin's life that went far beyond occasional perusal of numerous works with which he became familiar outside and beyond whatever formal education he had received.

To Curtin poetry was a window to what life was all about and in the darkest hours of his life and political career it provided a message of hope. Toby has made an important, indeed major contribution to our understanding of Curtin the man.