

The Road to Kashmir

Canberra poet John Leonard tells how he came to write his latest collection *Jesus in Kashmir*



I first began writing poetry in 1986, and at that time my poetry was dominated by a feeling of loneliness and hopelessness engendered by living on a small, cold, overcrowded island with another 55 million human souls, most of whom seemed to care little for the things that I found valuable. I coined the term 'unlove' to describe this situation, and this became the title of my first collection, published in 1990.

I know it is almost *de rigueur* for poets to regret their first collections, but I have read *Unlove* several times since 1990 and find it difficult to dislike these poems. I tried very hard to balance the hopelessness with that most necessary poetic weapon: poetic wit. For example the poem 'Owl-eaters':

Owl-eaters have little joy
From their strange tastes;
Spot them by their busyness
(Frantic at times)
To gobble up mice.

Or this, 'Common Courtesy', another satire on a society unknowingly imperilled by its ecological overstretch:

Just as confirmed stone-throwers
Rarely live in glass houses
(And those that do spend
Their lives picking up glass)
So any wise man would baulk
At living in a house of cards.

But common courtesy dictates
That on passing his neighbour's
Crazy, four-suited pile,
On tip-toe, with bated breath,
He should restrict himself
To the most mundane remarks.

Or if his neighbour calls him
For a whispered colloquy,
That all hints of foul weather,
A red dawn or mackerel skies,
Are so far forbidden him
As almost to be taboo.

Five years later, at the beginning of a new life in the at least not too overcrowded continent of Australia, and shortly after completing my PhD thesis, I found myself suddenly beginning to write a series of overtly political poems.

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These emerged in 1997 as *100 Elegies for Modernity* and were published by Hale and Iremonger in their Contemporary Australian Poets series. They were deliberately provocative, harsh, argumentative, and deeply green:

The best we can say for it, is that modernity is more assiduous to allege needs – but then we need needs more than anyone else has ever needed them.

They were also, as a friend remarked, almost devoid of metaphor—a remark which pleased me greatly.

However, as with *Unlove*, cheerfulness could not help breaking through even in this collection, and, as one perceptive critic pointed out, the final word of the collection is literally 'fervour'.

Where to go after the political?

Three or four years after *100 Elegies* I began to arrange my poems on various occasions into a sequence. Having defined the two sides of my poetic, the lyrical and the political, it was clear that this mixed sequence would contain elements of both. At first I thought that the collection would be entitled 'It may be time for another war', after a line in one poem, 'The New Millennium':

Nations fall apart, but can never
Be allowed to, morale is low –
It may be time for another war.

Written in May 2001, several months before the events of September 11 and their cynically manipulated *sequelae*. However it became apparent after a while that the poems I wanted to include fell into four sections, and only one of them was concerned wholly with the political.

This section, still entitled 'It may be time for another war', comes second after a sequence of poems about ordinary life and love. Here the poems are often grim, but there is a sense, as there had not been before in my poetry, of a normal life that can be grasped:

People live muddily in valleys
With little care for good or evil,

Beyond the usual name-calling.
Evil is what fails to provide
For its own good continuance –
Good is what does provide.

And from the high hills raptor eyes
May see much, with disapproval,
But fail to note the flammulated vagaries
Of the muddy life they look beyond.

The second section, as noted, contains the political poems, the usual straightforward, necessary ones against the evils of our times, but others insisting on finer distinctions:

You have always fought against them,
Always opposed them, always spoken
With the utmost contempt of their motives;
Sometimes you have suspected a
conspiracy.

What you have never suspected is
Something deeper – that all their efforts
Are indeed co-ordinated, all part
Of a single purpose long-designed.

And that what neither you, nor they,
Have realised is that this purpose,
All unknown to them, and you,
Is thwart to both your hopes.



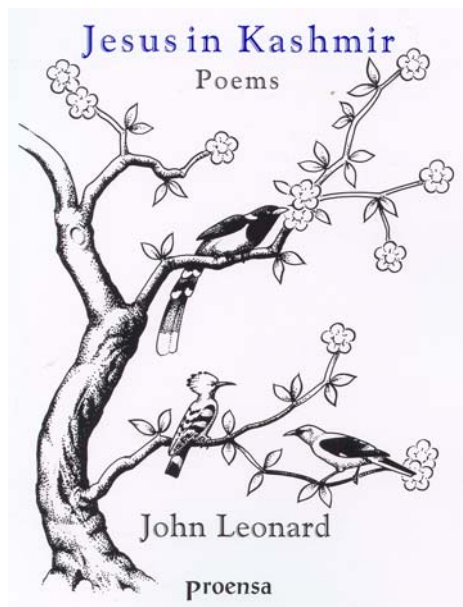
Where to go to after the political? Although the first two sections had contained much wit and satire I found I still had a whole section of poems, mainly about poetry and literature, that insisted on coming next. For example this poem, pointing out the obvious fact

that we should not expect the poetry produced in such an age as ours to be uniformly revelatory, or even true:

Why Read Poetry?

The point of poetry
Is precision. Poems
Are either exactly wrong,
Or exactly right.

So we read poetry
Mostly for our prognostics;
Just occasionally we find
The cure set forth.



And finally the last section: here I found, much to my astonishment, a group of poems that were frankly spiritual, or rather, they admitted the possibility of the spiritual, rather than recommending it as a means of ostracising or stigmatising other people, as most religious poetry seems to do. They recommended no spirituality in particular, but rather 'holiness, not dogma'. At first I could see no way of organising these and then one day I was watching a TV report of threatened war in Kashmir, and I was reminded that I

had read somewhere of a legend that Jesus, having survived crucifixion, travelled east and ended his days in Kashmir.

At one time I had been very interested in what happened in the years after Jesus's crucifixion, and dug the references out; a few hours later the poem 'Jesus in Kashmir' was written—it was only a few days after that I realised that it had been written on Easter Sunday!

What attracted me to the legend was that it was merely a legend; although the alleged tomb of Jesus in Srinagar had been held sacred by both Hindus and Muslims until the present century, the legend had received no official sanction in either religion and thus it was 'A story none could contradict,/No-one kill for'. Certain aspects of the story seemed to have a Buddhist flavour, and it was clear that if the historical Jesus had entered Kashmir, it was because there were at that time communities of Jews living in the that country, perhaps remnants of the ten northern tribes of Israel, deported by the Assyrians, or a more recent diaspora. And so this legend sat that the cross-roads of all these major religions, whilst belonging to none of them (in particular Christianity would not want to hear of a Jesus remaining on earth when he was supposed to have been assumed into Heaven):

....The great tree was filled with birds,
Children came with flowers on holy days,
He spent his time in prayer.

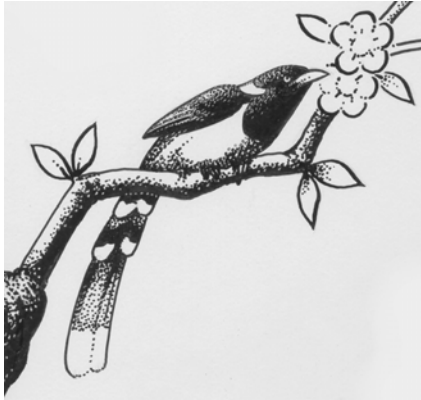
At length he died and was buried
Either by his disciple, or by strangers,
And his legend grew, but it grew

In obscurity, it grew into itself;
Of four pillars, only two remain,
The others being reports of reports.

And this story, his Brahman-, Buddha-
Life, his Sufi-story, story of itself,
Was local and various, opaque,

Was a story none could contradict,
No-one kill for – holiness, not dogma,
Its point. And still the great tree

Remains, filled with bright birds,
And the children with their flowers,
And the broken pillars, witnesses.



After this minor details like publication and distribution were less than important, though I did take care to have a striking cover, of Indian birds perched on a symbolic tree, drawn by my friend, leading Australian bird-artist Peter Marsack. And so the collection remains, as a witness of: my basic lyric bent, modified by satiric wit, political passion, and a sense that the spiritual, as long as it can be kept from turning into the religious, is a possible corollary to all three impulses.

For further details, and to order a copy of *Jesus in Kashmir*, please visit www.jleonard.net