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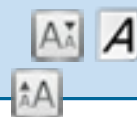


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The Mocking Mermaid: Maps And Mapping In Kenneth Slessor's Poetic Sequence The Atlas, Part Four

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Abstract

Midway through composing his five-poem sequence The Atlas (ca. 1930), the acclaimed Australian poet Kenneth Slessor suddenly wrote "Southerne Sea" in his poetry journal. He'd just chosen John Speed's famous double-hemisphere map, A New and Accurat Map of the World (1651/1676), as the epithet of his fourth poem "Mermaids." Unlike the cartographic epigraphs introducing the other poems, however, this map has little to do with "Mermaids," which is a riotous romp through seas of fantastic creatures, and a paean to the maps that gave such creatures

immortality. The map features a vast "Southerne Unknowne Land," but no mythical beasts. And while it names "Southerne Sea" and "Mar del Zur," neither "Mermaids" nor The Atlas mentions Australia or the Southern Sea. Moreover, Slessor's sailors are "staring from maps in sweet and poisoned places," yet what the poem describes are "portulano maps," replete with compass roses and rhumb lines—features notably absent on A New and Accurat Map of the World. My paper, the fifth part of the first full-scale examination of Slessor's ambitious but poorly understood sequence, retraces his creative process to reveal why he chose the so-called Speed map. In the process, it extricates the poem from what Slessor originally called "Lost Lands Mermaids" in his journal, details his debt to the ephemeral map catalogue in which he discovered his epigraph, and, finally, offers alternative cartographic representations for "Mermaids." Among them, Norman Lindsay's delightful frontispiece for Cuckooz Contrey (1932), the collection in which The Atlas debuted as the opening sequence.

Keywords

Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971); Cuckooz Contrey (1932); The Atlas sequence (ca. 1930); "Mermaids"; poetry—twentieth-century; poetry—Australian; poetry and maps; cartography—seventeenth-century; John Speed (1552–1629); Norman Lindsay (1879–1969)

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