

## **2022 Curtin Family Home Lecture (delivered 13/4/22)**

### **Dr Toby Davidson**

Hi everyone and thank you so much to Governor Kim Beazley for agreeing to help launch *Good for the Soul: John Curtin's Life with Poetry* here at the Curtin Family Home Lecture, it means a great deal.

The Curtin and Beazley families go way back in Cottesloe Labor folklore, and it's marvellous to see that continue.

I want to also thank Josh Wilson, MP for Fremantle, for his kind words and for the Acknowledgement of Whadjuk Noongar Country and elders past, present, emerging, which of course I want to echo.

There is a longer list of Acknowledgements in the book, but this evening I do want to particularly want to thank

- Julian Donaldson, CEO of the National Trust of Western Aust.
- Milly Bartlett from NTWA for tirelessly co-ordinating this event
- UWA Publishing, for being here tonight, and for publishing *Good for the Soul*
- The fabulous Grove Library for hosting and the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library for their help with archival work
- My partner Dr Erin Claringbold, who can't be here, but has lived and breathed this book as I have.
- Several generations of friends and family arrayed before me in an almost dreamlike, if slightly dystopian, fashion

## 1 – 'John Curtin's Use of Poetry in Aust's Darkest Hour'

It's wonderful to finally share this with you all. As Curtin's great-grandson and a poet myself, writing this book has been a pursuit of both intellectual and personal curiosity.

It's sometimes said, more often believed, that poetry has no pragmatic value, that poems are word-puzzles simply devised as a result of an excess of cleverness, sentiment or self-indulgence.

Innocent teenagers are tormented at school with impractical verses which they have to survive to beat the test, before they're finally freed from poetry forever and can graduate into real life. Poetry doesn't sell in Australia like it does overseas. Poetry is neither economic, nor rational, nor practical, it won't secure you a car or a house or a job, and thus – so the conventional wisdom runs – it's absolutely useless in a crisis.

How then did Australia's most highly-rated Prime Minister end up quoting British, Australian and American poetry to the public to call them forth during the nation's greatest-ever military crisis, and how did he end up using poetry to soothe his mind to better deliver his famous wartime leadership? Further, how is it possible that the same Prime Minister recommended that 'every man should read poetry for the good of his soul?' and gave speeches expounding the importance of the arts right in the thick of the war?

The truth is that poetry was integral to Curtin the communicator as well as Curtin the man. *Good for the Soul* is a rare thing in Australian publishing, a literary biography of a national leader. It exhaustively tracks John Curtin's life with poetry, from his childhood performance of Sir Walter Scott's swashbuckling romance 'Marmion' in the small Victorian goldfields town of his childhood, to verses composed to honour him after his death in office in July 1945.

## 2 – DARKEST HOURS

In this lecture, I will consider in depth two speeches and one written statement from December 1941, only two months into Curtin's Prime Ministership. John Curtin called this 'our darkest hour' in a radio broadcast to the nation on 8 December 1941 as Australia declared war on Japan in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack which drew the United States into the war.

This period, from Pearl Harbour to the sixty-fourth and last Japanese air raid on Darwin in November 1943 has been cast by many historians as Australia's darkest hour, when a nation-state only forty years old faced the very real prospect of invasion by a foreign power.

Before proceeding, however, I have to say that the recently completed online map of Australian Frontier Massacres by Lyndall Ryan and the University of Newcastle causes me to think that this darkest hour of struggle with a foreign power in 1941 also has a rival darkest hour of a different, but not unrelated, kind in British Invasion and the Frontier Wars.

The study of one can surely foster empathy and understanding regarding the other and I hope over time they become equally well-known, because the better a nation knows itself, the less deluded, more caring and more capable it becomes.

National institutions like the Australian War Memorial have a responsibility to play an expanded role in this. When I studied English and History at UWA, I regularly traipsed past the words of Socrates carved into sandstone at the Faculty of Arts: 'KNOW THYSELF'. It wasn't 'KNOW THY HIGHLIGHTS AND EDIT OUT THE REST'.

We saw how things ended with Socrates, of course, condemned to death by the powers that be for corrupting the Athenian youth. Yet ideas, as Socrates knew, are immortal. And, as my lecture in this fine library hopes to show, sometimes so are words.

### 3 – CURTIN PREAMBLE

In 1917, a 32-year-old John Curtin arrived in the West to take up editorship of the *Westralian Worker*. He had already reprinted much British, American and Australian poetry in his earlier paper, *The Timber Worker*, and been schooled in the quoting of the poetry in political speeches by his mentors Labor MP Frank Anstey and the British socialist Tom Mann. Curtin established an early reputation in Melbourne as a rousing speaker who dressed like a bookish recluse.

As a member of the Victorian Socialist Party as well as the Labor Party, he was introduced to ‘poets of democracy’ like Walt Whitman beside ‘poets of revolution’ like English Romantic poets William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and late nineteenth century radicals like Algernon Swinburne, William Morris and Victor Hugo.

Curtin saw and gave passionate speeches on the banks of the Yarra and later referred to this time as ‘my university’, as his formal schooling had ended at thirteen, like many working-class children.

When Curtin disembarked at Fremantle in 1917, one local observed ‘He looks more like a uni. professor than a socialist warrior.’ He married another bookish type, Tasmanian Elsie Needham, and settled at 24 Jarrad Street Cottesloe, which featured a prominent front room filled with books.

Curtin quickly became staunch friends with the first great anthologist of Australian poetry, Sir Walter Murdoch, a foundation professor of English at UWA, whose night classes Curtin also attended, along with the novelist and playwright Katharine Susannah Prichard.

Aside from a handful of satirical sketches (compiled at the end of the book), Curtin never wrote any poetry of his own. He was, however, quite used to the company of poets.

His father-in-law Abraham Needham, who lived with the family in Cottesloe, published a blood-red hardback of tub-thumping socialist verse entitled *The Radicals* and Curtin's daughter Elsie published a chapbook *Killed in Action and Other Verse* in 1944.

From his Melbourne days, Curtin personally knew radical poets such as Bernard O'Dowd (who we'll return to), Marie Pitt, Louis Esson and R.H. Long. None are household names today, but they still appear in major national anthologies. As PM, Curtin befriended Dame Mary Gilmore (Scott Morrison's great great aunt, who appears on the \$10 note), they corresponded and she wrote a raft of poems in his honour.

## 4 - TO 1941

In his first days as Prime Minister in October 1941, Curtin presented himself to the press as a self-styled intellectual who enjoyed relaxing, when he could, with a book, a beach walk, a game of cards or fossick in the garden. He also revealed that he held to a Sunday night poetry ritual. Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* reported it thus:

At the age of 56 John Curtin becomes ... the first Prime Minister from a Western Australian electorate.

This ex-journalist who led the Opposition for six years is known to the public as a brilliant orator and debater with the best command of vocabulary of any Australian politician.

To his family and close friends he is also the man who loves to read poetry – especially Milton – and confesses to being an “alleged” bridge-player and bowler.

At his home in Cottesloe (W.A.) John Curtin has a library of more than 2000 books.

“For 20 years it has been my habit on Sunday nights to devote at least an hour to reading poetry...I read them all, from Chaucer on – but my favourite is Milton. Yet I don't suppose many people read him today. Every man should read poetry – for the good of his soul.”

The new PM, the public were reliably informed, read and recommended poetry, especially the works of the author of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton. Perhaps Curtin was drawn to Milton in part because of Milton's reputation as a famous libertarian who gave anti-censorship speeches to the British House of Commons -- something Curtin drew upon in his own parliamentary speeches attacking the wartime censorship of the Menzies and Fadden Governments.

Curtin was also drawn to Milton's exploration of religion, society and the human condition. Curtin himself had abandoned Catholicism for radicalism and the Labour Movement in his teens, but still referred to the Bible and used Christian concepts in public and private rhetoric, especially when he sought to appeal to American ears.

General Douglas MacArthur, Curtin would discover, was a fellow fan of American poetry and in one of their first meetings they discussed poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.

But back to the phrase 'For the good of his soul', as there is another dimension to this. 'For the good of his soul' is the 1940s version of 'to support your mental health' and, as the war dragged on, colleagues and journalists discovered that the discussion or recital of poems seemed to calm Curtin, a lifelong workaholic, and lift him out of a state of nervous exhaustion or his crushing 'black moods'.

These black moods mirrored Churchill's experiences with what he dubbed 'the black dog', or depression. For both men this was undoubtedly worsened by the extreme mental and emotional strain of leading their respective countries through a war like any other.

## 5 -- Swinburne Ends Broadcast on 8/12/41

Now to the first speech I'll consider, Curtin's radio broadcast on 8 December 1941, the same day as word came through of the Pearl Harbor attack. It famously opened 'Men and women of Australia. We are at war with Japan'. Japan, Curtin intoned, had struck 'like an assassin in the night', but such flourishes soon gave way to a steely determination to mobilise the nation:

There is a place and part for all of us. Each must take his or her place in the service of the nation, for the nation itself is in peril. This is our darkest hour. Let that be fully realized ...

Men and women of Australia. It is my duty to sound a tocsin [alarm]! I proclaim a call unto you. I do it in the words of Swinburne:

Come forth, be born and live,  
Thou that hast help to give,  
And light to make man's day of manhood fair;  
With flight outflying the sphered sun,  
Hasten thine hour  
And halt not til thy work be done.

Thus Australia went to war with Japan on the back of lines 428–30 of Algernon Swinburne's 'The Eve of Revolution', a long poem from his 1871 collection *Songs Before Sunrise*, a socialist favourite. The poem was inspired by Mazzini's unification of Italy (now an Axis enemy), but broader ideals of Liberty and Freedom emerge as the poem's chief concerns.

[\*\*Play final minute of YouTube clip of Curtin's Declaration of War broadcast 1941\*\*]



You can imagine these lines echoing through people's houses as they gathered around the wireless to hear the Prime Minister's speech in response to Pearl Harbor. Curtin more often than not cited poetry at the start or end of speeches in this way.

Swinburne's concluding line 'halt not til thy work be done' was an ethos for Curtin himself, those around him, the armed forces and the country more generally as Australia moved to a war footing. A direct radio telegraph to Washington was established. Parliament was recalled. Private citizens were instructed not to take holidays. Drills were done. Trenches were dug. Windows blacked out. Family members farewelled.

Curtin himself did not return to Perth, making it the first Christmas he and Elsie had spent apart as husband and wife, and possibly also the first apart from his adult children in 24-year-old Elsie and 20-year-old John. The war would call upon them all.

## 6 – 1941 Boxing Day Broadcast and ‘Turn to America’ statement

Curtin invoked Swinburne to call Australians forth at the end of his broadcast declaring war on Japan and Australia’s darkest hour. In between frenetic preparations, the public mulled over what it all meant – disaster for the country, or ultimately a new dawn?

In another extraordinary broadcast, this time on Boxing Day 1941, Curtin prophesied the latter via William Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘To Toussaint L’Ouverture’, a poem of resistance which celebrates the ex-slave who won Haitian independence from the tyrannical grip of Napoleon:

We have a proud history, we have a noble heritage, and we can, with strength of mind, look dawnwards from this night of travail to a great future. On ourselves depends a vast part of what has to be done. While each of us has a grim responsibility and a stern and inexorable personal duty, no one stands alone.

These are, as Wordsworth put it –

“Powers that will work for thee – air, earth, and skies –  
There’s not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee! Thou hast great allies:  
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
And love, and man’s unconquerable mind.”

‘No one stands alone’ -- Curtin’s appeal to one ally in particular followed in the Melbourne *Herald* the very next day, the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1941. Of all his speeches and writings, Curtin is best known for his ‘turn to America’ statement, entitled ‘The Task Ahead’.

For John Edwards, author of *John Curtin's War*, this 1500-word piece is 'the most celebrated document in Australian foreign policy, [written] to stir greater Australian efforts in the demanding year ahead'. But, Edwards adds, 'the piece was also directed to an audience of two in Washington: Churchill and Roosevelt, then still conferring on strategy for the war against Japan'.

It was a clear assertion of Australian agency, for a place at the international table, and for this speech of monumental historical significance, Curtin chose to begin with words from Australian poet Bernard O'Dowd. O'Dowd was, for Curtin, the premier poet of Australia, his Aussie John Milton or William Wordsworth. Curtin began 'The Task Ahead' with a quatrain from O'Dowd's 'Dawnward', first published in 1902 when Curtin was an idealistic young man in the afterglow of Federation.

The poem depicts a young Australia on the precipice of ruin or the dawn of greatness, with the image of a red-veiled sun serving either as a portent of doom or symbol of hope. However as Douglas Stewart, the famous *Bulletin* editor and poet, remarked:

O'Dowd never for one moment allowed himself to think that [his image of] the "reddish veil" portended disaster. It was the Dawn; he never doubted it. Clearly, burningly, passionately, without apology and without fear of ridicule, [O'Dowd] saw Australia – with all its faults – as the hope of the world.

Curtin shared O'Dowd's hope and vision, and so began 'The Task Ahead' with these words:

"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?"

Curtin then continued...

So wrote Bernard O'Dowd. I see 1942 as a year in which we shall know the answer. I would, however, that we provide the answer ... We look for a solid and impregnable barrier of the Democracies against the three Axis Powers, and we refuse to accept the dictum that the Pacific struggle must be treated as a subordinate segment of the general conflict ...

Without inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom ... we shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give to our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy...

For Curtin at that moment in Australia's history, this imagery and the inspirational ideals behind it spoke powerfully to the potential dawn of liberty and the realisation of Australia's maturing on the world stage as more than a just far-flung outpost of the British Empire.

This dawn would not come easily, of course. It required, as Curtin put it, 'the reshaping, in fact the revolutionising, of the Australian way of life' as the nation responded to the Pacific war on its doorstep.

## 7 – CODA in 1942

In August 1942, John and Elsie Curtin attended Dame Mary Gilmore's 77<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Sydney, hosted by the Henry Lawson Society and attended by prominent literary and political figures. Curtin's brief speech that night was not widely reported and is not well known.

Nevertheless, it is one of my favourites as it reveals exactly why he dearly valued literature and the arts, right in the thick of the war, in a city which had been shelled by Japanese midget submarines just three months earlier.

For those who have endured the reductionist claptrap of economic rationalism, it also serves as something of a healing balm, or as my partner Erin puts it, 'a warm hug'. That night in 1942, Curtin declared, and I'll finish with this:

There is no censorship on poetry, at least, not always. In any case, it would be very difficult to enforce if anyone sought to impose it. Australia does not consist of the buildings around us, the thoroughfares, the munition factories. It consists basically of human beings, not only their physical presence, but their mental capacities, and, I believe, their spiritual purpose.

How shall they express their individualities? Through the men of letters, the poets, thinkers, dreamers, artists, sculptors and musicians. Without the collaboration of these, this country would be but a material place, well fed, perhaps, but not happy or enduring.

Thank you everyone and, of course, there's more in the book. I'm happy to answer any questions.