# Jack Lindsay meets Guillevic

***Gavin Bowd***

Jack Lindsay (1900-1990) was the son of Norman Lindsay, arguably the most important Australian painter of the twentieth century. In 1926, Jack Lindsay travelled to London with the ambition of leading an Antipodean cultural invasion. However, his literary enterprises, Fanfrolico Press and *London Aphrodite*, soon folded, with the result that Lindsay could not afford to return to his homeland. Instead, he plunged into a prolific career as poet, novelist, art critic, editor and translator, producing more than 170 books. In 1936, he abandoned Kierkegaard for Karl Marx and modernism for the historical novel. Now a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Lindsay contributed works in the new Popular Front line, notably his poem "Who are the English?" and *1649 – Novel of a Year*, which exhumed a radical British tradition buried by Establishment culture. This ideological evolution was accompanied by an increasing interest in France. During the dark days of the Second World War, he penned a long poem, *Into Action: the Battle of Dieppe*, which celebrated that heroic but disastrous cross-Channel expedition of 1942 and called for a Second Front involving the Free French. At the same time, he promoted the French Resistance poetry that began to gain considerable popularity in Britain. As World War was soon replaced by Cold War, Lindsay finally made the acquaintance, often through Nancy Cunard – "that indefatigable and ardent worker in all lost causes"[1] -, of Resistance writers such as Roger Vaillant, Aragon, Léon Moussinac, Jean Marcenac, Paul Eluard and Tristan Tzara, men who "seemed to me to live in a richer and fuller dimension of space and time than anyone I knew in England – to have gone through trials and tests that penetrated deeper into the spirit, and to have known triumphs,

[1] Jack Lindsay, *Meetings with Poets* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1968), p. 168.

exalted or serene, that made them, more simply, happily, and maturely, human beings in the vast scope of that term"[2].

These encounters and friendships are evoked in Lindsay's memoir, *Meetings with Poets*, published in 1968. It also includes an affectionate and amusing passage regarding Guillevic. The meeting with our poet on the terrasse of the Deux Magots, Boulevard St Germain, can probably be situated in the summer of 1949. Guillevic gives Lindsay a copy of *L'homme qui se ferme*, a collaboration with the artist Edouard Pignon. This long poem subsequently appears in the collection *Gagner*, of the same year, as does the *Chanson*, "Ma fille, la mer", which Lindsay translates here. Guillevic announces that he has "just been fired". This was not the first time in his career as a top civil servant. In May 1947, the Communists had been expelled from government, including minister François Billoux, of whom Guillevic was *chef de cabinet*. In 1949, the Cold War was in full swing, and Guillevic, as an open PCF member, would be a prime target for any purge of subversive elements in the French state apparatus (though he would soon return to work as *Inspecteur des finances*, retiring in 1965). But political principle apart, we see another side of Guillevic, as a spontaneously singing *bon viveur* who reminds Lindsay of the Scottish poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson. All these elements combine in Lindsay's poem of homage, where an indomitable Breton "block requiring spectacles" haunts the bars of St Germain-des-Prés, cocking a snook at authority and indulging in a passion he frequently expressed in oral and written form: *la chanson*.

**From *Meetings with Poets:***

I must mention also a small solid Breton, Guillevic, who composed in a style compounded of the concision of proverbs and the laconic brevity of a sort of lyrical instantaneousness. The butterfly pulsations of a short flight from flower to flower. Perhaps folksong had had a part in shaping his style; for I have been with him in café-bars where he burst easily and unself-consciously into song. (This capacity he shared with Hamish Henderson, who stayed a

[2] Ibid., p. 200.

while with us at Wellington Road, and who was liable at any moment to illustrate his remarks by raising his voice in folksong, in the street, bus or tube, without the least sense of doing anything unusual.)

Once Ann [Davies, actor at the Unity Theatre and Lindsay's partner] and I were sitting at the Deux Magots and Guillevic ambled across the open space in front of the seats, came up with his customary poker-face, accepted a drink, and then silently handed me a copy of a small book, *L'homme qui se ferme*. "That's me," he remarked. "Apposite. I've just been fired. Not that it matters."

I knew he had some sort of job in a government office. "Why?"

"Simply a matter of principle. Not that it matters."

I waited, but he made no more comment. He watched the people going by and accepted another drink. I found that he was hard-up. "Have you got any plans?"

He seemed surprised at such a suggestion. "No. Why? But it doesn't matter. Something will turn up."

Next evening he was singing folksongs in a café near the lower end of the Boulevard St Germain. Nothing was solved. Nothing mattered. Except of course the songs.

My daughter, the sea,
already you've guessed it,
isn't a present
that someone can give you

My daughter, the wave
is another world
where the foot is buried
and nothing answers

The horizon, my daughter,
is a great lord
that will take you in
when you have opened it

My daughter, the bramble,
you've noted already,
offers no friendship
that won't be a struggle

My daughter, the dance,
how may I teach you?
it's there in your eyes
and you will follow it

And hope, my daughter,
more strong than the sea
more strong than the bramble
the wave and the dance

Eluard enjoyed these poems by Guillevic, and drew my attention especially to one entitled *Life is Expanding* ["La vie augmente", also in *Gagner*]. Not long after the meeting with him at the Deux Magots, I wrote some verses on him in the Luxemburg Gardens, which I cite as holding my response to his personality and poetry in those days. The last two stanzas use images from his own poems.

Guillevic like a Breton headland
ignores enormous waves
that rave and rumble vaguely about
his absentminded feet

round as a ball of granite rolling
along the Paris street
a block requiring spectacles
but otherwise complete

in melancholic gravity
he meditates his parables
in strict concision and derision
wondering where he'll eat

and if as night links arms he tries
a song of love or bread
he sings in the café till thrown out
and takes his song to bed

He lost his job and took a knock
We had the luck to meet
"Simply a matter of principle…"
he mopped his brow in the heat

The rage of government offices
had closed above his head
but calm and maddening as a rock
he stood by what he said

in aphoristic indifference
there by the Deux Magots
he sipped vin rouge, stared back at the clock
and watched his chances go

As long as I've a song a song
of loving to repeat
I'll grit my teeth and whistle along
and not admit defeat

they can't call up the fire-brigade
against a flagrant flower
or sock a circle in the jaw
and I'm beyond their power

Why worry? I understand the law
and see the issue plain
as long as I can close my eyes
and open them again[3]

[3] Ibid., pp. 194-197.