

**The Nuclear Family from Wellington to Hiroshima:  
Eithne Wilkins's 'Oranges and Lemons'**

ABSTRACT

This is a recuperative essay addressing the work of Eithne Wilkins (1914-75), a poet with a strong presence in journals of the 1940s and 1950s, but now mainly remembered as the first translator (with her husband Ernst Kaiser) of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. I argue for her importance as a largely forgotten late modernist, and examine her major poetic sequence 'Oranges and Lemons', possibly the only long poem published by a woman in Britain between 1945 and 1960, and almost certainly the most ambitious. It is comprised of a series of allusive poems incorporating memories of her New Zealand childhood, of her father Edgar, portrayed as a fire-watching doctor, and of the experience of her brother Maurice Wilkins, who worked on the Manhattan Project and later won a Nobel Prize. I argue that the poem, with its complex and personal mythopoesis, represents a response to global conflict in which the scattering of the 'nuclear family' figures a hemispheric war.

Keywords: post-war poetry, late modernism, nuclear war, antipodes, mythopoesis.

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This is necessarily an essay in recuperation. In modernist studies, we often argue for an expanded canon, and, to be sure, in the last thirty years a number of works have been added to the list of those who are taught, included in anthologies, and made the subject of monographs. Often those texts are deemed to have been marginalized in some way, so that there seems an obvious virtue in placing them at the centre of our attention, de-colonizing the curriculum or paying attention to minority positions. But the relatively small numbers of such texts is one outcome of the inherently conservative brake of the institutions of canonicity, the self-sustaining interpretive traditions discussed by Frank Kermode and others, within an academy that does not always reward the pursuit of 'minor' writers.<sup>1</sup> The origins of English literary studies in an Arnoldian pursuit of texts which hold a permanent value, a secular midrash within which interpretation gathers around an established canon, sets the subject apart from the more open-ended historical inquiry implicit in philology. The consequent conservatism is embedded within the exigencies of the publishing industry, itself linked closely to the university curriculum: we are all familiar with the recent PhD on a less well-known writer facing a struggle to sell a book and being asked to add chapters on Woolf or Joyce; or publishing an article and seeing it remain uncited. It is perhaps overly crude to point out that even some promoters of the highly-branded 'New Modernist Studies' limit their writing either to high-status theoretical and disciplinary issues or canonical authors, but to do so is simply to recognise the persistence of a structure which is familiar to readers of Bourdieu: distinction and even dissent is articulated from a central position.

More modestly, too seldom do we – or perhaps I should particularize responsibility and say I, as someone who has worked in the field for many years – take the time to say that a writer's work has been almost entirely forgotten and yet is nevertheless worthy of interpretive effort because

of its inherent quality, and pay sustained attention to that for which there is no real interpretive tradition or even a ready audience. I propose here to look at a poet who had a vivid reputation in her own period, but who has largely been forgotten – though her reputation as a translator of modernist texts survives. She is important because she is part of a lost history of a late British ‘visionary modernism’ in the period 1936-1955, recently highlighted in one aspect by James Gifford and more broadly by James Keery.<sup>2</sup> As Andrew Duncan – one of the very few to mention her at all – has observed, she authored what appears to be the only major poetic sequence published by a British woman poet in the two decades between 1940 and 1960.<sup>3</sup> That sequence is in turn an important and deeply-felt, though highly oblique and personal, response to the epoch-creating event which is the coming of the atom bomb. Finally, she is also interesting, from my own perspective, because she is a figure in a polyglot European modernism which involves the immigrant experience and the southern hemisphere as one of its reference points. This is part of a global vision which is one outcome of what James Belich calls the ‘settler revolution’ of the previous century: an expansion of the Anglophone world which gives us the peripatetic multi-national work of a ‘George Egerton’ (Mary Bright), Lola Ridge, or even D. H. Lawrence.<sup>4</sup>

Eithne Wilkins was born in New Zealand in 1914 as Ethne Wilkins (‘Eithne’ was, she later said, her own Celticization).<sup>5</sup> Her father Edgar was a recent arrival, a doctor from two distinguished Dublin protestant families, the Wilkinsons and the Huttons (an ancestor designed Nelson’s column, and his parents’ marital breakdown is alluded to in *Ulysses*).<sup>6</sup> Immigrating to New Zealand in 1913 with his wife Eveline, Edgar Wilkins worked in Petone, then in rural Pongaroa, 100 miles north of Wellington, and then in Wellington. After some conflicts with the medical establishment he moved his family back to London in 1923, when Eithne was about to turn nine. They moved to Birmingham, where Edgar worked in public health in schools up to his death in 1946. Eithne studied languages and literature at Somerville College, Oxford, taught by the flamboyant Rimbaud scholar Enid Starkie. She worked as a left-aligned journalist and translator in London and Paris just before the war; during the war she taught at the Emanuel School, evacuated from London to Hampshire.<sup>7</sup> In 1941 she married the Austrian writer and translator Ernst Kaiser.<sup>8</sup> She had a research fellowship at Bedford College, London in 1953; in 1954 she and Kaiser moved to Rome for 12 years and, supported by the Bollingen Foundation, produced classic translations of German modernist writings by Robert Musil (the first English translation of *A Man Without Qualities*), Franz

Kafka, Siegfried Lenz, Gustav Mahler and others. Wilkins died in 1975, a few years after Kaiser, having worked at the University of Reading for several years.

Because the Wilkins family is so important to her poetry, I will linger on them a little. Her younger brother was Maurice Wilkins, the crystallographer at Kings College London who, with Watson and Crick, was to win a Nobel Prize for his work on DNA. In his autobiography *The Third Man of the Double Helix*, Maurice recalls their Wellington childhood in terms of an Edenic spiral: 'Eithne and I danced and danced, each of us whirling about, and life was a festival'. He also reports that their intense childhood bond was only ended by her near-death from septicaemia soon after they arrived in London: she was hospitalized for months, pre-penicillin, with drains in her joints, and was partially disabled thereafter.<sup>9</sup> In the drafts of the autobiography held at Kings College London, Maurice is even more candid about this event – a numbing early 'death' that left him slow to respond fully to later losses – and about Edgar Wilkins, describing him as at once an inspirational father, 'extraordinary fun', and a beguiling Peter Pan figure or even a 'holy fool' whose contempt for authority could create problems.<sup>10</sup> With his vegetarianism and unconventional educational ideas, Edgar seems to have fostered intensely creative children. Eithne described him as 'a doctor, above all a healer', and remained involved in his projects, editing his book on public health after his death.<sup>11</sup>

Wilkins's career as a poet spanned over 20 years, from the mid-1930s to the late 50s. Her output was sporadic and a promised volume of poems never appeared, so her distinctive and often difficult work – a corpus of around 40 poems that I have been able to locate, including a few longer sequences – survives only in the small journals of the period. She began publishing at Oxford, in the short-lived magazine of the women's colleges, *Lysistrata*, where she appears alongside Winifred Holtby, Margarita Laski, F.T. Prince and others.<sup>12</sup> She later had links to the poets of the 'New Apocalypse': her poem 'For Those Who are Alive' provided the title of Howard Sergeant's quasi-apocalyptic 1946 collection, and she has been compared to Dylan Thomas.<sup>13</sup> Like many of those associated with the field of 'Visionary Modernism' (or what Herbert Read and others labelled a Romantic revival) she also had affiliations with journals that represented a European modernist tradition – she placed a number of poems in the Bryher-funded *Life and Letters Today*<sup>14</sup> – and with the radical, often anarchist publications that sprang up after 1936, often featuring the wild Americans Henry Miller and Kenneth Patchen as twin icons. Two of her earliest

poems were printed in Roger Roughton's *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* in 1937 (where they are followed by William Empson's 'Just a Smack at Auden').<sup>15</sup> She appeared in the anarchist George Woodcock's journal *Now*, and in *Jazz Forum*, the short-lived but colourful jazz-and-culture review issued from Fordingbridge, Hampshire, by Woodcock's friend Albert J. McCarthy.<sup>16</sup> She was published in *Circle*, the Bay Area journal edited by George Leite, where she appears alongside Anais Nin, Robert Duncan, Patchen and Miller.<sup>17</sup> The most prominent selection of her work, including a reprint of some earlier poems, appeared in Kenneth Rexroth's American anthology *The New British Poets* (1949).<sup>18</sup> Her longest poem, the sequence 'Oranges and Lemons', was published in the multi-lingual Italian journal *Botteghe Oscure* in 1954; the last group of her poems appeared in the first issue of Joseph F. McCrindle's Rome-New York *Transatlantic Review* in 1959.<sup>19</sup> In total, this set of affiliations represents a significant intellectual formation for a poet who was making her name as a translator of modernist works: a set of international linkages embodying the idea of a new poetry emerging from the late 1930s, conditioned by the war but sustaining a European modernist inheritance.

Wilkin's work is more formal and metrical in her earliest poems, thereafter dense, irregular, allusive, and often marked by personal references. She was most prolific in the period 1943-47, with the war a constant presence. Her war poems are often written in dialogue with men who served: a reflection on the previous war dedicated to Edmund Blunden; a 'variation' on a theme by Sidney Keyes written after his death; two poems dedicated to the memory of dead friends, including the intensely-realized 'Persona', written 'in memory of Alan R. Davis, missing in India' (he is commemorated at the war memorial in Rangoon). Other poems express the numbing and splintering effects of death, as in 'Pearls That Were Our Eyes':

Now we are not able to shake off  
 so many millions for our second thoughts or turn  
 our faces like a picture to the wall.  
 Is it a wonder then our mouths fall open, thirsting  
 to bite this memory short?  
 There is no shelter in the intellect:  
 and peace – that was a debt we shall not pay  
 to skulls,

but weigh them down with stones.

The complexity of her dialogue with tradition, and the toughness of her register, is suggested by 'And only our Shadow Walks with Us', a poem that seems to allude to Eliot in its title but is dedicated to Robert Graves; which rejects a nostalgia that it nevertheless invokes; and which even seems to resonate with Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', then lying unpublished in his papers, with its version of the storm of history:

We cannot go again to our small house;  
 nor is it likely we can reach the juggling sea with all its flames.  
 Inaccurate, fragmentary, shrinking back from traces in the grass,  
 the earlier footsteps and the patch where others or ourselves have lain—  
 some other century, with lark ascending—we face the wind  
 blowing backwards from the memory, hair streaming from the brow.<sup>20</sup>

If her diction is often harsh, she could also write more lyrically, in the manner of Rilke, as in her sonnet 'Eurydike', with its pointed riposte to the myth of song as masculine loss and recompense, its caesurae and flowing enjambments figuring the poet's chopping of the flow of experience into the feet of his song:

And when she was dead, who had been all the luck  
 he knew, the very language that he spoke, in time  
 he hardly saw or heard the unveiled breezes mock  
 her clear lost face; how silence filled the hidden stream  
 behind those fading trees; how light was stripped away  
 from the steep highroad he forgot to recognise...<sup>21</sup>

After the war, her work increasingly engaged with the study of folk-lore and mythology (the association with the Bollingen Foundation may be significant here: it published Jung's works and such texts as Herbert Friedmann's *The Symbolic Goldfinch* (1946). Wilkins wrote an essay on the folk-lore of beans, and the only book she authored, *The Rose-Garden Game* (1969), is a learned and personal study of the mythology and art of the rosary and of prayer-beads from other

traditions.<sup>22</sup> She was working on a study of the mythology of the bear (an animal which she associated with Kaiser) when she died.

In the remainder of this article I will offer a reading of the flowering of that mythical thinking in Wilkin's major poetic sequence, the 18-page 'Oranges and Lemons'. It was published, as noted above, in *Botteghe Oscure* in 1954; as it is not readily available online I will quote copiously.<sup>23</sup> The journal often concerned itself with the legacies of the pre-war avant-garde: the same issue has work in four different languages by Edmond Jabès, René Char, W.S. Graham, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, Ingeborg Bachmann, Theodore Roethke, May Sarton and Pier Paolo Pasolini. In her endnote accompanying the poem, Wilkins reports that the sequence was excerpted from a slightly longer version written between 1948 and 1950, with Part 4, 'When I grow rich', completely omitted (since that Ur-text is unavailable, I use the part-arrangement of the published poem).

To read 'Oranges and Lemons' is to follow Wilkins into the echoing world of folklore and childhood song. In the endnote she states that the sequence was based on the assumption that the famous nursery-rhyme carries the traces of a 'death-and resurrection ritual' (193). The intensely woven elements of the poem include the heavens (the globe, the poles and hemispheres; glass snow globes or *Schneekugel*; the constellations Charles's Wain, a folkloric name for the Great Bear, and the Pleiades); the folklore of apples, candles, axes, and finger-games; the royal figures of Charles I (who becomes the severed head of the rhyme) and the King of the Grail legend; legends of lost towns and bells sounding from the depths of the sea. The questions it asks derive from the children's chant: what do we owe? How are we moved from one place to another? When will death come? A flavour of Wilkins's richly mythographic thinking is conveyed by her 1969 introduction to *The Rose-Garden Game*:

Everyone remembers the fascination of the soap-bubble, and of the glass marble that is like a soap-bubble; of the single dangling ball, luminous on the Christmas-tree; and of the snow-storm, that glass ball which contains a tiny landscape—perhaps a rose—grown house with a garden round it—all of which, when the globe is turned over, disappears in a whirl of white flakes, like the white rose-petals coming down from the ceiling of Sancta Maria ad Nives on 5 August, in memory of the miraculous summer snow of the year 352.

I think particularly of glass marbles of the kind that are no longer made, which have, impenetrably within the translucent globe, spirals of milky delicate lace and coloured ribbon, intertwining helices reminiscent of a molecular structure . . . nebulae . . . worlds within worlds. The sphere represents perfection; and the impenetrability of the glass represents the frustrated human condition, one's inability to reach both the astronomically far outer and the obscurely psychic inner patterns and fuse them into one globular whole, a correspondence to the original globular man in Plato's fable: that integral being which was split apart into male and female so that the two halves would always have to seek each other in the desire to regain wholeness.<sup>24</sup>

A good deal of it this can be read as a gloss on the sequence, with its preoccupation with optics and the snow-storm glass (she also wrote 'Murmelspiel', a complex poem on the swirling glass marbles which she collected).<sup>25</sup> Revealingly, the passage also seems to glance at her brother's work on the double helix of DNA.

In exploring the sequence, an important point of reference is the history of the Wilkins family. Understandably, Wilkins seldom identified as a New Zealander – though in 1955 she was still specifying in a short biography that she was born and 'spent her childhood there', and her memories of that childhood clearly played a major role in her imaginative life.<sup>26</sup> Her poem 'The Old Man' (1945), seemingly addressed to Edgar Wilkins, vividly recalls a dream-land of corrugated-iron houses, earthquakes, verbal informality, as well as the red rocks of Wellington.<sup>27</sup> He 'does not know the half of it',

For we tell no stories when awake  
of our sheet-iron dream  
or underground  
the broad pacific flame.  
And the old man has no say in us, except the twist of luck.

He is the unexploded mine, the no man's land.  
How should he know  
how shockingly, between the river and the open sea, the scarlet rock,

there runs a thin bright promontory winged with querying plants,  
 a cliff-edge stream  
 sprouting into air, with swivelled flowers, a dance  
 of earthquakes, and Johnnie still translating into Jack?<sup>28</sup>

The 'half' is of course a hemisphere. 'We' calls up a dream-life shared with her sibling which, in 'Oranges and Lemons' becomes the basis of what the Apocalyptics called a 'personal mythology', linking the biographical – anchored by place names, a diary entry – and the historical. 'Oranges and Lemons' is suffused with childhood memories of what the poem's word-play calls 'new sea-land'. It has as one focus her father Edgar, the poem's 'lechman' or leech-man as well as its death's head, shown working in the slums of Aston, Birmingham.<sup>29</sup> But the most important figure is her brother Maurice, the poem's golden child and lost object of longing, the other half of that Platonic unity referred to in *The Rose-Garden Game*. Maurice Wilkins also brings us to the politics of the war's end: despite his pacifist work before the war and brief membership of the Communist Party, he worked at Berkeley on the Manhattan Project.<sup>30</sup> The irrevocable fission of the nuclear family, I will suggest, becomes intertwined with the history of the atom bomb.<sup>31</sup>

What follows is a very provisional and sometimes speculative reading of a difficult poem. 'Oranges and Lemons' is structured as a dialogue between 'the conjoint hemispheres' which are the world of south and north, childhood and adulthood (192, 189). The poem's opening section, 'Oranges and Lemons Say the Bells of Saint Clements', focuses on the 'ship's child' and 'white-haired boy' who travels from New Zealand to London, but who remembers the 'wind and daylight' left behind. He is depicted both in intimate terms – in the repeated image of a child raising his arms to have his singlet taken off – and more mythically, in an image which will return at the poem's end, as a 'giant in his sleep', a solar being, 'sun coming over the top of his head ... / Summertime and ocean, the whole of creation / rolled like an orange round in a blaze' (177). His schoolboy and university optics – in Birmingham Maurice Wilkins ground his own lenses to make telescopes – are described at the poem's beginning as an attempt to recapture that lost world:

Oranges and Lemons, say the bells he remembers:  
 flickering in all-time the light-tree, the candles;  
 and home was the like of it, round as a ball.



Part 3, 'When Will You Pay Me? Say the Bells of Old Bailey', moves to another figure: a man lost in the woods, seeking his native village. The refrain is that 'there is a price to pay', that 'someone will suffer for it'. The question – a potent one for Wilkins herself – is what one does with 'the agonized body at the root' (183). The death of Edgar Wilkins from heart disease in 1946 seems to haunt this poem, but the figure is also 'every man' as he returns to the places of memory, 'puzzled, that the place he once called home / is uninhabited: / his village nothing more than, painted under glass, a paper-weight' (184). The round glass ball of memory is a recurrent image in the sequence, but there is also a pun: the poem ends by observing that 'the welkin's over all'. The welkin is the hemisphere of the firmament, but also one of a number of plays on the name 'Wilkins' (later Woollykin, black and white sheep, and Willekin). Balls are also heads in the poem, and Charles I floats in and out of this section, along with the Stuart legend of the King over the water. The father is gone, the King displaced, leaving a world of pain.

Part 4 of the sequence, 'When Will That Be? Say the Bells of Stepney', could be seen as its enigmatic centre: a short 30-line lyric, much more patterned and regular than anything else in the poem. It abstracts some of the sequence's central images: ocean, harbour, lighthouse, candle, glass ball, raised arms, thunder, death's head. Like the nursery rhyme itself, it takes the form of a series of elliptical questions. The sequence has, so far, concerned itself with travelling, memory and loss, but Part 5, 'I Do Not Know, Says the Great Bell of Bow', moves us forward: someone has departed. It seems increasingly difficult to read the poem in terms of family history; but as that history is present before and after this section, it is nevertheless tempting to see the poem alluding to Maurice Wilkins's departure for America, among other figures for loss:

Who knows that he was ever here at all?

There is an empty place that stalks about the world

and is the last resort,

where the lightning always just about to crash is break-glass, get to fiery water, celebrate!

now get to carbonaro, muffled-man or black-mask,

conjurer, now come!

Hear them all hallows! hallows! calling — let not little-boy have been licked up in flame

and nothing left for blacksheep

but to sleep,

alone! (187)

A *carbonaro* is a charcoal burner, but also an Italian revolutionary. I would suggest – though this is a little ahead of the evidence – that the passage evokes the burning power of the atom bomb, which will break a world, break apart memory, create universal death (All Hallows or Halloween, the day before All Saints, was linked by Irish antiquaries to Samhain, the Celtic festival of the dead, who may return to haunt the living). ‘Little Boy’ is the young Maurice, blond in contrast to his slightly darker, red-haired (blacksheep) sister, but also the name of the spherical uranium bomb dropped on Hiroshima, in an act in which Maurice Wilkins later regretted his peripheral involvement; he reported that he had ‘wondered about giving up science’.<sup>33</sup> At Part 5’s conclusion we again remember the dead, marked ‘with a handshake at the lych-gate, awkward words, / ... so lichening him to stone, grass-overgrown’ (187). This again evokes Edgar Wilkins, via a punning association of lych (which means corpse, German *leiche*) with the lechman (Leech-man) or doctor. The lych-gate of a church was traditionally where the dead were placed awaiting burial, a consecrated place of containment where they would not wander and haunt.

The sixth section, ‘The Last Man’s Head. Stepney’, moves towards a more healing language. It detaches itself from the actual words of the rhyme, returning to the geography of a Wellington childhood and sunken song:

Standing above us are three mountains, the giants dark in their long coats,  
 holding their little churches in their hands.  
 Looking towards the sea, or on a map,  
 no one can find them surely (not that Petone, not that Muratai, Pencarrow  
     Head the lighthouse, and Day’s Bay all open arms),  
 but only hear the stone bells ringing underwater, afterworlds:  
*Adeste fideles... Vineta! Vineta!* (188)

The poem moves from New Zealand to Aston, Birmingham, where Wilkin’s father Edgar worked as doctor and, during the war, with his wife as a fire-watcher:

Out of the Axe-Town, in the end, that is a slum of Burning-Town,

no sooner risen with a burning heat, the Smoke,  
 the lechman came, a thirsty man himself, fire-watcher and good doctor to the end.  
 The end? He told, who had a glory all his own,  
 who brought me to this parish, being born down under:  
 The dark house that we live in is the sea;  
 and the great ship Thunder moving round the world from room to room, the red  
     light and the green,  
 one world. (188)

'One World' was the slogan of the internationalist American politician Wendell Willkie, whose name may also be involved in the sequence's puns on 'Welkin' ('Willekin' etc.).<sup>34</sup> More personally, the red light of Birmingham's industry and the green world of 'down under' are the places through which children are moved, unconsulted; indeed, the circle-game of 'Oranges and Lemons' involves some of the stop/go terror of that movement. Edgar Wilkin's death is marked, in the rich idiom of the nursery rhyme:

Out of the slums of Axe-Town, the back-courts long condemned,  
 so candle comes.  
 Out of the dark of Ash-Town, light.  
 The gaffer in his white coat, fire on his forehead magnified, the speculum, of course  
     he came:  
 good doctor and our farthing, all our richness, all,  
 the death's head all our own.

Wilkins wrote a piece for *Jazz Forum* entitled 'Jazz, Surrealism and the Doctor', in which 'the doctor is ... the form that art must take if it is to work out the nightmare and what lies behind'.<sup>35</sup> But the lechman is also, in folk-lore, the third finger – a light pointing to a future (as G.F. Northall explains, 'Our ancestors had distinct names for each of the five fingers. Thumb, toucher, longman, lechman, littleman.... The third finger was called lechman, because a leche or doctor tasted everything by means of it. This is very curious; though we find elsewhere another reason for this appellation, on account of the pulsation in it, which was at one time supposed to communicate directly with the heart').<sup>36</sup> The passage which follows seems to refer to a long and exhausting

childhood walk which is alluded to later in the poem, and to an apple which sustains the children (Cox's Orange Pippin, a mainstay of husbandry in New Zealand):<sup>37</sup>

For Pippin was an apple,  
Pippin was a head.  
Pippin walked in my house,  
awakening the dead.

True story, sight for sore eyes, o believe me.  
A hand, as you might say, held out to take the traveller's hand returning late,  
to lighten him at last, remembering...

The poem ends with Wilkins asking whether this light of memory is 'the bonfire burning the pain away', after 'so longer a dark day' and the 'night more dazzling than the day', perhaps simply the time of war (189).

The next poem of the sequence is entitled 'St. Mary-le-Bow', though in *Botteghe Oscure* its title appears in a smaller typeface, like 'Stepney', so it and the final poem which follows probably constitute the second and third sections of 'The Last Man's Head' (the part which in her endnote Wilkins says has four missing sections). It imagines as a 'glimpse' the halves of the hemispheres united; 'the ball is whole' (189). The passage which follows is one of the densest in the poem, beginning with *Hoppe*, the German version of the childhood game of bouncing on a knee:

Hoppe, Willekin? Well, the name's the same,  
the day's the same —  
and who says two heads are better to this end than one?  
Longing alone is of no use; it is a singing to those sheep on long walks home across those  
hills  
when after nightfall, in far window, lamp was lit for crystal-kin  
who were so *hungry and so thirsty and so tired*  
*and so glad to be getting so near home.*  
Longing goes on for ever, round and round in endless figure eight.  
Only in-glimpse at last is open road, all clear,

and after that it will be some-day.

Some day it will be one day, Charlie, one more day and the balloon goes up.

Gay go up then, God send gay-day.

The italicized lines come from Eithne's childhood diary, recording the long walk mentioned earlier, to Pencarrow Lighthouse outside Wellington, their father singing to encourage his children (we know this because Maurice Wilkins quotes the diary entry in his autobiography).<sup>38</sup> The suggestion is that the speaker as 'crystal-kin' is imprisoned in the glass of memory; she must detach herself and wish her other ('Charlie?') a separate life, the 'all clear' of war's end. In the 'Gay go up then' passage the extended refrain of the older version of the nursery rhyme is referenced – 'Gay go up and gay go down / To Ring the Bells of London Town' - but are there also hints of Enola Gay, the B29 bomber which dropped Little Boy, both a candle of thunder and a 'godsend'?<sup>39</sup>

We come then to 'wedding's day', not the failed wedding of the earlier poem but a recompense for the 'lost day' of exile. This section too is richly allusive: the grail legend, folksong, King Charles again, the host, cosmology and the Wilkins family come together in passages of almost frantic punning. The poem evokes thunder, the 'leche-gate', the 'apple-cart of seven stars' and 'A wedding in the air':

*Tu felix Hostia... today? today?*

How far the present always is!

How long to wait till morning!

Till striding from the woods, from shadowy words still unworked-out, towards this  
house lit up —

what coming storm? what kindle-garden? grow!

Green grow so tall the flashes, o, from wrack to wrack —

and yet —

who knows? who knows?

for whom the lamps are flying, golden apples falling, and generation's at a standstill,  
but that this carnal house, a hallow house, is lit —

look up! look up!

for charcoal-burner's child, conspirator, who comes dark-capped, hard-heeled, and  
 winged,  
 a bubble-thing upon the brink,  
 whistling in darkness, carolling as he comes —  
 fire, fire! quick, fisher, king! —  
 as king I do not know. (190-91)

Some annotation is needed. The Pleiades (or seven stars) are alluded to in Revelation, where Christ holds them in his hand. The ancient folksong 'Green Grow the Rushes, O' describes the 'lily-white boys' (sometimes said to be the statues of Christ and St. John, clothed in rushes for Easter Week; in *The White Goddess* Robert Graves links this song to the shift between the oak and the ilex, the turning of the sacred year).<sup>40</sup> The charcoal-burner suggests the earlier *carbonaro*, but his child seems to allude from Heine's melancholy poem about Charles I, in which the child whose cradle the king rocks is (in his premonition) his future executioner.<sup>41</sup> The *felix hostia* or fortunate sacrifice is less clear, but may relate at once to Edgar Wilkins and to the flashes, fire, story and thunder which is the threat of world's end and the nuclear apocalypse of the 'wedding in the air'.

The final sub-section of the poem, 'Two Sticks and an Apple', depicts both 'the Great Bear waiting for the world to end' (192) and a second coming after All Hallows:

ring, ring merrybells, *mirabile!*  
 What we must make is masterpeace.  
 For surely this lightfall is the time for healing, is, down under, spring;  
 and as new sea-land is the underworld, so what we enter into, we are free from.  
 Look lively then. Look otherwards.  
 Look! Star-words! Far-works! (192)

The peace the poem moves towards is also a family reunion, in the sense that it journeys to the 'underworld' which is 'new sea-land', Eithne as Ophelus recalling her healing father and her brother to his science before the bomb, but more metaphorically to wholeness, to the father's mission and the return of the giant child with which the poem opened: 'Lechman? / Time will tell' (193). The final section begins with 'seven giants, mountainous; in spire and steeple', possibly the

churches of the nursery rhyme (if one adds the implicit presence of the Tower of London chapel to the six named churches). It ends with a capitalized and emended citation from Goethe's evocation of the multiple gods known in *Faust*, Part II, 'the eight, which no one had foreseen'<sup>42</sup>:

« DASACHTE,  
AN DAS NOCH NIEMAND DACHTE. »

Thou art this head of gold.  
Thou art this, Amen, art that.  
And Little Michel  
as well.

'Little Michel' is an allegorical figure for Germany, the equivalent of the English John Bull or the French Marianne, included in a poem of war's end and new dawn.<sup>43</sup> It is hard to construe this ending, but I would tentatively suggest that it adds a new and prophetic figure to the nursery-rhyme. Whether this is a version of her scientist-brother or even Wilkins's husband Ernst Kaiser (associated with the Great Bear), it seems a highly personal figure in whom the hope of the future might be invested.

Wilkins achieves in her sequence a sustained, at times crammed mythopoesis that is matched by few poets of her period. As ritual, 'Orange and Lemons' moves from childhood to middle age, from southern hemisphere to northern, from peace to war, from life to death, and from wholeness to loss. The splitting of the nuclear family is the beginning of pain, and the poem moves from the particularity of early experience to a world rendered global by the 'candle of thunder' which is, seemingly, the A-bomb 'Little Boy', nuclear fission creating a world of death. But it also seeks, intermittently, to find images of recovery: its 'masterpeace' is founded on the turning of the earth, on the healing powers of the 'lechman'.

It is, perhaps, a problem that so much of the poem seems to be an encoded form of family history. But we are given clues to that history, and as it is a history which impinges on the public record the poem gains in stature from its depiction of the nuclear family as the site of death, haunting, longing and even of potential healing. What does the poem ultimately 'say' about the history it

suggestively incorporates via its nursery-rhyme progress around the churches of London, and around two hemispheres? The implication is that the adult must work through the loss of an idealized – but perhaps also intensely nurturing - childhood, and must confront death, and that in a parallel fashion humans must accept the power of destruction they have unleashed, and a world which is no longer ‘familiar’ or *heimlich*.

Why did Wilkins’s healthy reputation in the period around the war produce little long-term recognition? One reason was simply that her work tailed off; she moved into academia and died relatively young; the volume promised in some biographical notes never appeared. Another was that she was associated with a generation of much-disparaged poets, especially the Apocalyptics, who were supplanted in the 1950s by the plain speaking of the Movement. The more florid and at times obscure version of modernism she represented – linked to Thomas, Patchen and Miller – was not the spare style of poets like Oppen and Niedecker, recuperated in the USA and UK in the 1960s. The one place where she might have been recognised as a (borderline) national poet worth remembering, New Zealand, never claimed her. And history moved on. So far as I know, the last poem Wilkins published was ‘Auto da Fe’, in the *Transatlantic Review* in 1959. It is a moving poem about autumn, about the prospect of death, and another ‘good day’ of burning through life:

So thin the time is —  
 skin, a leaf half-gilded by the wind.  
 Once here a woman was?  
 some girl who stoked the vegetable fire and had her name for it  
 herself:  
 a smouldering,  
 and worked in fiery air.  
 Good day it was, the turning face.  
 Good smoke, high wind’s day ordering everywhere the fall, the flaming  
 shift.<sup>44</sup>

Wilkins is above all the poet of war and war’s global destruction, of a flaming world like that of the bush-fire that almost killed her father near Pongoroa, or of the thundering ‘Little Boy’ which threatened to engulf her brother.<sup>45</sup> She registers that world as a totality, with her

intensely-remembered southern hemisphere as a place of possible healing, as it is in Huxley's *Ape and Essence* and other science fiction writings of the post-war period; but also the place from which, for her and her brother, a fracture in experience begins. In her engagement with the powers unleashed by twentieth-century science she has few rivals (Muriel Rukeyser, across the Atlantic, is perhaps her only real comparator in the period). In her more confessional mode, she anticipates some of the women's poetry of the sixties, though with a toughness born of wartime experience. As a woman writer in the period she seems to me unusual in her formal complexity, straining at the limits of a late, mythically-loaded modernism, deeply linked to European culture, and offering evidence for its persistence in a period that is often seen as dominated by the Movement and a more conservative poetic. In her singularity and the strange power of her verse, she surely deserves to be remembered.

## NOTES

I am grateful to the Maurice Wilkins archive at Kings College London for assistance and permissions. Every effort has been made to contact the literary executors of Eithne Wilkins.

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- 1 Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 2 James Gifford, *Personal Modernisms: Anarchist Networks and the Later Avant-Gardes* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014); James Keery, *Apocalypse: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020). Keery's groundbreaking anthology includes Wilkins among its over 200 poets, many of them 'recovered' figures. 'Visionary Modernism' is A. T. Tolley's term, expanded by Keery, e.g. in his recent essay "'The verticals of Adam": Dylan Thomas's and Apocalyptic Modernism', in *Reading Dylan Thomas*, ed. Edward Allen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 179-96.
- 3 Andrew Duncan, 'Mid-century women's poetry: Notes on "missing" mid-century poets,' *Angel Exhaust*, 12 Aug. 2010, <http://angelexhaust.blogspot.com/2010/08/edwin-morgan-and-george-mackay-brown-dm.html>. The nearest rival for the 'long poem' accolade I can see is Kathleen Raine's 'A Sparrow's Flight', *World Review*, NS 15, May 1950, 9-15, though it is a much less ambitious poem. The only other recent critic who has noted Wilkins's presence as a poet is James Keery, who points out that Ted Hughes's poem 'Thrushes' is derived from Wilkins's 'For Those Who Are Alive', the title poem in Howard Sergeant's collection *For Those Who Are Alive* (London: Fortune Press, 1946): see *Apocalypse: An Anthology*, 10.
- 4 James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 5 See Eithne Wilkins to Fulke Rosario, 13 June 1972, Maurice Wilkins Archive, King's College London, K/PPI78/6/2/5, p. 3-5 (also in Rosario papers, Harris Manchester College, Oxford). Subsequently referred to as MWA. The archive contains a note on Eithne he prepared after her death, a number of letters written by her, and typed accounts of life in New Zealand from the papers of Edgar Wilkins.
- 6 Helen Saunders. 'William Wilkins and *Ulysses*: a family story,' *Dublin James Joyce Journal* 10 (2017): 113-118.
- 7 Her life in Paris, after a split with a fellow-Communist called 'Arnold' in London (conceivably the literary critic Arnold Kettle) is described in a letter to an unknown recipient dated 4 September

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- 1968, MWA, K/PPI78/6/2/12. It suggests she may have worked for the *News Chronicle* in Paris. The archive contains letters on Emanuel School notepaper.
- 8 Online sources incorrectly give the year of marriage as 1949. They were married in Petersfield, Hampshire, where Emanuel School was evacuated, in late 1941. Wilkins re-naturalized as Eithne Una Lilian Kaiser in Dec. 1943, presumably because she had taken on her husband's alien status on marriage; Kaiser naturalized in 1947, by which time they were living in London. See National Archives HO 334/244/2531 and HO 334/179/26648.
- 9 Maurice Wilkins, *The Third Man of the Double Helix* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9-17.
- 10 Maurice Wilkins, memoir drafts, MWA, K/PPI78/6/2/7 and K/PPI78/6/4/1.
- 11 Eithne Wilkins, Letter to Fulke Rosario. Wilkins was her father's literary executor and supervised the completion of his 1952 book *The Medical Inspection of School Children*.
- 12 Eithne Wilkins, writing as 'Eithne Nic Liamog', in *Lysistrata*, which appeared in three issues 1934-35. Her early poems include 'Rondeau', 'Marz' and 'Variation on a Theme by Heine' (the latter two written in German).
- 13 Andrew Duncan, 'Mid-century women's poetry'.
- 14 'For Jacques Albala, Killed in France, June, 1944', *Life & Letters Today*, Vol. 44 no. 89 (Jan 1945), pp. 28-29; 'Poem About Vultures', *Life & Letters Today*, Vol. 44 no. 91 (March 1945), p. 156; 'Variations on a Theme by Sidney Keyes', *Life & Letters Today*, Vol. 45 no. 94 (June 1945), p. 157.
- 15 'Without Comment' and 'Cuckoo-Clock', *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* 10 (Autumn 1937), 23-24.
- 16 'The Old Man', *Now* 5 (1945), pp. 36-37; 'Peace in Our Time', *Jazz Forum*, II (Sept. 1946), 21.
- 17 'The Old Man' (reprinted) and 'Song by a Husky Voice', *Circle*, nos. 7/8 (1946), 116.
- 18 Kenneth Rexroth, *New British Poets* (New London, CT: New Directions Press, 1949), pp. 275-87 (a number of these poems were reprints).
- 19 See *Transatlantic Review*, issue 1, summer 1959, 128-132. Since these poems are dedicated in part to her father's memory, they may have been written earlier.
- 20 Kenneth Rexroth, *New British Poets* (New London, CT: New Directions Press, 1949), p. 278.
- 21 Eithne Wilkins, 'Eurydike', *Poetry London*, Vol. 3 no. 12 (Nov-Dec 1947), 24.
- 22 Eithne Wilkins, *The Rose-Garden Game: The Symbolic Background to the European Prayer-Beads* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969); 'Beanstalk', *Nimbus* Vol. 2, no. 3 (Autumn 1954), 8-12.
- 23 Eithne Wilkins, 'Oranges and Lemons', *Botteghe Oscure* 14 (1954), 176-193; subsequent references in text. In citing the poem I have reversed the journal's Italian printing style, which sets poetry in italics and uses roman for emphasis; I have also omitted the ellipses placed at the end of section headings.

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- 24 Wilkins, *The Rose-Garden Game*, 13.
- 25 'Murmelspielt', *The Delphic Review*, Vol. I no. 2, Spring 1950, 37-38.
- 26 Biographical note in *New World Writing*, 8<sup>th</sup> Mentor Selection, poetry selected by Richard Wilbur (New York: New American Library, 1955), accompanying her poem 'Person', 156-57.
- 27 Edgar Wilkins records two earthquakes in March 1923, typed letter excerpts, MWA, K/PPI78/6/2/8, The same file contains an exchange on New Zealand slang, which in this period routinely converted 'John' to 'Jack'. 'Red Rocks' is a place on the Wellington coast.
- 28 Eithne Wilkins, 'The Old Man', *Now 5* (1945), 36-37; also published in *Circle*, nos. 7/8 (1946).
- 29 One interesting element of the poem's set-up is the lack of reference to a mother-figure, though in a letter Wilkins noted that 'She is a wonder in her own way' (letter to Fulke Rosario, 13 June 1972, MWA, K/PPI78/6/2/5).
- 30 Maurice Wilkins was involved in uranium production techniques rather than the bomb itself. As a Nobel laureate, he campaigned against nuclear and chemical weapons. He was also investigated (and exonerated) by MI5 as a possible spy, because of brief pre-war phase as a communist.
- 31 It is perhaps worth noting that Kaiser and Wilkins later translated *Otto Hahn: My Life* (1970) – the autobiography of the discoverer of nuclear fission, a prominent opponent of nuclear weapons.
- 32 Wilkins may have in mind Brahms' setting of Wilhelm Müller's poem 'Vineta'.
- 33 Maurice Wilkins, *The Third Man*, 193.
- <sup>34</sup> Willkie's *One World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943) sold over 1.5 million copies within a few months, though Willkie himself died in 1944.
- 35 Wilkins, 'Jazz, Surrealism and the Doctor', *Jazz Forum* 1 (1946), 10.
- 36 G. F. Northall, *English Folk-Rhymes: A Collection of Traditional Verses Relating to Places and Persons, Customs, Superstitions, etc.* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1892), pp. 415-16, citing J. O. Halliwell's earlier *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales* (1849).
- 37 Apples return later in the sequence, for example in their association with All Hallows and the concoction of apple-and-ale known as 'lambswool'.
- 38 Maurice Wilkins, *The Third Man*, 10. The 8½ mile walk is also described in Edgar Wilkins's letter excerpts, MWA, K/PPI78/6/2/8.
- 39 James Orchard Halliwell, ed., *The Nursery Rhymes of England: Collected Principally from Oral Tradition* (London: Percy Society, 1842), p. 111 (Halliwell does not include the 'commonest English text' cited by Wilkins).
- 40 Robert Graves, *White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, ed. Grevel Lindop (1948; London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 284-85.

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- 41 Heinrich Heine, 'Charles I', *The Poems of Heine*, trans. Edgar Alfred Bowring (London: George Bell & Sons, 1908), 392-3.
- 42 Goethe, *Faust* Part II, Act II, scene v. Wilkins moves Goethe's masculine original ('der achte / An den noch niemand dachte') into the neuter. She may be thinking of Goethe's evocation of the alchemical marriage of moon and sun and the ancient twin gods known as Cabiri, associated with sea voyages, but the meaning is quite obscure.
- 43 Wilkins may have known this variant of the song: 'Pancakes and fritters, say All Saints' and St. Peter's, / When will the ball come? say the bells of St. Alkmun; / At two they will throw, says Saint Werabo, / Oh! very well, says little Michel.' 'Song on the bells of Derby, on football morning', Northall, *English Folk-Rhymes*, 16; also in Alice Bertha Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 2 vols. (1894-99), 94-98.
- 44 Eithne Wilkins, 'Auto da Fe', *Transatlantic Review*, issue I, summer 1959, 128-132.
- 45 An account of the Pongaroa bush-fire (which Wilkins would have read in having her father's journals typed) is in Edgar Wilkins's letter excerpts, MWA, K/PP178/6/2/8.