

# Christina Stead at 100

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Christina Stead would have turned 100 on 17 July 2002. It is idle—but irresistible—to speculate what kind of occasion Christina might have preferred to celebrate her centenary. Though her husband, William J. Blake, was more gregarious than his notoriously shy consort, she was fond of a party. Letters show her making preparations, sometimes expressing reluctance or exasperation about the need to entertain but displaying an inveterate instinct to be hospitable. Thus, in New York in the 1940s, she fusses about making stuffed eggs, while commenting, “I have to get in the usual Vermouth and peanuts” (Christina Stead Papers NLA MS 4967, Box 16, Folder 120). And in her role as writer-in-residence at the University of Newcastle in 1976, preparing to talk to schoolchildren about *The Man Who Loved Children*, she was still concerned to do the right thing: “I must get orange drink, biscuits, cups, napkins (though not asked to)” (*Talking* 140).

In fact, Christina Stead’s centenary was variously observed and celebrated. Modest press attention, in print and radio media, drew attention to the anniversary; and two academic conferences featured major tributes to this great Australian novelist. One of them took place at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature at James Cook University of North Queensland, Cairns campus, in July 2002: this issue of *JASAL* includes some of the papers presented there, about which I have more to say presently. The other event was part of the biennial conference of the British Australian Studies Association held at the University of Surrey in August 2002. Those presenting papers included: Hazel Rowley, in a keynote retrospect on writing Stead’s biography; other established Stead scholars from the United States and Australia; and more recent entrants into debate on Stead, based in the United Kingdom and Norway, all

bringing new perspectives to the author and her work. (Anne Pender is guest editing a Stead section for *Southerly* in which some of these papers will appear.)

The question is, what cause for celebration did Christina Stead's centenary provide? An answer, of course, must emphasise the opportunity to celebrate her achievements. Yet it has to be admitted that in some ways her reputation was stronger, and her profile more evident, a decade ago in 1993, ten years after her death—curiously, perhaps the high point of her fame (see especially Harris, "A Note", also Harris, "Christina Stead" and *The Magic Phrase*).

The story has often been told, with various emphases and reflections. Stead was born to Ellen (née Butters) and David Stead, in Rockdale, then a sparsely settled suburb of Sydney, New South Wales, on 17 July 1902. She died in hospital in Balmain, a rapidly gentrifying inner Sydney suburb, on 31 March 1983. It might seem that she travelled a short distance. Yet almost exactly half her long life was lived elsewhere than in her homeland. In 1928 she left Sydney for London (where she immediately met her life's partner, Bill Blake). She returned to Sydney to visit only in 1969, the widowed author of eleven works of fiction (there were to be four more, two of them posthumously published), then came back to Australia for good in 1974. Blake and Stead lived in London, Paris and Spain before moving to Blake's native United States in 1937. They were mainly in New York, occasionally in the nearby countryside, and briefly in Hollywood, before returning to Europe straight after World War II. From early 1947 to 1953 they shifted frequently, in an ever less optimistic rotation among Belgium, England, Italy, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands, before they fetched up in London, eking out a living for over a decade until the republication of *The Man Who Loved Children* in 1965 at last restored their fortunes.

While the Blakes' peripatetic existence had provided Christina with rich "copy" for her fiction, it also exacted a heavy price. The reasons for their being so much on the move principally were economic. They were often following up a job opportunity for Bill, occasionally for Christina; but in all their peregrinations they did not find financial security. Even when they had a relatively stable set-up, as in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s, their situation was compromised by their political affiliations (Bill, a Party member, was active in Communist causes, while Christina, though not an activist publicly, declared her left-wing allegiance). As long as they were in New York, they were at least accessible to a literary market. Their postwar return to Europe compromised that access. The publishing industry, especially in the United Kingdom, was severely restricted by wartime exigencies and took time to recover as paper and other materials became available again and a wider range of books could be published. Stead's cultural capital dissipated because some publishers, such as the New York house of Simon and Schuster, felt she had not repaid their substantial investment in her, while her British publisher, Peter Davies, was not enthusiastic about *Letty Fox* the last of

her novels he published. No publisher maintained an active stake in her work.

It was only when Stanley Burnshaw, author, publisher, patron and a friend from the 1930s, persuaded Holt Rinehart and Winston to bring out a new edition of *The Man Who Loved Children* that Stead's career gained fresh impetus. The 1960s reception of this novel enabled publication of more of her fiction. Four new works appeared over the decade following the republication of *The Man Who Loved Children*, all of them written during the period of silence: *Cotters' England* (*Dark Places of the Heart* in the United States), *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, *The Little Hotel*, and *Miss Herbert* (*The Suburban Wife*), together with an edited selection entitled *A Christina Stead Reader*. Significantly, earlier work was also republished in the mid-1960s: *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, *For Love Alone* and *The Salzburg Tales*.

This brief rehearsal of the publishing history of Christina Stead in her lifetime underlines the fact that the index to Stead's reputation, perhaps more than most authors, is how many and which titles are in print. In Stead's case, reprints of previous work were particularly important. Angus and Robertson in Australia and Carmen Callil's Virago in the United Kingdom were the key players, along with Holt Rinehart and Winston (and its successors) in the United States. In my view the Virago reprints of the early 1980s, timed to celebrate her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, were particularly significant: for example, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs* were published for the first time outside North America, and extensively distributed. But publishing takeovers through the 1990s displaced Stead's champions in these firms, and into the bargain the situation in respect of assignment of rights to her various works, always confused, has been complicated by takeovers and titles going out of print.

While most authors of any calibre stay in print after their death, at least for a time, posthumous publication on any scale is atypical. Yet two substantial volumes of Christina Stead's creative work appeared soon after she died, thanks to the endeavours of R. G. Geering, appointed by the author as her literary executor. Geering, then a Lecturer in English at the University of New South Wales, had begun to publish on Stead in 1962, having worked to raise consciousness of her work from the 1950s. He heard of her as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney in 1939, but did not read any of her work until 1943 when he was on active service on Thursday Island, and found *House of All Nations* in the Australian Army Education Library there (*I'm Dying Laughing: Behind the Scenes* 309; in this essay Geering gives a lively account of his relationship with Christina, through her books and in person). Just as her American champion Stanley Burnshaw was instrumental in securing the republication of *The Man Who Loved Children*, so the Australian Geering, with the assistance of other Sydney-based Stead enthusiasts, effected Angus and Robertson's reprinting of Stead titles in the mid-1960s.

At Christina's death, Geering took on the executor's responsibilities in earnest.

By 1985 he had prepared for publication *Ocean of Story: The Uncollected Stories of Christina Stead*, which brought together both pieces not previously collected and a good many sketches and stories found among her papers (this material, along with the mass of other typescript—some substantial drafts, much scrappy and miscellaneous—is now in the National Library of Australia). The labour involved to produce *Ocean of Story* was surpassed by the work needed to make sense of the various typescripts of *I'm Dying Laughing*, which he assembled into the text published by Virago in 1986 (which, he teasingly confessed, included one sentence of his: "*I'm Dying Laughing: Behind the Scenes*" 317). And then he set to work on her letters, of which he brought out a two-volume selected edition in 1992. A writer's letters are frequently an important source for information about the composition of the creative work, negotiations with publishers and so on: Christina Stead's letters are no exception. More than this, her letters are among her most robust and engaging writing, so that these volumes constitute another significant posthumous addition to her *oeuvre*.

It is no exaggeration to say that without the endeavours of Ron Geering there would have been much less to celebrate at Christina Stead's centenary. Sadly, Geering himself was oblivious to the anniversary. He died at the age of 84, on Christmas Day 2002, having passed the last years of his life in care, and in limbo, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. At his funeral, tributes were paid to him as a family man, teacher and scholar. It is fitting that he should be further acknowledged in the context of this issue of *JASAL*. Suspicious of what he saw as overly ingenious and sometimes obscure demonstrations of contemporary literary theory, especially by Americans, he would very likely have found some of the essays published here antipathetical. At the same time, he might have been proud to have enabled the essays to have been written—this is quite literally the case with the two pieces on *I'm Dying Laughing*. He was unfailingly generous to Stead scholars, and completely selfless in his dedication to the cause of promoting her work. His fond, bantering relationship with the author herself is dramatized in those of her letters to him included in her *Selected Letters*.

To turn then to critical discussion of Christina Stead. When she died, there were two books about her work: one by Geering (the 1979 version of *Christina Stead* is twice expanded from the original Melbourne publication of 1969), the other by an American academic, Joan Lidoff. Since her death, Christina Stead has been the subject of two biographies (Williams, Rowley), and of a number of critical monographs (in chronological order, Brydon, Stern, Gribble, Sheridan, Blake, Peterson and Pender). There have also been two monographs which feature Stead along with other women novelists in broadly political and postcolonial contexts (Gardiner, Yelin), and a volume of essays by various hands (Harris 2000). Critical articles continue to appear, perhaps relatively less frequently than before.

Recent criticism has both traced new trajectories through Stead's work, and

offered fresh angles to previous approaches. Thus Teresa Peterson in her “provocative re-reading” sees the ambivalences and ambiguities of Stead’s narratives as attempts to work out issues of sexuality. Satire has had a good deal of attention from Susan Sheridan, Fiona Morrison, and Anne Pender. Brigid Rooney is perhaps the most strenuous and consistent exponent of applying current theoretical perspectives, and thus of arguing a harder-edged account of the politics of Stead’s writing than we have previously had. This generalising comment is not to discount the work of such critics as Nicole Moore and Virginia Blain, each of whom has given close attention to a relatively neglected novel (respectively, *The Beauties and Furies* and *A Little Tea*). While *The Man Who Loved Children* continues to attract critical attention, along with the “Australian” novels *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *For Love Alone*, it is *I’m Dying Laughing* that is now most frequently discussed, in recognition of its demandingness and its stature. The other post-1965 novels are generally not much considered, either solo, or in pursuit of some more general argument. *House of All Nations*, the longest of Stead’s novels, still has not had its due in my opinion, despite Louise Yelin’s “Representing the 1930s: Capitalism, Phallocracy, and the Politics of the Popular Front in *House of All Nations*,” and commentary in book-length studies such as Pender’s. It is also notable that the manuscripts in the National Library of Australia are now much used: Anne Holding Rolling at BASA discussed a typescript “More Lives Than One” (Christina Stead Papers NLA MS 4967, Box 4, Folder 17), and my presentations at both ASAL and BASA conferences drew on my current project, an edition of the correspondence between Christina Stead and Bill Blake (Box 18, Folders 118–20).

The essays in this issue of *JASAL* are interestingly symptomatic of the current situation of Stead studies. In her keynote address, Judith Gardiner canvasses some of the history of Stead’s reputation from an important partisan position, since it was the American feminists, especially those on the left, both within and without the academy, who in the 1970s consolidated the opening made by Stanley Burnshaw’s championing of Stead. In the second part of her article, Gardiner goes on to provide the most extended analysis yet of *The Little Hotel* (which coincidentally has just come back into print). Just as Gardiner’s *Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy* opened new trajectories on Stead in terms of gender and politics, so does this paper almost fifteen years on. Gardiner not only gives reasons for according the craft of *The Little Hotel* greater attention than it has had, she provides a political reading appropriate for the troubled global village of the early twenty-first century.

Both Brigid Rooney and Susan Sheridan discuss *I’m Dying Laughing* (also the subject of stimulating papers from Kate Webb and Ulla Rahbek at the BASA conference), each developing her distinctive approach. Rooney takes the notion of abjection formulated by Julia Kristeva to facilitate her argument about the ideological pressure of the novel. The dialogue between these two pieces, specifically

around Stead's attitudes to revolution and the writing of it, is a good example of the kind of critical contention Stead invites. Sheridan is particularly interested in Christina Stead's relation both to the career of her character Emily Wilkes as best-selling author, and to the relative success of Bill Blake's first novel, *The World is Mine: The Story of a Modern Monte Cristo*.

By contrast, Michael Ackland turns his attention to the first-published of Stead's works, *The Salzburg Tales*. Concentrating on the initial story in this volume, "The Marionettist," and exploring its intertexts, Ackland, like Gardiner, demonstrates the rewards of attention to the formal properties of Christina Stead's writing. Moreover, his foray into works of high German Romanticism, with reference to psychoanalysis, sets Stead's work in quite different contexts from those in which it is mostly located. Another very particular context for the reception of one of Stead's novels is provided by Nicole Moore in her detailed examination of the banning of *Letty Fox* by the Australian Department of Trade and Customs in 1947. A case-study in censorship, "The 'totally incredible' obscenity of *Letty Fox*" also offers analysis of the novel's satiric impact.

Susan Lever writes on Stead as a literary critic (or rather, as Lever argues, an informed reader and reviewer), concentrating her discussion on the novelist's approach to the art of fiction as evident particularly in an unpublished notebook "Workshop in the Novel" (Christina Stead Papers NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84). Lever's concern, however, is not with Stead as aesthete. The contexts Lever sketches are principally to do with Marxist fiction: she considers attitudes to the proletarian novel in the 1930s and 1940s, and assumptions about social realism, suggesting that Stead's political commitment does not compromise her writing.

Finally, as a kind of coda to these essays, this issue includes two notes on "oriental" aspects of Stead's work. The Chinese scholar Jianjun Li demonstrates that there is more evidence in Stead's work than might be expected of her knowledge of and interest in China: he opens the way for exploration of other texts than the two he considers, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Man Who Loved Children*, and for discussion both of the particular and general (if any) significance of Stead's references to China. Finally, I have included a new letter, about a possible Japanese translation of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, not only to bring out the contribution made, albeit in a minor key, to our understanding of Stead, but also to indicate that there are likely to be more Stead letters in private hands which might well be brought into the public domain.

For even now, new Stead texts are emerging. A major "find" has been made by Dr Anne Pender: a box of Stead's papers retrieved from the basement of a Canberra house where they had been reposing for over twenty years. This carton contains a miscellany characteristic of Stead's effects: correspondence, a good deal of it to Stead from agents and publishers (Pender is particularly interested in Stead's relationship with the New York literary agent Cyrilly Abels); more of the typescript

of *I'm Dying Laughing*; and notes, drafts, clippings and ephemera. The discovery made news both in the London press and in Australia. While its full significance remains to be established, the discovery makes the point that, even at 100, Christina Stead can spring a surprise.

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