



CHRISTINA
STEAD

and the
Socialist
Heritage

MICHAEL ACKLAND

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THE SOCIALIST HERITAGE

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*For Hans and Leo, Gunda and Olaf, Jochen, Jutta and Knut—
for fifty years of warmest trust and friendship:
es hätte kaum besser sein können.*

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“PORTRAIT OF CHRISTINA STEAD, 1940s?”
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CHRISTINA STEAD AND
THE SOCIALIST HERITAGE

CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

“My friends know I have strong political views”.

—Christina Stead

Christina Stead's life is at once too well and too little known. Fourteen major works, totalling more than five-and-a-half-thousand pages, refract half a century of her experiences on three continents. These are complemented by important caches of surviving letters, which evoke her impressions of specific places and countries, capture the ebb and flow of her personal relations, and offer apparently frank avowals on a variety of literary, social, and historical subjects. Moreover Stead, following the reissuing of *The Man Who Loved Children* in 1965, enjoyed considerable fame and, after returning permanently to her native land in 1975, made herself publicly available on numerous occasions, including for lengthy periods as a writer in residence at the Australian National University and Monash University. There she cultivated the impression of being primarily interested in her art. Certainly she responded to current issues, embracing the concern of her friend, Herbert Cole “Nugget” Coombs, with indigenous affairs, as well as lending her voice to growing opposition to the war in Vietnam. But there was little in her utterances to distinguish them from the local leftist agenda of the day, which opposed

American imperialism and strongly supported federal Labour initiatives after decades of conservative rule. There was nothing to suggest that she had once been a fervent supporter of organisations opposed to parliamentary democracy, or a vehement advocate of engaged art, and the belief that writers should use their pens to cut through the moribund tissues of society in the cause of human freedom and revolution. Her political engagement before, and even during, the Pacific War was fast fading from memory. In 1973 she remarked, without exaggeration, in an interview: "People don't remember all that, you know. The thirties was a hundred years ago" (Lidoff 181). Since then the amnesia has only deepened, so that she remains in important respects, as the title of a recent monograph underscored, "the enigmatic Christina Stead" (Peterson).

Stead, of course, contributed to this situation. She spent forty of her most productive years as an expatriate, and she was often less than forthright in the many late interviews she gave. In her 1980 interview with Rodney Wetherell, for instance, she repeatedly left ambiguous or skirted around the issue of her political convictions. As a child, she allegedly eavesdropped on imagined conversations that "were about oppression", but remained naively unconcerned: "I don't know how this came in at all . . . I didn't ever think of oppression" (435). As an adult she was "not political" (though only "in the sense of . . . not the go to meeting type" [443]), and for many years in New York the circle she socialised in "wasn't a political society . . . although a lot [of friends] had strong political beliefs, yes" (443). Flagrantly, too, she disregarded her satirical writing to assert: "I'm not at all critical" or "I have no polemic instinct" (441, 443). Instead it was primarily characterisation, she claimed, that interested her, and the pressure of lived experience, not ideological imperatives, that motivated her writing, even in a novel such as *House of All Nations*: "I was working in all those things, and I . . . [Stead's ellipsis]. Out of the spirit of fun, and because I delight in the things I see, I wrote what I saw" (481). And early paternal training is invoked as proof of her supposed detachment and objectivity: "I was brought up by a naturalist. I *am* a naturalist. I see what I see, and if you see what you see, you

understand it. That's all" (441). Yet hints of a less apolitical writer peek through occasionally, as when Wetherell's suggestion that Louisa Pollit's fate "means redemption through suffering" draws the retort: "It means nothing religious. It means a genuine material situation" (438). Generally, however, Stead is guarded, carefully avoids showing her affiliations and, in the words of her first literary executor, is "often unreliable about details—and not only details" (Geering 1990, 431). She was ready to bemoan the public's fading memory of the 1930s when it meant she had to rework substantially a late manuscript, once regarded as finished, to make its allusions comprehensible. But when presented with an opportunity to dispel this forgetfulness through her own firsthand experience she tended to be evasive and misleading.

How, then, are this reticence and wariness to be explained? One reason might be that Stead, like most individuals of her generation, treasured her privacy. As a writer, and hence a public figure, she realised that she would attract scrutiny. As her fame grew, so did concern about posterity's presumed interest in her life, and she prudently reviewed which of her papers should be bequeathed to the nation. She also had before her eyes warning examples of biographical excess, such as Quentin Bell's life of his wife, Virginia Woolf:

[T]here sit the assiduous clerks, each knee deep in wastepaper, carding, spinning, weaving out of the paper a miraculous garment. When finished, each one throws it over the bones of the creature he pulls from the grave, so that it lives again for a moment; and no antic mischief, venality, shame or scandal is spared it; it must live through all again, this time in public, for all is visible in this wonderful see through cloth . . . [they] make money out of old turpitudes, unveiling the anatomies with the professional ease and hearty guffaws of medical students. They know the public will pay well for this unhopd visit to the dissecting rooms. (Geering 1990, 416–417)

Understandably Stead did not want to join the ranks of the literary living dead, their emotions anatomised, their vices and venality exposed.

Though whether this distaste for shameless prying adequately explains her extreme sensitivity on specifically political matters is a moot point.

Commentary on Stead and her work, however, has been more inclined to seek support for, rather than to question, Stead's late pronouncements. Evidence of political disinterest, even disdain, has been deduced from correspondence which contains lengthy complaints about interminable political discussions, or in which disgust is voiced at the place-hunting, immoral, and blinkered actions of party members. Much has been made, too, of the dissenting ideological position she revealed in 1938 to her close friend and fellow writer, Stanley Burnshaw, and of her supposed domestic constraints:

I have a very serious question to ask you: have you read André Malraux's "L'Espoir" and if so and if so what . . . ? I can lend you a French copy if you want to read it: you're an intellectual, you have the afflatus, you're not in, but alongside the Party (capital p shows good faith), and I should very much value your opinion on his latest book. Of course, Bill [Blake] doesn't think much of the calibre of a guy who is not in, but alongside the Party, and so it's no good my breaking up the happy home discussing it with him. (Rowley 254)¹

At best "alongside", not "in", the party was what she apparently wished to be. When her de facto spouse joined the New York branch of the Communist Party of the United States of America (hereafter CPUSA) in 1938, Stead allegedly regretted that her alien status prevented her from doing so, according to Hazel Rowley, "for one reason only: it would have provided material for the novel she wanted to write about communist radicals" (253–254). Similarly, when Stead strikes an unmistakably Marxist note in her prose, it is usually attributed to a close mentor figure, such as Blake, or the rival for her affections, Ralph Fox. In effect, as Brigid Rooney observes, Rowley's biography "insistently advances the hypothesis that, far from being authentic, Stead's political sympathies were motivated by her obsessive adulation of left-wing men" (84). The cumulative effect

of such readings and assertions has been to depoliticise Stead, and to obscure her actual intellectual trajectory.

Effacement of her former political engagement was evidently what the returned expatriate wanted. Her late interviews are punctuated by blunt denials. When asked point-blank by Wetherell, for example, about the politics of her masterpiece (“He [Sam Pollit] represents, I suppose, ‘New Deal’ socialism, or . . .”), she was abruptly dismissive: “He represents himself and nothing else. As he did in life” (443). Little wonder that much subsequent commentary, in spite of Stead’s identification for decades with communist objectives, has felt free to focus on autobiographical traces in the novel, or to discern there an unflinching anatomy of “the political powers of patriarchy” (Gardiner 2000, 151). Her elusive answers have tacitly sanctioned these approaches, while on other occasions she cultivated an impression of disorientation and indecision, as when she gave to Clem and Nina Christesen, long-time and influential supporters of Australian writing, a copy of her novella collection *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, inscribing it with “Love to Nina and Clem from a puzzleheaded Christina Stead, May 1976”.² Yet far from being muddled or a political ingénue, Stead, as we shall see, had been schooled by adversity on the need to don masks, as well as on avoiding confessing to what had been the single most important influence on her thought and writing: the socialist heritage.

Despite this subterfuge, Stead’s commitment to socialism, and in particular communism, should not be doubted. She treated these terms as kin and cognates, and she used them interchangeably, as does this study.³ Hers was a firmly held intellectual position, based on thorough knowledge of a broad range of social enquiry and experiment. That Edward Bellamy was a utopian socialist opposed to the “red flag”, or Herbert Spencer a social Darwinist, or the Haymarket martyrs anarchists did not preclude them from investigation, or from exerting an influence on her fiction. Although Stead once quipped that she was born under the star “Flux” (1992, 84), and lent this credence with her frequent shifts of

domicile as well as country, what did not change was her affiliation with the radical Left. Her political interest and education were life-long, her ideological engagement neither half-hearted nor fair-weather. She had early seen her father suffer political martyrdom for his radical views, and heard his ringing self-admonitions: "Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone, Dare to have a purpose true and Dare to make it known" (1985, 486). The lessons went home. Also this socialist grounding presumably made Stead receptive to the convictions of her future partner, William J. Blake, the American businessman and communist intellectual. With him she stood shoulder to shoulder in the socialist cause, first in Europe, then in America, until growing anti-Red hysteria led to their precipitous return to war-devastated Europe late in 1946. There for two decades they endured isolation, obliquity, and grinding hardship for their beliefs. With their audience dwindling and their works gradually going out of print, they were reduced to translating, to producing uncredited scripts and other forms of ghostwriting: in brief, to the half-life of penury and internal exile usually associated with Eastern bloc writers out of favour with their regimes.

Then and after her death, Stead's alignment with communism has apparently been regarded as an impediment to her literary standing and consequently downplayed. The trend began with the reissuing of *The Man Who Loved Children* in 1965, with a highly influential prefatory essay by Randall Jarrell which praised the book as an unforgettable, rarely equalled portrayal of family life. Other reviewers concurred, with the exception of Jose Yglesias. As a communist and former drama critic of the *Daily Worker*, he was well qualified to assert that "Marxist ideas . . . are inseparable from Stead's literary vision" (370). They are "what organizes her emotions and talent, what lends tension and drive to her creative process" (370), and what ultimately "has delayed her recognition" (369). Speaking of the novel itself he observed that, "although it may be possible to ignore this now, as Jarrell does in his essay, it was, consciously or unconsciously, impossible in 1941" (369). Finally, he remarked presciently that, given the antipathy of "our present establishment . . . to Stead's ideology", it

may be “possible, as it happened with Brecht, to extract many important subsidiary virtues from her novels” (370). Current feminist interpretations would figure highly among these, as would autobiographical readings. And Stead, in fascinating ways, confirmed the keenness of Yglesias’s commentary. An unremarked, expanded version of it, marked “Rough Galley”, exists among her collection of reviews (ms.4967/11/80), so that she was presumably consulted about its contents before it went to press. After its appearance, she disingenuously feigned surprise at Yglesias’s remarks to one correspondent (“I have just been proclaimed a ‘Marxian muse’ to everyone’s astonishment, my own not least” [Rowley 612]), whereas to Burnshaw, with whom she had long exchanged private, at times heretical opinions, she was more candid: “I do like the Jose Yglesias’s review very much, it is pertinent and canny” (Rowley 612)—an acknowledgement of the centrality of Marxist ideology in her writing that, until relatively recently, has generally been overlooked.⁴

In fact, during the 1930s Stead resembled Catherine Baguenault, the heroine of her first completed novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), who is described as “a woman of revolution” (144), with relentless energy for proletarian causes. As fascism grew in strength and noncommitment paled as an alternative, Stead hastened to man the intellectual barricades. In June 1935 she attended the first International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture in Paris, then found her way to Spain as a supportive Leftist onlooker, until she wisely fled the country once the Franco-led uprising began in July 1936. During her ensuing decade in New York, she was closely associated with the CPUSA, serving for a time as a literary editor of its cultural magazine, *New Masses*, and as a New York board member of the League of American Writers. This intellectual engagement flowed through to her novels. Three of the earliest, for example, deal with classical Marxist-Leninist subjects: the life conditions and aspirations of the proletariat (*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*), the struggle between revolutionary and bourgeois consciousness (*The Beauties and Furies*), and the heartless machinations of international financiers (*House of All Nations*). Arguably, too, her first fictional reckoning with the United

State is similarly topical, offering oblique but vitriolic commentary on much-vaunted benign governance in the common interest in *The Man Who Loved Children*. Stead not only sent out a questionnaire for one British association that probed current reasons for writing (Rowley 234), but she showed her own engagement clearly in her fiction as well as nonfiction during the 1930s. Indeed, so unambiguous was her commitment to fundamental Marxist-Leninist dogma that she was invited to study international literature in Moscow for six months in 1936 (1992, 71), and *The Man Who Loved Children* was sent to Moscow, by its reviewer in *New Masses*, for official approbation by Joseph Stalin's regime. Yet by the 1970s the events of this period had so lapsed from public memory that, in late interviews, the novelist could rewrite her personal history with relative impunity.

Ultimately, of course, that the case for a "Red Stead" is less well known than it should be is largely the result of posthumous commentary that has maintained her reputation, and in particular of Hazel Rowley's account of the elusive expatriate in *Christina Stead: A Biography* (1993). Deservedly regarded as the authoritative biography, Rowley's book, in its compendious original form, fulfilled Leon Edel's requirement that a scholarly life be "a kind of mini-archive" (14), and my own work on Stead is frequently indebted to its copious sources and diverse findings.⁵ Nevertheless, Rowley's monograph has considerable shortcomings as intellectual history.⁶ Although it describes the main stations in Stead's ideological pilgrimage, and acknowledges her communist affiliations and friendships, this is done in a piecemeal fashion, which falls well short of offering a coherent picture of Stead's lifelong intellectual interests. These are secondary to its probing of the effects of authorial traumas and passionate relationships, to its concern with speculating on what was happening in Stead's heart rather than in her head. Moreover, the organisation of the biography in loosely connected subdivisions, often of two pages or less, made it possible to present an array of vignettes, or information concerning diverse aspects of Stead's existence, without interrelating or analysing them. It is easy to lose sight of disconnected,

unexamined, or underplayed data—and many of Stead's intersections with socialism fall into this category—and overall the biography offers a carefully considered emotional, rather than intellectual, history of its subject. In Rowley's work, Stead is shown to be an author passionately driven to write and create characters, whose "commitment was to her writing, not politics" (254), as if the two were discrete, rather than mutually nourishing, spheres.

Nevertheless, despite these categorical judgments by the acknowledged authority on Stead's life, there is compelling evidence that this novelist was vitally interested in her work's informing ideas. Her Manhattan lectures on creative writing, for example, began with, and repeatedly stressed, the proposition that: "*The novel must have a message*. How to find out what you want to say" ("Techniques of the Novel", ms.4967/7/49). Similarly, from *Mainstream* (1947) she copied out and underlined: "*The novel of action is also the novel of ideas*" (ms.4967/7/49), and presumably it was not just of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that she could claim: "I really put some gristle" in it (1992, 62). Even years later, when Stead was striving to depoliticise her image, old habits of mind died hard. Ultimately the work of Virginia Woolf, for instance, reminded her of the French novelist tirelessly dubbed by Marxists in the 1930s a master masturbator of the decayed bourgeoisie, while implicit support of moneyed and privileged social classes is read as evidence of mental sickness:

Then as Marcel Proust was disliked and despised in stirring times because he cared nothing for the people but clung to "his duchesses" and his endless descriptions of an invalid's trifles; Virginia Woolf, also, was accused by the left, in the bad days of the thirties, of turning her back on the world and thinking only of her career . . . That she was "a literary and social snob" everyone agreed; she said so herself. One might think the established order and the fairytale hierarchies of kings, lords and ladies were necessary to these sick minds. (ms.4967/7/53)

The suspicion that this was penned by an essentially unrepentant product of those "bad days" of the 1930s is confirmed when she laughs Woolf to

scorn for having “no notion of history—‘there is no reason why a thing should happen at one time rather than another,’ she said; and blamed the troubles of the world ‘on the beastly masculine’” (ms.4967/7/53). This, too, was Woolf’s excuse for not joining “committees working against war and fascism” (as Stead did), and for writing self-indulgent rather than engaged fiction at a time “when the rise of Hitler was understood by everyone” (ms.4967/7/53), an error presumably not committed by the reviewer.

Determining the importance of intellectual content and engagement in Stead’s own work is, admittedly, complicated by the fact that much of her fiction defies neat interpretative closure—a tactic that is compatible with, and indeed possibly the product of, a firm political stance. Whereas plain didacticism may dull and lull a readership, teasing, intriguing outcomes will not, or as the Romantic poet, William Blake, stated uncompromisingly: “That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered [sic] what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act” (Erdman 702). Stead and her partner were familiar with his work; and open-endedness, as we shall see, was an authorial strategy that had influential socialist advocates. Also Stead, in the late 1930s and beyond, faced considerable constraints on the free expression of political views, especially in America. There for lengthy periods, in Yglesias’s words, the communist literary establishment “was revisionist in the pejorative sense” (370), and “Marxists were not revolutionaries” (369), so that more orthodox comrades, like herself and Blake, had to exercise tactical adroitness. In addition, they had to contend with mounting anticommunist sentiment. In 1942 Stead remarked to Blake of a projected work: “My moral will be—socialism—that is why the Upper Broadway outfit will not buy” (Harris 221–222); on another occasion she reported being shunned socially because “I was too far to the left” (Harris 390).

During the war committed writers had to heed the Party line, as well as Washington’s injunctions against treason, or suffer potentially dire

consequences. Doctrinal divergence could bring disciplinary action, ranging from a severe reprimand to public recantation, ostracism, or expulsion from the CPUSA. Contravention of Washington's decrees could draw unwelcome official attention, and lead to persecution, indictment, and a prison sentence. Survival as a dissenter required self-censorship or subterfuge. It was not a propitious time for unsanctioned views. Commentary, however, has paid insufficient attention to the key debates, theoretical cleavages, and peculiar ideological dynamics of the period, and even less to their putative effect on Stead's work. Yet these were weighty considerations for a writer and significantly, when Stead revisited the period years after in *I'm Dying Laughing*, it was not the enmity of conservatives and so-called liberal democrats that featured prominently, but the implacable self-righteousness of the Party faithful and their merciless punishment of ideological offenders.

These repressive forces, in turn, fostered arguably literary subterfuge of various sorts, such as the veiled or covert statement used in her twelve-page story, "The Old School", and helped shape its content. Described by her friend and literary executor, Ron Geering, as "one of the few things Christina Stead worked on in the last three or four years of her life" ("Afterword", Stead 1985, 540), it appeared posthumously in 1984. Largely ignored, the sketch has apparently been viewed as a slight, perfunctory performance by an author who, following her return to Australia, was notoriously unable to produce new work. Rowley sums up the agreed verdict on this late offering:

For the first time in years, she wrote and completed a story—the last complete piece she would ever write. "The Old School" was based on her experience at Bexley primary school, below Lydham Hill. This poignant story, which describes the way underprivileged children were cruelly scapegoated by the others, reveals an older, mellow Stead reflecting on her past. (540).

There is no interrogation of this final choice of material or its presumed factual basis. Nor is there any suggestion that this subject might have

had a specific bearing on her personal predicament, encapsulated a highly relevant truth, or otherwise impelled composition. The unspoken assumption is that an enfeebled Stead turned to what was still easy and possible for her: flight into a past vividly recalled by her tenacious memory and coloured by her lifelong concern with social injustice.

Certainly the tale is about schooldays, its tone non-accusatory, though this is no guarantee of its relative innocence. Things are not always as they appear at first sight, as its opening paragraphs underscore:

The brick school in its yellow playground lay south west from and below Lydham Hill. One morning the windbreak on the knoll half sank to the horizon like a constellation wheeling; the house lay close to the breast of clay, shawled in pines. It turned out that there were trees in the school ground too—a Moreton Bay fig, a pepper tree with outstretched arms and in the lower part, near the headmaster's house, some flower beds for the infants.

The rumour about the school among the very small children who had never been there, was that children were beaten there and prisoned, "caned and kept in, even the babies". Mistrial and injustice were common at home, but there never was any particular conclusion, while in this new yellow earth, there were strange administrators, and things had a beginning and an end, the end at four o'clock, the conclusion liberty, sometimes delayed "kept in half an hour". (1985, 15)

A realm of confoundingly imprecise and fluid appearances is starkly contrasted with the anchoring reality afforded by "the old school". The opening recounts a stunning optical illusion: "the windbreak on the knoll" sinking ("like a constellation wheeling") to form a shawl of pines around the brick school-house, though it turns "out that there were trees in the school ground too". The second paragraph deals with a verbal illusion or rumour: that even small children were beaten and imprisoned there, in a mirror image of the "mistrial and injustice" meted out domestically, whereas actually school operates according to definite, precise rules

(“Cause and effect were much clearer than at home” [1985, 15]), and provides a template for comprehending reality.

At issue in this story is not simply scapegoating, but socialisation, or how a dominant system inculcates its judgments, and thereby answers a basic human need for reliable orientation, for authoritative knowledge. Allegedly these memories of incidents at school owe their vividness to the fact that the narrator “was never able to make up my mind about [these] things”, so “the burning question of good and bad” remains. This is confessed in the final paragraph, which ends with a description of little children profoundly “stirred by moral debate. They are all the time sharpening their awareness of the lines and frontiers” (1985, 26)—a process in which they are powerfully aided by “the old school”. As depicted here, school is not primarily concerned with reading, writing and arithmetic, but with learning to see and act according to “moral” categories. Blucher boots denote an early departure from the privileged halls of learning for “rough work”, as well as depravity (“The nice girls looked down and away in shame, the dirty girls grinned” [1985, 16]), stealing a pear means six cuts, while divergence or deviation brings denunciation, and risks public humiliation and punishment. Similarly, loyalty to one’s classmates (Stead’s sly pun) is actively discouraged, strikes regarded as “a criminal thing” (1985, 22), welfare, such as Mrs Taylor extends to the impoverished Maidie Dickon, severely frowned on by the tone-setting informant clique: “Yes, morality has got a black eye. The teacher has fallen from grace. ‘She shouldn’t give her lunch when she never brings any’” (1985, 26). In short, far from being “mellow”, as Rowley adjudges, the novelist has selected events that provide an overwhelmingly negative portrait of this microcosm, where life is subject to institutional repression, applied by not only officials, but righteous informants and the mass of students who have internalised its codes and values.

This oppressive structure, the story underscores, has both pedigree and the capacity to be self-perpetuating. Expounding and explaining its rules bulk large on the curriculum (its “obsolete law [is] never debated” [1985,

17]), “neighbours and busybodies (informants should I say)” (1985, 22) abound, and lapses of conformity are punished with the ruthlessness of a natural instinct: accusing eyes are likened to “little sparrows pecking at the odd-feathered one” (1985, 23). Cruelty exacts submission, and the legendary terrors of the system make even its enforcers quake. Moreover, although this institution is located in New South Wales, its roots, as the tale variously suggests, lie in the Old World. One of its young enforcers is Dryden Smith. A “moral little boy” with a “good memory”, he is, the narrator highlights, “called after one of the greatest English poets” (1985, 17)—a poet, too, who took up literary arms in defence of the established monarchy. Fittingly, this everyman/Smith distinguishes himself by openly denouncing a boy who has ridiculed the authorities. His action creates unease among his peers, but it earns him official recognition in the form of a book about the ultimate American dream of presidential success, *From Log Cabin to White House*, as well as the right to recite “Horatius at the Bridge”. The narrator’s memory underscores at once similitude and connectedness between Dryden’s deeds: “I can still see his pale serious round face as it rose, twice, once for the denunciation, once for the poem” (1985, 17). In this microcosm, having the courage to condemn a transgressor openly is the counterpart of Horatius heroically defending the bridge against barbarian hordes who threaten the young Roman republic and, in time-honoured fashion, opens vistas of high office. By inference a transplanted culture is being reinacted here—an insight reinforced by the “pretty song about the old bell” that the pupils chant: an Old World ditty transposed and applicable to Bexley (“my song is the same as when new” [1985, 19]). This is indeed, in many senses, “The Old School”.

Finally, whereas only lip service is paid to republican virtue, the values of capitalism are implanted and nurtured from an impressionable age on. Mondays are set apart as “bank mornings” (1985, 22), when those from “prudent” households are given money to put in their savings accounts, administered by the headmaster. Only someone hopelessly obtuse like the narrator learns here “the horror of money” (1985, 23).

Thefts and acts against property are severely punished, while to be lunchless or “without any property at all” (1985, 21), like Maidie Dickon, is viewed as damning evidence of indolence. Kind-heartedness is out of place here, social conscience anathema, whether manifested in Mrs Taylor or the headmaster, who is paying for a leftish orientation: “a grey haired small-headed socialist, a mild moderate mediocre fellow, thought he had been slighted in being sent out to this distant suburban school, a revenge for his opinions” (1985, 18). A putative commitment to social justice implied by his name, Mr Fairway, has apparently achieved nothing, while the old fashioned nature, inferiority and even impotence of his ideological position can be inferred from his physical description. To borrow the story’s opening terms, the promise of “liberty”, held out on “this new yellow earth”, is sure to be “delayed” or “kept in” for far longer than “half an hour”. Though a show is made of republican values on formal occasions, and a delusive myth of possible, soaring success promulgated, in fact this world is rigidly hierarchical, discourages individualism, and uses schooling or indoctrination to promote class prejudice, injustice and the interests of unseen powers. The dazzling yet damning correspondences, these carefully configured analogies, suggest a hand long-practised in the arts of covert statement,

Viewing these events are two Steads, the ostensible narrator and her invisible creator, embittered and almost broken by decades of war and ideological conflict. At times their views overlap, as when her fictional counterpart thinks perhaps “that cruelty and injustice were natural and inevitable during all of a poor creature’s life”. But there are vital divergences. Whereas her earlier self “did not understand and . . . was always puzzled” about the significance and moral import of specific scenes, for her battle-scarred *Doppelgänger* there is far less ambiguity, as well as very contemporary parallels for the school scenes.⁷

Whether these incidents actually occurred is far less important than Stead’s choice of them for her final, sustained creative effort, having herself suffered for many decades from the threat of spies and, more

generally, from a hostile, denunciatory, implacable community. She, like Maidie Dickon, had known acute poverty and powerlessness. She, too, had felt hounded and subjected to ever-scrutinising faces, “craning, inspecting, deciding”, in a society that clad itself flamboyantly in “pink”, blue, white, and self-righteousness, like the schoolgirl informants. There she had seen classes divided into “a ragged line of the guilty, surveyed by the others with interest and guilt”. There, too, confessions extracted under duress brought not security but heightened unease (“What annoyed Mr Fairway was that Snowy Thorne would not admit all of his crimes, until after being baited and exhibited and worn down he cried and was caned; and even then no one was sure” [1985, 19]). At least the accused, like his communist counterparts, could be blamed for a multitude of unsolved crimes and ills, while the world of these conformists-in-training seemed guaranteed by “news about jails, reformatories, judges and sentences, lashings, canings, bread and water” (1985, 18). The older Stead, however, had more than hearsay knowledge of the full panoply of state terror. She had seen the willingness of the Roosevelt administration to turn against “Reds”, had felt fear seeping slowly from the findings of the Dies Committee on Un-American Activities, and finally fled a system bent on crushing socialism. Living the life of proscribed fellow travellers changing countries like shoes, and existing meagrely from sporadic publications, Stead and Blake had encountered few Mrs Taylors during the Cold War. These lessons were not readily forgotten.

The much-changed Australia, to which Stead returned permanently in August 1974, offered a problematic haven. Although the Left had considerable public traction, most postwar governments and mainstream society were staunchly anticommunist and pro-America. The Pacific War had forged a solid American-Australian alliance, local communist threats had reinforced it. Prime Ministers Harold Holt and John Grey Gorton had applauded increased American involvement in Vietnam. They had lent their forces to the American war-effort, their sovereign territory to secretive American tracking stations: they had gone, to quote a political slogan of the day, “all the way with LBJ”. The security branches of the two

nations cooperated closely, and it was widely assumed that communist sympathisers would find it difficult to attain government largesse. Stead's homeland had also offered, at best, a lukewarm reception to her fiction. *Letty Fox* had been banned on account of its alleged obscenity; local publishers had only shown interest in her two novels with Australian settings. Academic and literary circles recognised Stead's talent, but much-needed financial support and governmental recognition could be withheld. In 1952 she applied unsuccessfully for a Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship, at a time when the federal government was closely scrutinising the political orientation of applicants (Rowley 389). In 1967 the recommendation of a standing literary committee that Stead be awarded the \$10,000 Britannica Australia Award for Literature was overturned by a higher authority for dubious reasons. Officially she was ruled ineligible because of her long residence overseas and her doubtful national status. Stead's reading of this decision is not known. But she would certainly have been acutely aware of the fact that known communists could be denied access to liberal Australia, or summarily expelled from it, while the Petrov Affair provided, in the eyes of the general public, confirmation of the continued menace posed by communist infiltration and hidden sympathisers

Past and present experience, therefore, counselled circumspection in Australia. Stead was determined not to be enrolled as a women's liberationist, but neither was she going to remind the world that she should be viewed instead as a communist. After her death, the silence over this affiliation deepened for a time, and its strategic erasure, begun in late interviews, was completed by Stead's well-wishers. Feminist studies kept her reputation high in the academy, while the turn in historical studies away from narratives driven by famous leaders and mainstream politics militated against a detailed reappraisal of her response to contemporary ideas and events. Stead's political convictions and their profound impact on her writing have, with tragic irony, been largely bypassed by the ineluctable course of history upon which she and Blake, as good Marxist-Leninists, had set such store. My research seeks to help

redress the imbalance by charting Stead's very real achievement within the parameters in which she saw her own work, and by showing the sustained influence of socialist theory and practice on her life from her early childhood through to the outbreak of the Pacific War. By then her political views were firmly in place, the socialist heritage assimilated. Intellectually she was, as Yglesias rightly asserted, a product of the 1930s. Thereafter a new historical phase gradually emerged, dominated by the global hegemony of the United States and the Cold War, but their impact on Stead remains outside the scope of this study devoted to the first major phase of her ideological and artistic development.

NOTES

1. Parenthetical page references prefixed by Rowley are to her 1993 biography of Stead, others prefixed by Harris are to her 2005 edition of the Stead-Blake correspondence.
2. Copy held in the author's collection.
3. Seen historically, "socialism and communism are virtually interchangeable terms" (Carew Hunt 27). For a succinct account of their past usage see Carew Hunt 26-28.
4. The tide, however, has been slowly turning, with critics, such as Cowden, During, Gardner, Pender, Rooney, Wilding, Yelin and myself drawing attention to the political dimension of her fiction, and to the fact that the counter-case, in effect, "diminishes Stead; many of her best works are deeply concerned with political issues without being 'propaganda'" (Gardiner 1989 52), and neglects "that she retained a Marxist perspective on world politics and economics throughout her life" (Gardiner 1989 53).
5. In 2007 it was reissued by Melbourne University Press as a New Edition. Its newness, however, consists not in further insights, nor in drawing on a decade and half of intervening Stead scholarship, but mainly in deleting approximately twenty per cent of the original text to create a tighter, more reader-friendly narrative, for as Rowley remarked at the time of its launch: "I like to think I've become a sharper storyteller through the years and more economical with words" (2007). This is faithfully reflected by her bibliography, which cites only one work that has appeared since 1993, Margaret Harris's edition of correspondence between Stead and Blake, also published by Melbourne University Press. Unless otherwise indicated, all my references are to Rowley's 1993 text.
6. In addition, as Anne Pender has noted, the biography's psychoanalytical approach misrepresents certain key relationships and "obliterates some of the essential qualities of Stead's art" (8). See Rowley 1989 for a more focused account of Stead's political interests and engagements, which concludes: "it is important to stress that Bill Blake and Christina Stead never wavered in their commitment to the Left, or—more unusual—to Russia" (157).
7. Here, too, many of the author's abiding concerns appear in miniature, or in a less confronting register. The narrator's initial "horror of money",

for instance, recalls her creator's fixed aversion to the iniquities that its worship promotes in bourgeois society; Tom Biggar's decision to pursue paid manual work rather than his precocious artistic talent (1985, 16) pinpoints a proletarian dilemma as well as the actuality of artistic penury experienced by Stead herself.

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