

Literary Politics and the Cold War: The Case of Christina Stead

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Introduction

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, "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 sought to elect a federal Labour government after decades of conservative rule. There was nothing to suggest that she had once been a fervent member 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."¹ Since then the amnesia has only deepened, so that she remains in important respects, as a recent monograph underscored, "the enigmatic Christina Stead" (Petersen).²

I. Creating an Image for Posterity

Stead, of course, contributed to this situation. She spent the forty most productive years of her life as an expatriate, and she was often less than forthright in the many late interviews she gave. In 1980 to Rodney Wetherhell, for instance, she repeatedly left ambiguous or skirted around the issue of her political convictions. As a child, she allegedly eavesdropped

¹ Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Ungar, 1982), 181.

² Teresa Petersen, *The Enigmatic Christina Stead* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

on visionary 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” (W435).³⁾ As an adult she was “not political” (though only “in the sense of … not the go to meeting type” [W443]), 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” (W443). Flagrantly, too, she disregarded her satirical writing to assert: “I’m not at all critical” or “I have no polemic instinct” (W441, W443). 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” (W441). 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” (W441). 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” (W438). 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.”⁴⁾ She was ready to bemoan the public’s fading memory of the 1930s when it meant she had to rework substantially an earlier 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 kneedeep 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 unhoped

³⁾ W indicates a page reference to Rodney Wetherell, “Interview with Christina Stead,” *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (1980): 431-48.

⁴⁾ R.G. Geering, “From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead: Extracts and Commentaries,” *Southerly*, 50 (1990): 431.

visit to the dissecting rooms.⁵⁾

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, 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, immorality and blinkered actions of party members. Much has been made, too, of the dissenting ideological position she revealed 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 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.⁶⁾

At best "alongside," not "in," the party was what she apparently wished to be. When her de facto spouse, William J. Blake, 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 Rowley, "for one reason only: it would have provided material for the novel she wanted to write about communist radicals" (R253-54). 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 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."⁷⁾ 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 predictably dismissive: "He represents himself and nothing else. As he did in life" (W443). Little wonder that subsequent commentary, in spite of Stead's identification for decades with communist objectives, has

⁵⁾ Unpublished book review, rpt. in Geering, "From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead," 416-17.

⁶⁾ Letter of 29 September 1938, rpt. in Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993), 254. Hereafter page references to this work, prefixed by R, are cited parenthetically.

⁷⁾ Bridget Rooney, "Loving the Revolutionary: Re-reading Christina Stead's Encounter with Men, Marxism and the Popular Front," *Southerly* 58 (1998-99): 84.

felt free to focus on autobiographical traces in the novel, or to discern there an unflinching anatomy of “the political powers of patriarchy.”⁸⁾ 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 the Christesens a copy of her novella collection *The Puzzlehead Girl*, inscribing it with “Love to Nina and Clem from a puzzleheaded Christina Stead, May 1976.”⁹⁾ Yet far from being muddled or a political ingénue Stead, as we shall see, had been schooled by adversity in the need to don masques, as well as to avoid confessing to what had been the single most important influence on her thought and writing: the socialist heritage.

2. The Effaced 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 used them interchangeably, as I do here. 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,”¹⁰⁾ 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. In her household martyrdom for one’s political conscience was almost a family tradition. It began with her father who, thanks to his participation in establishing state industries, lost his government job and temporally his good reputation. This socialist grounding presumably made Stead receptive to the convictions of her future partner, the American businessman and communist intellectual William J. Blake. 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-ravaged 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 ghost-writing: in brief, to the half-life of penury and internal exile usually associated with Eastern block writers out of favour with their regimes.

⁸⁾ Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Male Narcissism, Capitalism, and the Daughter of *The Man Who Loved Children*.” *Daughters and Fathers*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), rpt. in *Christina Stead: The Magic Phrase*, ed. Margaret Harris (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 145-62.

⁹⁾ Copy held in the author’s collection.

¹⁰⁾ Letter to Kate Stead, June 1938, in Christina Stead, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters (1928-1973)*, ed. R.G. Geering (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992), 84.

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 former drama critic of the *Daily Worker*, he was well qualified to assert that "Marxist ideas ... are inseparable from Stead's literary vision."¹¹ They are "what organizes her emotions and talent, what lends tension and drive to her creative process," and what ultimately "has delayed her recognition." 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." 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." Feminist interpretations, which did much to ensure a revival of interest in Stead, would figure highly among these, as would autobiographical readings, so that *The Man Who Loved Children*, for instance, is generally viewed as a scarcely veiled autobiographical masterpiece, in which she exorcised her painful past as well as provided a searing anatomy of the insidious sway of patriarchy. Moreover, Stead, in fascinating ways, confirmed the keenness of Yglesias's commentary. An unremarked, expanded version of it, marked "Rough Galley,"¹² exists among her collection of reviews, which suggests that she was consulted about its contents before it went to press. After its appearance, she disingenuously acted as if surprised about Yglesias' remarks to one correspondent ("I have just been proclaimed a 'Marxian muse' to everyone's astonishment, my own not least" [R612]), whereas to Burnshaw, with whom she had long exchanged private, at times heretical opinions, she was more candid: "I do like the Jose Yglesias review very much, it is pertinent and canny" (R612)—an acknowledgement of the centrality of Marxist ideology in her writing that has generally been overlooked.

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,"¹³ with relentless energy for proletarian causes. By 1930 at the latest Stead had entered the Marxist-Leninist fold, as a letter of 24 November amply documents. There the château Fontainebleau, outside Paris, is described as at once lavish testimony to past exploitation and, she quips good-humouredly, "the only argument against communism, for it seems unlikely that anyone but a lord glutted with pride and riches would spend the money to build a thing so exquisite and so ornate."¹⁴ Otherwise apparently communist doctrine is

¹¹ Quotations are from his "Marx as Muse." Review of *The Man Who Loved Children*. *Nation*, 100 (1965): 368-70.

¹² National Library of Australia, NL MS. 4967, folder 80.

¹³ *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990), 144.

¹⁴ *A Web of Friendship*, 35.

unassailable, and she approvingly reports how “the successful communistic state of Russia ... is determined to wreck the capitalistic world.” Blake’s views are frequently reiterated, and she scoffs like an old hand at “the regular yearly rumour ... that Stalin has been assassinated” and Soviet overthrow pending, dismissing this as a strategy of ailing European states who “need a little cheering up by false rumours.” As fascism grew in strength, 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. 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* [1934]), the struggle between revolutionary and bourgeois consciousness (*The Beauties and the Furies* [1936]), and the heartless machinations of international financiers (*House of All Nations* [1938]). Stead not only sent out a questionnaire on the political engagement of writers, she showed her own clearly in her fiction as well as non-fiction. Indeed, so unambiguous was her commitment to fundamental Marxist-Leninist dogma that she could be offered a scholarship to study International Literature in Moscow for six months in 1936,¹⁵⁾ and *The Man Who Loved Children* was sent to Moscow, by its reviewer in *New Masses*, for official approbation by 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.

3. The Alleged Disjunction between Politics and Her Life’s Work

Ultimately, of course, that the case for a “Red Stead” is less well known than it should be is largely the result of the 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). D 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,”¹⁶⁾ and my own research on Stead is frequently indebted to its copious sources and diverse findings.¹⁷⁾ Nevertheless, Rowley’s monograph has considerable

¹⁵⁾ See her letter to Gilbert Stead, 25 January 1937 (*A Web of Friendship*, 70-71).

¹⁶⁾ *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (New York: Norton, 1984), 14.

¹⁷⁾ 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” (“The Mocking Country,” *Weekend Australian*, 25-26 August 2007, Books 9). This is faithfully reflected by her bibliography, which cites only one work that has appeared since 1993, Margaret Harris’s recent edition of correspondence between Stead and Blake, also published by Melbourne University Press.

shortcomings as intellectual history.¹⁸⁾ Although it describes the main stations in Stead's ideological pilgrimage, and acknowledges her communist affiliations and friendships, this is done in a piece-meal fashion, rather than as a coherent examination 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. Disconnected, unexamined or underplayed data is easily lost sight of — and many of Stead's intersections with socialism fall into this category — while overall the biography offers a carefully considered emotional, rather than intellectual, history of its subject. Rowley's Stead is an author passionately driven to write and create characters, whose "commitment was to her writing, not politics" (R 254), as if the two were discreet, rather than mutually nourishing spheres.

Nevertheless, despite these categoric 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."¹⁹⁾ Similarly, from *Mainstream* (1947) she copied out and underlined: "*The novel of action is also the novel of ideas*,"²⁰⁾ and presumably it was not just of her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, that she could claim: "I really put some gristle in it."²¹⁾ 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. Both she labels "sick minds":

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.²²⁾

¹⁸⁾ 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" (*Christina Stead Satirist* [Altona: Common Ground Publishing, 2002], 8).

¹⁹⁾ "Techniques of the Novel," NL MS. 4697, folder 49.

²⁰⁾ NL MS. 4697, folder 49.

²¹⁾ Letter to Nettie Palmer, 8 January 1936 (*A Web of Friendship*, 62).

²²⁾ These, and ensuing comments from her unpublished review, are rpt. in Geering, "From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead," 420-21.

The suspicion that this was penned by an essentially unrepentant product of those “bad days” 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.’” 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”—an error presumably not committed by the reviewer.

Stead was, as Jose Yglesias rightly stated, “a product of the thirties” and, despite its later eclipse in the public memory, she was unlikely to forget this period.²³⁾ After all, the decade saw her thorough conversion to a Marxist standpoint, as well as her seminal encounter with the world’s greatest capitalist nation, the United States, and ended with work on *The Man Who Loved Children*, which is set there in the years 1936 to 1938. These years constituted one of the most politically intense periods of her life, and during the latter part of the decade, spent in Manhattan, she was in close contact with the local communist party. Not only did Blake join its New York branch in 1938, but for much of their time in America they lived within easy walking distance of the party headquarters near Union Square. Active involvement in the New York branch usually meant immersion “in a movement that permeated almost every aspect of life. Members read party literature and frequently not much else; their social life was largely limited to other members; nearly all their free time was taken by some kind of party work; when they went to the movies, they went to a Russian film at the Stanley rather than to see the neighborhood theater’s Hollywood product.”²⁴⁾ Such, too, in general terms was Stead and Blake’s existence, except they contributed directly to the party’s intellectual life. Stead, for instance, was for a time a literary editor of the communist journal, *New Masses*, as well as a New York board member of the League of American Writers. Blake was a passionate, entertaining and very well-informed Marxist speaker, much in demand at meetings and rallies. Together they constituted a Communist household and their letters, during rare separations, leave no doubt about Stead’s strong commitment “My moral will be—socialism—that is why the Upper Broadway outfit will not buy” (H221-22), she remarked on one occasion, on another she reported being avoided because “I was too far to the left” (H390).²⁵⁾ As anti-Red sentiment increased, so did her apprehension of people informing about her Marxist reading matter and ideas, and their diverse Communist engagements saw them viewed as potential subversives by the F.B.I.

In the light of this record, it seems strange that *The Man Who Loved Children* should be primarily concerned with autobiographical and feminist, rather than with contemporary, issues—assumptions which I intend to probe in the remainder of this paper, first by

²³⁾ “Marx as Muse,” 369.

²⁴⁾ David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism* (London: Chatham, 1959), 107.

²⁵⁾ H indicates a page reference to Margaret Harris, ed., *Dearest Munx: The Letters of Christina Stead to William J. Blake* (Melbourne: Miegunyah, 2005).

examining the case in favour of the standard reading, then by alleviating the widespread amnesia concerning some of the crucial debates of the 1930s to suggest how the period shaped her masterpiece in unnoticed ways.

4. Making Sense of Her Masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*

The autobiographical case focuses on the father-daughter relationship, and treats the setting as a mere stage prop to this central drama. Its most authoritative proponent is Stead's principal biographer, Hazel Rowley. Whether in her voluminous monograph, or the essay "How real is Sam Pollit?,"²⁶⁾ Rowley argues compellingly that the composition of the novel amounted to psychotherapy. Stead, on the subject of her early adolescence, observed: "I'm not unforgiving—how could it be so when no-one is to blame?—they just made an etching out of me, I am deep-bitten" (R259). Hence, writing the novel lifted a "great weight off my mind, I ought really to say my soul ... it was as if I escaped from jail, although it may seem savage and mean to others" (R238). Rowley, building on these comments, paints Stead as emotionally scarred and, like Virginia Woolf, obliged to write about this seminal period:

At the time, however, plunging into the past brought violent emotions to the surface and caused her extreme emotional distress ... Stead felt oppressed by the stonework and brickwork around her. Her internal world—far more oppressive—was overshadowed by her father. The memories came flooding back. She slept badly. She raged. She wept. Among all that masonry, she was effectively undertaking her own psychoanalysis. (R258)

And the case is apparently clinched by a letter of 1942 to Blake. In it she reported triumphantly that the third and current wife of her father, Thistle Harris, found his depiction in the book to be: "exact—my memory is faultless: and she has guessed most of it, she even believes it all. But she still loves the guy — 'a monster, an undeveloped personality and a lovable child' says she. So I hope you now believe your own woman and realise she is *not crazy*" (H75). Undoubtedly, then, Stead had discussed with Blake the extent to which Sam Pollit was based on her father. The extreme nature of the portrait had, for Blake, apparently stretched credibility, so that Stead is delighted to be able to affirm her sanity and accuracy. Finally Randall Jarrell, in the 1965 introduction, confirmed the extraordinary verisimilitude of the book's characters, and unerringly anticipated critics' later preoccupation with the return of the repressed: "The book has an almost frightening power of remembrance; and so much of our earlier life is repressed, forgotten, both in the books we read and the memories we have, that this seems friendly of the book, even when what it reminds us of is terrible" (v-vi).²⁷⁾

²⁶⁾ "How Real is Sam Pollit?: 'Dramatic Truth' and 'Proces-verbal' in *The Man Who Loved Children*," *Contemporary Literature*, 31 (1990): 499-511.

²⁷⁾ Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical page reference are to *The Man Who Loved Children* (New York: Holt, 1965).

Why, then, did Stead choose to set her novel in a politically sensitive period of the 1930s if this was not a primary concern of her tale? According to Rowley, the answer is straightforward. Stead originally wanted to set the story at Watson's Bay in Sydney, where the original events took place. But her publisher, Simon & Schuster, insisted on a local setting to improve the book's chances in the fiercely competitive American market. Stead's willingness to comply may also have reflected a desire to spare the feelings of her real-life models. Rowley is similarly categorical about the decision to transpose events from the 1910s to the politically charged 1930s: "the real reason was linked to the change in location: the America Stead knew was contemporary America—the Thirties; unlike Bill Blake, she was no historical novelist" (R261). Neither surmise is easy to refute. In addition, the novel itself avoids opportunities to allude directly to events of immense historical and political import from that period. For instance, despite his adoration of Roosevelt, Sam Pollit views the nation's capital as the "new Jerusalem" (244), not the Washington of the New Dealers, while even the spectacular loss of wealth by his father-in-law, David Collyer, is attributed to spendthrift habits and innate generosity, rather than to suddenly worthless securities. From this it seems to follow that Stead was preoccupied with the family as family, for she displayed few reservations about dealing with contemporary American issues when they were her chosen subject matter, as two subsequent novels, *Letty Fox*, *Her Luck* and *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* demonstrate.

Finally, given this autobiographical emphasis, the spatial and temporal transference of the novel's events is treated by Rowley as a translation in the most literal sense. That is, Stead attempted to find equivalents, or at least close approximations, in contemporary America to previous Australian controversies, and succeeded admirably:

It was her good fortune that the Franklin Roosevelt government of the Thirties in many ways resembled the progressive New South Wales government earlier in the century. David Stead had admired that Labor Government and its policy of state socialism which enabled him to establish the State Trawling Industry; similarly, Sam Pollit is a "great partisan of the Roosevelt work plans"—largely "because of the work done in fish and forestry conservation by the W.P.A. and C.C.C. workers."

But the spatial and temporal dislocations provided a thorny challenge, to which, several critics maintained, Stead was unable to rise ... If *The Man Who Loved Children* had been the Australian book Stead wanted to write, it would not have had these flaws. (R261-62)

In addition, Stead allegedly recreated her father, David Stead's personal idiom so perfectly in the novel that she was able to put one of his original letters into chapter six "virtually verbatim. It poses the interesting question: when does 'naturalism' become 'plagiarism'?" (R263). Teasing out the implications of this word-for-word appropriation, Rowley ultimately projects the portrayal of Sam Pollit as an unresolved power struggle, so that although "Stead 'captured' her father in her novel, she would always remain ligated," that is, "tied. Hamstrung," and unable to emancipate herself from this painful past "even at the other side

of the world” (R263). These explanations of the changes to time and setting, buttressed as much by Rowley’s authority as Stead’s major biographer as by hard evidence, have not stirred a ripple of protest.

5. The Novel’s Immediate Historical and Political Context

Yet there remains unaccounted for Yglesias’s disturbing rebuttal of the terms in which the novel was reviewed, and Stead’s tacit approval of his views. In particular, Yglesias stressed the ideological complexities of the period and, given their current neglect by commentary, it is worth recapping them in some detail. Obviously they were the years that witnessed the unfolding of a world-wide depression, the rise of fascism and Europe stumbling like a sleepwalker towards war. They also brought a series of unprecedented ideological challenges for the CPUSA, from Stalinist purges and a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany to crucial doctrinal dissension among loyal party members and fellow travelers. Stead initially set foot in the United States in 1935, in the midst of what was a crucial watershed period for the country, and Sam Pollit knew it: “we have risen superior to the raw struggle for supremacy, the tooth-and-nail stage; it is now a struggle of types, brains and philosophies” (372). Alfred M. Landon, then Republican governor of Kansas, depicted the “nations of the world” in 1935 as “march[ing] towards a new social and political philosophy,”²⁸⁾ and the United States, a vast arena of conflicting views, would continue to seethe ideologically well beyond Roosevelt’s defeat of Landon in the November, 1936 presidential election. The crippling effects of the Depression were immense and ongoing. Thus in 1935 Roosevelt was still describing America as a stricken nation; conservatives agreed, depicting it as being on the verge of bankruptcy and the tyranny of the Collective State. In 1935 the Supreme Court struck down key elements of the New Deal as unconstitutional, while Moscow called for the formation of a Popular Front. Rapprochement and unity between diverse forces hostile to fascism became the order of the day. A year later the CPUSA, profiting from this ideological thaw to expand its local appeal, began to present itself as the direct inheritor of the American Revolutionary tradition. “Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century” became its slogan and party doctrine.²⁹⁾ Soon claims and counter-claims to the nativist central stage rang out in the media: an issue not lost on Stead’s Sam Pollit who also stresses that his ideas “are seeded in the oldest blood of our countrymen” (148), and this nativist identification is reinforced when his sister Jo claims ancestry traceable to the American Revolution (99).

Although a direct depiction of this larger contemporary theatre of disjunction, crisis and warring ideologies is absent from *The Man Who Loved Children*, it does invoke,

²⁸⁾ Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Politics of Upheaval: The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Mifflin, 1960), 533.

²⁹⁾ See Earl Browder, “Communism is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century,” *New Masses*, 25 June 1935: 13-14.

through its main protagonist Sam Pollit, crucial statist enterprises that were altering the nature of American government. Chronologically the book's setting coincides with the second Roosevelt administration. Then, in response to judicial and industrial setbacks, the administration's economic program substantially shifted, moving from its initial drive to counterbalance the concentrated power of capital and industry with that of the state (the First New Deal), to a more conservative attempt to restore competition and to return the country to a classic free market economy. Sam Pollit, however, is an advocate of a comprehensive, regulatory state apparatus and an unequivocal First New Dealer, an identification which implicitly recalls the seminal problem raised by the financial rout of 1929: would revolution or fascism (according to communists, the capitalists' last desperate attempt to hold on to power) inevitably follow from catastrophic economic conditions, or could Western governments reinvent themselves? America, which had led the world in democratic and capitalistic innovation, once again became a key laboratory of social experimentation, and the new government of Roosevelt, inaugurated in 1933, its acid test. The reform agenda of its legendary first hundred days broke with revered American traditions and ushered in a dramatic increase in government power. New agencies, like those which win Sam Pollit's whole-hearted approval, were established as part of a national relief program, that substituted state planning and assistance for unrestrained economic competition and character-molding self-reliance. Local socialists found themselves scrambling to mount an alternative program. Stead's novel is concerned with this apparently idealistic and socialist—inclined Roosevelt, and the ease with which ostensibly altruistic initiatives can assume authoritarian, even totalitarian traits.

For party members and fellow travelers, like Blake and Stead, the thirties and subsequent war years in America was a deeply divisive and ideologically troubled period. It was not only economic but also political norms that were inverted for, as Yglesias underscored in his review, "in the America of Roosevelt's second term ... Marxists were not revolutionaries," while the communist literary establishment of "the thirties and forties ... was revisionist in the pejorative sense." From 1933 on, American politics was dominated by Roosevelt's reform agenda, which caused a severe division of opinion in communist ranks. Those who adhered to an orthodox Marxist position were highly critical of the New Deal. Always ready to detect a deeply-laid conspiracy of Wall Street or the House of Morgan, they branded Roosevelt a stooge of vested interests and an American Kerensky, or head of an interim government destined to be swept aside by more lethal forces. This "Left sectarianism" was irreconcilably opposed to the "Right opportunism," represented by the General Secretary of CPUSA, Earl Browder. Striking out in increasingly independent ideological directions, he made common cause with Roosevelt and, instead of pursuing the goal of a proletarian revolution, worked constructively within the democratic processes, as he adapted Marxist-Leninism to American realities and won Moscow's approval. Political debate and the party line could, however, shift dramatically according to the needs of socialism's Soviet homeland. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 sparked a curt directive from Moscow to

the CPUSA to “stop trailing in the wake of FDR,”³⁰⁾ but Hitler’s invasion of Russia in June, 1941 led to revival of the Popular Front. Finally, the meeting of Allied leaders late in 1943 inspired, in the following year, Browder’s notorious Teheran proposal, which involved replacing the CPUSA with a newly formed Communist Political Alliance, and the abandonment of divisive socialism from its program in favour of a liberal consensus, promoted by working within the established two-party system. Thus Browderism became a shorthand for deplorable deviation and theoretical heresies that were carrying the CPUSA away from the Bolshevik model and into the arms of its sworn capitalist enemies.

The Stead household was hostile to the pro-Roosevelt line and remained staunchly Marxist-Leninist: even after Khrushchev shocked the Parry faithful in the mid-fifties with revelations of Stalin’s atrocities they remained loyal to the memory of the dead dictator. Hence during the second period of the Popular Front Roosevelt, despite his various gestures in support of Soviet Russia in its war against Nazi aggression, remained an object of scorn. “Yesterday” Stead commented, “I … heard God’s Gift to The Americas make his Unlimited National Emergency speech, which he made with a lot of fumbling, blundering, anxiety and crossness: he is no longer the guy who jumped cheerfully to power on the hopes of the forgotten man, that’s certain” (H142). Disillusionment with this despicable opportunist would, by inference, be bound to grow, even if the American public was irremediably self-centred: “they seem to think it is fair enough for these people to fight it out, they hate Hitler but neither one side nor the other means a thing to them; it is all sub-Yankee” (H55). American Communists who loyally followed the party line were, in her eyes, hardly more enlightened. In 1944 she sent Blake a caustic missive about an encounter with their friends Michael and Ada Gold:

She is abysmally stupid. Really. Surprised that there was “still” opposition to Browder. Thought that “the membership” had been convinced now that “the situation had been clarified” by the “loyal members.” I quote her phrases. Kept on about “clarified” because of the need for no split in the war effort. I didn’t attempt to go into this; if her husband can’t convince her, I can’t. (H303)

Years before, of course, Stead had been “convinced” by hers.

Stead and Blake concurred that Browder’s influence was unequivocally bad. It was voiding the term socialism of all meaning, and undoing the work of generations of party activists. Blake, for instance, regaled her with an anecdote about the ignorant view of the *New Republic*, that stalwart Germans would soon stem the Soviet tide: “We screamed with laughter but the fact is it shows that the bourgeois intellectual still does not understand in the slightest what a power Socialism is: the Browder acolytes by glossing over the fact that it is Socialism and that alone that is winning the war, have done much to encourage bourgeois

³⁰⁾ Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *The Forging of American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 287.

flummery” (H337). Evidence of this insidious weakening of socialist ideology, alliances and party solidarity was everywhere. “Last night Richard Wright called on me to tell me that the party’s crazy, losing all influence with the Negro, etc., and today I ran into nother [sic] Marxian with a lamentoso at the soda bar. I avoided him but he too was heretic—we are all heretics now—except Earl and J.P. Morgan” (H320). Browder’s policies, by 1944, have promoted heretics and schismatics, while his apostasy sees him bracketed with the redoubtable banker J.P. Morgan, Jr., the figurehead of American finance capitalism, whose hand Browder had offered to clasp in the interests of unity and peace. This debasement of socialism was intolerable, and Stead was equally convinced about the morally and intellectually moribund state of her host country: “Such a weak, soft middleclass has one foot in the grave and one on a banana-peel. They can’t fight anything, so the first gangster who comes along will have them all on their knees” (H308). “God’s Gift to The Americas” was one candidate for this part, another someone in the mould of her own Sam Pollit, who sees himself and his offspring as “socialists of a new socialism, leaders of men!” (148).

6. The Novel’s Contemporary Application

The focal point of Stead’s fictional critique of Roosevelt, and by extension Browder’s policy, is Samuel Clemens Pollit, the American patriot and “vague eclectic socialist” (316) of *The Man Who Loved Children*. As the president is to the nation, so a father is to his family, and arguably the novel offers, through the Pollit family’s sudden financial ruin, isolation and launching of a home reform agenda, called by Sam his “new deal” (372), a domestic analogy for the Great Crash and its aftermath. Also Sam is not only an unabashed fan of the president, but he throws into sharp relief their leader’s less desirable attributes. Repeatedly the president is his model, cited as justification for his own policies or silently aped, as when Roosevelt’s famed “fireside chats” to the nation inspire Pollit to launch his own Uncle Sam Hour on the radio. More disturbingly, Sam reveals the imperialistic and totalitarian tendencies that Marxist-Leninism identified with the final phase of capitalism. During his time in Singapore, for instance, Pollit fails to grasp that his pet notion of a single human family elides conflicting views, or that his privileged position allows him to impose his ideas on indigenous co-workers much as he did on childish interlocutors. Blind to the criticism of his subordinates, as well as to his own growing appetites for power and sensual gratification, the imperialist then seeks to implement at home the lessons gleaned overseas. There his will-to-power, masked as a drive for order, demands mimicry to the point of self-erasure, while communal activities, as in totalitarian states, are used to enforce his vision. Inflexible as well as unteachable, he is unable to see himself in his daughter’s depiction of tyranny in *Herpes Rom*, or to realise that he now embodies the evil he once claimed to abhor.

Equally bleak is Stead’s disillusioned verdict on the land that, self-applaudingly, has long viewed itself as the last, best hope of humankind. There, despite the government’s highly publicized reform manifesto, Roosevelt’s forgotten man remains firmly at the bottom of the economic pyramid, as the forlorn outcasts of Eastport demonstrate (347).

There, despite successive progressive administrations, wealth, privilege and influence still reign supreme. Hence Sam's successful career, although underpinned by native talent and considerable learning, depended on patronage. Similarly impecunious Clare, although the gifted offspring of brilliant parents, has neither prospects nor the personal courage to break free when the opportunity presents itself. For Stead poverty and lack of influence constitute a social millstone, not the starting-point for one of those fairytale ascents from obscurity to financial plenty and power—the fictional stock-in-trade of Horatio Alger—that constitute the American dream. Minorities in her novel still lead lives of quiet desperation in worm-eaten shacks, while children and women constitute perennially enslaved groups, in spite of the Pollit mantra that imperiled truth and good will finally triumph.

Rather than closing ranks with other Leftist forces, in keeping with the Popular Front agenda, Stead provided in *Sam Pollit* a highly critical case study of a socialistically-inclined, democratic leader, whose projects, as the marlin-boiling-down climax shows, threaten to reduce socialist ideals to a mass of stinking blubber. By the novel's end Sam stands revealed as an insidious and potentially lethal deceiver of himself and society. Far from being an original, or even a coherent thinker, this "leader of men" is actually an opportunistic appropriator, not of tempting funds, but of others policies and ideas, as well as a calculating manipulator of his people's affections. In him blindness and self-confidence go hand in hand. Despite revolts and suicide, the Great I-Am, as his wife bitterly dubs him (165), can project a glorious future for himself teaching American virtues and ideals on the radio (518). Yet as events have shown, he is devoid of critical self-awareness, devoid of any genuine sense of social or racial justice, as well as a foe of freedom and equality. Like Roosevelt, whom communists knew was incapable of dismantling the capitalist system, that root cause of social ills, Sam can entertain thoughts of a future state, liberated from gravity's baneful drag (82), but not of alleviating concrete examples of down-trodden human potential, such as Clare, dressed in rags and tatters, or his own despairing wife. All this and more Stead could obliquely suggest, without overtly contravening the party line, which might have been answered with a reprimand, or merited more severe forms of party discipline, such as a humiliating public recantation.

7. Conclusion

The bitter lessons of these and subsequent years, which fostered literary subterfuge and veiled statement, were not readily forgotten. The much-changed Australia, to which Stead returned permanently in August 1974, offered a problematic haven. Although the Left had some public traction, most post-war governments and mainstream society were staunchly anti-communist and pro-America. Hanoi's success against the United States and its allies in Vietnam had showcased the undiminished strength of communist arms and ideology. Their menace seemed very real and was felt throughout the region; circumspection was called for. Repeatedly in late interviews Stead showed she 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. Since her death, the silence over this affiliation has only deepened, and its strategic erasure, begun with her own often misleading statements, has been completed by Stead's well-wishers. Feminist studies have kept her reputation high in the academy, while the recent turn in historical studies away from narratives driven by famous leaders and mainstream politics has 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 bypassed by the ineluctable course of history upon which she and Blake, as good Marxist-Leninists, had set such store. Stead's case, then, is a striking reminder of how political ideology has at times shaped literary and, more broadly, artistic reception. It is well known, for instance, that the CIA acted to help enshrine American Abstract Expressionism as a direct product of democratic individualism, and as a resounding endorsement of American cultural and intellectual values. Perhaps similar covert forces were at work influencing literary theory and reception. Certainly the post-war ascendancy of New Criticism offered a stark contrast to the resolutely political focus of socialist realism. Its formalist emphasis largely excluded historical and political considerations, and encouraged the kind of ahistorical readings so evident in Rowley's biography. The work and achievement of Stead, in short, is in need of urgent reappraisal, as no doubt is the writing of many comparable fellow travellers from the 1930s. Stead may not be the greatest star in the feminist modernist canon, though she is undoubtedly a very bright one, but she may well be the most significant Marxist novelist writing in English between the two world wars and beyond.