

Christina Stead's Poor Women of Sydney, Travelling into Our Times

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If the nation, the novel and psychoanalysis ... draw our gaze in two directions at once—inward to their imaginary psychic territories and outward to their global reaches or, on a different axis, backward to their hegemonic histories and forward to their postcolonial afterlives—what can we learn from such double vision? (Cooppan, *Worlds* xxiii)

This paper considers the imaginary psychic territories that Christina Stead (1902–1983) brought into the first novel she completed, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. These were constituted from a wide range of reading, and from familiarity and often affinity with Left intellectuals and political activists in Sydney from towards the end of the First World War (during which the Russian Revolution had also occurred) through the 1920s, and then from what she found in London and Paris from 1928 to 1934, when the book was substantially written and revised. Stead had arrived in London in May 1928 with a novel, 'Death in the Antipodes,' in mind; how much of it was on paper is unclear.¹ As is well known, she was pursuing on some level an unsatisfactory romance with the Sydney University tutor, Keith Duncan, who went in 1926 on a travelling scholarship to the London School of Economics to study political science, and who intended to go on to further work in the United States. This was apparently why Stead introduced Duncan to Wilhelm Blech, her American boss in the job she found—serendipitously, it would turn out—at the grain exchange business of Strauss and Company almost immediately upon her arrival, with little money to live on, in London. It was purportedly Duncan who told Blech that Stead 'thought herself a writer' (Rowley 85), after which Blech asked her to show him some of her work. After he had taken it home for the weekend, she recalled later, Blech 'looked at me with absolute astonishment . . . and he said: "It has mountain peaks"' (Wetherell 85); this undoubtedly increased the boss's already considerable interest in his secretary. Seven months after their meeting, he asked her to move to Paris to continue as his secretary (Rowley 91)—and perhaps he thought at the time, his 'back-street wife' (Rowley 24–25).

Many passages in *Seven Poor Men* significantly bring out Stead's own familiarity with actual figures on the Sydney Left,² and some of their activities and preoccupations in the mid-nineteen-twenties. Stead's interaction after that with Left intellectuals and writers in London, and Paris, was also drawn upon in inventing or developing some of the characters in the Sydney-set novel.³

Expanding the focus from the men foregrounded by the title allows more attention to the styles of femininity, or psychic territories, that this novel by a woman writer depicts and investigates.⁴ Dorothy Green in 1968 argued that Catherine 'is the real centre of the book and it is her predicament as a woman, and as a woman who has come to maturity in Australia that is the seed from which the book grows' (Green 153). The title, and the list of *dramatis personae*—'The Seven Poor Men'—might have seemed to suggest that any women were written as significant in their relation to the men. The novel's main characters were described, in a review when it first appeared, as 'victims of the depression, all searching for jobs or loves or

Wait also had a proposal for saving the two militant Seamen's Union leaders, Tom Walsh (Adela Pankhurst's husband) and Jacob Johnson from deportation in 1925, as Baracchi relates:

Well before they had been seized, Esther Waite [sic], the strange girl with bushcraft at her fingertips already mentioned, came to my home & said, 'Come out the back.' And there, looking down on the dense forest of the expansive Lane Cove Valley, she put to me this proposition: I can *guarantee* to hide them down there till this blows over so they will never be found & feed them adequately every day. (Baracchi 64)

She asked Baracchi to get the proposal put to them at once, and send an answer back to him. He comments, 'She was urgently and romantically in earnest, & I believe she could have done it. I said I would do as she asked, but the two Reds plumped for the constitution. So history was written Evatt's way, not Esther Waite's [sic]' (Baracchi 64).

Esther had been born in 1898; she was the eldest among four sisters and a brother, Mildred was the second child. Similarly to Stead, 'encouraged by her father, Esther took a keen interest in the natural history of her surroundings.' 'Bad eyes and bad health,' according to *Aurora Australis*, the P.L.C. magazine for December 1916, were said to have prevented Esther from getting into Sydney University from Presbyterian Ladies College, and also from completing her studies in art at Sydney Technical College in the 1920s, though she later took private lessons with the artist, Joseph Bennett (Rost 1, 2). Ethel Morton comments that Esther moved to P.L.C. because she 'resented the regimentation' at Abbotsleigh, and that she 'moved out of 'the big house' and took up residence in 'the man's house,' which had previously been occupied by a servant—this was out in the garden.' Esther seems to have had similar difficulty to Catherine's in conforming to the conventionalities of middle-class life. 'While at Technical College, Esther lived in Balmain' (Morton 2). 'She formed a romantic attachment with Lewis Rodd' (another person who attended Sydney Teachers' College), 'but he finally married Kylie Tennant in 1932. Esther never married' (Rost 3).¹²

Sparrow refers to Esther, when he first mentions her, as 'a rather unstable young woman' (Sparrow 142), and also adds that *Seven Poor Men* drew 'on Stead's experiences in the early twenties,' and that, further, 'Catherine, the troubled main character, derives from Esther, with whose mental processes Stead was fascinated' (Sparrow 143). Rowley also intriguingly mentions that 'Stead was fascinated by stories she had heard of this wild young woman who once went so far as to commit herself to a mental asylum' (Rowley 130, no source). These mental hospitals in the first decades of the twentieth century were not very congenial environments, even if one were in the position of both patient and a teacher in the workshops, as Catherine says she will be (and the latter role is the reason she gives her mother for going there at all). If 'Forestville' is Gladesville, despite the elegant architecture and the layout of its 'beautiful gardens . . . rich with flourishing arbours and parterres,' its 'far alleys and adjoining paddocks' (298, 310), the advisability of committing oneself to be there might be wondered at.¹³

In one of the final scenes of *Seven Poor Men*, a group including the Folliotics, Kol Blount, Joseph and Baruch, and a woman called Fayre Brant, has come to visit Catherine at Forestville; we are told that she 'smiled with anger at seeing them all there,' and 'designed the sort of conversation she wished to hold by asking Fulke long questions about Winter, still in gaol, but to be released in three days' (298). Baruch takes his farewell of Catherine in 'the workshop where she taught design and woodcarving' (310); she calmly cuts her wrist with a knife, for which Baruch

