

# The Totally Incredible Obscenity of *Letty Fox*

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The passage on p. 279, to which the Board has drawn special attention, appears not only indecent, but totally incredible. (C. A. Quin, Acting Senior Clerk, Department of Trade and Customs, file on *Letty Fox*, 1947)

I don't know what imagination is, if not an unpruned, tangled kind of memory. [. . .] I have a practical mind and see little use in the imagination. (Letty Fox in Christina Stead, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* 45)

Christina Stead's *Letty Fox: Her Luck* has always been recognized as a "provocative" novel (Harris, "Human Comedy" 46). Just how provocative has been less clear. Published in New York in 1946, Australia declared it a prohibited import in mid-1947. It is the only one of Stead's books to have been banned, and Australia is the only country in the world to have banned it. Though Stead biographies have discussed the banning and recent studies demonstrate increasing interest in it, neither the procedures involved in the banning nor the complexity of what was at issue for the Australian officials have been explored.

A picaresque novel following the usually amorous and often humorous adventures of its central character, *Letty Fox* is also a blazingly critical portrait of the American bourgeoisie, the family and the marriage market. Yet Kenneth Mackenzie, reviewing it for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1947, felt that Stead ("not a very good writer") had merely said to herself: "I'll write a rude book, and make it hot." Stead's defense against this kind of response was to argue for the novel's realism as a satirical critique of New York society. The tension between the novel's perceived

deliberate salaciousness and its author's claims to represent a particular milieu, condemned on its own terms, forms the basis of the controversy surrounding the novel. This tension is condensed in the contrast between the two quotations that I have used to begin this discussion. Reporting on the details of the novel for the Department of Trade and Customs, to which he recommended it be classified a prohibited import, administering clerk C. A. Quin finds one of the novel's more explicit references not only indecent but actually unbelievable: "totally incredible." In contrast, Letty conceives of her own imaginative processes as merely "unpruned memory." This is a revealing confession for such a loquacious and yet pragmatic writer, speaking in a novel masquerading as her own autobiography. "A liar is a realist," as Letty says (*Letty Fox* 45).

Related to questions about the novel's documentary value, about real sex and real New Yorkers, the processes that banned *Letty Fox* enact conflicting models for reading it as a portrait of a social world. For the authorities, *Letty Fox* was too much about sex: hyperbolic and excessive, thus unbelievable. For Letty, her revelations come from her practical mind and are grounded in some observational truth about her world, as she tells it within the novel. The novel's claims to satire, then, complicate Letty's position. The conflict between these readings is clearly present in the records of the banning, in the reports from the authorities deliberating on the novel's obscenity and recommending its prohibition.

The sequence of events that led to Australian authorities banning the novel is evident from the files on the case kept by the Department of Trade and Customs and the Literary Censorship Board, two federal government bodies then adjudicating and administering prohibitions on imported books at a national level. Pieced together from sequenced documents and stamped dates on memos, the paper record testifies to the assiduousness with which these government bodies performed their duties as censors. Through the details furnished by reports on the novel from customs officials and the members of the board, circulated as the decision process required, the precise offences of the novel can be identified, even though the clerks and literary experts prefer to refrain from naming or explaining those details in the main. And a twenty-first-century reader must actually work hard to understand the objections to *Letty Fox*, a vivaciously detailed novel full of sexual adventure and jokes now reasonably opaque in any of its refusals of propriety or convention.

As records, the reports have an almost kaleidoscopic effect, in which the details of obscenity recede continually until they are almost invisible. And, of course, they did become invisible, banned and illegal, unavailable at some absolute level in law. At the same time, those details were deemed excessive, over-iterated, unnecessary, the reports describing them as if they are too close to a reader's eye, like the foreground of the view through a kaleidoscope. The details are also granted enormous power: the power to harm, degrade, corrupt. In her discussions on hate

speech and pornography in *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler explores the ways by which censorship can be said to precede obscenity and is compelled to speak that which it fears and expels. The import of this version of Foucault's repressive hypothesis is in evidence in the case of *Letty Fox*; its joking smuttiness is turned into serious and harmful indecency, its satiric excess found to be at once too literal and yet also not the truth about either New York or Australia.

The details of the obscenity that offended in Stead's first properly American novel, about a "typical" New York girl, reveal something of what that portrait of New York represented for Australian authorities. At another level, the offence is revealing because *Letty Fox* is such a complexly ambiguous novel in both mode and tone. Its treatment of the obscene details is at once profoundly satiric overall and yet sometimes, surely, deliberately salacious. Perhaps it was not the social critique at the heart of *Letty Fox* that offended but its wish to tell; its many sexual episodes, references and jokes can be treated as matter-of-fact incidents by Letty, but are also recounted with relish. Sue Sheridan classes the novel a "sexual picaresque" for its frankness about taboo subjects (95) and Anne Pender's recent analysis also emphasizes the importance of the bawdy ebullience with which Letty treats sexual details (66). Letty's provocative yet cynical, individualist feminism motivates the tell-all style, which is at the same time a lesson in excess from Stead, about "the error of feminine riot!" (*Web of Friendship* 172). But in the analysis of the authorities, treatment and content are separated and literal meanings prevail. In a context in which an unaccountable Australian regime of systematic censorship drew moral boundaries to establish national boundaries, and scandals and controversies over literary representations of sex had been headline news for some years, *Letty Fox's* reception in Australia can be seen to represent a particular scandal of concerted misreading and repressive prudery.

*Letty Fox: Her Luck* appeared in 1946, soon after Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*. Hazel Rowley suggests that it was marketed "like a cheap romance," with a dust jacket displaying a soft cameo drawing of two girls and a blurb promising "[t]here are no reticences" (331–2); however the Harcourt Brace dust jackets I have seen feature a portrait of a single woman, obviously Letty, gazing directly at the viewer. The novel was a *succès de scandale*, selling over 12,000 copies in the United States but marking a downturn in Stead's critical reputation, as Harris notes and the mixed reviews demonstrate ("Critics" 13). It proved a complete failure in the United Kingdom (the last of Stead's novels to be published by Peter Davies) and provoked such hostility in Australia that its banning had some influence on Stead's reputation in her home country for many years. The initial reviews in the United States included objections to its "seediness," as well as more measured appreciation of its satire; unqualified praise was rare. The most influential of the reviews proved to be by William McFee, published in the *New York Sun* on 8 October 1946. McFee denounced *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, together

with its predecessor *For Love Alone*, as “saturated with sex,” and described the novel as a “quagmire of promiscuity and misinformation about New York City.” He objected strongly to the idea that it was a representative picture of New York, declaring that Miss Stead may be “under the impression that she knows all about Greenwich Village and what it stands for in American life. She does not, nor does she know how Americans talk.” His view was that: “[t]his novel about Letty Fox and her scabrous collection of relatives and lovers contains much that is vulgar but not funny.”

In Australia on 9 October 1946, the *Sydney Sun* published an article reporting McFee’s verdict. Headlined “Sydney Girl’s Book called Quagmire,” the article positions *Letty Fox* as the object of a minor scandal. Describing Stead as a “Sydney novelist” who has been “living in New York for nine years,” the article cites other reviews that characterized the novel as a “satire on American marriage and sexual habits.” The second half of the article bolsters the scandal angle by reporting the support of the Secretary of the US Society for the Suppression of Vice, John Sumner, for the banning by Australian authorities of Edmund Wilson’s *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946). A collection of short stories about suburban New Yorkers, *Memoirs of Hecate County* was a mid-career book from a respected left-wing critic, writer and historian. Its prohibition nevertheless occasioned Sumner to extort other literary boards to follow the example of Australia, which, he declared, “has always taken a strong stand against lewd and salacious literature” (“Sydney Girl’s”). As he further noted, “some indecent writings which escaped our Courts have been banned there.” The following day the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the comments from Sumner as news in themselves, noting that *Memoirs of Hecate County* had been banned in some parts of the US and that the bans were based on a single story in the collection (“Ban on Book Lauded”).

A third response in the Australian media came in a *Daily Telegraph* article by Theo Moody, reporting from New York on 25 October 1946, interviewing Stead at length about the reviews. Copies of all of these articles were collected by customs officials and are included in the department correspondent file on *Letty Fox* held in the National Archives (NAA A425/145, Item 1949/1976). The copy of Moody’s article held in the National Archives is inscribed, “Seen,” underlined by three names and two signatures, both dated 25 October 1946. Under the banner “They call her book obscene,” the article’s headline is “‘I’m really a Puritan,’ Christina Stead says.” Critical of the “heavy hand” of the Australian censor, Moody quotes McFee’s review but reports on the novel himself, conceding that “there are many who would find *Letty Fox* shocking.” The article then quotes Stead’s strong defence of the novel as an authentic picture of a New York girl and as a satire on American customs. Stead’s just completed but not yet published *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, then titled *The Blondine*, is also described as a satire on New York life. “‘I suppose some critics will say that this is obscene too,’ Miss Stead said. ‘It deals with obscene material, but it

is not obscene. It is very frank, but written in an austere style. My object isn't obscenity at all." The article ends with a statement from Stead opposing censorship of any form ("I believe in free expression in art") along with Stead's well-cited criticism of Australian censorship practices: "Ever since I was 17 and began taking an interest in art they seem to have been banning things in Australia." Williams and Rowley separately trace the interest of the Department of Trade and Customs and the Literature Censorship Board in both *Letty Fox* and *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* to the influence of this publicity, and it seems clear that the Sydney *Sun's* pointed angle directly provoked action from these bodies. In a 1949 letter published in *Bibliomews*, the Australian Book Collectors' Society Journal, Stead blamed the banning on the reactions of the Australian papers (Williams 180).

On 30 October 1946, a mere three weeks after McFee's review began this sequence of responses to *Letty Fox*, the Comptroller-General in the Department of Trade and Customs in Canberra sent a memorandum to the Collectors of Customs in all states. The memo requested that "should any importation come under notice of the under-mentioned publications [*Letty Fox* and *The Blondine*] the goods be detained and a copy be submitted to this office for review" (NAA A425/145, Item 1949/1976). Customs was acting under its "dragnet" clause, as Deana Heath describes the legislation then active under Section 52 (c) of the Customs Act (75). Under the expansive definition of obscenity in Item 14a, exceeding English law, Australian customs had the power to seize anything "which unduly emphasize[d] matters of sex or crime" or was "calculated to encourage depravity" (qtd. in Heath 75). In February 1947, four months after Comptroller-General J. J. Kennedy's memo, J. W. Brophy in the Victorian office forwarded an uncorrected proof copy of *Letty Fox: Her Luck* for the perusal of the national office. In the next step in the series, documented in the Department's correspondence in its file on *Letty Fox*, Comptroller-General Kennedy forwarded this copy on to Dr L. H. Allen (NAA A425/145, Item 1949/1976). Allen was an English and Classics scholar from Canberra University College, formerly from Duntroon Military College, whose main service to Australian literary endeavour seems to have been his long service as chairman of the Literature Censorship Board. This board, established in 1937 to advise the Minister on censorship decisions, acted only in an advisory role; moreover, customs was not required to seek the advice of the board in order to act. Dr Allen and the board provided a detailed report to the Department in May 1947 (NAA A425/145, Item 1949/1976). This report recommended banning, in which opinion C. A. Quin, the administering clerk from Customs, concurred. Before returning it to Mr Kennedy, Quin added three further points of summation to the report from his position as clerk, and these included the technically damning opinion that the perusal of the novel may have a harmful effect. On receipt, Kennedy then forwarded these combined reports to the Minister for Trade and Customs in June 1947. He added a handwritten note

summarizing the Board's recommendation that *Letty Fox: Her Luck* be banned because of over-emphasis on sex matters and expressly agreeing with Quin. The Minister appears to have inscribed the words "I concur" at the bottom of the memo to finalize the decision (NAA A425/145, Item 1949/1976).

The Department can be seen to have been acting with diligence, following its own statutory processes carefully. The effect of this diligence, however, was not to ensure a range of measured opinion or reference to some parameters of community standards but repeatedly to deny both as points of address. Instead, the reading that judged the novel obscene occurred within tightly hermetic circles of manufactured objectivity. A policy environment in which a Minister's opinion mattered very strongly ensured the concurrence demonstrated in the final decision. In 1935, with Nettie Palmer, Stead drafted a report to the Paris Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture protesting against Australian book censorship. An article in the Perth *Daily News* quotes their report directly: "taking advantage of the distance from Europe, the (reactionary) Government bans books which would keep Australians in touch with progressive English and European thought" (qtd in "Strong Protest Against Book Censors"). The report went on: "We are demanding that the worth and legality of books should be judged by Australian literary leaders," and urged the Paris Congress to send protests to Joseph Lyons as Prime Minister.

By 1937, in fact, the advisory Literature Censorship Board made up of Government-appointed literary experts had been formalized, apparently in response to the kind of public pressure that Stead and Palmer applied in Paris. Its original role thus was to liberalize and formalize decision-making, but it had no clear authority through which to influence a decision. Under the all-encompassing Section 52 (c) of the Customs Act, the Minister for Trade and Customs had power to ban a work merely by proclamation. In 1941, E. J. Harrison used this power to re-prohibit Joyce's *Ulysses*, reversing the 1937 decision of the Literary Censorship Board (L. H. Allen papers; Coleman 30–31). By the late 1940s, any authority attached to the Board seems to have been neutralized in an environment in which the experts agreed strongly with the repressive instincts demonstrated by the Minister and the Department. The effective discovery of possible offence relied on diligent observation from a network of customs officials, including examining officers on the wharves, third-class clerks, collectors and officials up to the Comptroller-General; a network that functioned as a very tightly controlled system (Heath 76). This network operated in concerted distinction from the kinds of publishing contexts and reading protocols that a writer like Stead would take for granted. The impact of this hermetic system on the developing Australian culture industry was forceful.

The scandalized reception of *Letty Fox* in Australia is best understood as part of a domestic climate in which literary obscenity scares had become a repeated,

hyperbolic trope in public discourse. In September 1944, Max Harris was brought to trial before the Adelaide Police Court for the publication of the Ern Malley hoax poems and convicted of publishing an obscene publication. In March 1946, the first of the three trials of Robert Close and his publisher began in Victoria for the publication of his racy novel about love on a merchant ship, *Love Me Sailor*. The *Love Me Sailor* case was accompanied by an anti-censorship campaign from writers' organizations but concluded with a gaol sentence for Close of three months, reduced on appeal to ten days. In April 1946, Angus and Robertson faced trial under the NSW Obscene Publications Act for publishing Lawrence Glassop's novel about the siege of Tobruk, *We Were the Rats*, and was convicted and fined ten pounds. It is reasonable to suggest that by October of that year, when the *Letty Fox* reviews featured in Australian papers, public awareness about obscenity was at a very high level and the bureaucratic processes for prohibiting imported publications were very finely honed. Peter Coleman's standard history of literary censorship in Australia reports an account from "Senior Customs Officials," quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 10 January 1948, that "throughout the preceding ten years, there had always been 'at least 450' books banned" (34). Far from operating as a mechanism that distinguished non-literary forms of culture from literary or artistic forms, it is possible to assert that obscenity laws functioned as one of the best understood frames through which literary value was debated in Australia in this period.

The objections about *Letty Fox* were clearly to its apparent "over-emphasis on sex," a decision about both quantity and purpose. This is the conclusion of the two-page report on *Letty Fox* from Dr Allen, communicating the opinions of the members of the Literature Censorship Board to the Department of Trade and Customs, recommending prohibition (Series A425/145, Item 1949/1976). Allen's report attempted to demonstrate the amount and nature of this unnecessary emphasis within a frame that sought also to judge the aims of the novel. As a revealing piece of functional reading, the tone of this report is uneven, even peculiar, a mix of formal literary references delivered in a conversational tone ("so far so good," comments Dr Allen, after translating the novel's motto from Retif de la Bretonne, that one cannot gain experience without folly). Details are treated with coy secrecy or with explosions of caustic disgust ("[Letty's] uncle Phillip is an anaemic Bluebeard who ends his loose and futile life by hanging himself") and even sarcasm ("[t]he authoress has taken care to put Letty in her social and family setting—and a terrible setting it is"). The report begins with moral objections to the general import of the novel, the first objection being to the novel's negative picture of family life. It specifically pinpoints Mathilde's "jaded hopelessness," left "without even a sedative illusion," although she is "one of the two characters in the book even moderately attractive," a characteristically literal reading of the novel's satirical critiques. Letty's "repellent" early sexual precocity is observed and the report objects to the discussion of sexual

matters before children, a reference to a minor character named Susannah Ford introduced late in the novel. Letty describes Ford as a Freudian who “wallowed chin deep in psychoanalysis” to “keep her chaste” (370) and explicitly criticizes Ford’s behaviour towards children. The main members of the Fox family are condemned, Solander as a “weak-minded libertine” and Jacqueline for wasting her “attractive idealism” on the older Simon Gondyah.

The report then goes on to identify the pages in which excessive sexual and obscene meaning could be found. Episodes are described without precise explanation or explicit detail and a link between sexual activity and moral corruption is presumed, although the report’s characterizations do reveal the influence of psychoanalytic categories and sexological explanations in the Board’s responses to the novel. In the main, the objections are to the novel’s representation of underage or just youthful sex and desire, drunkenness, nudity, lesbianism and homosexual sex, what is referred to as sadism by the report, references to penises and impotence, reference to sexual acts outside marriage, an apparently perverted propensity for a certain colour, swearing, “merely coarse” jokes and general “oversexed” behaviour. In the apparent “saturation” with sex of all 500 pages, Allen and the board include episodes such as Letty’s easy abortion, a teenage pregnancy and schoolgirl “sapphism,” and the many imputations of sex for money, such as those with which the novel begins. One episode to which the report objects strongly appears to be that in which schoolgirl Letty’s first attempt to lose her virginity is thwarted by the impotence of Clays Manning, her older married lover. In the novel, the scenes are treated with irony first by Letty (her mother’s disapproval is “much ado about nothing,” 282) and at a more extended level by Stead, who exposes Letty’s manipulation of her family and Clay’s own manipulation of Letty, his fake reasons for his disinterest in sex and his willingness to expose her to scandal without loyalty. “To give in detail all Letty’s love affairs would be tedious,” declares the report, “but mention must be made of her first lover, Clays Manning, a pervert (see his liking for a certain colour [268], and the very unpleasant episodes on pp. 270–271; 274).” The censor’s references are to the English Peter Davies edition.

We can infer that the details that offended the board in this instance consist firstly in the novel’s description of Letty and Clay attempting to have sex and secondly in the matter-of-fact way in which Stead (not Letty) treats Clay’s apparently sex-induced impotence: “with shocking calm, [he] told me that his excessive love had made him impotent” (280). The phrase “he brought me back to bed, and taking my hand showed me where to put it” includes unambiguous detail about sexual practice. This phrase can be judged to have been particularly offensive and to be more than a technical breach of allowable content in 1946. The report terms the passages “unnecessary and offensive,” although it also acknowledges that “indecent is a relative matter.” Letty continues to offer jokes, rage and speculation about Clays’ “failure,” as he repeats his (lack of) performance

the next night by going out with friends (“Was he a pervert of some sort?” [283]). More than “merely coarse” for the board and plainly unacceptable to it, another unmentionable example appears to refer to the scene in which Letty seduces Luke Adams, who in his “wild air” had stood up and this action had “brought my lips against his naked thighs” (*Letty Fox* 365–66). Identifying details such as this as offensive obscenity demonstrates the literal provocations embedded in *Letty Fox*’s “sexual picaresque,” but also reveals something of the moral direction of the censorship. Letty willingly enters into sexual adventures and describes them with a carnal pleasure. She is angrily frustrated by Clays’ impotency and seduces Luke from her knees, and this knowing, corporeal enthusiasm must surely be part of what the board’s report finds “distasteful.” By Letty’s own admission, she is “bold, arrogant, and coarse” as the report notes. It finds her also wanton: “definitely oversexed” to a degree that is “repellent.” From a woman, speaking in the first-person, Letty’s desires thus strongly challenged the moral rectitude of the department and the board. *Letty Fox* itself represents an important example of disruptive feminist obscenity in the history of Australian censorship.

The specifics of the report’s curt objections to the important figure of Lucy Headlong are also revealing. They feature merely as: “witness Lucy Headlong, Lesbian (367–68) and sadist (365).” The page references are to the scene from Letty’s second visit to Lucy’s country house, in which Lucy comes to her in the night. Lucy’s intent is at first mistaken by Letty for murderous madness (“my impression was that [. . .] she was going to strangle me” [378]) and only recognized afterwards (but also strongly misrecognized, since Letty’s habitual lack of self-knowledge refuses her own sexual passion for Lucy) as “really a lawless, unnamable, shameful possession of me [that] she had wanted” (379). Lucy is recognised as a representatively lesbian figure by the report’s brief declaration, even though the novel prefers innuendo and is reasonably coy, from Letty’s point of view at least, about naming the attraction between herself and Lucy. At one point Letty describes Lucy as “a millionaire of the persuasion feminine,” (332) although this could merely be a reference to Lucy’s gender. The reference to sadism is to a childhood story recounted by Lucy about her “glorious” pleasure in an accident in which a hated cousin cut his chin on an axe and bled onto snow. Really a story about her love for colour as an artist—“the boy’s blue coat, the scarlet blood, the sun, the bright hatchet” (376)—the objection to it is an obvious over-reaction that deliberately associates lesbianism and sadism. The report’s dismissive, name-calling tone manufactures a shorthand impression of comprehensive sexualized corruption, giving no hint of the finely rendered, evocative ambiguity attached to Lucy’s presence in the novel.

The “authoress seems to have expected objections” to the jokes of the ribaldry-named Gallant Stack, advertising man-about-town and notable dinner guest of Letty’s father. The report takes care to note the contents of Stead’s defensive

foreword, in which she declares Stack's dinner scenes to be records of real conversations heard in Manhattan. The report rejects this defence and finds no reason for including his jokes, saving its severest charge of inexcusable excess for "the detail double-marked on p. 279." This seems to be the description of Gallant Stack boasting about the "size and power of his male parts," the attention of women to his "extremities, the while, in fact, he felt the disseminator showing all its unusual dimensions, for this was the effect of wine, ladies and fun upon him" (289). The penis references and the suggestion of amusing and desirous sex between men in Stack's long joke about the knight and the king can be assumed to provide the offence listed in the "see also pp. 285–6," and the report also objects to the owl and soldier joke from this scene: "a soldier shoots and shoots and sometimes hits." The joking reference to Stack's erection is the offence that the administering clerk, Quin, identifies as the most grievous in his brief assessment of Allen's report, and it is this detail that he declares "not only indecent, but totally incredible."

The profound failure of Stead's realist defence for both the board and customs is evident in Quin's response, a summary and elaboration of the board's report that functions as a secondary confirmation of its assessment. (This takes the form of a minute paper, included in the Trade and Customs correspondence file [Series A425/145, Item 1949/1976]). In the analysis of both the members of the board and the customs officials, the "real" details of *Letty Fox* are not only unnecessary but actually fail as documentary effects; they are not real at all, neither the poignancy of Lucy's desire nor the physicality of Stack's erection. The report and the secondary readers thus explicitly reject the critical aims of the novel as realist satire. Stead's bawdy emphasis on female sexual enjoyment and the novel's "note of celebration and delight in the decadence and strife of life and New York," as Pender describes it (75), are both only excessive without this frame. And it can be argued that this excess consists, for the most part, in the pleasure represented.

Quin compounds his critique with a rejection of the novel's literary merit, which is "very slight indeed, the style being a verbose gabble" (Series A425/145, Item 1949/1976). Rather than recognizing the "elaborate imitation autobiography" that Angela Carter describes as "a completely successful impersonation of an American woman" (257), the combined responses from officials damn *Letty Fox* as a fake or failed autobiography, the board finding it "incredible that a girl of that age could write so maturely and with such a range of knowledge." Stead's authorship is revealed by the novel's "slangy piquancy—a style that could have been written only by a trained litterateur," declares Allen's report. One of many of Stead's novels without a clear genre, the satirical realism of *Letty Fox* was also confusing for reviewers, who discussed its credulity as a social document at length. Much of the source of this confusion is Letty's first-person narrative, from which an adjudicating authorial voice is missing. So also is a clear moral frame of condemnation through which to identify its cynicism, the very falsity of Letty's

“false precocity,” as Diana Brydon terms it (91). And indeed Pender’s treatment of *Letty Fox* as a satirical novel shows that even this cynicism sometimes fails, as, for example, when Letty confides her disappointments and wounds in those moments when she can “taste a kind of filthy dust in my mouth” (369).

The Australian scandal about *Letty Fox* occasioned an extended debate between Colin Roderick and Douglas Stewart in *Southerly* in 1948. Roderick had published two studies of Australian novels by 1948 and Stewart was well into his influential period as editor of the *Bulletin’s* Red Page, and these two prominent critics argued forcefully for the worth of *Letty Fox* as a “startling social document,” although not necessarily as a novel. Roderick’s very interesting and speculative review compares it to a 1946 psychiatric study called *Modern Women: The Lost Sex*, which argued that “in very large numbers” women of the period were “psychologically disordered” (qtd. in Roderick 56). The review elaborates on this as in part an effect of a society then very interested in “the physical life” and admits respect for Letty’s “infinite capacity” for seduction or her “sexual valour” (57). Roderick was not convinced by *Letty Fox* as a novel, finding that it lacked the moral convictions of even Zola, but his response does provide some measure of its provocations in Australian contexts, as part of the “crop sown by Freud” but “satisfying enough to the reading public” (57). What Roderick recognizes, and the Customs reports fail to recognize, is a meaningful context for *Letty Fox: Her Luck*. But perhaps it is more accurate to argue that these different readers conceived of that context in distinct, even adversarial ways. For Roderick, Stead’s picture of “The Freedom of Women” is a product of a Western, international, cosmopolitan social world. His reading acknowledges that the formations of love, marriage, sexuality and family so strongly critiqued by *Letty Fox* are linked to capitalist and patriarchal structures and there to be reported on and discussed. He doesn’t necessarily align himself with the enthusiastic curiosity that Stead’s long novel exhibits about these formations, but his review recognizes them as parts of a set that is not singularly characteristic of a single society. The censors’ reports, however, find the novel’s representations quite unbelievable, unacceptable as a picture of any kind of social world. But these incredible details are also the faults of New York or North American culture, clearly distinguished from the Literature Censorship Board’s own: “If we are to accept the picture as genuinely representative, N. Y. middle-class society is at the nadir of morality and culture.”

The offence of *Letty Fox* was strongly associated with Stead’s expatriate status (“Sydney Girl’s Book called Quagmire”) but we can see that this association functioned differently in the two contexts. The New York objections were that she didn’t know New York, (inferring that her indecent ideas were perhaps Australian) but the Australian authorities banned the novel as a portrait of a corrupt New York, to which morally upright, white Australia could feel superior. In her interview with Moody, Stead’s defence was to argue that there were many

girls like Letty in New York *and* Australia, in this defence refusing a nationalist understanding and modelling a cosmopolitanism for which she had already spoken in Paris in 1935. The banning of *Letty Fox* in Australia clearly designated the novel's interests as un-Australian and directly rendered Stead's own status as an Australian author highly problematic. Chris Williams suggests that the mere existence of the Trade and Customs file related to the banning helped influence the decision not to award Stead a Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship in 1952 (178, 181). Stead's slim Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation file may also have been an influence on Stead's reputation for Australian authorities, although that file mostly consists of information about her brother's activities as president of the Chatswood branch of the Australian Communist Party in the 1940s (Williams 178). Williams also notes that, in a letter to *Bibliionews* in 1949, Stead appealed unsuccessfully for a domestic publisher for *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (180), expecting that customs would regard it too as a possible prohibited import. Also the subject of a report from Dr Allen and the board, and an inspection from Mr Quin in customs, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* was found to be "unconvincing" on more than one level. The board could not find it indecent, however, in the main because "its tedious and diffuse disjointedness would tire most readers quickly" (Series A425/145, Item 1949/1976). The impact of the banning of *Letty Fox* on Stead's career can be seen to be quite significant. There is more to be explored in the nature of the threat that the novel presented to Australian authorities, however, especially about what it evidences about national jurisdictions over moral authority.

Reconstructing the banning of *Letty Fox* in the manner that I have here appears merely to reproduce the modernist narrative of liberalization and gradual sexual freedom presumed in much of the history of Australian censorship, in which contemporary readers can enjoy a distance from previous, repressive paradigms. It is clear, however, that postwar Australian literary censorship practices were some of the strictest, perhaps the most repressive, in the collapsing British Empire. The processes that banned *Letty Fox* reveal multiple levels of foreclosing literalness and the collapse of critical distinctions between reading and language, bodies and words, desire and its names. The intense complexity of a Stead novel as a text was reduced to the immediacy of a speech act, to singular words that wound. In effect, the mainstream Australian reception of *Letty Fox* produced it as harmful obscenity, confirmed in those meanings in a highly centralized way, by state institutions and their powerful mechanisms for reading. In other forums, even in Australia, the provocations of *Letty Fox* were neither obscene nor necessarily offensive. But, of course, these forums had little access to the book or its "totally incredible" obscenity in those years.

## Works Cited

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