

***Dearest Munx: The Letters of Christina Stead and William Blake.***

Ed. Margaret Harris. Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah, 2005, 576pp.

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***The Equal Heart and Mind: Letters between Judith Wright and Jack McKinney.*** Ed. Patricia Clarke and Meredith McKinney. St Lucia,

Qld.: U of Queensland P, 2004, 216pp.

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Why do writers of past generations seem so prolific? Were pen and typewriter ever idle? Or does the past always appear thus, its cumulative testimony shadowing a fragmented, inadequate present? Things are never so simple, yet readers might be forgiven for indulging such reflections in the wake of two recently published correspondences: *Dearest Munx: The Letters of Christina Stead and William J. Blake*, edited by Margaret Harris; and *The Equal Heart and Mind: Letters between Judith Wright and Jack McKinney*, edited by Patricia Clarke and Meredith McKinney. The length, detail, passion and frequency of these letters, written when the couples had to spend intervals apart, make for a pleasurable reading experience, especially for admirers of Wright's poetry or Stead's fiction. Yet these illuminating correspondences also shed much light on the daily lives, politics, networks and milieux, as well as the thoughts and feelings, of two of Australia's most significant writers.

Christina Stead (1902-1983) left parochial Sydney behind in 1928 for the northern hemisphere, drawn like so many others of her generation to the cosmopolitan centre. This loss eventually proved the nation's gain: by the time Stead returned in the 1970s, her reputation was at its peak. Born a decade later, Judith Wright (1915-2000) did not follow the expatriate pattern, finding in Australia, particularly in the land, her inspiration. Indeed Wright, through her poetry and activism, was one of those who led Australians towards greater cultural maturity, towards a deeper understanding of place, history and civic responsibility.

These otherwise very different women had something in common: a formative companionship with their lovers, ultimately husbands—relationships crucial for their writing. Though long separated from their respective first wives, neither Jack McKinney nor Bill Blake would find divorce easy to procure and so prospects of remarriage receded for many years. Judith and Christina

both felt keenly their anomalous positions. Yet love and companionship flourished despite or because of their rejection of social conventions. These felicitous relationships, entailing emotional and intellectual companionship, were also sustained by close connections to wider communities of friends, in politically and artistically counter-cultural circles.

The correspondence between Stead and Blake, in Margaret Harris's handsome, rigorous and comprehensively annotated edition, *Dearest Munx*, is an invaluable addition to Stead scholarship. Until 2001, this correspondence had been under embargo. It is easy to see why: the letters vividly confirm what is often alleged about Stead's controversial use of family and friends as the basis for her fictional characters. The Stead-Blake correspondence allows us to eavesdrop on the couple's intimate conversations: here are revealed their evolving attitudes towards, as well as their affection or repugnance for, a wide range of people, from business associates to the closest of friends. There are few absolute surprises, for snippets of the correspondence had already filtered into the public domain. Hazel Rowley was fortunate to gain earlier access to the letters, and they were clearly of tremendous importance for her definitive 1993 biography of Stead. Publication of the letters now allows readers to contemplate, among other things, the merits or limits of the Rowley portrait.

There are too many treasures in *Dearest Munx* to list, but one of the most remarkable must be the lengthy New York-Hollywood tranche, from May to June 1942. This sequence, as Harris says, achieves an almost novelistic quality with its extended dramas, rhythms and cohesion. On Blake's side there is his excited networking, such as his dinner with Groucho Marx, and on Stead's, her fascinating reflections on the gestation of *For Love Alone* (1944), and how she was grappling with her novel's antagonist, the infamous Jonathan Crow. These letters are important too for their documentation of the experiences that were to seed Stead's great, posthumously published novel, *I'm Dying Laughing* (1987), her satire of Hollywood's decadent left.

Towards the end of *For Love Alone*, Teresa Hawkins embraces James Quick as her lifelong partner. Yet a fatiguing restlessness steals over her. She knows she cannot reveal to him her frankest thoughts, so that it seems "each day would be a step farther into the labyrinth of concealment and loving mendacity." Teresa moves beyond such fears, but her awareness warns us against taking the Stead-Blake letters at face value. Though they promise a window on the couple's private world, such writing, as Harris observes, always has its public,

performative dimensions. Even so, the letters resound with reciprocal care. They display mutual delight in wordplay, shared political views, intimacy and enduring love. Blake's letters exude his incorrigible optimism for often ill-fated enterprises, from a career in Hollywood scriptwriting to an academic posting in East Germany. They also provide copious testimony of Bill's literary and emotional significance for Christina. He was her lover, mentor, ally, agent, intermediary—in short, he was her mainstay, as she herself acknowledges with disarming vulnerability: “The chief thing for a writer is to have a mate, a real one. . . . This is what I feel because I have you . . . without you I should be like a quivering angle-worm on a hook. . . .”

At first glance, the McKinney-Wright letters, beautifully produced in a slim paperback volume with deckle-edged paper, may seem less substantial, its contents spanning a mere half-dozen years. After all, Judith and Jack spent only two decades together, from 1944 until Jack's death in 1966, just half of Christina and Bill's time. But it was a no less significant relationship for its comparative brevity. Dating from the early courtship period to their happily secluded life on Tamborine Mountain, the correspondence concludes after the birth of their daughter, Meredith, in 1950, an event requiring Judith's extended ante- and postnatal stays in hospital in Brisbane. The letters between Jack and Judith are just as regular, detailed and intimate as those between Christina and Bill. Likewise, occasional waspish comments against notable others—Clem Christesen being the favourite *bête noire*—make for lively reading. Yet the McKinney-Wright letters also convey a very distinctive dynamic of their own.

“Did you notice,” writes Judith in her letter of 7 August 1945, “my sense of Doom coincided with the atomic bomb?” Bearing out the book's title, the letters strikingly testify to Judith's shared belief in Jack's vision, in the urgency of applying his philosophical inquiry to a world in crisis. The letters reveal the strength of their consensus and collaboration, and the degree to which Judith helped shoulder the burden of Jack's lonely endeavour. Their mutual adherence to this, from some angles, rather idiosyncratic vision entailed a rejection of social, institutional, academic and disciplinary conformity. Though his own publications remained obscure, Jack's effort to carve out a space for new ways of thinking in the postwar era, including an intuitive yet global kind of imagining, ultimately made its mark. Judith's poetry and activism gave their shared vision public shape, efficacy and durability. That isn't to say that the mundane and the ordinary aren't also vividly present in these letters, along with plenty of wit, indignation, humour and love. For

instance, Judith writes of accepting a position as University Statistician, because she couldn't "resist the idea of being a poet and a statistician at the same time." The letters in *Equal Heart*, like those in *Dearest Munn*, are neatly grouped, with each cluster deftly introduced by its editors. Two memoirs enclose the whole—Meredith's warm recollection of life with her parents on the mountain introduces their correspondence, while Judith's achingly honest account of Jack's final days provides closure. Interspersed with these groupings are ten of Judith's poems, revealing themselves newly through the prism of the correspondence. The facsimile of her handwritten, previously unpublished poem "The Cage" conveys the depth of her bereavement in 1966.

These two books allow us to glimpse the lives of women writers whose relationships with their partners were both of their time and, in their strength, reciprocity and equality, challenging to simplistic assumptions. The deaths of their partners were momentous in their lives: Christina Stead, it seemed, lost her muse for fiction; Judith Wright continued to write poetry, but she would increasingly pour her energies into activism, a burning passion to change the world.

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