

Christina Stead in Japanese

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Christina Stead's novels have been translated into a number of languages, mainly European ones. I know of twelve such translations, five into Italian, three into French, two into German, and one into each of Hebrew and Portuguese. However, only one of her works has appeared in an Asian language: a translation of *The Man Who Loved Children* by the Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu was published by the Chinese Literature Press in Beijing in 1999. Work on a translation of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* into Japanese reached an advanced stage in the late 1970s, but it was not published due to the financial difficulties and eventual collapse of the intended publisher, Simul Press. A letter of 1976, here published for the first time, gives a glimpse of Stead's negotiation with Professor Michio Ochi of Meiji University about this translation. Professor Ochi had already published a Japanese translation of Patrick White's *Voss* in 1975, and was subsequently to bring out several more translations of Australian works.

Ochi's approach to Stead was made via her cousin Gwen Walker-Smith, who in the late 1940s attempted to interest Australian publishers in Stead's work, and more recently had re-typed the manuscript of *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, published in 1976 by Random House in New York. It is thanks to the "Mr Rix" mentioned in the letter—now Professor Alan Rix, Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Queensland—that I have had access to the letter. In 1976, Alan Rix, who had previously collaborated with Ochi, was undertaking doctoral research at the University of Tokyo. His family had a direct connection with the Steads, in that his maternal great-grandmother was Stead's aunt, Christina.

The meeting with Professor Ochi proposed in this letter took place in August 1976, when Stead returned to Sydney after a term as writer in residence at the

University of Newcastle. In exuberant epistolary mode, Stead described Ochi as “‘the Emperor of Japan’ (he is the nephew of the Emperor of Japan!),” and Newcastle as “Coal Town (for that’s what it is—Pittsburgh-on-the-Pacific” (*Talking* 141). There was subsequent correspondence between author and translator, apparently no longer extant, about such matters as allusions in *Seven Poor Men* (*Talking* 142).

Here is the text of the letter, one of Stead’s characteristically messy typescripts with several handwritten insertions (these have not been noted in transcription):

20th May, 1976.

Dear Professor Ochi:

Thank you for your kind letter of May 15; and indeed I had heard of you through my cousin Gwen Walker-Smith and of Mr. Rix... Please call me Christina Blake—I prefer it, probably partly out of shyness; but also to remember my husband, William J. Blake.

Thank you, too, for all you say about some of my books; and I am honoured that you should wish to translate *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. I understand what you say about the ten-year reservation. For my part, I should be very pleased to have *Seven Poor Men* translated into Japanese by you and Mr. Rix; it would please me very much; and I should like to leave it to you to do what you can about what you refer to as a “token fee.” I think I must mention the matter to some people here I have just asked to be my agents, *Curtis Brown*. I have an agent in England and one in the U.S.A.; but now that I am settled here again, I find that they are too remote and cannot keep in touch satisfactorily with Australian publishers. I shall therefore ask my representative to write to you; if they wish to do so. I want to say again that I am perfectly willing and glad to have you do the translations of this and other books if you care to.

I think that Curtis Brown has been in touch with you over the VOSS affair? That is unlucky. I asked Mr Patrick White, a friend, for the name of an agent and he of course gave me the name of his agent, Curtis Brown. (I have only last week opened negotiations with them.) Oddly enough, I was in his house for lunch, when Mr. White received the two good reviews which you mention, *The Asahi* and *The Mainichi*; though, in fact, I visit him only about once in two or three years.

I am sure we can make satisfactory arrangements.

I should be glad to see you when you come here end of *July* or *beginning of August*. I was very surprised to find that you knew I should be in Newcastle; but it is so. I have just looked at the calendar and find that my ten weeks (of second term in the University) should finish about 29th or 30th July. But I do not really suppose they will want me to stay to the last day—hence, I may get down to Sydney during the last week in July, *perhaps early in the week*. I could see you then and would be very pleased to answer any questions. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is a novel of youth, with its sorrows, perceptions and dithyrambs. All people in the novel (or almost all) want to find a way out. Michael takes the extreme way; Baruch Mendelssohn is going to another country; one looks forward to changing the world; Catherine goes to a madhouse, etc. A very few remain as they were; and the hero is plodding, constant, suffering young brother Joseph, who is without dithyrambs or spectacular experiences, but does the work of the world. This is the only novel of mine that is placed wholly in Australia. *The Little Hotel* and all the others are placed in European scenery—and “happened” there; *The Man Who Loved Children*, however, though a description of an Australian family, was by me transported bodily to the U. S. A. and every detail verified, so that all American readers take it for a picture of an American family. *House of All Nations* happened in Paris in the setting described; *The Little Hotel* in Switzerland in the places described, *Cotters’ England* in England, as described and so on.

I shall get in touch with Curtis Brown immediately and should like to write to you again if there is anything to explain. But please consider that for me, the matter is settled.

Sincerely yours,
 [handwritten signature Christina Stead]
 Christina Stead (C. E. Blake)

P.S. I have today asked my U.S.A. publishers Holt, Rinehart & Winston to send you a copy each of *The Little Hotel*, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *House of All Nations*. (The first placed in Switzerland, the second in Baltimore and Washington D.C. (U.S.A.) and the third in Paris.) I have asked them to airmail them.

The special interest of the letter lies in Stead's comments on her works. The summary of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is remarkably forthcoming: in particular, her use of the word "dithyrambs" in connection with it is illuminating. Stead's identification of her vehement, idiosyncratic first novel as "a novel of youth" is amplified by the suggestion that its seeming formal irregularity may derive from the classical precedent of wild choral songs to Dionysus. Though she had previously made assertions about the authenticity of the locations of her novels, here she provides a comprehensive summary statement. The occasion of writing to Professor Ochi prompts the author to fresh observations on her novels, especially *Seven Poor Men*. But the letter also casts light on Christina Stead's uncertain sense of self and her sometimes perverse behaviour.

The opening paragraph proceeds from polite civilities to a rather plaintive request that Professor Ochi address her as "Christina Blake—I prefer it, probably partly out of shyness; but also to remember my husband William J. Blake." Yet she uses her authorial signature, "Christina Stead," with "Christina Stead (C. E. Blake)" typed below. In her widowhood, Stead was more tender to Blake's memory than she had been towards him in the last years of his life (he died in 1968). From the time of her re-location to Australia in 1974, she was fretful about her living arrangements and the company she kept: "Is there any company for me but a good man? No" (Rowley 523). In addition to providing the emotional—and at times domestic—support that enabled Stead to write, Blake had been more businesslike than she in managing publication rights and other such matters. As forecast in this letter to Professor Ochi, Stead entered into a formal arrangement with Curtis Brown as her Australian agent in December 1976 (*Talking* 165–66). The arrangement continued to her death in 1983, with personnel at Curtis Brown at times becoming exasperated by her tendency to make impulsive agreements in conversation or correspondence without reference to them. Something of this well-intentioned waywardness is apparent in her letter.

The letter also gives a sidelight on Stead's relationship to her great contemporary, Patrick White, which was generally prickly since each was capable of prima donnaish behaviour (Rowley 515–8 and 554). White, however, was consistently generous towards Stead, whose work he championed from the time of the republication of *The Man Who Loved Children* in the mid-sixties.¹ But Stead was unimpressed by those of his novels she read during her visit to Australia in 1969—these included *The Living and the Dead* (1941, republished 1962) and *Voss* (1957)—and, despite her comment in 1975 that "Patrick is admirable, quite without a rival" (*Talking* 79), her opinion of his fiction did not improve substantially on further acquaintance (Christina Stead Papers). The two writers met for the first time when Stead was in Australia in 1969. In late 1974, Stead was the first recipient of the Patrick White Literary Award, a career award for older writers endowed by White from the winnings of his 1973 Nobel Prize.

This letter amplifies our knowledge of Christina Stead's attitude to her work, and to aspects of its distribution in the last decade of her life. There are undoubtedly other Stead letters, whether single ones like this, or batches of letters to a particular correspondent, yet to emerge to add to the treasure trove assembled by R. G. Geering in the two volumes of selected letters he published in 1992, *A Web of Friendship* and *Talking into the Typewriter*.

Endnote

1. Rowley 314 and 449; also 464 for White's letter in Stead's defence during the furore in 1967 about the Britannica Australia Award, denied her because of her long absence and hence dubious "Australianness."

Works Cited

- Rowley, Hazel. *Christina Stead A Biography*. Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1993.
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- . *Talking into the Typewriter: Selected Letters (1973–1983)*. Ed. R. G. Geering. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1992.
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- White, Patrick. *Bosu*. Trans. Michio Ochi. Tokyo: Simul, 1975. Japanese trans. of *Voss*. London: Cape, 1957.

