

Resisting Judgement in Christina Stead: Critical Writing of the 1980s

ANN BLAKE
La Trobe University

Jonathan Franzen writing in 2010 in *The New York Times* deplored the neglect of Christina Stead, and especially of her masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*. He quoted a 1980 study of the 100 most-cited literary writers of the twentieth century, based on scholarly citations, which made no mention of Stead. He continued: 'This would be less puzzling if Stead and her best novel didn't positively *cry out* for academic criticism of every stripe. Especially confounding is that *The Man Who Loved Children* has failed to become a core text in every women's studies program in the country' (12). Franzen's complaint is of course an old story, and what is true of this novel is true of her work as a whole. Her first two books, published originally in England, appeared with considerable acclaim there and in Australia. After thirty years of mixed reviews, she at last won accolades and prizes, but has not managed to hold a sure place in the Western canon, or with the common reader. Among writers, however, she has a vocal following, Franzen being the latest in a distinguished list.

The Man Who Loved Children, first published in 1940, is one of the outstanding 'sleepers' of twentieth-century publishing history. This autobiographical novel of her childhood and early adolescence initially received poor reviews and was out of print by the end of the war. In 1955 Elizabeth Hardwick counted it, in words to be often repeated, among Stead's 'Neglected Novels.' It remained 'lost' until Stead's friend Stanley Burnshaw organised a reissue in 1965 when it won fresh acclaim and, for a while, made Stead famous. Randall Jarrell's introductory essay, especially written for this edition, was entitled 'An Unread Book.' No one can pretend that Stead novels are easy reading. But that aside, there's no doubt that her unsettled life, moving between England, the US and much of Europe, had a harmful effect on her literary standing, and is a factor in explaining the delay in her work's receiving recognition.

In Australia her long absence from the country, from 1928 to 1969, the difficulty of obtaining her books, and, perhaps, their European and later American settings, combined to allow her to sink almost out of sight. It was not until the 1960s that admirers of Stead, notably Ron Geering, made efforts to get her work back into print, with the result that in Australia, the US and the UK she rose to literary prominence, was interviewed, written about, and sought after. But, as Franzen claims, without the sustained readership her best novels deserve, in the opinion of her admirers.

Laurie Clancy was among Stead's admirers at an early stage, though his own published critical writing on Stead cannot claim to be among the very earliest post-war literary criticism in Australia on Stead. His *Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone*, a forty-page essay, appeared in 1981, in the series *Essays in Australian Literature*, edited by John Barnes. A 'selected' bibliography of articles on Stead at the end of the book lists thirteen critical articles, ten from Australia. Clancy certainly had predecessors, but not many, and at that time only Ron Geering had published a full-length study.

In fact Clancy's interest in Stead went back fifteen years before his book appeared. He began an MA on Stead and had written to her with some queries: he was never lacking the courage to

approach writers with questions or a request for an interview, never fearful of rebuff or humiliation. Stead replied, courteous and helpful, as, judging from her published letters, she habitually was to thesis writers and others enquiring about her work. Chris Williams refers in her biography of Stead to Clancy's approach and quotes at length from Stead's 'second reply' to Clancy. This is an important piece which would otherwise be unknown. Stead, rejecting once again any notion that she thinks, or ever thought of herself as a professional writer, here reveals her father's wish when she was fourteen that she leave school and become a journalist. She replied: 'I don't know enough and I won't be a journalist.' She writes, she tells Clancy, independent of formulas and 'approaches': everything she writes is 'the truth as I see it,' a poetic truth (Williams 240).

Clancy's correspondence with Stead is curiously not included in the two volumes of letters edited by Geering published in 1992, whether because Clancy did not release the letters, which seems unlikely, or because he was not approached for them, is not known. This omission may suggest something of Clancy's own position as critic of Stead. He was in the field before writing on Stead became something of an academic cottage industry, especially in New South Wales. When a Christina Stead Study Day was held at Sydney University in 1987, co-sponsored by ASAL, interest in Stead in Australian universities was in full swing, and it was said that no less than four biographies of Stead were in progress. But by then Clancy was writing fiction and had moved on to other topics. It is then perhaps not surprising that in Hazel Rowley's Stead biography (1993), which has sadly rather eclipsed Williams's, Clancy is not quoted or mentioned. A further anecdote from the days of Clancy's pursuit of Stead, often retold, and included by Williams, must be mentioned. In 1980 Clancy invited Stead out to lunch when she was a distinguished guest at Writers' Week in Adelaide. The restaurant was just across the street from the Oberoi Hotel but Stead called for a taxi:

The taxi driver said, "Look, it's just over there, you can walk it," but Laurie said Christina had a magisterial quality about her and insisted, so they got in, the taxi driver drove a hundred yards, did a U-turn and charged them about ninety cents. They had a marvellous meal, and went through the same ritual to get back. (Williams 308)

Thanks to the good relations Clancy had with Stead even before the Adelaide meeting, she visited La Trobe University in 1976 to lecture to students studying what she had by then learnt was called 'in the U.'s "Ozlit"' (*Talking into the Typewriter* 149). I shall always be grateful to him for this chance to meet her. Now through her letters we can see her rounds of university visits to be a writer in residence, lecture and meet students, 'the poor ants—stewed' (*Talking into the Typewriter* 159), very much through her eyes. So much so that 35 years later it is hard to recollect how we reacted to her, apart from the moment when one student asked a question which to our embarrassment boiled down to whether Stead had in fact, like Louie in her novel, poisoned her step-mother. With typical tact and patience, she replied that the book was a work of fiction, and went on to reassure those in her audience concerned about the damage parents may do that children were remarkably resilient. Short, stocky, quietly spoken, tactful but forceful, this courteous woman left an indelible impression on the staff who accompanied her to a mediocre lunch.

-00-

Clancy began his 1981 essay on Stead with a brief nod at the familiar issue of neglect before putting his first point: how much there was in common between her masterpiece, *The Man Who*

Loved Children, and *For Love Alone* (1944). Both were based ‘to a considerable extent’ on personal, indeed ‘autobiographical’ experience, a fact he had had confirmed by Stead in a letter dated July 1966. On the issue of her relocating *The Man Who Loved Children* from Sydney to Baltimore he is able to quote her own words to him on the enormous work involved in the change. The underlying motive, explained by Stead as the need to spare her family, was revealed by Rowley in her biography: the publishers were apprehensive of the reception in the US of a novel set so thoroughly in distant Australia (Rowley 261-2).

While acknowledging that *For Love Alone* makes its readers aware of issues beyond that of the development of a young woman, especially the stunting effects of poverty, Clancy saw the novel’s focus as above all on Teresa Hawkins, and this makes it virtually a continuation of the life of Louisa from *The Man Who Loved Children*:

Both novels display an extraordinarily relentless concentration on the growth of the imagination and the inner life of a young woman; collectively, they offer one of the most sustained and intense explorations in contemporary fiction of the progress through adolescence to adulthood of a young girl. (*Stead* 2)

A further common factor: both novels are preoccupied with ‘the exact nature of love, sexual and otherwise,’ and the distorted forms it may take ‘especially among males.’ Stead, creator of the predatory Nellie Cotter in *Cotters’ England*, might not have wholly accepted this last point, but no doubt most readers, and Stead herself, would accept these outlines of the two books. The introductory chapter concludes by observing an important paradoxical quality in Stead’s writing: her intense familiarity with her fictional figures, with the fact that they are ‘unusually articulate’ bringing readers even closer to them. However, this warm imaginative closeness coexists with a narrator who is cool and detached: there is no authorial commentary. Stead is a compulsive observer, at times, Clancy feels, so caught up in what she sees that she overloads her readers with information and details, but she is never a moralist: ‘her curiosity transcends any temptations towards easy moral judgment’ (4).

The following four short chapters on *The Man Who Loved Children* take up these issues and provide a lucid introduction for a reader new to the novel. Chapter Two explores the means by which the detachment is achieved. Clancy identifies contrast as the ‘tool of objectivity,’ the juxtaposition of contrasting episodes undercutting the intensity of what immediately precedes. Chapter Three focuses on the contrasting views of the world of the ill-matched Sam and Henny, an image of a marriage suffused with Stead’s poetic intensity, where the husband and wife take on a near symbolic force of powerful contrasts with neither winning the author’s or readers’ simple sympathy. Neither can be wholly condemned, as Clancy says of Sam earlier:

There is no doubt that Sam Pollit . . . is, morally speaking, a kind of monster. . . Yet while we are left in no doubt as to what is destructive in his nature, I do not feel that the appropriate response is of one outrage, if only because it simply fails to encompass the sheer vitality and originality of Sam as a creative figure in fiction. (4)

Here Clancy is surely close to the distinctive qualities of Stead’s fiction, which she at times associated with the influence of her naturalist father: a relish for life in all its forms and a disinclination to judge, a position captured in her characterisation of Henny’s view of life as ‘beautifully, wholeheartedly vile’ (*Man Who Loved Children* 48). ‘Every human being is a sort of monster, if you get to know them,’ says a character in *I’m Dying Laughing* (396).

Clancy's discussion of the structure of the novel (Chapter Four) begins with a careful analysis of the organisation of 'painstaking detail' and movement towards a climactic resolution before turning to the 'apparent digression,' Sam's visit to Malaya. Here Sam is seen by people outside the Pollit family who are ready to comment on his oddity. After his long absence he is at first, the narrative relates, 'more restrained' in his behaviour with his children, a difference attributed to the fact that he 'had been eight months amongst people of his own age and had conversed only with them' (*Man Who Loved Children* 269). Clancy argues that there is a suggestion that the visit had been 'beneficial' to Sam: 'he shows signs of arriving at some kind of maturity' (16). However Sam quickly resumes the role of tyrannical adult and Clancy attributes the reversion (perhaps too ingeniously) to his 'ruthless suppression' of elements of sensuality which had emerged during his time in Malaya: this 'may well be one of the main causes of his renewed authoritarianism' (16). Whether the novel provides sufficient evidence to support a claim that Sam does 'mature,' however temporarily, is doubtful: this is to take too moralistic a line. The explanation offered by the narrative is more convincing, that is, that while being in the company of adults for eight months he had simply got out of the habit of his intense manipulative play-acting, and then grew back into playing both child and tyrant. Structure may be the ostensible subject of this chapter, but, understandably, Clancy comes back to the absorbingly complicated figure of Sam.

'A War of Words,' the last chapter, is an excellent account of Louie's triumphal emergence as young woman and commander of language. In the private world of her reading and writing, and in her love for the teacher Miss Aiden, Louie resists her rationalist father's dominance, finally defeating his belittling of her poems, along with all works of the imagination. She triumphs, thanks to the 'intensity of her commitment to her artistic vocation' (22). Following Graham Burns in this emphasis on language, Clancy firmly traces the stages of their war and does full justice to this remarkably convincing portrait of the literary artist as young woman (*Stead* 22-3).

In 1980 Stead wrote letters to Bill Hunter, editor at Shillington House, and to Ron Geering praising Clancy's book. To Hunter she wrote:

But Laurie's study is most friendly, intense, and inward. And (you will hardly credit this) for the first time, reading it, (*TMWLC*) I realised that it was a 'portrait of the a. as a young girl'. Yes. I was so intent on the family picture, I think; and I never thought of myself as any sort of artist—or even a writer. I know that sounds mad; it's true, though . . . Now, I see that that is (also) what it is . . . Thanks to Laurie Clancy . . . (*Talking into the Typewriter* 357)

Clancy 'does me proud' she told Geering (*Talking into the Typewriter* 358). What better comment could a critic receive from a writer? On *For Love Alone*, Stead felt Clancy had not done so well, not surprisingly, given, as she put it, that it 'is so alien (and raw and helpless),' though 'what he says about Jonathan Crow is very good' (*Talking into the Typewriter* 357).

Clancy's opinion is that the second, London, half of this novel loses something of the 'relentless and total absorption in the world of her characters' evident in the Sydney chapters. Teresa's uncompromising determination to love, and to resist the social pressures to marry at any cost never weakens, but the London chapters lack the variety of Teresa's Sydney encounters. She appears almost exclusively locked in her obsessive self-sacrificial pursuit of Jonathon Crow, physically weakened, sexually ignorant and confused, and blind to his cruel manipulation of

her. Clancy's chapter on Crow offers a convincing account of his egotism, his 'facile rejection of the possibility of love is a way of avoiding any personal responsibility' (34), and also of the naïve self-punishing Teresa, and her patient excusing of Crow's cruelty.

It is, Clancy argues, when the 'apparently idealized Quick' (25) appears on the scene that Stead trips up. The James Quick chapter recapitulates commentary on the cruel companionship of Teresa and Crow, and the less appealing second half, and what accounts for that. But the main point is Stead's 'almost total failure to realize Quick convincingly as the (almost) ideal lover for Teresa' (38). He finds Stead guilty of 'fairly unsubtle manipulation of the point of view' in inviting the reader to share Quick's hatred of Crow, and accuses her of failing to establish what Quick sees as Crow's intellectual inferiority, though he admits that Crow does finally give himself away, and, in his 'almost insane egotism,' mad 'scientism' and belief in male superiority he is Sam-like. Moreover, he sees that Stead does not idealise Quick's relationship with Teresa.

In the last chapters of this long novel, as Teresa and Quick begin their 'connubial life' together in the long-awaited resolution to Teresa's romantic quest, Stead gives her readers a jolt. Teresa finds she cannot speak frankly about herself to Quick without hurting him and is forced into deception. He wants the 'ideal, romantic love of famous love affairs' and so she abandons 'the thought of telling him the truth about her love' (*For Love* 459) and resigns herself to playing a part: here the male is weaker and must be 'pampered and protected from reality.' This, along with the deception, in Clancy's view, contributes to 'a distinctly unsentimental view of marriage' (40).

And he finds more evidence of flaws in their marriage. When Stead writes of Teresa: 'She did not revel in the physical pleasures of marriage, but her secret life became more intense' (464), Clancy finds an implication that Quick is sexually inadequate, and that this is what spurs Teresa on to enjoy her 'right to happiness,' and to 'try men,' as she puts it. She leaves to enjoy a brief sexual relationship with their friend Harry Girton and on returning home to Quick realises (unrepentant) that he is her 'only love, but not the first and not the last.' She is 'free' (496).

This final 'distinctly unsentimental' effect struck Clancy as in keeping with the negative view of marriage all through this novel. Admittedly it does not fit with a conventional romantic view of marriage, in fact or fiction. Two clues to understanding what Stead was aiming for are to be found in material not published at the time Clancy was writing. 'A Harmless Affair,' a short story published first in 1984, reworks the triangular relationship between Teresa, Girton and Quick and the 'rather strange sequence of events,' as Geering put it (Stead, *Harmless* 66), and helps define the place of the episode in the ending of the novel. Geering dates the story tentatively in the 1940s, roughly at the same time as the novel (*Southerly* 66).

The major differences between the two versions are that in the short story the husband is a less developed figure and, less important than it might seem, the lovers do not go away together. Instead there is a different consummation: the man leaves for a distant country and then comes news of his death. The woman's grief is so terrible her loving husband cannot hide his anger. The most mysterious aspect of both episodes is that Stead makes the women see their lover as a twin-self. Both Teresa and Lydia in the story feel fated to love this other man, while still loving their husbands. This is the experience Stead is dramatising: a love different from

adulterous feeling. It is not so much ‘unsentimental’ as deep in sentiment. And this experience is not to be unique: like Teresa, Lydia wonders when she may meet her next fated lover.

Here it is worth quoting Stead’s reply to a post-graduate student, Sally Bearman, who asked her in 1976 about ‘other loves’ in *For Love Alone*. She offered some general comments on our present society’s ‘form of marriage . . . monogamy . . . it does not work very well.’ She goes on: ‘To condition people, especially girls, to this, we are told that we can only find one true love,’ an idea which fits in with ‘romantic stories,’ such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and ‘the first flowering of sexual emotion,’ not denying that it may remain a ‘hope and ideal’ for older people (*Talking into the Typewriter* 125).

The triangle has, typically in Stead’s work, a basis in fact: the lover is based on her adored friend, the radical journalist and writer Ralph Fox, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War in 1937. No one knows now for sure whether Stead did have a sexual relationship with him, but that is not important. What is clear from her letters is that her motive, or one of her motives, in including the episode in *For Love Alone* was precisely to avoid the effect of a conventional conclusion. At least, this was how she saw it in her letter to Sally Bearman and in the 1980 letters she wrote to Bill Hunter and Ron Geering where she praised the account of ‘*TMWLC*.’ Using words similar to those she wrote to Bearman, she explained her intentions to Hunter: ‘The Harry Girton episode (which never took place) I only put in so that people would not say, “So she got married and lived happily ever after”’ (*Talking into the Typewriter* 357). To Geering she writes that Clancy is wrong about Teresa’s ‘unsatisfied sexual nature,’ but admits:

that’s my fault. . . . I thought at the end, “Now they (not cheered) will see it as a—‘then they got married and time stopped there.’” It was silly of me—but I went ahead and put in that Harry Girton thing . . . Well, so I misled the critic myself. (*Talking into the Typewriter* 358)

It is pleasing to record Clancy receiving this apology. But it is important not to regard Stead’s fierce criticism of conventional marriage as an exchange of sex and money where, as Henny puts it, ‘men hold all the aces,’ as including the ‘marriage’ in the final chapters of the book, with its remarkable exploration of the ‘secret life’ of women, and the painful tensions within marriage felt by both husband and wife. The loving relationship between Quick and Teresa included Teresa’s being unable to speak the ‘truth’ to him, and possibly loving other men, could be seen, with Clancy, as ‘decidedly unsentimental,’ but from Stead’s perspective, this was ‘the truth.’ Stead may have regretted including the explicitly sexual Girton episode because it ‘probably hurt [her husband] Bill terribly,’ but one cannot imagine her wishing to retract the abundant flowering of Teresa’s happiness in love.

-00-

Just a year after his essay appeared Clancy published an article in *Australian Literary Studies* with the title ‘Fathers and Lovers: Three Australian Novels.’ This is a discussion of fictional male egotists in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Kylie Tennant’s *Time Enough Love* (1945) and Elisabeth Harrower’s *The Watch Tower* (1966). Each acts in a destructive way towards the women around him, all three disguise their erotic aggression under forms of pretended love, taking on the role of ‘a quasi-paternalistic figure or a feigned child figure.’ Each novel provides a neatly resolved plot-line where, Clancy observes, the victim eventually sees through the deception and ‘abandons the older man’ (‘Fathers’ 458).

By comparing the figures of Tennant and Harrower with Stead's, Clancy illuminates the 'confusion' in Sam Pollit of 'the roles of father, infant and lover.' In Sam's relationship with Louie, Clancy is of course examining an actual father, not 'a quasi-paternalistic figure.' Reworking commentary from the essay, he can point to ample evidence of an adult manipulatively playing the role of child, both in his games with the children, his 'wheedling,' and his 'dreadful baby-talk.' When this fails the 'cajoling parent' reverts to the 'despotic adult' (*Stead* 17).

Apart from behaving with a childish egotism, Sam displays a less easily condemned childlike quality: innocence. Here Clancy appositely rehearses comments from his essay on Sam's unworldliness. To illustrate his lack of awareness of the impact he has on people, Clancy cites again Sam's sexual bigotry, his conviction that men are superior, a view he expresses 'with a frequency and directness that is breathtaking in its artless honesty' (462), this last phrase paying tribute to the extraordinary achievement of Stead's creation of Sam, her capacity to sweep readers off their feet. And so it is not surprising that for all his comparative analysis of the three novels and their male egotists, Clancy ends up here as he did in the essay, backing away from any sense of 'outrage' (*Stead* 4).

Clancy's 1980s critical work on Stead continued with an essay in the collection *Who is She?* edited by Shirley Walker (1983). The contributors, men and women, were, the 'Preface' announces, to inquire 'how Australian prose writers, [men and women] have dealt, in their fiction, with feminine figures and concepts of the feminine' (Walker ix). Given its date, this language seems to suggest a distancing from or even a wariness of feminist criticism, though some few of the essays do take a feminist stance. Stead herself was always hostile to feminism if it meant hostility to men, claiming repeatedly in interviews that men were women's natural companions, and detesting Lesbians. At the same time she was hailed not just as a woman writing about women, to recall Elaine Showalter's categories, but as a feminist writer whose novels were being reprinted by the feminist inspired Virago Press.

This perception of Stead was based particularly on the two novels discussed by Clancy in his 1981 essay, and they are the ones he writes on here, along with *Letty Fox Her Luck* and the rarely discussed novel, *Miss Herbert (the Suburban Wife)*. His essay 'The Economy of Love: Christina Stead's Women' begins with a quotation from *For Love Alone* where the young Teresa finds her reading of literature confirms her sense of the truth of love and passion, as against the conventional ideas of society; but, she asks, where are the books by women? 'She found nothing in the few works of women she could find that was what they must have felt' (*For Love* 76). Stead herself, Clancy reasonably claims, has redressed this imbalance, and he goes on to reiterate his sense of the link between the first two novels in the 'comprehensiveness and objectivity of the author's exploration of the successive stages of young womanhood.' He singles out *The Man Who Loved Children* as demonstrating 'the general oppression of womanhood' and the 'intuitive bond' between women, even those antipathetic towards each other (*Economy* 137).

The essay then turns to 'economic imperatives,' and the 'spiritually stultifying effect of poverty,' seen especially in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and in *For Love Alone*. In Stead's fiction the only way out of poverty for women is through marriage. Clancy puts the case in strong language: for women in her novels, 'flailing about in a morass of sexual unfulfilment and financial impoverishment and threat, she postulates the unfashionable thesis that marriage and the financial security it can bring is an indispensable precondition of a woman's life' (*Economy* 139). Given the lack of educational and economic opportunities for women at the time Stead

was writing: ‘marriage is simply indispensable for any woman who wishes to live free from moral vilification and physical want’ (139). In her novels the ‘haven’ of marriage usually proves to be a delusion, and most of the marriages either do not eventuate or prove unsuccessful; nevertheless, Clancy insists, Stead sees ‘personal fulfilment and self-justification in terms of marrying a man, and nothing in the later novels conflicts with this’ (141). As Rowley puts it: ‘Marriage validates women; it also destroys them’ (279).

Clancy follows Stead in referring to the ‘marriage’ of Teresa and Quick, but it is worth underlining that this is no literal marriage: the reader knows that Quick is already married. Stead uses the word to imply the commitment this unconventional couple feel to each other. In the last chapters of this long novel, as already mentioned, the Harry Girton episode both transforms the idea of marriage, and purposefully shatters the conventions of the romantic narrative. And the horizons of the resolution are widened even further. As she journeys into a life ‘beyond misery’—her years of physical and emotional privation—Teresa’s happiness transforms itself momentarily into a vision of the possibility of happiness for all suffering humankind (494).

In the last section Clancy opens up new ground. He turns to Stead’s later fiction and finds there a depressing absence of the ‘ardour and idealism’ of Louie and Teresa. Instead there is a monochrome picture where ‘social and economic necessity governs a woman’s capacity to experience and receive love’ (*Economy* 142). He quotes Teresa’s reply to Jonathan Crow when he accuses her of wanting to *own* men: ‘We have no other property’ (372).

Clancy’s focus is on two novels of the 40s and 50s, *Letty Fox Her Luck* (1946) and *Miss Herbert (the Suburban Wife)*, published only in 1976. The first is ‘a picaresque story of a girl-about-town in Manhattan,’ relentlessly charting the struggle of the would-be journalist and writer Letty Fox to find an apartment, a job, but most of all a man who will keep her. Letty is a New York counterpart to Teresa. As she rattles on in the first person she strikes the reader as, like so many Stead figures, utterly without self-awareness. She is virtually amoral, and, curiously, a writer who discounts the work of the imagination. Letty believes only in writing about ‘reality.’ Stead may tire her readers with repetitive tales of Letty’s dreams and failures, but she is more appealing, in her tireless energy and optimism, than is suggested by Clancy’s description of her as ‘cold-bloodedly’ tricking and blackmailing her targets (144). Stead was always impatient with critics who rushed to judge or condemn the people in her books. Rodney Wetherell got into trouble with Stead for suggesting that the financial world of her novel *House of All Nations* was ‘corrupt’: ‘Well, corrupt is the way you may see it. If you have very strange ideals about any kind or part of the world, you don’t know it. You’ve got to be in it to know it’ (441). Her fiction refuses to make such judgments, its daring gaze blenching at nothing. Clancy knows intellectually that this attitude lies at the heart of her fiction, and, as mentioned earlier, characterises Stead as having ‘almost nothing of the moralist about her’ (4). The challenge for the reader is keeping up with her.

Letty’s many lovers and man-hunting, along with being a communist, resulted in the novel being banned in Australia. For Stead, censors were hypocrites. *Apropos of Letty Fox* coming off the list she wrote: ‘People forget what they themselves were like in their innocent youth—or at least what their classmates were like’ (*A Web of Friendship* 176). Clancy is not shocked, but he is disapproving, wanting less satire and more positive images than is offered by this ‘deeply ironic novel about a society that treats sex and love as commodities’ (Rowley 279). *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948), also set in New York, was similar in its ‘realist’ and especially financial point of view; women and property are traded, ‘everything was for sale’ (Stead *Little* 194). And as Stead wrote jokingly to her cousin in Australia of ‘NY’: ‘it is really a hell of a

town . . . “Naples on the subway””; she had been in it and she knew it (*A Web of Friendship* 112).

Clancy finally turns to the portrayal of women and marriage in *Miss Herbert (the Suburban Wife)*, a novel set in middle-class London in the 30s and 40s. The novel is dominated by ‘the epitome of the conventional,’ in Clancy’s phrase (148), Eleanor Herbert, an untalented woman who tries to write, who marries, has children, is left by her husband and then struggles to provide for them. Beautiful but inhibited, always trying to be the good wife and mother of the women’s magazines, her life emerges as another damning indictment of marriage, here as constrained by a repressive English middle-class morality. Clancy concludes by pointing to the novel’s impressive coda where Eleanor expresses horror at the passion which grips her young daughter. She is capable of feeling desire, but runs away from it.

This discussion of women and marriage in Stead ends gloomily, with a stress on the inescapable importance of money. Teresa is fortunate, but even she has to keep her secret life out of sight, to spare Quick distress. This troubled Clancy and led him to invent unconvincing explanations, and, taken together with the Girton episode, to deny that the marriage of Teresa and Quick was happy. This allowed him to claim there are no positive images of marriage to counterbalance to Stead’s ‘unsentimental’ view. But in *Miss Herbert*, as in *Letty Fox*, Stead does incorporate cameo roles, based on herself and her husband, as a happily married if desperately poor couple, comparable to the ‘connubial’ but unmarried bit-part pair Solander and Persia in *Letty Fox*. These images offer a brief contrast to the unaware Letty and the repressed Eleanor Herbert, but admittedly they don’t weigh heavily in the novels’ overall scheme. Clancy is left with this conclusion:

In the end, social necessity dictates that sexual love, at least for women, is firmly subjected to questions of economy and security. It is remarkable how little mention there is in the later novels of even physical fulfilment as a cause of satisfaction in sexual relationships. (149)

On this last point, Stead at times produces metaphoric, rhythmic, almost Lawrentian prose when writing of sexual feeling, but by more recent standards she is reticent, as is typical of most writers of her generation. Writing of Teresa’s and Girton’s sexual encounter, Rowley draws attention to Stead’s pallid descriptions: ‘The business of the night was over’ (*For Love* 488), and suggests that for Teresa, the excitement was not in the physical event; sexual desire overwhelms her ‘when she *thinks about* Girton,’ before and after (Rowley 228-9). The implication is that for Stead herself, romantic attachments were most passionate in the realm of her imagination. For both these reasons, perhaps, Clancy is right to remark that in Stead’s fiction the pleasures of sex are no counterweight to what it sees as the inevitable troubles of a woman’s life, married or single. And of a man’s too. She is not a novelist seeking to lay before her readers ‘positive images,’ sentiment or the transient pleasure of sex but rather how things are, ‘the truth’ as she sees it. As Stead, quoted in Rowley (279), wrote to her husband in 1942: ‘It is a real inferno we are born into’ (*Dearest* 291). If this is at times stark and disconcerting for her readers, it is simultaneously an essential element in the pleasure of reading her work, along with her cool narrative eye which withholds judgment and glories in observing all forms of human behaviour.

-00-

The essay Clancy published in 1981 appeared in a series designed for students, a work for what publishers distinguished as the educational market, a point to notice because it is in line with his commitment to teaching, and to reaching the widest audience through literary journalism. He was not one to give his energies to establishing himself as the great academic critical writer. Instead, in my view, he saw himself primarily in the roles of writer and teacher and worked hard at both—writing fiction, and teaching literature and later creative writing. Stead herself would have approved of this, she herself taught writing, gave advice to writers, and read and re-read on principle anything that was sent to her: like many writers she had time for those who were writing, but not for critics and academics.

WORKS CITED

- Burns, Graham. 'The Moral Design of *the Man Who Loved Children*.' *The Critical Review* [Melbourne] 14.(1971): 38-61.
- Clancy, Laurie. *Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone*. Essays in Australian Literature. Melbourne: Shillington House, 1981.
- . 'Fathers and Lovers: Three Australian Novels.' *ALS* 10.4 (1982): 459-67.
- . 'The Economy of Love: Christina Stead's Women.' *Who is She?* Ed. Shirley Walker. St Lucia: Queensland UP, 1983.136-149.
- . 'The Life of a Novelist.' *Meridian* 8. 2 (1989): 175-178.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "'A Strindberg Family Robinson": Rereading "The Man Who Loved Children".' *The New York Times Book Review*. 6 June 2010. 11-13.
- Geering, R. G. *Christina Stead*. New York: Twayne, 1969.
- ., ed. *Southerly* 1 (1984). Christina Stead Special Issue.
- Hardwick, Elizabeth. 'The Neglected Novels of Christina Stead.' *The New Republic*. 1955. Repr. in *A View of My Own*. New York: Farrer, Strauss and Cudahy, 1964.
- Jarrell, Randall. 'An Unread Book.' Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Rowley, Hazel. *Christina Stead A Biography*. Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1993.
- Stead, Christina. 'A Harmless Affair.' *Southerly* 1 (1984). Christina Stead Special Issue, ed. R. G. Geering. 66-84.
- . *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948.
- . *Cotters' England*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1967.
- . *Dearest Mux The Letters of Christina Stead and William J. Blake*. Ed. Margaret Harris. Melbourne: Miegunyah P, 2005.
- . *For Love Alone*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944.
- . *Letty Fox Her Luck*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946.
- . *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. London: Peter Davies, 1934.
- . *Talking into the Typewriter Selected Letters (1973 - 1983)* Ed. R.G. Geering. Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1992.
- . *The Man Who Loved Children*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940.
- . ed. *A Web of Friendship Selected Letters (1928 - 1973)*. Ed. R.G. Gerring. Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1992.
- Walker, Shirley. 'Preface.' *Who is She?* Ed. Shirley Walker. St Lucia: Queensland UP, 1983. ix-xi.
- Wetherell, Rodney. 'Christina Stead: Interviewed by Rodney Wetherell.' *ALS* 9.4 (1980) 431-48.
- Williams, Chris. *Christina Stead A Life of Letters*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989.