

# 'A little bit of the real Sydney': Comparing Gender, Socialism and the City in Works by William Lane and Christina Stead

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In Western discourse, the city often allegorises an imaginary political order in a tradition extending from Plato's republic to nineteenth and twentieth-century utopian visions of community. In comparing two Australian novels set in and about Sydney, however – William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (1892) and Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1935) – my interest is in how the city represents not a neutral but a gendered political order. The vision of the ideal city to which these novels refer is both founded on 'woman' and erases her as a subject. Connecting with Susan Sheridan's work on the gendering of the radical nationalist tradition in Australian literature, I explore how these particular novels intervene in contemporaneous debates about gender and 'the woman question' in the context of radical socialist thought (Sheridan esp. 36–9).

Teresa de Lauretis begins *Alice Doesn't*, her book on feminism, semiotics and cinema, with a striking meditation on a passage from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Calvino's passage tells the story of Zobeide, 'a city built from a dream of woman', a city that 'must be constantly rebuilt to keep woman captive.' The city, observes de Lauretis, '... is a representation of woman; woman, the ground of that representation. . . . [woman is] both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history' (de Lauretis 13). De Lauretis' argument applies also to the city which, like woman, is impossibly double. The city can figure an ideal community but also represent sinfulness, degeneracy and whoredom. This is nowhere more explicit than in modernist texts such as Fritz Lang's German expressionist film, *Metropolis*, with its good mediator, the pure revolutionary woman Maria, and her double, the bad robotic Maria who uses her machinic sexuality to incite the masses to a destructive frenzy (Huyssens 65ff). In my reading of the novels by Stead and Lane, a similarly doubled figure of the revolutionary woman links these radical narratives of the city.

For both Lane and Stead, Sydney – with its slums, sweatshops, public meeting places, parks and waterways – is, despite the intervening decades, at once a local, material place and an allegorical city. Aspects of the representation of this modern industrial city bear more than a passing similarity to the representations of Lon-

don in the works of Blake and Dickens. In the Sydney of these novels, the poor working classes, professional classes, rich entrepreneurs and radical intelligentsia are arranged hierarchically and contingently. Crowded slums are juxtaposed with palatial apartments and glittering hotels, cafés and public meeting places are vectors of political activity and the dreadful street gives rise to the protest march and the barricade. Lane's novel polemically appropriates this literary tradition, but also participates in the radical nationalism of late nineteenth century Australian writing. Texts such as the Henry Lawson poems, 'Song of the Outcasts' and 'Faces in the Street' (respectively published in May 12 and July 28 issues of the *Bulletin*), evoke William Blake's London, relocating the ripening scene of revolutionary activity in the streets of the antipodean modern city.

The revolutionary 'desire' flowing through Lane's novel, furthermore, attaches to what Raymond Williams might term an 'emerging' modernist structure of feeling (Williams 16–20). In Stead's novel, this structure has become fully manifest. In both novels, the modernist structure of feeling can be detected in the trope of the tour of the city. As characters walk through the city they witness the contradictory spectacle of modern urban life while experiencing kinaesthetically its mobility, flux and flow. The walking tour affords glimpses of tableaux which give theatrical rise to socialist interpretation and discourse in a politicised rendering of the modernist figure of the *flâneur*.

Counterbalancing the dynamism of the streets in both narratives is another inner city habitat which in contradictory fashion reinscribes and revises the displaced domestic interior of the bourgeois novel: this is the gendered political space of the quasi-familial Bohemian circle. Bohemia, in these city novels, replaces the claustrophobic world of the provincial bourgeois family with a structure of elective affiliation. For all its radical potential, however, this affiliation is still mediated by woman. The radical Bohemia located at the heart of both Lane's and Stead's Sydney is centered on the home of the modern heterosexual couple. The couple's home is a significantly cultured and progressive domestic space which functions as a magnet for the city's artists, writers and nomadic hangers-on. As the transitional, semi-public space of the modern intelligentsia, this version of Bohemia enfolds the contradictions of socialist rhetoric and modernist experimentation. The ways in which Bohemian circles are represented in each novel, however, suggest important ideological differences between them. These differences highlight both the historic centrality of the gendered script to socialist thought and some possible points of resistance.

### ***The Workingman's Paradise:* socialism, Bohemia, heterosexual coupledom**

Set in 1890s Sydney, *The Workingman's Paradise* – which Michael Wilding sees as exemplifying pioneering socialist realism – deploys a romance plot between its protagonists (Wilding 103). In *Along the Faultlines*, Susan Sheridan argues that the

romance novel was routinely denigrated by cultural nationalists who privileged realist and modernist fiction, and who relegated much writing by women to an inferior cultural status (37). If elements of Lane's novel seem to mark a surprising departure from this hegemonic devaluation of the romance, it may also be seen as the exception proving the rule. Legitimised by its radical male authorial signature, the novel's romance plot is what popularises Lane's political polemic. Moreover the text is freighted with realist description and high political discourse. Young socialist activist Nellie Lawton, a woman whose 'pale sad face' nonetheless reveals her 'determined will and . . . intense womanliness' (8), meets up with her old playmate from the bush, Ned Hawkins. Ned exudes, romantically enough, 'a dashing manliness in every motion, a breath of the great plains coming with his sunburnt face and belted waist'. For Nellie, Ned's unionist vision has been too parochial, confined to the plight of his mates and co-workers, the shearers and drovers from the bush. Hoping to win his solidarity with the urban proletariat, Nellie invites Ned on an alternative tour of Sydney – far from the pleasurable lovers' jaunt to Manly, Bondi or Watson's Bay that Ned himself secretly anticipates:

'Don't you think, Ned, that you might see a little bit of the real Sydney? Strangers come here for a few days and go on the steamers and through the gardens and along George-street and then go away with a notion of the place that isn't the true one. If I were you, Ned, right from the bush and knowing nothing of towns, I'd like to see a bit of the real side and not only the show side that everybody sees.' (13)

I will return later to Nellie's invitation to consider with what effect it is reconfigured in Stead's 1950s novel of the English working class, *Cotters' England*. But first I will consider how the tour of the city in these novels conveys socialist thought, and how deeply this tour is gendered.

In *The Workingman's Paradise*, Nellie Lawton as tour guide mediates the city slums for Ned, showing him the squalid condition of the crowded courts, alley ways and sweatshops. In Lane's Sydney, it is women's exposure to sexual predation, prostitution and male drunkenness which relays the full horror of the slums. The culminating scene of the tour, which clinches Ned's commitment, is their late night encounter with a sleeping prostitute, lying in pathetic abandon on a park bench. The pure womanliness of Nellie is juxtaposed with the prostitute's disreputable and degraded condition. Nellie's gesture of solidarity both transgresses and reinscribes the masculinist terms of class and gender at play in the narrative's radical polemic:

Suddenly Nellie . . . bent forward, stooped down. The strong young face, proud and sad, so pure in its maiden strength, glowing with passionate emotion, was laid softly against that bruised and battered figure-head of shipwrecked womanhood; Nellie had kissed the sleeping harlot on the cheek. (100)

This scene, 'staged' for Ned's benefit, charges him with his mission. Simultaneously it prompts his sublimation of sexual passion. In Lane's text, masculine solidarity (and therefore unity of the white nation) is achieved via the feminine spectacle. Woman complements and fills out abstracted political discourse. Wilding's contention that the narrative's refusal of the marriage plot signifies Lane's radical rejection of all plot needs some qualification (Wilding 105). Nellie's virginal unreachability seems more aligned to the sublimation of romance required to enable a masculinist politics of revolution. The protagonists' passions are redirected to the socialist cause. Far from entailing a refusal of the marriage plot, this redirection is a temporary deferral in the quest for an ideal social realm. This radical future realm is only imaginable through the continuity of what Carole Pateman has memorably called the sexual contract – the contract guaranteeing the dominance of men over women through fraternal patriarchy (see Pateman esp. ch. 1).

This connection between a gendered social hierarchy and revolutionary discourse becomes most evident in the chapters about the Sydney intelligentsia which depict a gathering of journalists, musicians, artists and writers in the home of Connie and Harry Stratton. Here Nellie ushers Ned into an unfamiliar world full of the contradictions and promise of intellectuals' engagement with the socialist cause. These fascinating chapters rehearse the currents of debate amongst Sydney intelligentsia of the time (see Wilding's 'Introduction', esp. 65–75). But though they foreground feminist debate about the role of women in the 'Cause', these scenes also manifest the gendered structure of Lane's political vision. The Stratton couple embodies the future world for which the socialists are striving: Connie is 'a dark-haired, grey-eyed, full-lipped woman of 30 or so, with decidedly large nose and broad rounded forehead, . . . pleasingly plump as her evening dress disclosed.' (48). Through their domestic intimacies, the couple enact ' . . . a little love scene . . . of which the others were all unconscious unless for a general impression that this long-married couple were as foolishly in love as ever and indulged still in all the mild raptures of love' (48). Nellie does argue vehemently with Harry Stratton about his version of the ideal woman:

'Full-lipped and broad-hearted, fit to love and be loved! Full-breasted and broad-hipped fit to have children! Full-brained and broad-browed, fit to teach them! My women should be the embodiment of the nation, and none of them should work except for those they loved and of their own free will.' (71–2)

Outraged by this (and cheered on from the sidelines by Connie) Nellie roundly objects to Harry's denial of woman's individuality, desire and difference, and his imposition on women of the role of mothers of the nation. She points out ' . . . you can't raise free men from slave women' (73). Nellie's argument, however, displays a personal aversion to motherhood: 'Why should we be mothers, unless it pleases us to be mothers?' (74). She even declares her decision never to have children, never to marry. When her feminist rejection of women's poverty and

oppression shifts to a denial of the biological imperative, Nellie goes too far. At this point Geisner, a crucial character in the book, intervenes. With his international activist credentials, Geisner, as John Docker's reading suggests, is probably homologous with Lane himself (Docker 159). With weighty narrative authority, Geisner counters Nellie's complaint with a clinching argument: 'You are wrong, Nellie. . . . Above us all is a higher Law, forcing us on . . . if [woman] claims entrance to the Future, it seems to me that she should not close Life's gate against herself.' (75)

Through this recourse to capital 'L' Life, to the injunction to obey the law of nature, the original patriarchal contract is secured again, and Nellie's arguments are contained. The ideology of the text returns us to the normative scene of the loving couple. This is an important counter to its otherwise seemingly radical deflection and deferral of the marriage plot.

### **Seven Poor Men of Sydney: struggling with(in) gendered radicalism**

The exploration of woman-as-revolutionary in Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* intersects in several ways with that of Lane's novel, offering itself as a strategic repetition and revision of its polemical precursor. The telling omission from its opening cast list of seven poor men is the eccentric and vagrant Catherine Baguenault, whom Stead later described in interview as 'the kind . . . you meet in old Bohemia' (Lidoff 216). Paradoxically Catherine's nominal marginality has been read as a sign of her actual centrality to the text (Green 153). While the narrative rarely relays Catherine's viewpoint directly, her irritable relation to the other characters renders her a point of resistance. The incestuous dimension of the Catherine/Michael (brother/sister) dyad symbolically disrupts exogamy, the mechanism which secures the heterosexual contract and orders fraternal patriarchy. But it is Catherine's relationship with Baruch Mendelssohn which is of greatest interest for my argument. Baruch is Stead's earliest sketch of her eloquent life-partner William Blake, a Marxist economist and writer. Blake himself never journeyed to Australia, so the fictional Baruch's role in the novel sets up a metanarrative play, collapsing the distance between temporal and spatial contexts – between here and there, then and now. The fictional conflation of space and time that Stead effects by placing her portrait of Blake within the frame of her Sydney novel is mirrored in the subtle relation between prewar Sydney and postwar London intimated, as I will argue subsequently, in *Cotters' England*. Partly through this metanarrative play, Catherine's encounter with Baruch suggests the erotics of engagement with the revolutionary figure. Their encounter, moreover, directly repeats and transgresses the Ned/Nellie romance of Lane's novel.

The encounter between Catherine and Baruch occurs just after we learn of Catherine's passion for Fulke Folliot, the editor of the *International Worker*. We also learn that Baruch secretly admires Fulke's wife, Marion. The Folliots, though pe-

ripheral, not only represent the ideal couple but are also a point of intersection for Baruch's and Catherine's desires. Like the Strattons in Lane's novel, the Folliot's are members of the Bohemian intelligentsia working for the socialist cause. They are, however, criticised by Baruch, despite his desire, as inauthentic revolutionaries. With their impeccable internationalist credentials they are faintly derided as 'pioneers of middle-class defection'(58). As a couple, the Folliot's are a professional unit adapted to the metropolis. Like the Strattons, they model an ideal socialist/sexual union:

The husband and wife did not conceal their passion for each other. The many visitors to the house looked sidelong at their bedroom, decorated with roses, as if at that rare and desirable mystery, a happy union. (58)

Their desires routed through the married couple, the otherwise intractably singular Catherine and Baruch circle each other curiously, engaging in an erotic intellectual exchange. Baruch's first assessment of Catherine is highly critical and inscribes a scathing revision of her precursor, Nellie Lawton. Baruch sees Catherine as:

'dark, furious, thin, poor by choice, a woman of revolution without a barricade, with something of the politician in her, an organiser of Labour Branches, a marcher in strike processions, a person who got excited by caucus decisions, a woman who worked in holiday camps and workers' education theatres, always passionately involved in something, always half-sick.' (144)

Baruch's view is important as he generates the novel's most engaging form of Marxist rhetoric, even though it is framed by his excessive idealism. He envisages, floating above the real city, a gleaming city on '... an adamant island, where the erudite lived and put the world to shame, told the truth to princes, and wrote tracts to enlighten the slaves... But he doubted his own future...' (140-1). Though idealist, Baruch's talk energises the narrative, breaking the aridity of the political discourse represented elsewhere.

Catherine and Baruch argue about the value of what the Folliot's are doing. Baruch views their circle with a barely disguised contempt. He warns Catherine:

'you imagine you are in love with any number of sad little pedants and posers in a backbiting circle where your passion is a subject for conversation over buttered toast... You are a pure artist - don't you know yourself?' (150-1)

But Catherine challenges Baruch's confining judgement: '... I am born to strive. Under many hoods and hats we are all the same creature all the time trying to make its way out of a thicket.' Baruch reciprocates by developing a portrait of Catherine as a naked woman bursting through a thicket, and impeded by tropical

vine and boa-constrictor. Baruch's portrait is perceptive, but somewhat patronising. He views Catherine from a Marxist perspective: the impeding vine symbolises the middle-class woman's 'romantic notions and ferocious, because ambushed, sensuality'. This reading of Catherine is both sympathetic and reductive of woman's desire. The cultural silencing of women, exposed but not fully recognised by Baruch, is ironically inscribed in the very structure of the narrative. Catherine's desire is re-presented in the narrative partly through an ostentatious textual silencing: her viewpoint, emerging intermittently like her sudden, wild entrances, is continually thwarted in a script appearing to privilege male self-realisation.

A different perspective, however, is implanted in the way Joseph Baguenault misremembers the title of Baruch's portrait as 'The Free Woman'. Joseph's translation endows the woman with an already achieved freedom, even though in Baruch's picture she is captured in the painful process of emergence. The conjunction of the achieved utopian dream with the freeze frame of the woman in struggle, 'bursting through the thicket', expresses the unresolved desire between Baruch and Catherine, defining both picture and relationship in dialectical terms, making their encounter the site of intersecting ideas about love and revolution, gender and Marxism, sex and social constraint. The male Marxist lover is subjected, in and through Stead's novel, to a return of the woman's gaze. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, masculinity and revolutionary Marxism – and the relation between them – are rendered both problematic and objects of desire. Woman's struggle can be explained by Marxist theory, but also suggests a challenge to its limits.

## Conclusion

The parallels and differences between Lane's and Stead's Sydney novels open up broader questions about how the heterosexual romance plot is imbricated in radical political narratives. In conclusion I want to glance briefly towards *Cotters' England* (1967), Stead's bleak, postwar novel which, in one of its reviewer's words, explores the failure of the English working class movement to make the revolution (Yglesias 421). The intertextual connection that my reading has suggested exists between the gendered representation of Sydney's 'old Bohemia' in both *The Workingman's Paradise* and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is displaced and reconfigured in the regressive space-time of *Cotters' England*. Nellie Cotter's political energies are perversely directed towards the subversion of revolutionary goals. Importantly, as a covert lesbian, Nellie undermines the foundation of the postrevolutionary community – heterosexual coupledness. Early in the novel, Nellie outlines to Caroline, a vulnerable young woman she ultimately drives to suicide, the tour of reality she'd like to take her on:

'I'd like to take ye with me, show you a bit of England with the lid off . . . the furnace beneath the green moor that'll blow up into a blistering volcano one of these days'. (46)

Nellie's tour of English reality, however, unlike Nellie Lawton's tour of Sydney, leads into a hall of mirrors, a labyrinth of cultish fakery, rather than towards engagement with revolutionary socialism. Stead's 1950s English Nellie peddles a corrupted and corrupting version of community. Although extraordinarily charismatic, Nellie Cotter is the novel's great villain, the mirroring antithesis to the Nellie of Lane's novel. While there is no explicit allusion to *The Workingman's Paradise in Cotters' England*, the connections my reading has traced render plausible the idea that Lane's Sydney does indeed shadow Stead's England, adding secret layers of place, memory and history to its overt critique of England's left. This half-buried Australian context, invoking the ghost of British colonialism, subverts the coherence, insularity and self sufficiency of nation in *Cotters' England*. Moreover, juxtaposing these two Nellies suggests not only the complexities involved in reading political narratives, but also how gender and sexuality are reproduced in and themselves reproduce radical political discourses.

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