

**Michael Ackland. *Christina Stead and the Socialist Heritage*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2016. 288pp.
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I once boldly suggested to film director Bruce Beresford that he might consider making a film based on Christina Stead's last, and masterful novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*. He read it and later gave me to understand that he thought it would be rather difficult to adapt for film because it revolved around talking and did not offer a great deal of action. He was right of course. So many of Stead's novels are focussed on characters talking, arguing, deliberating and pontificating, and their topics are frequently complex, referential and highly political. They therefore require a lot from their reader.

This detailed study of Stead's socialist heritage opens with a marvellous quote from the writer herself: 'My friends know I have strong political views.' On the first page, Ackland acknowledges the fact that Stead's life is 'at once too well and too little known.' This is a paradox given the two biographies and numerous articles and books that have been published about her life and work. He also recognises that due to her lengthy period of residence away from Australia, and her sometimes obtuse comments about her own political views, it has not been easy for scholars to agree on them. She was not a meeting-goer, and she shunned easy ideological positions in life and in her work, describing herself, as Ackland makes clear, as 'a naturalist.' Ackland explains her reticence in terms of her intensely private instincts and the need to 'don masks' to survive in so many countries.

Ackland sets out to demonstrate that Stead's political interests, orientation, education and engagement were sustained, clear and strongly felt. He identifies the fact that she was prevented from joining the Communist Party of the USA in the late 1930s while living with her de facto husband, the American communist Bill Blake, only because she was not a citizen. Ackland also makes clear that the way in which her interest in leftist political activities has been viewed has served to 'depoliticise' Stead and explains that this diminishes her and her legacy. Ackland challenges those many readings of Stead that do this and comprehensively proves the opposite. Like Stead, he uses the terms communist and socialist interchangeably and sustains an argument through the text that she held that position firmly, unwaveringly and with a great knowledge of literature on the topic. If I have a criticism of this fine book, it is that Ackland might have given more attention to the weighty scholarship on Stead in setting up his framework and rationale for the study. He skates over it, and this is a shortcoming of his introductory chapter.

The case Ackland presents in his book for a 'Red Stead' (his term, 8) is persuasive and carefully argued with reference to Stead's lectures, letters and comments on reviews of her work. Ackland does not ignore Stead's attempt to depoliticise her image later on and does concede that her fiction is difficult to define neatly. But he interprets that as a 'tactic that is compatible with, and indeed possibly the product of, a firm political stance' (10). He does not diminish the considerable pressure of conforming to the views of the 'Party faithful' too, explaining what he calls some of her 'literary subterfuge' as a response to such forces, both at the time she was writing some of her works and when she wrote about earlier periods of history through which she lived.

Ackland's book redresses the imbalance of the critical response to Stead and demonstrates the significance of socialist ideas on her life and work from her childhood. He designates her, as Jose Yglesias did, a 'product of the 1930s' (18) and focuses on the first part of her career up until the publication of *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), her best-known work. Initially when I realised this in reading the book, I was a little concerned, naively hoping Ackland would tackle the entire oeuvre, but realised swiftly that his task was large enough in dealing with the genesis of her development and its manifestation in the first stage of her career.

In the first chapter entitled 'A Socialist Awakening,' Ackland outlines in illuminating detail the influence of Stead's father, David Stead, on her, and articulates her own sense of her father's political shortcomings: 'untheorised socialism' and a failure to adopt 'dialectical materialism.' Ackland also conveys the divisions amongst the Left in Sydney when she was a young woman, explaining that the ferment amongst radicals in the mid-1920s provided the context for her first novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934). Ackland also documents Stead's comments about her education articulated much later in her life and her rejection of the 'insular' and false class values imposed on her by her schooling and the culture more generally. Ackland identifies Stead's meeting and friendship with Bill Blake in London as the 'turning point' in her socialist education, again providing a full account of her mentor's attitudes, knowledge and political orientation. Ackland states that with him in these early years Stead 'completed the familiar trajectory from a background in eclectic socialism to wholehearted embrace of communism and its contemporary embodiment in the Stalinist state' (48). He substantiates this through a wide range of references to Stead's letters.

In his chapter on Stead's novel about finance capitalism, *House of All Nations* (1938) Ackland offers a penetrating analysis of the novel and Stead's first-hand experience of the world of banking, investment banking financiers and their extraordinary wealth, attitudes and behaviour. He points out Stead's concurrence with the 'Party line,' and her own articulation of a 'Marxist-Leninist case against international capitalism' (146). His explication of the targets of Stead's vast novel is interesting, revealing her scathing 'demystification' of the volatility and the 'ruthless drive for profit' amongst the elite members of the elite members of the finance set. The analysis of Stead's pitting of characters who 'love wealth' and those who 'love humanity' in her novel in terms of her Marxist imaginary, is also persuasive and interesting in this chapter.

Ackland's full and cogent analysis of Stead's response to living in the United States flows directly from his commentary of her witnessing of brutal capitalism in the Old World and in her native Australia, documenting her observations of the inequalities, reformist action and socialist pushback that inform his analysis in this chapter. In this section of the book, Ackland provides a comprehensive account of the growth of affluence, corporate power, growing prosperity and the problems of infighting in the CPUSA. He documents Stead's reaction to the fact that everything in the US 'is expressed in terms of money' and refers to Blake and Stead's ménage as a 'Marxist household, whose energies were concentrated on socialist activities and which socialised in communist circles' (191). He explains that for much of the period of the ten years they spent living in Manhattan, they resided within an easy walk of the head office of the Party located near Union Square. Ackland's copious documenting of Stead's notes on Browder (later she referred to him as 'The Oil') and the broader political sphere, are fascinating in this chapter, that lays down the foundation for his analysis of Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*.

In discussing its genesis and Stead's comments about it, Ackland acknowledges her comment that writing the book gave her 'the jitters.' The portrayal of a man who resembles her father

David Stead must have been excruciating. In his analysis of the novel and Stead's socialist heritage Ackland explains the traditions of thought exposed and dissected by the key characters, Sam's progressive era ideas that 're-emerged triumphant in the New Deal' (205). His 'wrong ideas' are also exposed by Stead and explored by Ackland in the context of Sam's capitalist tyranny.

In the Epilogue, Ackland documents the mixed reviews the novel attracted when it was first published during the Second World War, and the changing fortunes the War brought to Stead and Blake. His argument that the 1930s were seminal for Stead and her education in Marxist-Leninist thinking is brought to its conclusion in this chapter. Ackland's sustained analysis of Stead's socialist education and the way it infused her key early novels in this book offer insight, evidence and a highly appealing discussion of this writer's true political orientation, vigour and passion as a writer and as a citizen of the world. I recommend it to scholars and general readers alike. I also recommend the Cambria Australian Literature Series in which this book sits.

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