

The Nightmare of Kiwi Joe: C. K. Stead's Double Novel

R. T. ROBERTSON

“NEW Zealanders may well wake up one day to find a military dictator riding them and wonder how he got there,” said Bill Pearson in “Fretful Sleepers,” an article he wrote in 1951 and published the following year in *Landfall*.¹ Subtitled “A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist,” the article described all the worst faults of a provincial society and the seven dreadful habits of its intellectuals. Pearson ended by calling on New Zealand writers to abandon an intellectual elitism and work more closely with their society in order to waken it from its dream:

Somehow at the back of the outlook of the New Zealander is a dream, a dream of security in equality. Everybody acts the same . . . It is a version of a human dream [but] the special quality of the New Zealander's version is that the evil is to disagree or be different.²

C. K. Stead is a New Zealand professor of English and literary critic; he is also a poet, short-story writer and now a novelist. In *Smith's Dream* he has taken up Pearson's suggestion of a New Zealand dictatorship and also his challenge to waken New Zealanders from their dream in a novel that now exists in two versions. The 1971 edition stopped just before the original ending which is added in the 1973 edition. In a note to the latter Stead says he “got cold feet” about the violent ending and suppressed it but “the novel now ends as I intended it to when the idea first came to me.”³ We now know that Smith is wakened from his dream to live out a nightmare that ends only with his death.

The first question we can ask about the restoration is why Stead got cold feet; the first version ends with Smith's vision of a girl alone on a beach — was the habit of dreaming so strong in Smith (or Stead) that he could not break it? In the second version Smith awakens, realizes the vision is but another dream, and is shot by a party of security police lead by the ex-head prefect of his high school; and the question this raises is why a dream must be exchanged for a nightmare — can the dreamer, the average New Zealander, not be woken by art into life?

Stead says in his note to the second edition that it "would be difficult to explain" his hesitation in the first. But it is possible to suggest an explanation by looking into the novel and by placing it in its New Zealand tradition of dream narrative and of academic writing.

W. H. Oliver in his *Islands* review of the first edition complains that it is only "half a novel" because "Stead is not at all interested in how things happen."⁴ Oliver is very interested in how "the decent New Zealand dream has been blown to shreds by a strong wind of world anger." Stead's explanation is that there was an economic collapse caused by disturbance in world trade on which New Zealand depends for its "dream of security"; this is to raise again the spectre of the Great Depression. The country recovered because a dictator named Volkner engineered a coup with army and police assistance (the dictator is later called "X" — shades of 1984?) But some New Zealanders objected to the methods needed to restore the dream to working order and, apparently lead by the Communist Party, took to the hills in guerrilla opposition; here Stead has tapped an even older and deeper New Zealand dream than that of social security; it appears in New Zealand literature in what Winston Rhodes and others call the "man alone" theme, after John Mulgan's novel *Man Alone* (1939).⁵

Much of the foregoing is revealed in the early chapters of the novel but the action precedes revelation; by the end

of the second chapter Smith has been arrested as a guerilla suspected of complicity in the blowing up of a ship loaded with American arms coming to the rescue of the beleaguered Volkner regime. After the arms supply come the American "advisers" and then American troops who carry out a typical "search and destroy" mission and massacre the town of Coromandel in order to save it, as the classic Vietnam prescription has it. The "world anger" to which Stead is responding is thus revealed early in the novel as the anti-Vietnam movement. "I admit to a basic obsession with the Vietnam situation," said Stead in an interview:

I've been actively campaigning against it for years . . . nothing has affected me as deeply as that war. I used to think, 'If only people could understand what it would be like if it was happening in their country,' but I knew it was hard to make the imaginative transfer.⁶

Why Stead should be obsessed with Vietnam is not a decent question but it may have a New Zealand rather than a human answer in the situation of the New Zealand intellectual turned novelist in order to awaken his people by making an "imaginative transfer." New Zealand intellectuals have been obsessed with Vietnam partly for New Zealand reasons. They share with all New Zealanders a deep fear of the teeming hordes of Asia but they have their own awareness of the precariousness of New Zealand's economic, geographical and racial situation at the bottom of the South Pacific. This awareness is intensified by a sense of futility — no protests will stop the French atomic tests at Mururoa — and often breaks out in criticism of the average Kiwi and his dream, or contrariwise in attacking developments in the world which do not accord with the "decent dream." The novel was written in 1970; had Stead waited a year, as Oliver points out, he would not have had to make an imaginative transfer because New Zealand society began to be polarized on the question of continuing rugby tests with South Africa: "rugby and race have combined to connect the world's great angers to our social norms," says Oliver.⁷

It is difficult to appreciate the relief and energy with which New Zealand academics and others flung themselves at last into a cause of both general New Zealand and real world concern — the relief of finding a real connection or contribution and of not having to make an imaginative transfer. It is equally difficult to appreciate the form Stead's transfer takes; his concern is ultimately not for the suffering Vietnamese but for the average Kiwi who does not dream that his country could also be Vietnamised now that this pattern of large-power mutilation of a small country has been revived after Spain in Korea and South-East Asia. The novel is a cry not of protest at the treatment of the Vietnamese but of fear that another small country could be engulfed in a world pattern because it persists in its own dream of nineteenth century isolation. This fear breeds the nightmare of *Smith's Dream* and the novel underlines its warning by summarising the process by which it could happen. There is perhaps a deeper fear that New Zealanders have never earned their nationhood in New Zealand — except possibly in the Maori Wars — and a niggling sense of unblooded paradise that keeps them "waiting for the taniwha," in James K. Baxter's phrase.

There are thus a number of reasons, given the New Zealand character and the attitudes of its intellectuals, why Stead should have written his "moral tale," as he calls it.⁸ But there are other reasons why it should take the double form it did.

What made Stead nervous about the original ending was that it carried to a logical conclusion the nightmare he had created. But the nightmare is simply the inversion of the dream. Smith's first dream is one, says Stead, that "lived in the heart of every Kiwi" — to be free of woman, children, job, politics, civilization, and to be alone in the bush, or on an island such as Gut Island where Smith takes refuge. The nightmare, as John Mulgan indicated in *Man Alone*, is that world events will always catch up with New Zealand, that it will be sucked into cosmic conflict yet

again as it has been since the Boer War. The two endings, then, represent both the dream and the nightmare and both misrepresent the reality of the peculiar situation of New Zealand in the modern world.

The Kiwi dream is as much a part of New Zealand literature as it is of New Zealand life. In 1872 Alfred Domett published *Ranolf and Amohia*, an epic poem about a Pakeha youth and a Maori maiden, with the subtitle "A South-Sea Day-Dream"; the subtitle was altered to "A Dream of Two Lives" in the revised edition of 1883. Twenty years earlier F. E. Maning published in Auckland under the pseudonym of "a Pakeha Maori" his *Old New Zealand* with the subtitle "A Tale of the Good Old Times." Dr. Hocken in his introduction to the 1906 New Zealand edition identified in familiar terms the source of the dream of getting away from it all:

To such a man what glorious possibilities life in New Zealand must have held forth. Every whaler and trader brought back stories of that little known but lovely land, held by a splendid race of savage men, whose pastime was war, with whom to live was to be brave, and whose women were dark-eyed, soft-voiced and affectionate. To all like him such was a call from the wild . . .¹⁰

In 1889 Sir Julius Vogel published *Anno Domini 2000*, a vision of a British Empire headquartered in Australia with a woman as Prime Minister. Both Vogel and Domett had been Premiers of the colony and both responded in literary dreams to the "call from the wild."

Later writers responded more cautiously to the dream by stressing its obverse, the nightmare, and trying to bring their fictions to some valid conclusion by finding the reality that lay somewhere between the two. Frank Sargeson in *I Saw in my Dream* (1949) and John Mulgan in *Man Alone* allowed their heroes to take another name as Smith does, and to escape from suburbia or settlement into "the wild" but they brought them back to their starting points; John Mulgan gives Johnson a muted awareness of the brotherhood of man that sends him off to Spain with his mate;

Sargeson allows Henry/Dave an affirmation of being that will answer his question "waiamihea."

There is a return for Smith but there is no escape for New Zealand. Smith is taken from his island off the coast of Coromandel by the end of the second chapter and plunged into the social changes which had occurred while he was worrying about his wife's desertion, settling his affairs and living on his island. Smith is tortured by the secret police, then cleaned up and interviewed by Volkner who invites him to pose at a press conference as a reformed guerrilla; Smith escapes (again) and as "Buck" becomes the manager of his father-in-law's motel in Rotorua, a cover for guerrilla operations which is blown sky-high when the guerrillas massacre the American advisers quartered there. Smith escapes (again) and is transferred back to the Coromandel area by the guerrillas, narrowly escaping the massacre by American troops of the town of Coromandel, but eventually hunted down and killed by Jespersen and his men.

The three main episodes — Auckland, Rotorua and Coromandel — provide opportunities for complicating the plot by making his wife's lover his guerrilla captain, Bullen, but more for allowing certain characters to speak their piece about revolution. Volkner's message is that his "children," the New Zealanders, suffer from "a hunger of the spirit" which will be satisfied by "a creative response" to life — "no ulcers, no tensions" — which is suspiciously like the original dream and appears to be derived from "the aristocrat of the black races," the Maori.¹¹ This enforced stability and consensus is cynically set in a larger frame of reference by Captain Willoughby, an American adviser who calls his men "babes" and whose world is devoid of any values; and it is shown in practice by Captain Jespersen who has Smith beaten up to settle an old score from high school where Jespersen was head prefect and Smith objected to cadet training.

On the other side Buff is a member of the Communist cadre which sees the little guerrilla war as part of the

revolution of the masses and Bullen gives this frame of reference its New Zealand connection; he "was ready to merge his will in the collective will of what he called 'the people,' meaning the oppressed of the world." He leaves Smith "feeling that revolution was something pure, almost a condition of nature."¹²

The most important of these interlocutors, however, is Arthur Buckman, Smith's father-in-law, who is given the fifth chapter in order to summarise *how* the dictatorship occurred. Buckman describes himself as the "average Kiwi"; the confused and vague details he gives us of Volkner's coup were criticised by W. H. Oliver but the myopia is precisely Stead's point. Smith represents the New Zealand intelligentsia; Buckman is the type of the New Zealander en masse; both act out "the dream that lived in the heart of every Kiwi" — that is, of escape from the workaday world. Behind both is another voice identified as "we" which is allowed to muse at frequent intervals on what went wrong with the dream and what is happening in the nightmare: the third voice is equally myopic although it seems at times to be speaking from a time identified as "later."

The reason for the curious form of the novel — its staged dialogues, violent incidents, arrangement of characters into goodies and baddies, and especially the confusion of voices in Smith, Buckman and "us" — lies in the role laid on the writer in New Zealand. We can tell that Stead is against the Vietnamization of New Zealand and presumably of Vietnam or anywhere else; what is he speaking for? The occasional references to Catholicism are not enough to link this novel with the attack on a modern Machiavelli in little Caesar in the name of liberal humanism that is seen in M. K. Joseph's *A Pound of Saffron* (1961) nor with the views of the late J. C. Reid, although all three writers have been members of the Department of English at Auckland University. To find where Stead stands we have to look closer at the third voice, the

authorial combination of typically average Kiwi and New Zealand intellectual.

The New Zealand writer has long been expected to write on New Zealand society. In a farewell radio talk some years ago Daiches Raphael amended the old chestnut about the American, the Englishman and the Frenchman writing essays about the elephant to include the New Zealander — his essay was entitled “The Elephant — And Society.” The first thematic survey of New Zealand fiction is Robert Chapman’s 1953 *Landfall* article “Fiction and the Social Pattern,” recently reprinted in Wystan Curnow’s collection, *Essays on New Zealand Literature* (1973). Chapman’s first point is that in New Zealand “each author is driven to be his own sociologist”¹³ because the traditional and easy fictional types have to be modified to be recognisable Kiwis, and there is no clear “social pattern” which would provide substitutes: “if the fiction here sounds like a report it may be that the reader’s mind selects out what there is in it of report because that report has not been made elsewhere and is needed.”¹⁴ *Smith’s Dream* is a report and thus a very New Zealand novel in a rather antiquated mode. But there are reasons for its persistence.

The society is so close to the writer that he is half “average Kiwi” and half the opposite, an artist; to write about that society he not only uses the “report” form but also tries to find a “temporary place on the outside” from which to make his observations. The technique incurs both penalties and advantages; “the writers’ way of examining the society they depict,” says Chapman, is to cast the hero as an isolate.¹⁵ W. H. Oliver’s chief criticism of *Smith’s Dream* (first version) is that Stead’s “concern with the isolated individual” (Chapman’s phrase) results in what Oliver calls “half a novel” — “the situation is always ‘out there’ and only vaguely depicted because there is no one around who does not share the myopia” of “us” and “the average Kiwi.”¹⁶ This amounts to saying that while Stead has not been able to find a vantage point of

observation to distinguish the social pattern on which a coup can be predicated, he has convinced us of the myopia of Smith, Buckman and the Kiwi. But the myopia is more likely to be that of Smith and of Stead and of the New Zealand intellectual, their inability to do more than swap nightmare for dream and never achieve reality.

Wystan Curnow dissected this myopia in the essay, "High Culture in a Small Province"; using several American critics (possibly a novelty in New Zealand academic discussion), he stressed the "instability of orientation . . . that must in part be attributed to the thinness of our high culture," which enforces an amateur versatility on the educated man — he may be scholar, poet, historian, critic and novelist all rolled into one; and to the "weakness of psychic insulation," the closeness of his material to his own life.¹⁷ Curnow is especially critical of the easily held and frequently vociferated liberal humanism of important writers:

When they point to the spectre of fascism which they see as lurking beneath the surface of New Zealand's egalitarian democracy, they are pointing also to that spirit of soured Protestantism that informs their own views of education and still blocks liberal educational practise in the school system.¹⁸

The mote is in their own eye, and it is chiefly for its possibly unconscious report on that blocked vision that *Smith's Dream* is most interesting.

Following Curnow, we can suggest that one cause of the myopia is in the school system, such as the segregation of male and female adolescents and the wearing of school uniforms. This would lead us into those very dark mysteries of the New Zealand psyche — the attitude to children and to women which constitutes a dream behind the dream. Smith has two violent dreams in the novel — of being both child and headmaster when the latter hands out machine guns for the staff to shoot the children; and of hooking his ex-wife on his "set line" and tearing her about as he tries to free her. Deep waters, indeed, and somehow connected with the impossible dream of the rogue male,

aptly summed up in a remark attributed to one of Barry Crump's heroes: "I reckon there's nothing a woman can do for a man that he can't do for himself with his own two hands."

When, as Oliver remarks, "the decent New Zealand dream has been blown to shreds by a strong wind of world anger," its ever-present nightmare comes closer; "conflict would displace consensus,"¹⁹ or, as Chapman puts it, "a simple materialism combined with self-complacency" becomes "constrained conformity instead of willing cohesion" and it is the artist who "demonstrates the insufficiency . . . when confronted by crisis."²⁰ But this crisis is not unknown in New Zealand; it happens in every family, according to Chapman, in the brief period between the regimented adolescence of high school and the conventional settling down to family life.

That is not so extraordinary anywhere but the degree of restraint in the conformity of New Zealand society combined with the difficulty of ever really getting away short of leaving the country can make for very violent action when the isolate is thwarted in breaking away or when he is being brought back to society. Stead's novel, in fact, could be based on two earlier fictive treatments of the Graham affairs — Erik de Mauny's *The Huntsman in His Career* (1949) and R. M. Burdon's *Outlaw's Progress* (1943). Of them Chapman remarks that the "implacable hunt by monolithic authority contains something of a parable about the solid pressure of society upon the individual."²¹ But it may also say something about the latent authoritarianism (or hunger for authority to end the nightmare) within the academic writers, and this is as often as not revealed in their peculiar attitudes to women and children. Just as Willoughby's men are his "babes" and all New Zealanders Volkner's "children," so Smith assaults Bullen because he feels that the children Gloria took with her to Bullen were "*his* children."

The converse of this is that the Triple Goddess has only two faces in New Zealand literature — those of maiden and crone-mother; the matron or Venus figure, the wife-mother, is absent — at least from male writing. And the reason may be that women writers are not nearly as worried about little Caesars; Katherine Mansfield neatly neutered Sir Harold Beauchamp in Stanley Burnell by ringing him with women and children, as in "At the Bay." Chapman refers to the male writers' "bifocal view of women" as either sex objects or mother replacements; both, curiously enough, occur in one chapter of Stead's novel where he almost has to earn his passing a roadblock by being seduced by a Pakeha girl who knows a secret way; he eventually crosses with the help of a Maori woman, which seems a distant echo of Maning.

Behind the average Kiwi's dream of escaping from these psychoses, either by heading out for the bush or by hoping that no one will notice New Zealand, lies an obvious nightmare — that another economic global collapse or a political regional conflict will suck in New Zealand, or that there is no escape in the bush. But the relation of dream to nightmare is through a psychosis in the intellectual, a member of a too high culture in a too small province, to use Wystan Curnow's terms. This psychosis is deep in New Zealand life. Chapman notes that "the provision of a male environment" to compensate for the matriarchal pressures "makes for a fair degree of latent homosexuality . . . encouraged by too intensive and lifelong separation of the sexes."²² That separation goes back to the high school segregation and to the authority still granted university teachers. Earle Birney in his poem "Kiwis" comments on the "wheel-broken students" he met at a university suspiciously like Auckland;²³ and the same university is the setting for the lecture on Machiavelli by the head of the English Department in Joseph's *A Pound of Saffron* (1961). Joseph's intention was that the lecture should reveal his villain's ideas; it unconsciously parodies

the authoritarianism of the university teacher in New Zealand which is the basis for Curnow's remarks about "the conspicuousness and pervasiveness of amateurism" in New Zealand academic life and "the tendency away from specialisation."²⁴

This is not true of New Zealand's practising writers. In his later novels Sargeson has made overt the latent homosexuality of his earlier work; Janet Frame observed: "the average New Zealander possesses no staircase leading to the upper floor; indeed no upper floor" and she is building both in her work.²⁵ Stead's "report" on the Vietnamization of New Zealand is full of the nightmare bogies of the basement, not the real psychic problems of that "emotional upper storey" which Janet Frame explores. The inability then to respond to the collapse of the dream except by evoking the nightmare does not bring the hero to any realisation where he and New Zealand are in space and time. But it does provide us with a first-class portrait of the New Zealand intellectual and shows that he is indeed much more an average Kiwi Joe than he might suspect, as Pearson suggested. He shares the same myopia and until he looks inward for the cause of his dream and nightmare he will be unable to bring them healthily into the daylight of the present. The world revolution which Stead sees encroaching on New Zealand is not his nightmare of American imperialism nor Smith's callow vision of a revolution of the oppressed of the world. It is the awareness of the need for innovation.

Stead's obsession with Vietnam is, then, an uneasiness about innovation expressed by the imaginative transfer of a world tragedy into the nightmare of Kiwi Joe; presumably the whole novel is a bad dream about "what it would be like." "What is disturbing," says Curnow, "is that this uneasiness produces reactionary rather than innovative thinking."²⁶ Chapman concluded his survey of New Zealand fiction twenty years ago by asserting that the writers' "true platform of values" could be described easily: "they

are the values of humanitarian liberalism."²⁷ James K. Baxter saw a change in progress in the New Zealand poet's idea of his social function since the thirties: "In those years, he cast himself as a messianic prophet; since then he has offered himself as a therapist."²⁸ While Stead may have intended his novel as therapy, the effect is that of a prophet; he writes from the humanitarianism of suffering with his South-East Asian neighbours in their agony, but he is not liberal except in the sense Curnow discredits as both authoritarian and hostile to innovation.²⁹ Perhaps with this novel we come to the end of the dream narrative as prophecy in New Zealand literature and awaken to recover the "creative response" (Volkner's term!) to the changing world in which New Zealand now belongs.

NOTES

¹Bill Pearson, "Fretful Sleepers," *Landfall* 23 (Sept 52); reprinted in *Landfall Country*, ed. Charles Brasch (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1962); p. 334.

²Pearson, p. 354.

³C. K. Stead, *Smith's Dream* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1971; second edition, 1973); p. [6]; all references are to this edition.

⁴W. H. Oliver, "Half a Novel," *Islands* 1.2 (Summer 72); p. 171.

⁵H. Winston Rhodes, *New Zealand Novels* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1969); pp. 28-33.

⁶Interview with Cherry Raymond, *New Zealand Women's Weekly* (Sept 3, 1973); p. 27; reprinted in *Moko* 1.3 (Mar 74); p. 9.

⁷Oliver, p. 171.

⁸Interview with Cherry Raymond, *Moko* 1.3; p. 11.

⁹*Smith's Dream*, p. 11.

¹⁰F. E. Maning, *Old New Zealand* (Christchurch; Whitcombe and Tombs, 1906); pp. iv-v.

¹¹*Smith's Dream*, pp. 38-41.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹³Robert Chapman, "Fiction and the Social Pattern," *Landfall* 25 (Mar 53); reprinted in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973); p. 75.

¹⁴*Idem.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁶Oliver, p. 172.

¹⁷Wystan Curnow, "High Culture in a Small Province," *Essays on New Zealand Literature*; p. 167.

¹⁸*Idem.*

¹⁹Oliver, p. 171.

²⁰Chapman, pp. 83, 94, 96.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 95.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 85.

²³Earle Birney, *Rag and Bone Shop* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971); n.p.

²⁴Curnow, pp. 164, 160.

²⁵Janet Frame, *Landfall* 32 (Dec 54); p. 309.

²⁶Curnow, p. 167.

²⁷Chapman, p. 97.

²⁸Curnow, p. 169; this is Curnow's paraphrase of James K. Baxter, *Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1967); p. 26.

²⁹C. K. Stead's paper, "For the Hulk of the World's Between," in *Distance Looks Our Way*, ed. Keith Sinclair (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1961), proposes the value for writers of the tension created by remoteness, a tension of optimism and pessimism, positive and negative attitudes to New Zealand, unlimited and limited views of its potential. He seems to see the positive value of the tension but prefers the limited view of New Zealand life; his attitude seems to have intensified in the succeeding decade.