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"Hedging on Destiny": History and Its Marxist Dimension in the Early Fiction of Christina Stead

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"We hedge on destiny" (216), remarks one of the financial sharks in *House of All Nations*, meaning at its simplest that our success depends on double-guessing the outcome of events, or historical processes: a form of analytical divination of considerable interest to Christina Stead and her communist friends in the 1930s. Then, as the Great Depression worsened, they believed themselves to be living through one of the major turning-points of history. Her life-partner, the American financier and Marxist intellectual William J. Blake, looked forward to 1931 as "the battle year fit to stand with 1517, 1848" (*Letters* 35), years when Luther smashed the unity of Western Christendom with his dissenting theses in Wittenberg, and the revolt of the armed proletariat profoundly shook the European social order. Now advanced capitalism, which had once exercised unparalleled sway over distant continents as well as home markets, was entering its long-predicted final crisis. Even greater convulsions seemed pending and lent new urgency to the key Marxist-Leninist issue, in Blake's words, of "who will inherit the kingdom of history" (Harris, *Letters* 250). This pressing concern is one not usually associated with Christina Stead and her imaginative output, despite her occasional, barbed comments directed at those who ignored, or turned their back on the historical record.[1] Instead, commentary has delved into her preoccupation with the "political powers of patriarchy" (Gardiner 151), and with characterization, while her books, it is often argued, are shaped by "flows and surges of emotion" (Blake 4) rather than being those of a novelist of ideas. Yet Stead, in 1936, noted with obvious pleasure that *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* had at last attracted insightful, serious commentary, adding: "I really put some gristle into" it (*Letters* 62). Presumably this was the case, too, with her subsequent novels and

would normally have included, in the work of a committed Marxist-Leninist, more than a passing interest in history. In what follows I wish to initiate detailed discussion of history's neglected role in Stead's fiction. Beginning with an illustration of the widespread tendency to downplay its significance in her work as a whole, my argument then focuses on what historical fiction means typically in Marxist terms. From the outset Stead arguably embraced this view-point, as emerges from her working notes and the texts of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *House of All Nations*, early novels which reveal an abiding preoccupation with the historical implications of both temporal settings and contemporary events.[2]

To date history in Stead's books has usually been treated implicitly as a mere backdrop or expendable element,[3] its choice dictated by a desire to draw on her immediate or most recent experience: an approach exemplified by her principal biographer, Hazel Rowley. Stead's first novels, for instance, are set in the cities in which she had spent her youth and early adulthood: Sydney and Paris. Subsequent fictional locations reflect her trans-Atlantic peregrinations, making it easy to leave the issue of their precise historical import to one side—though this arises unavoidably in the case of her masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*. There events from her adolescence in Australia have been transposed to Washington, D.C. and Maryland during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's pre-war administration. According to Rowley, Stead initially wanted to set the story at Watson's Bay in Sydney, where the original incidents took place. Her publisher, Simon & Schuster, however, insisted on a location in the United States to improve the book's chances in the fiercely competitive American market. This had the added advantage, from Stead's point of view, of making identification of her real-life models less likely, and so conjecturally of sparing the feelings of her family (Rowley, *Biography* 258–63). On the key decision to translate domestic scenes from the 1910s to the politically charged 1930s Rowley is equally categoric: "the real reason was linked to the change in location: the America Stead knew was contemporary America—the Thirties; unlike Bill Blake, she was no historical novelist" (*Biography* 261).[4] Certainly the circumstantial evidence in favour of Rowley's view seems compelling, but what exactly does being a historical novelist mean? Rowley's statement is correct in so

far as Stead had little interest in recreating far-distant historical epochs. Whereas Blake wrote novels about the American Civil War and the Romanovs,[5] her work is set predominantly in the 1930s and 1940s. And when the passage of time effaced the public's memory of the subject matter in *I'm Dying Laughing*, she found the labour of revision, and especially of supplementing its historical context, scarcely supportable: "people don't remember all that, you know. The thirties was a hundred years ago. So I started to go to work and explained it all to people. And it got me down. I don't want to write like that, filling in all kinds of details. These reference books kill me" (Lidoff 181).

Yet Rowley's judgment ignores what might constitute meaningful engagement with history, in fiction, from a specifically Marxist perspective. This is authoritatively presented in *The Historical Novel* by Georg Lukacs who, like Stead, was writing in the shadow of ascendant fascism and vitally concerned with the issue of committed literature.[6] Lukacs's sweeping study identifies two distinctive approaches to history. The first, which accords with Rowley's implied definition, produces novels that "are historical only as regards their purely external choice of theme and costume" (15); the second anticipates, or mirrors, the lessons of dialectical materialism. In earlier "so-called historical novels," according to Lukacs, reality or the social world, even if "treated with unusual plasticity and truth to life … is accepted naively as something given" (15–16)—an illusion comparable with "the Enlightenment's conception of man's unalterable nature," which is singled out by Lukacs as "the greatest obstacle to an understanding of history" (27).[7] The second tradition, inaugurated by the work of Sir Walter Scott, problematizes history. That is, not only does it focus on the "great crises of historical life" (37), but the "whence and how" of history's unfolding have also become crucial "problems for the writer" (16). This promising start suffered a serious setback, however, when the betrayal of the proletariat by the terrified bourgeoisie in 1848 found its aesthetic correlative in an abrogation of interpretative responsibility. The focus of the historical novel shifted from the common people, so prominent in Scott's work, to the merely subjective. Facts were "freely and arbitrarily interpreted," history became a decorative setting or accessory, in the belief that its development was

"unknowable and that therefore it is necessary to 'introject' one's own subjective problems onto the 'amorphousness' of history" (293). More recently, Lukacs observes, the historical novel has been used to mount a belated defence of humanist values menaced by fascism. In each instance, bourgeois authors, confounding the reanimation of historical details with writing materialistically, have turned to individual experience as the one reality on which they could dilate with comparative certainty and failed to "portray the kind of individual destiny that can directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch" (342)—a mistake not replicated in Stead's fiction.

Implicit in this critique of bourgeois subjectivity and introjection, and in the counter-case for the representative individual destiny, is a specifically Marxist notion of history. Positing the ubiquitous influence of ideology, Marxist-Leninism argues that current knowledge and readings of bygone epochs bear the imprint of a particular class and system. Their aura of impartiality and universality is thus a semblance; their purportedly immutable facts are actually historically conditioned. This deceptive state of affairs is revealed by dialectical materialism, which insists that the real meaning of events emerges from seeing them not in supposedly "objective" isolation but as part of a larger, ongoing process. For Marxist theorists like Blake and Lukacs, history and society are knowable and open to human intervention. Importantly too, in terms of Stead's novels, a Marxist-Leninist must take into account the historical nature of the present. The novelist should not be interested merely in "the reproduction of the immediate, simple determinants of social life" (Lukacs *History* 9), as if it were a natural given, but in concentrating on protagonists and incidents which expose its man-made character. In this schema the socialist writer's role is to illuminate the socio-economic forces driving the unfolding of history, as well as to present the facts "from below," that is, from the standpoint of shared social life. Thus to be novelistically engaged and vitally concerned with history, from a Marxist perspective, does not depend on reanimating former periods or societies but on comprehending society as a historical problem that is to be analyzed materialistically—a view to which Stead as writer demonstrably subscribed.

Conscientious research, fastidious choice of temporal co-ordinates and the careful embedding of historical references are features of her writing, but the use to which she put this material remains largely unexplored. Many pages of closely typed notes from authorities and other sources survive, for example, for *I'm Dying Laughing*, even though Stead remembered the period vividly. There is no doubt accuracy was a vital concern. In the case of *House of All Nations,* Blake provided her with a "short summary of principal political and financial events May 1931 to July 1932" (Geering 403). This, given his staggering recall of facts and his whole-hearted embrace of socialist theory, would presumably have meant detailed notes laced with Marxist commentary, such as he provides for the "Socialist Chronology" to *An American Looks at Karl Marx*. The major issue from a Marxist perspective, however, was "which of the data of life are relevant to knowledge and in the context of which method?" (Lukacs, *Class* 5). A partial answer emerges from diary-like jottings of 15 June 1936, which show that Stead considered a range of time-frames for *House of All Nations*, each of which had subtle ramifications:

> Read French newspapers in New York public library: Débats covering Lagny disaster and Stavisky scandal, also riots of Feb. 6 as intended to use this period in opening novel.
>
> Made numerous notes: descriptions of eye-witnesses: also political notes showing careful preparation of coup d'état, which was let out of the cupboard too soon by disaster and Stavisky scandal. Noted changes, spy-stories, interesting faits-divers, (for reference only, the latter) …
>
> Recast chapter arrangement … cut out Lagny disaster, Stavisky scandal: put story back to 1933. Later at Bill's suggestion, put story back to 1931-32, years of breakdown and Hitler rise to putsch. (Geering 402–3)

Stead, having lived in Paris from February 1929 to at least 1934, was potentially able to write about each of these periods with equal authority. What differed significantly, and presumably explained her wavering choice, were the nature and import of crises during these years of

chronic regime instability. France had forty governments in two decades, thanks to shifting right- and leftwing coalitions, as well as periodic financial scandals which implicated government ministers.[8] These undermined confidence in democratic and capitalist institutions and encouraged identification of the republic with corruption, mendacity and flagrant incompetence. Especially notorious was the Stavisky affair in 1933, involving multiple deaths and "a shady financier … who for years had kept one step ahead of the law, not without the aid of influential acquaintance in the world of high society and politics" (Cobban 140–1). Facing prosecution, Stavisky fled to the provinces where he was found dead.[9] Was this another effort by a desperate government to cover its sins, or a genuine suicide manipulated to cause maximum damage to the regime? Extreme opinion, fanned by an unbridled right-wing press, ignited a series of massive demonstrations on 12, 22 and 27 January. These culminated on 6 February 1934 in a huge protest march and the bloodiest street clashes since the Paris Commune:

> Among the estimated 40,000 rioters fourteen were killed by bullets and two died later from their wounds; some 655 were injured, of whom 236 were hospitalized and the rest treated at first-aid stations. The police and guards lost one killed and 1,664 injured, of whom 884 were able to resume service after having their wounds dressed. The guardians fired 527 revolver bullets; the number of shots fired by the rioters was never ascertained. (Shirer 201)[10]

Afterwards Paris resonated with accusations and denunciations, with each side of politics discerning in events evidence of their antagonists' dark designs, or a narrowly frustrated coup d'état. Stead subscribed to the socialist thesis[11] and probably saw in the bloodshed another massacre attributable to state violence.

Recasting the time-frame of *House of All Nations* therefore drastically altered the scope and thematic focus of the novel. Her initial choice would have foregrounded the ambiguities, shifting coalitions and crises of French politics, as well as the clouded motives thrown up by revolutionary situations and famously dissected in Marx's writings on

nineteenth-century France. Stead was thoroughly familiar with this literature and settled on the historical struggles of the French proletariat as the subject of Oliver's dissertation in her previous novel, *The Beauties and the Furies*. This time she finally turned to "1931–32, years of breakdown and Hitler rise to putsch": events which pinpointed the failure of capitalism and raised the question of whether democracy could reinvent itself, or whether its powerbrokers would seek salvation in a fascist state. Her decision involved sacrificing a host of fascinating, cloak-and-dagger episodes ("coup d'état … Stavisky scandal … spy-stories, interesting faits-divers'"), as well as a dramatic, potentially revolutionary opening. In return she could dissect the socio-economic malaise signalled by repeated French financial scandals (for example, Hanau in 1928, or Oustric in 1930), and recall through the plight of one private bank the default and collapse of hundreds of banks which threatened to plunge the middle-class into pauperdom, first in the United States, then in Europe. Also the final chronological choice centred the novel in a period which, authorities agree, saw the belated onset of the Great Depression in France: late 1931 (Goubert 289, Bury 264). Stead chose, in short, to refract the crisis of the age rather than of the hour. She decided to evoke not the worst urban mayhem in the Third Republic but the chaos and carnage of a bankrupt system, together with the stark alternatives offered by brutal Hitlerism and socialist fraternity, as depicted by Alphéndery and like-minded comrades in *House of All Nations*.

Stead's focus on banking reflected its emergence as the indispensable keystone in the world-spanning arch of capitalist enterprise, and hence as a major determinant of current conditions.[12] Already in 1893 J. P. Morgan, at the President's behest, had famously intervened to prop up the financial sector and restore public confidence during extreme stock-market volatility and runs on currency. Also banking underpinned business and industry with credit, while its fabled deep reserves, whether in national vaults or the Rothschild coffers, guaranteed the international monetary system. This carefully cultivated reputation for probity, sound judgment and laudable intentions is savaged by Stead. Her novel fully supports Alphéndery's verdict that banking is a "lunatic world" (614), driven by the self-centred pursuit of money. Typically notions of com-

munal good become a stratagem for further gains ("Altruism is selfishness out with a pair of field glasses and imagination" [100]), much as sharp economic declines or social upheavals register with her bankers primarily as speculative opportunities. Their utterly unscrupulous practices, which are detrimental to both individuals and nation states, are epitomized by Jules Bertillon. Like his bank, Bertillon presents a trust-inspiring front. Surrounded in his office by classical economic treatises, he exudes charm and apparently well-founded confidence. In fact, he is profoundly ignorant of many basic financial transactions (399), contemptuous of hard data as well as hard work, and happily equates money-making with swindling (444). "He thought of his business as a crooked roulette wheel, a confidence trick, and of himself as a clever pirate" (426) and unashamedly maintains, "you don't make money by *knowing* anything. You make money by having a game and smart dumbbells to work at it for you" (520). Tellingly, his bank affords a view of the majestic garden surrounding the Rothschild headquarters, a proximity that arguably underscores similarities of origin and method, while an impression of insubstantiality, bordering on invisibility, aroused by Bertillon outside his office suggests hollowness at the core of present financial proceedings. "This world," the narrator concedes, "was really crumbling" (633); ultimately it is not just the bullion holdings of his "Banque Mercure" which fall disastrously short of expectations, but those of the Bank of England itself.

Historical awareness, though informing the entire narrative, becomes an overt issue when Alphéndery's Marxist reading of history is played off against opposing world-views. Apart from offering acute economic analysis, his interpretations are distinguished by a capacity to cope with large-scale change and by a genuine concern for humanity. His sceptical interlocutors are unable to think beyond their acculturation and class interests. As the motor of history, Stewart evokes the conventional *primum mobile*, deity, and Plowman, oblivious to the fate suffered by the world's subject peoples, has confidence in Britain's providential ascent to global dominion. "You have no history," he accuses Alphéndery, which draws the retort: your "sense of history is that the British Empire will last for ever by divine right. And the rest goes spinning brainlessly till

London organizes it. Oh, worthy race, admirable illusion" (465). Both Englishmen ignore the dynamic modelling of Marxist historiography, together with the death-knell it spells for bourgeois speculators like themselves:

> "I mean, to get rich or powerful a man has to have God working for him," said Alphéndery cryptically. "I mean history."
>
> "Ah," Stewart shook his head archly, "you call it history; I call it god. But we think the same, Michel; I rather thought so." He was pink with satisfaction. (324)

This view of a supernaturally ordained unfolding is no closer than a "pink tinge" to Alphéndery's thoroughly "Red-understanding" of change, rooted in class struggle. Similarly Bertillon, predictably, is only able to grasp one phase of this dialectic. "The history of the world is down" (105) he repeats, but being bent on money-grabbing he misses the potential of social upheaval to generate an altogether different order. Socialist doctrine, however, enables Adam Constant to view capitalism as the mere "dawn of economic history," the equivalent of "living among the Cro-magnons" (77), Alphéndery to have "hope in things not yet born" (554), and readers to see in Bertillon a representative of the debonair, money-centred bourgeoisie, whom Stead elsewhere likens to a doomed dinosaur "breath[ing] his vegetarian last in the antediluvian grass" ("Writers takes Sides" 454).

These historical concerns, and the compositional choices they dictated, were nothing new: Stead had faced them already in her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Its main action could have been set in any one of a number of antipodean watershed periods, such as the socially convulsed 1890s or divisive war-time years.[13] Instead, although its plot spans decades, from Michael's childhood in the opening scene, through his involvement in the Great War, to his suicide and its aftermath, the bulk of its action takes place in 1925, during the worldwide British seaman's strike. Yet once chosen, even this year provided a multitude of fictional possibilities, as the Stead Papers held in the Australian National Library, Canberra, demonstrate. Among them is a typed, single-spaced document of twelve pages, bearing the hand-written heading: "1924.

Early 'Communist Scare.' Moonshine in Australia. British Seamen's Strike" ("On Literature II").[14] But apart from an initial entry it covers, on an almost daily basis, events in Australia and overseas from 3 October 1925 ("Another blow delivered at communist elements by the Labour Party congress at Liverpool") to 24 December 1925 ("Shark menace"). Included also are precise descriptions of local weather conditions, which suggest strongly that this chronology was prepared as background material for a novel, though the lack of any date of compilation leaves this conjectural. Specific historical details as well as catch-phrases from the press abound. It is noted, for instance, that Miss Margaret Bandfield and Mr. Sidney Webb were 'eliminated' from the Labour Party because of their communist affiliations (3 Oct), and that the policy speech of Prime Minister Stanley Bruce in Dandenong singled out law and order as "the paramount issue of the campaign" (6 Oct). A day later the *Leader* branded communists "White Ants of Civilisation" and accused them of "Russianising Aus[tralian] Policy," comments which are counterbalanced by a passage quoted from "the official organ" of the CPA: "Imperialism's Mailed Fist. The present world-wide crisis in the Br. mercantile marine constitutes a mighty blow to the much-vaunted supremacy of Br. shipping interests and marks a definite step in the growing militancy of the Br. working class [which] is pointing to the dismemberment of the 'Robber Empire.'" Reportedly this will usher in "a period of intensive class warfare." This material, in brief, is apparently drawn from sources similar to those which feature in the genesis of *House of All Nations*.

Once again, Stead decided against sensational or more obviously "interesting faits-divers" in favour of a single, low-key scene in the local Communist Hall: a location and incident that arguably pinpointed the predicament of CPA. For whereas the rest of the communist world had demonstrated solidarity, its endlessly bickering Australian section had initially been reluctant to support the striking mariners. Only the strenuous intercession of Guido Baracchi (the model for Fulke Folliot) had managed to coax the sole concession of "allowing the indigent victims to bunk down in the Communist Hall" (Macintyre 97). Stead implicitly recalls this debacle when she has Baracchi's fictional counterpart deliver an address attacking Mr. Wellborn (Prime Minister Bruce) in

the same venue. There striking seamen form the bulk of his audience, while "round the wall some of the seamen were already sleeping, with their coats under their heads, and bits of blankets and variegated rags over them" (172). Even though his talk is too abstract for them, "at the end the seamen applauded respectfully" (174). The ensuing speech by Whiteaway about "practical things," however, elicits warm enthusiasm, well-intentioned if "clumsily phrased" questions, and "some applauded him every two or three words, like pepper-shot" (174). These strikers are neither the wild 'Reds' painted by right-wing propaganda, nor idealized representatives of the heroic proletariat, but another group of "poor men" with genuine grievances, needs and a willingness to endure hardship in pursuit of justice: "They were the very tail of the workers, ignorant, wretchedly paid, put-upon and misled, and now, owing to the strike, almost starving" (174). Afterwards Winter, the quintessential Marxist-Leninist, articulates key issues raised by the strike: "What did Comrade Lenin think would be the immediate Labour history of Australia? How would the traditional Trades Union movement develop here? Would we continue to be betrayed by the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party]?" (174–75). Although designated "serious questions," they draw forth no immediate response, so that the reader is implicitly left to seek answers for them in the novel itself.

The year chosen, 1925, in itself provides a partial response as well as a strong indication of Stead's unspoken concerns in composing this work. Australia, long regarded as the working-man's paradise, had not proven fertile ground for Moscow's allies and agents. Its pioneering social legislation and the precocious, world-leading success of the PLP had produced an unusually durable belief that bosses and workers could cooperate for their own and the nation's benefit, and that therefore reformist or evolutionary channels were preferable to revolutionary action. The result, according to Lenin in a *Pravda* essay of 1913, was "a peculiar capitalist country" (Churchward 243). There workers' movements had achieved some notable successes; nevertheless, nascent capitalism was little threatened by allegedly socialist regimes, and political labels were frequently misleading. Conservatives routinely masqueraded as liberals, and Australian Labour politicians and union officials were "everywhere

most moderate and 'capital-serving'" (Churchward 243). Lenin's verdict had lost little of its relevance in 1925—or even a decade later. Certainly an organized communist movement had existed since 1920, but it had had little impact on traditional political alignments. Instead its history was a series of mishaps, marked by debilitating splits, rejection or "betray[al] by the P.L.P.," and miniscule membership.[15] In 1925 it had a mere "40 active members scattered along the eastern seaboard from the wilds of Queensland to Melbourne" (Macintyre 98). Nevertheless, the CPA decided to defy the ruling Nationalist Party's Red-baiting and stand six independent candidates in the New South Wales state election that year. The ballot results were deeply humiliating. The most popular candidate received "just 317 votes," a less fortunate aspirant quipped sacrilegiously of his tally: "Sixteen brother—four more than Christ had to start with" (Macintyre 95–6). By 1925 the CPA had comprehensively failed to provide a viable alternative to the Labour Party and was in abysmal disarray: its prospects could hardly have been bleaker. This was its nadir and fully justified the decision of fictional Baruch, and Stead in 1928, to seek to further their political education overseas.

The seamen's strike highlighted these problems, and how out of step the party was with the international movement. In 1924 the Executive Committee of the Comintern had adjudged the CPA one of its weakest sections and again chastised it for meagre reporting and dearth of membership, as well as for lack of initiative and overall lifelessness. These failings were glaringly obvious in 1925. The Australian branch, as usual, seemed driven by personal or obscure motives, as well as unable to succour the destined shapers of history—a situation which Stead deftly encapsulates through a passing encounter in the offices of the *International Worker*:

> A visitor took off his hat and sat down on the one chair in the waiting-room. He stared fixedly at the banners standing against the wall, spelling out each letter as if he could not read. They were the placards recently used in a procession of striking seamen. When he had finished with the banners the visitor found obscure names in the map of Australia on the wall

> and fidgeted. Catherine Baguenault loitered about the corridor and peeped into the room from to time with affection. She had made up the banners and printed them by hand. (128)

Fulke then appears, converses animatedly with Catherine, and "dismissed the visitor in a word" (129), to turn again to his gifted female comrade. As in this vignette, much of antipodean socialism was in the hands of renegade bourgeoisie, detached from and largely ignorant of the workers' actual condition. The fervently crafted banners, like Fulke's address, are difficult for their intended audience to grasp: what, the office props implicitly ask, is the relation of ringing communist slogans to Australia? Nor, as Stead repeatedly shows, is this land likely to nurture staunch, dedicated cadres. Instead, without adequate leadership and inspiring models, the capacity of youth for self-sacrifice is warped, its energies exhausted in largely futile deeds. Withdrawal, not commitment, ends the fictional trajectories of these "poor men." Michael plunges into the sea, not the cause of the proletariat. Joseph withdraws to constraining domesticity, Catherine to an asylum, Baruch to the utopian promise held out by America, the Folliots to their inherited wealth. How, the novel covertly asks, is the dawning class consciousness they represent to make a meaningful contribution to the Communist International?

This singular failure, in turn, contributes to widespread feelings of crippling, amorphous dread and suffocating entrapment. References to probing and questing abound, which climax in Blount's ringing "Why are we here?" (309). This open-endedness is reiterated when Winter and his peers are cast as investigators of the strange notes emanating from a tree, or the efforts remembered of those who constructed an amphitheatre "at Cremorne to await the second coming" (313–14). Also Michael Baguenault's attempts to pierce the veils of actuality are part of a timeless human endeavour, stretching back to the dawn of human settlement on *terra australis*, which "saw the medicine man and feathered dancer challenge the unseen" (313), through to the work of Michael's biological father as an astronomer. Yet a keen, countervailing awareness of the ultimate nullity of individual endeavours is underscored by recurring images of a vast, cosmic web or, more terrifyingly, of a gigantic,

preternatural adversary, imagined variously as "the malign and bitter genius of this land" (309), or an "iron-browed prognathous monster … 'Disorder, Lord of earth'" (304). Where then should the baffled quester turn? Instinctively Joseph's thoughts move from the confusion caused by the serried parables in the final chapter to exemplary Winter, who "in gaol thought of the state of the workers—something easy to think about and understand" (304–5). Expansive-minded Baruch registers a similar need: "If I don't forget all this at once, I won't sleep to-night. I have to think of sane, material things all the time, or I see blue devils" (304). Communists, Baruch stresses, "have no illusions about how you get things done—practical men" (285). And earlier he urges Catherine to "Go abroad … Get a real cause to fight about" (150). Her current activities are adjudged flamboyant posturing, the Folliots rightly dismissed as sentimental opportunists. "What is all this knocking your head against suburban brick walls" when, "a born soldier," she could be of "the young guard of the proletariat" (150). Thus socialism does not seek to answer all mankind's timeless questions concerning the cosmos, but it should offer a concrete program for regenerative action in the temporal sphere. Locally, however, the party had shown itself to be incapable of providing clear guidance to either down-trodden, unlettered workers or to a reform-hungry, younger generation and so failed in its self-appointed task of making Australia far more than a scattering of insignificant, "obscure names" in the atlas of world-history.

Ultimately for Stead it is not deity, or more mundanely banking, that holds the key to the future of societies and the race as a whole, but history as worked out through the lives of individuals. Their primacy in shaping it is underscored in her first novel, where Catherine confides to feeling "I am history" (135), or a defeatist Joseph concludes : "History is at a standstill with me" (316). This vision of characters as the litmus test and shapers of their times remained a crucial feature of her fiction during the "battle years" of the 1930s. Then Stead answered her own call in "The Writers Take Sides" for a committed literature with novels that were highly critical of existing conditions, as well as illustrative of the predictive power of Marxism. In them authorial omnipotence, wedded to retrospective subject matter, is used to underscore the rela-

tive merits of conflicting ideologies and to confirm, subtly but didactically, a Marxist-Leninist reading of social history, such as Alphéndery presents. Writing about the recent past enabled Stead, in effect, to hedge on destiny with overwhelming "insider's knowledge"—though strictly for ideological gain. In her first novel only doctrinaire Winter maintains that social upheaval is imminent: "Terra Felix Australis, this waste and sleepin' land, this lazy dago land, whose volcanoes died and whose rivers dried up millenniums ago, is on the edge of a social volcano" (169–70). His passionate outburst, as ensuing exchanges with Joseph show, is based more on the belief that this must be the inevitable outcome of capitalist injustice here ("Because 'their Whitehall' is breakin' the sheep's back" [170]), whereas the majority still think that "destiny can be supplicated" (315). Yet prescient Baruch, well before the Wall Street crash, predicts that the present system may last at best ten to fifteen years, while many instances of kindled social consciousness attest to growing unrest among "poor men." Later, in *House of all Nations*, society is no longer viewed "from below" but from the offices of those actually shaping economic conditions, and the crucial setting of 1931–32 captures an essentially chaotic, lawless society, poised at a historical turning-point. Here, as Alphéndery remarks, scandals and individual excess are "in reality … indices" (543) or, as Lukacs demanded, "typical" as well as instructive (*Historical Novel* 342). For Stead, in short, there was history enough in the epochal present, as well as rich promise. Capitalists may have, as Adam Constant observes, "art, learning, science," refinement on their side. "We have," he adds with scarcely concealed Marxist triumphalism, "nothing but history" (36).

Notes

1 This, for instance, was a reprehensible attribute of Sam Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children* and her own father, David Stead, of whom she wrote in "A Waker and Dreamer": "He hated us learning history at school, because it was a record of old European villainy and bloodshed; he gave the French no credit for their enlightenment or struggles for liberty; and he disliked Pasteur, perhaps because Pasteur thought wine good" (*Ocean* 485). Similarly, she treated with derision Virginia Woolf for having "no notion of history—'there is no reason why a thing should happen at one time rather than another,' she said; and blamed the troubles

of the world 'on the beastly masculine,'" as well as for writing self-indulgent rather than engaged fiction at a time "when the rise of Hitler was understood by everyone" (Geering 421)—an error no doubt avoided by this reviewer of Quentin Bell's biography of Woolf.

2 The centrality of Marxist ideology and radical politics to her *oeuvre* has, of course, been intermittently underscored, beginning with Yglesias's highly suggestive review of the reissued *Man Who Loved Children*. Significant subsequent explorations include those by Arac, Rowley ("Politics"), Sturm, Wilding and Yelin, while more recently Ackland, Cowden and Rooney have underscored the urgent need for a reappraisal of Stead's Marxism and its putative impact on her fiction.

3 The role of satire in her work has of course attracted attention, most notably in Pender and Blake, but even then emphasis is placed on Stead as a critic of contemporary decadence and the foibles of her time.

4 In addition, as Rowley points out, the period of American life that Stead knew firsthand, by a happy coincidence, afforded many topical resemblances: Roosevelt's reformist government, which Sam Pollit so admires, recalling "in many ways" the state socialism practised earlier in the century by the New South Wales Labour government, and enthusiastically supported by David Stead (*Biography* 261–2).

5 Blake, however, was drawn to these periods because of their potential contemporary application. He observed numerous parallels, for example, between the American Civil War and the 1930s and 1940s, as "Lincoln 1942" demonstrates, while the Czarist dynasty presumably made inevitable, in his eyes, the Bolshevik revolution and Soviet Russia, although the manuscript of this novel, on which he worked after the Second World War, has apparently not survived.

6 No suggestion of direct influence is intended here. Stead's first books appeared shortly before Lukacs began work on his classical study in 1936–37, so that presumably they were unknown to him, while she almost certainly only learnt of the Hungarian's work after the Second World War.

7 Here naive is being used in the dual sense of simplistic and, with a Schiller-indebted inflection, as not meditated or reflected on.

8 Public debate was also fired by the issue of war debts, both Germany's mandated reparation payments and France's contractual obligations to American finance and industry for war-time assistance—--neither of which was fulfilled.

9 In addition, a "police official charged with the investigation was found dead on a railway line, tied up and poisoned" (Cobban 141).

10 Shirer's is the most circumstantial account (195–201), but the number of casualties varies according to the historian consulted. Referring only to the protestors, for instance, Goubert claims 'fifteen dead and hundreds wounded' (288), while Bury states that 'fourteen rioters were killed and over 600 injured' (259).

11 According to the party's leader and future president, Léon Blum, 'these riots indicated a definite plot on the part of the Right to overthrow the Republic' (Bury 267).

12 Certainly she shared with one of her characters the desire to "leave … on record … the waste, the insane freaks of these money men" (58), which she herself had witnessed at Peter Neidecker's Travelers' Bank in Paris. But the resulting 780-page opus arguably targets its fictional counterpart, the "Banque Mercure," as a metonym for a hopelessly corrupt system and reflects the significant role of banking and international finance in communist theorizing.

13 These issues would have been raised inevitably as the manuscript grew from being presumably primarily an account of one man's unfortunate life, entitled "Death in the Antipodes," to a broader social canvas that required considerable rethinking and reworking at a time when she was intensively reading classics of Marxist literature (Rowley, *Biography* 128–37).

14 The term "Moonshine" is apparently inspired by one of the last entries of this document which reads: "Mr Lazzarine says pother about communists is 'moonshine and nonsense.' Poor attempt to throw dust (not bombs) in the eyes of the people" (Stead, "On Literature II").

15 For its first two years the local communist movement had been split by rival claimants to Moscow's imprimatur, the former Socialist Party based at Sussex Street and the new creation with its headquarters at Liverpool Street in Sydney. The achievement of unity at the behest of the Communist International (Comintern) left rancor and deep divisions, which were exacerbated when CPA members were denied membership of the state and federal Australian Labour Party, itself the parliamentary wing of the trade union movement.

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