



# Shelf Life

Reviews, Replies and Reminiscences

## C.K. Stead

*What ghost was being appeased? What wrong was being righted or sin atoned for? I didn't know. It was all, this writing business – and had been since it first began when I was still at school – mysterious, possibly even neurotic. I knew only that for a moment the world which 'out there' seemed so imperfect, so 'fallen', so much less than the heart desired, 'in here' had been called to order.*

Every morning for the last thirty years, C. K. Stead has written fiction and poetry. *ShelfLife* collects the best of his afternoon work: reviews and essays, letters and diaries, lectures and opinion pieces. In this latest collection, a sequel to the successful *Answering to the Language*, *The Writer at Work*, and *Book Self*, Stead takes the reader through nine essays in 'the Mansfield file', collects works of criticism and review in 'book talk', writes in the 'first person' about everything from David Bain to Parnell, and finally offers some recent reflections on poetic laurels from his time as New Zealand poet laureate. Throughout, Stead is vintage Stead: clear, direct, intelligent, decisive, personal.

**C. K. Stead** was born in Auckland in 1932. From the late 1950s, he began to earn an international reputation as a poet and literary critic and, later, as a novelist. He has published more than 40 books and received numerous prizes and honours recognising his contribution to literature, including in 2009 the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction and the Montana New Zealand Book Award (Reference and Anthology) for his *Collected Poems* and in 2010 the *Sunday Times* EFG Private Bank Short Story Award and the Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine. He received our highest award, the Order of New Zealand, in 2007, and he is the New Zealand poet laureate for 2015–2017.



# Contents

## Introduction: Afternoon Work

### 1. The Mansfield File

Meetings with 'The Great Ghost'  
Katherine Mansfield and the  
Fictions of Continental Europe  
First Person as Third Person:  
Mansfield's Married Man  
Tom & Viv and Murry &  
Mansfield  
A Note on Larkin and Mansfield  
Janet Bites the Hand . . .  
Margaret Scott, 1928–2014  
Some Railway Journeys in New  
Zealand Literature  
The Murry–Mansfield Muddle

### 2. Book Talk: Sixteen Reviews

An Important Modern Critic  
Kiwi Kevin  
Roddick is Back – A Celebration  
Virginia Woolf's Nightmare  
Colm Tóibín's Mary  
Not Part of the Entertainment  
Industry  
Golding's Booker  
Author Obsession  
The Man who Wished to be Other  
'Moss'  
'Sleeplessness, disquiet, ardour' –  
Zbigniew Herbert's Grand  
Claim  
T. S. Eliot as Letter-writer  
The Trophy Husband  
The Sky is Falling  
Drawn to the Green Light

### 3. First Person

My First Book/s  
Comprehensive: The Lawrence  
Jones Interview  
My Parnell  
Dear Chris  
One Thing Leads to Another  
Sylvia and her Editor  
Why Catullus?  
Poetry: Formalists and Freedom  
Fighters  
Small Talk Questions  
The Case of David Bain  
A Talented Transient  
The Takahē Interview  
World War I – Close Up from a  
Distance  
Hawke's Bay Answers  
At the Molino a Sesta, Gaiole in  
Chianti  
'Yes T.S.'  
What's Going On Here?  
Twelve Questions  
Only Connect . . .

### 4. The Laureate Reflects

Allen Curnow – 'Poet Laureate'?  
Irish Poets and Poetry  
Ezra Pound: One to Be Reckoned  
With  
'Taddeo Grande' – Ted Hughes  
W.B., T.S. and W.H. – 'our clients  
at least can rune'

## Meetings with ‘The Great Ghost’

My awareness of Katherine Mansfield began even before I'd read her. When I was at primary school during the Second World War there was a series of cards, ‘Great New Zealanders’, which came with the breakfast cereal Weet-Bix, and I still remember some of them. The great New Zealand scientist was (of course) Ernest Rutherford, the great athlete was Jack Lovelock, the All Black George Nepia, the tennis player Anthony Wilding, the statesman ‘King Dick’ Seddon, the soldier ‘Tiny’ Freyberg, the opera singer Oscar Natzke, the Maori leader Sir Peter Buck, and the writer Katherine Mansfield. There were others, but if my memory is right there was just one in each category. I'm sure Mansfield would have been chosen for one reason only – not because in New Zealand she was much read outside the literary community, but because she was known to have ‘made it overseas’. These were still (though I would soon be resenting and rejecting the description) colonial times – but

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A keynote address to an international conference on Katherine Mansfield held at Birkbeck College, University of London, in September 2008.

the Dominion (as it then was) was striving to shake itself loose, to see itself as an independent nation. What better measure (ordinary New Zealanders would have asked) that we were a nation in our own right than that some of ours could measure up against those of the homeland; could succeed and shine there?

Here, then, we have Mansfield figuring possibly as inspiration, possibly as burden; and the burden aspect, I'm sure, explains the irritation in the voice of Allen Curnow in the only spoken comment I recall him making on her. He and Denis Glover and I were on a literary panel in Auckland and her name came up. Curnow's response was to recall 'some fool' in the Christchurch of his youth writing that she was 'the only peacock in New Zealand's literary garden'. I interjected 'peahen', which Denis capped with 'Piha'; and if more was said I've forgotten it.

The undertone of irritation with Mansfield around this time among New Zealand writers trying to establish an indigenous literature was quite strong. Curnow, dismissing what he calls the 'awful archness' of Robin Hyde's lines on Mansfield, adds a gratuitous footnote quoting Geoffrey de Montalk on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Denis Glover disparages her as 'prissy' and says he gave up reading her long ago.<sup>2</sup> And Frank Sargeson warns the young Vincent O'Sullivan not to 'spend his life on the dreams of a Karori schoolgirl'.<sup>3</sup>

For myself, reading Mansfield began at secondary school and university. It was random, intermittent, the stories only (no letters or journals), and quite unrelated to formal courses. She was not 'taught', nor was 'New Zealand literature', but I was very conscious of her, and admiring – especially of a quality I would much later describe as 'an indefinable, all-pervasive freshness in her writing, as if each sentence had been struck off first thing on a brilliant morning'.

I think I was also soon aware that if you read more than a few stories you were likely to come upon some in which the wonderful sensibility deliquesced into mush, the sharp eye missed its target, the trick-cyclist fell off her bike. But these were only impressions, and

I never gave Mansfield focused critical attention until 1972 when, at the age of 39, I was awarded the (as it then was) Winn-Manson Menton Fellowship – so named to commemorate its primary benefactor, Sheilah Winn, its founders, Celia and Cecil Manson, and the French town that honoured Mansfield with a memorial. By that time I was Professor of English at Auckland, my special field being twentieth-century Modernist poetry and criticism.

Before I come to that, however, I want to say a word more about Mansfield's reputation in New Zealand when I was young. The two men who influenced me most, and encouraged me as a poet during my student years, were Frank Sargeson and Allen Curnow. Curnow was my teacher at the university, Sargeson my literary friend and mentor outside it. I never heard either of them say much about Mansfield. There was the irritable Curnow remark about the peacock in our literary garden; and I do remember Frank once, in conversation, saying of something of hers I had admired that, 'Yes, OK, it was good', but it was *'the kind of thing women can do'*. This rather odd idea (odd enough for the remark to stick in my memory) was one he had once tried to elevate into a critical principle, though I didn't know that until it appeared posthumously in a selection of his critical pieces.<sup>4</sup>

It was a radio talk he gave in 1948. His argument is that as a fiction writer Mansfield is 'in the *feminine* tradition'; and he hastens to add that this is not just another way of saying she's a woman. Others he lists as belonging to this tradition are Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen and E. M. Forster, all of whom he admires. But then he adds, seeming to contradict himself, that 'the feminine tradition is the *minor* tradition'. The tendency that characterises it is concern 'with the part rather than the whole – in other words a tendency to make your story depend for its effectiveness on isolated details and moments of life'. A writer of Jane Austen's stature can get away with it; but fiction of this kind, when it fails, fails very badly, 'because everything is so very tenuous – everything is, as it were, hanging by the finest of threads'.<sup>5</sup>



## Hawke's Bay Answers

**Q:** *Why, as an English literature student, was I of the impression you were the grumpy old man of New Zealand literature?*

**C. K. Stead:** I'm certainly old now. Was I already old when you were a student? But I imagine you're more interested in 'grumpy'. Over the years I have been involved in some literary and political debates and have argued quite fiercely, and with a clarity that people sometimes find alarming. No masking of the intent or gilding of the lily. But I have wondered occasionally whether this reputation has to do partly with my bony face and the tendency my mouth has to pull down at the corners whenever a camera is pointed at me. I would have to say that anyone who has this impression hasn't looked very closely at my work, or known me personally. The author of *All Visitors Ashore* 'grumpy'???

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These were my replies to questions sent by a local Hawke's Bay paper in March 2009, in advance of my appearance at a festival there.



**Q:** *If there was/is an undeclared war between C. K. Stead and the Kiwi literati, could this explain why you've yet to be crowned New Zealand Poet Laureate?*

**CKS:** How decisions are made on things like the Poet Laureateship, the PM's Awards, and the Montana Book Awards is as mysterious to me as it is to most people. Often they seem inexplicable. Maybe there is, as you suggest, an 'undeclared war'; but questions of this kind are an invitation to paranoia so I avoid giving them serious thought. On this subject, however, I should mention that an article in a recent *Metro* said that I had not been sufficiently acknowledged by my own city. This is quite wrong. I have received awards and honours from my old school, Mt Albert Grammar, and from my university (Auckland); I was made a Laureate of Waitakere City (on the basis of having a bach at Karekare), and in 2007 given Auckland City's annual Distinguished Citizen award.

**Q:** *A Victoria University professor once told me he found most contemporary New Zealand poetry overly introspective, 'too much naval gazing going on'. Is this a fair comment on modern New Zealand poetry?*

**CKS:** It's probably true of most poetry everywhere, always – which is only a way of saying that poetry is extremely difficult to do well, and that using it as a vehicle for therapy or a form of self-medication is just one of many traps everyone who tries to write it has to look out for and guard against.

**Q:** *Who's your most admired New Zealand woman writer? Why?*

**CKS:** Living: Charlotte Grimshaw. (Well, she is my daughter. But she also has a huge talent.) Elizabeth Knox – for the quality of

the writing rather than for where her imagination takes her. Keri Hulme (when she's doing it). Michele Leggott.

**Dead:** Katherine Mansfield. She died young, but she not only wrote fiction, sparkling with intelligence and insight, which took the art of the short story in English forward to a new level; she also left such a treasure trove of letters and journals – a wonderful record of the writer at work. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame . . . Really it makes more sense to ask about admired books than admired writers, because they're all so uneven (as writers always and everywhere are) and have highs and lows.

**Q:** *Were you ever one of the famous literary drinkers?*

**CKS:** No, but I've known some of them.

**Q:** *In your book *The Writer at Work*, you wrote that your sense of what is local in writing is something always fitted into a larger picture. What do you mean by this?*

**CKS:** The local is very important, especially in poetry. But I think there should be consciousness, somewhere implicit in the work, of a larger world – of history, of literature at large, of politics – otherwise the work is provincial.

**Q:** *An ex-editor once told me the idea of writing schools is absurd, i.e., that you can't teach someone to write creatively. Thoughts?*

**CKS:** I agree on the whole, though I did run a Creative Writing course at the University of Auckland in my last three years there – 1984–86. But I think there is much more for a writer to learn about writing by studying great literature than by attending writing classes.

**Q:** *You once agreed that all art aspires to the condition of music. It struck me as a brave stance by a staunch man of letters . . .*

**CKS:** I think this is a way of saying that literature doesn't succeed or fail by what it means, but by being a work of art. It has meaning of course. But what makes it a poem or a story or a novel is the art of poetry or of fiction, which depends as much on shape, structure, sound, mellifluousness, tone, grace – and so on. In other words it is *like* music: this is more a metaphor than a statement of literal truth.

**Q:** *During his visit last year, Irish poet Paul Muldoon said 'poets dis-improve as they get older'. Do you know what he's saying / is this the same for C. K. Stead?*

**CKS:** There is a freshness and vividness of feeling that is lost, I suppose. But I feel more that there's a loss of self-consciousness, and consequently a freeing up, a greater ease. I find as I get older that poetry comes more readily, not less. But I do admire Muldoon, and respect anything he has to say on the subject.

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