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ROCKDALE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL



PRICE 5 c .

# ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

1/46 Oatley Avenue,  
OATLEY. 2223.  
November, 1977.

Dear Friend and Member,

The regular meeting will be held as follows:

Date: Friday evening, November, 25th, 1977 at 8.00 p.m.

Place: Council Chamber, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

Business: General.

Syllabus Item: Dr. Mira will give an illustrated talk entitled:-

"Badges and Medals as Milestones in Papua New Guinea Independence."

Supper Roster: Captain: Miss Callister, & Mesdames Preddy, Farrar & Barrack.

Ladies please bring a plate.

Mr. A. Ellis,

President.

Phone: 587.1159

Miss A. Lang,

Secretary.

Phone 57.2608

Mrs. B. Perkins,

Publicity Officer.

Mrs. E. Wright

Treas. & Social Sec.

Phone 599.4884

Phone 587 9164

Mr. A. Ellis,

Research Officer.

Phone 587.1159.

Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other.

Franklin.

Many of our Members are on the sick list. We are sorry to hear this, and trust that you will all be well again soon.

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Books numbered 1 to 6 should soon be available again at a reasonable price.

Also available (by the same Author)

Book 7. "The Early History/Tempe & the Black Creek Valley."

Contact Asst. Secretary 'Phone 59.8078  
OR Miss Otten 'Phone 59.4259 (after 8 p.m.)

Society Badges are available - \$1.00 each. (See Mrs. Wright).

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Miss Otton, Curator of 'Lydham Hall', is in need of Ladies and/or Gentlemen to assist with the week-end roster. Visitors come from far and wide to see this lovely old Home, and your presence would greatly facilitate the inspections. Ring Miss Otton, Phone '59.4259, your call will be appreciated.

There is now a large glass display case upstairs in Lydham Hall. At present it contains a few souvenirs from the various wars. Can you help to enlarge this display by exhibiting some of the war relics which you might have? These will be greatly appreciated, and good care taken of any souvenirs which you might care to loan or perhaps donate. Ring Miss Otton 59.4259.

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NOTE TO MEMBERS.

Please advise Secretary ('phone 57.2608 - after 6 p.m.) of any change of address - this will save disappointment when your Bulletin is posted to you.

SOCIAL.

An outing has been arranged for November 26th to the Lane Cove National Park, including "a River Trip" on the "Paddle Wheeler", lunch will be in the National Park following the River Trip (bring your own eats etc.)

Time: 9.00 a.m. sharp.  
Meeting Place: Rockdale Town Hall  
Cost: \$2.75 per person.  
Date: 26th November, 1977.

Ring Mrs. Wright - 599.4884, for details of social activities.

Special Note. November Meeting will be Friday, November 25th - usual time and place.

" " December Meeting will be Thursday, 15th December, - same time and place - Supper in annexe of Town Hall.

Ladies provide a Christmas Plate, please.

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CHRISTINA STEAD - Authoress.

The following three articles are reproduced because of their interest and the fact that Christina Stead was born and educated in the St. George District. Her brother Jack, was President of the St. George Historical Society for twelve months, 1971-72.

- *Bromwyn Perkins*  
*Publicity Officer.*

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RANKED with the immortals ... CHRISTINA STEAD.

- *Kay Keavney - Reprinted with kind permission of The Australian Women's Weekly. November 17, 1976.*

If you saw her in the streets of the Sydney suburb of Hurstville, you'd hardly give the elderly woman a second glance. You might notice her firm walker's stride and erect back. You'd never guess, though, that this was Christina Stead, whose life and works your descendants might be studying a century from now.

Overseas where she lived, loved, adventured and wrote for nearly 50 years, they compare her with the immortals: George Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Proust. Few writers, let alone Australians, have been so praised in their own lifetime as this 74 year-old widow.

And none was ever harder to interview!

She's courteous, urbane, articulate (in several languages) but even pricklier about privacy than her friend and admirer, Nobel Prize-winner, Patrick White. As she said in her deep voice: "All I'm interested in is the work."

This interview was a rare privilege. She'd granted few since she came home to live in a specially built-on wing of her union-official brother's house in Hurstville. And she'd block with a straight bat the minute you got too personal. Example - I ask about William Blech, brilliant, colourful, cosmopolitan, the banker, writer (as William Blake) and confirmed radical, her first boss when she reached London.

They had a marvellous love story - he and the half-starved girl from Sydney who typed his letters by day, and by night, in a drear London bedsitter, wrote her first book because she thought she was dying and had things to express. The last thing on her mind was publication. Her boss managed to read it, saw "mountain peaks" in it. They got married in Paris. They were lovers and boon companions

till he died nearly 40 years later.

I say, "You must have vivid memories of the first time you saw him?" She says, "Very." My pen poises expectantly. "But" she adds pleasantly, "I'm not going to tell you what they are." End of subject. Fair enough though. She *has* told us in "the work" where Teresa and James Quick meet in "For Love Alone", my favourite of her dozen or so books. All were torn out of experience, direct or indirect. ("People tell writers everything.") transmuted by creative genius. She never did think about publication. ("I write because I can.")

She wrote straight on to the same typewriter for 30 years, toting it round Europe and the US (even Hollywood, where she drew a nice salary without ever writing a screenplay, and absorbed material for her book on the McCarthy era, "I'm Dying Laughing.") She wrote anywhere, in hotel rooms or on kitchen tables, while William pounded away on another machine in another room.

She might never have published but for William. But even he never saw a line till a book was finished. The books just dribbled into print, sometimes decades after she wrote them. Even now, she has "works" thrust heedlessly away in trunks.

Anyway, in all essentials she's Teresa, just as she's Louisa Pollit in "The Man Who Loved Children," her acknowledged masterpiece.

US literary pundit Randall Jarrell wrote of it: "It seems to me plainly as good as 'War and Peace' or 'Crime and Punishment'." American poet Robert Lowell called it "a classic, a big black diamond of a book." "In a manner of speaking," she admitted, "the Pollits are my family." "Time" magazine called the Pollit father "a champion male chauvinist boar". Christina's father was a brilliant self-made marine biologist, a socialist (she still is). She was his eldest, born in Rockdale, N.S.W.

He married again after her mother died, and produced a big second family. Christina loved them, but, crushing dreams of becoming a writer, had to drudge for them. The family was poor ("I knew only poor people.") She was 26 before she got away. She saved in secret, with travel the lodestar. A teacher, she became a secretary for the extra money. "It took me six years," she said. Her endurance was incredible. She walked from her Rockdale home to her city job, and literally starved herself. She even worked on the boat that took her to England, nursing an alcoholic. When she landed she was so weak she feared she was dying.

But she went job hunting. She had to. And met William Blech. Very soon the arid years were over. The future was rich, though the Blechs never were.

"He was widely considered a financial genius", she said, "But he was too honest and good-natured to make fortunes for himself.

He had a gift for friendship and wonderful talk. We moved around a great deal, always entering the life of the particular country. I never cared where I lived, so long as I was with him. And he felt the same."

She only wrote when an idea beset her. ("Ideas grow inside you like pinetrees. Some grow bigger than others.") For long periods, she wouldn't write at all. At white heat, it was sometimes 20,000 words a day. She never re-read a book when it was finished. Slowly, but awesomely her reputation grew.

In 1967, she was put up by Australia for the \$10,000 Encyclopaedia Britannica Award - and rejected, on the grounds that she'd ceased to be Australian. "Ironically," she said, "we always wanted to come here, but the problem was money. When William was ill (he died in 1968) he wanted to bring me back to my family." William grew too ill to read her still-unpublished "I'm Dying Laughing". She read it aloud to him. When he died, the springs dried up. She lived on alone in England, which she never liked. ("I think it's the Thames clay. It gets into everything. A country needs a hardrock base, like Australia's.")

At first for brief visits, now permanently, she did come home to the city (now greatly changed) which she evoked and preserved so perfectly in "Seven Poor Men of Sydney".

Is she writing again? "Nothing at the moment", she said, closing up. "I changed countries and that cut me off quite a bit." She stood up. I risked one more very personal question: Does she regret not having children? "No", she said after thought and smiled, "The books are the children."

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PORTRAIT OF A PRIVATE WRITER -

- *Jill Sykes*  
*Sydney Morning Herald*  
*17th June 1976.*

*Christina Stead hates her surname. As a child, she used to be teased with the name bed-stead - little knowing that Stead was to stay with her for the rest of her life, despite her marriage to the writer, William Blake.*

For it was her maiden name that she used for her first book, and the 12 that followed it. Yet another, 'Miss Herbert - The Suburban Wife', is being published in New York this month.

As long ago as 1938, she was profiled in Time magazine: "Tall, stark-faced Christina Stead is an unusual novelist with an unusual background... a third-generation Australian, the oldest

daughter of an ichthyologist, she began her business career in Sydney..." The name that is still an ache of childhood pain became famous around the world. Even in Australia.

Ironically, predictably, her homeland was the last to know. She was born in 1902 and writing at a time when you had to be published overseas before an Australian publisher wanted to hear about you.

For 40 years she lived overseas, absorbing her surroundings in London, Paris and New York, writing about them - and being published with increasing enthusiasm. Her best-known books are probably 'The Man Who Loved Children', 'Seven Poor Men of Sydney' and 'The Little Hotel'.

Hortense Calisher wrote in The New York Times last year: "No wonder her work has reminded many of Tolstoy, Ibsen and Joyce - any tag to signify that the reader is offered breadth of vision and honest depth of enjoyment, with neither sacrificed to the other." Not that she is interested in the publicity. Christina Stead must rank with Patrick White as one of the most private writers in the world.

She agreed without hesitation to my request for an interview in connection with her appointment as a writer in residence at Newcastle University, beginning last week. But I feel almost guilty in reporting our rambling, enjoyable chat which was punctuated with her shy denials of fame and fortune.

Discussion of her books was out. "After I have written a book, it's goodbye," she said. People may ask her, as I did, about her motives in creating characters like Letty Fox, the liberated New York girl of the forties. She didn't have any, she says. She was simply describing a typical product of that environment. Any foreshadowing of women's liberation was purely accidental. "When I write, I am not trying to do anything to anybody, not to help anybody or broaden anybody. I write because I can."

Publication itself is apparently an incidental. Unprompted, her youngest brother Gilbert, an official with the AMWU, told me more about her in 10 minutes than she did in an hour. He is fiercely proud of her. It was he who told me she sometimes had a story or a book put away in a drawer for years before she got around to offering it to a publisher.

Conversation with the writer herself came in fragments. Her understatement was nerve-wracking: I kept having to remember I wasn't talking my way under the barricades and into the smoking Strand Arcade. This was a time for subtlety and gentility, though occasional rapier thrusts seemed permissible if done in style.

We talked about Canberra, which she loves for its altitude and fresh air; Australian wildlife, which she has observed with delight;

housework, which she dislikes although it was once listed as one of her hobbies - "I never said I liked housework, it must have been a friendly male journalist who thought I should;" women's liberation, which she sees as a century-long struggle; the rebirth of interest in living a simple life; and the sun, which she referred to as "he."

She said that she always rose with the sun, a habit she had picked up as a child when she was brought up in the country. Where was that? Hurstville. It was all green acres then, she explained. Nothing like the banks of houses that surround her now in the same suburb, where she settled nearly two years ago in a flat attached to her brother Gilbert's place.

The young Christina grew up with an echidna as a pet. "Having a naturalist for a father, we didn't have dogs or cats like other children. We had a duck, too, which used to eat the porridge that stuck to the bottom of the saucepan."

Leaving school, she went to Teachers' Training College, then learnt shorthand and typing because she thought it would be more useful if she was going to travel.

In 1928, unpublished, she sailed for Europe where she met the man who was to be her husband. They lived in Paris in the '30s, working in a bank. The financial world of her book, 'House of All Nations' was based on that time.

Her years in France indulged her love of languages - something she misses enormously in Australia, though she was delighted in the number of foreign tongues she heard here after being so long away. The composition of Australia had changed between 1928 and 1969. "Tant pis" she sighed as we bemoaned the old buildings that once made up Kings Cross.

But she is not one to dwell on the past. With a book set in England on the verge of publication, she is working on a novel about the McCarthy era in America, and another is slowly emerging from an Australian background. But the going has been slow since she returned, a widow, to Australia. "I was cut off from all that was my previous life," she said. She needs a web of close friends as a starting point for creativity. "Ideas come seeping into my head, and it takes some time to work these up. I have a couple of recipes that help". I read plays, because although I cannot write plays I find that the structure of the dialogue and its clarity helps me sort out my ideas."

And those ideas, triggered by her ever-sharp powers of observation, are still coming.

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CHRISTINA STEAD - Authoress.

- (Mrs) V W Long  
Reprinted from St. George Historical  
Society Bulletin - November 1966.

Christina Stead has won acclaim overseas as a great novelist. Recently her books were re-published after many years and book reviews praise her as "one of the most gifted authors this country has ever produced." Both England and America claim her as their own, as most of her working life has been spent overseas.

It is not generally known that Christina was born and educated in the St. George area. Christina lived at Bexley and attended the Bexley Public School and St. George Girls' High School.

David Stead was left a widower with a small daughter, Christina. He later married a Miss Gibbons from "Dapetto", the Gibbons family home in Wollongong Road, Arncliffe. He brought his second wife to his home "Lydham" in Bexley. Christina recalls that when a small child, she walked from "Lydham" to "Dapetto" (the Grandparents' home) to fetch fresh milk and unsalted butter for the little ones. "Dapetto" had its own cows, dairy and a milk maid.

Christina writes: "I was very young then, it was a long, long walk and I used to get very tired with the milk can. There was a dairy then at the junction of Wollongong Road with Forest Road, which ran right down into Stoney Creek. The dairy gradually declined. I don't know why. The people and cows lived in a few ramshackle sheds with faded whitewashing and were very poor. There were quite a number of people living about the District (which was very scattered) in very, very you might say up-country conditions, then. As a child I went to Bexley Public School which was at first a little old place of the real old penitentiary style of school building - though they changed it while I was there. The School often went on nature study expeditions down Stoney Creek and the gully beyond. The gully was quite fresh and lovely at times and quite bare of buildings."

The gully in those days was a paradise of native flowers and shrubs, lilli-pilli trees and weeping willows were entwined with wild clematis, sarsparilla and hardenbergia vines, wild bush orchids, bracken, maidenhair fern and violets are a few of the varieties which covered the banks of the gully.

When at St. George Girls' High School the pupils used to visit Brighton-le-Sands Baths. Christina remembered the water as being slimy and sometimes full of jelly-fish. She describes the Botany Bay mud as not very refreshing.

Her father, David Stead, belonged to many nature loving societies, and was a great walker and firmly believed in it. So Christina often accompanied him on these expeditions. She often walked from Bexley via Tom Ugly's to Cronulla. When holidaying at Cronulla, they



walked along the beaches to Kurnell. There were quicksands there then. They also walked around the surround districts.

Christina has been described as a very quiet, almost shy girl. Her school mates called her "Peggie".

David Stead was left a widower for the second time, with the responsibility of Christina and a young family. He married Miss Thecla Harris, a teacher of St. George Girls' High School and in 1916 the Estate was sold. The family moved to Watsons Bay. Christina was almost 14 years old and it was about this time she lost contact with the Bexley District. She became familiar with Watsons Bay and the Harbour area.

Quote:- "I used to live on the top of the highest climb from Arncliffe a mile or so away in Bexley, in a stone house called 'Lydham' which may still be there although I am sure it is now surrounded by brick villas, if it exists at all, for the last of the Estate, a few acres on top of the hill, was sold in sub-division when I was about 14, this was about 1916. This old house of big sandstone blocks, quarried from the bottom of the hill, was surrounded by old pines of good growth, which went downhill with the paddocks (there were three, they were what was sold in sub-division) and from our windows, verandahs and attics of course, we could see straight through the heads of Botany Bay, as well as clear away west to the Blue Mountains. It was a lovely situation."

Christina lived at Watsons Bay from 1916 to 1928. When 26 years of age she left for England and her career as a novelist began.

Her recently re-issued books are:

Seven Poor Men of Sydney  
Salzburg Tales  
For Love Alone  
The Man Who Loved Children.

She also wrote a book on Finance which amazed the Bankers and Professional men of that day. Amazement was expressed at a young woman showing such a knowledge and insight in finance.

Christina married C.S.Blake, an author whose novels include:

The Angel          The Copperhead          The World is Mine.

Christina Stead's early days in our district can be visualised by seeing her old home 'Lydham' & 'Dapetto' - the latter being the Salvation Army Girls' Home. Her description of her schooldays and the long walk with the milk can give a realistic picture to her life here at the turn of the century.

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