CHRISTINA STEAD appears on this month’s front cover, photographed in the 1970s. Born in Sydney in 1902, Stead lived most of her life abroad, as Professor Margaret Harris discusses in this month’s La Trobe University Essay: “‘Dearest Munx’: The Love Letters of Christina Stead”. Stead’s great novel The Man Who Loved Children appeared in 1940, but, as The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature notes: ‘Until 1965 none of Stead’s novels was published in Australia and her long absence and life of travel militated against her formal recognition here and elsewhere.’ In 1965 the influential American critic Randall Jarrell championed her work in his Introduction to a reprint of The Man Who Loved Children, now widely held to be a masterpiece of twentieth-century fiction.

The National Library of Australia holds a range of Stead’s papers, reflecting her passionate life, radical politics and extensive output. These include manuscript and typescript drafts of prose, and notes, background material and jottings relating to her numerous writings. Among them are the manuscript for an uncompleted novel, More Lives Than One, notes relating to For Love Alone, and The Man Who Loved Children, fragments of House of All Nations, and early versions of Letty Fox: Her Luck and Cotters’ England. There is also a wide range of correspondence, including that with her partner, William Blake. The Library also holds Stead’s diaries for Belgium, 1936; Switzerland and France, 1950–51; and for Paris, the USA, Spain, Belgium and London for the period 1929–40. Stead’s papers include a folder of portrait photographs taken between 1930 and 1982. The Stead papers were acquired in ten consignments between 1975 and 1999, and were recently supplemented by fifty letters between the author and her stepbrother David Stead. In addition to the above, various papers and correspondence relating to Stead’s life and work can be found within other holdings of the Library’s Manuscript Collection, including the papers of H.C. Coombs, Jack Lindsay, and Stead’s biographer Hazel Rowley.
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Margaret Harris, Professor in English Literature at the University of Sydney and Christina Stead’s literary executor, is preparing an edition of the letters between Christina Stead and William J. Blake. A version of this essay was presented at the conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature at James Cook University in July 2002.


David Hutchison is a Fremantle reviewer.


Sylvia Lawson’s latest book is *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia*, a collection of stories and essays.

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Patrick Wolfe is Victoria Research Fellow in the Europe–Australia Institute at Victoria University of Technology.
Dimitri Tsaloumas is the recipient of the latest Emeritus Award from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. The Award, valued at $40,000, is given ‘in recognition of an outstanding and lifelong contribution to Australian literature’.

The first issue of Blue Dog: Australian Poetry is now available. Ron Pretty, its managing editor, states in his editorial that Blue Dog is ‘in direct line of succession from Poetry Australia’. Mr Pretty is joined by six state and territory poetry editors. As well as publishing much new poetry, by writers such as Alex Skovron, Jennifer Harrison and Aileen Kelly, Blue Dog features a range of critical articles.

The Byron Bay Writers’ Festival is fast becoming one of the most desirable of the smaller festivals. This year it runs 1–4 August, with guests including Hilary McPhee (author of our ‘Commentary’ this month), Drusilla Modjeska and Bruce Courtenay.

Fullers Bookshop, in Hobart, has a full programme in coming months. Events include Martin Flanagan, who will talk about his new book In Sunshine or in Shadow on 22 August; Marilyn Lake, who will discuss her imminent biography of Faith Bandler on 8 September; and actor John Bell, who will be ‘performing from his autobiography’ on 15 November.

On 19 August, the ABR Forums will resume after a brief winter recess. Raimond Gaita, whose new book, The Philosopher’s Dog, has just been released, will be in conversation with Anne Manne. These Forums usually sell out, so please book early. (See page 19 for details.)

Radio National’s poetry programme, PoeticA, is now broadcast each Saturday at 3.05 p.m. Coming highlights include programmes on Nick Cave’s ‘dark love songs’ (3 August); Xanana Gusmao, East Timor’s first president, reading his own poetry (31 August); and Dorothy Porter, Anthony Lawrence and Phil Norton poetising about The Future (12 October).

Few books take more than three decades to complete, but that’s how long Ian Fry, a former lay preacher, agriculturist and journalist, laboured over Trouble in the Triangle, a massive two-volume study of the relationship between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. On 29 August, at Readings, Carlton, Ian Fry will discuss his timely work with Barry Jones.

ABR is always seeking new outlets, new readers — and new subscribers. They enable us to expand the magazine and to make a broader contribution to literary and cultural debates in this country. We are always looking for new ways of distributing the subscription flyer that accompanies this issue. Can you help us? Perhaps you know of schools, libraries, offices, conferences, university departments, professional bodies, writers’ organisations or historical societies that would be interested. Throughout August, anyone providing ABR with access to a mailing list for promotional purposes will be entitled to a one-year complimentary subscription to ABR (or a one-year extension if they already subscribe). Reading groups are also encouraged to participate, and will receive a complimentary reference book. Please contact the Editor, Peter Rose, on (03) 9429 6700.
Cairns as cultural curiosity

Dear Editor,

Gideon Haigh begins his review (ABR, June/July 2002) of my book, Keeper of the Faith: A Biography of Jim Cairns, with a childhood reminiscence about a letter he received from Cairns in 1975. Understandably, at the age of nine, what impressed Haigh about the letter was its style rather than its content. Yet, if his review is anything to go by, Haigh has never outgrown this preference for style over substance. Self-indulgent and plain silly, he not only does the book an injustice, but undertakes an even greater disservice to Cairns.

Two examples of Haigh’s silliness will suffice. He contends that the book consists of ‘endless slabs of quotes from press reports’, apparently blind to its extensive range of sources, including archival records and interviews (some thirty interviews with Cairns alone). Indeed, breadth of research was one reason the Australian Historical Association and the National Centenary of Federation judged the manuscript worthy of support. Then there is Haigh’s suggestion that an ‘alert narrator’ would have seized upon Cairns’s presentation in childhood with a copy of William Morris’s News from Nowhere to digress into a discussion about the Utopian tradition. What makes this suggestion so gratuitous is that, as any ‘alert’ reviewer would know, the narrative regularly pauses for detailed reflections upon the books that most profoundly influenced Cairns’s intellectual development.

The most negligent thing about Haigh’s review, however, is that it displays no curiosity in, let alone comprehension of, my book’s themes. This is especially incongruous given his complaint that the biography is a doctoral thesis and not a book. If that were the case, how is it that Haigh remains utterly clueless as to what that ‘thesis’ is? He offers no opinion, for example, of my argument about Cairns’s importance as a voice of dissent against the established order, or of the book’s challenge to the mythology surrounding his political trajectory of the Labor Party and the impoverishment of contemporary political discourse.

How to explain that so little registered with Haigh? He would probably insist he was rendered comatose by the ‘wooden prose’ that is the trademark of ‘réchauffé Ph.Ds’ written in ‘the clunking, creaking, monotonous vernacular of modern Humanities departments’. Yet other reviewers (in the mainstream media, not academic journals) have consistently remarked on how readable the book is, despite its serious intent, and how moving is its account of Cairns’s life. Nor can I resist observing that it’s difficult to treat seriously a reviewer who, in accusing scholarly presses of feeding ‘academic vanity’, declares: ‘I’d like to share here a personal partis pris … Why are university publishing houses churning out books with audiences of approximately three at best, including the author’s mum? There, I’ve said it.’ Does Haigh have any idea how pompous he sounds here, or how simplistic is his diagnosis of the problems facing scholarly presses?

I concur with Haigh that, ultimately, what is at issue here is ‘a matter of vision’. He seems to have no head for a serious, sustained and unashamedly political narrative. He prefers historical writing that is dilettante in style and non-challenging in content. His belief that I should have approached a study of Cairns in this way underlines that he has no understanding of Cairns, or what made him special. While Haigh found my book’s many references to social change tedious, the truth is that Cairns’s commitment to ideas and social change defined him above all else. What’s more, it was the sheer relentlessness of that commitment that made him so radical, disturbing and different in the Australian political landscape. Haigh, it seems, would have me rob him of this. No longer defiantly political, Cairns might thus be reduced to a kind of cute cultural curiosity.

I’ll finish by quoting from another Cairns letter, one he distributed at the launch of Keeper of the Faith. Despite attending the launch, Haigh appears not to have noticed it. In the letter, Cairns declares that the biography has ‘allowed me to understand my own work’ and ‘the reasons for [my] success and failure’. That Cairns acknowledges this, even though the book’s assessment of him is not always complimentary, speaks volumes for his open and inquiring mind. I hope readers of ABR will judge the book with the same spirit.

Paul Strangio, Clayton, Vic.

A military misnomer

Dear Editor,

In the June/July 2002 issue of ABR, you published a review by Peter Ryan of War Letters of General Monash, edited by Tony Macdougall. Mr Ryan believes this book not merely to be a ‘shortened version’ of the 1934 edition. I suggest that that is substantially what it is.

As John Monash’s granddaughter, I am familiar with most of the literature about his life and career, and am fortunate to own an original copy of the War Letters of General Monash, published in 1934 by Angus & Robertson, edited with an Introduction by F.M. Cutlack. Over the years, many people have told me that they hoped that the War Letters of
LETTERS

General Monash would be reprinted, so I was pleased to learn that a new edition had appeared in the bookshops. However, on reading it, I am deeply disappointed.

Firstly, the title is misleading. Since it is not a reprint of the 1934 edition, this book ought not to carry the same title. In all honesty, it should be clearly marked as ‘abridged’ or ‘selected’. Mr Macdougall admits that ‘this edition ... contains approximately half the text of the original edition’. The grounds for inclusion or exclusion of letters are given as the omission of ‘repetitious passages’ and ‘family matters’. That is scarcely adequate. A comparison of the two books confirms that Macdougall has merely lifted half the letters, excised the others, and provided a new Introduction and linking passages.

Mr Macdougall’s Introduction covers the whole of Monash’s life, or attempts to do so, in ten or so pages. (Cutlack’s was purely a military Introduction, and an excellent one.) There is no shortage of accurate material on Monash’s life, and Mr Macdougall rightly praises Geoffrey Serle’s fine biography (1982). Had he consulted that work more closely, he would have avoided the many mistakes and misinterpretations in his Introduction, and in his bridging passages between the letters. The latter are intended, presumably, to fill up the gaps left by cutting out half the letters, a simply hopeless task.

Herewith some examples of how the Introduction is often misleading and mistaken:

1. ‘Written to his wife Victoria and intended only for her eyes and their daughter’s.’ In fact, some of them were widely circulated, and written with that intention, as part of Monash’s campaign that the Australian troops be given due respect for their feats of arms.
2. Monash was ‘possibly the only true intellectual among the senior commanders of World War I’. (There would have been hundreds of such men of Monash’s rank and above.) Praise is sweet, particularly of one’s grandfather, but this assertion is both unlikely and impossible to prove.
3. Monash as a boy spent ‘a short period in Jerilderie’. It was actually two and a half years in all, an experience that affected him for the rest of his life.
4. Monash had a ‘happy childhood’. We don’t know that. He was very close to his mother, but his father was distant and inadequate and the boy was overworked to fulfil the adult demands on the ‘wunderkind’.
5. ‘He attended his barmitzvah at the age of thirteen.’ A Jewish boy does not ‘attend’ his bar mitzvah; he is or becomes bar mitzvah.
6. ‘Princes Street Bridge’. No such structure exists.
7. ‘The city’s few Jews were mostly assimilated.’ Meaning what by ‘assimilated’?
8. ‘Their daughter Bertha (Bert) was born in 1892.’ The Monash’s only child, my mother, was born in 1893, not 1892.
9. The depression of the 1890s ‘almost destroyed Monash’s financial security’. At that stage in his life, there was no security to be destroyed.
10. Monash was a member ‘of the best clubs’. Is the Melbourne Club one of these? Jews were not welcome, and Monash never belonged.
11. The family trip around the world in 1910: ‘Europe itself seemed to have left him cold.’ Please consult Serle pages 174–75. Monash much enjoyed his only European trip, or, at least, many aspects of it.

I could go on, and on; this is not the half of it. Mr Macdougall reignites the long-held Australian myth surrounding Lloyd-George’s and Liddell-Hart’s remarks of the 1930s about Monash’s possible accession to the highest command in World War I. Serle devoted perhaps his finest chapter to the matter of Monash’s postwar reputation. He demonstrates how unreliable these assertions were and clarifies the political arguments in Britain that caused them to be made.

The Australian public deserves better than these dubious passages and many others for which I have no room here.

Now that this emasculated version of the War Letters has been published, it is unlikely that there will be a reprint of the original edition, which contained twice the number of letters, covering the whole war, as well as maps, photographs and index, all of which are missing from this edition. We are therefore deprived of the possible availability of an important work of Australian history.

Elizabeth Durré, Kew, Vic.

John Monash victorious
Dear Editor,
Peter Ryan, in his review (ABR, June/July 2002) of Tony Macdougall’s War Letters of General Monash, points out that Geoffrey Serle’s biography John Monash has long been unavailable. He quotes Macdougall’s view that it is ‘possibly the finest biography of a public figure and a private man published in Australia’. Ryan laments that the publisher’s efforts to reissue in paperback have come to nought because ‘the university that bears Monash’s name has declined even a paltry financial contribution to the project’.

Melbourne University Press is indeed keen to republish. And, sadly, it is true that our formal approaches to the very highest reaches of Monash University failed dismally. But the scholars of Monash have shown their mettle. We are delighted to report that, thanks to the intervention of Graeme Davison and others, and to generous contributions from the School of Historical Studies and the Centre for the Study of Jewish Civilisation, we will now be able to restore John Monash to the world in a handsome new edition.

Teresa Pitt, MUP, Carlton, Vic.
Reviewing the reviewer

Dear Editor,

Any mention of White always did provoke strong feelings, and it is important not to get caught up with counter-productive views on new readings of canonical works. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to answer Richard Bell’s review (ABR, June/July 2002) of my book Patrick White and Alchemy.

Bell’s review ranges from comparisons with his ‘favourite book’ on Frank Zappa in the opening paragraph, an inflation of commonplace and outdated perceptions of White, to multiple highly problematic reductions of, and generalisations on, White and ‘significant artists’, and how difficult it must be to find new things to say about them.

In addition, Bell compares my work to David Tacey’s neo-Jungian work on White, failing to note that I explicitly distance myself from it in several places in the book. There are indications that Bell has read only the first third of the book and skimmed the rest, as there is no mention of the complexities of the latter two-thirds, where alchemy is analysed as a significant hybridity metaphor in post-colonial fiction.

Bell states that ‘no evidence is proffered in support of the contention’ that White had an interest in alchemy. Given that the reviewer is reading a 332-page monograph on alchemical imagery in the first part of White’s oeuvre, this statement seems bizarre. Any White aficionado would know that, both as a writer and as a man, White was extremely secretive about his private life, guarded his inspirational sources jealously, and systematically destroyed any references to them. After Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’, Bell’s argument against my book that there is no biographical evidence of White’s interest in alchemy fades, especially when counter-shaded with the prolific manifestations in White’s entire oeuvre. Towards the end of the review, Bell’s pseudo-knowledge of alchemical scholarship becomes apparent when his ‘quick google search’ leads him to a surprise discovery of Barbara Di Bernard’s standard work Alchemy and Finnegan’s Wake, thereby exposing a striking lack of knowledge of the field he attempts to review.

James Bulman-May, Aarhus, Denmark