

## National News

**A**MONG THE WRITERS whom Christina Stead met when she returned to Australia in 1974 were Patrick White and Judah Waten. White was strongly opposed to the role of libraries in preserving the 'papers' of writers. 'My MSS are destroyed as soon as the books are printed. I put very little into notebooks, don't keep my friends' letters as I urge them not to keep mine, and anything unfinished when I die is to be burnt.' Waten, on the other hand, had just sold many of his papers to the National Library, and he urged some of his literary friends to do the same.

Stead responded cautiously to Waten's suggestion, referring to 'my hoard of old papers, which is and always will be in a state of "chassis" while I am around'. She agreed to talk to an emissary of the Library and one day in June 1975, I met her at the Hurstville railway station. We walked to a nearby restaurant, where she told the waiter that she was 'treating her grandson to lunch, as it's his birthday'. Over lunch we talked generally about the different writing methods of well-known writers. I said that Anthony Trollope (whom she dismissed abruptly) seemed able to write hundreds of pages with only an occasional change or correction. In contrast, Henry Handel Richardson, who wrote in pencil in a very small hand, was always dissatisfied with her early drafts and almost every page has deletions and balloons of words, phrases and other insertions. Eventually, I was to find that Stead's own style of badly typed, cut-and-paste drafts was just as distinctive.

Later, at her brother's home, Stead showed me two filing cabinets and a shelf of papers. She handed over her 1950–51 diary, which she described as a failure. In return, I bought her a Greek–English dictionary, as she had said that she was learning modern Greek. 'I started it all because of some friends, Greeks, at the corner shop here; and I was feeling lonely for Europe (perhaps; one is never quite sure).'

Stead undertook to bequeath her papers to the Library. Following her death in 1983, her literary executor, Ron Geering, confirmed that the papers would come to the Library. He sent the first group in 1984; further instalments arrived in the next seven years. Geering took his duties very seriously and devoted a lot of time to bringing order to the state of 'chassis'. He also encouraged the Library to approach long-standing friends of Stead, such as Ettore Rella in New York and Philip Harvey and Gunnvor Stallybrass in London, who were likely to have kept letters. Gradually, the collection became a substantial personal archive, rather than just notes and odd relics from lost manuscripts.

Hazel Rowley believes that Stead destroyed many of her papers shortly before she returned to Australia. This is highly probable, but, in any case, her peripatetic life since her departure in 1928 was hardly conducive to record-keeping. Whereas White destroyed papers on principle, it seems likely that it was both indifference and storage considerations that led

Stead to destroy or discard papers. She did bring back some of her papers to Australia, and she seemed unconcerned at the prospect of them ultimately being in a library and available to all and sundry.

Not surprisingly, Stead's early books are hardly represented in the papers. There are only a few pages of notes and drafts of *House of All Nations* (1938), *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944). The surviving drafts of *Cotter's England* (1966) and *Miss Herbert* (1976), as well as some of the short stories, are much more substantial. Although Stead sometimes wrote letters by hand, her books were always written on a typewriter (unfortunately for researchers, she seldom wasted money on a new ribbon). The typescripts have numerous deletions; sometimes there are handwritten corrections or insertions. They are in various hands and may provide some clues about the work of editors such as Stanley Burnshaw and Oliver Stallybrass in tidying up manuscripts. It is, however, extremely difficult to date the typescripts or to work out a sequence of drafts. Rather than making amendments to a draft, in the Richardson manner, Stead would rewrite passages that bothered her and later rearrange the sequence of pages and chapters.

Stead wrote and received thousands of letters, and she drew on them when writing *The Man Who Loved Children*, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) and other books. While most do not survive, some important groups of letters among her papers are of considerable biographical interest, including her correspondence with William Blake (which became open in 2001). Many were written by friends in Britain, Europe and North America. There are also letters from a scattering of Australian writers: Dymphna Cusack, A.D. Hope and Patrick White. In the last decade or so, some of her correspondents, including H.C. Coombs, Laurence Pollinger, Gwen Walker-Smith and Ethel Anderson, have donated or sold letters from Stead to the National Library. The biographers Christine Williams and Hazel Rowley also passed over substantial collections of source material on Stead, including copies of letters they had found in overseas archives.

As well as literary manuscripts and letters, the papers of Stead contain autobiographical fragments, notes about writing methods, interviews, book reviews and photographs. There are diary notes written by Stead in Europe in the 1930s and a detailed diary that she kept at Foxwarren Park in Surrey in 1958. Nearly twenty years after her death, other hoards of old papers are still coming to light. The Library's holdings of sources on the life of Christina Stead are now far more extensive and diverse than I had imagined when I first spoke to her about papers at that Hurstville restaurant.

**Graeme Powell, Manuscript Librarian,  
National Library of Australia**