

## STEAD ON STEAD

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**South-West of Eden, A Memoir 1932-1956**, by C.K. Stead; Auckland University Press, \$45.

For someone described by his publisher as a 'towering figure in New Zealand literature' - a description the author would probably endorse - one approaches the memoir of his youth with expectations of discovering the magical springs of his inspiration or, to the contrary, a story of childhood deprivation and loss that fuelled his high ambition and achievement. The surprise is that C.K. 'Karl' Stead's youth was rooted so firmly in the conventional and prosaic, within such a limited familial and environmental reach, that its narration, at times, becomes simply mundane. We must wait until Stead reaches university before the narrative becomes truly engaging; and therein lies the tale.

Stead lived all his childhood at 63 Kensington Avenue, Mount Eden, and went to nearby Mangawhau School before progressing to Mount Albert Grammar. For the first seventeen years of his life 'there were five of us' - 'the grandmother', mother Olive, father Jim and older sister Norma who, with Stead, formed a group 'at intervals turbulent, sad, combative, hysterical; but ... also full of jokes, music, good talk, caring and love.' Stead was named for his Swedish master-mariner grandfather, Christian Karlson, a looming figure of romance and myth who, though dead before Stead was born, he felt to be 'a sixth family member' who 'subtly, invisibly, ruled the roost.' Karlson had built 63 Kensington Avenue over two quarter-acre sections in the early 1920s and, after his death, the most economic arrangement was for only child Olive and family to move in with her mother. For Stead's father this seemed a 'trap from which there was no escape; yet he loved the house and the garden, and made them (almost, but not quite) his own.'

Jim Stead's entire life seemed almost, but not quite, his own, physically disabled after an early gun accident, frustrated in his career and in securing a Labour Party seat. Stead has admitted that he did not examine his relationship with his father until beginning this memoir and, although there is sympathy and some affection in Stead's account, there is no sense of strong paternal influence. Stead's piano teacher mother was the greater presence in his growing up and her disappointment in his ability to master the keyboard extended into doubt about his ability to accomplish anything. Olive attributed Stead's later academic success to hard work, not talent, and a reader cannot escape the conclusion that much of Stead's need to succeed, to show off his academic and literary achievements, has been in response to his mother's persistent doubt, and in order to avoid repeating the humiliation of his father's relative failure, casting the 'dark shadow of defeat over everything.'

Stead devotes two thirds of this 345-page volume to his pre-university years, a time spent almost exclusively in Mount Eden, with excursions to the beloved arcadian 'Paradiso' of his cousins' farm at Kaiwaka in Northland. At times, the reader must practise devotion to duty in working through the detail of episodes such as his 'athletics career' of school high jumping, to the point of agreeing with Stead's statement that there was 'quite often something laborious about my personality.' The ingenuous honesty revealed in this is a notable grace of the memoir, as well as the genuine sense of adolescent surprise at discovering how clever he is. But his recurrent need to tell everyone of his cleverness, even to this day, has not always proved to be wise.

The memoir flowers when the narrative reaches Stead's university years in 1951. He enters a world where his academic and literary talents are given full scope and he moves into a social and emotional environment beyond the hedges of Kensington Avenue. While the recounting of his movement into the literary world of the 1950s contains few surprises - we have read or heard a number of these stories before - the real surprise is the refreshing frankness with which he tells of his doomed love affair with the delightful Diane (Dee-ahn) Henderson, daughter of painter Louise Henderson, who moved in a milieu of such cultural sophistication that he was 'certainly embarrassed at, and shied away from, the idea of taking her' home, although he was always in and out of the Henderson household. At the time, it was 'not just the difference in style, in sophistication, in taste; it was also the fact that my family seemed to have gone into eclipse.' Stead writes so well of the end of this first great love that we share the depth of his memories of loss and anguish. With similar openness, Stead writes of his love affair and marriage to Kay Roberts and the (illegal at the time) abortion she chose to have because, still young, 'There were things she wanted to do, places she wanted to go.'

Stead writes of poetry and poets and other writers and academics, sometimes with the acid-etched rigour for which he has become well-known. Of Professor Bob Chapman, for example, he writes, 'He was remorselessly, and rather abstractly, a "thinker" - one who wrestled with ideas valiantly and not always with

success. If he had arrived on the scene half a century later, he might have made a top-rate literary theoretician, where the confident opacity of his thought, and his inability to ever make perfect sense, would have been seen as virtues.'

Stead's relationships with Allen Curnow and then Frank Sargeson and Janet Frame predominate, cast in the light of a certain exclusivity that absents others who also circled these flames at the same time. Stead said at a recent seminar that he 'does not do reverence,' and his descriptions of Frame, his analysis of her character and behaviour in her earlier years, and the qualities of her writing, are refreshing. At a time when Janet Frame is presented as something of a literary saint, to say of her work, 'It had no structure, no shape, but it was full of striking imagery and flashes of brilliance' can seem like heresy. Or 'At heart I think Janet ... was a meek anarchist, an intellectual suicide-bomber, who rejected the whole human order, and whose work, structureless, directionless, brilliant, with flashes of genius, offered not hope but a black hole.' Stead's writing on Frame is imbued with insight, compassion and considered judgement.

In his Foreword, Karl Stead writes that, to tell his own story, a 'product of my genes in concord or combat with mid-century Auckland ... ought to be if I got it right, a way - one way - of telling the story of my time and place.' Stead does offer useful commentary on being pakeha. Being in a 'colonial condition' in his youth 'had benefits as well as deficiencies. It was not (I speak as a Pakeha) subservience; and it did direct our attention outward to a larger framework, a bigger world, saving us from the excesses of introspection which have beset us in recent years.' But the personal world he describes appears to have been too confined to allow the memoir to become also a story of his time and place.

Stead acknowledges the help of several people and institutions but 'The rest is memory, which I have relied on, and have found no reason not to trust.' A sense of infallibility is surely the Achilles heel in this 'towering figure'. Better that we see the book simply as his own memoir of people and events past and not a prescription for truth. It ends as Stead, aged 23, departs with his wife for their first overseas trip, sailing 'over the rim of the world into that other place, and another life.' Will there be volumes two and three, north and east of Eden, where the infallibility of his memory might be more vigorously tested?