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C. K. Stead – Introduction for The Poetry Archive

‘I think of writing a poem as putting oneself in the moment, *at* the moment – an action more comprehensive, intuitive and mysterious than mere thinking . . .’

C(hristian) K(arlson) Stead, b. Auckland, New Zealand, 1932, Emeritus Professor at Auckland University, is perhaps New Zealand’s most internationally celebrated writer, with a literary life spanning more than fifty years as a poet, novelist, academic and critic. He is the author of eleven novels, fourteen volumes of poetry, two volumes of stories and several works of criticism. He has been the recipient of many prestigious awards honouring his services to literature, including a CBE in 1985, and in 2007 New Zealand’s highest honour, the Order of New Zealand. His work has been translated into many languages, and his output continues to win international accolades: his story ‘Last Season’s Man’ won the first Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award in 2010 and a prize of £25,000 – the largest prize in the world to date for a short story. Also in 2010, in somewhat of an *annus mirabilis* for Stead, and proving that age has not diminished his creative talents, his poem ‘Ischemia’ won the inaugural 2010 International Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine, a prize of £5,000.

Stead started his career writing poetry, a protégé of Frank Sargeson and Allen Curnow, and though perhaps best known for his fiction and literary criticism, Stead insists that his poetry is what he enjoys most, finds most demanding, and takes most seriously. His evolution as a poet can be traced in the recently published *Collected Poems, 1951-2006* (2009), where he acknowledges in the Foreword that his early poetry was more ‘conventional, obvious and external’ than his more mature work, but that throughout his poetic career he has been ‘obsessed’ with poetic form, which he likens to music, and the writing of which he sees as ‘an action more comprehensive, intuitive and mysterious than mere thinking’.

The eight poems chosen for the archive show something of the evolution of Stead’s poetic gift. ‘Pictures in a Gallery Undersea’ (1959), was voted the best poem of *Landfall*’s first fifteen years of publication in 1960, and reveals Stead, the young ‘colonial’ from the South Seas, revelling in his sensory and historical perceptions of London. The structure of ‘This Time’ (1972), foreshadows Stead’s later, more condensed poetic form, and shows a poet growing in confidence and technical mastery. In ‘Cold Moon’ (1974) and ‘This May be Your Captain Speaking’ (1982), several recurring themes are revealed. The first reflects the months Stead and his family spent living in Europe as the recipient of the 1972 Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship in the South of France, at Menton, and highlights the poet’s fascination with place, viewed in this case through an ethereal (or celestial) discourse between time, place and eternity; while the latter poem moves its starry firmament from Europe to the South Seas. The ironic ‘A Discursive Poem About Poetry and Thought’ (1997), reveals Stead’s often-remarked-upon frankness in confronting contentious issues, and reminds us of the troubled ride his forthright opinions have sometimes given him in his homeland. ‘Cat/ullus’ and ‘Catullus 65’ (2002) each mourns a death – the first, that of his cat Zac, the second of his friend and fellow-poet, Allen Curnow – and emulate a certain tough objective quality found in the Latin poet. ‘On Turning Seventy’ (2002), exposes a heightened awareness of aging – once more through those finely tuned Antipodean eyes – by a poet rooted firmly, from the very outset of his career, in the country of his birth.

The calmly measured tone of Stead’s voice in the recordings belies the –sometimes acute – emotion implicit in the poems presented here.

C. K. Stead

Prizes and awards

1963 Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Short Story Award.
1972 Winn-Manson Menton Fellowship
1976 New Zealand Book Award for *Quesada* (Poetry)
1977 Honorary Visiting Fellow, University College London
1985 Awarded a CBE for services to New Zealand literature
1985 New Zealand Book Award for *All Visitors Ashore* (Fiction)
1985 New Zealand Book Award for *The Singing Whakapapa* (Fiction)
1996-7 Senior visiting Fellow, St John's College, Oxford
1999 *Landfall* Competition Essay Prize
1995 Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature
2001 Honorary Doctorate of Letters by the University of Bristol
2001 King's Lynn Poetry Prize.
2002 Fellow of the English Association (UK)
2005-6 Michael King Fellowship
2007 Member of the Order of New Zealand
2007 Bogliasco Fellow in Literature, Liguria Study Centre
2009 Montana New Zealand Book Award for *Collected Poems, 1951-2006* (Reference and Anthology)
2009 Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Fiction
2010 The Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award
2010 International Hippocrates Prize for Poetry and Medicine

Most recent bibliography and related links

Mansfield: a novel (2004)
My Name Was Judas (2006)
The Black River (2007)
Book Self (2008)
Collected Poems, 1951-2006 (2009)
South-West of Eden: A Memoir, 1932-1956 (2010)

* (included in) Jan Kemp, Jonathan Lamb & Alan Smythe (Eds), *Waiata Archive*, 1974
www.aonzpsa.blogspot.com

* (included in) Jan Kemp and Jack Ross (Eds), *Aonzpsa*, 2002
www.aonzpsa.blogspot.com

* (included in) Jack Ross and Jan Kemp (Eds), *Classic New Zealand Poets in Performance*, Auckland University Press, 2005
<http://web.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/aup/book/200506-book/classic-new-zealand-poets.cfm>

* (included in) New Zealand Book Council Writer's File
<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/steadck.html#a2793>

*(included in) Britannica On-line Encyclopedia
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/564405/CK-Stead>

*(included in) Auckland University New Zealand Literature File
http://www.nzlf.auckland.ac.nz/author/?a_id=151