

Biographer of big subjects

Hazel Rowley (1951–2011)

Lucy Sussex

To write about a biographer is to be aware of a presence, psychologically if not spectrally, sitting on your shoulder. This presence is not an angel, more like an imp, the minor demon that arouses bad deeds, or thoughts. In writing about a biographer we can feel not angelic inspiration, but the imp of doubt, saying: This is not good enough, I could do better.

Hazel Rowley, scrutinising her own life – first as an academic, then as a serious literary and political biographer – would have done better than those who have been stung into obituary-writing by her sudden, unexpected death on 1 March. What follows is merely a series of brief reflections. I knew Hazel briefly, but at a crucial time in her life, when she was writing her first biography, *Christina Stead* (1993). It led her to a change of career, and to acclaim as perhaps the greatest Australian biographer.

Why did she choose biography? Hazel had a great respect and love for Stead's work: here, she knew, was a great subject. Stead had entered her soul, a niggle that would not be adequately resolved until she dealt with it properly. Hazel was a bloody-minded biographer – a compliment. She sought the truth about her subjects via hard grind in the archives, facing down hostile interviewees, literary executors, and copyright lawyers. Never would she play safe; she picked big subjects from the beginning.

For an academic whose interests included feminist theory and existentialism, what was the appeal of Stead, that fabulously gifted but flinty novelist? They made an odd literary conjunction: Hazel tall, thin, elegant in blue jeans and a linen shirt; Stead anything but. The two did share a commitment to left-wing politics. They were also essentially outsiders. Hazel was born in London, emigrating to Adelaide, aged eight. Migration is an alienating experience: Hazel transformed it into a strength. She could immerse herself in different cultures while still remaining very much her own woman.

She also shared Stead's flair with the written word, used in the service of observing character, what people make of their lives. Hazel freely admitted to falling in love with her subjects, but with none of the sentimentality that afflicts some biographers, who dream about their subjects or treat them like new best friends (creepy when the subject is dead). Of another writer's gush about Stead, she commented wistfully: 'Stead didn't much like women.' Ipso facto, Stead would not have liked

Hazel, but it did not stop Hazel from observing her subject with a cool, clear-eyed gaze that never omitted a significant fault, but was singularly marked by empathy – the quality that creates a truly great biographer.

I only ever heard Hazel admit doubts once, in relation to applying her academic writing skills to the general readership. My response was to ask her if she wrote a good letter. In the end she managed the stylistic transition with ease. Another transition, from life as a Deakin University academic to that of a full-time biographer, she made after *Christina Stead's* success. As she commented in 1996, in a famously forthright article for *The Australian*, a scrupulously researched book counted for less in the points system than a series of short articles. She also saw the dire future of the Humanities in Australia, the cuts inaugurated by Hawke's government to be followed by more cuts under the conservatives. Combining academic work with her new vocation became increasingly untenable. So at forty-five she took a package, left for the United States, and never looked back.

It took guts to step into the unknown, and for her next book to be *Richard Wright* (2001), a biography of the African-American writer, and friend of Stead. Here, Hazel benefited from being – though white – non-American, without the contentious history of US race relations in her ancestry. She would follow by turning her academic interest in Simone de Beauvoir (the subject of her PhD) into *Tête-à-Tête* (2005), a study of Beauvoir's intense intellectual life, but also of the great union with Jean-Paul Sartre. It showed a new direction, into unconventional but lasting loves, which culminated in *Franklin & Eleanor* (2010), her last biography, about the Roosevelts. 'She had three or four great books left to write,' commented a friend. The first of these, about the Hollywood Ten, was already planned.

Perhaps the purest statement of Hazel Rowley's intent and methods was her 2007 *Australian Book Review/La Trobe Annual Lecture*, 'The Ups, the Downs: My Life As a Biographer' (*ABR*, July–August 2007). In it she declared: 'It's bad enough to die; we don't want some dullard turning our lives into insipid gruel.' It was bad enough that she died so young, with so much ahead of her. Oh, Hazel, you were never dull, and if you never made old bones, you never made gruel either. ■