

Grand portraits in silky words

HAZEL ROWLEY
BIOGRAPHER
16-11-1951 — 1-3-2011

By **PETER CRAVEN**

HAZEL Rowley, the celebrated Australian biographer who wrote the ground breaking life of Christina Stead, the greatest Australian novelist apart from Patrick White, has died in New York after a series of heart attacks and strokes following an untreated fever. She was 59.

Rowley's *Christina Stead* is one of the most significant biographies in Australian history, and she went on to forge an international career for herself with a biography of the African-American novelist Richard Wright, and a book about the celebrated existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir. The latter, *Tete-a-Tete* (2005), attracted controversy in France.

She was about to start an Australian tour to promote *Franklin and Eleanor*, her account of the marriage of the Roosevelts that was released here on February 1.

Rowley was born in London, and came to Australia as an eight-year-old girl. She talked about how the sunny house where she played among the mosquito nets was like a vision of paradise to her. But when she broke the dress code at a superior primary school in Adelaide, St Peter's College for Girls, she found herself hauled up in front of the school by the headmistress and told: "You wouldn't go out without your knickers on, so why do you go out without your gloves?" Rowley later said: "So a month passed before this bloody repressive country started to leave its mark on me!"

It was a point of pride with Rowley, who wrote so empathically,

sometimes impatiently, of Stead that she never forgot the wounds. She went to school at Presbyterian Girls College and then to Adelaide University, where she majored in French and German. Eventually she wrote her doctorate on Simone De Beauvoir and Violette Leduc.

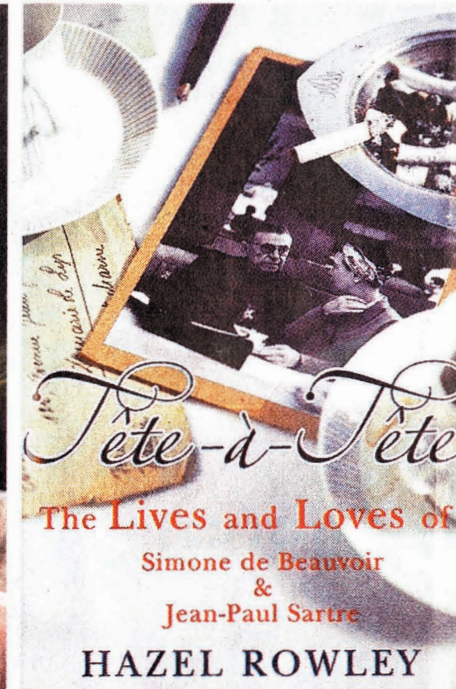
There is, in fact, a photo of Rowley from 1976 when she was doing research in Paris sitting next to De Beauvoir, whom she interviewed and revered. The influence of the great French feminist and mistress of Sartre on Rowley's own work was immense.

"De Beauvoir's whole life was about courage," Rowley said, "she never had the illusion that freedom would be easy."

Rowley got a job at Deakin University in the 1980s when a comparative literature background allowed for a wider range of people to teach what were essentially English literature courses. She didn't find the academic life easy either. She was pained and angered by male academics who would declare to her, "You can't say that". She was condescended to by people who were unworthy to untie her shoes but affected to believe she was a plodder. She came to loathe the narrowness of the theory-dominated Australian academic literature department. "The new regime is so opposed to the spirit of free inquiry that it is no longer possible to think creatively."

She always went her own way, against the grain. It was fortunate, though, that the comparative approach had allowed the girl with languages to get her teeth into Christina Stead.

Doris Lessing praised the fineness and balance of the Stead biography and Helen Garner described it as "a marvellous book, a grand portrait". When I reviewed it for *The Age* in 1993 I



said that it was "biography of the highest order, as finely organised as anything by Ellmann" (the great biographer of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde) and with a "command of tempo" that made it "one of the finest biographies ever written about an Australian".

I can still remember the excitement in the room when Joan Kirner launched Rowley's *Christina Stead* at Mietta's restaurant and the feeling of exultation than an Australian woman had written a great life of a great Australian woman.

Rowley, however, wanted pastures new. She decided to chuck the academic world, take her super and try her hand at a big American subject. It was extraordinary that this shy Adelaide girl should have the courage to enter the lion's den and write a full-scale biography of the black American writer Richard Wright, the seminal figure in black Amer-

ican literature who went before Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. And she succeeded.

She worked for a time at the Du Bois Institute at Harvard and she received a string of accolades from the toughest judges in the world, black American writers. Darryl Pinkney in the *New York Review of Books* spoke for the legion when he praised the book's excellence and readability and the concentration with which Rowley told Wright's story.

It's amusing that Rowley's publishers chose not to feature a photo of the author (with her fair and Waspish appearance) on the cover of the Wright biography, which may have encouraged the belief that Hazel was a "sister" in every sense, but the real achievement is that she mastered the research to satisfy this exacting readership just as she had taken on Australian literature with Stead.

It is easy to forget how crucial biographies can be. It is because of Rowley that we understand how deep the affinity was between Stead's father, David, the naturalist, and Sam Pollit, the overbearing hero of *The Man Who Loved Children*. Or how much the fictionalised portraits of her husband, Bill Blake, or of the original of the misogynist, Jonathan Crow, in *For Love Alone*, had their real life correlates and contradictions.

Tete-a-Tete, her book about Sartre and De Beauvoir, is an impassioned but reasoned defence of that famous literary and political couple and it landed Rowley in hot water when the executors objected to the "fair use" loophole that had allowed Rowley to paraphrase Sartre and De Beauvoir letters in the American edition.

This led the great French publishing house of Gallimard to shy

away from the book and after another firm, Grasset, did publish it, it had to be pulped because Claude Lanzmann (the man who made the great Holocaust documentary *Shoah*, and one time lover of De Beauvoir) threatened legal action. It was then, frustratingly, reprinted in France only in a smaller run.

It's the kind of thing that could happen to Rowley because she had such dedication to the task of the biographer.

But she was dazzled by the experience of being interviewed on French television, in French, for one of their highbrow book shows.

In her last book, *Franklin and Eleanor*, she took on an even more competitive subject by treating the complex intimate lives of the great New Deal and World War II president FDR and that most formidable of first ladies, Eleanor Roosevelt.

The American critic Michael Dirda suggested that Rowley's work is like a transfigured version of what we get in the celebrity gossip stories. Certainly she stuck to her guns in her belief that the intimate life, the personal life, was the most important politics that we could know.

Once, in 2006, at the *Village Voice* she gave a talk and discovered herself surrounded by bodyguards who were there to protect Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali Dutch woman who attacked fundamentalist Islam. Someone said to her they knew the Sartre-De Beauvoir executors were heavy but they didn't think it was this bad!

Rowley did not marry or have children. She was especially close to her father, Derrick Rowley, an immunologist and microbiologist who died in 2004.

She is survived by her mother, Betty, brother Martin and sister Della.