

LIFE AS ART: THE BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING OF HAZEL ROWLEY

Edited by Della Rowley and Lynn Buchanan
Introduction by Drusilla Modjeska
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An Adelaide writer on the world stage

Hazel Rowley is the most heroic figure in the history of Australian biography. This woman, who died freakishly of what looked like a chill 10 years ago in New York, turned herself into a biographer of international stature out of a sheer passion to tell the truth about human life as a nonfiction narrative. Her sister, Della Rowley, and a close friend, Lynn Buchanan, have put together a collection of her pieces. They are not chronological; they're repetitious and follow no set order, but they have a luminous and obsessive power.

Ian McKellen was once described as a great monk of the theatre, and Hazel Rowley's spirit will forgive me if I say she was like a great nun who encompassed the power and the glory (despite every squalor and frailty) of human remembrance. "Nada te turbi" (Let nothing disturb you) was the motto of Teresa of Avila, and Rowley never let her own fearfulness stand in her way. She was an Adelaide girl and her academic background was not in English literature, but in German and French, when she stumbled into a job teaching at Deakin University where the interdisciplinary was valued.

And so she hit her destiny and started writing the life of Christina Stead who wrote the most highly regarded novel in Australian history, *The Man Who Loved Children*, which Robert Lowell had described as "a black diamond of a book", and the one which transposed a harbourside Sydney childhood to Annapolis for the benefit of American readers. When Rowley's monumental and moving life of Stead (*Christina Stead: A Biography*) appeared in 1994, I compared it to Richard Ellmann, the great biographer of Joyce, and David Marr's biography of Patrick White.

The jargon-ridden academic world patronised Rowley, and she loathed it, so she chucked it in 1997, took a payout, sold her St Kilda flat and proceeded to write the life of the African-American writer Richard Wright (*Richard Wright: The Life and Times*) an all but impossible mission. Then she wrote a book about Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (her abiding obsession), and in the year before she died published a book about the Roosevelts: Franklin D., the New Deal president in the wheelchair, and Eleanor, who kept him going even if her pull was towards her own sex.

Existentialism was Rowley's backing factory. "In what way do we make ourselves out of how we have been made" – the question Sartre posed, and de Beauvoir alluringly echoed, she made her own.

When Rowley suggested Stead was too "big", a boyfriend said: "Why start small?". Another boy, a German, asked her: "Wer, wenn nicht wir? Wann wenn, nicht jetzt?" – "Who if not us? When, if not now?". And so Rowley, who would be accused of Adelaide "prissiness", took on the world. She understood why Stead could say "I always felt like a cripple because my father thought me ugly", and she understood, too, how the voice of Bill Blake – Stead's adored husband – shaped her work: "Just as the voice of Nora Joyce is ever present in James Joyce's fiction". This is the hard-won insight of a biographer because the Blake voice blends with the no-man's language of Sam Pollitt (whom we know is intimately based on Christina's father, David Stead). And Nora's voice, the Molly Bloom voice in Joyce, is the voice of the muse, which allows him to present the lyrical scatology of everyday life.

Rowley realised that biography is literary scholarship because it establishes the parameters of the self-evident. If Leopold Bloom, as Ellmann established, shares the homely qualities of Joyce, they can't be objects of satirical condescension. So it's never true that Stead's "characters' failings are attributable to ... the revolutionary doctrine they espouse". She's hypersensitive to Stead's predicament. Randall Jarrell, in the 1965 introduction to *The Man Who Loved Children*, which created the book's reputation, wrote: "The world's incomprehension has robbed it, forever, of what could have come after *The Man Who Loved Children*." In fact, publishers had rejected books such as *Cotters' England*, which Angela Carter thought were superior to it. Stead herself wondered. Success and achievement can be bedfellows.

Rowley understood the sorrows of artistic election. She haunted the Rue Jacob in honour of the tomb Stead never had and knew why Richard Wright said "I felt relieved when the boat sailed past the Statue of Liberty". She turned herself into his biographer so that often the only white face she would see would be her own in the mirror. She maintained her rage against the oppression of McCarthyist anti-Communist America. She hated all this as a



Clockwise from left: African-American writer Richard Wright; author Christina Stead; biographer Hazel Rowley



passionate left-liberal who was also, in the most honourable sense, one of nature's alienates. Her rage sometimes made her forget the writers of the left who could be published, such as Graham Greene, or the way Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* burnt up the stage.

Her passionate attachment to Sartre and de Beauvoir was central. De Beauvoir famously wrote "One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman", and Sartre told her to "dare", to put herself into her work. Their sexually open relationship, with its abiding marriage of true minds, is the cornerstone of Rowley's biographical conception and so was their leftism. She never minimises the pain and compromises of the relationship. Sartre, on a visit to Brazil, can't walk except in a zigzag, combating chronic depression with amphetamines, three-quarters of a bottle of whisky and five strong barbiturates a night.

All of this is told in the context of a mini-biographical excursion about a young redhead, which has its own narrative satisfactions.

Rowley signed up less ambivalently than its formulator might have to the proposition that "happiness" is "an ideological tool", that it is "not about real people", and "there is no gauge for measuring happiness". "Personally," she wrote, "I find Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre an admirable couple."

Tête-à-tête – the title was to emphasise the soul marriage – led Rowley into the very lion's mouth of the French culture she adored. The book was to be published by the great firm of Gallimard until Sartre's adoptive daughter, Arlette Elkaim Sartre, objected. The book was taken up by Grasset.

Fortunately, Rowley succeeded in getting HarperCollins in New York to publish a full version of the book, which invoked the American concept of "fair use".

When *Tête-à-tête* was published in October 2006, *Lire* magazine said it was the best literary biography of the year. Rowley was interviewed, in French, for 40 minutes on TV: "Speaking on the French media had been the most nerve-racking thing I had ever done in my life."

Rowley's last biographical venture also involved an existential commitment to soul marriage. *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* was written in New York. It's an intimate retelling of how a woman from a Republican family nurtured and pushed the patrician Democrat, who was struck with polio and could not have taken a step by himself but who went on to be one of the greatest of American presidents. Accused of being a class traitor, he initiated the New Deal that pulled the US out of the Depression and led it through World War II.

He never could have done this without Eleanor Roosevelt's love even though one of her girlfriends could write to her: "Darling, in a blue velvet dinner gown or out of it – I love you." Eleanor Roosevelt said: "You must do the things you cannot do." Rowley wrote: "She did. FDR did. As a couple, they both did."

Need we add Rowley did? "Love is complicated," she wrote, "and it's a pity to talk about it as if it isn't."

Rowley did not make things easy for herself. But she fought every day she lived to tell the truth about life and to tell it as a story, unjudgmentally. This collection includes an unusually polished essay about visiting the town that inspired *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She sneakily and brilliantly uses American "fair use" to give an unforgettable snippet of a letter from Harper Lee.

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Drinkers of the Wind

Ah, those *drinkers of the wind*,
as I remember, still a child,
hearing that the Arabs called them ...

I see them now, those thoroughbreds,
snorting in their heraldry
and stretched across the straight.

I have no wish to trouble friends
who've followed horseflesh all their lives,
who plan one day to own a gelding

or maybe just a tenth,
who've read the pedigrees and know
the strappers by their stable names,

those friends who'll haunt a track at dawn,
who'll wager on an algorithm
that, on occasion, works.

I understand their feel for detail;
I have it in another field
and so must share their sadness as

the footage on the screens tonight
is turning less romantic,
those *drinkers of the wind* full-gallop,

brittle on their slender legs
and sensing, as they surely must,
the green tent with the big syringe,

the knacker's truck that trails the field,
gathering the losers,
their nostrils flaring wildly as

they clatter up the ramp.

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