

Henry Handel Richardson, a Secret Life – a talk given by Dr Barbara Finlayson at the Bendigo Philosopher’s Group on July 2, 2018

The background music are songs to which Henry Handel Richardson (HHR mainly from now on) wrote the music, some whilst she was at school, others as a music student at Leipzig. That she wrote music is not well known as was her deep involvement in Spiritualism, the subject of my talk.

Firstly though, I shall give a very, very, potted summary about this author Henry Handel Richardson, the nom de plume of Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson. She was born on the 3rd January 1870 in East Melbourne, the eldest daughter of Dr Walter Richardson and his wife Mary. The family lived in various Victorian towns, as well as Melbourne itself during HHR’s childhood and youth. These included Chiltern, Queenscliff, Koroit, and Maldon after her father’s death. Her mother took the family to Europe in 1888 to enable HHR and her sister Lill to continue her musical studies at the Leipzig Conservatorium.

HHR married George Robertson who became chair at the University of London and they moved to that city 1903. She published her first novel, *Maurice Guest* in 1908 and that is when she adopted her pseudonym. (I have included a list of her writing in the hand out.) The best known are *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. She died in 1946, aged 76.

In Dorothy Green’s book about Henry Handel Richardson, *Ulysses Bound*, she said, ‘Richardson’s life-long adherence to Spiritualism is a fact which has largely been ignored.’ This book was first published in 1973, and HHR’s involvement in Spiritualism was largely ignored until 1996 when 2 events occurred.

But before going there I will back-pedal again to briefly mention modern Spiritualism, which is usually considered to have commenced in 1848 in Hydesville in the state of New York, when the three Fox sisters supposedly heard rappings. The movement became a craze in some parts of the world, such as the USA, Britain and Australia, especially Victoria. I have included a few definitions of Spiritualism in the handout, including one from HHR’s father, Walter. (**screen**)

—that there is a state, condition or locality, to which, after a change called death, our spiritual body ascends...— that communication between the inhabitants of the two worlds is possible.

Dr Walter Richardson, Presidential Address to the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists in Melbourne, 1871.

Walter Richardson was elected the first president of The Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists on Sunday 23 October 1870, ten months after HHR was born, but he had been, and continued to be an active Spiritualist travelling throughout Victoria and twice to Britain where he attended many séance and frequently wrote for the Journal *The Harbinger of Light*.

Much has been written about Walter and his Spiritualism mainly because he was the prototype of Richard Mahony in HHR's novel *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Although there are similarities, between Walter and Richard, the novel is fiction. Perhaps the greatest difference is between the two Mary's, the wives of Walter and Richard. In the novel Mary is sceptical of the movement and frequently chides her husband. 'REALLY, Richard!...what next, I wonder?—'. Mary considers the encounters from the other world unbelievable. 'To think, because a table stood on two legs or a pencil wrote: "I am here," that dead people--people who lay mouldering in their graves!--were speaking to you.'

On the other hand, although the real Mary, Mary Richardson, does not appear to be over enthusiastic about Spiritualism she does not seem to oppose it. Moreover, she does attend some séances, especially after her brother dies.

So HHR spent her early years in a spiritualist household. Then her father died when she was 9, and from then on there were no apparent Spiritualistic beliefs in the household. In her autobiography *Myself When Young*, written when HHR was 76, she states that, as an older child she read 3 Spiritualist books but wondered what she made of them.(only one of these is actually a Spiritualist text).

But back to Dorothy Green and her statement (**screen**). In Dorothy Green's book about Henry Handel Richardson, *Ulysses Bound*, she said, 'Richardson's life-long adherence to Spiritualism is a fact which has largely been ignored.' This book was first published in 1973, and Richardson's involvement in Spiritualism was largely ignored until 1996 when 2 events occurred.

The first was a conference to recognize the 50th anniversary of HHR's death. (I attended that conference and I don't remember any mention of HHR's connection to Spiritualism, but I did not know about it then.) More importantly to us here, is the release of letters pertaining to HHR, the other event.

The availability of these letters has had a troubled history and they were not readily available until 1996. Richardson left her entire estate to her friend and companion, Olga Roncorini. A large number of letters had been destroyed at HHR's request, except some of the correspondence from Richardson's Australian friend Mary Kernot, (both to and from Richardson.) which she returned to Mary who sent them to the Mitchell Library. Then, in the 1950's and early 1960's, The National Library obtained three substantial collections from the

Mitchell Library, including letters from from Oliver Stonor and Nettie Palmer as well as Mary Kernot.

The National Library, having obtained these letters, was then directed by the Mitchell Library that they were to be closed for fifty years. They were not opened until 1996. From 2000 on, the letters have become easily accessible through their publication in three volumes, edited by Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele from Monash. (show book). These three collections totalled a few hundred letters and provide much of the information about HHR's involvement with Spiritualism.

However, there had been a small book published in 1957, by Olga Roncoroni and Edna Purdie, who had been secretary to George Robertson, HHR's husband. *The book was Henry Handel Richardson: Some Personal Impressions*. To be fair to Olga, she denied HHR was a Spiritualist and that she was more interested in scientific research and had no use for demonstrations of clairvoyance or for sittings with alleged mediums. Nevertheless, elsewhere Roncorini describes some of the sittings in the Robertson household with the two housekeepers, Irene and Else Stumpp, and writes that Richardson and Irene sat at an Ouija-board, 'their hands on the indicator, for a period every day.' Her Ouija-board is at Chiltern

Since the release of *The Letters*, there has been some commentary about HHR's involvement with Spiritualism in papers and books. In the three volumes of *The Letters* the amount dealing with Spiritualism itself is minute, just 3 entries in the index, although there are tangential references. We do better looking for the Society for Psychical Research, 12 entries. HHR joined the SPR on coming to London in 1904, was a member of the London Spiritual Alliance by 1912 and The National Laboratory of Psychical Research in 1928.

There is a substantial number of letters to the founder of The National Laboratory, Harry Price, between 1930 and 1934. These are mainly short business letters about the payment to attend séances with eminent mediums. He addressed her, and she signed herself as Mrs J G Robertson or Ethel F L Robertson although he knew she went by the name of Henry Handel Richardson. The Laboratory was concerned with exploring the truth in séances and exposing fraud. (Eventually, Price himself was deemed fraudulent. Actually it was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who caught him cheating during a séance)

Other letters are more pertinent to Spiritualism. These were sent to her old school friend Mary Kernot. This vast correspondence dates from 1911 right up the HHR's death, where they discussed many things and Spiritualism was only a small but important part. One could say that she tried very hard to convince Mary to take Spiritualism seriously, and she sent copies of the journal *Light* and quite a few books on the subject over the years.

She also wrote to Mary about the lighter side of Spiritualist manifestations when unexplained knocks and bangs and movement of the furniture made by a merry little poltergeist in their home. The more serious letters were written after her husband George

died in 1933. Some are just snippets inserted amongst other conversations but tell of her belief. There were also letters of consolation; for the loss of Mary's dog, her brother and in later years her husband: 'Cherish that sense of companionship you have, my dear: it's good for both of you, & [sic] is probably a very real thing. Mine has not yet been lost—after close on eleven years.' She goes on to say that shadowy figures are real: 'Indeed, a successful sitting gives an extraordinary sense of *life*'.

I will read part of a letter written in January 1934, (p 4) as HHR gives a summary of her involvement with Spiritualism. Her voice with inflections comes through.

You say you would be interested in----- help of a human telephone.

She ends writing on this subject with a plea for privacy. (screen)

Please keep it all to yourself. *You* know I shd hate my privacy invaded. When I'm gone it will be time enough for people to know more about me.

There were other requests for the privacy of her beliefs.

It's not a subject I care to push on those who disbelieve or disapprove; but I am quite ready to speak of it to a sympathetic listener. But it would be for your ears alone. On no account wld [sic] I have my private beliefs made the subject of talk.

And

But please, Mary, keep *my* interest in these things to yourself. I shd [sic] hate, more than words can say, my private beliefs & [sic] opinions to get anywhere near the press. I am most emphatically not cut out to be a martyr.'

The question is whether HHR is more interested in keeping her private life and that of the author separate or is it her beliefs. Harry Price of the National Laboratory had asked her to lend her name to a report exposing the fraud of the medium Helen Duncan. She replies, 'I've worked for twenty years to keep this apart from my private name, & [sic] on no account wish the two to be brought into connection in print.'

In the converse, but perhaps it is the same. HHR wants her name as an author accepted. When she was awarded the King George V Silver Jubilee medal in 1935, the accompanying document headed 'Buckingham Palace' stated the award was for Mrs J G Robertson. She

returned the document immediately to Australia House refusing to accept the medal under that name. On her death-bed, at the age of 76, she insisted her real name (Mrs Ethel Robertson) be removed from the MGM movie contract for the film rights to FRM and that of HHR be substituted.

However, at the beginning of the passage I read to you, she writes, (**screen**)

Tell me you do not consider me a 'flighty' or 'hysterical' person.--- Believe me, I am neither, but as sane & critical as they're made.

The fear of insanity probably haunted HHR. She was greatly troubled by her father's mental illness before he died, probably due to syphilis. The diagnosis of his dementia has recently been contested by Bruce Steele.

In 1920 Elliott O'Donnell, a ghost hunter and a writer of ghost stories, (and who believed in ghosts), wrote *Menace of Spiritualism* in which he equated Spiritualists with weak minds: 'the generality of people attracted by Spiritualism are either abnormal or weak-minded, or that they eventually become so, once having adopted that cult.'¹He goes on to say that the hallucinations experienced by patients suffering from mental aberration are similar to the phenomena claimed by Spiritualists.

In 1932 Father Knapp, a Roman Catholic priest, launched an attack on Spiritualism in the *Sunday Graphic*. He said that Spiritualism was a serious menace to the mental health of the people as well as to their spiritual welfare. He added that its practice had sent a million people mad. The Roman Catholic Church was opposed to the Spiritualist movement. 1864, Spiritualist writings were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books (*Index librorum prohibitorum*). In 1898 and 1917 the Holy See denounced the movement and Pope Pius IX condemned the evil twins of Spiritualism and socialism

The Spiritualist movement had a mixed history of popularity and rejection. After the first invigorating acceptance, scepticism led to its decline, especially after many fraudulent episodes were exposed. There was a re-emergence during and after the First World War.

In England, where Richardson was living, the popularity peaked around 1937-38. An enquiry from a committee acting for the Archbishop of Canterbury (1937) found that there were 520 affiliated societies distributed throughout Britain and that same year 9,000 people gathered at the Royal Albert Hall to hear Estelle Roberts speaking to the dead, while a further 60,000 applied to see her give five further demonstrations in 1938.

To many, Spiritualism is connected to a place of worship, a Spiritualist Church, but started through an **anti**-Christian Spiritualism movement during the 19th century, in parts of London and the North of England. These were mainly working-class converts who, without a belief

in Christ, believed that an after-life was a prolongation, on a higher plane, of the present life, with its human aims and interests which assured them of immortality.

The **anti**-Christian Spiritualists ultimately reverted to a form of church organization because of a decision made sometime during the 1860s to hold Sunday services as a rational alternative to Christian worship. Importantly, the séance itself came to resemble Christian services; holding prayers, Bible readings, and hymn singing, before, during and after the séance.

Richardson did not attend a Spiritualist Church, but much to Olga Roncorini's dismay, she was buried by a spiritualist pastor. Olga writes following HHR's funeral—

Everything went wrong at H.H.R.'s cremation. The flowers were late. The organist couldn't play the Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis, by Vaughn Williams which she had particularly wished. Eves had told the Authorities that H.H.R. was a 'Spiritualist', which was untrue. She had always been interested in the scientific work of psychic research. As a result a Spiritualist Pastor arrived, and conducted the Service which bore no resemblance to the Church of England Service which she had wanted. H.H.R. had said, 'I want the good old words of the C. of E. funeral service.

The final wishes of HHR may have been true, but I think HHR may have been pleased at the arrival of the Spiritualist Pastor.

Phantom Walls Sir Oliver Lodge

Raymond Sir Oliver Lodge

Many Mansions Air Marshall Lord Dowding

Edge of the Etheric Arthur Findlay

Spiritualism
