

Chiltern Remembers Henry Handel Richardson

The North East Victorian town, Chiltern, slumbers peacefully just one kilometre north west of the Hume Freeway, pretty much equi-distant between Wangaratta and Wodonga. Every day of the year thousands of vehicles pass the exit to the town, their occupants, presumably, in the main blissfully unaware of the town's existence. For many years the then Hume Highway passed right through the town's narrow shopping precinct, a streetscape that has changed very little over the more than a century since buildings first appeared there. Chiltern is one of the four towns in the Indigo Shire that are sometimes referred to as Australia's most significant collection of historic towns. The other three are Beechworth, Rutherglen and Yackandandah.

The first Europeans to settle the area around Chiltern took up pastoral leases during the 1840's. Gold was discovered there in 1858, which resulted in thousands of miners, eager to make their fortune, flocking to the various leads that made up the Indigo goldfield. At its height the population was estimated to be 20,000. However by the 1870's the town that had grown up on the back of the gold rush was already in decline as mining activity underwent a sharp downturn. To make matters worse, a severe drought was also having an impact, when, in 1876, a new doctor and his family arrived to take over the existing medical practice.

Doctor Walter Richardson settled in Chiltern mid-1876, to be followed by his wife Mary and their two daughters, Ethel aged six and Lil aged four, who took up residence in August of that year. Ethel went on to gain everlasting fame for her literary efforts, using the pseudonym Henry Handel Richardson (HHR). Her great trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is heavily based on the story of her father's life, although her husband reportedly said that in drawing Mahony's portrait she was really drawing her own. The trilogy tells of the tortuous struggle with life that an immigrant Irish doctor had, living in the then Colony of Victoria during the second half of the nineteenth century. One English critic has described it as "one of the great inexorable books of the world." Of course those who have heard of Henry Handel Richardson, are more than likely to associate her with *The Getting of Wisdom*, her coming of age novel that drew on her days as a student at Presbyterian Ladies College in East Melbourne, filmed very successfully by Bruce Beresford in 1977.

The Richardson family lived in Chiltern for a period of about fourteen months, renting "the best local property", Lake View, which still stands today a short distance from the town's main street. Many people, including locals, often ask why Chiltern makes such a "fuss" about Richardson, when she was, after all, resident in the town for a relatively short period of her life. The answer is simple. Lake View is the only memorial to Henry Handel Richardson that can be found anywhere in the world. She has no burial site, her ashes having been scattered on the sea near Hastings in England, where she lived and wrote for many years. There are other Victorian properties lived in by the Richardson family. In the case of the Koroit post office, where Mrs. Richardson was postmistress, there is a brass plaque (in need of polishing) reminding the passer-by that Henry Handel Richardson once lived there. However, Lake View is the only former Richardson residence that is open to the public, and is now in the care of the National Trust.

Another reason that present-day Chiltern chooses to remember Henry Handel Richardson, relates to the significance of the family's Chiltern experience. The third book of her trilogy, *Ultima Thule*, draws on the family's traumatic period spent in Barambogie (read Chiltern). For the novel's chief character, Richard Mahony, as it was for her own father, Walter Richardson, Chiltern was really the beginning of the end. Or as Michael Ackland in his excellent biography *Henry Handel Richardson: A Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) says referring to the Richardson family, "Chiltern marked the end of the family's hopes." Walter Richardson's wife and young children witnessed and shared his gradual disintegration on a daily basis. It is now generally agreed that Richardson was suffering from syphilis, which led to a gradual, yet accelerating, mental and physical breakdown over the final twenty years of his life. (The impact of this, on his children in particular, doesn't bear thinking about.) There is no doubt this left deep mental scars on both children for the remainder of their lives. HHR herself once said that a

writer usually had all his material by the age of ten. Coincidentally, she was ten when her father died, finally releasing the family from the torment and shame that his condition had caused for so many years.

How then does Chiltern choose to remember Henry Handel Richardson? Local people were very much to the fore when the fight to preserve "Lake View" took place during the late 1960's. Eventually the National Trust stepped in and assumed responsibility for the house which was officially opened as a Richardson memorial on the one hundredth anniversary of her birth, January 3, 1870. Every year since 1970, her birthday has been celebrated at Lake View. Naturally the celebration always includes a birthday cake and spirited rendition of "happy birthday to HHR" as well as one or two addresses focusing on some aspect of the Richardson family's time spent in Chiltern.

Following this year's celebration, a decision was made (somewhat belatedly perhaps) to form the Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia. The Society's mission is to "celebrate and promote the writings (including music) of HHR." Membership of the Society is already nearing the one hundred mark and its first organised event will take place in October this year with a tour of most of the sites in Victoria, once occupied by the Richardson family. The tour will visit her birthplace Blanche Terrace in East Melbourne, as well as Chiltern, Queenscliff and Maldon.

The January 3, 2009 birthday celebration in Chiltern promises to be a very special occasion, when HHR's great-niece and nephew, together with their families will be present. HHR herself had no children, but her sister Lil had one son and it is his two children, Angela and Patrick Neustatter, who will be joining the celebration. Angela Neustatter who lives in London has recently donated a writing desk, used for many years by her great-aunt, to the Chiltern Athenaeum museum where it will remain on permanent display.

So sixty- one years after her death, at Hastings, England, at the age of seventy- six, HHR and her writing are enjoying a renaissance among an ever-growing band of devotees, through the Society that takes her name. In Chiltern, her childhood home still gazes across the reflective water of nearby Lake Anderson, just as it did all those years ago when HHR bounced her ball on its verandas, telling herself stories as she struggled to cope with the trauma of her father's lengthy, and terminal illness.