

The Return of the Native: HHR's visit to Australia in 1912

Clive Probyn

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Richardson's parents emigrated from England to Australia after the first Gold Rush: her father, Dr Walter Richardson, came out to Australia in August 1852; her mother, Mary Bailey, in May 1853.

HHR herself was born in Melbourne in January 1870, and her first voyage across the world had been at the age of 3 years and 2 months, in April 1873, returning to Australia in September 1874.

As we all know, she spent just eleven months of her life in Chiltern, in two periods□ from July 27 1876 to 26 January 1877 (the next 3 months were spent in Queenscliff), then back in Chiltern from late April until her final departure in the last week of September 1877.

Eleven years later, having left PLC, she and her younger sister Lil were taken by their mother to England, arriving there on 11 September 1888. HHR then enrolled as a piano student at the Leipzig Conservatorium.

As a married woman, she travelled frequently in Europe, and less frequently to the West Indies, and South Africa. Most of her writing, however (four and a bit of her six novels), is concerned with her native country, to which she made only one return visit. This was from 2 August to 23 November 1912, and it is this that I want to speak about today. I shall end with her comments on Chiltern, dated 12 October.

In 1912 HHR was 42 years old, the successful author of two largely autobiographical novels, *Maurice Guest* (1908) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910). It was 36 years after she had last bounced a ball against these brick walls, reciting verses to its rhythm hour after hour. This was the

place to which she gave the fictional name of Barambogie.

She kept notes on the 1912 trip, an account of places, people, events, plants, colours, slang phrases she overheard, the effects of light on water, the colours of dawn and sunset, place names, distances, various colours of the earth, the appearance of gums in the heat, and so on—whatever she needed and could turn to account in the novel that had been shaping itself in her mind since February 1911 (Letter 45), and which was to occupy three volumes and take over her life until 1930. Just occasionally, these Notes reveal personal, even intimate details, buried among the instructions to herself to include specific things in the future novel. The Notes have come down to us in the form of a typescript produced after the event from a handwritten original by her secretary Olga Roncoroni. It is now in the National Library of Australia in Canberra. [1] <#\_ftn1> They describe not only what she saw but also how she felt about what she saw. Not only that, they also record how she thinks her parents might have felt and experienced in the same places sixty years previously. It is sometimes hard to distinguish HHR's comments on the landscape she describes from those she puts in the mouths of her parents, and in some cases it is impossible to know how to interpret comments that we only know from their later appearance in the three novels. What HHR sees, therefore, is not always an easy matter to define. She had already written in great detail about her own early years in Maldon in *The Getting of Wisdom*, published just two years before her trip to Australia, but it is in the trilogy that she produced her most vivid description of the Australian landscape.

The Notes give a very different record of her experience. There is no idyllic image of the lush, fertile, natural bounty that we read of in Maldon. The western and north-eastern Victorian landscape she experiences in the late winter to summer of 1912 is hard, grey, dry, a dusty melancholic backdrop to struggle and hardship. It is as though she is looking at it already through the tragedy of *Richard Mahony*, bending it to the narrative needs of *Ultima Thule*, which is of course the narrative of a man's disintegration and collapse.

The Notes are not simply an account of what happened, a daily series of random events and observations unrolling in time, but a confirmation in her own 1912 experience of what she had already experienced as a reader of her parents' letters of the 1850s to the 1870s. She opens the Notes with this: □The courage required to undertake such a voyage in all the discomforts of the fifties. Motive—power very strong; or adventurous spirit of the English illustrated. Conditions in England evidently very bad<sup>1</sup>.

HHR arrived in Australia with the plot of the novel already formed, and the purpose of her travels in Victoria was to reveal and therefore confirm the experience of her parents, almost two generations before. This was to be a work of historical reconstruction: she was not interested in discovering something new for herself. It was what we would now call a research trip: it was work, and its purpose was to check the already known, correct where necessary, add detail and measurements, and also transcribe material from printed sources. Even so, HHR used her own eyes and interviewed people who had actually known Walter and Mary Richardson. The 1912 Notes is in fact the earliest written outline we have of her great trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, although at this stage it had neither title nor distinct form.

Sixty years separate the parents' from the daughter's experience of Australia, and inevitably changes had occurred in that time. In 1912 HHR sees the last quarter of the previous century from the relative comfort of a seat in a speeding railway carriage, or from the comfort of the best available hotels, like the Windsor in Melbourne, Craig's in Ballarat, or the Ozone in Queenscliff. Her parents had made do with a canvas tent, horses and carts, wagons and coaches, and their own feet. What, then, was the daughter's journey into her parents' lives in Victoria. What was her route?

Having crossed the Indian Ocean, HHR's first landfall was Fremantle, on 3 September 1912, where she is dazzled by the intense gentian blue of the sky after rain and hail showers, distracted by the beating of rain on a zinc roof, dismayed by the crowds of loafers outside the public houses, instructed by language difference (the word "docket" is used for "bill"), and, like many European visitors, including her contemporary D H Lawrence, was drawn to the "melancholy, grey-green trees stretching far up into the sky. Their weeping foliage. (Sparkling with rain). . . The unfinished, ragged, straggly look of everything. Untidy...A chemist in shirt sleeves." In a manuscript botanical addition she inserts the word "Byronia".<sup>1</sup>

On 8 September she arrives in Adelaide, noting that in 1863 a passage by a sailing vessel was made to Adelaide in 69 days. Another took ten months<sup>1</sup>

When she arrives in Port Philip Bay she is again struck by colour, this time "Red roofs, blue and white water, blue and white sky", and when she goes to

Malvern, among the □jerry-built little houses<sup>1</sup>, she is again struck by the □temporariness of all the buildings in towns and suburbs.<sup>1</sup> Even at this early date, Richard Mahony is an almost fully formed character in HHR's mind, a character to whom she speaks, as if to an actual acquaintance: □The excessive familiarity of the people must have grated on Mahony,<sup>1</sup> she notes. Such a comment is only possible, of course, because HHR here speaks not only of Mahony here but also of herself (the phrase is □must have grated<sup>1</sup>, not that it did grate□we are in a creative area where the real and the imagined are utterly inseparable). She notes the names of hotels in Melbourne, for future reference, and records again what she calls □The over-friendliness of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Her first foray out of Melbourne is to Geelong, and she goes there by train, via Footscray and Newport, jotting down the fact that Geelong got its first tram in 1912. She visits Yarra Bend, the location and landscape for Richard Mahony's final breakdown, in the Asylum there□ and although this must have been a particularly distressing expedition for the daughter/novelist, there is no such record in the Notes. She returns to Melbourne after travelling through Essendon, Woodend, Gisborne, Keilor Bacchus Marsh, and Melton, the distances carefully recorded for later use.

On 19 September she takes a detour, to the Dandenongs, not a location in the novel but the place where her old schoolfriend and correspondent Mary Kernot lived, and in whose home she stayed for a couple of days. She then visits Richmond (the South Richmond post office had been her last home in Australia), the hills of Hawthorn, the Yarra Bridge, Vaucluse, the Fitzroy Gardens (where we know from other sources that she took photographs of her Fitzroy birthplace, of PLC, and of the location of the final scene of *The Getting of Wisdom* in Fitzroy Gardens). She also makes detailed notes on the foliage of she-oaks, the brown grass tussocks which, □if you close your eyes, you could mistake for sheep<sup>1</sup>, the wattle, the gums at Mount Macedon □ragged beyond description.<sup>1</sup>

After looking at Castlemaine, she takes the road to Maldon on 23 September, again responding to the fruit and flowers of this place, the □Flowers in kerosine tins. The many uses to which these tins are put<sup>1</sup> and the capeweed □brought over by von Müller to obviate drought.<sup>1</sup>

The mining towns of Creswick and Ballarat are of central importance to the first volume of her trilogy, and are scrutinised for their colours, their road layouts, their views and perspectives, and she makes a sketch map of the location of Government Camp and Bakery Hill, for the Eureka Stockade episode in the novel. On 29 September she is suffering what she calls the □awful dust<sup>1</sup> of Ballarat and has evidently done some research among the

newspapers and directories there, noting that her father's house in Ballarat is now numbered 4 Webster Street, and that he had been a trustee of Christ Church. She stays in Ballarat for some days and then sets off back to Geelong by train, noting down sights and sounds from the train itself  
□Uphill for train...Train puffing.<sup>1</sup> At Warrenheip she hears and records the conductor's call □Anyone for Navigator?<sup>1</sup>

It is perfectly clear from all of this that she is both re-enacting the journey of her parents, and at the same time telling herself about the future novel: one cryptic comment reads, □Red earth. Shortly after this Mahony would say what he did [a comment not here explained]...Warrenheip and Buninyong still visible, and blue ranges, which they would drive towards, all day. Country grows flatter and less treey. Hills rise like islands from a sea of trees.<sup>1</sup> Mahony and Polly would have the Youyangs on their right, on leaving Geelong.<sup>1</sup> And then there is an almost unique and unexpected acknowledgement that in all of this time she is not alone but has been accompanied by her husband, John George Robertson, the Professor of German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of London: □Man addressed N[ub]. as <sup>3</sup>Gent.<sup>2</sup> This cryptic reference to her husband's nickname brings him into focus, if only for an instant. In fact, there were two more in her party, neither of whom is mentioned in the Notes, and this was her sister Lil and her son, the nine-year old Walter Lindesay Neustatter. [2] <#\_ftn2>

The party returns to Melbourne on 2 October□it is lilac time, along with banksias, plums and cherries, with cape weed everywhere. The following day sees her arriving by coach on Mount Dandenong, at Mary Kernot's house, where she spends another two days□noticing the birds, the jackasses in particular, the trees, the smell of wood fires, the ground orchids□before travelling by road to Queenscliffe on 5 October. Here she spends two days and collects more photographic views of the place and the Bay. She notes □The absolute deadness of the place except in the season: Dec 15 to end of March.<sup>1</sup> And then, suddenly, there is a brief, intense personal memory of her father, triggered by being in this particular place: □My remembrances of him in order: pale, with the red and white comforter, fetched from blacksmith. Taking us children for a walk. Sitting in the cargo boat.<sup>1</sup>

On 8 October she sets out for Koroit and Warrnambool (□Like the Sussex Downs<sup>1</sup>). Here she visits her father's grave-site and copies down the inscription on it. She notes □The meanness of the wooden addition to the [Koroit] Post Office<sup>1</sup> (where her father died), and it is here that she seems to be writing directly into the novel as well as describing her father too. Walter Richardson and Richard Mahony, the real and the fictional, are at this point indistinguishable:

Behind those two little windows he died□lay dead□Why do I feel so strongly about him? An early Victorian man, with all the prejudices and limitations of his time. But I see him as a seeker, with all the higher needs in him crushed physically, dissipated mentally, dazed and confused by the ultimate demands of life. He was never equal to it.

>From Warrnambool she returns to Melbourne via Geelong, and learns from the Smart family there that her father was □Proud, reserved, hot-tempered; so upright that he could not imagine dishonesty.<sup>1</sup> She also writes down five sentences spoken by him, and remembered by the Smarts.

Finally, on 12 October 1912, either HHR alone, or HHR and her husband, or HHR and her husband and little Walter, are on their way to Chiltern by train from Melbourne, via Wallan, Broadford, Euroa, Benalla, Wangaratta (still the route of the railway line and of the M31/Hume highway). HHR speaks of □Miserable little bush townships along the line.<sup>1</sup>). Again, it is the landscape that preoccupies her, the □pale-porcelain blue sky...the pale blue smoke of burning trees... brown dust.<sup>1</sup> It is now late winter/early spring. Here is the whole Chiltern entry and it will be read today by Graeme Banks:

ON THE WAY TO CHILTERN. October 12th, 1912.

The inevitable Victorian view: blue ranges, nobbly hills (bare), in background, stone-strewn paddocks, a few contorted trees.

Tuft grass.

Past Wallan, the country becomes more wooded.

Bracken very brown. Hillier.

Very heavy dew indicative of a fine day.

Miserable little bush townships along the line.

Just before Broadford a hill□a conical volcanic peak, thickly wooded.

Broadford pretty: hilly, up ad down, trees, red creek. Fields of capeweed.

October 12th, 1912.

Some young gum-scrub as red as geraniums.

Sheets of yellow.

Gumtrees look white in the strong light. In summer they must be quite white.

Flat, lightly timbered country, now yellow with capeweed but in summer it would be one white desolate plain.

Gums very dry, and brown grey.

The inevitable blue, dream hills.

Line of nobbly hills on the right.

Euroa. At the foot of low ranges; tidy villas in gardens. Long roads, clouds of dust.

Sandy soil; sun baking on it.

Red sorrel. Vines quite in leaf. (October 12th.)

Flat treey plains; always the low wooded ranges on the right. A pale porcelain-blue sky. One white floating cloud.

(His talents as a reader and reciter.)

Whole paddocks, where every tree had been ring-barked.

Pale blue smoke of burning trees.

Barren brown dust, brown foliage, glare of sun.

After Benalla, hills on both sides.

After Wangaratta, still blue ranges.

CHILTERN.

Ranges all round: wooded.

Narrow streets of the township; the crude red of the brick.

The great bare, green-bordered roads. All the horrid sticky littleness of the place. To think of it going on day after day, and no hope of escape.

Banksias everywhere.

(He could not always find his words.)

The lagoon almost dried up.

The right-of-way beside the house.

Flies, blowflies, dust, heat.

Blaze of light and sun (October); bare roads.

Lilac full out. Figs quite large. Shops shut up.

Journey back.

The gums grey in the heat; they droop, look withered. Sky grey with heat; trunks grey. Hills full of bare grey trunks. Grey earth.

It would be in Chiltern, with nothing to do, that he would abandon him=[self] to spiritualism.

Paddock of grey ghosts of trees.

The earth round Wangaratta when first turned up is pink; it fades in the sun to yellow white.

Between Wangaratta and Benalla very high mountains on the left.

Pale grey ghosts.

What are we to make of the Chiltern setting? The drama of Ultima Thule centres on the Chiltern scenes and Richard Mahony's psychological, physical and professional breakdown in Lakeview. It is of course the inner, psychological process that concentrates our attention. Chiltern, the setting for that breakdown, is much more than a background to Mahony's tragedy. It is a part of the psychological foreground, presenting the kind of landscape

that seems in some way to be a cause as well as the framework.

HHR does not mention that she also walked around Lakeview and took photographs of the building and its surroundings. Six lines below this account of Chiltern, she is in the Indian Ocean on the way home, and it is 27 October.

We've noticed that HHR's Notes combine observations, memory, projection forwards into the evolving novel, and lots of facts about roads, colours, seasons, plants, flowers, and measurements such as distances between places, and timetables for coach runs and train journeys. We've also noticed that it is at times impossible to separate out what HHR might be saying in her own voice from what she appears to be saying through the voices of her father Walter Richardson and of Richard Mahony, the fictional re-creation of her father. When she came to write the first two paragraphs of *Ultima Thule*, however, that separation had been achieved and could not be clearer. All of her preparatory work, the travel, the research, the many drafts, come down to this opening page: here is Mahony and here is HHR in the same paragraph, but the difference between them is stark, absolute, and now recognises two entirely different responses to the challenge of the Australian landscape: (See paragraphs two and three of *Ultima Thule*)

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[1] <#\_ftnref1> National Library of Australia (Canberra), MS 133: Notes 1912.

[2] <#\_ftnref2> Lil is listed on the ship's passenger list (according to Peter Cuffley), and Walter appears in some of HHR's own photographic record of the visit.