

## The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney

- some thoughts from Charles Sherlock

It took me a while to get into the first volume of the trilogy. The descriptions of early gold mining in Ballarat were interesting, but it was not until Polly / Mary came into view that things got moving. I became increasingly interested, and wanted to keep reading.

The structure of the book seemed to be a bit like a spiral – working around the setting of Ballarat, meeting a widening range of characters whose relationships steadily deepened, until towards the end things got quite intense. The last couple of chapters seemed to contain little but Richard's internal thoughts (as identified by HHR).

A few things I noticed enough to mention them to Peta:

- The 'rhythm' and balance of many sentences, and the wide, well-used vocabulary. I learnt some new words – e.g. 'nonce' – but what was the game 'loo'?
- The sharp and memorable characterisation of people, and their shifting relationships. The story seemed to reflect debated notions of character being 'fixed' (e.g. Johnny being hopelessly bad from infancy, Purdy and Ned as hopelessly flighty) or changing (especially as seen in Richard himself).
- The early history of Ballarat: from alluvial to hand-digging to company mining, the development of 'east' and 'west', Lake Wendouree, the Legislative Council and Constitution, the medical and legal professions, etc. How do the characters who play a part in public life relate to historical personages?
- HHR's significant insights into the distinct 'worlds' in which men and women lived in 'traditional' English-speaking societies, especially the (post-Industrial Revolution) division between domestic and employed work.
- The book does not reflect the huge gender imbalance in the population in these years, however. It seems more positive about women's role in the emergence of the Victorian middle class than I understand to be the case: cf the wives of clergy who died between 1848 and 1880 from *anomie* due to the (unexpected) pressures on them to create and sustain the middle class 'stability' that was assumed to be their role in England. Polly / Mary would have made a wonderful Archdeacon's spouse!
- The assumption that all but incorrigibles were church-going – which seemed to influence most characters' outlook on and living of life more positively than I'd expected. Archdeacon Long is an attractive figure – modelled on Hussey Macartney?
- The intellectual issues of the 1850-70s are given more attention than I'd expected. Richard's (HHR's?) notes on Genesis reflect accurately the Edinburgh Enlightenment, and emerging 'Higher Criticism': his concern for Polly's reaction mirrors that of Darwin towards his wife (Emma?) as issues around 'evolution' came to the fore.
- The difficulties of travel, yet the willingness of people to put up with a lot to move around (until the railways came – will be interested to see how this develops in the later books as cars appear).

