

‘Maldon and *The Getting of Wisdom*:
Autobiography and place,
Fact and Fiction’

A talk given at the Henry Handel Richardson Celebration Weekend,
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by

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The Getting of Wisdom, Henry Handel Richardson’s favourite novel, was published in 1910, twenty-four years after she left Maldon for Melbourne. It overlapped with the finishing of her first novel, *Maurice Guest*, published in 1908. If we look at the shape of Richardson’s career as a writer, particularly in relation to her use of sources, we might notice that, chronologically, her career goes backwards—she returns, progressively, to earlier and earlier stages of her life, and eventually, in her great trilogy of novels *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, she re-creates the early, indeed pre-marital lives of her parents, almost twenty years before her own birth in 1870. It is as though she set out to answer two very large and connected questions: where do I come from and does an understanding of my origins help me to know what I am.

Five of her six novels, *Maurice Guest*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* trilogy, are, broadly speaking, autobiographical works that unwind a narrative in reverse chronological order. Her first novel, *Maurice Guest*, charts her

student days and adulthood in Germany—if the fictional Maurice is in his early twenties, his creator was only 26 when she began writing him. The very last part of the trilogy, the so-called Cuffy chapters, that might have become a fourth volume, ending with ‘Australia’s finest hour’ at Gallipoli, reflect aspects of HHR’s own infancy and childhood: as they open, in 1880, HHR would have been ten years old. She makes Cuffy only two years younger. Richardson keeps her characters firmly within the orbit of her own experience: as she creates them, she also creates aspects of herself.

The Getting of Wisdom describes not just a version of HHR’s girlhood and adolescence: it also outlines her theories of writing. It is a story of the making of a novelist; it is about how one learns to lie (in Plato’s sense), about the relationship between the imagination and what we call the real world. We never quite know where we are at any point in *The Getting of Wisdom*, and this is not only because the novel is about Laura’s *process* of growing up, and unfolding of her selfhood, but also because HHR herself was and remained in a state of uncertainty about herself and her art, never capable of and never interested in fixity, resolution, or in what would nowadays be described by the clichéd term ‘closure.’ She saw herself as a rebel and as a misfit. As a writer she was interested in processes and boundaries. She tests and sometimes breaks the rules. She is interested in transgression.

Maldon had a key role to play in all this. As a landscape, and as a community, it exercised a powerful influence on the shaping of the novel. It is one of two such shaping places—school being the other, and more powerful social organism, and one that will deny and re-form most of the ‘natural’, unschooled character of the young Laura. She will be asked to deny much of what Maldon has given her—notably its freedom from supervision by the parental eye—just as she will be asked to conceal the fact that not only does her mother make her clothes and do embroidery for sale but also (a far worse social stigma), that she earns her living in a post-office. Much of the novel is set against the backdrop of the Victorian city of Melbourne, but by comparison with Maldon and PLC Melbourne is not much more than a two-dimensional panorama. In *Maurice Guest* the sense of place (in this case Leipzig) is very strong, but again, no stronger than the set of international human relationships around its chief character. Like all novelists, Richardson is interested primarily in human psychology, not history, or topographical realism for its own sake. She was completely indifferent to the commercial character of Leipzig, aware of its military history, but not engaged by it as a writer. She is not at all interested in the fact that it was the *mining* industry that created and for a while sustained Maldon. Above all else, and as a

student of Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, Ibsen, and the Russian novel, she is ultimately interested not in questions of form or narrative techniques but in the nature of truth. And while we are saying what *The Getting of Wisdom* is not, I should add that *The Getting of Wisdom* is neither a children's book nor an attempt at autobiography. If you want autobiography, then her posthumously published autobiography *Myself When Young* might seem to provide it— but even here, the shaping vision of retrospect proves fatal to any assumption about a one-to one relationship between actual experience and its narration. We may be closer to the *truth* of her experience in *The Getting of Wisdom* than in the ostensibly factual autobiography, and I say this because of two discoveries in the novel, both Laura's: the first is that the self is not something given but something to be made, fabricated: we are not the passive products of a social system or context but, if we choose, creatures of our own making. In Laura's settler society, in 1880s Maldon and Melbourne, everything is possible—new and spectacular wealth, and equally spectacular failure, making something new or replicating the old. This is not a casual accident but the very essence of colonial society. Getting it wrong (and Laura habitually and naturally gets it wrong on many occasions) means the difference between being in and out, between membership and exclusion, between success and failure, and it demands the kind of

wisdom that coolly accepts hypocrisy as the way of the world. So, in chapter eleven we read of this fourteen-year-old's second great discovery, that the invisible engine that drives all social relationships, is necessarily neither talent nor intellect, but materialism, the possession of money:

Now, loud as money made itself in this young community, effectual as it was in cloaking shortcomings, it did not go all the way...some of the wealthiest, too, were aware that their antecedents would not stand a close scrutiny; and thus a mighty respect was engendered in them, for those who had nothing to fear...the three professions alone were sacro-sanct [i.e. the church, the law, and medicine]. The calling of architect, for example, or of civil engineer, was, if a fortune had not been accumulated, utterly without prestige; trade, any connection with trade...was a taint that nothing could remove; and those girls who were related to shopkeepers, or, more awful still, to publicans, would rather have bitten their tongues off, than have owned to the disgrace... Laura knew very well that good birth and an aristocratic appearance would not avail her, did the damaging fact leak out that Mother worked for a living. Work itself was bad enough... But the additional circumstance of Mother being a woman made things ten times worse: ladies did not work.

Writers are no good unless they can be both inside and outside at the same time, however, and surely the most painful truth in the whole novel lies in Laura's rapt absorption, as a witness, to the public accusation, humiliation, and eventual expulsion of Annie Johns, for theft. It is not so much the crime itself that transfixes Laura, nor is it the fact that she senses only too easily the power of

temptation for a poor student from a straitened family: it is the sheer *melodramatic excitement* of it all; and it is this —the shocking physical response in her when she feels her heart palpitating—that jolts her writing career into gear. Laura has read Dickens’s *Bleak House*, and projects for the miserable Annie Johns the same fate as the wretched crossing-sweeper Little Jo, in ‘a black, dilapidated street avoided by all decent people’, but at night, ‘a swarm of misery’. In other words, Laura has already experienced first in Literature what she now meets in Life, so the latter is not a discovery but a repetition and a confirmation. We are told later on that Laura’s thinking is ‘done mainly in pictures’ (187), and so she can write a romance set in Venice even though she has never been there and has no idea what a gondola looks like. When she is chastised and told to write about something she does know about, she thinks, immediately, of Warrenega, the novel’s name for what is of course Maldon (188). And it is here that the collision occurs between telling lies and romancing, between making it up and telling it how it is; and it is here that Laura makes her most important discovery:

As the light in the room went out, a kind of inner light seemed to go up in Laura; and both then, and in the following days, she thought hard. She was very ambitious, anxious to shine, not ready to accept defeat; and, to the next literary contest, she brought the description of an excursion to the hills and gullies that surrounded Warrenega; into which she

had worked an adventure with some vagrant blacks. She and Pin and the boys had often picknicked on these hills, with their lunches packed in billies; and she had seen the caves and rocky holes where blackfellows were said to have hidden themselves, in early times; but neither this particular excursion, nor the exciting incident, which she described with all the aplomb of an eyewitness, had ever taken place. That is to say: not a word of her narration was true, but every world of it might have been true.

And with this she had an unqualified success.

“I believe there’s something in you after all, “ said Cupid to her, that night—“Anyhow, you know now, what it is to be true, yet not dull and prosy.”

And Laura manfully choked back her violent desire to cry out, that not a word of her story was fact.’ (189).

So Realism is an *effect*, not the thing itself: it is a *style* that can be learnt, it is not necessarily something that must first be lived, or that is in some way beholden to life itself. In fact, the ‘exciting’ but untold incident in Laura’s Warrenega story does have its counterpart in *Myself When Young*, but it is of no novelistic use to her at all. During the actual picnic in and around the nearby hills and gullies of Maldon, and probably with one of the children of the neighbouring Calder family, boiling the billy, roasting potatoes, and so on, the children fence in a live frog with burning twigs and leaves— ‘to see what the frog would *do*’, as Richardson put it. The incident is shameful, of course, but it teaches Richardson the meaning of shame and shows her the unthinking cruelty of which unthinking children are capable. The specific incident is later

discarded, but the *message* of the incident about the cruelty of children towards others is carefully stored away for later use in her narrative set in PLC. A roasting frog is of no relevance, but sending someone to Coventry may be a human variant of it. It is the latter example of social cruelty that features in Laura's story.

On 27 August 1911 Richardson wrote the first of many letters to her former school-friend Mary Robertson (now Kernot, and the model for the character called Cupid in the novel). Her letter from London to Melbourne was in reply to Mary Kernot's fan letter, and it directs itself at the way to read this novel:

I thoroughly enjoyed my schooldays, & all they brought me. My aim in the book was to be truthful & sincere—even though I could only give a small portion of the truth—had I given the whole, Good Lord what an outcry there would have been!—and I am ready to vouch, with my whole heart, for the truth—the ideal truth, of course, not the truth of the facts represented in the book—of what I say... 'The Getting of Wisdom' is, so to speak, ten fingers held to my nose—in a most impolite attitude—in the direction of my reviewers. These insisted, or the majority of them did, that 'M[aurice]. G[uest].' could be nothing else than the personal confession of some misguided youth, who now put his sorrows on paper; & this diverted me so much that I determined to mystify them entirely & give them something to think about. They are, most of them, entirely [in] the dark as to my sex at present—the authorship has been kept a dead secret over here & I am bound to say some have not taken the mystification very kindly.

The end of the chapter containing Laura's literary experience may also be taken as a hit at those who were positive that M.G. was nothing but a transcription from life. (I, p. 204)

‘Nothing but a transcription from life.’ Here we are in Maldon today, where *The Getting of Wisdom* seems to have started. So what are we to make of Maldon’s role? What exactly *is* represented of its people and historical circumstances in the book? Did it provide no more to the budding novelist than some naturalistic details of the bush, a blank canvas. And can we ever be sure that Richardson is NOT holding up those ten figures, defying us to separate the fact from the fiction?

The small Richardson family—the recently widowed 45-year-old Mary Richardson, and her two daughters, the ten-year-old Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson, and her sister Lil, 14 months younger, arrived in Maldon because Mary had been transferred there from Koroit, on 27 August 1880. They stayed for six years. Mary was Maldon’s first postmistress, having learned the necessary administrative skills, including Morse code, and was put in charge of at least two male employees, a telegraph operator and a postman. The latter thought it beneath his dignity to work under a woman’s eye, and often let Mary feel his resentment. She was paid less than half the salary of the previous (male) incumbent—£120 per annum. After schooling from a series of governesses at home, Ettie Richardson left her Maldon home for the first time to

attend the PLC in Melbourne, where she is a student from April 1883 to December 1887.

In any narrative about growing up, origins are of course crucially important, and it has been recognised that *The Getting of Wisdom* offers some powerfully suggestive writing in its early chapters.

Here is a mythic reading of these early chapters, itself powered by the distance and passion of another, but later Australian expatriate (Germaine Greer):

Laura Tweedle Rambotham's journey from up-country to Melbourne is every bit as momentous as Maurice Guest's pilgrimage to Leipzig, but it means more to the reader who makes the journey with her, as we do not with Guest, from a paradisaical home which is more garden than house, where the animals named by Laura eat from her hand. The brashness of the provincial capital strikes as harshly upon the reader as it does upon Laura, and so we are committed to her from the outset. We view her weaknesses with the same kind of ruefulness as we view our own. At the end of the second chapter, she is a fully defined character (as Guest never becomes), the sort of skinny, pale, intense girl for whom puberty is still far distant at twelve years old. She is the difficult eldest child of an impecunious gentlewoman, replete with inappropriate notions of refinement, who might do well,

if only most of the time she were not listening to a different drummer, bursting with unanswerable questions which she dare not ask. The reader passes with her from the blinding light of the Australian outdoors to the penumbra of fake gentility which engulfs the Ladies' College. The interplay of dazzle and twilight is finely managed throughout the novel. In her red hat and purple dress, Laura is a child of the light who gropes through the shadowless gloom where her sparkle is to be exchanged for polish... (Introduction, *GW*, 1981, p. xiii)

This seems to say nothing we might refer specifically to Maldon. Instead, it translates this specific place into a kind of earthly Paradise, an Edenic place of colonial origin. What can we set against Germaine Greer's generalised interpretation? And where is the truth if the author we are dealing with has just told us that she was lying in the book about her schooldays?

In fact, there is so much to say about what Maldon represented (under the fictional guise of Warrenega) to her both at the time and for the rest of her life that we are forced to select examples. In her autobiography, Maldon is conceived and recalled in visual terms (like Laura) and named as the place where she spent

the happiest days of my childhood, free at last of unchildish anxieties; and when, of a sleepless night, my thoughts turn

homewards, it is usually in these carefree, sunlit surroundings that I find myself...Compared with Koroit, Maldon seemed and indeed was a lovely spot. For one thing trees abounded, Even the main street was lined with great gums, and almost every house had a garden, in springtime a profusion of white and coloured blossoms. Blue ranges banked the horizon, and to the rear of the little town rose its own particular hill—old, boulder-strewn Mount Tarrangower—an hour's stiff climb up a trickling gully, and a landmark in the district for miles around.' (35)

Richardson's description develops into a catalogue of raging horticultural fertility. She provides the perfect blueprint for a wholesale restoration of the Maldon post-office garden, should it ever be attempted. So, the six-roomed red brick house had a garden—

and what a garden! Never had we one like it. Here grew not only gums but shady firs, two immense arbours of yellow buddleia, so ancient that their trunks were unspan-able, cactuses nearly as tall as ourselves. For flowers there were roses and the usual giant geraniums, while a cool side-garden gave us jasmine, and violets galore [HHR's favourite flower for the rest of her life]. But all this was nothing to the fruit. Round the back verandah hung a muscatel-vine, in season so laden with grapes that neither we nor our friends could cope with them, and they ultimately went to the pig-tub. It was the same with the nectarines, the yield, too, of a single tree. In addition, we had peaches and apricots, red and white strawberries, raspberries and white-heart cherries, walnuts and almonds. The passion-fruit we left to our elders, who ate it with port-wine and cream, and plums and gooseberries were only good enough for jam. Neither we nor, as far as I can remember, anybody else grew vegetables. These were

supplied by John Chinaman, who trotted from door to door with their hanging baskets.’

This is from *Myself When Young*. But very little of this makes its way into the actual novel (maybe only two or three pages in chapter one), but there is just enough to make the *leaving* of it the point of this first chapter, where we are already witnessing Laura’s skill at make-believe narrative and experiencing that state of transition— of becoming something else—that fascinated Richardson for her whole career. So, as the book opens, Laura is about to leave: as the book closes, Laura has *already* disappeared round a bend in a path in the Fitzroy Gardens. Richardson is always interested in movement.

We might also notice that Richardson gives us rather more detail about Maldon horticulture than she does about Maldon personalities. This is fictional autobiography, not history or tourism after all, but we should not ignore the clues to what Richardson is *not* interested in, when she uses John Chinaman as a generic name for all of the individual Chinese vegetable growers. At the time, of course, there were anything up to six thousand Maldon lives being pursued alongside Richardson’s, including an unknown number of Chinese vegetable growers.

Other and contrasting contemporary observations and narratives have come down to us. While she was in her first year at PLC, and

covertly reading *Yellow Backs* in the outside bathroom of the Maldon post-office, the town council employed a street cleaner on an annual contract of a pound a week. He lived in a simultaneous but parallel universe. He was a prolific poet, in Welsh; he was called Joseph Jenkins, and he kept a diary of his years in Maldon and elsewhere. He thatched, ditched, ploughed, built, emptied cess pits, dug wells and, in his spare time read and enjoyed Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's great *Iliad*, Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained* (he preferred the latter!). As far as I know he never mentioned the Richardsons in his diary, even though he must have regularly used the post-office and the Athenaeum next door to it. When *he* noticed the Chinese, as a fellow member of the labouring classes in Maldon, he added the sort of specific, observed detail we would associate with the novelist's inquisitive art: 'we walked home in single file like the Chinamen do. They never walk two abreast in order not to tramp on too many innocent worms' (130). And of the vegetable growers, he noted, 'They carry every variety of vegetables from door to door in two big baskets suspended from a pole across the shoulders. The contents of each basket weigh about eighty pounds when they start their round. They travel at the trot, and the spring of the pole helps them, for they keep in step with it' (150).

If we wonder why Richardson has given us so much gastronomic detail about this wonderful place, the reason is not simply because she likes realistic detail. *Myself When Young* was written sixty years after these events had taken place. It was, in a sense, her war work. In the early 1940s, literally over her head, the Battle of Britain was fought and won across the south coast of England. Her letters to Mary Kernot were constrained by censorship laws, but what is perfectly clear is that Richardson (like most other people at the time) felt that life itself was on hold: the inescapable, ordinary, everyday sign of total war was all sorts of food shortages and rationing of clothes, petrol, heating fuel. On top of all this she lived in a place nicknamed ‘bomb alley’—‘amid the perpetual noise of aeroplanes, raid warnings, and bombs’. By comparison with all of this, Maldon is seen quite clearly as the paradisaical *place* that had restored this thin, lanky, fatherless, precocious and neurotic ten-year old to psychological and physical health:

The fact that, physically, I turned out even as well as I did, I believe I owe to this garden.

There could hardly be a clearer and deeper acknowledgment of the beneficial influence of a particular place on the life of an individual. This was what Maldon meant to her: here she enjoyed an open-air, physically liberated childhood on a varied and vegetarian diet, and it was here that a ‘jumpy, overstrung little

creature' (her own words) lost the nervous facial tic that had made her 'a constant object of ridicule' ever since her father's death. She was thus able to start her formal schooling without this crippling embarrassment. There were parties in the post office, card games at what was probably the Warnock house, performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operas around the piano. The Mechanics Institute next door to the post office offered migration tales of old London told to an attentive HHR by its elderly caretaker ('At the time of course I believed every word', but later thought the stories 'highly-coloured and extremely romantic...[and] owed much to Dickens.') And there was a whole gallery of human flotsam and jetsam: 'Of the Chinese leper who lived and was dying alone in a hut out in the bush, I had to be content with fancy pictures.' She attended the Maldon races: 'we did not know a dull moment', she wrote, and she concluded that Maldon 'helped to nourish the imagination of the future story-writer. Such, too was Maldon, with its boulder-strewn hills, its far-view of dream-blue ranges, and the flowery luxuriance of its gardens.' Here, too, she read Shakespeare, dragging in her sister Lil to perform the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in a tree, and here began her lifetime interest in Spiritualism, by reading her father's books. She discovered her dislike of the English novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy: her taste was to be gratified not

by English novels but by the continental Europeans, Zola, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky.

I have mentioned her appetite for Yellow Backs, cheap editions of popular novels, mostly historical romances: these evidently fulfilled a purpose in feeding her insatiable reading needs. As at Chiltern, so in Maldon: she made up fictional narratives in her head while repetitively bouncing a ball against the wall—a habit that died when she began formal schooling and was asked to write things down.

And in actual physical terms, that most important journey of her life, from the country town to the modern city, and from childhood to young womanhood, may be tracked in great detail by anyone who walks south down Maldon's High Street from the post office with the novel in one hand and a copy of Miles Lewis's and others' 1977 *Maldon Conservation Study* in the other. Turn to chapter three of *The Getting of Wisdom*, and we can follow Laura's journey in one of Cobb's coaches past the Commercial Hotel, the Bank of New South Wales, the Royal Mail Hotel, Page's Royal Hotel, past McFarlane's drapery store, to the remains of what was known as [Talbot's] Halfway House, seven kms on the way to Castlemaine—opposite the Gowar School at Muckleford—then on to Castlemaine station, and from there to the rest of her life.

Maldon was the first step in a journey to Melbourne, Germany, and London.

And last but not least, there was Jack Stretch, one Maldon identity whose influence on Richardson was very profound indeed. This was a deeply private and apparently one-sided relationship, yet exactly the kind of experience to be exploited and only partially reshaped in the novel as part of Laura's own. Jack Stretch's presence in the novel also shows Richardson's technique of reversal—Archdeacon Stretch in real life becomes Archdeacon Long in the trilogy, just as Mrs Boyes becomes Miss Gurley in *The Getting of Wisdom*, just as Richardson the writer disguises her sex behind a male persona. As I am sure everybody here will know, the Rev J C T (Jack) Stretch, the first Australian-born Anglican bishop, and bishop of Newcastle since 1906, lived one block away and opposite to the Post Office, at Holy Trinity parsonage, from 1868. He was fifteen years older than Richardson, and both in *Myself When Young* and in the novel, she confronts her intense and enduring passion for this dashing cleric, describing her eyes 'feasting on a beauty of line and feature the like of which they had never seen—and, incidentally, were never to see in a man again' (a particularly revealing comment, I believe). It is the lengthiest incident in the whole autobiography (fully nine pages of *Myself When Young* are devoted to Stretch and to the sensuous religious

experience he induced in his thirteen-year old parishioner). In the novel, Stretch and his two devoted housekeeping sisters surface as Robert ('Robbie') Shepherd, his adoring wife and sister Isabella, but the portrait is a muted and composite one, for Shepherd is described as only 'quite attractive', and is melded with details drawn from another Maldon vicar, the Rev Arthur Vincent Green, who was curate of St Peter's Eastern Hill during HHR's time at PLC. HHR was marched to St Peter's each Sunday to morning service. We know that Stretch was sent a copy of Richardson's novel by his sister Grace (a long-standing and close friend of HHR): we know that he read it; but we cannot be sure that he recognised himself in the figure of Shepherd. My guess is that he knew *exactly* where this episode pointed.

From Richardson's point of view, it wasn't until years later, when she was married and at work on her great Australian trilogy of novels, that she recognised that the Maldon years and the emotionally painful relationship with the unwitting Jack Stretch had provided the intense emotional experience that would fuel her extraordinarily powerful novel *Maurice Guest*.

This process of self-recognition was first worked out in *The Getting of Wisdom*. And this, after all, is what the title of the novel means: yes, experience leads to knowledge, and yes, knowledge

must be accompanied by understanding, and yes, understanding must be accompanied by wisdom. But where is wisdom to be found and why must it be found way of blundering, embarrassment, emotional torment, shame, foolishness and pain? For the answer to some of these questions, we turn to her Maldon years.

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