

Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia Inc.

Newsletter December 2016



January 3, 2017 – HHR birthday picnic tea at Lake View, Chiltern



Come and join us for the celebration of HHR's birthday in the lovely grounds of Lake View at 6pm. Bring a picnic tea. All welcome!

HHR Annual Oration in March 2017 - Maldon

In an exciting development the 2017 oration will most likely be held in Maldon in March along with another HHR event which will be part of the Castlemaine Festival. The Festival event will be a discussion of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* by two writers (yet to be named) in the Athenaeum Library, next door to the Post Office where Richardson lived from 1880-1886 in Maldon. More details to come!



Maldon Athenaeum Library

Germany trip in May 2017

Plans for the trip to Germany are well under way. We will arrive in Munich on Monday May 8, travel by train to Leipzig on Friday May 12, to Berlin on

Wednesday May 17 and to Strasbourg on Saturday May 21, finishing on Tuesday May 23.

In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Ultima Thule* Leonie Kramer speaks of the influence of HHR's experiences in Germany:

'In 1888 Mary Richardson took her two daughters abroad, so that Ethel could continue her musical studies at Leipzig Conservatorium. She spent most of the next sixteen years in Germany which became and largely remained her spiritual home. In Leipzig she met J.G.Roberston whom she married in 1895 and who became the first Professor of German Literature in London. In Leipzig too she experienced failure as a musician, and her own account of these years clearly suggests that she turned to writing as a refuge from the public life of the executant musician. In Germany, both before and after her marriage, she absorbed with relish the musical and intellectual life of the day, and her mind was stimulated and nourished as it had never been before. She read widely in European literature and in the late 1890's, under the influence of her husband's suggestion that she should turn her experience of the musical life of Leipzig to good account by writing about a musician who failed to make good, she began *Maurice Guest* (1908). The sense of rootlessness and insecurity, and, in her musical and literary interests, of isolation from her fellows, that had marked her childhood in Australia, vanished in the active cultural life first of Leipzig, and then of Strasbourg.'

We'd love to have a good number of members sharing the experience, so please contact Graeme Charles on 0411 422 557 or email: graemejcharles@gmail.com for more information.



Leipzig Conservatorium

Meeting of HHR and Koroit Historical Societies

A very happy group of HHR Society members and Koroit and District Historical Society members gathered at Mickey Bourke's Hotel in lovely Koroit for lunch on 29 October. We were all aware that we were just over the road from the Post Office where Mary Richardson came with her two young daughters in 1878, and that above us was the room where the warders who accompanied Walter from the asylum stayed in 1879.



At lunch

In a round the table introduction we met:

Members of the Koroit and District Historical Society:

Andrea Lowenthal, president of KDHS and also the great granddaughter of the Maldon chemist's wife mentioned in *Myself When Young* – 'who clung to a mid century costume, and walked the roads in crinoline and ringlets'.

Di Gale, past president of KDHS who has long dreamed of creating an HHR tour to the various Richardson towns

Julia Schlapp who read and loved *The Getting of Wisdom* as a country boarding girl herself, and whose mother was in the National Trust and worked at Lake View

Kim and Michael Webster who have a deep interest in local history and are keen to learn more about HHR

Kathy Baulch who has been frustrated by earlier attempts to develop an interest in Koroit as an HHR town

Bridget McLoughlin who was born in Koroit. Although she had not read HHR before she promised that as from today she was 'a reformed character' and bought a copy of one of HHR's books from our little display

Members from other Richardson family places:

John Barkla who lives in the house where HHR was born at 179 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy



Marie Bell and Helen McBurney who live in Maldon and have been involved in various HHR activities in that town. Helen read *The Getting of Wisdom* for HSC and was frustrated by the character of Laura

Janey Runci who also lived in Maldon and has been a Richardson admirer since she read *The Getting of Wisdom* as a schoolgirl

Graeme and Dot Charles who lived in Chiltern until recently and who were founding members of the HHR Society Committee in 2008. Dot read *The Getting of Wisdom* at school and found it very funny. Years later she read *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and believed she'd found 'the great Australian novel'

Past students from PLC:

Heather McNeill who has been reading HHR since she went to school and always enjoys HHR Society activities

Alison Street who now cohabits with John Barkla in Blanche Terrace, the birthplace of HHR. As a doctor herself she loved Bruce Steele's book on Walter Richardson

HHR Scholars:

Brigid Magner who is writing a book about literary places. As part of this work she is a member of a number of writer's societies, but the HHR one is her favourite!

Rachel Solomon who worked on the Richardson Project at Monash with Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele with a particular interest in HHR's short stories. Rachel is currently working on HHR's time in England.

Eager readers:

Helen Macrae and Carolyn Mooney are in a book group together and both love HHR's work



Andrea Lowenthal, Julia Schlapp and Helen McBurney at the lunch

There was productive discussion about the ways the two societies might work together to develop HHR materials, and more urgently to repair Walter Richardson's grave as the inscription is almost illegible. The eager cleaners amongst us who would like to have got at it with a wire brush were warned off. The matter will be investigated.

Andrea Lowenthal, president of the KDHS suggested that their society could apply for grants from the Council for these matters.

After the lunch we gathered at the Post Office for a group photo and Kathy Baulch pointed out the way the hotel rooms would offer a fine view for the warders to keep an eye on Walter.



Outside the Post Office

We moved then to the KDHS rooms in the lovely old school house where Di Gale shared snippets from the local newspapers of 1878-80 and gave a rich picture of the town in the time when the Richardsons lived there.



Di Gale fronts a panel of past mayors of Koroit to share her work



Dot Charles goes back to childhood at an old school desk at the KDHS

Just before we left for Walter's grave at the Tower Hill cemetery John Barkla gave a stirring reading of Richard Mahony's funeral procession setting off from the town.



John Barkla

At the cemetery Graeme Charles read the final scene from *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and a posy of native flowers donated by the KDHS was laid at Walter Richardson's grave.



Queenscliff – a cameo of the imagined life of the Richardson family



Ettie and Lil watch anxiously as their mother attempts to reason with their ailing father.

Queenscliff Historical Society organised a wonderful HHR event for History Week in October this year. Local actors Matt King, Melinda Hughes, Isobel McDonald, Dan Eastwood, Stewart Firth and Laura McMahon enacted a cameo scene written by Dorothy Johnston of the life of the Richardson family in the garden of the house where they lived at 26 Mercer Street in the 1870s.

The performance began with an introduction by Dorothy Johnston, including excerpts from Walter's letters to Mary (still in Chiltern) about the Queenscliff house and their prospects there. The cameo scene depicted the young Ettie and Lil being harassed by

their troubled father, Walter, who went off looking for Mary before he was returned by a kindly neighbour, Mr Golightly. (Members of the Golightly family still live in Queenscliff and attended the event.)



Dorothy Johnston introduces the performance

Mary returned then from her training for Post Office work and attempted to placate Walter before she explained to her daughters what was happening. It was a moving scene and greatly appreciated by the audience.

This was followed by a reading by director Matt King of the death scene of Richard Mahony at the end of *Ultima Thule*. Much discussion followed about the power of Richardson's work.

A crowd of about 30 gathered for the each of the two performances on October 16 and 23.

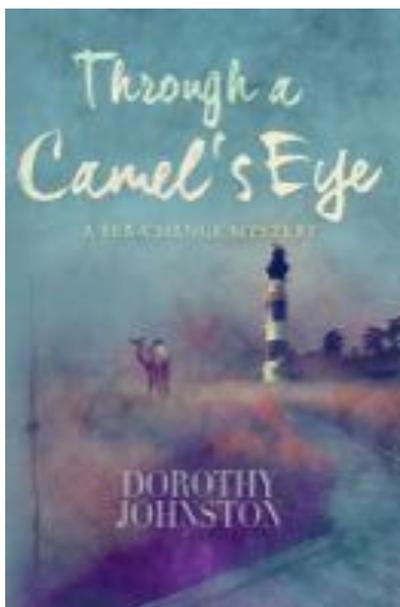


Some of the audience

HHR Society members, Janey Runci and Helen Macrae attended this event and made a happy link with the Queenscliff Historical Society.

The writer Dorothy Johnston is a writer of literary and crime fiction. She was twice short listed for the Miles Franklin award and was the founding member of the Seven Writers, a Canberra-based group of women writers who met regularly to debate and critique each other's work. The group included such luminaries as Sara Dowse, Marion Halligan and Marian Eldridge. Members of the group published widely and their work was seen to raise the profile of Canberra-based writers.

Dorothy now lives in Ocean Grove. Her most recent novel, published in April this year is *Through a Camel's Eye*, the first of a series of sea change mysteries set in Queenscliff.



The house at Queenscliff

Members may be interested to know that the house where the Richardson family lived in Mercer Street is now available for holiday rent. The Cox family have renovated the house and are keen for HHR Society members to visit. For more details go to www.ultimaqueenscliff.com



Owners Anne Marie and Stewart Cox and Stewart's parents (formerly of Maldon)

HHR's great niece on Elena Ferrante and HHR



Angela Neustatter and Clive Probyn at the 2009 birthday picnic at Lakeview

Many of us were lucky enough to meet HHR's great niece Angela Neustatter and her brother Patrick at the 2009 birthday picnic at Lake View. Angela, a writer and journalist travelled from England, and Patrick, a doctor, from the US to present one of HHR's desks to the Athenaeum Library in Chiltern.

In a recent article in *The Guardian* Angela wrote about the 'outing' of the Italian writer who produced the phenomenally successful *Brilliant Friend* series of four novels. Elena Ferrante (the name of the writer's character, but not her real name) had chosen to remain anonymous. There had even been speculation that she was a man, until a journalist uncovered her identity.



Angela has kindly given permission for us to include the article she wrote about this in our newsletter

I know how Elena Ferrante feels. My great-aunt was outed too.

Henry Handel Richardson was one of the foremost Australian novelists of the early 20th century ... and

nobody knew she was a woman until somebody tipped off a newspaper.

When I heard that Elena Ferrante, the pseudonymous Italian author of the My Brilliant Friend series of novels, had been “outed” in the New York Review of Books by Italian journalist Claudio Gatti, it stirred memories handed down through my family.

The Italian author’s closely guarded anonymity has been blown by an idiotic bin rummager, as though she were a fraud or criminal.

In 1929 a similar thing happened to my great-aunt, when the third volume of her autobiographical fiction trilogy about her childhood in Australia, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, was published. She was a novelist who wrote as a man – Henry Handel Richardson – and whose first novel, Maurice Guest, was described by Carmen Callil, founder of Virago books, as “one of the great novels of the 20th century”.

The books’ strongly feminist approach attracted attention and the press became determined to find out more. It was, Richardson noted, the Daily Telegraph that published a paragraph, “saying my identity as Miss Ettie R [her real name was Ethel] had been discovered and disclosed. Who was the culprit?” She never found out.

My great-aunt adopted a male name, as George Eliot did, to ensure her works would be taken seriously at a time when women writers were still regularly diminished. She was a reclusive, eccentric woman, who insisted her maid should wear heavily padded slippers to avoid noise. A suffragette who was also president of the Psychic Association, she invited Olga Roncoroni, a much younger woman whom she met when Roncoroni was playing the piano in a cinema, to live with her and her husband for the rest of her life.

Being a female writer may not be such a problem these days. More eyebrows may have been raised at the erotic content of Maurice Guest, or at the description of passionate affection for an older girl at boarding school in The Getting of Wisdom, than they would be today.

But Ferrante writes with a deeply intimate, intensely empathetic understanding of her female characters. And, as was the case for my great-aunt, this has aroused huge curiosity about how far her writing is autobiographical, and just who and what she is.

Ferrante says all she wants is to concentrate on her writing, and what could be more reasonable? Surely it is not hard to understand why a novelist would not want journalists’ interpretations to get in between their work and their readers.

The unmasking of Elena Ferrante has violated my right not to know.

What was it about Ferrante’s anonymity that so irked Italian journalist Claudio Gatti? Did he simply fail to

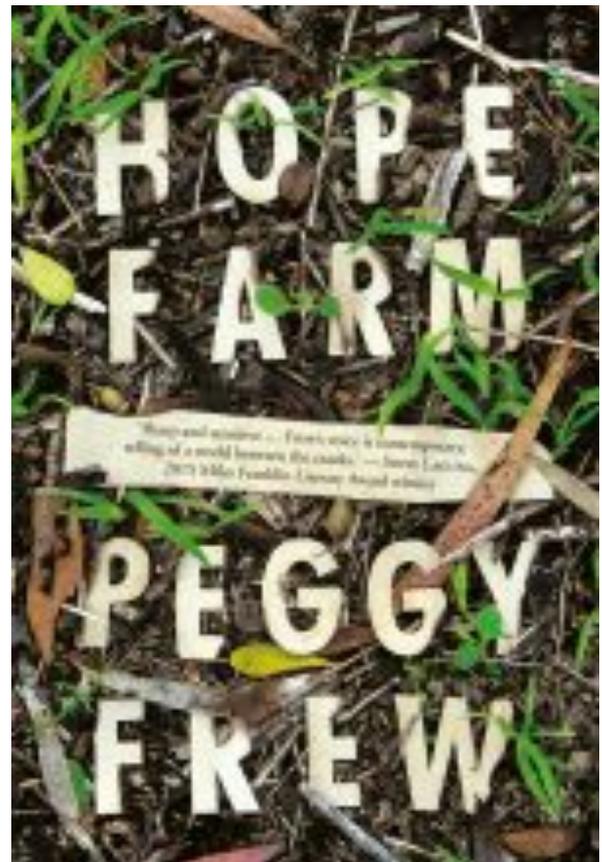
understand that men crave public acknowledgement more than women do?

My great-aunt went to enormous pains to be known only as Henry Handel Richardson and, extraordinarily, kept a hugely discursive and lengthy correspondence with Paul Solanges, translator into French of Maurice Guest, without him ever finding out that she was a woman. Being “outed” caused her deep upset and she was disturbed by the requests for interviews and photo-shoots that followed.

So I feel much compassion for Elena Ferrante, as I shall continue to call her, and disgust for Gatti, who it seems “uncovered” her identity by tracing payments through her publisher, and has sanctimoniously justified his actions by asserting the right of the readers who made her a superstar, to know her identity.

Gatti has since been described as an “investigative journalist”. Perhaps it dates me as a decayed old hack, but my working life has been lived with humble regard to the enormous value of investigative journalism. Digging out the identity of a fabulous writer who does not want to join the age of exhibitionism at any price is degrading. And if, as has been suggested, it puts her off writing any more, what a price to pay.

Peggy Frew wins Barbara Jefferis Award – congratulations from the HHR Society!



Peggy Frew, winner of our inaugural HHR Fellowship for Short Story Writing has won the Barbara Jefferis award for her second novel, *Hope Farm*. The award is for “the best novel written by an Australian author that depicts women and girls in a positive way or otherwise empowers the status of women and girls in society.”

The award is offered biennially, administered by the Australian Society of Authors, and comes with prize money of \$50,000, funded by a significant bequest from Jefferis’ husband, the late film critic, John Hinde.

Barbara Jefferis AM was a writer, feminist, founding member of the Australian Society of Authors, and its first woman president.

Have a look at the HHR website:

www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au

You can now watch a video on our website of the event honouring HHR in the Honouring Australian Writers organised by the NSW Writers Centre and held at the State Library of NSW. Also read past orations and newsletters.

Membership of the HHR Society

If you’re not a member and would like to join, please contact the secretary, Janey Runci or the president, Graeme Charles:

j.runci@bigpond.com or graemejcharles@gmail.com

Subscriptions are \$15 per year.

If you are a member subscriptions for 2016 are now due and can be paid by direct deposit into our bank account or by posting your cheque to the Society at **86/80 Trenery Crescent, Abbotsford, Victoria 3067**.

Bank account details are: Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia, BSB 803 070, Account number 77605. Please make sure your name appears on the deposit.

HHRSA Committee

President: Graeme Charles

Vice-President: Bill Steele

Treasurer: Helen Macrae

Secretary: Janey Runci

Committee Members:

Gloria Banks, Bronwyn Minifie,
Heather McNeill, Rachel Solomon

Website: www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au