

## Text Publishing *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* joins the Text Classics stable

Read here an edited version of Peter Craven's introduction to the book

No Success Like Failure

by Peter Craven

Only Australia could have coughed up *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. A doctor on the goldfields meets a girl and makes good. He thrives, he fails, he goes off his head. He brings all his bright hopes crashing down around him because he has no capacity for practical life. Call that a national epic. No wonder we settled for the doggerel and the bushrangers.

Patrick White read *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* as a young man, working as a jackaroo, and thought it was wonderful. He was not wrong. You could argue that the impulse to create an Australian art of fiction filled with that sense of calamity that can rise to tragedy, an art exalted in its scope however rooted in the notations of naturalism, and open to the way Australia can impose itself on the geography of the imagination as a thing of doom, rather than good fortune, all harks back to *Richard Mahony*. White might have said, with some truth, that he had come out of that rubbishy Ballarat goldfield too.

Germaine Greer wrote that Henry Handel Richardson chose to embrace the conventions of naturalism at precisely the moment when those conventions died. It's a resounding judgement, though not one that can be sustained. *Richard Mahony* is a great, if belated, novel: *Australia Felix* was published in 1917, *The Way Home* in

1925 and *Ultima Thule* in 1929, seven years after Joyce's *Ulysses* and the death of Proust.

The difficulty with *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is that it has never become a shared myth by being filmed. Bruce Beresford, who filmed Richardson's school story *The Getting of Wisdom* with such effortless authority, has written a screenplay of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* but no one, so far, will come within cooee of producing it.

It might be a different story if David Lean had filmed *Richard Mahony* as he was edging towards epic in the 1950s. Or Tony Richardson, who made *Ned Kelly*, and described Australia as a beautiful country full of horrible people. It's his father-in-law Michael Redgrave who I see as Mahony: the silver voice, the refined face, the capacity to represent an imperviousness which is the other side of excruciation.

Mahony's predicament (which is never separate from his overweening blindness) is that his sense of his own superiority—which is real—is forever casting him down because he wears it like a fatality. Nowhere in Australian literature is there a more deadly and prophetic portrait of the national tendency (among intellectuals and other bright people) to see the singularity of the self as evidence of the fact—as a form of ontological entitlement rather than happenstance—that *ego solus*, yours truly, will always be the brightest person in any room. Whereas just this way of seeing things—which Mahony exhibits to the point of hubris—is the abiding face of national immaturity.

It's not hard to see how the combination of factors that make up the obsessional power of Richardson's masterpiece can come across with an all but crippling sense of embarrassment. That, I suspect, is the true source of the objection to the novel's naturalism. In *The Getting of Wisdom* a limited part of Henry Handel Richardson's experience is made to startle and soar through the guise of the school story. Societies which are worried about whether art is possible for them sometimes perpetrate literary achievement through the cover of writing for children. Everything from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Kim* to the novels of Sonya Harnett and *The Getting of Wisdom* does this.

In *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, by contrast, the raw material of the author's background is utilised with an aptitude that might appear gargantuan and unbalanced. Young Ethel's father was a doctor, a man of exceptional talent, who rose high and fell mightily. He turned his face from the light of Australian colonial success, was financially ruined and at one point certified as insane.

She was, of course, an Australian prodigy, young Ethel. She studied music in Leipzig as her fictional avatar in Mahony, the boy, Cuffy, never did. And by the time she was twenty-five she was married to J. G. Robertson, later professor of German at the University of London. Are there shades of George Eliot here, of Lewes, of Casaubon? Who knows? Only the work matters.

*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is tightly focused on a man of great fineness who comes apart and the woman who cherishes him like a mother, a child, a saint. Mahony's wife Mary (who starts life as Polly) is a magnificent portrait of a dark Geelong girl of sixteen who enacts the most extraordinary pietà over the husband who has become like a child whom she loves body and soul.

*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is written in a high, nearly stiff style and incorporates a good deal of European polish, is stately, rhythmical, visually precise and full of the points of view and idioms of the characters it wrestles with. Sometimes, as in the myriad details of Mahony's consciousness, the effect is of a sculpted narrowness that can formulate anything about the world but can never capture the blindness that attends its own insights. We see him following the will o' the wisp of a more refined life in England, a more remunerative life in some new nook of Victoria, always isolated from everyone except his beloved wife, whom he cabins and confines so selfishly, but who continues to adore him no matter how cold-eyed she is about his futile apprehension of the treasure at the end of the rainbow. It is a superb portrait of a marriage and the way in which a couple can hoodwink themselves through the magic scattered by intelligence even in the teeth of idiocy.

*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* should be read in one big gulp, more or less quickly, at a steady rate. It has a rich supporting cast but Richardson is never quite sure how interested in them she is. This is evident at one glittering extremity from the figure of the alienated pharmacist Mahony meets in Ballarat who is an even

more recklessly articulate nihilist than he is. But it's also there in the depiction of his early comrade-in-arms, Purdy, good-looking and cavalier in the Eureka days, who becomes bald and pudgy in middle age without losing the marvellous overheard quality of his dialogue.

Henry Handel Richardson is splendid at her vernacular dialogue though her notation of it in a crypto-Dickensian spelling is often homophonically inept. She does, however, give repeated signs of having a broader and somewhat more populist range of skills than she chooses to concentrate in *Richard Mahony*. Characters are realised at one juncture and then fade offstage to be revived or not as the merest afterthought or convenience. This is lifelike (in the sense that it mirrors the randomness and serendipity of life) by some principle of absentmindedness but it suggests a nearly reckless disdain for structure and a lack of interest in the symbolic potency of the subordinate characters.

In practice *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is full of characters on the sidelines who are like the revenants of past lives. The scene, late in the piece, where the lawyer Ocock comes to Mary's rescue—and we see tears in what have always been cold eyes—is the kind of touch we could do with a bit more of. Think, by way of contrast, of how the book kicks on when Richard and Mary's son, Cuffy, appears because he serves as a foil to both his parents. *Ultima Thule* is illuminated by his voice. His shame at his father and his desperate blind pity for him which co-exists with his red-faced horror and confusion and loathing are beyond praise. So too is the moment when the old German professor realises he is a musical prodigy like his creator.

*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is an all but lost continent of a book. It is a novel about poverty and worldly failure and the grind and nightmare of a life that is ruled by money which does its best to ride roughshod over every impulse towards simplicity and delicacy and truth. It is a book written in defiance of materialism and complacency, full of hatred of the vision of Australia summed up by James McAuley's words: 'The people are kindly with nothing inside them.'

More than any other novel in our literature, more than *Voss*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* deserves the accolade of the Great Australian Novel. It's a delusion,

of course, a quest for the golden boomerang doomed to futility because only the Australian cult of success could make such a grail seem worth the candle. Still, it is a mighty and moving work, this bursting-at-the-seams anti-epic to the muse of a vanity which sees every golden bowl broken and every silver cord loosed.