

**The Other Richardson Girl – Ada Lillian (Lil) Richardson by Graeme Charles.
Speech notes for HHR birthday celebration – “Lake View” Chiltern, January 3,
2007 and repeated Maldon, October 11, 2009**

Introduction:

Now let's take ourselves back to January 3, **1877**, the only birthday HHR would have celebrated in Chiltern, and think about the scene we might have been looking at then; as you look beyond me now at “Lake View”.

Chiltern was really the end of the line for the Richardson family. Doctor Walter Richardson's physical and mental condition resulting from syphilis, had deteriorated to such an extent that the carrying out of task's associated with the conduct of a medical practice were beyond him. He was suffering mood swings, headaches, nightmares, speech difficulties, giddiness and writing difficulties.

Those of you who are quite familiar with HHR, either from reading *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* or any of the biographical contributions made by people such as Dorothy Green over many years, can perhaps see the 7 year old Ethel in your mind's eye, somewhere along the veranda bouncing a ball against the wall, losing herself in story-making, as she so often does.

Inside the house her father, Walter, is probably closeted away in his surgery, which he ventures out of less and less as the unhappy months spent here drag on. If he has ventured out of the surgery there is every chance that he and his wife Mary are locked in yet another argument about finances and their future. The argument will finish as it so often does now, with Walter weeping like a baby on Mary's shoulder. Ethel's way of coping with this embarrassing unhappiness is to escape to the veranda and lose herself playing ball and creating stories.

But there is another little girl here. Ethel's five- year old sister Lil, who unfortunately has found no such escape mechanism. Her method of coping is to shadow and cling to Mary. Her mother has become her rock, a rock she will never be far away from until her mother's death in Munich in 1896 when Lil was 25 years old.

Ethel wrote in her autobiography: *Myself When Young* that Lil's haunting fear of losing mother persisted, and blighted her whole childhood.

Ada Lillian Richardson b.1871 (St.Kilda) d. 1944 (Wales)

This then is a brief story of Lil; fifteen months Ethel's junior, whose life remained almost inextricably linked to Ethel's, until her death in faraway Wales in the penultimate year of the Second World War, 1944. They maintained a close lifelong relationship, marred perhaps to some degree by Ethel's uncontrollable resentment of their mother's obvious preference for the softer Lil.

According to Lil's daughter-in-law, there was a close emotional bond between the sisters, a bond that must have developed inevitably from their being thrown so much on their own resources, and which lasted with unusual intensity for long after they were both married.

Indeed, Dorothy Green in her 1973 book *Henry Handel Richardson & Her Fiction* said

“The question of the relationship between the sisters is clearly a study on its own.”

But that is a subject we must leave now, for another time.

In 1888, a few years after their father's death, both girls had attended Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne from which Lil matriculated at 16. Subsequently, using the proceeds from the sale of the former family home in Hawthorn, their mother took them to Leipzig, Germany hoping to see their considerable musical talent fulfilled. HHR who excelled on the piano was enrolled at the Royal Conservatorium of Music there. Lil, a very accomplished violinist was later tutored in Munich.

Ethel said of Lil “But I have always considered my sister the more genuinely musical of us two. What barred her way, both in childhood and afterwards, was her lack of self-confidence. She was strongly urged by her then-time master to appear in

public. She used to pace the streets of Munich trying, in vain, to nerve herself for the ordeal. It was a pity; for with her impeccable ear, her excellent memory and full rich tone, she might have made something of a name for herself.”

They were both better than average **tennis** players, who could more than hold their own playing against men, their favoured opponent. The one obvious difference between them lay in their temperament and looks. Lil was considered more graceful and classically good looking than Ethel.

Probably as a result of her looks and temperament Lil had many suitors, eventually marrying a German ophthalmologist, Otto Neustatter, in Munich in 1900 at the age of 29. She gave birth to her only child, a son Walter in 1903. Evidently the birth was a painful, gruesome event resulting in her inability, even if she had wanted, to have further children. Walter Neustatter spent a great deal of his childhood living with, or near his aunt Ethel, who had also married and was living in London. Walter became an eminent forensic psychiatrist in London, but more of him and his children later.

Otto and Lil were living in London; Walter was attending school there, when World War 1 threatened. Otto found life in London as a German, difficult to say the least, and when the war eventually broke out he returned to Germany. Lil and Walter remained in London and she dropped her surname in favour of the old family name of Lindesay.

Her daughter-in-law wrote: “She (Lil) was a person divided, with a foot in each Country (England and Germany), she would really have liked to be Otto’s wife and Ettie’s sister all in one piece and in one place.”

The two of them lived in Ethel’s London home whilst Ethel and her husband lived in the countryside to escape the worst aspects of wartime London. Towards the end of the War, Walter was attending King Alfred’s, a progressive co-educational school which, in those days, was almost unique and regarded with much suspicion. He arrived home for afternoon tea one day with a newly arrived teacher. Alexander (A S) Neill was to become relatively famous in education circles for his innovative approach to educating the young. Lil had a keen interest in education and as a feminist had embraced the need for far-

reaching education reform at that time. Neill was 12 years younger than Lil, but they hit it off and gradually her affection shifted from Otto to Neill. Together they began to look for a place to realise their educational ideals and in 1921 Lil returned to Otto in Dresden to announce her new commitment.

Later that year Neill joined them, and he and Otto also hit-it off. With Otto's complete support they established their first International School. The school eventually became known as **Summerhill**, it still operates today in Leiston in Suffolk. Neill described it as a "free school." This did not mean it was State funded; rather the freedom he was referring to was the personal freedom of the children in his charge.

In 1923 Neill and Lil moved the school from Austria to Lyme Regis in the south of England where Ethel had found them a suitable building known locally as Summerhill. They again changed location and moved to Leiston in 1927.

Summerhill is universally regarded as the world's first "free school" and describes itself as first and foremost a place where children can discover who they are and where their interests lie, in the safety of a self-governing democratic community.

To give you some idea of what others thought about the school, HHR when talking about Summerhill, said, "Their school is quite full at present, about 40 children, most of them with some kink in their brains."

Not all Summerhill students appear to have had "some kink in their brains." For example, Lil's granddaughter who continues to lead a highly successful professional life, attended Summerhill. As you might imagine it has had its share of critics over the years. A Director of Education in California once famously wrote that he "would sooner send my children to a brothel" than send them to Summerhill. Its current Principal is Neill's daughter from his second marriage, with the delightful name of Zoe Readhead.

A name I'm sure you'll agree, that seems entirely appropriate for a Principal of a school that dares to be, just a little bit different.

In 1926 Lil divorced Otto and married Neill. Otto himself remarried, and they all continued as the best of friends. Lil's constant need to be reliant on someone else now

shifted itself to Neill's love and ambition. She was unstinting in her self-sacrifices to the demands made by the school over many years. For example, when the school was at Lyme Regis, and struggling financially, she worked for 3 years without a break. Unbeknown to her, Neill had started a relationship with a younger woman and in 1933 he officially left Lil for her. At the time Lil was devastated but they both stayed on at the school so as not to derail it. However she was left in a psychologically precarious state, chronically uncertain and with her spirit much undermined. After Lil's death, Neill wasted no time in marrying his new love.

Lil was holidaying with Otto and his new wife in Baltimore, USA, when World War 2 was declared. She managed to return to England and the school, but the added stress caused by, for her a second world war, further weakened her spirits.

The school was forced to relocate to Ffestiniog in northern Wales because of the wartime danger in Leiston. Unfortunately the move did nothing to improve her state of mind, the condition of the school building was deplorable, and with rationing and incessant rain, by the summer of 1941 Ethel "found her a complete nervous wreck." Her decline was exacerbated and Neill with his focus on his school and his own misery seems to have been incapable of providing her with much emotional support. She eventually suffered a stroke, was placed in a nursing home (spending the last year of her life in a mental home in Harlech) and continued to decline until her death on the 30th April, 1944. Just two years before Ethel's death in March 1946.

Her daughter-in-law wrote: "Almost her last journey into the outside world was to her son's wedding near London. She arrived late for the party, a little old lady in her best clothes, bent, timid, exhausted and unable to communicate with the wedding guests."

The two sisters returned to Australia only once after leaving for Leipzig on August 3 1888. In 1912 they sailed on the *Orsova* to Melbourne. It is known that Ethel visited Chiltern and "Lake View" during the few weeks she spent in Victoria. It is reasonable to assume that Lil would have accompanied her here.

I mentioned earlier Lil's son, Walter, who died in 1978. He was a leading forensic psychiatrist in London, who gave expert evidence at the trial of Ian Brady, one of the infamous "Moors murderers", and his list of luminaries included Rolling Stones member Brian Jones.

Walter had two children, both of whom are still with us. His daughter, Angela Neustatter, is a well-known feminist author and journalist who for the past 30 years has contributed to most of the serious British newspapers and magazines including The Guardian, The Observer and the New Statesman. His son, Patrick Neustatter, lives in Virginia, USA, and is a partner in a large innovative medical centre there. He is a family practitioner whose treatment style "encourages patients tolerant of alternative medicines, to consider whole body/spiritual care with minimal medicines." Angela's interest in feminism; one of her seven published books being *Hyenas in Petticoats: a Look at Twenty Years of Feminism*, in all probability had its roots in her grandmother's (Lil's) involvement in the Suffragette struggle during the early 20th Century. In fact both she and Ethel were keenly interested in feminism and the Suffragette struggle. Lil, living in Dresden at the time, responded enthusiastically when Ethel forwarded copies of The Suffragette to her. In 1914 she and Otto, at some risk to themselves, hosted a meeting of sympathisers in their home, addressed by leading suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. Earlier in 1912, before the trip to Australia, she along with two other women attacked a post office in Fulham Road, London. She was subsequently jailed for two months.

There remains one other interest shared by the sisters, to consider. They both inherited their father's preoccupation with **Spiritualism**. The Spiritualism movement originated in the USA in 1848 and is based on belief in the survival of human personality and the possibility of communication between the living and the dead. Walter Richardson had joined the local spiritualist circle here in Chiltern, which unfortunately did nothing to lessen the poor regard the townspeople had for their medico. They both attended psychic society meetings and séances at various stages throughout their adult lives and Ethel had read books on the subject as a child. It is known that the sisters together with their husbands shared a common interest in Spiritualism.

So the two sisters born fifteen months apart and dying within a similar space of time, had despite Ethel's enduring feelings of sibling rivalry, spent their entire lives, not only close to one another geographically, but close to one another spiritually. They shared many interests and supported one another through difficult times. One achieved lasting fame as a great Australian novelist; the other perhaps deserves to be better known for her contribution among other things to educational reform and Summerhill in particular, and to feminism.

Acknowledgements:

1. Henry Handel Richardson & Her Fiction by Dorothy Green (pub.1973)
2. Myself When Young by Henry Handel Richardson (pub.1948)
3. Henry Handel Richardson: Fiction in the Making by Axel Clark (pub.1990)
4. Henry Handel Richardson Some Personal Impressions edited by Edna Purdie and Olga Roncoroni (pub.1957)
5. Henry Handel Richardson A Life by Michael Ackland (pub.2004)
6. Mrs Lins: Sister to Henry Handel Richardson by M.A. Clutton-Brock (pub.1967)
7. The New Summerhill by A.S.Neill (pub.1992)