

# Ettie and Nettie

*When Nettie Palmer visited Henry Handel Richardson*

by Brenda Niall

It is a brilliant summer day in July 1935. The scene is a house called Green Ridges, near Hastings, Sussex. Two women, seated but not relaxed, face each other across a formal drawing room. This is the first time they have met. Nettie Palmer, Australian writer and journalist, has come to stay overnight with the novelist Henry Handel Richardson.

As novelist and journalist they know one another's writings well, and they have been corresponding for years. But there is tension in this first face-to-face encounter. They will never be friends, never on first-name terms. Not because of the absurdity of their matching names – Ettie and Nettie – but because Ettie, who has for years insisted on being called Henry instead of her given name Ethel or that childish diminutive Ettie, prefers to keep her distance. Today it will be Miss Richardson and Mrs Palmer, as it has been in their letters. It will take years even to adjust the greeting to 'Dear Nettie Palmer'. It will never become 'Dear Henry'.

Green Ridges is the home of expatriate Australian novelist Henry Handel Richardson, chosen for its seclusion and its commanding view. In her husband's lifetime, Richardson's retreat was the top floor of a tall house in London, with a view of Regent's Park. Green Ridges, too, looks outward, and from above. High on a windy hill, it has a wide view to the sea as far as Beachy Head. The big room downstairs is all that most visitors will see. Above is the author's domain, with green baize doors to keep out the sound of human voices. No one can look in on the writer at work.

Like Richardson's house in Regent's Park Road, Green Ridges keeps a silence as absolute as Proust's cork-lined study. Richardson doesn't see many visitors. Letters to her few intimates show intense curiosity about human behaviour, a sharp eye for personal and professional weaknesses, and a comic sense which sparkles for the very few whom she allows to come close to her. Palmer

isn't one of the intimates. Yet Richardson has good reason to invite her to stay. Palmer is by the mid-1930s a very strong influence in literary circles in Australia. Because she needs to make a living from her journalism, she spreads her reviews quite widely, from state to state. She has readers in Hobart and Brisbane as well as in Melbourne and Sydney. For the past ten years she has helped to make Richardson's novels known and appreciated, an important role since Richardson's books, published in London and the United States, are not well known in Australia. Championship of her novels in times of neglect had been important for an unknown expatriate, and Richardson knows this very well.

The meeting had been years in the making. In 1925 a mutual friend in Melbourne, Mary Kernot, rebuked Nettie Palmer for ignoring Richardson's novels in her survey of contemporary Australian literature. And it did seem odd. How could such an intelligent scrutineer fail to notice Richardson's first three major works?

The first novel, *Maurice Guest* (1908), Nettie might have missed because of its European setting and the male pseudonym. But the next one? It does seem strange that she missed *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910). Not just because of its extraordinary quality, but because it was quite recognisable as a portrait of school life in Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne (PLC), where Nettie had been a pupil. She was there at the turn of the century (fifteen years after Richardson), and the school was important to her. In the small circles of middle-class Melbourne, Richardson's irreverent take on PLC did cause gossip, amusement, and hurt feelings.

Why did Nettie Palmer miss out on a novel which she was later to compare with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? Wondering about this, I checked her movements around 1910 and found that she was out of the country. The book appeared in October 1910. Nettie was then in London, in love with novelist Vance



Nettie Palmer, 1943 (National Library of Australia)

Palmer, and enjoying a new freedom from a rather oppressive family circle in Melbourne. So, in 1910, when former PLC pupils and teachers were reading *The Getting of Wisdom* in Melbourne – some amused, others indignant – Nettie had other things to think about. She was about to move from London to Berlin to study modern languages, but in the meantime she was feeling independent for the first time in her life. This was before her marriage – she was still Nettie Higgins, niece of the well-known judge Henry Bournes Higgins, and only daughter of rigidly devout and possessive parents. Nettie was finding Europe a much-needed escape. She wrote: ‘I’m glad to be going places where no one will care if I live or die and where I won’t find my photograph literally or metaphorically on every mantelshelf ... [in the family]’.<sup>1</sup>

If Richardson had known the young Nettie Higgins, she might have found that they had a good deal in common, not least in their need for independence. By 1911 Nettie was more or less engaged to the penniless Vance Palmer, but they couldn’t afford to marry. She needed to train as a teacher, and her field was modern languages: German and French. Leaving Vance in London, trying to make his way as a writer, she found it hard to be alone in Berlin. During her time of study there, unsure about her future and lonely without Vance – with whom she was passionately in love – Nettie had a breakdown: a nervous collapse, as she called it.

Again, there is a parallel with Richardson, who also studied in Germany and whose anxiety about performing in public was an important factor in her giving up

her planned career as a pianist. And for both young women the resolution of their dilemma came in marriage. Henry married George Robertson, a young lecturer in literature, taking a chance on his being able to support them both. Against the wishes of her family, Nettie married Vance Palmer in London, in 1914.

From then on, her ambitions merged with his. Although she had some promise as a poet – she published two volumes of poetry, in 1913 and 1915 – she put that ambition aside in order to make it possible for her husband to write. His drive to write was stronger than hers; and what he wanted – what they both hoped for – was that he would write the Great Australian Novel. During their marriage Vance wrote novel after novel, and he had a degree of success, enough to keep him

hopeful. The Palmers had nothing like the security that George Robertson was eventually to give Henry. Nettie was her husband’s part-time typist and secretary and had to supplement his earnings with her journalism. She had her first child in London in 1915, and the second two years later, back in Australia.

I wondered how Nettie missed reading *Australia Felix*, the first volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mabony*, in 1917, as well as *The Getting of Wisdom*. Again, there was a very good reason, which surfaced when I read her letters of the period. She was back in Australia when Richardson’s third novel was published in August 1917, but she was suffering from acute post-natal depression after the birth of her second child in May of that year. As well as that, it was wartime and Nettie was feeling guilty at keeping her husband from enlisting in the Australian forces, because he could not leave her in her precarious state of health.

There are some striking parallels and differences in the marriages of Henry Handel Richardson and Nettie Palmer. Richardson always had her husband’s encouragement, and a secure income came within a few years of their marriage. She wrote because she wanted to write; it was from inner necessity. George Robertson protected her from the world. Her study was a sanctuary. And there were no children.

The Palmers were always on the edge financially. In a mirror image of George Robertson’s protective role with Henry, Nettie’s mission was to protect Vance from becoming a wage-earner. But as novel after novel fell flat, she must have realised that he was never going

to fulfil his dream.

In 1924 Nettie published a little book – really just an extended essay – on Australian writers<sup>2</sup>. *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923* didn't include Richardson. It tended to privilege writers who were getting their inspiration from native soil, as Vance was trying to do. She could not openly praise her own husband's books, but she promoted the values that they stood for: not expatriate fiction, but the home-grown 1890s style of realism and nationalism associated with Henry Lawson and others of the *Bulletin* school.

*Maurice Guest*, with its European setting, would not have fitted the model, but you would expect Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* to feature in a survey that found room for Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894). But no – not a word about Richardson. That was in 1924. By then Richardson had published three major works: *Maurice Guest*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, and the first volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.

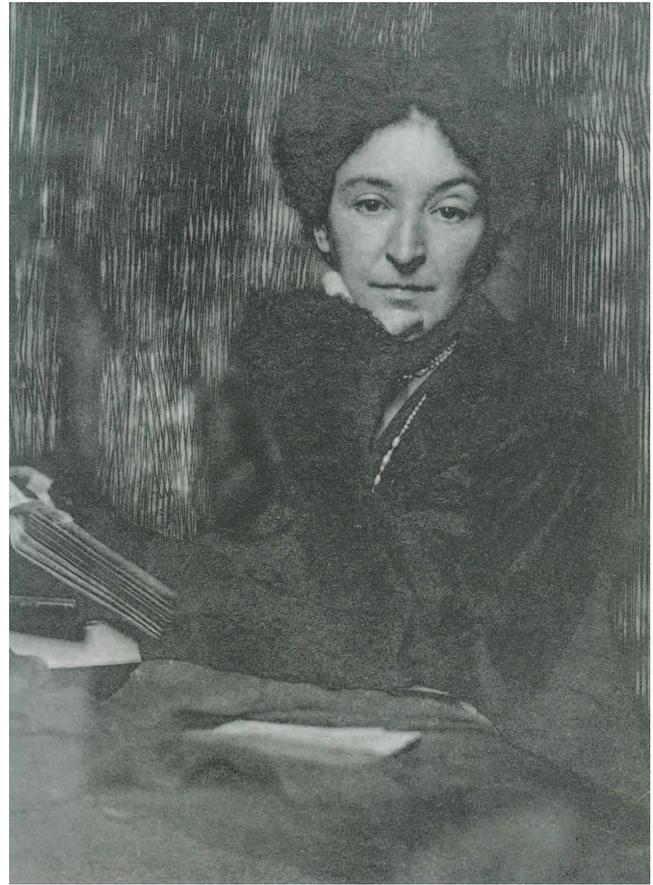
Nettie seems not to have read Richardson until 1925. It is astonishing that she didn't catch up at least by the time of writing her survey of Australian literature. She wasn't parochial; she read widely in European literature. You would think that with her own experience of being a student in Germany she would have been instantly drawn to *Maurice Guest*.

When she eventually discovered *Maurice Guest*, Palmer did so through Mary Kernot, who did some useful lobbying to attract her attention. Through this old-school networking, Palmer obtained a review copy of *The Way Home* (1925), the second volume of the Richard Mahony trilogy. She gave it and Richardson's earlier work a good spread on the famous Red Page of the *Sydney Bulletin*.

Even then it was not a review to delight the author – not so far as *The Way Home* was concerned. Palmer thought that the novel had 'a kind of faded charm'. She compared the atmosphere with that of a warm room with the venetian blinds drawn, in which a whiskered gentleman and a crinolined lady are discussing spiritualism. Summing up, Palmer described the novel as part of a 'solid achievement'. In itself, she said, it was 'a little flat and lacking in atmosphere'.<sup>3</sup>

Faded charm, flat, solid, lacking in atmosphere – these aren't the words to delight an author. Writing about it to Kernot, Richardson made the best of the review – as she really had to do because it had been engineered by Kernot. But she wouldn't have warmed to Nettie Palmer for such minimal praise. It wasn't Richardson's style to protest about bad or indifferent reviews; she was inclined to take them with a show of amused detachment that was never quite convincing. And she remembered them. Many years later she was complaining that Nettie Palmer had called *The Way Home* a 'piece of faded tapestry'.<sup>4</sup>

Things changed in the next year or two. Nettie



Henry Handel Richardson, c.1904 (National Library of Australia)

began to promote Richardson's work more generously in her various literary outlets. They began to write to one another: the stiff circumspect letters of professional acquaintances, with Richardson expressing gratitude in return for Palmer's discerning reviews. Meanwhile, from Kernot, who was always ready for a gossip, HHR extracted an image of her unknown reader: 'Tell me, what they, the Ps [Palmer] are like to look at. He with his tiny meticulous handwriting & she with her ease of expression & really natty journalistic talents?'<sup>5</sup> These words – 'tiny' and 'meticulous' for Vance's handwriting, and 'natty' for his wife's journalism – are in their way as much of a put-down as the words 'faded charm' and 'solid' and 'flat' in the Palmer review.

Back came a letter with Kernot's accounts of the Palmers, to which Richardson responded, ready to make a comedy of Nettie, Vance, and their two daughters: 'She sounds *most* wearing & I begin to understand Vance better. Think of living with that always beside you – that paragon of energy and capability ...'<sup>6</sup>

In other letters to Kernot, Richardson continued to be patronising about Vance's novels and amused by Nettie's devotion to this unpromising literary career. Vance Palmer's novels were not without merit; and they earned a good measure of respect. But it was a small and cautious measure compared with the outburst of praise that came to Richardson after she published the

third volume in the Richard Mahony trilogy.

The Palmers were generous about *Ultima Thule*, as it was called. They knew it was a work of genius and said so. Vance offered his 'homage'. Nettie gave it unqualified praise. This was 1929, and for the years to come Richardson could count on Nettie to keep her name in front of the Australian public. Late in Richardson's life, Nettie was doing her best to put her forward for the Nobel Prize.

As a freelance writer and broadcaster, Nettie's output was prodigious. She contributed to the daily newspapers in Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane. The Sydney *Bulletin* took her work and so did the *Women's Mirror*. She had her own column in the influential *All about Books*; and within the period 1927 to 1933, Vivian Smith estimates she published a staggering total of 212 articles on Australian and overseas books in the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*. These weren't snippets but solid review articles

of 1500 words each. She argued for a strong Australian publishing industry; so long as London dominated, she said, Australian literature would struggle.

For all these reasons, Richardson had to respect Nettie, although in her private letters to Mary Kernot in Melbourne she was dismissive about Vance's novels. Even to Nettie, she was unable give more than faint praise, stressing how productive he was. Saying 'What a worker!' would have stung.

Worse than this – as her letters to Kernot reveal – she was inclined to blame Nettie for the lack of passion in Vance's work. The novels were timid, she thought, because he was stifled by his too-capable wife. This was unfair to Nettie, who became the family breadwinner so as to give Vance his freedom to write.

This wasn't as absolute a freedom as Richardson herself was given, but it certainly helped Vance to produce a steady stream of novels and short stories as well

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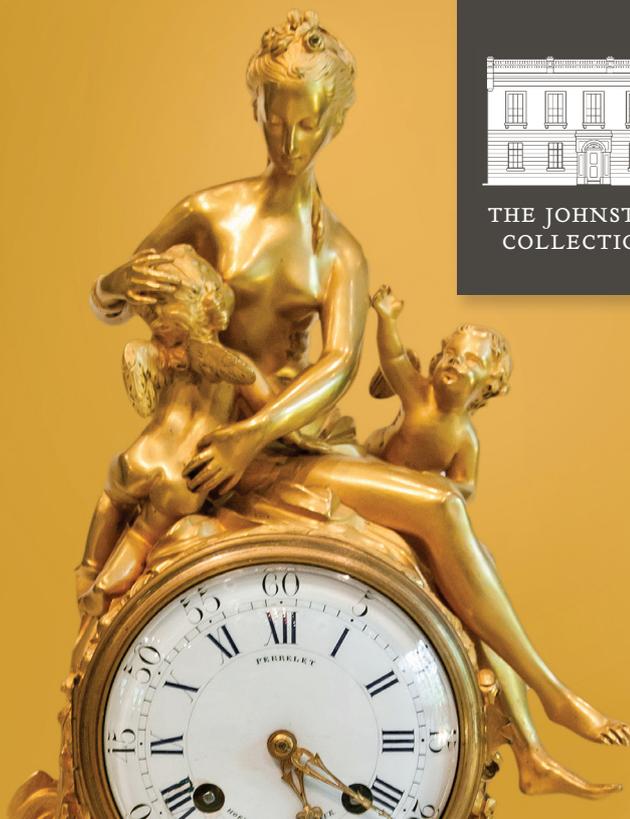
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as journalism. Between them, the two Palmers stayed financially afloat, even during the Depression. His novels usually sold about 2000 copies. That was not bad at all, but compare it with Richardson's print run of 85,000 copies in the American edition of *Ultima Thule* alone. Of course, Richardson had waited a long time for the dazzling success of 1929, but by then Nettie must have known that nothing like that would ever come to her husband.

When at last Nettie came to London in 1935, Richardson waited impatiently for her to make a visit to Sussex. She would never have travelled to London to meet Nettie. Home ground was safer for this reclusive woman. And so on a warm July afternoon, they met at Green Ridges.

Palmer's account of the meeting is cool and observant. Richardson stood on the bottom step of the stairs by the front door to receive her; a slight but commanding figure in a velvet housecoat and dark slacks who 'wore her clothes as if she meant them'.<sup>7</sup> Why didn't she descend that last step? Palmer doesn't speculate, but the added height adds to the air of command.

When they sat for tea in the big drawing room downstairs, Richardson kept her distance, placing Palmer on one sofa and herself 'on another sofa across the room'. Palmer noted a grand piano, French windows opening to a formal garden, and beyond it a wide view of the 'green ridges', the bay and the English Channel. Richardson in her velvet housecoat, with her deep-set hooded eyes, and the long nose that made her (so she said) look like Goethe in profile, was formidable: a plain woman in her mid-sixties who dramatised her looks, rather as Edith Sitwell did.

Nettie, round-faced and rosy with big dark eyes, could have looked pretty but was too diffident to think of trying. Just short of her fiftieth birthday, she dressed dowdily, let out her dresses (the seams 'strained' against her plumpness) and wore the mended shoes that figured on the tight Palmer budget.

So they sit, not so much together as apart, with half the width of the room between them. It was considerate to give the guest full view of the splendid line of coast and sea, but it also meant that Richardson, facing Palmer, had her face in shadow, the choice of someone who prefers to watch and not to be observed too closely.

Writing about the visit for publication, Nettie Palmer was discreet about her first impressions of a writer whose talent she revered, but her tone lacked warmth. She thought of the room not as a friendly meeting place, but as the author's 'shell'. Later, as a privileged house guest, Nettie was allowed to pass through a 'muffled baize-door' that led from the author's bedroom into her study.

On Richardson's side, a private letter is more revealing, in its amused condescension.

Well, Nettie Palmer came down & stayed a night with me. I found her a very pleasant person, & grateful to be allowed to pay the visit (!) But in the main she was a disappointment. Her writing, clear & to the point, is so much better than her talk. This I found to be of the 'rambling', 'reminiscenty' (can't spell) order. She was not to be pinned to her point ... How wrapped up she is in Vance & the girls, too! For her Vance's lack of success must be a real tragedy – though she's very brave about it. Perhaps won't let herself grasp all that's implied ...<sup>8</sup>

What did they talk about? First, the male pen name on which Richardson insisted. She had worked for twenty years to establish her own name. Why shouldn't she have it? Richardson was her name before marriage. 'My husband rejoiced that I wasn't merely Mrs J.G. Robertson.' As for Henry, 'well, *Maurice Guest* appeared at the time of feminist agitation, and I wanted the book to be a test. No one, positively no reviewer, spotted it as "just a woman's book".'<sup>9</sup>

The word to which Palmer returned was 'firm'. Richardson spoke 'very firmly'. And when the blinds were drawn as the summer light faded, she saw Richardson's face 'shadowed, though still firm'. And again, 'Her alert talk is what stays in the mind, in vigorous outlines, in firm outlines.'<sup>10</sup> Vigorous, firm, alert: the words show respect, but no warmth. This wasn't a friendship in the making.

From her side of the room, what stayed in Richardson's mind was not the 'quietly flowing river' of her own talk, as Palmer described it, but Palmer's 'unstoppable chatter'. You would never guess from that deflating word 'grateful' that Richardson needed Palmer. A second visit prompted another patronising account:

Well, I had Nettie down again for a night ten days ago. Really, Mary, I can make very little of her. She strikes me as being rather on the dull – meaning, not quick-witted – side ... Of course I do feel sorry for her. She has to whip herself so hard to keep her faith in V[ance]. And is handicapped as his wife from ever bringing his work forward. But – I believe the *doubt* goes deeper.<sup>11</sup>

You would never think, from Richardson's lofty tone, that she had been entertaining her most important Australian patron. Nettie Palmer was a formidable woman of letters who wielded real power, but what she seemed to project – at least to Richardson – was rather commonplace. Perhaps Nettie herself did not feel powerful. Somehow she managed to suppress her envy of a talent so far beyond that of Vance Palmer. Perhaps Richardson could not admit, even to herself, how much she wanted the literary recognition in her home country that Palmer gave her. Or admit her dislike of having to be grateful.

The more I thought about these two women, the more I saw the parallels and contrasts. They were half a

generation apart in age, but they had been educated at the same school in Melbourne; they had both studied in Germany; both were formidable intellectuals, widely read in European literature, but with a close professional interest in contemporary Australian writing. Yet neither their few meetings, nor the many letters they exchanged over the years, brought them closer than they were on that first awkward summer evening in Sussex in 1935, so unrewarding for both, and so revealing of their separate selves.

Their fragile friendship – if we can call it a friendship – went on in its anaemic way by letter until Richardson's death. We know, from Richardson's letters to Kernot, how ambivalent she was about the Palmers. When Nettie failed to send her husband's latest novel, Richardson became anxious – were Vance and Nettie offended with her? When the post brought her yet one more undistinguished novel, she was irritated, and it showed in her minimal response.

How much did it matter, this edgy relationship between two remarkable women who had so much to offer one another? Beyond the personal disappointments and hurt feelings, there was one unlucky consequence. Soon after Richardson's death, Nettie began to plan a biography. She was well placed to write it, and because the Palmers were suddenly better off than before, with a legacy of a house of their own from Nettie's parents, she had more time to write something substantial – something of her own, beyond the journalism that had been paying the bills. It was her turn to be the writer in the family.

When she presented her idea to Richardson's friend and executor Olga Roncoroni, and asked for personal papers and letters, the double-edged nature of the Palmer–Richardson relationship presented itself as an obstacle. Kernot had a wonderful collection of private letters. But to show them to Nettie would have revealed all the sharp and denigrating things that Richardson had said over many years about both Palmers. Put these letters to Kernot beside those written to Nettie Palmer, and the contrast would be obvious. Bland pleasantries in one set and, in the other, a comic but belittling account of dreary Nettie and her dull husband. Kernot reread the letters and was appalled. Could she let Nettie read about her visit to Green Ridges with the line: 'How she babbled!' Could she give Nettie these inflammatory letters?

No, she couldn't. Besides, Kernot and Roncoroni were in agreement that Nettie wasn't the right one to capture Richardson's personality. 'I can't feel she has sympathy enough to light up [Richardson's] powers,' Kernot said.<sup>12</sup> They were possessive about Richardson – no biographer would have been good enough – but they were probably right to be doubtful about Nettie.

There was never real sympathy between the two women. There were two barriers between them. One was Richardson's ambivalence about Nettie's promotion of her work; she couldn't forget that it had been slow

in coming and that some of it missed the mark. The other was the failure of Vance Palmer's great ambition. He never wrote the Great Australian Novel. Richardson did, in her Mahony trilogy.

And so Nettie Palmer was denied access to the Richardson–Kernot letters. Her biography dwindled to an appreciation of Richardson's fiction, with a biographical framework. It was the first full-length study of any Australian writer, and so it was important. But it was deprived of the oxygen that Richardson's private letters could have given – had the situation not been so fraught with unacknowledged rivalry on Nettie's part and Henry's refusal to let herself be known except to the very few in her intimate circle. ■

**Brenda Niall** is a Melbourne author. Her books include *The Riddle of Father Hackett* (2009) and *True North: The Story of Mary and Elizabeth Durack* (2012), published by Text.

**This is an edited version of the 2012 Henry Handel Richardson Oration delivered by Brenda Niall for the Henry Handel Richardson Society on 12 October 2012, at the State Library of Victoria.**

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## Endnotes

1. Nettie Higgins to Vance Palmer, 3 February 1910. National Library of Australia, MS 3942
2. Nettie Palmer, *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923*. Lothian, 1924, p. 7. Nettie Palmer's stress is on the need for realism, close observation of the known, and the kind of nationalism associated with Henry Lawson and the 1890s. She wrote: 'what we have to demand from our literature is that it shall to some extent express our virgin and inarticulate continent'
3. Nettie Palmer, 'Henry Handel Richardson'. *The Red Page, Bulletin*, 15 October 1925
4. HHR to Mary Kernot, 10 June 1941. *Henry Handel Richardson: The Letters Vol. 3*, edited by Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele, Miegunyah, 2000, p. 514. HHR kept a book of cuttings 'which I have only to turn up to see what was said about any particular volume'. Distancing herself a little from this attentiveness she said that it was her 'very thorough' husband who started this collection, which she continued.
5. HHR to Mary Kernot, *Letters Vol. 2*, p. 122
6. HHR to Mary Kernot, *Letters Vol. 3*, p. 213
7. Nettie Palmer, *Fourteen Years*. University of Queensland Press, 1988, p. 194
8. HHR to Mary Kernot, 29 July 1930. *Letters Vol. 3*, p. 135
9. *Fourteen Years*, p. 175
10. *Ibid* p. 176
11. HHR to Mary Kernot, 30 December 1930. *Letters Vol. 3*, p. 145
12. Mary Kernot to Olga Roncoroni, 20 February 1948. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, MS 6092