

Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia Inc.

Newsletter June 2014



HHR Writing Competition 2014

Our writing competition is underway with entries already coming in. The due date is 31 July 2014 and the judge is Helen Garner. We have been promoting the competition far and wide across Australia and also in New Zealand, France, England, Canada and the US.

Can you help?

Members are encouraged to enter the competition and to promote and publicise it.

If you know of anyone who may be interested for information, guidelines and entry form, you can direct them to our website:

www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au

If you would like posters to place in your local library, community centre or any place where people might be interested, please contact Graeme Charles at PO Box 35, Chiltern Victoria 3683 Australia, or on gcharles@communityaction.coop

Thanks for the kind donations that have been received from members for the competition. These help us with promoting the competition, prize money, judging, administration and postage costs. More donations are always welcome.

Thanks also to our sponsors, Text Publishing, who have once again provided book prizes and given us valuable coverage on their website.

HHR in the Ether

Interest in and study of HHR is alive and well if the following articles and events are anything to go by.

On The Conversation:

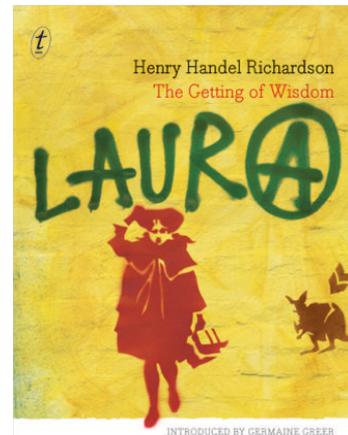
If you had to argue for the merits of one Australian book, one piece of writing, what would it be?

- *The Getting of Wisdom*, says Michelle Smith, Research Fellow at Deakin University

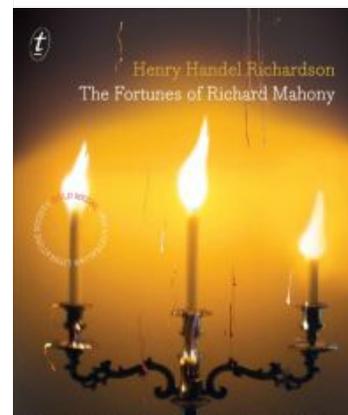
- *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, says Paul Giles, Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney.

Smith and Giles present their answers to the above question on *The Conversation*, an independent source of news and analysis that uses content sourced from the academic and research community. It includes an occasional series where one of their authors makes the case for a work of their choosing.

In Michelle Smith's article about *The Getting of Wisdom* she refers to a comment by H G Wells that it was the 'best school story he'd ever read'. Smith then explores the ways in which Richardson's novel actually flaunts and subverts the conventions of the British girls' school story.



Text Classics



Text Classics

Paul Giles heard that the American novelist, John Updike once said that *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* could be found in every American library shelf when he was growing up. Giles set himself to read the book and find out why. Giles sees the story as 'having a direct relation to the American epic tradition, of which it works in some ways as a sophisticated parody'. He said he was 'awestruck by the expansive scope of Richardson's imaginative world'. You can read these articles by Michelle Smith and Paul Giles in full by going to:

www.theconversation.com.au

and enter 'Henry Handel Richardson' in the search box.

On The Drum

Anne Summers, writer and columnist and also a leading feminist, editor and publisher recently appeared in a panel discussion on the ABC television current affairs and news analysis program, *The Drum*. The panel host asked members what book would they recommend to Tony

Abbott. Anne Summers' answer was *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* which she regarded as one of the truly great novels written by an Australian. Summers believes that the making and losing of fortunes in that book has resonance for today's mining-led economy.



In Australian Book Review

In a recent essay entitled *Something very difficult and unusual – The love song of Henry and Olga* - Ann-Marie Priest has written about the relationship between Henry Handel Richardson and her lifelong companion, Olga Roncoroni.



HHR and Olga at Lyme Regis

The essay was one of just five shortlisted for the prestigious Calibre Essay Prize. The Prize, conducted by *Australian Book Review* is intended to encourage brilliant new essays and to foster new insights into Australian culture and society.

Priest is a literary scholar and the author of *Great Writers, Great Loves: The Reinvention of Love in the Twentieth Century*. She teaches academic writing at Central Queensland University.

The essay was published in May 2014 *Australian Book Review* and is available by subscribing to the magazine at

www.australianbookreview.com.au

or at your local library. Please see Bruce Steele's reply to Anne-Marie Priest's article on page 3.

If you see any reference to Richardson please let us know so that we can share it with members in the newsletter. Send to j.runci@bigpond.com or to PO Box 35, Chiltern Vic 3683.

Welcome to new members

Rosie Barter from Beaconsfield, Western Australia

Sebastian Fink from Leipzig, Germany, the city where Richardson went to study music before she settled in England, and the setting for her novel, *Maurice Guest*.



Sebastian Fink

Sebastian grew up in Riesa near Dresden and then studied History, Journalism and Linguistic Science at the University of Leipzig, completing his PhD in 2010 and then working as a lecturer there. He now works as a journalist for various newspapers and as a guide for the Museum of Contemporary History in Leipzig.

Here are Sebastian's impressions of Richardson's novel, *Maurice Guest*:

Before I read it, I didn't know much about Leipzig 100 years ago, but after the first pages I started comparing the described pictures in the book with the actual city today and was excited, how much still is to be seen here.

Also it's a pity I missed the old Gewandhaus and the old University buildings described in the novel. The book itself in the beginning was hard to read, because HHR is describing and characterizing very much without bringing the story onwards. But after the first third it became more and more thrilling to read on.

One can imagine, that the novel was near a scandal in the old days, because it's telling many intimate details about the relationships of the main characters. Susan (Susan Schale, another HHR member in Leipzig, featured in an earlier newsletter, December 2011) and I saw Wedekind's "Lulu" in the theatre in Leipzig on Saturday and could really see how HHR found her way to the character of Louise.

Bruce Steele's Reply to Anne-Marie Priest's article in ABR

Anne-Marie Priest's creative essay "The Love Song of Henry and Olga" (ABR, May 2014) proposes that the relationship between Henry Handel Richardson and Olga Roncoroni was probably an erotic, perhaps even an overtly sexual one. In establishing this, she relies on a particular reading of some of the available evidence. This reply is about evidence and what we do with it. I believe that one reaches conclusions from the evidence as it stands, not from how one might like it to be. So when it is asserted (with no grounds given) that the principal witness statement, Olga's Memoir of HHR, is "coded", anything may emerge.

Asking the manager of a struggling small-town cinema for the identity of a very talented musician HHR hears (but cannot see) translates into "extracting" the information. When, after discussion with her husband, HHR meets and befriends the girl and asks her to tea at their home, this is decoded as a "seduction", a "dogged pursuit" and "luring". Later, when the Robertsons offer to facilitate her psychiatric recovery, this altruistic act is found to be "frankly implausible" – as it would be were seduction and pursuit the motive. It is not homosexuality that is in question here but deliberate seduction as a motive. In the light of what follows, it cannot have been simply an impulsive and selfish move on HHR's part. Her husband was consulted about the person they were to make a significant member of their household. After all, as HHR herself acknowledged, it was he who paid the bills: she had very little money of her own.

"In biographical terms, a marriage generally trumps other relationships" suggests bias in biographers. In HHR's case, Green and especially Ackland (who had access to much more material than Green) draw clear conclusions from the evidence. The evidence points to this marriage doing just that. "A Love Song" purports to subvert that. This marriage was far stronger than any other relationship. Apart from other considerations, HHR depended on it.

HHR's "extremely musical" nature, as her nephew Walter Neustatter put it, played the initial role in HHR's rescue of this talented pianist from her mother-dominated agoraphobia and in their subsequent close relationship. In almost every biographical account, it seems that once HHR left Leipzig, her musical life was over in favour of her writing. Certainly she abandoned any idea of becoming a professional performer; but anyone with musical sensitivity would find it hard to believe that it was the end of her musical life and indeed the facts speak otherwise. They would also understand what it means to find a kindred musical spirit. Noting that her husband was an "excellent botanist and geologist, an expert on ships and boats," HHR added that in "music he did not get beyond Wagner, for whom he had a passion." Still, he loved listening to music of all kinds and admired HHR's musical talent: she could play and interpret Wagner's music for him. It was a mutual interest in Wagner's operas that began their friendship in Leipzig. No musician himself, Robertson loved the operas rather as a student of literature and drama. HHR, however, played her piano every day and composed many little songs. Her playing of Schumann's piano works was considered particularly sympathetic; she was a keen concert-goer. After Leipzig, her music was a solitary thing. Until she met Olga,

her only musical companion – and that only occasionally – was her sister Lil, a competent violinist. It was Olga's striking ability as a pianist and improviser, almost matching her own, which alerted her before she actually saw or knew Olga. Both Olga's parents and Robertson encouraged and supported what became a lively musical friendship. They were soon playing piano music for four hands. In HHR, Olga found a fellow musician, but also a friend and a mainstay – one who, by arranging psychiatric treatment, enabled her to pursue a musical career. This was something her parents could not do. The Robertsons did and their home became hers.



HHR and John George Robertson taken in Munich in 1896 (they were married 30 December 1895)

In her husband, George Robertson, HHR found a protector, a provider, a father, an intimate companion. After his death she wrote: "In him I lose a husband, father, brother rolled into one. He was everything to me." Their marriage was "38 yrs of companionship ... Altogether he was the most unselfish man who ever lived, & the most understanding – and that's not just the overflow of a heart full of grief ... he was greatly loved – as much loved as respected for his learning & knowledge." Robertson was in many ways like the father she admired, loved and lost in childhood. She remembered Dr Richardson as the retiring scholar – albeit an amateur – absorbed in his books and research: even when the family was struggling in the abortive Hawthorn practice, he was out buying books, bringing them home in his carpet-bag. The trauma of finally losing him in demeaning circumstances in Queenscliff and Koroit, left its mark on her: there is much of her in the imagined character of Cuffy Mahony. Robertson, retiring scholar, loving, generous provider, was so like a father. The relationship satisfied a psychological need in her. Their relationship, it seems, was not of romantic intensity; probably not of great sexual fulfilment. We do not and cannot know. It was fundamental to HHR's well-being and security. It enabled, encouraged and, to a degree, inspired her work as a writer. It gave her freedom to pursue her own interests and friendships in which he had neither the time nor the temperament to participate. But they were both extremely protective of their privacy.

Of her writing, alluding to the dedication of Shakespeare's Sonnets, HHR declared that Robertson was "the only

begetter – in so far as he removed every stone from my path, provided the necessary money to keep me in artistic idleness, cheered me in days of neglect, & believed in me from the bottom of his heart.” He alone encouraged her from the time they met in Leipzig. Her first published book, a translation from the Danish of Jacobsen’s novel *Niels Lyhne* (1896), was done at his bidding and under his watchful eye. Published under her married name, the dedication is “To my dear Husband” but signed “Mädel” (little maid) – not “Wife”. He was her “fireside critic”: she depended on his critical approval. She would leave a draft chapter of *Maurice Guest*, for instance, for him to read while she escaped to walk, even in the snow, suffering pangs of apprehension until the verdict came. Her last novel, *The Young Cosima* (1939) published after her husband’s death is dedicated “For N.” *The End of a Childhood* (1934) is also dedicated to him “For B. S.” The initials are of her pet names for him (N. short for Nub). Her work for some twenty or more years was devoted to recreating her father in the character of Richard Mahony. Except for the first issue of *Ultima Thule* (to M. L. R., her mother), *The Fortunes* is dedicated to “W. L. R.”, her father.

To be sure, their lives outwardly appeared separate and to a very large degree they were. Her husband was happiest among his books, HHR said. In achieving what he did in the world of scholarship with such international distinction, along with lecturing, teaching and examining, he worked long hours and travelled a good deal. He was a light sleeper: barely four hours a night. Their separateness, even at home, was confirmed by Anne Dow, the Robertsons’ housekeeper for many years in London and at Lyme Regis, when she told me about her work in the Robertson household. Mrs Robertson she found “pernickity and temperamental”: everything had to be in order and on time. She must never be disturbed when working. But Prof. Robertson was a “lovely, kindly gentleman”. When at home, he too worked alone in his study. If he wanted something, she said, – brown paper, string – he would never send for her but come downstairs himself to get it, and stay for a chat. He would often entertain a student to tea in his study. Mrs Robertson was never part of this: she would meet her own friends in her study or the drawing-room. But as Walter Neustatter recalled, whenever possible they met at the end of the day for music and to catch up on the events of their days.

Except for rare sea voyages, Robertson did not enjoy travel for its own sake: in 1929, for instance, they enjoyed a month’s voyage to the West Indies. HHR enjoyed local journeys by car, continental travel, as well as concerts and movies for which he rarely found time. Generally she needed these as relaxation from a stint of concentrated work, and occasionally for her health. In Olga she found a lively, fun-loving companion and a keen chauffeur. While they went on their jaunts by car, singing HHR’s setting of Chesterton’s “The Rolling English Road” at full voice as they sped down country lanes, George preferred “solitude & a bachelor menage”. Yet, after his death, she confessed to Miles Franklin (not one of her confidantes) he “was by far my most intimate friend; & had been at my side ever since I began to take my first uncertain steps as a writer. His sympathy & encouragement were unfailing, & all through those years of silence & neglect I wrote for him alone. Now the bottom seems to have fallen out of my world.” When in

1928 Heinemann refused to take *Ultima Thule*, George, confident there was no risk, put up the £165 to ensure that the firm published the last part of the trilogy, albeit in a small edition. It sold out in a week. His investment was returned and the book became a best-seller. From the start he recognised her genius and nurtured it.

When apart, they communicated by writing notes to each other. Whenever they were actually separated – by HHR’s travels or George’s work outside London – they wrote each other daily, often just about day to day trivia. Only one of the many hundreds, even thousands, of such notes survived the destruction of countless letters and papers after HHR’s death. Margaret Capon found it in 2005 concealed between the pages of a book. Its discovery came too late for inclusion in the edition of Richardson’s correspondence. It is now in the National Library. Even that one letter of perhaps 300 words shows that easy intimacy on a range of business and personal matters, characteristic of a firm and trusting marriage. Priest’s essay seeks to subvert that in favour of “Henry and Olga”.

This devoted relationship (“companionship” in her word), and her creative life as a writer, Olga could neither provide nor share in. After Robertson’s death, however, her devotion to HHR was necessary and, it seems, increasingly close; it could never replace him. It is clear from Olga’s letters to Mary Kernot and others, that she found the literary work and the responsibility of being HHR’s executor often beyond her. Contrary to Priest’s assertion, she did work for HHR by typing and household tasks. Several of HHR’s song manuscripts are in Olga’s hand. She learned to type and typed the endless drafts of *The Young Cosima*. Like her predecessor in this role, Irene Stumpp, she became housekeeper, cook and secretary. After their move to Fairlight, Olga became HHR’s closest companion and her supporter during the war years. Whether she was more than that is sheer speculation. HHR’s obsession with privacy ensured that even within the evidence of her surviving correspondence, her intimate life remained her own. Olga is generally referred to as “my friend”.

Olga could not ever be HHR’s provider, her “most intimate friend”, her loving “fireside critic”, nor her inspiration whatever else she was or may have been. It is safe to say that without John George Robertson, and their rock-solid marriage, we would never have had Henry Handel Richardson. And that, surely, is what matters.

Reminder Subscriptions

At the AGM held on 3 January 2014 it was resolved to keep our annual membership subscription at \$15 per individual. If you haven't already done so, you can send your 2014 membership sub to the Society at PO Box 35 Chiltern 3683 or direct deposit into our account ‘Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia’ BSB 803 070 Account no. 77605, making sure your name is shown.

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