



HHR's Birthday Celebration, 2015

Despite soaring temperatures and recent gale force winds about seventy people came to HHR's childhood home, Lakeview, from NSW, Melbourne and Chiltern and the north east district for the annual celebration of her birthday on January 3.

Rex Fuge

The focus for the meeting this year was a celebration of the life of our first President, Rex Fuge, who died of a sudden heart attack on September 6, 2014. Bill Steele, who worked with Rex at the Chiltern Athenaeum and has succeeded him as President there, spoke of Rex's untiring work in ensuring the preservation of Lakeview and promoting HHR's legacy.



Rex receiving his HHRSA Life Membership at the AGM, 3 January 2013

A bench to commemorate Rex's work has been donated by the volunteers who work at Lakeview. With a wave of an imaginary cloth Clive Probyn, President of the Society, unveiled the seat with its memorial plaque.



Mary Fuge and Clive Probyn



The plaque on the seat

Members were especially glad to see Rex's wife, Mary at the celebration. Mary herself suffered a heart attack recently and then had surgery. She returned home to Chiltern only a few days before the Birthday, but came along with her son, Warren.



Mary and Warren Fuge

The press also came to Lakeview on January 3, and the following article appeared in *The Border Mail* on Tuesday, 6 January:

Town's Tribute to Historian Rex Fuge

A man who spent much of his life marking the legacy of author Henry Handel Richardson has been honoured at an event in Chiltern. Rex Fuge, who died last September, started an annual celebration of the writer's birthday at Lakeview in Chiltern in 1970.

About 70 people gathered at the venue on Saturday night to continue the tradition, with a special tribute to Mr Fuge. Chiltern Athenaeum Trust president Bill Steele said the gathering had been 'excellent'.

'We thought numbers were going to be down on last year because of the heat,' he said. 'But we had a very good turnout. There were lots of laughs.'

A bench honouring Mr Fuge was unveiled outside the venue.

'Professor Clive Probyn paid tribute to Rex for all the work he'd done,' Mr Steele said. 'The bench was donated by the volunteers who run Lakeview who also had a plaque made. It was a great event.'

Cutting the cake

Beryl Pickering, manager of Lakeview, did the honours and cut the HHR birthday cake. As usual the table was set with a vase of red roses as HHR required on her writing desk, and there was the framed portrait of HHR. This year as well there was a photo of Rex.



Launch of Bruce Steele's new book

Bruce Steele entertained us with a fascinating talk about the two important men in HHR's life—her father, Walter Richardson, and her husband, John George Robertson—as an introduction to his new book of John Robertson's lectures on Wagner. Here is the talk:



Professor John George Robertson

'Today we celebrate the 145th birthday of HHR. Each year we hear something about her life and her works, about her parents and her sister who lived for a time here in Chiltern. I have been asked to talk about two

books relating to two important men in HHR's life: one about her father and the other by her husband. Of course we know that she had a devoted husband who supported and encouraged her writing, but he rarely gets more than a mention. So on this occasion, as we note the publication of one of *his* works, it's a good time to hear a bit more about this man and his work. If you received the June Newsletter last year, you will have read quite a bit that I wrote about Professor Robertson and their marriage. In introducing his book I'll add to some of what was in that article.



Bruce Steele

John George Robertson was born in Glasgow in 1867, the eldest of five children. He was precociously gifted: he entered Glasgow University at the age of 15. His early interest in science was encouraged by his father but he became increasingly interested in literature especially German literature and thought after reading essays by another Scot, Thomas Carlyle. His initial university study, however, was Classics in which he graduated MA in 1886 aged 19. Partly to satisfy his father's ambition for him, he returned to science and graduated BSc in 1889. He retained a life-long interest in botany and geology. HHR said he was an expert in both.

From Glasgow he went to the University of Leipzig where he specialised in German Literature, gaining his PhD in 1892. And of course, it was in Leipzig that he met Ethel Richardson, a young Australian music student who was studying piano performance at the Leipzig Conservatorium. They soon discovered a mutual interest in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner. Together they began a detailed study of the texts and the music of the composer's works. They attended performances whenever they could buy cheap seats and they really *were* cheap in those days.

For George Robertson it was the start of a life-long professional study of the composer. As a literary historian, his main interest was in the poetry and drama of Wagner's works. He was no musician himself, but Ettie was able to play and analyse the music for him. 'In music,' she wrote later, 'he did not really get beyond Wagner, for whom he had a

passion.’ In her work, the influence of Wagner is pervasive and is especially evident in *Maurice Guest*.

In the years up to their marriage in December 1895, Robertson survived by journalism and examining. In 1896 he was appointed Lecturer and then Professor at Strassburg University. His work there culminated in the publication of his encyclopaedic *History of German Literature* in 1902. This became a standard work in English for the rest of the century. It led to his appointment as the first Professor of German Language and Literature in the University of London in 1903, a position he held until his death in May 1933.

George Robertson was to HHR husband, protector, provider, father and 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, she wrote, ‘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.’

The interesting word in her list is *father*. Robertson was in many ways like the father she admired, loved and lost in childhood. She remembered Dr Richardson as a retiring scholar absorbed in his books and research. The trauma of finally losing him in such demeaning circumstances in Queenscliff and Koroit, left its mark on her. George Robertson, scholar, loving and generous provider, was in this respect like her father. The relationship was fundamental to HHR’s well-being and security. It enabled, encouraged and even inspired her work as a writer. She wrote that he was ‘the only begetter’ of her works, ‘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.’ 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. It was published under her married name, Ethel F. L. Robertson, and the dedication is ‘To my dear Husband’. It is interesting that she signed herself not ‘Wife’ but as ‘Mädel’ (little maid).

Their relationship gave her freedom to pursue her own interests and friendships in which he had neither the time nor the temperament to participate. He was happiest among his books, HHR said. To achieve 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. They were each in their own way extremely protective of their privacy.

So their lives appeared separate and to a large degree they were. Their separateness, even at home, was

confirmed by Anne Dow, the Robertsons’ housekeeper for many years. She spoke to me about her work in the Robertson household. Mrs Robertson she said was ‘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’. He would work alone in his study. If he wanted something, Anne Dow told me, 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, she said, was never part of this: she would meet her own friends in her study or in the drawing-room. But HHR’s nephew Walter Neustatter recalled that, whenever possible, they met at the end of the day for music and to catch up on the events of their respective days. When they were apart they wrote daily notes to each other.

In 1933 Prof Robertson gave a series of open lectures to London University on Richard Wagner, the composer whose works he and HHR had first studied back in Leipzig. These lectures survived in typescript but have never been published until now. They were the last lectures he gave, as he died two months after giving the last of the series. When we think back to 1933, it was a brave thing to have spoken on Wagner at the time. Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January while the lecture series was in progress. The Nazis’ use of Wagner’s music in their propaganda was becoming more and more apparent.

Opposition to all things German was growing in the British community. Not only as Professor of German, but one whose sister-in-law was married to a German, Robertson had already been threatened during World War One. He would have been well aware of the unpopularity of the path he was treading in 1933. In fact, *The Times* obituary spoke of his writing and speaking about German thought and culture ‘at a time when it required moral courage to push German intellectual wares in this country.’ Yet there is no hint in his lectures of the German political situation. It was not relevant to his intention: he was examining cultural history. That the lectures were not published at the time may have been due to the political and social climate of the 1930s. Yet only the year before, Professor Robertson had received the Medal for Arts and Science from the German government. It was presented to him by President Hindenburg. His fellow recipient was none other than Benito Mussolini!

What is special about this book of lectures is conveyed in its title, ‘Richard Wagner as Poet and Thinker’. Few writers have exclusively taken this approach to one of the great figures in 19th Century Europe.

While the title may sound forbidding to some, the lectures are remarkably readable; but as HHR remarked, ‘He was such a good speaker.’ And the

genial tone of voice is there in his lecturing style. It is in the belief that this work is an important and original contribution to Western cultural history that I decided to have it published. But I should also declare a personal interest here.

Like HHR and JGR, I first came across Wagner as a young music student. It was in 1951 when the ABC broadcast the operas from the first post-war Bayreuth Festival. I sat up night after night with my little radio and a few scores and was hooked. I have loved, listened to, seen and studied his works ever since. I doubt if this book will convert anyone to Wagner's operas if they are not already Wagnerites. To serious Wagnerians it should hold a deal of interest. Robertson's demonstration that Wagner was a significant dramatic poet as well as composer is convincing. Now that *The Ring* has been performed in Adelaide and recently in Melbourne there's a growing following. Getting to know the texts well beforehand makes the theatrical experience richer and more exciting.

This book won't make the best-seller list, you'll probably agree; but it's offered as a tribute to a great scholar and in memory of the devoted husband of Henry Handel Richardson. HHR's own last tribute to her husband is, of course, *The Young Cosima*. The dedication is to 'N.', the initial of one of her pet names for him, probably 'Nub'. And of course the major figure in that novel is Richard Wagner.

And now a brief word about the other book. It is two years ago on this occasion that we launched *Walter Lindesay Richardson MD: A Victorian Seeker*. This was my attempt to find HHR's father, the man behind her Richard Mahony. The book has now been reprinted in a more readable format and there are copies available from me at the special reduced price of \$30. If you buy both books the price is \$50. These prices include packaging and posting."

To order one or both of Bruce's books go to the Society website:

www.henryhandelrichardsonociety.org

A tree falls at Lakeview

If you've ever spent time in the gardens at Lakeview you'll remember the two grand old trees, one in front of the kitchen outbuilding, and one to its side. The magnificent canopies of these trees have provided welcome shade for many occasions over the years, including the Society's Annual General Meetings and birthday celebrations.

However just a few days before 3 January this year heavy winds swept through the Lakeview gardens, splitting the trunk of one of these trees and causing a large branch to fall and luckily just rest on the roof of the kitchen building.

An arborist has inspected the tree and advised that it will have to be removed at a cost of about \$2,500. Meanwhile the whole area has been roped off.



The tree in all its glory at the AGM 2013



Now the branch rest on the roof of the kitchen outbuilding



The trunk is split in two

But despite this there was the usual serenity of the lovingly maintained gardens. Many thanks to Anne Vyner who does such a splendid job despite the high temperatures in Chiltern.



The view of the lake from the garden

More than ‘a nice bunch of genteel ladies’



Rosemary Gordon

‘A nice bunch of genteel ladies’—that’s how Rosemary Gordon refers to herself and the other members of the North Eastern Women’s Auxiliary of the National Trust—but this group of women has been formidable in their continued efforts to raise funds for the upkeep and repair of HHR’s Chiltern home, Lakeview.

One corner of the verandah where the young Ethel Richardson played and made up stories has recently been repaired, thanks to the fund-raising efforts of the Auxiliary. HHR wrote of this verandah in her memoir, *Myself When Young*:

It was here that, no new books coming in, I took to making up stories for myself. To the accompaniment of a ball bounced against a wall. For I was a very active, not to say restless child, and never sat still if I could help it. As I spoke my stories aloud, the noise I made was considerable, and I don’t wonder that I was often shoo’ed off by my mother from where she was sitting.

In *Ultima Thule* (the third volume, of HHR’s trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*), the young character Cuffy reflects on the house where he and his mother and sister have come to join their father who is struggling with failing health in the fictional town of Barambogie. The house is largely based on Lakeview and the town on Chiltern.

For he wanted so awf’ly much to be happy – in this house that he loved, with the verandahh, the garden, and the fowls, and the Lagoon – and when he saw Papa miserable, he couldn’t be.

Most recently the Auxiliary has raised \$10,000 for the repair of plastering throughout the old house. How do they do it? For the last 30 years, the Auxiliary has met five times a year with about 40 attending most meetings, and sometimes husbands as well. The actual meetings are ‘short and sharp’, Rosemary says, and then there is a talk, a film or an outing. A film and basket lunch at the old Star theatre in Chiltern can raise \$2,000. It’s friendship that keeps members coming, Rosemary says, but an added incentive is that

the group has been given autonomy with the money raised.

For their next meeting in February the group will go to Lake Hume resort and hear a talk about the development of the lake. Once a year the group go on a tour to places of historical interest for three days. The tour is so popular that it is usually booked out immediately.

Each January 3 when the Society gathers to celebrate HHR’s birthday we have the privilege of sitting in the carefully tended gardens of that house, walking through its rooms, along its verandah, and looking out to Lake Anderson, called ‘the Lagoon’ by Cuffy. And each year we are grateful for the work of the Auxiliary.

Mary Gaunt – a new book on another amazing woman and writer from Chiltern

Just fifteen years before HHR and her family came to Chiltern another young girl was born and lived with her parents in the town. Mary Gaunt’s father, William, was a goldfields official, living in Chiltern from 1861–64, then in Beechworth and various other goldfields towns, ending up in Ballarat. Significantly, when Mary Gaunt wrote short stories many years later it was to this landscape and society that she largely returned.

All that is left now of the Gaunt residence in Chiltern is one old pear tree, such trees being the longest surviving of the fruit trees. What a contrast to the house and gardens of Lakeview to remind us of HHR and the influences in her work.

However Bronwen Hickman, writer, historian and HHR Society member, has been coming to Chiltern for the last fifteen years in search of the story of Mary Gaunt. Her search began earlier as a young mother with a baby in an air force house in Laverton. It was here Bronwen read a few lines about Mary Gaunt, about the young woman’s threefold aspirations. Mary Gaunt at the age of 20 had wanted to study at Melbourne University, become a writer and to travel. That was 1881, the first year women could study at Melbourne University.

Mary Gaunt’s aspirations resonated for Bronwen. She had had to abandon her course at Melbourne University when her husband’s work took them to Wagga. If Mary could do those three things in 1881, surely she could do the same in the latter part of the twentieth century. And so her work began.

Bronwen’s search began with the Public Records Office. William Gaunt submitted fortnightly goldfields reports which enabled her to follow his movements and track Mary’s early years. Bronwen’s efforts led her overseas and also to Chiltern. She came to the Athenaeum and met the late Rex Fuge, who was

enthusiastic and informative about her work. It was Rex who took her to the property with its solitary pear tree.

Over twenty years, Bronwen travelled to the places Mary Gaunt wrote about, including Italy, France and England. She regrets she did not get as far as Africa, China and Jamaica! In 2001 she produced an edition of Mary Gaunt's stories, *Life at Deadman's*. Interestingly these stories appeared in various newspapers across Victoria in Gaunt's lifetime and one of those towns was Maldon, another town where HHR lived as a girl. In 2014 Bronwen's biography, *Mary Gaunt, Independent Colonial Woman* was published.



Bronwen Hickman

Bronwen is presently working on a one-woman play about Mary Gaunt. Hopefully this might be performed at the same time as an HHR event so that we can all enjoy it.

Mary Gaunt, Independent Colonial Woman is available from www.melbournebooks.com.au

Writing Competition 2014: Celebrating and Promoting the work of HHR

As organisers we were very happy with this year's competition. For our first competition in 2012 we received just over 70 entries. In 2014 we received 450!!

Large donations from members allowed us to give bigger and more prizes. We simplified the process by cutting the youth section as we only received six youth entries last time.

We believe the increase in the number of entries was partly due to our decision to do a quarter page advertisement in *Australian Book Review*, and also online. Text Publishing gave us great support again, promoting the competition and providing books for prizes.

The standard of the short list of twelve writers was so high that Helen Garner, our judge, asked to award an extra Third prize. We also gave a Special Essay Prize for an essay with some link to HHR. The winners are some of Australia's top emerging writers. If you Google any of these names you will see what I mean: Jennifer Down (First), Melanie Napthine (Second), Stephanie Buckle (equal Third), Rebekah Clarkson (equal Third) and Sylvia Martin (Special Essay Prize).

The prize giving event at the Wheeler Centre on November 9th was a warm-hearted affair. Helen Garner spoke of her own link to HHR, drawing in her reading of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, a visit to Lakeview with Axel Clark (HHR's biographer and a close friend of Helen's), and features of each of the winning stories. Helen dedicated her talk to the memory of Axel Clark who died at the age of 58 in 2001. A number of those who attended said they were going straight home to read HHR again, or in some cases, for the first time.

An unexpected outcome of the competition was a request by some of the shortlisted people to read each others' work. I contacted them all and a number decided to be on an email list and have already begun to swap work. One of the winners, Rebekah Clarkson, wrote in an email:

'And thank you for organising the emails of the short listed writers. I feel very grateful to have discovered the HHR Society and this lovely community.'

For our next competition in 2016 we hope to get some professional administrative assistance for the huge task of sorting, numbering, recording and sending on the entries to the readers, and then to the judge. The increased number of entries warrants this.

Our Society goal is to celebrate and promote the writings of HHR. The 2014 competition certainly did that!

Changes on the Committee of the Society

At the elections at the AGM Graeme Charles succeeded Clive Probyn as President. Thanks to Clive for his great work, and congratulations to Graeme.



Clive Probyn and Graeme Charles

There are two new faces on the Committee. Bill Steele was elected to the position of Vice President.



Bill Steele

Bill is President of the Chiltern Athenaeum Library, where he has worked for many years with Rex Fuge on local history, including HHR. He will also take over Rex's position on the Shire of Indigo Heritage Advisory Board. He makes video documentaries on local history such as his one on HHR and another on the Chiltern Fire Brigade for their 140-year celebrations. Bill plans to include more audio visual material where possible at the John McEwan Annexe of the Athenaeum.

Helen Macrae was elected as Treasurer. Helen comes with a background in adult education and a special interest in governance. We are looking forward to her assistance as we revise our constitution.



Helen Macrae

Proposal for date of AGM to move to Autumn

There was some discussion about the wisdom of holding the AGM on 3 January at a time when Chiltern is so hot and fire prone, and members are likely to have family commitments.

It was agreed that autumn may be a preferable time. A motion was passed: 'That the HHR birthday celebration on 3rd January should continue, but that the AGM be moved to a convenient date in March, to be decided by the committee.'

Have you paid your membership subscription?

At the recent AGM, the annual membership subscription of \$15 per individual was confirmed. All members are urged to pay their subscription as soon as possible.

While many members did pay their annual subscription last year, there were many others who didn't. At this stage they remain on our membership list and we would like to keep them there. So, if you are one of those people, who would like to remain a member of the Society, could you please pay this year's subscription as soon as you can?

Payment can be made by direct deposit into our bank account or by posting your cheque to the Society at PO Box 35, Chiltern 3683.

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

If you do not wish to remain on our membership list, please email our Secretary, Janey Runci, at j.runci@bigpond.com or write to us at the PO Box shown above.



New HHRSA Committee

President: Graeme Charles

Vice-President: Bill Steele

Treasurer: Helen Macrae

Secretary: Janey Runci

Committee Members:

Clive Probyn, Bronwyn Minifie

Website: www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au



Lakeview