

# Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia Inc.

## Newsletter May 2015



### Everybody's talking about HHR!

In this newsletter we hear from David Cohen from Dorset in England who has generously donated to the HHR Society a copy of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* signed by Richardson herself.

A new member, Barrie Sheppard tells of the joys of re-reading *The Fortunes*.

The designer, Robert Buckingham, when asked what book best captured his sense of Melbourne, named *The Fortunes* in a feature in *The Age*.

When noted Australian novelist Thomas Keneally and publisher Carmen Callil were asked on BBC radio to name 'the classic Australian novel', both chose *Maurice Guest*.

When Jill Sanguinetti set out to write her boarding school memoir she was inspired by her reading of *The Getting of Wisdom*.

Hugh Kiernan, one of the finalists in the HHR Writing Competition 2014 launched his memoir, *Love Letters from Transylvania* in April. Hugh's entry in the HHR Competition forms the introduction to this work.

Read about all of these in the following newsletter.

And if you see anything about HHR or are inspired to write something yourself for a future newsletter send it by email to Janey Runci at [j.runci@bigpond.com](mailto:j.runci@bigpond.com)

### Signed copy of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*



The Society was thrilled to hear from David Cohen in Dorset, England, with the news that he had a copy of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, signed by Richardson herself. An accompanying letter reveals that the book is a review copy sent by the publisher, William Heinemann to The Windmill Press in Surrey. David generously offered to donate the copy to the

Society and the committee has decided to give it on loan to the Chiltern Athenaeum where it can reside with the desk where Richardson is reputed to have written the trilogy.

### Introducing David Cohen

I am a recently retired English teacher. I was born in the East End of London but I've lived in Dorset (Thomas Hardy country in the southwest of England) since 1976. In 1977 I was one of the founder members of the Badger Poets, a group that is possibly the longest running performance poetry group in the country. As well as writing, I'm an avid reader, I love music and I play the guitar. I am married and my daughter is a professional musician.



David Cohen

How I came to acquire the trilogy is somewhat lost in the mists of time but I think I bought it many years ago from a second hand book shop in Shaftesbury, not least because I was intrigued by the press cutting and it being a signed copy. Sorting books out in preparation for moving house, I again came across the trilogy and decided it was time for the book to have a proper home. Using the wonders of technology I contacted Graeme Charles and knew the book had to fly to its proper home. I'm delighted to have been a small part of such an amazing journey.

### Rediscovering *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*

#### Barrie Sheppard

I first read *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* about 45 years ago. Twice, in fact, when I taught it as part of an Australian Literature course at Rusden State College

in the 1970s. I read it again recently for an English Literature course I teach for the Bayside U3A.

Back in the seventies I marvelled at its greatness. After my recent reading I marvel again, and even more: marvel at its scope (historical, both social and political), the psychology, the characterisation, and the humour, and the writing (faultless throughout), and the landscapes (the “ands” can go on). And, for the deeply moving story of Mahony’s decline into madness, with Mary’s accompanying ascent into a kind of secular sainthood. Who could not be moved to tears by the scene on the Quay at Warrnambool?

So, reading it again, I had all this to enjoy, and wonder at, but there was more—the children. I had either forgotten them, or, more likely, read over their place in the novel, because, perhaps, back then I didn’t appreciate children as much as I do now, tending to take them for granted.

What insight into children HHR had, the more remarkable from one who herself was childless (a prodigious memory no doubt helped): their bewilderment at adult language, the effect on them of Mahony’s eccentricity and his decline into depression and ultimately madness (on the score of depression, being one who has suffered real depression, I know HHR’s insight into the disease is astonishing). And then there’s the heart-rending account of the death of little Lallie, and the psychological truth of its effect on Mary

After I had finished my six, two-hour classes on the novel with the U3A people, I was still engaged, and, browsing on the internet for more on Richardson’s life, I discovered the HHR Society. I joined immediately.



New members of the HHR society – Barrie and Fay Sheppard

## What book has best captured your sense of Melbourne?

*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* was the answer given by Robert Buckingham in *The Age* weekly feature, ‘My Secret Melbourne’ (Saturday, 17 January 2015).

Robert Buckingham is the founder of the Melbourne Fashion Festival and the founding Director of Australia’s Fashion Design Council. He runs his own creative strategy company, called Mr Buckingham, and works as a consultant for London’s trend forecasting studio, ‘The Future Laboratory’.

About *The Fortunes* Buckingham said, ‘It’s a trilogy, a historical novel, some would say the great Australian novel, and it’s the story of the gold rush, the immigrant’s tale, with references to St Kilda, the goldfields and Chiltern, near where my mother’s family come from. It’s a beautiful book and it captures the way in which many of us are immigrants, and our relationship to the country, and shows Richardson’s interest in social history, architecture and Melbourne’.

## Maurice Guest – the great Australian classic?

In an episode of ‘Open Book’ on BBC radio in January this year the panellists considered the ‘classic literary canon’ of Australia as represented in Text Publishing’s re issue of neglected Australian classics in its Text Classics series. The presenter, Mariella Frostrup spoke of ‘a treasure trove’.

The panel considered works by Thomas Keneally, Elizabeth Harrower, Jessica Anderson and others. They were asked for their choice of the Australian classic. Both Thomas Keneally (Australian novelist) and Carmen Callil (publisher, writer, critic and founder of Virago Press) chose *Maurice Guest*.

Keneally said it was ‘splendid, almost modernist in the European tradition, but in an Australian voice.’

Callil said it was her ‘desert island book. One of the greatest novels ever written about obsessive love.’

For more about Callil’s views on *Maurice Guest* go to the web for an article from *The Guardian*, 23/8/2008 titled ‘Agony by Agony’. Callil herself re-published *Maurice Guest* as a Virago Modern Classic in 1981.



## Learning from Laura

### Jill Sanguinetti

Ten years ago my sister Margot came across an old box containing the letters we had written home fifty years ago, as boarders at Methodist Ladies’ College. We laughed, shrieked and wept when we sat on the floor to read them. How could Mum and Dad have left us in such a dreadful place?

There, in her childish handwriting, was my thirteen year-old self, her joys, agonies, strivings, rebellions, religious doubts and Methodist spiritual epiphanies writ large. Margot’s outpourings of loneliness and

homesick grief were heart-rending. Suddenly, we were back at the open-gated prison where for one hundred and fifty country girls, emotional care was unheard of and hunger and cold were the order of the day. The letters confirmed what we had suspected—that the stress of boarding and academic pressures had set each of us up for depression and anxiety later in life.



Jill Sanguinetti

But the letters revealed another side: MLC provided rich learning, and living closely with other girls brought close friendships, hilarity and fun times. I wrote in 1961 that, “being a boarder is revolting and terrific at the same time”. On re-reading those words I had a flash of insight into the emotional hangover I had carried around for decades: I had never been able to understand or articulate the contradictoriness of it all. As I wrote in the introduction, “My MLC years had lain undigested in my psyche for five decades, like a lump of old stodge, too conflicted and too mundane to put into words”.

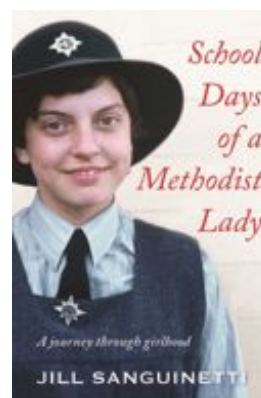
Seized by an imperative to write, I sorted the letters and the stories came pouring out. It was my way of re-living and re-understanding those half-forgotten but crucial four years, my narrative therapy. Then other childhood memories rose up and demanded to be included: early joys and sorrows; at times tortured family relationships; glorious freedoms of a country childhood in the fifties; and my formation by school and family as a whole. Slowly I made sense of my jumble of contradictory memories, and over ten years, learned how to write.

I re-read all the schoolgirl literature I could find with *The Getting of Wisdom* high on the list. Laura Rambotham became my schoolgirl soul-mate and HHR my literary inspiration. Poor Laura: wrong-headed, passionate, impulsive, lying in desperation to be admired, cheating at her history exam, ‘odd and undignified’ in the eyes of her peers. I loved her and saw myself in her. She, too, ricocheted between desolation and excitement, enchantment and disillusion, religious devotion and cynical disbelief. Laura’s trials and misadventures helped me find the words and the courage to write about the intense, mercurial schoolgirl who was me.

An unexpected reward has been that dozens of boarding school survivors and others traumatised by their school years have contacted me, wanting to share

how reading ‘School Days’ had stirred *their* childhood memories and prompted them to re-visit their own school-related emotional baggage. And this, in turn, is what *The Getting of Wisdom* did for me. I’m forever grateful to Henry Handel Richardson for giving us Laura, and for her delicious observances of goings-on at ‘Ladies’ College’ a century ago.

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Wild Dingo Press, 2014

Copies are available at all good bookshops or can be purchased online from [www.wilddingopress.com.au](http://www.wilddingopress.com.au) Tel: 8571 4999

## Launch of Hugh Kiernan’s book

Hugh Kiernan, one of the finalists in our HHR Writing Competition in 2014, recently launched his memoir, *Love Letters from Transylvania*. Committee members Helen Macrae and Janey Runci attended the happy event in Fitzroy.



Hugh Kiernan

My book *Love Letters from Transylvania: a memoir of blood cancer, identity and storytelling* was recently published by Michael Hanrahan Publishing. The introduction to the book, a personal essay on the theme of writing about illness, was Highly Commended in the 2014 HHR Society Writing Competition.

Over my life I’ve worked for a local newspaper and as a freelance writer. My life experiences include periods as a primary school teacher, farm labourer, adult literacy teacher and public servant. I’ve published pieces on childhood, school life, the workplace, sport,

family life and illness. My work includes reviews, interviews and a children's book on photography. I have also co-edited an anthology of stories for adult readers.

In 2007 I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer. In 2008, soon after the completion of treatment, I commenced writing about the impact of illness on my life. This writing explores the relationship between illness, everyday life and identity. Several of my recent stories have won awards. In 2011 I commenced kidney dialysis and retired from my most recent day job in the Victorian government.



*Love Letters from Transylvania* can be ordered from Myeloma Australia and from local bookshops, or in ebook and print on demand formats from online book retailers such as Amazon and Book Depository.

## Membership of the HHR Society

### Current Members

If you're already a member – just a friendly reminder that the annual subscription of \$15 is now due and can be mailed to PO Box 35, Chiltern 3683 or via a direct deposit into our bank account at the WAW Credit Union. BSB 803 070 Account no. 77605 in the name of Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia.

### Thinking of being a member?

New members are always welcome. We have various events and a newsletter three or four times a year. We are currently working with the Chiltern Athenaeum Library to give discounted access to the Library and to Lakeview for members. The annual subscription is

\$15. The following will give you some idea of the Society and its activities.

The HHR Society was formed in 2008 in Chiltern 'to stimulate enjoyment and study of, and general interest in, the works of Henry Handel Richardson.' The occasion was the annual celebration of HHR's birthday on January 3 with a picnic tea in the gardens of Lakeview, one of Richardson's childhood homes. Although a number of her childhood homes are still standing Lakeview in Chiltern is the only one that is now not privately owned.



*Lakeview, Chiltern*

Since then, the picnic teas on January 3 at Lakeview have continued and there have also been HHR tours to other HHR towns such as Maldon and Queenscliff. HHR festivals have been held in Maldon. A book, *Henry Handel Richardson in Maldon*, and a DVD, *HHR, a Giant in Australian Literature* have been published.

We've had film viewings and annual orations from Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele (world experts on HHR and editors of the definitive editions of HHR's writing and music), Angela Neustatter (English writer and grandniece of HHR who donated HHR's writing desk to the Chiltern Athenaeum), our patron, film director Bruce Beresford, who directed *The Getting of Wisdom*.

We've run two successful international writing competitions in 2012 and 2014, both judged by the writer, Helen Garner.

[j.runci@bigpond.com](mailto: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](http://www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au)