

'Looking through time itself': Henry Handel Richardson and the haunting of *Lake View*

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Thank you to Graeme Charles for offering me the chance to speak to you today. I have to say at the outset that I'm not an HHR expert – I'm really a tourist in the area of HHR studies. At present I'm writing a book on literary places in Australia. One chapter of the book involves a discussion of sites associated with HHR. Today I would like to focus on themes of haunting through an examination of texts, objects and practices that enable visitors to *Lake View* to engage in imaginative time travel.

Haunting necessarily involves a consideration of the ways in which the past interacts with the present. A ghost is essentially a figure from the past which reminds us of what has gone before. But the term 'haunted' does not always refer to ghosts as such. It can also refer to a 'haunted' state which can either be a pleasant communion with a bygone spirit, or it might entail distress and anxiety. It can also refer to the old 'haunts' of notable individuals.

During my research into literary tourism, I have discovered that haunting or haunted-ness is a common aspect of the presentation of literary houses yet the term is not always used in a literal sense. Hilary Iris Lowe in her discussion of Mark Twain's former residence Quarry Farm, observes that fellows working there frequently say that the place is 'haunted' by the 'spirit' of Twain but they hardly ever mean that it is 'actually haunted'. Instead, they are referring to the mingling of presences at Quarry Farm both past and present, real and imaginary (Lowe 153).

The idea of haunting goes way back to the beginnings of literary tourism in ancient times, but became more prevalent during the 18th century England when there was a resurgence of interest in the places where writers had once

resided. As William Howitt argues in *The Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (1847) '[t]he first thing which forcibly strikes our attention in tracing the Homes and Haunts of the Poets, is the devastation which Time has made among them. ..he lays waste their homes and annihilates the traces of their haunts with an active and a relentless hand'(1). Howitt was engaged with visiting poet's homes and haunts and writing about them, invariably complaining about the pitiful state they were in, due to the ravages of 'Time'.

The promotional materials for most literary houses encourage the idea that the former home is haunted by the writer's spirit. Ghosts, as readily imagined embodiments of the past, can help visitors to connect with the layers of history existing in a particular heritage site.

Scholars have also identified time travel as a significant element of the practice of visiting literary sites. As Alison Booth argues, '[p]reserved sites, testimonials of haunting and encounter, and the practices of re-enactment seem to share the common impulse to deter the decay of time, to shore fragments against our ruin.' (Booth 151) As Paul Westover observes, pilgrims often describe their experience at literary sites in terms of time travel, 'as if a ruin or artifact were a portal to a vanished past' (Westover 6). Through their preservation, literary sites allow visitors to apprehend the 'absent presence' of the vanished author, or to imagine the author inhabiting the same space in which they temporarily stand. They may also mentally conjure up the characters and scenes that the author has created. In this way, the author's 'real life' and the world he or she has produced may co-exist in the mind of the literary tourist.

As you will already know, *Ultima Thule*, the third book of the FRM trilogy features a house uncannily like *Lake View* where the central character Richard Mahony undergoes a steep decline due to a mysterious illness. HHR explores the psychic distress of Mahony in considerable detail, based on her experience of own her father's illness, however she also adds another tragic event to

increase the drama. One of Cuffy's twin sisters, Lallie, dies from fever during their time in Barambogie (the fictional name for Chiltern). This increases Mahony's sense of impotence and contributes further to the family's instability.

Following Lallie's death, Mahony's condition worsens, driving him to escape the claustrophobia of the house and to run into the trees for solace.

Arrived there, he flung himself at full length on the wet and slimy ground...And for a time he did no more than lie and exult in the relief this knowledge brought him—this sense of freedom from all things human...[Mahony] became suddenly aware of the breaking over him of a great light: he was lying, he found, in a pool of light; a radiance thick as milk, unearthly as moonlight. And this suffused him, penetrated him, lapped him round. He breathed it in, drew deep breaths of it; and, as he did so, the last vestiges of his old self seemed to fall away. (214-218)

Mahony experiences a 'white ecstasy' that 'left mere knowledge far behind'. He believed, as he lay face down in the mud, that he now has access to the 'Ultimate Plan'. The suddenly the light was gone and 'the hideous spectre of his blackest nights took visible form, and persisted, till, for the first time, he dared to look it in the face.—And death seemed a trifle in comparison' (218-219).

Mahony's disordered mind sees his madness outwardly manifested as a 'black spectre' that is worse than death. Seen as a failed suicide attempt by the Barambogie community, this incident marks the end of Mahony's credibility as a doctor and necessitates the family's immediate departure from the town. Mahony's long-suffering wife Mary is resigned to the fact that they must leave the town but her greatest regret is that she will be deserting the spirit of her dead daughter Lallie:

her heart was heavy: no matter how unhappy you had been in it, the dismantling of a home was sorry business, and one to which she never grew accustomed. Besides, this time, one of them had to stay behind. As long as they lived there, her child had not seemed wholly gone; so full was the house of memories of her. To the next, to any other house they occupied, little Lallie would be a stranger. (221)

The idea of Lallie inhabiting the house after their departure is deeply distressing to Mary who wishes to protect her even in death. Even though Lallie is a fictional character, it might be argued that her ghost coexists with those of 'real' former inhabitants.

Return to Chiltern

As Clive Probyn has discussed in a 1912 address titled 'The Return of the Native: HHR's Return to Australia in 1912', HHR came back to find *Lake View* as part of a research trip when planning the *Fortunes of Richard Mahony* trilogy. During her tour around country Victoria, accompanied by her husband and nephew, HHR wrote detailed notes on her travels, recording views, smells, sounds and sensations. HHR walked around *Lake View* taking photos of the house and its surroundings, conducting a thorough inspection to fill out her already vivid mental images of the place.

Oddly enough, Nettie Palmer claimed erroneously that the house had been pulled down in *Henry Handel Richardson: A Study* (1950):

On her return to Australia in 1912, she visited Chiltern to examine the house in which her father had spent some of his most painful months. It had been pulled down, but she carefully took measurements of the rooms in another house of the same kind and pattern, so that she might more easily visualise Mahony in his little box of a surgery, or the living-room where the round rosewood table devoured the floor-space and the Collard took up nearly the whole of one wall. (Palmer 159)

(This incorrect claim had a detrimental effect on the efforts to turn *Lake View* into a museum since some people thought it had already been destroyed but that's a story for another time.)

On this research trip HHR encountered her former self and communed with the spectre of her late father in the space of her childhood home. In a letter to her French translator Paul Solanges, HHR wrote about the strange experience

of returning to her old haunts in 1912: 'It was not the present me I presented to those people out there...It was the small remainder of memories and common experiences left over from a long-past day, & these alone.' (HHR in Ackland 201) Although HHR disavows any emotional engagement with the sites of her youth, the writing of the *FRM* trilogy involved a revisiting of scenes burnt indelibly on her mind and a final reckoning with the 'ghosts' that haunted her throughout her life, according to Michael Ackland (Ackland 260).

Through a close examination of HHR's notes, the reader may discern that she was focusing her energies on connecting with her father's 'spirit' in order to re-animate him textually. Although he had a huge impact on her life, she claimed that she had few memories of her father: 'Of the many dim shades of the past, his is one of the dimmest. I cannot remember what he looked like, or how he spoke or moved, or, in fact, anything at all about his outward appearance.' (HHR in Steele xiii) She had a few fragments of memory and sources such as letters and newspapers from which to resurrect her father in the form of Richard Mahony. She gave Richard Mahony Walter Richardson's interest in Spiritualism. One line in her 1912 notes confirms this: 'It would be in Chiltern with nothing to do that he would abandon him [self] to Spiritualism' (Notes 20). In this cryptic sentence, HHR enters imaginatively into her father's attraction to 'the other side'. This one line also demonstrates one of the strange characteristics of the notes — which Clive Probyn has identified — 'at times, it is impossible to separate out what HHR might be saying in her own voice from what she appears to be saying through the voices of her father Walter Richardson and of Richard Mahony, the fictional re-creation of her father.' (Probyn) This is a kind of writerly possession; as if HHR is 'channelling' Walter (as in a séance) to produce her portrait of Richard Mahony.

It is indisputable that Spiritualism played a major part in Walter Richardson's life. In fact, he had been first drawn to the post in Chiltern because the former physician Dr Rohner was well known in Spiritualist circles, contributing to the Spiritualist publication *The Harbinger of Light* to which Richardson also

contributed. In July 1877 *The Harbinger of Light* published Richardson's report on a meeting of the Chiltern Spiritualist circle:

I have had the pleasure lately of being present at the above circle by invitation of the spirits themselves; and as I was long convinced by personal investigation of the phenomena, and the causes of the same, I hardly expected to receive such fresh evidence, or to witness anything new. I was, however, agreeably disappointed...I held conversation with the invisibles. They wished me to come oftener, they said. They were so happy (Richardson cited in Steele 124)

As Bruce Steele observes, Richardson had long been interested in the intellectual side of Spiritualism but his time in Chiltern saw an increasing preoccupation with séances and supernatural practices. HHR and her sister Lil—like their father before them—were fervent believers in Spiritualism, subscribing to the existence of human entities beyond death. (Ackland 240). As HHR wrote to her friend Mary Kernot in October 1931:

I do wonder if, like me, you [Kernot] have come to look on death as a simple passing from one room to the next?— a mere matter of a different rate of vibration. For me, the dead go on existing just as they were, though invisible to us, & only gradually reaching heights from which they are inaccessible. To know this, has certainly made my own life much easier. (HHR to Kernot cited in Ackland 239)

HHR uses the image of the house to explain her Spiritualist belief that loved ones continue to exist 'invisibly' in the next room. Arguably her traumatic childhood experiences at *Lake View* laid the foundations for her lifelong devotion to Spiritualism.

Writerly artefacts

Now I'd like to consider the role of objects at *Lake View* and the ways in which they might function as receptacles of memory, or material memories. It is not uncommon to believe that the spirit of a dead person can be apprehended through the objects they have touched. In *The Brontë Cabinet*, Deborah Lutz argues that ordinary objects can carry us to other times and places. She says 'I feel the deep mystery of the lives of others in this palpable emissary of past

moments, now impossible to recover. The texture of those lost days settles into possessions that outlive their owners...' (Lutz xxi)

Since *Lake View* houses very few original items belonging to HHR, there are a number of pieces which have been 'approximated' or 'substituted' carefully by the National Trust and dedicated volunteers. A piano in the drawing room reminds the visitor of the major role played by music in HHR's life, with a musical career in Leipzig before she became a novelist. The house also contains medical equipment, including a birthing chair, which references the house's function as a medical practice. Memorabilia such as articles, letters, photos and portraits are also displayed — including a striking portrait of HHR by Rupert Bunny — referring to HHR's successful career beyond Chiltern.

Naturally, an item which actually belonged to HHR has an extra-special aura for the visitor. HHR's first writing desk is located at *Lake View* (while another larger desk, from later in her career, resides at the Athenaeum). *Lake View* was not the site of her literary production yet her memoir suggests that she was already composing stories in her head at this time. In *Myself When Young* HHR reflects on her juvenile storytelling which arose in response to the lack of reading matter; a symptom of the family's reduced means: '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. (18)

The desk now displayed at *Lake View* accompanied HHR on moves between Europe and England, enabling the writing of *Maurice Guest* and *The Getting of Wisdom*. This desk, which belongs to HHR's middle age, represents a departure from strict historical accuracy, indicating that there is no way of going back to the precise time that HHR lived in the house. The display of the desk, with its complex history, brings together multiple times and places into the present of *Lake View* which might be apprehended by the perceptive viewer.

There is an intimate quality of the communion (albeit one-way) between the living visitor and the dead writer, enabling a temporal shift. Anja Nelle identifies the 'journey into the past' function, or the evocation of the past in the present as a crucial attribute of literary sites. (Nelle 5-7). Two recollections of journalists visiting *Lake View* show how their experiences involve sensations that they cannot entirely explain.

At a birthday celebration in 1977, Joan Palmer reported in the *Australian Woman's Weekly* that she sat on the lawn at *Lake View* listening to HHR's work being read aloud when she apprehended a presence: 'It was then I heard the sound of running feet and a childish voice talking to herself as she bounced a ball regularly against the old brick walls.' (Palmer 49) For Palmer, the atmosphere of *Lake View* is vivid enough to bring the young HHR back to life.

Travel journalist Kerrin O'Sullivan reported that the house gave her the opportunity to 'see' through time: 'It feels a little eerie, as if I'm looking through the great author's eyes, indeed through time itself' (O'Sullivan 2012). O'Sullivan engaged in imaginative time-travel in order to inhabit HHR's subjectivity, seeing *Lake View* from the author's perspective, however fleetingly.

Beryl Pickering, a guide who has been associated with *Lake View* for twenty-five years, believes that there are ghosts in the house but that they are not all connected with HHR. Beryl observes that four mediums have come through *Lake View* at different times and have felt the presence of ghosts in the house, most notably a 'distressed' man pacing up and down the hallway and a little old lady sitting on a bed in the children's nursery. Beryl herself has not seen ghosts but she says that she has had a number of strange experiences, including the unexplained movement of items in the house (Pickering 2014). These spectral phenomena add to the legend of *Lake View*, giving it a supernatural aura.

Visitors to *Lake View*, while still inhabiting the present, can perceive the layers of history at the site, including HHR's childhood habitation, her 1912 return, the

period of residence by others followed by near dereliction and subsequent refurbishment. Although *Lake View* does not feature actors masquerading as ghosts, as in many literary houses overseas, there are distinct possibilities for communion with the departed presences of the young HHR and her troubled father — and their fictional counterparts Cuffy and Richard.

As I have already argued, haunting is an important theme within HHR's fiction, for the author, for readers, and for visitors to *Lake View*. An exploration of *Lake View* allows a kind of time-travel into the 'actual' past as well as the fictionalised past of HHR's trilogy. Just as HHR re-configured *Lake View* — and the town of Chiltern — in her fiction, so literary tourists can visualise the young HHR, or imaginatively 'become' her in the space of her former home.

This annual birthday celebration implicitly recognises the importance of acknowledging the past in the present. Despite the fact that HHR has been dead since 1946, we all here to honour her life and work. Through the rituals enacted here this evening, the spirit of HHR is summoned up to engage with the living once again.

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