

HHRSA Oration, 2022 by Clive Probyn
[Chiltern, 3 January 2022]

**HHR goes to the Movies and comes home with the
Pianiste**



HHR and Olga on the beach at Lyme Regis

We think of Henry Handel Richardson as a *writer*, creating life by writing words. When she was *not* writing (and therefore not in total control of her medium), what sort of a *listener* and a *viewer* was she?

She was 36 when Australia produced the first ever feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, in 1906. I don't believe she ever saw it, but she saw many others, for she lived in the formative years of the cinema. Some of her own writing would be translated posthumously into movie scripts and visual images. Her first novel, *Maurice Guest* (1908) provided Metro Goldwyn Mayer with a film subject in 1954; her second, *The Getting of Wisdom*, appeared in a screen version in 1977; her last, *The Young Cosima* (1939), had on its paperback reprint cover an image of Vanessa Redgrave as Cosima in a four DVD epic called *Wagner* (1981-84) that ran for nine hours. I don't have that much time at my disposal

today, and in any case my focus is on aspects of Richardson and film in a context broader than film adaptations of her work. Before I do this, we should note that Richardson also lived through the early stages of broadcast public radio. Britain's first advertised live public radio broadcast took place on 15 June 1920 (two years before the BBC's first programme), when Dame Nellie Melba, sponsored by the *Daily Mail*, sang into a microphone in Marconi's *Wireless Telegraph Company* located at Chelmsford, Essex. In the same year Richardson and her husband George took a three-year lease on 'Westfield' as their home in Lyme Regis (5 May 1913). By the end of the 1930s there were maybe fifteen million radio sets in a population of 46 million. Richardson was by then in her 60s and she owned one of them. In January 1940 she was negotiating terms for a 104-part radio-drama version of the trilogy. It never transpired, but Beverley Dunn wrote a successful ten-episode version of *Maurice Guest* for the ABC in 1978. The radio and the cinema were part of her life: in the first year of the second world war, she wrote, 'Petrol is just enough to take us to Hastings & back twice a week—once for household shopping, once to a Cinema' (*Letters*, 1240). The BBC kept Australia and England in touch. Richardson's Australian contemporary at the Presbyterian Ladies College and her correspondent, Mary Kernot, wrote to her on 1 September 1939 (two days before the UK and France declared war on Germany) that she and her husband Percy had 'hired a wireless so have all the news as it comes through & have quite clear re-broadcasts from the B.B.C. & talks. . . There is little to be done but wait.' (III, 1226). Australians (but not Mary Kernot) would eventually hear Richardson's recorded voice reading an extract from the Proem to *The Way Home* in the BBC's Propaganda Service on Good

Friday, 7 April 1944. It had been written during the Great War. The recording in London and the broadcast had been arranged by George Ivan Smith, who established, headed and operated BBC Radio Australia during the Second World War. HHR described him as ‘a wildly enthusiastic admirer of the *Trilogy*. Said the reading of it was “an event in my life” (*Letters*, 1359 and 1406). The reading was Richardson’s contribution to England’s war effort.

The *first* daily BBC radio broadcast had been heard in November 1922. Ten months later, on 28 September 1923, appeared the first issue of its official print publication, *The Radio Times*; five years after that, on 10 May 1929, its leading article was signed by ‘Henry Handel Richardson’ and entitled ‘The Magic of the New Concert Room.’

At the suggestion of Captain Arnold Gyde, Richardson’s publicity man at her publishers, William Heinemann, she had reluctantly agreed to attend a live concert broadcast from the BBC’s first London studios at Savoy Hill. It offered a distinctly Modernist program.

Arnold Gyde’s wife was the Swiss soprano, Sophie Wyss. Their son, Humphrey had distinguished godparents, Benjamin Britten and Henry Handel Richardson. Sophie was Benjamin Britten’s first pre-war Muse, and on this occasion her ‘fresh, beautifully trained voice’ performed ‘a group of old French’ songs. During her subsequent tour of Australia in 1948 she also performed some of Richardson’s own songs. Richardson was present for the rest of this 1929 BBC programme, which featured the Russian-then-French-then-US composer Igor Stravinsky’s orchestral suite for the one-act comic opera ballet *Pulcinella*, premiered in Paris in 1920 with sets designed by Picasso. Richardson makes no mention of this rich Modernist context and instead posed a question: Is

music best experienced in the unique moment of live performance, as a shared public event, or as a solitary, private and entirely non-visual happening detached from its origin and context and transmitted by radio wave?

Live concert music had begun to be broadcast on the BBC in 1922. Richardson's training in music at the PLC and at the Leipzig Conservatorium had included regular concertgoing, so her preference for a radio *broadcast* over attendance at a live concert is perhaps surprising. She puts the question as a contest between watching and listening and between the eye and the ear:



So here she is in that coveted place, her own private electronic concert hall, sitting in a favourite chair at her own London fire-side at 90 Regents Park Road, London. For a two-year period one of her more frequent visitors here was the Australian journalist and novelist Brian Penton. Remarkably, Penton was to meet her on more than twenty occasions, and on his first visit he was joined by Norman Lindsay, the Australian artist, critic, and writer. Here is a detail from Penton's record of the visit on 9 March 1932:

Beside the fireplace, with its perpetually burning gas fire, was another shelf, where she seemed to keep her favourite reading—German translations of the Russians, works by German and Swedish authors, which she read in their original as easily as she read English.

There was a big grand piano in the middle of the room, a portable wireless in the corner, and a mask of Beethoven on the wall over the fire place' (*Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 1946)

There is no better domestic account of Richardson's cosmopolitan milieu—European literatures and European music—in both of which contexts she was herself a *performer*. In their respective studies, on different floors of their London house, husband and wife each had their own 'big' grand piano, and *both* were deeply immersed in German texts, German music, German translations of 'the Russians', and Danish and Swedish too. It seems more than likely that each had a portable radio. It makes sense that having dropped public performance in favour of a career as a *writer* Richardson preferred thereafter to *listen* to music in private rather than perform it to an audience. Accordingly, she composed maybe a hundred or more songs (57 of which have survived

and been published), and which were kept for private performance in her own home.

Her argument is that the ear should not be distracted by the eye. A live concert was therefore an inferior experience not only because it showed that the sound-event was a manufactured thing but that the result was impure, contaminated by the extraneous clatter of performers and audience, or as she put it:

the crackling of programmes, the turning of pages, whispers, coughs; and many a time in a concert-hall I have envied Ludwig of Bavaria sitting solitary in his pitch-dark opera house in Munich, to hear a performance of [Wagner's] Tristan or The Ring. Richard Wagner at Bayreuth, with his sunken orchestra, was the first real purveyor of invisible music in privacy.

In this refined neighbourhood of private and solitary pleasure, Richardson believed, there were profound *social* changes at work. Radio provided access to music for all who wanted it and in approving this she joined the enlightened thinkers of her time:

we once were a great musical people; and it is my belief that this bringing back of music to the home will do more than anything towards reawakening a love and understanding of good music in England.

A little later a contemporary British music critic and radio playwright, Edward Sackville-West, went further, describing the BBC's Third Programme as 'the greatest educative and civilising force England has known since the secularisation of the theatre in the sixteenth century.'

The Third Programme specialised in classical music, plays, opera and concerts. It was indeed the nation's 'New Concert Room' and

Richardson had sensed the cultural moment, even though the initial Third Programme broadcast was not until Sunday 29 September 1946, six months after her death. Had she lived longer, her portable radio would surely have been permanently tuned to the Third Programme, much as loyal listeners to our own ABC's Classic FM today.

So much for Richardson's preferred mode of musical performance: witnessing has become listening, the event disembodied and unlocated. What, then, did she choose to *watch* and how did she cope with the inescapably public presence of a modern cinema where, even during the silent era, sound was coordinated with but also subservient to the visual image?

I do not want to give the impression that Richardson was visually deficient in some way. In Leipzig and London she attended galleries, exhibitions, opera and ballet, and was sufficiently interested in modern sculpture to commission the Serbian sculptor Sava Botzaris to produce a Modernist bust of her, describing him as 'a modern of the moderns' in 1931. In fact, she had grown up with a new visual genre that would capture and retain her attention every week of her adult life. We are, of course, talking about film, and here for a start is her selection of must-see films included in a letter from London to her friend Mary Kernot in Melbourne on 19 October 1936, seven years after the *Radio Times* piece:

Films? I've been a film fan since the days of the [First World] war; & never fail to see one picture a week. I am a staunch believer in the future of the Cinema. Much of what is shewn is still on the

level of the penny-novelette; but there have been some outstanding pictures, & these are on the increase.

Have you ever seen [Charles] Laughton on the screen? If you have the opportunity take it. And do not miss a picture by René Clair, or our own historical pictures 'Tudor Rose' or 'Henry the Eighth;' or 'The Ghost goes West'[directed by René Clair]: or 'Thirty-nine Steps' [directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935: from John Buchan's novel]: these I assure you, Mary, are all first class. In none of them, so much English is now spoken, will your ear be offended by the American snarl.

There is more to say about this particular selection of recommended films, but the point here is that Richardson was an enthusiastic, informed, selective and regular fan of the cinema. This enthusiasm did not include American musicals, and she sensed American domination of the film industry. She went to the cinema for distraction, to watch a film, not to meet with or talk to people: Olga Roncoroni tells us that 'Night after night in 1919, when she was living at Lyme Regis and working on *Richard Mahony*, she would visit the cinema in the old Assembly Rooms . . . she always chose the most isolated seat in the place.'¹

By 1911, when Hollywood produced its first film, Australia had produced 62. 1919, ten years before the *Radio Times* article, was also a significant year in *Australian* film history—the year of the now classic silent film *The Sentimental Bloke*, based on C. J. Dennis's verse novel *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915), directed by Raymond Longford and followed by the early work of Charles Chauvel.

Richardson's cultural loyalties were sharpened by the worst of times, two world wars. On 8 August 1914 she wrote from Lyme Regis to Mary Kernot in Melbourne, explaining the cultural pain at the heart of her writing and of her very being:

I have loved Germany very dearly & have many good friends over there; & its Kultur has meant so much to me that it has been hard to accept the fact of our being declared enemies . . . we are not fighting the German people . . . but an intolerable militarism, which belongs by rights to the middle ages, & was become a menace to all Europe. (I, 348)

German and American cultural influence was transmitted by their respective film industries from 1903 to 1946, that is for the whole period of Richardson's residence in England. Added to which, her husband, a Scot, was the Professor of German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of London. In 1932, along with a co-recipient named Benito Mussolini, the President of the German Republic, Paul von Hindenburg, presented him with a medal for his achievements in German literature (*Kunst und Wissenschaft: Letters II*, p. 462), and he was lecturing in London on Wagner in early 1933 (he died 28 May 1933) as Hitler, Wagner's devoted propagandist in Bayreuth, became Chancellor. Her distinction between German culture and its contemporary militarism was made easier because her family as well as her literary and musical education had *multicultural* European origins and a multinational focus. She noticed that the British film industry, like the English language itself, was locked into a competitive relationship with other European film companies and was increasingly dominated by the U.S.A. As George Bernard Shaw and then Churchill famously

remarked at the time, England and America were two countries separated by a common language. Richardson's phrase 'our own historical pictures' indicates her English national consciousness but says nothing about the range of her European cultural interests. Nor does it describe her own sense of a marginal political identity. In her own words she was 'Half Irish (with a dash of Italian) & a birth & bringing-up so far from here, the original English element in me is small' (*Letters* I, 607, to Mary Kernot: 3 December 1915).

During the second world war, this sense of multinational origin, most notably of course her Australian birth and upbringing, made it possible for her to stand back from chauvinist patriotism in a time of crisis. Her choice of what to *read* as a BBC broadcast in the Pacific Service of the BBC on Good Friday 7 April 1944 was Richard Mahony's comment on Mary Mahony's remark in the Proem to *The Way Home* (1925) that the landscape of England's south coast was like Melbourne's Botanical Gardens: 'If the landscape before them was lovely as a garden, it had also something of a garden's limitations . . . England's littleness, her tiny, tight compactness, the narrow compass that allowed so intense a cultivation . . . after the wide acreage of the colonial paddock . . . after the broad, red, rectilinear Australian roads.' As this war had been approaching, and with her Australian-English-Irish-Italian background and her reading of Australian, English, Scandinavian, German, Russian, Italian and French literature, she understood British film as a sub-group of an already developed *international* medium.

In 1930 Sewell Stokes—screenwriter, playwright, novelist, biographer and London probation officer—interviewed Richardson and

others (including A. A. Milne and Aldous Huxley) for his book *Hear the Lions Roar* (1931). Stokes's record contributes a unique detail to Brian Penton's comment about the books in her library:

She reads, omnivorously, anything from a novel to a cookery book . . . Also, she is an enthusiastic theatre-goer, and intensely interested in good films.

About some of the German and Russian productions she is very enthusiastic; but American films exhibiting the art of D. W. Griffith, Chaplin, and Menjou, she will go a long way to see.

[Adolphe Menjou acted in silent and talkie films, was an anti-communist colleague of John Wayne and Barbara Stanwyck, and had recently starred with Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (1930). D. W. Griffiths' (silent) *Birth of a Nation* had appeared back in 1915, but his *Abraham Lincoln* had just appeared, on 25 August 1930. I will return to Chaplin in a moment.

So how, where and when would the keenly film-loving Richardson go to see German and Russian films? In addition to their joint and regular expeditions to the cinema in Lyme Regis and Hastings, Olga Roncoroni (her companion for 27 years) says that Richardson had 'always a great liking for films and was a keen member of the old Film Society in London during the days of the UFA.'

The Film Society of London was based in the New Gallery cinema in Regent Street. Its selection of films, shown at several London West End cinemas, was a 'hugely popular cultural event' at the time (Brian McFarlane, *Encyclopaedia of British Film*, p. 221). The Society had been formally established in 1925 and its early members and supporters

included H. G. Wells, who wrote a fan letter to Richardson in 1911 about *The Getting of Wisdom*. She replied to him (22 May) and spoke about her interest in 'the psychological analysis of a great passion' in *Maurice Guest*, and that it was 'the subconscious self & the actual springs of human conduct that interest me most' (*Letters I*, 151). The Film Society also included George Bernard Shaw, the film directors Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Powell, Anthony Asquith and Carol Reed, together with the economist John Maynard Keynes, the sculptor Augustus John, and several members of the Bloomsbury group of writers. Apart from H. G. Wells, we cannot be sure that Richardson knew any of these figures personally. We have always to remember her chronic social phobia. Personal appearances at all public events were anathema to her: on such occasions her two personae (Mrs George Robertson and Henry Handel Richardson) would be revealed as one, and she firmly rejected any attempt to mix her private life and her public literary identity. The Richardson sisters were both feminists and suffragettes in their different ways, but only Lil was publicly active and only Lil went to jail. Her literary sister knew about but took little or no direct active part in the London literary-social-political scene. As for the Bloomsbury group, there were limits to Richardson's patience with experimental Modernism: she certainly read Virginia Woolf's novels and essays as they came out, but told Mary Kernot: 'V.W. doesn't send me her books . . . I shall keep 'The Waves' [Woolf's 1931 novel] for an ocean voyage, when I've time to puzzle it out' (17 April 1932, *Letters*, II, 380). Unfortunately, the fact that she shared godparents' responsibilities for Humphry Gyde is not evidence that she ever met her co-godparent Benjamin Britten.

With or without her presence, the Film Society of London met weekly on Sunday afternoons and first opened with Paul Leni's German silent fantasy horror film *Waxworks* (1924), featuring Jack the Ripper among other characters, and closed with the Russian master Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938: with a score by Prokofiev) in April 1939.

The Film Society enjoyed 14 annual seasons and showed a total of 496 films, a *yearly* average of 35. In 2019 our own Sydney Film Festival offered 307 films from 59 countries in just eleven days (from 5 to 16 June), a *daily* average of 28.

The declared purpose of the Film Society of London was to show films, notably foreign films, that were intrinsically worthy but were not commercial enough in their appeal or were too *avant-garde* for regular showing, or that had been banned by the British Board of Film Censors. It showed so many Russian films that London newspapers accused it of promoting Soviet Communism. None of this would have posed any problems for Richardson. Such films were the visual parallel to the German, Russian and Scandinavian novels she read at her own fireside. An example of the *avant-garde* category was Fritz Lang's futuristic German silent film *Metropolis* (1927), the first full-length science fiction film, banned perhaps because of its depiction of mass production and its image of industrial workers as mindless zombies or dangerous revolutionaries. It would have been thrilling to see this film for the first time when it appeared.

As for the category of censored or banned film, the Film Society was the first to show Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (in 1925), banned in 1926 by the British Board of Film Censors (because of its revolutionary subject, presumably) and not granted a certificate until January 1954, in

spite of the fact that in 1948 (and again in 1958) it was judged by a panel of international experts to be the best film ever made (*Halliwel's Film Guide*, p. 92).

Richardson would have known about and probably watched such films. She certainly *did* see the offerings of **London Films**, the company established by the Korda brothers in 1932.

Their second film, a subject from British history, was recommended by Richardson and starred Charles Laughton and Merle Oberon in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933).

Olga also refers to the *U.F.A.*

In the period from 1919 to the early thirties this was the Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft—Universal Film stock company— (*Books of Today*, July 1948, p. 4), a film production company founded near Berlin back in 1917. It enjoyed both a monopoly in Germany and co-production arrangements in England, thereby enjoying access to the English market until 1933.

The UFA had a nationalist agenda that included Fritz Lang's silent classic series of two films *Die Niebelungen* of 1924, and it could call on the screenwriting talents of Billy Wilder and the acting talents of Peter Lorre and Marlene Dietrich.

The Blue Angel was a UFA production in 1930. Hitler's anti-Semitic policies eventually drove these skills and many actors to the UK and the USA. Leni Riefenstahl stayed in Germany, directing the Nazi propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will* in 1935, also distributed by the UFA.

In Australia, as everywhere else until the early 1920s, film had been a silent, black and white medium. The 'sound track' was provided

by a live pianist, mischievously re-created in John Power's *The Picture Show Man* (1977: with Rod Taylor and John Meillon).

In July of 1926 Mary Kernot and her husband were on a River Murray paddleboat, the *S.S. Ruby*, visiting towns in South Australia. Mary wrote to Richardson of the 'liveliness' of Mildura, Renmark and Berri: 'lots of water, electric light, cars make life quite tolerable & the people are well dressed & full of energy. Picture halls are everywhere, open air for the summer & others for the winter' (*Letters*, II, 55).

When silent films gave way to talkies, of course, the need for an accompanying pianist disappeared, and there was no going back. When colour films arrived in a world of black and white there was co-existence for a time, and some of the best films ever made—such as *Citizen Kane* (1941)—are in black and white well into the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, *The Third Man* (1949) is sometimes described as the Best British Film ever made.

Wartime conditions presented propaganda as history (the British government-funded Technicolour *Henry V*, with Laurence Olivier as star and director, appeared in 1944). Richardson's London years, from 1904 to 1934, had placed her in a perfect time and place for serious filmgoing, but it was not always a solemn business. It could be fun, too:

Yes, [she wrote in October 1936] I too loved the earlier Miceys.

Of late, as is only natural, their author is running short of ideas.

The first Silly Symphonies were perfect.' (19 October)

These were the Disney cartoons of Mickey Mouse, and she had in mind the five and a half minutes of cartoon brilliance of *The Skeleton Dance* of 1929, and the next one, *Egyptian Melodies*, both directed by Disney himself.

In recommending René Clair's *The Ghost Goes West* (1935) to Mary Kernot, Richardson was responding to a clever British romantic comedy that begins in the archaic and exhausted feudal world of eighteenth-century Scotland and escapes into the New World of brash and aggressive American capitalism. It may appear to be simple escapism but it is also an indication of where popular culture and the film world in particular had been heading for some time. Richardson saw this new source of cultural energy very clearly.

I have talked about her London film life, but it was filmgoing in Lyme Regis and Hastings that was to have the most profoundly personal consequence for Richardson. Outside her marriage and immediate family, the most important and certainly the longest-lasting relationship in her life began in the Assembly Rooms cinema in Lyme Regis and continued when she moved to Hastings.

The Lyme cinema never turned a profit. It seated only 200 and had been set up in the ballroom of the Georgian Assembly Rooms in December 1913 by Olga Roncoroni's father, John Baptist Roncoroni, a year and a half before the Robertsons leased 'Westfield'. The Assembly Rooms were supplemented by another venture, the Cinema Tea Garden, which seems to have employed at least four people and was gas-lit. It faced seawards and was flanked by the Three Cups Inn, the Fish Market and the Pilot Boat Hotel. John Roncoroni ran the cinema, his wife Nella Phillips Roncoroni ran the tea-garden and restaurant; their daughter Olga Maria worked for both parents. John used the professional name Jack Ferdinand Raymond. He was an already experienced cinema entrepreneur who had moved recently from nearby Broadstairs. The 1911 Census (compiled when Olga was 18) described him as 'Proprietor

Picture Palace.’ He employed his daughter as ‘Pianiste’ and she later described him as ‘a quiet, nervous man . . . [with] the simple, straightforward type of mind with which H.H. could make instant contact’ (69). Richardson herself described him as ‘one of the wittiest men she had ever met,’ particularly when playing cards. He looks capable and confident, but at least on one occasion his cinema skills collided with cruel wartime reality. The local newspaper has this item (recently discovered by an HHR Society member Rachel Solomon):

‘On 1 January 1915, the Royal Navy battleship HMS Formidable was on patrol in Lyme Bay when it was struck by two Imperial German Navy U-boat torpedoes. The second of the pinnace boats carrying surviving crew members to shore had its visibility obstructed by high seas and the following night land could not be seen because of blackout restrictions. A seaman spotted a bright light coming [he believed] from the cinema projector at the old Assembly Rooms where the operator was trying to fix the projector (obviously unhindered by the thought of putting the whole township at risk of attack). The operator was, in all likelihood, John Roncoroni. Forty-eight men rowed against wind and tide to reach the beach at Lyme Regis.’

[We should add that of the 750 crew, only 199 survived.]

In photos of Nella Roncoroni she has an anxious, strained expression and we know that she initially resented her pianist daughter’s friendship with the novelist. John and Nella’s agoraphobic daughter, Olga Maria first met Richardson in 1919 or 1920, when she was 26 or 27 and was still completely dependant on her mother or father. At this point Richardson herself was forty-nine and was at work on *The Way Home*, the middle volume of her trilogy. The cinema occupied the ballroom of the original Assembly Rooms which had once hosted such distinguished visitors as William Pitt the Younger, England’s youngest ever

Prime Minister, Isaac Disraeli, and of course Jane Austen. This is where Austen meets her 'Irish gentleman' (the lawyer Thomas Lefroy) in 1804.

Outside, on the Cobb itself, and clearly visible from Richardson's 'Westfield' home, is where Louisa Musgrave is 'jumped down' from the Cobb wall by Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion* (1818) and slightly injured (*Letters*, II, 593). The former Assembly Rooms card-room had been converted by Nella into a café/restaurant.

In summer Olga was employed all day in the restaurant and provided piano accompaniment to the silent films shown weekly on each of three evenings from 8 until 10.30 p.m. She also *taught* piano, assisted her mother in giving dancing-lessons, and ran the dances and whist drives. It was during one of these regular visits to the Lyme cinema in search of some mental distraction that Richardson noticed the skilled piano accompaniment performed by this largely home-taught young woman who sometimes played for seven hours at a stretch. Olga had been playing the piano for her living since the age of 15.

Richardson at first went to the Lyme Assembly Rooms cinema unaccompanied (not for the dances, I should think, but perhaps for the whist drives). Her husband's academic work obliged him to remain in London except for an occasional weekend or holiday.

It was war that had moved them to the *comparative* safety of the south coast in 1915, to 'Westfield,' Lyme Regis, for the writing of *Australia Felix* (1917), and where she also worked on *The Way Home* (1925) and *Ultima Thule* (1929). Richardson chose the most isolated seat in the cinema, thus signalling that she wished to keep her own company and carefully conserve her social energies. She had mentioned the skilled

pianist to her husband George and he it was who suggested the benefit of some social contact. He asked: 'Why don't you ask the girl at the cinema to tea? She might prove more entertaining than some of the people you have tried' (64)—an intriguing sidelight both on Richardson's state of mind at the time, her experience of Lyme Regis society to date, and on Mary Mahony's similar difficulties with the stuffy Buddlecombe society in *The Way Home*. Like Jane Austen before her, Richardson was busy creating a whole world of her own. In Richardson's case this meant turning Lyme Regis into Buddlecombe for the middle novel of the trilogy as Jane Austen had turned Worthing, Sussex, into Sanditon. Olga remarks, somewhat obtusely:

She was a keen cinema fan, finding rest for her always very active brain in gazing for a couple of hours at the happenings on the screen, which called for no mental effort and stopped her mind from continuing to work on the current book.

When in London she 'was a great supporter . . . of the opera, ballet and theatre. In Hastings she visited a cinema weekly if there was a good film being shown' (MS of Olga's Lake View tape, p. 4). In April 1934, in the year following her husband's death, Richardson and Olga moved their permanent home to East Sussex, to 'Green Ridges' in Fairlight. Here, Olga would play duets and sing Richardson's own songs, as well as carry out secretarial duties, act as her companion, driver, two-fingered typist, reluctant cook, cleaner and finally her executor and first biographer. She accompanied Richardson on her cinema-going in Hastings, where they had a wide choice. In 1912 there had been 22 places showing films ('cinemas') in the town and seven of them were still

running as late as 1950: the Gaiety, the De Luxe, Orion, Regal, Ritz, Kinema (St Leonard's) and the Roxy (Silverhill). The Regent had re-opened on 11 October 1937 in a splendid art deco building with no overhanging balcony in its auditorium—Richardson had a lifelong phobia of things dropping on her head. In 1938 the Union Cinema de Luxe on the Hastings waterfront, later known as the ABC Ritz cinema, also re-opened its refurbished interior with a showing of Greta Garbo and Charles Boyer in MGM's bio-pic *Conquest* about Napoleon's Polish mistress Marie Walewska.

In mid-September 1940, when fear of a German invasion was at its height, Richardson and Olga left their house in Fairlight for a three-week escape to a village ten miles inland, to avoid the bombing, the sound of machine-gun fire, the dog-fights overhead, and to get some uninterrupted sleep. Five days before the two women returned to Hastings, on 30 September 1940, the Public Hall Cinema in Hastings, built as an all-talkie cinema in 1933, was bombed and 14 people were killed. In the middle of all this, Richardson wrote apologetically to Mary Kernot to say that she had no news to give her about the latest *American* films or plays (III, 480)! By 2015, the Regent was the only cinema in the town.

Richardson left Hastings on a regular monthly two-hour drive to London in her 20 horse power, gas-guzzling Alvis or Armstrong Siddeley, staying for a week or ten days of theatre, concerts and films.



When petrol rationing was introduced in 1939 her twice weekly visits to Hastings included ‘a visit to a local cinema, for which form of entertainment H.H. retained a taste until she became too ill to go out at all’ (117). Olga’s comment was, as we shall see, literally true. Weekly cinema visits continued during the bombing raids of 1942, and ‘one had often to go down to the underground shelters in the middle of a performance and wait there until the Germans had dropped their bombs in the town’ (140)—a comment that makes the threat of a German invasion of England sound like an exercise in bad taste, a minor interruption to the serious business of watching moving pictures. In January 1945, recuperating after major abdominal surgery, in bitter cold and in deep snow that made walking impossible, ‘she made a weekly visit to the cinema whenever she thought a film worth going to see, travelling to and fro by taxi’ (Olga, *Some Personal Impressions*, p. 165).

The process of turning her own novels into film and stage performance interested Richardson a good deal, if only because she saw it as a means of increasing her book sales and making some money. It is a subject for another occasion, but some points should be made here.

She would have been gratified by *some* results of turning novels into films, such as Hitchcock's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, or MGM's version of James Hilton's *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1939), with the same leading actor, voted the Best Picture of 1935, or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, **directed** by John Ford in 1940.

Of the less successful translations, there was the Technicolour Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical remake (1940) of Noel Coward's stage operetta of the same name, *Bitter Sweet* (played in the West End, 1929-31, and first filmed in 1933). In 1940 Coward himself told *The Daily Express*, 'I was saving up *Bitter Sweet* as an investment for my old age. After MGM's dreadful film I can never revive it.' Olga and Elsie Cole (Richardson's close neighbour) went with Richardson to see *Bitter Sweet* at a local Hastings cinema in September 1940, at the most dangerous point of the war before the raids of May 1943. In 1955 Elsie Cole recorded this comment:

H.H. was very fond of the films, and we all felt, I think, that the picture [*Bitter Sweet*] had earned the newly coined phrase of 'a release.' It is never easy to find a completely good film, but Miss Richardson showed her wisdom by accepting those which had at least some good quality. I wonder, therefore, if she herself might not have been more lenient to the film Rhapsody than so many of the admirers of her book Maurice Guest, from which the film was taken but to which it bears scarcely the slightest resemblance' (*HHR:Some Personal Impressions*, p. 59).

Mrs Cole had noticed Richardson's capacity to extract *something* valuable even from the dross of a third-rate film, a shrewd neighbourly observation and evidently beyond at least one of Richardson's more distinguished Australian literary peers. When she discussed filmgoing with her fellow novelist Miles Franklin in 1935 she was struck by Franklin's 'complete humourlessness' [that] 'always brings out the devil in me.' This was primarily a reference to Nettie and Vance Palmer (the former being Richardson's belated champion in Australia), but she added Miles Franklin to their company: 'I feel I *must* say something outrageous. I don't forget Miles Franklin's look of horror when I said I "left my brains" at the door of a Cinema—went, & often, to give them a rest. I saw 'Poor fool' written all over her. And yet M.F. is *not* without humour, is she? But they all seem to expect *me* to be so solemn. One day I shall stand on my head.' (*Letters*, III, 134).

Richardson did not always switch off her brain at the ticket office, and neither was she a cultural snob. At this late period of her life (1939) all of her major writing had been completed, including *The Young Cosima* (1939). She had been a regular filmgoer for 25 years, in London, Lyme Regis and Hastings. It was now her turn to be gobbled up in a translation into film. In April 1940 (III, 441) David Boehm asked Richardson to renew the film rights to *Maurice Guest*, *Ultima Thule* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. MGM approached her again in September 1945 with a timely offer of US \$52,000 for the world film rights to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Richardson and the scriptwriter would each receive 40%, their two respective agents 10% each. The much-needed money was paid and accepted but no film was made.

Maurice Guest was eventually turned into a film by MGM and Charles Vidor, re-titled *Rhapsody* (1953) and appeared eight years after the novelist's death. It was now the age of the big studios, Twentieth-Century Fox, Paramount, Warner Brothers, MGM and RKO Radio. *Rhapsody* was not a successful translation. Maurice becomes James Guest, an American ex-GI, Lulu becomes Louise (played by Elizabeth Taylor); a completely new character, Lulu's father, makes his appearance, evidently to reassure the audience that there will be no hanky-panky between the two main characters. And, worst of all, there is a happy ending.

Richardson, of course, never saw the film version of *Maurice Guest*, but she had no illusions about what Hollywood might do to her novels. In relation to the trilogy her scepticism would not be tested simply because the film would never be made in her lifetime. Even so, she had recorded her response to such an event in advance: 'It would be a great help to my withering finances, and —well, I never need to see it! Olga would deputize for me' (167).

There was, however, one last film that Richardson had to see and it may indeed have been the last occasion on which she would ever leave her Fairlight home. In March 1939 the American novelist and biographer of Mozart, Marcia Davenport, had enthusiastically reviewed Richardson's last novel, *The Young Cosima*, when it first appeared and had concluded that its author was 'one of the really great and serious novelists working today, and that everything she does has true stature and permanence' (*Letters*, III, 341).

On 29 December 1945, just three months before her death, HHR and Olga went by car to the ABC Ritz cinema on the Hastings seafront and sat

through a 2-hour long film called *The Valley of Decision* (1945), adapted from Marcia Davenport's best-selling 1942 novel of the same name.

Davenport's novel, a romance set in the Pittsburgh steel industry, had been a commercial success, but Richardson described it as 'a long dull film about strikes.' Her motive in seeing it was to observe the performances of Greer Garson and a newcomer to the cinema she had never heard of called Gregory Peck. Both had been mentioned in the MGM pre-publicity for the roles of Mary and Richard Mahony.

The film did not eventuate, but there is a link to today. The 36-year-old Jessica Tandy appeared in *The Valley of Decision*, and in 1989 at the age of 81 she would be the star of *Driving Miss Daisy*, directed by Bruce Beresford, the current patron of the Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia. It won that year's prize for Best Adapted Screenplay and, as we all know, Bruce Beresford also directed the now classic film version of Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* in 1977, with a script by Phillip Adams based on a screenplay by Ida Veitch.

Getting *The Getting of Wisdom* onto the silver screen in 1977 required the combined efforts of Southern Cross, the Australian Film Commission, the Victorian Film Corporation, Channel 9 TV Network, Phillip Adams, Barry Humphries, and Bruce Beresford.

I therefore end with an obvious and recurrent question. Several filmscripts already exist, but what might it take to get *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* onto a screen, large or small, as a single film, or as a series of TV episodes, here or overseas? Answers on a postcard please.
