

HHR and me, BB

By Bruce Beresford

My mother read very few books. In fact, I don't recall her ever reading any at all, though I suppose she did. I do remember that after a few drinks, she would recite, in a florid style, poems by Robert Service – a Canadian who specialised in lengthy ballads of life on the wild frontier:

*A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known as Lou.*

My father read virtually nothing but cricket and Australian football reports in the papers. He never bothered with the news itself – with the result that when he was called up for military service in 1939 he was astonished to learn that the country was going to war. His first question to the recruitment board was a request that they identify the enemy.

However, in the 1950's, when we lived in Toongabbie, an outer suburb of Sydney, he was addicted to cheap and very short paperback westerns – a genre that seems to have disappeared. I remember that his favourites were *No Guns Nelson* and *The Gay Bandit of the Border*. The 'gay bandit' of the title was not gay in the modern sense of the word, but a jolly likable chap who outwitted the law as he roamed the border between Texas and Mexico.

When my father died my sister and I found two books in a small bedside cabinet, along with a certificate showing that he had changed his name, in 1942, from 'Swift' to 'Beresford'. The books were well thumbed and numerous sentences were underlined in pencil. One was *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and the other *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. He was not a notable endorsement for either book. He had no friends that I recall, though he occasionally mentioned a couple from his youth – and he never stopped worrying and started living. His depression only increased over the years.

In my first or second year of high school an optimistic English teacher introduced the class to Joseph Conrad. *Gaspar Ruiz* and *Almayer's Folly* quickly revealed to me that there must be a world of great stories and great writers that had, not surprisingly, escaped my notice.

The house in Toongabbie did in fact have a small shelf of books in the living room, including a leather-bound set of Thackeray and a set of French, Russian and English classics bound in soft Morocco leather. I was discouraged from touching any of these books because 'they are valuable'. I think both sets were probably wedding presents. My mother claimed to have adored *Vanity Fair* but when I opened that volume many years later -in fact after she died - I found that the pages had not been cut (i.e. each page was joined at the top to the

succeeding page), and it would not have been possible to read it without this action being performed.

There were a few other books on the shelf, and these engaged my attention. I glanced at and then rejected *The Fool Beloved* by Jeffrey Farnol, but reached for a badly printed and damaged paperback – *Power Without Glory* by Frank Hardy. I must've been around fifteen by now and found Hardy's vividly written story of political skulduggery in Melbourne totally thrilling. I then moved onto two massive volumes. The first was *Gone With the Wind* - now much disparaged as politically incorrect because the main characters were slave owners but not criticised or condemned because of this fact. Nevertheless, it was and is undoubtedly a great tale told with passion. The second epic turned out to be an Australian saga - *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. The rise and fall of Mahony, his life in Australia, the goldfields, the Eureka Stockade, his success as a doctor in Melbourne, his return to England, his mental decline, was all so absorbing that I finished the three volumes, printed in one massive edition, within a few days.

In 1955 I saw a film, *Rhapsody* with Elizabeth Taylor and Vittorio Gassman playing rather unlikely music students in Switzerland. In the credits, which I always followed with interest, I noticed that the trite story was adapted from a novel called *Maurice Guest* (published in 1908), written by Henry Handel Richardson. I found a copy of in my favourite 2nd hand bookshop, Berkelouw's, in Hunter Street, Sydney. The novel, needless to say, was far more detailed and interesting than the film adaptation. Further sleuthing revealed that 'Henry Handel' was a pseudonym and the author was a woman named Ethel Richardson.

Some years went by as I stumbled my way through a university course, then left for England after my final exams in 1963. After some years of odd jobs, including a two-year stint in Nigeria, I applied for a position with the British Film Institute, an organisation that, being Government funded, escaped the grasp of the film union, the ACTT. (An organisation that mysteriously forbade people working in the film business in Britain unless they were Union members; however, membership was denied to anyone not already employed in the film business. I never understood the reasoning behind this closed shop policy, I doubt if anyone did, as it resulted in strangling film production in the U.K. The widely detested Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, banned 'closed shop' unions, after a long struggle, in 1990).

My qualifications for the BFI job - a couple of short films made on 16mm in Australia and a Sydney University degree - seemed unimpressive, at least to me. I was awe struck by the interviewing group which included Sir Michael Balcon, the celebrated head of Ealing Productions, as well as a number of other knights and even Lords. Perhaps my obvious enthusiasm for films was the factor that resulted in my running the BFI's sparsely funded Film Production Board.

Anyone in Britain could apply to the Board for funding and technical help and facilities for their film. My job was to read all the submissions, meet the applicants, work out the cost of the production, then submit the feasible projects to a committee that consisted of notable film makers, a couple of theatre directors, and a few film and theatre critics.

During my years at the BFI (1966-1972) 86 films were made, mostly shorts which varied from narrative stories to wild abstract visuals. Among the directors who made their start with this system are Ridley and Tony Scott, Mike Leigh, Steven Frears and Nick Broomfield.

My base was an office with a couple of editing rooms in a run-down area called Lower Marsh, just behind Waterloo station. On Fridays there was always a low-rent street market and it was on a bookstall run by a cranky elderly lady with a mass of dyed inky black hair that I picked up a tattered copy, with an unattractive orange cover, of a book by Henry Handel Richardson – *The Getting of Wisdom*.

For some reason I was unaware of this short and witty novel, clearly based on the author's experiences, as a naïve country girl, at a leading Melbourne girls' school, where many of her fellow pupils, from wealthy families, tended to be snobs, critical of her home made clothes and rustic background. A lesbian affair with the charming Head Girl was described with delicacy. Even the mention of such a relationship must have been a rarity at the time of publication -1910.

Oddly, very oddly, I identified with the leading character, Laura Tweedle Rambotham, as I always imagined myself, probably irrationally, as an outsider. I determined to make a film adaptation of the novel as soon as my career had reached a point where this could be a possibility.

Many years went by. I returned to Australia in 1971, having heard that the Commonwealth government was making funds available for the production of feature films. Enterprisingly, Barry Humphries and I worked on a film script, an adaptation of his *Private Eye* comic strip *Barry McKenzie* – the adventures, or mis-adventures, of a gormless Australian in London.

Through the enthusiasm and influence of Phillip Adams, modest finance was found through a clearly dubious and unwilling Government agency. It was pointed out to me that I'd never directed a feature film – to which I responded that everyone applying for money to do so was in the same situation. Further, there was great anxiety that Barry McKenzie would 'be bad for Australia's image'. I remember wondering what it was they imagined this 'image' to be and refrained from pointing out that my travels abroad had led me to think that Australia was thought of merely as a sunny place of footballers, cricketers and beer swilling louts.

The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) proved to be very popular with audiences. The critical reaction, on the other hand, could not have been worse. Where Barry Humphries and I saw harmless jokes and overall good humour the

reviewers saw and heard only vulgarity and bad taste. I suppose they had a point, (a mean-spirited point) although the film is almost refined by today's standards.

My plan to follow up *Barry McKenzie* with *The Getting of Wisdom* was now torpedoed as I was perceived as an irretrievable lowbrow. With my wife and three children I returned to London, hoping to return to the British Film Institute.

A few months after arriving in London a phone call came from Phillip Adams asking if I knew a play, *Dons Party* by David Williamson. He was anxious to produce a film version and, as I found out many years later, a number of potential directors had turned down the project because of the difficulty of making a film in which eleven characters are all clustered around a TV set on election night. This was a setting essential to the play and would prevent the film being 'opened up' with a variety of locations.

I read a copy of the play and was captivated by Williamson's wit, cynicism and skilled portrayals of a group of predominantly left-wing voters. (The style struck me as an appealing mixture of Ibsen and Ayckbourn.) The sex scenes were extraordinarily explicit, probably even by the literally no-holds-barred level of 2021. The cast, headed by Graham Kennedy, John Hargreaves and Ray Barrett, tore into their roles with gusto. Although made on an absurdly low budget (\$250,000) the film was well received and I ended up with an unexpected 'Best Director' award from the Australian Film Institute.

Now that I'd had a modest dose of acclaim I once again began pushing *The Getting of Wisdom*. Reg Grundy, a quiet ex-sports commentator who had made a fortune from TV quiz shows, said he would finance "G of W" if I first made a Barry McKenzie sequel.

This was done. Barry Humphries and I had fun concocting more McKenzie adventures – *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*. Again, the film was popular. Again, the critics destroyed it in print and on air (mercifully, the internet had not yet arrived). Reg Grundy declined to finance *The Getting of Wisdom*, probably as he now knew he could never make the money from feature films that he could from quiz shows. The quiz shows, I realised, cost him *nothing at all* to produce. The formats were copied (and paid for??) from American shows, the TV stations donated the time slots as they knew they would have large audiences and could sell advertising time, the participants weren't paid and the prizes they competed for (mostly 'white goods') were all donated by the manufacturers.

Of course, in my usual role of the inept businessman, I had no written contract with Mr Grundy.

I realised, at rather a late stage, that a crucial step, as with any film project, is to have a script. I rather naively approached the Film Commission for finance that would enable me to write it. At a meeting with a couple of formidable bureaucrats who seemed to be dominated by a humourless Canadian

lady (how did she end up in Sydney?) named Nadine Hollow, I was told that as the novel was written by a woman and the story concerned schoolgirls, then a woman should be found as scriptwriter.

Aware of no alternative to this suggestion I began to search and was somehow guided to a middle-aged lady named Eleanor Witcombe, who lived in Hunters Hill in a house she shared with a daughter of the painter/writer Norman Lindsay. Eleanor had written a couple of charming radio plays and was familiar with *The Getting of Wisdom* and, in fact, all of the work of H.H. Richardson.

Quick-witted, widely read, and with considerable musical knowledge, the immensely personable Eleanor turned out to be one of the great eccentrics. Her main difficulty, as a writer, was an inability to actually finish anything. Numerous pages were sent to me as I struggled for an income directing TV commercials, a genre for which I displayed considerable lack of skill. Eleanor's writing appeared to consist of a ragged and incoherent narrative replete with frequent and elaborate scenes tangential to the story of the key schoolgirl characters.

Desperate after at least six months and afraid that the film was going to slither away from me permanently, I insisted that the chaotic pages were reduced to no more than 110. Eleanor claimed to see the logic behind the request and agreed to its implementation.

A few more months went by, punctuated by frantic phone calls from me. Finally, the allegedly abbreviated script arrived. I was not even slightly surprised that it was at least fifty pages longer than before, not one hundred pages shorter.

I then saw no alternative but to stealthily begin editing the material down to a workable length. There were a few gems hidden among Eleanor's verbiage and I hope I salvaged these. I had to add a few scenes I was convinced were necessary and ransacked both the novel and HHR's memoir *Myself When Young* for inspiration.

Armed with the script, ostensibly written by Eleanor Witcombe the Victorian Film Corporation were approached for finance. No time was lost in informing me that as the project was from a novel written by a woman, with a script written by a woman, then a female should direct. The fact that the entire project had been driven by my passion was swept to one side. After some hesitation I agreed to the female director *providing* that if, in the future, she had a project with a predominantly male cast, it would be handed over to me. The logic of this was difficult to contest. It was sulkily agreed I could direct.

Writing this, in 2021, I realise that many of the films I have directed, which have predominantly female casts, would now be forbidden to me. Without a woman directing they would not be able to go into production. So I am lucky to have made, (apart from *The Getting of Wisdom*), *Paradise Road*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *Puberty Blues*, *Bride of the Wind*, *Ladies in Black*, *Rich in Love* and *Evelyn*.

I knew that casting *The Getting of Wisdom* would be difficult. All of the girls in the story were aged between 15 and 18, so the usual path of searching for professional actresses wasn't an option. Instead, I contacted the Headmistress of the Ladies College, in Melbourne, where Ethel Richardson (aka Henry Handel) had actually been a pupil from 1883-87. Quite a number of the students were interested in auditioning. Most read fluently and expressively, so it was quickly apparent there would be no problem casting the dozen or so speaking roles. For the heroine, Laura Tweedle Rambotham, I chose a feisty young girl named Susannah Fowle who delivered all of the dialogue with flair and understanding. I was certain, as we shot the film, that she would go on to have a film and/or theatre career. This turned out not to be the case. After a few publicity jaunts, and a little TV and theatre work Susannah chose some other career. Perhaps her outspoken manner, her directness, did not endear her to producers and directors, or perhaps she found the jungle of film and television production limited in its appeal.

A problem with the casting was that it was advantageous to find a girl who could play the piano reasonably well – a key factor in the story. This greatly cut down the number who could audition for the role. Susannah had studied piano and was convincing in the piano scenes, although the piano heard throughout the film was played by a 15-year-old student from the Sydney Conservatorium named Sarah Grunstein. Sarah went on to acclaim and an international career.

I was delighted with the vivacious bunch of girls I found in Melbourne but didn't succeed in finding a candidate to play Evelyn – the older girl with whom Laura has a relationship. I was in London for some now forgotten reason and thought I might find someone there with the elegant rather aristocratic quality I thought Evelyn should have. A number of young women auditioned and I chose a beautiful 18 year old named Hilary Ryan.

I was stunned a few months later when Hilary arrived in Sydney. She greeted me with an American accent, quickly assuring me that she could easily return to the English accent she had used in the audition. She'd acquired this while at drama school in London.

For the key role of the Headmaster I naively sent the script to James Mason and Laurence Olivier. Not surprisingly neither replied, no doubt lacking enthusiasm for a trip halfway across the world, and a very modest fee in an Australian film by an unknown director. After considering various options in Australia I suggested to Phillip Adams, the producer, that perhaps Barry Humphries could play the part for us. I already knew, of course, that Barry was immensely versatile and that the ubiquitous Edna Everage was only one of his characters, part of a vast repertoire.

Barry gave a sensitive performance, along with a first-rate adult cast that included John Waters, Sheila Helpmann, Julia Blake, Patricia Kennedy and Candy Raymond.

Production went smoothly, the Victorian era being cleverly re-created by the production designer John Stoddart and superbly photographed by Don McAlpine; both of whom had designed and filmed both Barry McKenzie films. McAlpine went on to shoot numerous Australian and American productions and has been deluged with awards, but I still think that *The Getting of Wisdom* displays his most beautiful images.

The film was selected for competition at the Cannes festival, much to my delight. This delight rapidly abated when I was contacted from Cannes and told it was no longer eligible as it had been screened previously. I denied that there had been any screenings, then found out it had indeed been shown at a festival in Singapore – no doubt agreed to by the Film Commission or possibly Phillip Adams, - who would not have considered that the Cannes festival selection would be a possibility.

Still – *The Getting of Wisdom* was shown in Cannes *not* in the main festival, but in out-of-competition screenings. I went to the first ‘screening’ where there was no audience at all. I was assured they would come to the second screening, which was at night. No one came to that showing either.

(I was personally pleased with the final film, which seemed to me to tell a delightful story, full of engaging characters. Regrettably, my opinion was not widely shared. Critical reviews were disparaging and audiences scant. *Wisdom* was totally eclipsed by two other Australian period films – *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *My Brilliant Career*. As far as I know there have never been any overseas screenings or TV or DVD sales.)

A few of the talented young actresses in *The Getting of Wisdom* found some other acting roles, though these seemed to peter out within a few years. The only one who went onto an impressive career was Sigrid Thornton, who had brought a lot of sparkle to a small role in the film.

I was not alone in thinking that the beautiful Hilary Ryan would have a major film career but she married shortly after her return to England (she never went back to America) and gave up acting, it seems, after appearing in one episode of *Dr Who* and a 1984 film, *Scandalous*. I still see her and her family occasionally on my visits to London.

Quite a few years went by after *The Getting of Wisdom* with the usual mixture of successes and disasters. I was nominated for an Academy award for the script of *Breaker Morant* (1980) and direction of *Tender Mercies* (1982). *Driving Miss Daisy* won the Academy Award for Best Film in 1989, though I had no nomination as director. *Black Robe* won the Canadian award for Best Film in 1991 as well as a number of other awards, including Best Director.

There was an unexpected coda relating to Eleanor Witcombe, whose script for *The Getting of Wisdom* won an Australian award for Best Adapted Screenplay, Some time in 1978 a call came from an executive at Fox studios in Los Angeles. Evidently someone there had seen *The Getting of Wisdom* and thought Eleanor would be an ideal writer to send to Northern Ireland to

interview people on both sides of the IRA/Catholic vs Protestant/British disputes and then come up with a script dealing with the issues involved. A year or so had gone by and the Hollywood studio had received nothing from Eleanor although they knew she had returned to Australia from Dublin. I was evasive when asked what my experience was during the scripting period of *The Getting of Wisdom* but said I would visit Eleanor for information.

Eleanor was as chatty as always and talked excitedly about the weeks spent in Belfast. She enthused, in particular, about the IRA, their anti-British stance etc. When I asked about her response to interviews with the British side of the issue she only said 'Oh, I wouldn't talk to them!' It was clear to me immediately that if the LA studio was to receive any script at all it was almost certain to lack the impartial quality required.

I have no idea if Fox ever received a script from Eleanor but think it unlikely.

After some years in North America I was back in Australia in 2002 and was contacted by two people I didn't know - Zelda Rosenberg and Oscar Whitbread – who asked if I was interested in a film of HHR's epic *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. I was certainly interested but had signed a contract with an American company to direct a film about Beatrix Potter. This would take about a year to completion. However, a few days after the Mahony call I was reading the *Sydney Morning Herald* and was startled to find an item stating that Chris Noonan, an Australian director, was going to America to begin work on a Beatrix Potter film. I quickly phoned the production company back in Los Angeles. Not surprisingly my call was not taken by the company head, Mike Medavoy. I was put through to a subordinate who calmly told me that the producers had been told I was 'not available' to direct the Beatrix Potter project. He was vague about where this information could have come from, as it certainly wasn't me or my agent. Its veracity was accepted without question, it seemed, as it was not considered necessary to check with me. Needless to say, no portion of my fee was paid despite my contract. Experience had taught me that legal battles with Los Angeles film producers were a waste of time and money. My agent, who remembered the 'old days' when important deals were all done with a handshake and then honoured, was now aware that so many lawyers become involved that cases can drag on for years and, more importantly, even if won, the financial settlement would not be enough to cover legal fees.

Curiously (at least to me) after having directed over 30 feature films between 1972 and 2021, many of which won awards and a number of which made money, I have been removed as director from at least six other projects. As early as 1980 I turned up in Melbourne to direct a TV film, *Water Under the Bridge*, and was told to return to Sydney 'because of the financing we must have a Melbourne-based director'. As recently as a week ago (July, 2021) a

brief e-mail arrived dismissing me from a project about the singer Buddy Holly on the basis that 'we want to have a black director'. I was a little stunned as I had done almost a year's work in preparation and had a signed deal.

In these and other examples there had been no disputes with producers and in most cases I found out about my demotion from news or trade paper articles or from a call to my agent by a lawyer on behalf of the producers. I can only assume that for some reason my association with the various films did not inspire confidence.

Back to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. With available months facing me in Sydney rather than production in the USA, I quickly began work on an adaptation of the formidable three volume novel of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.

I re-read the same copy from the Toongabbie mini-bookshelf that I had read around 1955. This time I made detailed notes of the structure of the story and the roles of the numerous characters. Previous adaptations I had done or been involved with had shown me that this was a crucial first step. An outline along the lines of 'a' happens, which results in 'b', then 'c' takes place – and so on- is invaluable when working on the construction of a film script. The prose style of the writer of the novel is removed and the sequence of events is laid bare. In some cases I've realised that even impressive novels by acclaimed writers can have not only major narrative flaws but inconsistent characterisations. Elegant or vivid prose tends to paste over problem areas.

Richard Mahony was, it seemed to me, reasonably well structured. Quite an achievement considering that it was a three-volume compilation written over a lengthy period (1917-29). Sometimes key characters would vanish from the story and be replaced at a later point by a different character with a different name, but serving much the same function such as friend of Mary Mahony. In the film script (and the TV series adaptation that I also wrote) I combined various characters in the interest of narrative clarity.

I think it took me around six months to come up with the film script. The writing involved not simply adapting the novel but a considerable amount of research into the period, from around the time of the Eureka Stockade into the twentieth century. As with other scripts I've written I aimed at writing four pages a day. A normal feature length script is around 100 pages, which means a draft could be completed in 25 days. As I'm easily distracted by friends, books and music I realised many years ago that without some discipline I would produce nothing at all or would produce very little over a considerable time period.

Zelda and Oscar seemed to quite like the draft I sent them. Both had been associated as producer and/or director on a number of films, mostly for TV. *Richard Mahony* was definitely a horse of a different colour – an adaptation of a book as long as *War and Peace* that would require a budget well in excess of the average Australian production.

Zelda launched herself, with energy, into introducing the project to production groups in both England and Australia. A major problem, I realised very early in the process, was that virtually no one, or, more accurately, precisely no one, had ever heard of the book, let alone read it. I think that all three of us, Zelda, Oscar and myself, all imagined that a script of an acclaimed (if quite a few years previously) Australian masterpiece would be greeted with interest.

The usual procedure with production entities, world-wide, is to give the script to a 'reader' for 'coverage'. It's always impossible to find out just who these readers actually are; I suspect that most are young graduates with a recently acquired degree that implies some knowledge of plays, novels, scripts etc. The coverage always consists, firstly, of a synopsis of the story and characters. The second part is an opinion of the quality of the script itself – structure, dialogue, characterisations and so on.

The one piece of 'coverage' I read in relation to *Richard Mahony* was relentlessly hostile to both the story and the adaptation.

It has never ceased to surprise me, over my many years in the film business, just how casual major producers can be. They often seem quite happy to hand over decisions costing millions to the opinion of one or two employees – simply because they could not be bothered to spend time reading a submitted script themselves. In fact, the only Hollywood producer I know who *definitely* read scripts and formed his own opinion was Richard Zanuck, with whom I made *Driving Miss Daisy*. He was never concerned that the huge amount of negative coverage we were given on the script of that film was valid. One producer, with whom I had worked a couple of times, told me that he would finance "Daisy" without bothering to read the script – as he respected my opinion. Still, I sent it to him and insisted he read. A call came a couple of days later; 'Bruce,' he said, 'I'll finance any script you want to make *except this one*.' After some months of these depressing reactions I remember saying to Richard Zanuck, 'All these people who've read our script think it's just lousy. Isn't it possible they're right and we're wrong?' Zanuck was a man of few words. 'No,' he replied, 'we're right and they're wrong.' *Driving Miss Daisy* won 4 Academy Awards, including Best Film and Best Screenplay.

Zelda and I went to London and had a couple of meetings with BBC executives re *Richard Mahony*. I had thought that perhaps that among this group of Oxbridge graduates there would be someone who at least recognised the novel for the masterpiece that it is.

But this was not the case. I was further disillusioned a few years later when I met the same group of people, having submitted to them an extremely well written script by a Scottish writer, Paul Pender. This was the dramatic and moving story about the contralto Kathleen Ferrier (1912-1953) who, I was certain, would be a household name in the UK. No one I spoke to at the BBC had the remotest idea who she was so, of course, knew nothing of her immense

popularity, her huge recording sales or her tragic death. A postage stamp with her image on it was issued just before my BBC meeting. I showed this at the meeting, where it aroused only mild curiosity. I was told there was no point in reading Pender's script as 'why make a film about a nonentity?'

Back in Sydney, at one point I found myself meeting with a rather large lady who was in charge of productions for Channel 9. She showed a vague interest in *Richard Mahony* probably because it wouldn't have been all that easy to totally ignore a film maker who had made a string of successful and/or acclaimed films, been nominated twice for an Academy Award and directed an AA 'Best Picture' – though these attainments had not impressed either ABC or BBC executives.

I doubt if she read my Mahony script, but she pointed out, at length, the depth of her contempt for Australian audiences, stressing that the uninspiring productions of Channel 9 were what 'the audience demanded'. It didn't take me long to realise that the projects she was approving for production were those that matched her own taste, not that of the audience. I wasted my breath pointing out, as tactfully as possible, that I believed Australian audiences are, in general, educated and aware. Their enthusiasm for a number of distinguished BBC productions was certain proof of this...

Any prospect of a production through Channel 9 was zero.

The lack of progress was disappointing to both Zelda and Oscar. Zelda called to express the view that maybe the trajectory and the character of Mahony was too depressing and that she and Oscar thought it might be advisable to write a draft which put more emphasis on Mahony's wife. I was taken aback at this suggestion, which I found hard to take seriously. I know that in the Victorian era it was common to make drastic changes to Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, both survived and presumably went on to a happy married life. In the 1950's Hollywood film *Rhapsody*, adapted from Henry Handel Richardson's, *Maurice Guest*, James Guest ends up happily married, rather than a suicide, as in the novel. Despite having Elizabeth Taylor in a leading role, *Rhapsody* was a failure, though it occurred to me that perhaps the happy ending factor had influenced Zelda and Oscar.

Modern audiences, I believe, are much more inclined to accept their characters in full and often disturbing detail. *Richard Mahony* always struck me as a devastating, compelling character study so that shifting the emphasis away from him to his wife (!) seemed absurd. Thinking about this, I wondered if the makers of *Anna Karenina* had ever thought of shifting the focus from Anna to one of her relatives, would *Gone With the Wind* have been improved if Scarlet's bitter story was softened and the emphasis shifted to Melanie, a secondary character?

(I don't know if a script giving the key role to Mahony's wife was written. Sadly, I had no further contact with Zelda or Oscar, both of whom I liked and admired.)

I have never forgotten the final paragraph of the novel and dreaded the thought of in any way diminishing the magnificently detailed, ruthless characterisation of Richard Mahony...

“All that was mortal of Richard Mahony has long since crumbled to dust. For a time, fond hands tended his grave, on which in due course a small cross rose, bearing his name, and marking the days and years of his earthly pilgrimage. But those who had known and loved him passing, scattering, forgetting, rude weeds choked the flowers, the cross toppled over, fell to pieces and was removed, the ivy that entwined it uprooted. And, thereafter, his resting place was indistinguishable from the common ground. The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit.”