

*ETHEL FLORENCE LINDESAY  
(HENRY HANDEL) RICHARDSON,*

(1870-1946)



***The yellow scarf: Portrait of Henry Handel Richardson  
(National Library of Australia)***

Ethel Florence Lindesay (Henry Handel) Richardson, novelist, was born on 3rd January 1870 in Fitzroy, Melbourne, elder daughter of Walter Lindesay Richardson (c.1826-1879), M.D., and his wife Mary, née Bailey. Walter Richardson was a respected obstetrician. He and his wife were active members of the new Spiritualist movement sweeping America, Europe and Australia and in 1869 Walter became the first president of the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists, a body noted for its innovative ideas on politics, health and social progress. He was also a member of the Senate

of the University of Melbourne and a prominent campaigner for a clean water-supply for the city of Melbourne. Both he and his wife took a keen and active interest in mining and the share market.

Walter took the family to England in 1868, where he practiced medicine in Yorkshire for a short time. On returning to Melbourne to find himself wealthy he led the life of a gentleman for three or four years. He took his family abroad again in 1873-74; but while away lost a significant amount of money during a slump on the share market. On his return he resumed practice in Melbourne, then moved to Chiltern, where a mining boom was anticipated. However, in failing health, he became a quarantine health officer at Queenscliff. Here he broke down, entered a private asylum, then was committed to the Yarra Bend asylum, where he was diagnosed as suffering from general paralysis of the insane (incipient), eventually recognized as a late manifestation of syphilis.



Post Office at Koroit, where Ethel's mother was postmistress.

Meanwhile his wife had been appointed postmistress at Koroit. Walter Richardson had actively participated in the life of the colony and his daughter's masterpiece, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, has too often

been taken to be a faithful account of the life of her father as a victim of personality defects, instead of a brain infection. We also need to remember that Ethel Richardson spent more than fifty-eight years of her life as an expatriate, about fifteen in Germany where she was happy, the rest in England where she never felt 'at home'. As her husband was to remark, in drawing Richard Mahoney's portrait she was really drawing her own.

Ethel declared once that a writer usually had all his material by the age of 10. The horrifying circumstances of Walter's illness and death, the permanent sense of insecurity inflicted on Ethel, marked her personality and her work. She had other problems: her childhood was spent moving from one home to another and an uneasy relationship with her mother, and above all a large port-wine birth-mark stretching from her right shoulder to her hand which caused her acute embarrassment.

In 1883 Ethel was sent to Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne, where she was an excellent student, played first-rate tennis, and was outstanding in music, including composition. The lady superintendent advised Ethel's mother to allow her to take up a musical career instead of proceeding to university. During her adolescence she had two disturbing emotional experiences: an infatuation for the local curate John Stretch, and for an older school friend. Ethel made good use of both experiences in her school story *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910).

Laura, the main character in the novel, is the eldest child of a country family. The novel concentrates solely on Laura and information is passed to the reader via her experiences and her understanding of the world. The girls at the school she attends are generally from rather wealthy families and those,

like Laura, who come from less fortunate backgrounds learn very early not to divulge their circumstances for fear of ridicule. From time to time Laura lets little snippets of information about her family slip out, and she suffers for it.

In fact, these seem to be the main forces controlling the action of this book: fear of one's peers, embarrassment about one's family, and the desire to "better" oneself by belittling others. None of the girls in the school, nor the teachers for that matter, come across as anything but self-serving and boorish. Even Laura, who starts out so young and strong, surrenders to the role expected of her. It's not a very pretty picture of teenage schoolgirls at the end of the nineteenth century.

As a reader you hope that times have changed, and that schools and school children aren't like this anymore. But at the back of your mind, as you remember your own school-years, some of us may wonder if they have.

After leaving school Ethel spent a few months teaching music at a small suburban private school, a job she hated; reading romantic novels; writing gloomy entries in a diary; and reading (surreptitiously) her parents' love-letters, which expressed their feelings for one another very frankly. In August 1888 Mrs Richardson took her girls to Europe. After visiting relations in England, the family moved to Leipzig, Germany, where Ethel enrolled at the Royal Conservatorium in April 1889 to study the piano, and her sister the violin. They were soon immersed in the musical and social life of the town, and Ethel in her growing romance with John George Robertson, a young Glasgow science graduate turned philologist studying at Leipzig University. Though her relationship with her sister was always close, Ethel

resented her mother's preference for Lillian, and sibling rivalry occurs regularly as a theme in her novels.

Between their engagement and the marriage in Dublin on 30th December 1895 Ethel graduated from the conservatorium with honours in all branches of her subject and received acclamation for her performance first movement of Beethoven's piano concerto in C major at her graduation ceremony. Following their marriage the Robertsons lived for several months in Munich (where her mother died), then moved to Strasburg where John had been appointed a university lecturer and subsequently a professor, With the appearance of his *History of German Literature*, his long career as a famous scholar began; in 1903 he accepted a chair at the University of London in German and later Scandinavian studies, and set the subjects on a firm foundation in Britain for the first time. The honours bestowed on him by the German, Swedish and Norwegian governments and were well deserved. It has been suggested that Richardson's unfulfilled ambition to be awarded the Nobel Prize stems from envy, perhaps subconscious, of her husband's success.

The move to London suited Robertson better than his wife, though until World War I they spent a good deal of time in Germany. Ethel's sister Lillian had married Otto Neustatter, a German eye-specialist, and had become an active suffragette during visits to England and Ethel also supported the cause.

Robertson's teaching and his intensive research, the extra work he undertook to keep up a large household and satisfy his wife's expensive tastes, especially for travel, left him little free time. The decision not to have

children was probably hers; the possible explanation an unfounded fear of passing on whatever was the cause of her father's illness. It followed that she needed a 'saving occupation', and writing was the one, after music, for which she was most fitted. No man could have done more than Robertson to ensure that she was free to devote herself to her writing, not only in a material, but in every other sense. It is not too much to suggest that he began her real education. His knowledge of literature, music and the arts was immense; traces of his literary criticism and of his lectures on Wagner can be seen in Richardson's novels, especially in the central imagery of the trilogy.

Ethel loved the cinema, belonged to a private film-club which enabled her to see films proscribed in England and had contacts which supplied her with banned books. Her curiosity about the variety of human experience was one of her most marked characteristics and her knowledge of Freud's writings dated back to early days in Germany. Her diaries from 1887 to 1946 suggest a temperament tormented by depression. As she said herself: “a death/weariness of things in general ... sometimes takes possession of me”....(but)..... “it goes hand in hand with a vigorous hold on existence and with the unyielding toughness of the born fighter”. This is largely true, and a sense of humour helped her to keep a sense of proportion, but it is also true that throughout her life she was never independent. She had first her mother to lean on, then her husband, and after his death Olga Roncoroni, whom the Robertsons befriended in 1919, when Olga was 26 and Ethel 49.

Olga, in need of treatment for a psychosomatic illness which she fought bravely through her long life, came to live with the Robertsons in 1921. Until Robertson's death in 1933, Olga taught Dalcroze Eurhythmics at a London school. She was pretty, vivacious, highly intelligent, wrote manuals

about her work and was above all a competent musician. Her sense of fun appealed to Ethel's lighter side, and although life in the novelist's household was not easy, she agreed to a death-bed request by Robertson "to look after Henry" when he had gone.

Speculation has marred discussion of this friendship, founded on the premise that Ethel's literary interest in homosexual relationships indicated 'deviant' sexuality. There is no evidence to support this view; even less to support the view that Olga was 'deviant'. But if 'deviance' could be demonstrated, one would have to explain why Ethel's two masterpieces *Maurice Guest* and *The Fortunes* deal centrally with two staunchly heterosexual relationships. There is no doubt of her early happiness with her husband, documented to more than twenty years of marriage; no doubt that she was 'devastated' after his death and no doubt that they were intellectually compatible for the whole of their marriage. After Robertson's death (of cancer) she continued obsessively at the ouija-board or séances to attempt to get in touch with him and re-establish what she insisted was permanent contact. She discussed her writing with him and told him her problems or played to him, and thereby continued the dependence of nearly forty years.

In 1934 Ethel, with Olga, had moved to Fairlight, near Hastings, and remained there all through the bombing raids of the Second World War. Olga's own health was bad, but she continued to care for her friend. After years of physical and financial trials, Ethel died on 20 March 1946 of cancer. She was cremated at a dismal funeral service in London and her ashes were scattered out to sea off Hastings with her husband's. In 1957 her house in London acquired a blue memorial plaque, but the building was later demolished. The Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers saved her

birthplace from demolition and the Victorian National Trust restored Lake View, Chiltern, and her cherished Australian home. Among its relics is the ouija-board!



*Lake View House at Chiltern, Victoria, the author's home during her years at school.*

Ethel's use of a pen-name, adopted for mixed motives, probably militated against recognition especially when feminist literary history began. Her first novel, *Maurice Guest* was highly praised in Germany when it first appeared in translation in 1912, but received a bad press in England, though it influenced other novelists. The novel explores the consuming power of sex and love. Set in Leipzig in the 1890s, when that city was a centre of music, it tells the story of a provincial young Englishman, Maurice Guest, permitted by his unwilling parents to abandon school teaching and study music there. He finds himself in a cosmopolitan group - - German, English, American and just one Australian, Louise Dufrayer, whose face Maurice glimpses by chance at a music lesson. Instantly, and for ever, he is spellbound. What Maurice feels for Louise is an overwhelming passion, an obsession which of



course he calls love. She belongs, soul, body and heart, to another man, the dissolute Schilsky, violinist and composer, a great artist. When he abandons her, she is saved by Maurice, and their love story proceeds to its extraordinary end

When approached to publish Maurice Guest the publisher Heinimans (Australia) declared it to be “inappropriate in its present form” demanded that 2000 words be cut and that the language be “toned down.”

Her trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* is set in Australia during the gold-mining boom of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and is one of the classics of Australian literature. In *Australia Felix*, *The Way Home* and *Ultima Thule*, Richardson weaves together a number of themes. The central character, Richard Mahoney, despite finding initial contentment with his wife Mary, becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his ordered life. His restlessness is not understood by Mary, who has to endure the constant shattering of her security as Richard desperately attempts to free himself; his attempts finally plunge them into poverty. In the figure of Richard Mahoney, Richardson captures the soul of the emigrant, ever restless, ever searching for some equilibrium, yet never really able to settle anywhere. Richard’s search, though, is also the more universal one for a meaning that will validate and give purpose to his existence.

The trilogy suffered from the long intervals between its three volumes: *Australia Felix* (1917); *The Way Home* (1925) and *Ultima Thule* (1929). The last brought overnight fame and the three volumes were published as one in 1930.

The power of her writing is reflected in the following extract from *Australia Felix*.

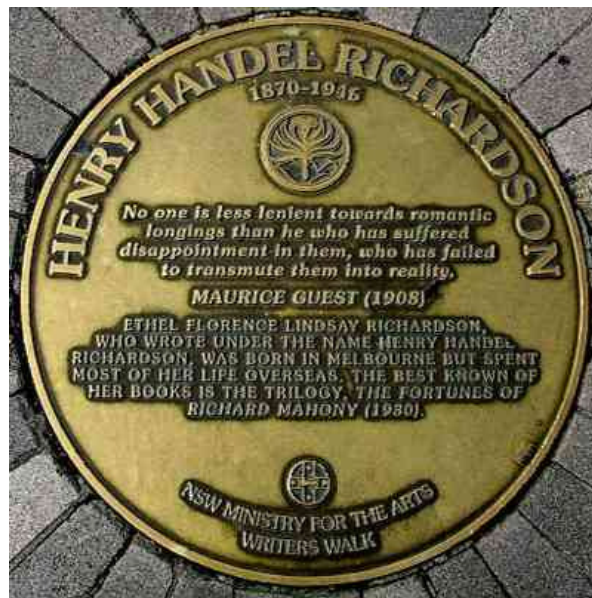
“In a shaft on the Gravel Pits, a man had been buried alive. At work in a deep wet hole, he had recklessly omitted to slab the walls of a drive; uprights and tailors yielded under the lateral pressure, and the rotten earth collapsed, bringing down the roof in its train. The digger fell forward on his face, his ribs jammed across his pick, his arms pinned to his sides, nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask; and over his defenceless body, with a roar that burst his ear-drums, broke stupendous masses of earth.

His mates at the windlass went staggering back from the belch of violently discharged air: it tore the wind-sail to strips, sent stones and gravel flying, loosened planks and props. Their shouts drawing no response, the younger and nimbler of the two - he was a mere boy, for all his amazing growth of beard - put his foot in the bucket and went down on the rope, kicking off the sides of the shaft with his free foot. A group of diggers, gathering round the pit-head, waited for the tug at the rope. It was quick in coming; and the lad was hauled to the surface. No hope: both drives had fallen in; the bottom of the shaft was blocked. The crowd melted with a "Poor Bill - God rest his soul!" or with a silent shrug. Such accidents were not infrequent; each man might thank his stars it was not he who lay cooling down below. And so, since no more wash dirt would be raised from this hole, the party that worked it made off for the nearest grog-shop, to wet their throats to the memory of the dead, and to discuss future plans.”

Her fame, however, was short-lived. As late as 1977, when Virago Press republished *The Getting of Wisdom*, some London critics referred to the author as 'Mr Richardson'. Her short stories, *The End of a Childhood* (1934), and the novel, *The Young Cosima* (1939), had lukewarm receptions.

However, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* is an archetypal novel, powerfully symbolic yet realistic, written about the great upsurge of nineteenth-century Western capitalism fuelled by the gold discoveries. With relentless objectivity it surveys all the main issues which were to define the direction of white Australian society from the 1850s onwards, within the domestic framework of a marriage. In 1973 an English critic called it “one of the great books of the world.”

Henry Handel Richardson's place in Australian literature is important and secure.



**Henry Handel Richardson plaque, Writers' Walk, Circular Quay, Sydney.**

## **Works by Henry Handel Richardson**

### **Novels**

- *Maurice Guest* 1908
- *The Getting of Wisdom* 1910

- *Australia Felix* 1917
- *The Way Home* 1925
- *Ultima Thule* 1929
- *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* 1930
  - Comprising the novels: *Australia Felix*, *The Way Home* and *Ultima Thule*
- *The Young Cosima* 1939

### **Short Story Collections**

- *Two Studies* 1931
- *The End of a Childhood* 1934
- *The Adventures of Cuffy Mahoney* 1979
- *The End of Childhood: The Complete Stories of Henry Handel Richardson* 1992 edited by Carol Franklin

### **Non-Fiction**

*Myself When Young* 1948

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### **Sources:**

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[http://knowledgerush.com/kr/biography/831/Henry\\_Handel\\_Richardson/](http://knowledgerush.com/kr/biography/831/Henry_Handel_Richardson/)