

Henry Handel Richardson

A LIFE

MICHAEL ACKLAND

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For Rhonda
and for Pam and Tony

*How I do hate the ordinary sleek biography! I'd have every
wart & pimple emphasised, every tricky trait or petty
meanness brought out. The great writers are great enough
to bear it.*

Henry Handel Richardson

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Prologue

HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON is now one of Australia's best known writers, but the woman behind the pseudonym, Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson, remains shrouded in conjecture. Initially her novels received a mixed press, sold spasmodically, and by the Second World War were out of print. Since her death her reputation has firmed, with films and reprints bringing her fiction before a wider public. Yet many crucial issues bearing on her private life are still unresolved. Was she, as some have suggested, drawn to lesbianism, or at the least to bisexuality? Did she fear to contract congenital syphilis? What did she think of her wayward, iconoclastic father? What was her relationship with her radical, reformist sister Lil? What was her attitude to the woman's movement? The Munich accord? The questions are almost as endless as the later surmises. To this mystery she contributed in no small measure by her own decisions. By choosing to live permanently overseas from 1889, she distanced herself from her native land and likely chroniclers, and her reclusive English existence assured that she left few traces in London social life. Even her final literary testament, *Myself When Young*, begins with the words: 'It has never been my way to say much about my private life. Rightly or wrongly, I believed this only concerned myself'.¹ It breaks off, moreover, at the beginning of 1895, before she began prolonged creative writing or serious experimentations with the supernatural, and years before world events would force her to reappraise her feelings for the two countries which exercised the greatest influence on her: Australia and Germany.

This dearth of reliable information was fully intended. During her lifetime Richardson received many requests for biographical details and did little to fulfil them. Instead she jealously guarded both the secret of her

gender and details of her family life, while feeding her biographers, as Elizabeth Summons observed, 'what she thought was good for them and what she wanted the world to believe of her'.² This was done through occasional letters, then concertedly through an autobiography in which apparent frankness masks repeated manipulation of the facts. Readers, however, have been slow to recognise this. Standard accounts of her life follow it closely, paraphrasing Richardson's words and rarely questioning its accuracy. Certainly *Myself When Young* sheds valuable light on her existence and attitudes, but often its prime value is as a psychological document in which fantasies eclipse, or compulsions elide, verifiable actuality. And 'her fantasies', as Dorothy Green underscored, 'were always subject to control for a purpose'—though too often her putative purpose has been left unexamined.³ Similarly, photographs of her offer few insights. Heavily lidded eyes lend her gaze a veiled quality, her studied poses conceal physical defects, such as an unsightly birthmark, and she was capable of sending an enthusiastic correspondent a reproduction of Goethe's bust in profile with the remark: 'it has always been said that the portrait ... has a certain likeness to me'.⁴ Yet the veil can be lifted, at least in part, and her autobiography interrogated and probed for hidden revelations.

Biography inevitably assumes a particular angle of vision, and this account of her life is no exception. It is haunted by two images. One is of the impressionable child in 'The Bathe', the tale which introduces her last major work, *Growing Pains: Sketches of Girlhood*. This story focuses on a crisis of self-identity, and a dawning, fearful realisation of the burden of gender which the female child is destined to assume. It opens with a naked prepubescent girl, frolicking in the shallows beyond the restricting shoreline. Observing her from the beach are two mature women. Enticed by her heedless pleasure as well as by the inviting natural scene, they decide to strip and join her. Layer upon layer of clothes is cast off to reveal tired, blotched, misshapen bodies marked by the trials of sexual maturity:

Splay-legged they were, from the weight of these [physical] protuberances. Above their knees, garters had cut fierce red lines in the skin; their bodies were criss-crossed with red furrows, from the variety of strings and bones that had lashed them in. The calves of one showed purple-knotted with veins; across the other's abdomen ran a deep, longitudinal scar. One was patched with red hair, one with black.⁵

For the child it is a terrifying revelation. Before this, she has no more seen a naked female body than grasped what adulthood might mean for her.

Now she stares with 'horrid fascination' at 'something ugly'—socially and biologically inscribed females. Her concluding thoughts are at once comprehensible and mockingly impossible: 'Oh, never ... never ... no, not ever now did she want to grow up. *She* would always stop a little girl'.⁶ The story is the climax of decades of engagement with women's experience, with suffragette ideology and with the dramas of heterosexuality which Richardson knew equally from literature and from life. The association of childhood with insecurity and rude awakenings had other roots. These stretched back to the author's own traumatic upbringing, when the sea was a source of refuge and joy, the land a site of harrowing insights into an adult world which, after promising nurturing protection, had shown a dark and shocking underside which the young girl never forgot.

The other seminal image is of the secluded work-space, the sound-proofed room of her own upon which she insisted. There, shielded from disturbances by closed doors and a well regulated household, Richardson sifted and reshaped the remembered past into the work for which she is justly famed. For the best part of forty years her mornings were devoted to writing, her afternoons to recreation. This rigidly maintained routine, however, was singularly poor in raw life experience. For this she had to reach back into the rich store gleaned during eleven crucial years spent on the Continent, and even earlier to the mixed blessing of a youth spent in Australia. The importance of these two periods is duly reflected in this study, as it was in the subjects and settings of her novels, and their literary appropriation provides a perfect illustration of Nietzsche's adage: 'In solitude grows what one brings into it, also the inner beast [*Vieh*]'.⁷ Richardson, who drew many of the epigraphs for *The Getting of Wisdom* from this same passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, undoubtedly knew Nietzsche's dictum. She would have recognised its personal application, and she went to considerable lengths in her fiction to conceal the varied and often dark sources of her inspiration. Her earlier self, Ettie or Ethel Richardson, was even eclipsed in daily usage by her later pseudonym Henry, and my subsequent use of these two names is intended not only to follow her family's practice, but also to underscore her distinctive avatars as Ettie and Henry Handel.

To the outside world her authorial existence may have seemed conventional and withdrawn. But its results show her to have been a mature version of the intelligent, disenchanted woman in her tale 'The Professor's Experiment' which concludes: 'behind her locked door, Annemarie continued to indulge thoughts and hatch plans of the kind that herald revolutions'.⁸ In Richardson's case, fictional probings were fuelled by a deep

sense of something having gone ‘wrong in the making’, both in herself and in the nature of things.⁹ This translated into social criticism and an extreme drive for privacy. Her writing-name was at once a mask and a buffer. ‘This Henry Handel is the man of straw I have set up for the critics to tilt at, while I sit safe & obscure behind.’¹⁰ In practice, however, she felt keenly the barbs and criticisms launched at H.H.R., but her stratagem did distance her family life and doings from public scrutiny. When urged to reveal details of her own existence she quipped: ‘Time enough for more when I am dead & gone’.¹¹ It was a reiterated plea, as was the wish for more than ‘the ordinary sleek biography’: ‘I decline to be whitewashed, when the time does come. The whole truth for me’.¹² Sixty years after her death and a decade after the release of her embargoed papers, it is time to reconsider her life, to progress further towards the tantalising but elusive goal of ‘the whole truth’. Her correspondence is now published, her novels and other family documents have been carefully edited, her life-story partly told. Yet many of its most important phases still remain largely unexplored and her assertion that ‘the books are me, & outside them there is little worth knowing’ has been too seldom challenged.¹³ To refute it is one aim of this biography. More generally, it seeks to reveal the human and revolutionary dimensions of her life, though to do this we must first understand what it was that she carried with her, and confronted daily in her creative solitude—the problematic but richly instructive legacy of ‘growing pains’ in cultures and lands far removed from inner London where she passed her most creative years.