

# Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia Inc.

## Newsletter April 2017



### Our Society trip to Germany— HHR's 'spiritual home'

In little more than a month we're off to Germany! A small group of Society members will gather in Munich and travel after to Leipzig, Berlin and Strasbourg to follow some of HHR's footsteps and to immerse ourselves in the cultural life she enjoyed in what Leonie Kramer spoke of as HHR's 'spiritual home'.

We are thrilled that we will be joined for part of the trip by HHR's great niece and great nephew, Angela and Patrick Neustatter, grandchildren of HHR's sister, Lil. We will also be joined and assisted by German scholars of HHR's work and members of the Society – Irmgard Heidler in Munich and Stefan Welz in Leipzig.



*Stefan Welz*

In Leipzig Stefan Welz has planned a number of events for us, including a Grand Concert at the Gewandhaus, a guided tour of Leipzig, City of Music, a Motette at St Thomas Church, an HHR tour including a visit to the School of Music (former Conservatorium) and various places referred to in 'Maurice Guest'. We will also take a trip to Dresden to see the Hallerau school where HHR's sister Lil and A.S. Neill worked before they set up Summerhill.

Through the pages of future newsletters we hope to share this very exciting journey, and what we learn about HHR with those of you who can't be with us.

### Two Tales of Old Strasbourg: by Rachel Solomon



*Kaiser Wilhelm University, Strasbourg*

In the spirit of literary tourism generated by the upcoming HHR Germany and Strasbourg trip, it seems a good time to briefly consider the short stories 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg.' HHR claimed that 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy' and 'The Professor's Experiment' were written alongside each other in London during World War I from notes made earlier, presumably while living in Strasbourg between September 1896 and April 1903. The stories appeared separately for practical reasons until 1934 when they were published together in *The End of a Childhood* under the composite heading, 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg.' There is significant evidence, from both within and outside of the stories, to suggest that 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy' and 'The Professor's Experiment' were always intended to be read as a diptych, variously mirroring and contrasting with each other.

The seed of the idea for 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy' came from the death of the baby of HHR's maid, Eva, in Strasbourg. Two entries in HHR's diary of 1899 mark an unsentimental record of this short and unnamed life: 'went to see E.'s baby'; and just over three weeks later: 'went to see dead baby.' Eva's baby was not Peterle Luthy, and there is no reason to think that the fictional Henriette had any basis in Eva.

However, it is likely that Peterle's mother travelled the same paths and lived in similar conditions to those she observed on visiting Eva and her baby. The second side of the diptych, 'The Professor's Experiment,'

originates from HHR's observations of the other side of the social spectrum: academic life in the newer parts of the city. As HHR's husband, John George Robertson was starting out his career and fulfilling his duties outside of the University, HHR wrote to her mother of her visit to the home of Professor Emil Koepfel and his sister. HHR's description of the Koepfels is very different from their likely fictional counterparts, Paulchen and Annemarie. However, it is probable that the imaginary foundations of the story were found somewhere in HHR's experiences of her role in accompanying JGR on his calls.

For the literary tourist eager to trace the steps of Henriette and the Professor, HHR provides detailed roadmaps as to the different paths they follow in Strasbourg throughout their respective stories. The tour in May this year will very likely follow the path taken by Henriette as she wheeled the new-born Peterle home from hospital. The participants may have the good fortune, arriving as they are in the same month as Peterle, to observe the bloom of 'snowy masses of fruit-blossom' as they pass by the buildings and monuments of the old section of the city. They will probably be too early to experience the full blooms and scents of the roses that the Professor enjoyed as he considered the contents of Elsa's reply to his marriage proposal on a hot June day. Nonetheless, much of the built environment in which the action takes place will still be visible.

Further to her detailed and evocative rendering of the physical landscape, HHR employed a more subtle technique derived from artistic tradition in order to create a more nuanced layer of meaning. HHR's original subtitle for 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy' was 'An Interior' which she described as being 'in the style of the Dutch painters.' More specifically, she was referring to the seventeenth-century genre paintings which were characterised by realist domestic environments which often functioned as complex and ambiguous expressions of adult morality. Regarding themes and iconography, the 'Two Tales' can be seen as operating in the manner of the genre painting. In 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy' the narrative of Peterle's short life, represented by detailed factual description, plot, character, and a chronological sequence of events veils a more covert narrative which is thematically defined by clandestine sexual relations, including incest. Likewise, in 'The Professor's Experiment', HHR's successful implementation of impersonal, detached and often ironic narration provides for multiple levels of interpretation. The Professor, Annemarie, Elsa and Herr Braun can be seen as enacting a domestic drama concerning marriage, birth, and death. Additionally and, the relationships within the frame can be seen as manifestations of the Oedipal drama. In the early

1930s, the editors at *Good Housekeeping* magazine took it upon themselves to diminish or remove some such implications from HHR's texts. HHR reinstated her unillustrated original texts for publication in *Two Studies* ('Life and Death of Peterle Luthy') and *The End of a Childhood* ('Two Tales of Old Strasbourg'). Readers of these restored stories will be mindful, in passing the half-timber houses in the Tanners' Quarters in la Petite France or the solid apartment buildings that once were occupied by academics of the University, that behind closed doors all is not necessarily as it seems.



*Rachel Solomon*

## About Rachel

Rachel completed a PhD on HHR's short stories at Monash University supervised by Bruce Steele. She was the Research Assistant on the Monash Henry Handel Richardson Project, which saw the publication of Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele's *Henry Handel Richardson: the Letters*, 3 vols, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press (Melbourne, 2000), which bears her name on the title pages.

## A Maldon Weekend – March 25-6

As the Castlemaine Festival had organised a HHR event at the Maldon Athenaeum on March 25 the Society combined this with the AGM and our annual oration on Sunday morning.

### At the Maldon Athenaeum

Thirty people crowded into the small Athenaeum Library in Maldon on Saturday March 25 to hear writer, Robyn Davidson, author of 'Tracks', and writer, blogger, editor Angela Meyer share their ideas in a lively conversation about 'The Fortunes of Richard Mahony' and HHR's work in general as part

of the Castlemaine State Festival. Angela hastened to tell us that they spoke 'as enthusiasts, not experts'. Their enthusiasm was certainly evident and well appreciated by the audience.



*Robyn Davidson and Angela Meyer at the Maldon Athenaeum Library (Note Angela's well marked copy of 'The Fortunes of Richard Mahony'!)*

Both writers had vivid experiences of reading 'The Fortunes'. Robyn took the book to India to read in preparation for the Maldon event and had the pleasure of reading it in one gulp over a week. She was 'completely bowled over' by it, finding herself in tears as she came to the end. Angela was asked to read and review it for 'Lifted Brow' a number of years ago and was at first shocked at the book's size, but once she started reading couldn't believe how wonderful it was.

Both writers admired Richardson's characterisation and Robyn spoke particularly about the extraordinary character of Mary Mahony and the telling portrait of a marriage created by HHR. Richard Mahony 'would have been a pain to live with', Robyn said, and yet both writers spoke admiringly of the way Richardson allows us to feel for both Richard and Mary. They also agreed that 'Richardson does vanity, pride and embarrassment really well', and referred to passages in 'The Getting of Wisdom' and 'The Fortunes'.

Robyn spoke of the way the countryside is seen to destroy characters such as Richard and Purdie. The country was a source of 'so much wounding and disappointment'.

Angela and Robyn concluded with concern and a touch of gloom that HHR is not more well known. Why is this the case? Why aren't more people interested? Why isn't more being done about it?

In the lively discussion that followed the presentation, answers were offered to the questions posed. The fact that the event was booked out very shortly after it was first advertised, and many people were disappointed that it was not moved to a larger venue, suggests a great interest in HHR's work.

Reference was made to Text Publishing and the work they have done in their Classics Series in publishing

and promoting the work of HHR and other Australian writers. Also the NSW Writers' Centre in choosing HHR for this year in their 'Honouring Australian Writers' series. Interestingly the session on HHR they organised at the NSW State Library was also booked out, attracting about 200 attendees and more waiting outside.

Acknowledgement was also made to the Stella Prize Committee that does great work in promoting the work of Australian women writers in schools.

And last but not at all least we might consider the work of the HHR Society. Perhaps the questions could be taken as a challenge to we members of the Society whose aim it is to promote HHR's work. A glance at the list of HHR events held in the last 12 months (see President's Report at the AGM) suggest that interest in HHR's work is alive and well!



*Lee Mead on the right, and fellow Maldon resident at the Athenaeum event*

Those of you who attended earlier Maldon events will recognise Lee Mead, former joint postmistress of the Maldon Post Office. Lee and her partner Jan did much to promote HHR in their time in the Post Office, including the acquisition of the HHR franking stamp commemorating HHR's time in Maldon. Visitors to Maldon Post Office can request to have their mail franked with this stamp.



## Dinner at the Maldon Hotel

On Saturday night those of us who'd managed to get tickets for the afternoon event gathered at the Maldon Hotel with some Maldon members for a companionable meal.



(L-R) Lesley Cooper from Lilydale, Dot Charles from Wonthaggi, and Marie Bell and Helen McBurney from Maldon



(L-R) Helen Macrae, Carolyn Mooney and husband Robert (all from Melbourne) and Graeme Charles from Wonthaggi

## 2017 AGM in Maldon



*A beautiful autumn morning in Maldon*

This year the AGM was held in Maldon at the Community Hall.

Graeme Charles as President reported that this had been a busy and successful year for the Society. Five excellent newsletters were published and emailed to over 100 members with an extra 25 mail outs. Graeme extended the Society's thanks to editor, Janey Runci, and to Meg Probyn who has continued to format each issue.

The January 2016 HHR Birthday event at Chiltern included the Oration by Brigid Magner on Literary Tourism. Later in April the Society participated in the program of events in Chiltern as part of the National Trust's Heritage Festival, organising an address by Dr. Sylvia Martin: *Aileen Palmer's Getting of Wisdom*.

Links with two of the HHR Victorian towns—Queenscliff and Koroit—have been strengthened. Janey Runci and Helen Macrae attended an enactment of a scene in the life of the Richardson family in the house where they lived in Queenscliff in the 1870s, an event for History Week October 2016. A group of HHR Society members gathered in Koroit on 29 October 2016 to meet with members of the Koroit and District Historical Society and to visit the grave of Walter Richardson at the Tower Hill Cemetery. The Society hopes to further strengthen links with these two towns and perhaps recruit a committee member from each of these significant places.

The Society assisted with a highly successful and well-attended event at the NSW State Library in August (*Honouring Australian Writers: HHR*). The first Writer's Fellowship at Varuna Writers Centre (*The HHR Fellowship for Short Story Writing*) has been awarded to Peggy Frew. The resources of the Society were stretched with the previous Writing Competitions and Janey Runci has worked to develop this relationship with the Writers Centre. It is planned to award the fellowship every two years.

Graeme thanked all committee members for their support and contributions during the year.

Two motions were put to the meeting and passed.

**Motion 1:** That the membership fee of \$15 paid by new members after June 30 will cover their membership for the year they join and the following year.

**Motion 2:** That membership fees for overseas members be waived.

### **Elections were held with the following results:**

President: Graeme Charles

Vice-President: Janey Runci

Secretary: Heather McNeill

Treasurer: Helen Macrae

Ordinary members: Gloria Banks, Rachel Solomon, Bronwyn Minifie

## 2017 Oration – Placing HHR in Germany

‘Placing HHR in Germany’ was the timely oration delivered by Dr Irmgard Heidler in the Maldon Community Hall to an appreciative audience on Sunday, March 26. Dr Heidler demonstrated the many influences on HHR’s work from her very important time in Germany, including music, architecture and literature. Leipzig at the time was the centre of the book industry and Munich was the cultural capital.

Writers and artists met in cafes and inns, and although there was a military presence, it was largely theatrical as evidenced in the gaudy costumes in the photos Dr Heidler showed. HHR read very widely in German literature, often for her husband who had great trust in her judgement as he worked on ‘A History of German Literature’. HHR participated in the Modernist movement in her time in Germany.

Dr Heidler also gave fascinating information about the relationship between HHR and Lil and Otto Neustatter.

The above are just a few of the thoughts Dr Heidler offered. The full text of the oration will eventually be available on our website.



*Dr Irmgard Heidler at the Maldon Community Hall*

The Society thanks member Helen McBurney for her work in booking the hall and organising equipment for Dr Heidler. Also Helen and Marie Bell for the emergency printing of Dr Heidler’s talk.

HHR books, bags and cards continued to sell at a small table set up for the purpose at the hall.

## Lunch and HHR walk in Maldon

Those who were able to stay on after the oration repaired to one of Maldon’s lovely cafes – Le Sel –

and spent a couple of happy hours in the leafy back garden.



*At lunch*

At the end of the lunch Helen McBurney, local member and joint author of *Henry Handel Richardson in Maldon*, took the German visitors for a HHR tour of the town.

## HHR in the air

**Fiona Richardson:** In a recent article in ‘The Age’ Fiona Richardson, the Victorian Minister for Women, bemoaned what she called ‘the stony silence over the history of commendable women’. She listed HHR as one of the ‘notable women Victoria can lay claim to’.

**Don Watson:** Those of you who’ve read Don Watson’s book, *The Bush*, may have noticed the reference to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* where Watson sees the bush as mirroring ‘the hero’s personal confusion and decline into madness’.

## Welcome to new members: Di Parsons and Anne Venn



*New member, Di Parsons assists our treasurer, Helen Macrae in Di’s wonderful bookshop*

**Di Parsons** recalls the excitement of visiting Lake View more than 30 years ago, the thrill of being at the place where one of her favourite writers had lived. Today Di lives in the lovely small town of Trentham and runs 'Trentham Books' – a book-lover's paradise at 19 Victoria Street – where she takes great pleasure in directing visitors to her HHR collection.

Trentham Books is open most weekends, public and school holidays or by appointment (ring Di on 0448760563).

Call to readers: Have you known a bookseller or librarian or someone else who's helped you find some of HHR's work? If yes, let us know at [j.runci@bigpond.com](mailto:j.runci@bigpond.com) and we'll put it in the newsletter.

Let's promote booksellers and others who promote HHR!!!



*Anne Venn*

**Anne Venn** has long been a fan of HHR. Perhaps the original reason is her Maldon connection. She's been a resident of Maldon for 40 years. She lives up the road from the Stretch vicarage, was married in the church and of course is in and out of the Post Office a lot. She's very interested in Australian history, and taught it at secondary level for many years at Castlemaine Secondary College. She found 'The Fortunes of Richard Mahony' a fascinating imaginative insight into the Ballarat gold fields.

Anne commented: 'The HHR Society website offers a lot of reading and research. I really appreciate this aspect and that's the main reason for my joining up. It's generously available to all.'

## Ashleigh Mounser—a familiar name and face?

President, Graeme Charles spotted this article in 'The Age' on March 31, 2017 and recognised the name and face of the winner of the Youth section of our Short Story Competition in 2012. It seems that Ashleigh is putting her writing to good use!



## 2017 Membership of the HHR Society

The membership fee is \$15, due on 1<sup>st</sup> January each year. Renewals can be paid by a direct deposit into our bank account:

BSB 803070 Account number 77605.

Please make sure your name appears on the deposit.

Or you can send a cheque made out to:

Henry Handel Richardson Society of Australia,  
c/- The Treasurer, HHRSA,  
86/80 Trenerry Crescent, Abbotsford,  
Victoria 3067.

If you have any questions about membership call Helen Macrae on 0401 901 558.

### HHRSA Committee

President: Graeme Charles

Vice-President: Janey Runci

Treasurer: Helen Macrae

Secretary: Heather McNeill

Committee Members:

Gloria Banks, Bronwyn Minifie, Rachel Solomon

Website: [www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au](http://www.henryhandelrichardsonsociety.org.au)