

## Rezensionen

**Probyn, Clive, Bruce Steele, eds., 2000. *Henry Handel Richardson: the letters*, 3 vols., Melbourne: MUP, 2000. ISBN Bd 1: 052284797-8; Bd 2: 052284935-0; Bd 3: 052284936-9.**

**Reviewed by Rudolf Bader, Zürich.**

The novelist Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Florence Robertson née Richardson, often simply referred to as HHR), though she spent the greater part of her life in England, is still considered one of Australia's foremost writers of the first half of the twentieth century. She was born in Melbourne in 1870, and travelled to Europe in 1888 to study music at the Conservatorium in Leipzig. But from music she gradually drifted into literature. She eventually translated Danish and German authors into English. She married John George Robertson, who became the first Professor of German at London University. Her first novel, *Maurice Guest*, which is set in the milieu of the music students at Leipzig, was published in 1908; her second novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*, a Bildungsroman set in a Melbourne girls' school modelled after her own school, followed in 1910. Apart from one short visit back to Australia in 1912, she spent the rest of her life in Europe, mainly in England, where she died in 1946.

HHR's mature works include her biographical novel, *The Young Cosima* (1939), which explores some relevant episodes in the life of the woman who was born a daughter of Franz Liszt, married first Hans von Bülow and later Richard Wagner, and who was one of the prominent figures of nineteenth-century Germany. HHR's greatest achievement, however, must be her trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, a set of three novels – *Australia Felix* (1917), *The Way Home* (1925) and *Ultima Thule* (1929) – relating the story of an Irish doctor who moves forward and backward between Australia and Britain and gradually loses his hold on life, a character modelled after HHR's own father and a fate exemplifying Horace's famous phrase *Coelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt* ("Those who travel across the sea exchange their skies but not their own minds"). This trilogy, a masterpiece in every respect, may be interpreted as a metaphor for Australia's cultural consciousness during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, a state of affairs that Martin Boyd was later to put into the mouth of one of his characters in the following words: "Only our bodies were born in Australia. Our minds were born in Europe. Our bodies are always trying to return to our minds (*Outbreak of Love* [1957], 128).

What knowledge do we have of the intellectual setting of the woman behind such achievements? Apart from her own autobiographical work, *Myself When Young* (1948), and apart from a few minor monographs about her life and work by various Australian scholars, all matters related to HHR and her life were either kept under seal by her friend and executrix, Olga Roncoroni, or administered and dominated by the scholarly efforts of Dorothy Green, whose two great volumes – *Ulysses Bound: Henry Handel Richardson and her Fiction* (Canberra, 1973) and its heavily revised new edition, *Henry Handel Richardson and her Fiction* (Sydney, 1986) – left little room for differing views.

It is with intense satisfaction and indeed with a sense of relief that HHR scholars in Europe and Australia have welcomed the few but substantial recent publications that shed new light

on the artistic mind of this important Australian writer. These have become possible after the opening of the HHR papers in the National Library of Australia in Canberra and the Mitchell Library in Sydney in 1996, fifty years after her death. The first such publication was the Academy Edition of *Maurice Guest*, edited by Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele (St. Lucia, 1998). Now the same editors have managed the enormous task of publishing HHR's letters, which means about 1500 letters to and from HHR, of which about a thousand are in her own hand, constituting an intellectual exchange between Australia, England, Continental Europe and the USA from 1874 to 1946. The result is very impressive: three bulky but beautifully presented volumes of HHR's correspondence, along with a wealth of further information (in notes, in three introductions, in tables of chronology, in photographs and in the entire scholarly apparatus).

Volume One contains the correspondence dating from HHR's childhood to the time of the Great War (1874 to 1915) and illustrates the development of an Australian girl into a translator and an established author. The most interesting correspondence of this period is that between HHR and Paul Solanges, the French translator of *Maurice Guest*, a rich exchange of views and ideas between the author and a sympathetic, admiring but critically alert French intellectual living on the Italian Riviera who never knew that she was a woman. Solanges wrote in French and she replied in English. This edition has an annotated English translation preceding each of his letters. The correspondence with Solanges began in 1910 when he offered to translate her novel and ended with his death in 1914. During their exchange they discuss mainly matters of literature, ancient and modern, and the views on Nietzsche and contemporary writing of the period are indicative of HHR's literary orientation. Naturally, they exchange a wealth of observations on contemporary world affairs and, of course, on particular features and details of *Maurice Guest*. As an example, here is what Solanges finds difficult to handle in HHR's description of the performing style of the gifted young musician called Schilsky (in chapter 14, part 1 of the novel):

Une observation. Il m'est impossible de traduire *slitheriness* (à propos de la façon dont Schilsky joue son poème symphonique). Je vous propose de me servir du mot *technique* pour l'opération qui consiste à exécuter au piano une *partition orchestre*. Et alors je dirais, non pas *synthèse* (voyez ma note) mais comme suit: «Il arrivait pourtant à se rendre maître de parties injouables au moyen de ces *réductions* synthétiques et géniales dont les compositeurs ont le privilège.» (Letter 298, 26 August 1913, *Letters*, Vol. I, 533)

This gives a taste of the detailed questions negotiated in the correspondence. During the four years, eventually, HHR and Solanges became quite close friends, although she never told him the truth about herself. Only a few weeks before his death she even sent him a portrait of Goethe and mentioned that it was said of herself that she somewhat resembled the great German.

The second correspondence of importance, that between HHR and her best school-friend Mary Kernot of Melbourne, lasted from 1911 to HHR's death in 1946, and it stretches over all three volumes of the present edition.

Volume Two covers the years from 1917 to 1933. This is the period in HHR's life which was dominated by her creation of her masterpiece, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. It is a section of the active life of a mature woman, at the beginning of which her fame as an author was yet very slight, at the end of which her established fame was blighted by the death of her

husband. During this period, HHR lived and worked mainly in London, and after her husband's death she had to leave London and start a new life in changed circumstances in the country. Her major correspondents during this period, apart from Mary Kernot, are the Irish writer Mary Frances McHugh (1900-80), Harry Price (a psychic researcher and book-collector), the literary scholar Edna Purdie (Professor Robertson's successor as Professor of German and co-editor, with Olga Roncoroni, of HHR's posthumously published works), the colourful and eccentric publisher and dentist Jacob Schwartz, and her friend and admirer Oliver Stonor. HHR was in personal contact with many of the leading minds in Australian letters of the time, such as Miles Franklin, Brian Penton, Norman Lindsay, P. R. Stephensen, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Nettie Palmer.

A few months after the publication of *Australia Felix*, HHR reports the book's critical reception to her friend Mary Kernot:

Mahony was published here at the end of August, & in spite of the war has managed to creep into a second Impression. More than that I can't hope for, & certainly don't expect. The reviews, considering that most of our young blood is out of England, were very fair; though the fact of the book appearing in two parts made some of the writers rather shakey as to what it was all about. But, so far, I have had my best success in America. There is a little group of people in New York who seem to believe in my work, & have been saying very nice things about it. (Letter 358, 27 January 1918, *Letters*, Vol. II, 9)

During the publication history of the novels of the Mahony Trilogy, Mary Kernot is invited by HHR to assist her in finding "foolish slips & blunders" (Letter 419, *Letters*, Vol. II, 84) in the text, i.e. inaccuracies or other small details which the writer may have overlooked and which might provoke silly reviews or even attacks later.

Mary Kernot is also her confidante in views on eminent people that HHR meets. As an example, here is what HHR tells her friend about meeting K. S. Prichard in 1933:

K. S. Prichard called on me the other day. I thought her a charming woman, & quite unspoiled. She is off to Russia just now, but I hope to see her again on her return. I thought I saw her books in her. (Letter 827, 23 July 1933, *Letters*, Vol. II, 467)

After her husband's death, HHR became a lonely woman leading an even more secluded life than before. Volume Three of the *Letters* covers this period, 1934 to 1946. She had become an old widow in a small Sussex village, where she lived until her death. In this period, though marked by the publication of *The Young Cosima* and *The End of a Childhood* (1934) as well as her work on other pieces, her life was overshadowed by the approaching Second World War, which she describes and comments in great detail to her friend Mary. Thus, her old school-friend proves to be her most constant and lasting friend through her entire life. Through the last phase of her life she was aided by her companion and secretary Olga Roncoroni, who wrote the last letters for her, which are also included in this edition. HHR's very last letter is to Mary, in which she thanks her friend for all she has done for her, and she reacts to Mary's report of an article in the *Melbourne Age*, which compares George Sand, George Eliot, the Brontës and HHR as pseudonymous women writers: "As if I wldn't be proud to be compared to G. S., G. E. [...]" (Letter 1473, 9 March 1946, *Letters*, Vol. III, 722).

The overall impression to be gained from this wealth of letters is one of a fulfilled and intellectually alert life devoted to literature. The edition under consideration here proves to

be an extremely useful and enlightening quarry for researchers and HHR admirers alike, and it allows further studies into autobiographical aspects of her work, into sources of her literary material, into her background and her views. Hardly any serious scholar researching and writing on HHR's work in future can afford to neglect this major piece of editing which offers such valuable evidence far beyond this eminent Australian author's published work, contributing a wealth of revealing information on the literary climate in the first half of the twentieth century.