

## A Note on Henry Handel Richardson

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### Australia versus Europe:

Henry Handel Richardson is an Australian writer who belongs to the period of the first flowering of the national literature during the years, 1880-1930. Although it sounds a too facile overestimation to claim that *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*,<sup>1)</sup> her greatest achievement, "is among the half dozen or so great novels of the 20th century,"<sup>2)</sup> she certainly is one of the first few writers of the emerging island continent who could legitimately attract critical attention outside the local scene. It must also be admitted that although the setting of the trilogy is in Australia and the local flavor certainly turned to good account, Richardson as a novelist does not belong so much to the then prevalent Australian literary climate as to the tradition of European fiction writing. She was born and educated in Australia, but at the age of seventeen went to Europe to study piano at the Leipzig Conservatorium. Here she met J. G. Robertson, who was later to become first professor of German at London University, and was married to him in 1895. For the rest of her life she lived mostly in Germany and London, to return to her "home" only once for two months in 1912. The beginning of her literary career was as a translator of the Danish naturalistic writer J. P. Jacobsen, whose *Niels Lyhne* she published under the English title *Siren Voices* in 1896. Jacobsen remained the first and probably the one strongest influence on the making of this novelist, initiating her (as she admits in her introduction to the book) into a "romanticism imbued with the scientific spirit, and essentially based on realism."<sup>3)</sup>

Such a background naturally provided Richardson with a motive to break off from an easy-going tendency of a native writer to trade on the "local color"; she was properly more interested in her personal sources of art, the world of her private, inner experiences. Chauvinistic critics may be doubtful of the relevance of much of her writing to the "tradition" of Australian literature—she being simply an expatriate. Expatriation, however, is often part of the price some writers have to pay in growing out of the local to the more universal, and in the case of Henry Handel Richardson too, her

international reputation would never have come without paying the price.

The naturalistic philosophy of fiction writing that she learned from Jacobsen and the contemporary European literary climate proved felicitous; it toned down her inveterately romantic temperament<sup>4)</sup> and gave an objective poise and accuracy to her description. Yet the innate temperament was never dead, of course, and while the theory of fiction provided her with an artistic detachment and a scientific grip on life, the natural gift for the romantic enabled her to render to extended narrative a feel of truth without becoming too pedestrian and prosaic.

And the Australian setting certainly lent her a hand in this respect; it gave the book a romantic coloring of a distant, unknown land. But it also gave a larger locale for the author's imagination to work on the fate of the protagonist. Mahony, whom Richardson modelled on her father, is a man of restless soul. As the three full volumes of narration show, to him there is no "home" in the whole world; no matter where he goes, he finds himself frustrated and dissatisfied. Australia was no exception; it was another "promised land", among many, of his dream. Incurable visionary that he is, he comes to Australia in hopes of finding it a happy land (*Australia "Felix"*), and is soon disillusioned. Then he makes efforts to return to and settle down in England twice, but finds the way home leading only to the realization of homelessness (*The Way Home*). Disenchantment awaits him everywhere. He comes back to Australia again - for no better reason than that of mere restlessness, it appears, - finds a momentary happiness in his new abode, Ultima Thule (the highest point attainable?), but it presently turns out to be the end of his journey (*Ultima Thule*) - his journey to mental disintegration and death. In thus describing the life of a man with what we would now term "existential restlessness,"<sup>5)</sup> Richardson incorporated her Australian experiences into the novelistic substance to the best purpose. Without the Australian background, the trilogy would not have achieved the sweep, depth and persuasiveness that it has.

Thus the book has grown to be something more than a mere lengthy family saga in an unfamiliar continent at the time of the gold rush; it should be legitimately famous for the well-balanced critique of the provincialism of the Australian society (as typically revealed in the first two volumes) as well as for the novelist's insight into the fate of man and skill in creating a monumental figure of tragic proportions. In the following pages, I will look exclusively into some specific aspects of Richardson's artistic prowess leading to the special success of the last volume of the memorable trilogy.

***Ultima Thule:***

As is generally agreed, there is no doubt that, of the three books that recount the fortunes of the Mahonys, the last one, *Ultima Thule*, is the most successful. There is also no doubt that the success ultimately is the success of the sureness of the way Henry Handel Richardson looks at things, the reality of life and the reality of the human mind. Compared with the preceding two volumes, *Ultima Thule* definitely has the truer ring of authentic realism that we find only in a great novel.

Technically speaking, the success depends largely on the introduction of Cuffy into the story as a major character, a second Richard Mahony, as it were, who replaces the disintegrating father, inheriting his artistic temperament and having a completely different kind of grip on life from the more or less practically oriented Mary Mahony. With the birth (at the end of the second part of *The Way Home*) of Cuthert Hamilton Townshend-Mahony, and definitely in the last book of the trilogy, the narrative begins to take on a new perspective, and an increasingly important role is given to the sensitive boy as the story rushes to its catastrophe. It is apparent that the author consciously utilizes this character as a very important point of view, a very effective sentient center through which to look at the 'fitful fever' of a life that constitutes the most tragic account of this remarkable trilogy.

The innocence of a boy, indeed, is the one characteristic that cannot be found either in Richard or in Mary, since they are grown-ups with more or less biased ways of thinking. Thus the device of a naive character thrown into the hectic turmoil of this story of disintegration results in something that is absent from the preceding two parts; to a great extent, it objectifies and vivifies the narration which would otherwise be too subjective and emotional, and very often it produces an ironic effect which is indispensable to a novel that aims at a true account of complex realities.

One of the most notable examples of objectification is found in the many scenes of falling out between Richard and Mary. We can see how technically valid Cuffy's point of view is when we read a passage like the following:

And then Mamma came marching in herself, and was furious. "And when I've sent out specially to get it! I never heard such nonsense. Going the whole day without food just to spite me!"

She was quite close up to Papa when she talked this; and they were both dreadfully angry; and then... then Cuffy *distinkly* saw Papa's foot fly out and hit her... on her knee. And she said: "*Ooh!*" and stooped down and put her hand to it, and looked at him, oh! so fierce...but she didn't say any more, not a word (and he knew it was because he was there), but turned her back and walked out of the room and slammed the door. And he felt frightened, and went away, too; but not before he'd seen Papa put his face in his hands, just as if he was going to cry.<sup>6)</sup>

Henry Handel Richardson certainly needed the boy's point of view in order to unflinchingly describe this painfully realistic episode, and the irony of the whole scene becomes apparent when we read the immediately following paragraph:

They kept a goat now: it was chained up in the back yard, to eat the grass and things, which would have smothered them if it hand't. Well, he went out to the goat—it was tied up and couldn't run away—and kicked it. It maa-ed and tore round like mad; but he just didn't care; he kicked again. Till Luce came out and saw him and made awful eyes, and said: "Oh, *Cuffy!* Oh, poor little Nanny! Oh, you bad, wicked boy! I'll go wight in and tell Mamma what you're doin'!"

But Mamma could not be got at. She was in the bedroom with the door locked; and she wouldn't come out, though you called and called, and rattled the handle. (But she wasn't dead, 'cos you could hear them talkin'.)<sup>7)</sup>

Behind the irony of a small episode like this, we do not fail to detect that there is a tragic sense of life that controls the thematic direction of the whole story, that it is a terrible story told with an objective detachment rarely to be met with. Other examples of this kind of the accuracy of description with objectifying effect are found throughout the story, especially in such places as the death of Mahony and the closing part of the narrative that follows it, the episode of Richard's return home after he failed to commit suicide, the scene that recounts the sickness and death of Lallie, the episode of the love affair between Mr. Angus and Aunt Emily, etc.

*Ultima Thule*, the volume leading to the *denouement* of the novel, has several good instances of dramatic or tragic ironies effectively executed. For example, Richard, who once strongly refused to take in boarders, is forced by increasing poverty to appeal to Mary to take in a boarder or two. That episode of Richard beating a horse, driven by madness, is another example of a dramatic irony since he once asked a man not to beat the animal so cruelly and scolded Cuffy for beating his rocking-horse. There is also a tragic irony in the catastrophic ending itself when we recall Richard saying to the pessimistic chemist, Mr. Tangye: "It's sheer folly to talk about what life makes of us. Life is not an active force; cannot mould or mar our fates. No, it's we who make what we will, of life."<sup>8)</sup>

However, whereas this kind of irony can often be too overt and even too trite as a novelistic device, we find a different, more subtle kind of irony effectively working in the narrative substance. It results from the very innocence and naiveté of the eye with which Cuffy looks at situations. Cuffy, through his invincible innocence of a child, puts an interpretation on affairs that inevitably takes on an ironic turn because we, knowing the limitation of Cuffy's childish understanding, interpret it differently.

The best example of this kind of ironic description is seen in the episode in which Papa, "the Dumplings," and Cuffy go out for a walk soon after the family arrives at the up-country town of Barambogie. In the following passage, the boy's innocent observation reveals with a telling irony the hypocrisy latent in the relationship of the adults.

On the way home they went along a street, where there were lots of little shops, with verandahs. Men were leaning against the verandah posts, smoking and spitting; and other men came to the doors and stared, as they went by. Papa was polite to them, and said "Good morning!" to everybody, with a little bow, and whether they did or not. And sometimes he said as well: "Yes, these are my youngsters! Don't you think I've reason to be proud of them?"... and as often as this happened, Cuffy felt uncomfortable. For these weren't the sort of men you stopped and talked to: you just said good morning, and went home. Besides, they didn't seem as if they *wanted* to speak to you. They didn't take their pipes out; and some of them looked as if they thought Papa was funny... or silly. Two winked at each other when they thought he wasn't looking - made eyes like Cook and Eliza used to do.<sup>9</sup>

Here is a slice of life that in its stripped bareness and irony testifies to a competent novelist in the realistic tradition.

Cuffy's presence can even produce a weird humor in the following example where the puzzled boy asks his "cranky" father, "What's Latin?"

"Latin is one of the dead languages."

"How can it... be dead? It isn't a... a man."

"Things perish, too, child. A language dies when it is no longer in common use; when it ceases to be a means of communication between living people."

This was too much for Cuffy. He struggled with the idea for a moment, then gave it up,...

"Convention demanded it... convention and tradition... the slavish tradition of a country that has always rated the dead lion higher than the live dog. And thralls to this notion were those in whose hand at that time lay the training of the young. The torturing rather! A lifetime lies between, but I can still feel something of the misery, the hopelessness, the inability to understand what was required of you, the dread of what awaited you, was your task ill done or left undone. A forlorn and frightened child... with no one to turn to, for help, for advice. That most sensitive, most delicate of instruments—the mind of a little child! Small wonder that I vowed to myself, if ever I had children of my own... to let the young brain lie fallow... not so much the alphabet... the A B C."—Thus, forgetful of his little hearer, Mahony rambled on.<sup>10</sup>

Now well advanced in his mental dislocation, Richard is not even aware that he has to choose his words and phrases so that they are understandable to Cuffy, and his speech with its hyperbole and broken utterances produces an effect of strange humour which is at the same time very touching in its tragic implication.

One of the thematically significant conflicts of this novel<sup>11</sup> is that Mary, with all her affection toward Richard, does not understand her husband.

In *Ultima Thule*, a parallel relationship is made clear between Mary and Cuffy. The mother is grossly impervious to the niceties of the child's temperament. In an episode like the following, we see the success of the author's realistic insight in throwing light on the relationship between mother and child, on the fated incompatibility of the romantic temperament with the practically-minded which constitutes the major part of the author's thematic concern in this trilogy. Cuffy wanted to give Mamma "the very nicest things he had:

...the two great big shells he had found all by himself, which he kept hidden in a cave, so that Luce shouldn't touch them unless he said so. He'd give them to Mamma, and she'd like them so much that she'd want to stop here, and never go home—oh, well! not for a long, long time. —Off he raced, shuffling his bare feet through the hot, dry, shifty sand.

But it was no good: she didn't care. Though he made her shut her eyes tight and promise not to look, while he opened her hand and squeezed the shell into it, and shut it again, like you did with big surprises. She just said: "What's this? Your pretty shells? My dear, what should I do with them? No, no! ...you keep them for your self!"—and all the while she wasn't *really* thinking what she said. And he couldn't even tell her why, for now Aunt Tilly shouted that the telegram-boy was coming at last; and Mamma just pushed the shells back and ran out into the road, and tore open the telegram like anything, and smiled and waved it at Aunt Tilly, and they both laughed and talked and wiped their eyes.<sup>12)</sup>

So far I have tried to point out some of the prominent aspects of the use of Cuffy and his point of view in this novel. It must not be forgotten, however, that these devices are merely a part of the artistic preoccupations that Henry Handel Richardson had in mind when she was writing this novel. For example, she uses many other points of view (including Richard's and Mary's points of view that are most extensively found) as freely and as effectively as she uses that of Cuffy. It would probably be truer to say that with a less technically oriented writer like Henry Handel Richardson, all that matters is the sureness of the way she looks at life. I do not believe in the kind of critical sophistication that says technique is everything. No matter whose point of view the novelist uses in a novel, it is after all the writer himself who puts down the observations of the character whose point of view he uses at the moment. In a novel like *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* that belongs to the tradition of less sophisticated novel writing, the ultimate success seems to me to come from the sureness of the author's grip on life and the extent to which he can let his "mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts."

After all, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is a terrible story. It is not merely a story about money, nor merely a story of geographical disorientation. It is something more than these, something even more than a family

saga or a fictional biography. One critic maintains that it is a story of a character degenerating into insanity and idiocy as the result of purely physical decay of tissues and that therefore it is pathetic, but not tragic.<sup>13)</sup> A careful reader, however, would not overlook the struggle and suffering, both inner and outer, of the protagonist as a great factor in his mental disintegration. Henry Handel Richardson, it seems to me, probably had in mind the case of Schumann, together with the life of her father, in conceiving this tragic character. Schumann, like Richard Mahony, suffered from nervous disorder, failed to commit suicide and was finally confined in an insane asylum (Incidentally Clara, like Polly, was sixteen when Schumann fell in love with her). In an episode of the warm spiritual rapport between the Baron and Cuffy, the author refers to the tragic life of the musician who put into music "the thousand feelings awoken in him by this emptiness and space and desolation," and has this to say:

... what you have flowed tears for, my child, that were the sufferings of a so unhappy man—the fears that are coming by night to devour the peace—oh, I will not say them to one so tender! ... but these, so great were they, so unhappy he, that at the last his brain has burst" (There! he *knew* he had been going to burst!) "and he have (sic) become mad. But then, see, at once I have given you the consolation... Our dear madman he has that made, too. His name was Schumann. Mark that, my little one... mark it well!"  
 "Shooh man.—What's mad?"<sup>14)</sup>

In fact, the trilogy reads like listening to a piece of great music, and the last volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* reminds me especially of the last movement, *Adagio lamentoso*, of Tchaikowsky's sixth symphony, where the slow descent into darkness and despair is as overwhelmingly suffocating as the catastrophe of the fortunes of the Mahonys.

And such fortunes are universal and timeless. Henry Handel Richardson's intention to that effect is also undoubted. A passage from *Religio Medici*, which she quoted as a motto for the first volume of the trilogy, clearly shows the novelist's overall ambition.

"Every man is not only himself;  
 ... men are lived over again; the  
 world is now as it was in ages past;  
 there was none then, but there hath  
 been some one since, that parallels  
 him, and is, as it were, his revived  
 self."

Richard Mahony is her father, herself as well as part of everyone of us.

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\*\*\* The original paper was presented to Dr. Day in his seminar in Australian literature at the University of Hawaii in the spring of 1967. The present one has been partly revised and enlarged.

**Footnotes:**

- 1 The trilogy was first published separately: Volume I, *Australia Felix* in 1917, Volume II, *The Way Home* in 1925 and the last volume, *Ultima Thule* in 1929.
- 2 See Norman Bartlett, "The Australian Novel Today" in *The Rising Generation*, Feb. 1967.
- 3 Quoted in Geoffrey Dutton's *The Literature of Australia*, p. 320.
- 4 In *The Young Cosima* (1934), Richardson depicted Wagner as incorrigible Romanticist, suffering from a force outside himself. Apparently Richardson regarded the Nietzschean Übermensch as one "absolved from the duties and responsibilities of ordinary life, and from the moral censure of ordinary human beings." See Dutton, p. 329.
- 5 In "D. H. Lawrence, Australia and *Kangaroo*," I dealt with the similar problem as manifest in Lawrence's Australian experiences. See "Bulletin of the Kyushu Institute of Technology" No. 20, 1972.
- 6 Henry Handel Richardson, *Ultima Thule* (The Norton Library), p. 221.
- 7 Richardson, *Ultima Thule*, p. 221.
- 8 Henry Handel Richardson, *Australia Felix* (The Norton Library), p. 357.
- 9 Richardson, *Ultima Thule*, pp. 63-64.
- 10 *ibid.* p. 172.
- 11 Richardson once said, "I never cease to believe that character-drawing is its (i. e. the novel's) main end and object, the conflict of personalities drama." See Dutton, p. 325.
- 12 *ibid.* p. 145.
- 13 See Cecil Hadgraft, *Australian Literature: A Critical Account to 1955*. (London, 1960), p. 155.
- 14 Richardson, *Ultima Thule*, p. 94.

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