

Topic Page: [Richardson, Henry Handel \(1870 - 1946\)](#)

Definition: **Richardson, Henry Handel** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Australian novelist. She was the first Australian writer to win a reputation abroad. Her works include *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910), based on her schooldays and filmed in 1977. She left Australia when only 18.

Richardson was born in Melbourne. In 1888 she went to study piano in Leipzig, Germany, and her first novel, *Maurice Guest* (1908) is based on these years. The trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, published as *Australia Felix* (1917), *The Way Home* (1925), and *Ultima Thule* (1929), traces the career of a gold-rush migrant from the early 1850s to the mid-1870s and draws heavily on the life of her father.

Summary Article: **Richardson, Henry Handel**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson) wrote her novels, short stories, and music as an Australian expatriate, and although the style of her fiction responds to and belongs with the European tradition of literary realism (Flaubert, Zola, Stendhal), most of her subjects are not European. Her pseudonym and her residence in Germany and England occluded her identity and delayed her recognition in Australian literature: she was hardly known in her own country until the international success of *Ultima Thule* in 1929, which won her the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal.

She was born on January 3, 1870 at Blanche Terrace in what is now East Melbourne, the first of two daughters of Mary Bailey and Walter Lindesay Richardson, an Edinburgh-trained doctor drawn to emigration by news of the 1851 gold rush in Ballarat. Ethel and her sister Ada Lillian (Lil) received the best available education at the Presbyterian Ladies' College, where Ethel excelled academically in English, history, and music. Walter's death in 1879 prompted Mary to take her daughters to Germany to pursue their musical education, leaving Melbourne on August 3, 1888. Just as her second novel (*The Getting of Wisdom*, 1910) is based on her own adolescence in Victorian Melbourne, so her first novel (*Maurice Guest*, 1908) recasts her adult experience at the Leipzig Conservatorium for Music, where she studied piano. *Maurice Guest* analyzes the rapacious nature of musical genius, the tragedy of mediocrity, and a destructive eroticism in the international student community in Leipzig. Sexual preferences are discussed with an unusual frankness.

In Dublin in December 1895, she married John George Robertson, a science graduate from Glasgow and a doctoral student of European literature. They shared interests in Wagner, Nietzsche, Georg Brandes, and Ibsen, and moved to England when Robertson was appointed professor of German and Scandinavian studies at London University. They visited Australia from August to November 1912, but otherwise England remained their home until Richardson (widowed in 1933) died in 1946.

Richardson's male pseudonym was a deliberate attempt to escape the public eye and the dismissive category "woman novelist." Her secretary, companion, and executrix Olga Roncoroni always called her "Henry," and although Richardson insisted on rigorously separating her private and public lives, her success as a writer made public appearances both undesirable and unavoidable. Each of her novels except the last is either set in Australia or has an Australian heroine. Her fiction is largely but not exclusively based on her own life or on the documented lives of others. Her great and distinctive

achievement is the epic trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1917, 1925, 1929), which presents the founding of the colony of Victoria – and to a lesser extent the founding of a nation – through a single family history and using her parents' letters. Richardson's characteristic tone is autumnal, ironic if not tragic, and her original intention had been to add a fourth volume, taking the *Fortunes* up to the Australian role in the Gallipoli disaster during World War I.

The Getting of Wisdom was her favorite work, and it remains her best-known novel. It has been a fixture in the Australian literary canon since the 1960s, when it was adopted as a high school text, but without its Nietzsche epigraphs, which hinted that this was *not* intended as a novel for or about children but an ironic autobiographical critique, including the intense experience of homosexual attraction. Her short stories (notably “The Bathe,” “Two Hanged Women,” and “The Wrong Turning”) also deal with states of troubling sexual self-consciousness and the pains of transition and transgression.

Her last and least popular novel, *The Young Cosima*, was published in 1939, just before the outbreak of war. Again, the bedrock of the fiction is documentary fact, but this time the historian outweighs the novelist's interest in a woman's quest for self-realization. It turns Du Moulin Eckart's 1929 hagiography of Cosima Liszt-Wagner into a complex study of a woman moving from bourgeois duty and marital self-sacrifice to the service of a ruthless but also transcendent genius, Richard Wagner.

Richardson has no romantic illusions, but a steely belief in impermanence and a troubled conviction that human destiny is a compound of self-delusion and idealism. Her husband believed that the character of Richard Mahony represented its author's own yearning restlessness, which may also be glimpsed in her songs. She read Freud's works in Germany long before their translation into English, and it is not surprising that her novels are each marked by an endless questioning of human desire.

SEE ALSO: Australian Fiction (WF); Historical Fiction (WF); Migration, Diaspora, and Exile in Fiction (WF); Queer/Alternative Sexualities in Fiction (WF)

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