

**Bruce Steele. *Walter Lindesay Richardson MD: A Victorian Seeker.***

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This new biography of Walter Lindesay Richardson is one of the products, perhaps the final one, of the many years of research carried out at Monash University on the life and works of his daughter, Henry Handel Richardson (HHR), the largest scholarly project yet undertaken on any Australian author. In particular, it draws heavily on the letters written by Walter Richardson and other family members, as published in Meg Probyn's *Marriage Lines: The Richardson Family Letters 1854-1877* (2000), as well as on Dr Richardson's own publications on medical matters and on spiritualism.

As HHR herself eventually admitted in *Myself When Young* (1948), in broad outline the life of the eponymous hero of her best-known work *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930) paralleled that of her father. Like Mahony, Dr Richardson came to Victoria in the 1850s after the discovery of gold, was a storekeeper, then a doctor at Ballarat, married a younger woman called Mary and after some successful years in Victoria returned to England. After the failure of a couple of attempts at medical practice there, he came back to Australia where his investments in mining companies allowed him to retire in Melbourne and devote himself to intellectual pursuits, especially spiritualism. During this time, two daughters were finally added to the family, which in 1873 once again set sail for England. While there, Dr Richardson received bad news about his investments and hurried back to Melbourne. His attempts to resume medical practice there, and later at Chiltern and Geelong, were increasingly unsuccessful, in large part because of his deteriorating health. In 1878 he was admitted to an asylum and Mary was forced to train as a postmistress to support the family. He was later sent home and died at Koroit in 1879.

In the Preface to his biography, Bruce Steele examines earlier attempts to disentangle the facts of Walter Richardson's life from HHR's fictional recreation of it. In 1970, Ken Stewart published an essay based on his research into Melbourne cultural life of a century earlier, which revealed many differences in the character and behaviour of the real and fictional doctors. Steele, however, is particularly concerned to challenge the sensational diagnosis made at much the same time by two experts in mental health, Alan Stoller and R H Emmerson, who claimed that Dr Richardson's decline and death was the result of tertiary

syphilis. This led to some critical discussion as to whether *The Fortunes* could properly be considered a tragedy, if the protagonist's fatal flaw was not one of character but of physiology. As Steele points out, even if a syphilis infection was the reason for Dr Richardson's illness, something that can now not be confirmed, there is no evidence that HHR knew of this, or that she intended Mahony's decline to be the result of a specific medical condition. He also agrees with the comment made by HHR's husband, Professor George Robertson, 'that, in my imaginary portrait of Richard Mahony, I had drawn no other than my own' (xiii).

In retelling Walter Richardson's life, then, Bruce Steele relies on the factual records of it, largely ignoring how this life was later transmuted into fiction. Walter received an excellent medical education at Edinburgh, where he read widely, keeping up with the latest advances in medicine, science and other fields. As anyone who has read his letters and essays recognises, he was also, in Steele's words, 'a writer of force and distinction' (xvii). During his years in practice at Ballarat in the 1850s and 60s he published eight articles in the *Australian Medical Journal*, mainly on aspects of midwifery, as well as a number of letters in Melbourne and Ballarat newspapers. On his first visit to England, Walter wrote five 'Letters from Home' for the *Australian Medical Journal*, amounting in total to over 20,000 words. As a gentleman of leisure in Melbourne in the early 1870s he was a frequent contributor to the new spiritualist journal, *Harbinger of Light*, also sending the journal 'Letters from London' and monthly 'News of Spiritualism from England' during his visit there from 1873-74. While in London he also gave an address on 'Spiritualism in Australia' that praised 'your antipodes' for adopting advancements such as the eight-hour day and manhood suffrage, claiming it to be a 'land where every honest and capable man can really sit under his own vine and fig-tree' (108). This version of Australia as 'the working-man's paradise' is, of course, a far cry from Mahony's as presented in *The Fortunes*.

In the trilogy, too, Mahony's growing interest in spiritualism tends to be viewed negatively, especially by his more pragmatic wife Mary, as part of his failure to 'never be equal' to life in Australia. By placing the development of spiritualism in its historical context of Darwinism and critical analysis of the Bible, however, Steele shows Walter's involvement to be an extension of his early and continuing interest in progressive social, cultural and scientific advances. Unlike Mahony, who becomes a member of the conservative Melbourne Club during his time of wealth, Richardson joined the more bohemian Yorick Club. Unlike

Mahony, he enjoyed a lively social life, with a wide network of family and friends. And as their letters demonstrate, Walter and Mary Richardson had a passionate sexual relationship, both writing of their physical longing for each other during periods of separation. As I have noted elsewhere, HHR never hints at any of this in relation to the Mahonys; Richard initially views Mary as his 'child-wife', with their relationship becoming reversed during his illness when he becomes child to her mother.

While Walter Richardson's life was also cut short by a terrible illness, for much of the time it was one of happiness and success. Steele begins his conclusion with Dr Richardson's obituary from the *Australian Medical Journal*, which describes him as 'unusually gifted', 'a fluent and impressive speaker', a person of 'intelligence and bonhomie' whose 'literary qualifications were greatly above the average' (141). The justice of this has been well demonstrated in the chapters that have gone before, which add to our knowledge and understanding of life in nineteenth-century Australia, as well as showing conclusively that HHR invented much more than has sometimes been claimed. This can even be seen in the final stages of Mahony's life, where HHR was able to draw on her memories of her father, and where the real and the fictional come most closely together. As Bruce Steele demonstrates, there is no evidence that Walter Richardson was treated badly at Yarra Bend asylum, or that Mary had to personally intervene to have him released into her care, since sending patients home to die was a common practice at the time.

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