

FOREWORD

M*aurice Guest* has been a long time in the shadows awaiting rediscovery. Published in 1908, this novel was quite well known in its day, but several things militated against it afterwards. Its realism, so strikingly in the grand manner, was virtually bound to be ground down by the modernism of a James Joyce or a Virginia Woolf coming into fashion. The novel's setting of Leipzig was also overtaken by events, as Germany turned from being the picturesque and cultured country that once attracted widespread admiration into what looked like an ever-renewable source of fear, hatred and war. Moreover, the author made her way in the literary world to become a friend of H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw and the Powys brothers, but all the same she was altogether too retiring, too serious, to be any good at self-promotion.

Born Dorothy Richardson in 1870, she had grown up in Australia, never lost the echo of an accent and referred to herself as a colonial. She is one of the earliest and foremost writers to qualify as Australian and international. Her collected letters, published in Australia, reveal how much she owed to the country of her birth. A suffragette in spirit if not in act, she nevertheless seems to have adopted her masculine pseudonym more out of whim than any wish to make some sort of ideological statement, and the assumed identity of Henry Handel Richardson tended further to push aside her personality. To those who knew her or wrote memoirs of her she was either HHR or Ettie.

Victorian-style fate stamped her childhood. Her father, a doctor, became ill, was declared mentally unsound and soon died, 'a gentle, broken creature,' as HHR put it in a passage of autobiographical writing. Reduced to genteel poverty, Mother proved devoted and capable, educating HHR and her younger sister Lil in one of the best schools in Melbourne. Both girls were recognised early as musical prodigies, HHR a pianist and Lil a violinist. The intention was to train them to earn their living as musicians, and to that end Mother took her daughters to Leipzig and enrolled them as music students, transferring family life to lodgings in the city.

The years from 1889 to 1892 that HHR spent in Leipzig were, she recorded, 'the happiest I had yet known' and during that time 'I became a person in my own right.' Mother was house-keeper and chaperone in a context where young women wore buttoned gloves and hats with veils, and to walk in the woods with a young man was risqué. American

and British, often Scottish, students provided a full social life, and in the course of it HHR was to meet George Robertson, a future professor of German literature. Their engagement and ultimate marriage put paid to HHR's projected musical career. This novel is close to HHR's lived experience, and part of its strength derives from regret that she never became the professional pianist and perhaps the composer she might have been.

Leipzig was then the capital of music in Europe. Well-known professors held classes at the famous Conservatorium, and regular concerts at the Gewandhaus were either given by virtuosi of the day or were the critical testing ground of up and coming students. They were all geniuses together. The way that HHR captures the competitive striving of teachers and pupils to reach the highest possible standards of excellence remains as fresh as ever.

Like all the other music students, Maurice Guest arrives in Leipzig full of hope, in his case glad to be escaping from a stifling background in England. For a good many chapters it is impossible to be sure quite which direction the novel is taking: maybe this will be the account of a young man with courage and talent enough to fight through to a happy ending. Slowly, as a result of very skilled and carefully paced story-telling, we are led to suspect that Maurice isn't one of the geniuses after all. And the proof of this is that his love for Louise comes to matter more to him than music and his career. Idolising her, he loses touch with his future, with reality. The two of them go dancing or skating, they run away to a pension as though on a honeymoon, but these brilliantly vivid scenes serve only to deceive Maurice about what for Louise was never going to be more than a passing affair.

The reader is made aware of the dangers of unequal relationships, involving possessiveness, jealousy, cynical and mercenary motives, spitefulness, the impulse to humiliate and be master, to do violence to the loved one or the self when unable to have one's way. It is remarkable that someone with suffragette and feminist sympathies like HHR should portray a woman as cruel as Louise - but then it takes the weakness of Maurice to complete the tragedy. HHR, we can at last recognise, had special and profound insight into the human heart in all its emotional complexity, and this novel, with the spotlight now on it, stands as her greatest achievement.

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