



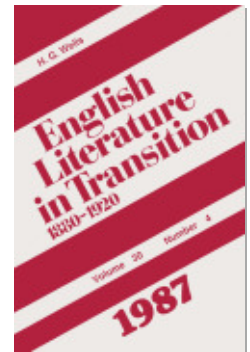
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Henry Handel Richardson

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Loizeaux's method is to analyze theory first and practice after and in a study where the chronology is refined this could be dangerous. The tentative or experimental tends to be subdued though it may be conceded that the continuity of Yeats's general ideas is a more important element in his career. Finally, we may return to the illustrations. It is sad that in so excellent a book these should be so bad: for the most part dark and blurred. In the case of "Lapis Lazuli" where reading of small details in the art object is crucial, it is disastrous.

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HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON

Karen McLeod. *Henry Handel Richardson: A Critical Study*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1985. \$44.50

Karen McLeod's study is, by her admission, polemical. She wants to convince us that the author of *Maurice Guest* (1908), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910), and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* (1930) is "among the handful of great writers of this century" (96) and a novelist of classic proportions whose work "deserves to be included as a matter of course in any discussion of the fiction of the period" (242). She ranks Henry Handel Richardson above Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett and asserts that Richardson's "best work is better than either" (242). These are strong assertions about a writer who, despite recent Virago and Penguin reissues of her works, is still little known to English and American audiences. But McLeod tackles this ambitious task with confidence and serious intent. She firmly believes "we ought to rejoice in being able to claim such a fine and central writer as part of our heritage" (x).

Henry Handel Richardson (pseudonym for Ethel Florence Richardson Robertson) is already considered a major novelist in Australia. Her works, particularly *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, have received serious and respectful attention by Australian scholars, Dorothy Green's impressive study *Ulysses Bound* (1973) being the most influential, but McLeod wants to bring Richardson to the attention of a larger audience.

The book is not merely polemic. She articulates two other purposes: "to write a critical study of a novelist, and to define her in her cultural setting and speculate about its relationship to English literary tradition" (x). Her chapter divisions reflect these latter goals. The opening biographical chapter is important, for Richardson did draw on family history and childhood experiences in Australia when plotting her novels. Of more interest, however, is the one tracing her intellectual development after moving to Germany. A music student in Leipzig during the 1890s, Richardson was exposed to intellectual movements which affected her permanently. McLeod first describes the stimulating musical world of Leipzig, with its Wagnerian cult and youthful spirit, and

then traces Richardson's reading in Nietzsche, Jacobsen, Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky, and Bjornson. According to McLeod, these influences, particularly that of Nietzsche, pervade Richardson's works and make her more European than English. With this intellectual framework clarified, McLeod dedicates the bulk of her study to analyses of Richardson's novels, four chapters to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, and one each to *Maurice Guest*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, and *The Young Cosima*. One chapter is dedicated to her short stories, but Richardson excelled as a novelist, not as a writer of short fiction; thus, the chapter exists pro forma, simply to insure a comprehensive treatment of Richardson's canon.

In all the novels except *The Young Cosima*, an admitted failure, McLeod sees originality and greatness. In *Maurice Guest*, which is a disturbingly intense, dark story of an English music student caught in an obsessive love affair which eventually leads him to suicide, McLeod sees Maurice as the embodiment of the moral and psychological speculations resulting from Richardson's reading in Nietzsche and Jacobsen. She views Richardson's analysis of the destructive relationship between Maurice and Louise as relentless and "extraordinary" and maintains "it is difficult to think of anything comparable in our literature" (56). In her discussion of *The Getting of Wisdom*, which she thinks "hovers between being a minor tour-de-force and a minor masterpiece," McLeod emphasizes the philosophical underpinnings which distinguish it from other chronicles of a school girl's maturation. Laura faces major moral questions, rejects the accepted stock answers and emerges as a strong young woman, a failure perhaps by conventional moral standards, but independent and vital. An analysis of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, the trilogy published over a period of twelve years (which fact McLeod believes partially accounts for its lack of immediate recognition as a unified masterpiece), occupies over a third of the book. The realistic elements of this novel have brought it both censure and praise. The picture of the early Australian colonists is indeed accurately presented, and McLeod holds that realism up as a positive feature but contends that Richardson's genius is in character delineation. She says, "As a writer on marriage between a husband and wife of similar stature but distinct personalities, she has few equals. It is her particular triumph that she enables us to understand with such vivid sympathy the experience of being Richard and the experience of being Mary" (142). Thus, in each very different novel, McLeod sees creative genius.

In her final chapters McLeod strongly argues for a reassessment of Richardson's overall achievement and place on the literary map, and she is convincing. By demonstrating the philosophical depth of Richardson's novels, the evocative power of her characterizations, and the psychological realism of her presentation, she proves that Richardson deserves a higher place in the literary canon. But "higher" is the proper term, not "highest." McLeod's claims are often hyperbolic. She passes over Richardson's weaknesses too easily.

Admittedly, characterization is Richardson's strongest point, but McLeod would convince us that the characters have an identity and volition somehow independent of the author. She repeatedly praises the characters' autonomy and "openness" and holds that Richardson's "characters make their own choices and thereby shape the pattern of their subsequent choices" (215). What she means by "openness" is not immediately evident. If her point is that Richardson's narrative stance is experimental in some way, she needs to clarify that point. Her argument about the characters is also undercut by the effusive praise of the Cuffy sections of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*. Certainly, in filtering experience through a young child's perspective, Richardson attempts a difficult task, and she does admirably well. McLeod finds this narrative experiment "an astonishing achievement" (172), but these sections are decidedly awkward in spots and suffer from Richardson's lapses as a stylist, lapses which mar her works generally. McLeod concedes that Richardson is no master stylist. And perhaps, as McLeod contends, her facility with other languages, her wide reading of German and French authors, and her work as a translator do help account for her undistinguished style, but McLeod rather facetiously asserts that "she gets away with manner by the vitality of matter" (208). Matter can go only so far to recompense for manner, and some readers may find this very real weakness a serious obstacle to overcome in accepting Richardson as a writer of "classic stature."

McLeod's claims may sound hyperbolic, and she may not convince us that Richardson is better than Virginia Woolf, but if she can get us to read more of Richardson, she has accomplished an important goal in her study. And Richardson should be read. She presents realistic human reactions to death, suffering, sexual obsession, and moral bewilderment, and she has the power to make readers care intensely about her characters. The intensity and moving finality of *Maurice Guest* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* do merit more recognition than they have received in the past. But ultimately, of course, Karen McLeod cannot convince us of Richardson's merit—Richardson must.

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LANGUAGE AND DECADENCE

Linda Dowling. *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. \$29.50

Fin-de-siècle decadence has long been closely associated with a perversely artificial language, the "learned corruption" cited by Arthur Symons in an echo of Baudelaire's and Gautier's celebrations of the language of a decaying civilization. Stylistic qualities representing decay or disease appeared to many readers of the time naturally congruent with the perversity, love of artificiality, and fascination with sin by which decadent writing was also being widely defined. However, why there were so many competing styles among writers