Prologue

HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON is now one of Australia's best known writers, but the woman behind the pseudonym, Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson, remains shrouded in conjecture. Initially her novels received a mixed press, sold spasmodically, and by the Second World War were out of print. Since her death her reputation has firmed, with films and reprints bringing her fiction before a wider public. Yet many crucial issues bearing on her private life are still unresolved. Was she, as some have suggested, drawn to lesbianism, or at the least to bisexuality? Did she fear to contract congenital syphilis? What did she think of her wayward, iconoclastic father? What was her relationship with her radical, reformist sister Lil? What was her attitude to the woman's movement? The Munich accord? The questions are almost as endless as the later surmises. To this mystery she contributed in no small measure by her own decisions. By choosing to live permanently overseas from 1889, she distanced herself from her native land and likely chroniclers, and her reclusive English existence assured that she left few traces in London social life. Even her final literary testament, *Myself When Young*, begins with the words: 'It has never been my way to say much about my private life. Rightly or wrongly, I believed this only concerned myself'.[1] It breaks off, moreover, at the beginning of 1895, before she began prolonged creative writing or serious experimentations with the supernatural, and years before world events would force her to reappraise her feelings for the two countries which exercised the greatest influence on her: Australia and Germany.

This dearth of reliable information was fully intended. During her lifetime Richardson received many requests for biographical details and did little to fulfil them. Instead she jealously guarded both the secret of her

gender and details of her family life, while feeding her biographers, as Elizabeth Summons observed, 'what she thought was good for them and what she wanted the world to believe of her'.[2] This was done through occasional letters, then concertedly through an autobiography in which apparent frankness masks repeated manipulation of the facts. Readers, however, have been slow to recognise this. Standard accounts of her life follow it closely, paraphrasing Richardson's words and rarely questioning its accuracy. Certainly *Myself When Young* sheds valuable light on her existence and attitudes, but often its prime value is as a psychological document in which fantasies eclipse, or compulsions elide, verifiable actuality. And 'her fantasies', as Dorothy Green underscored, 'were always subject to control for a purpose'—though too often her putative purpose has been left unexamined.[3] Similarly, photographs of her offer few insights. Heavily lidded eyes lend her gaze a veiled quality, her studied poses conceal physical defects, such as an unsightly birthmark, and she was capable of sending an enthusiastic correspondent a reproduction of Goethe's bust in profile with the remark: 'it has always been said that the portrait … has a certain likeness to me'.[4] Yet the veil can be lifted, at least in part, and her autobiography interrogated and probed for hidden revelations.

Biography inevitably assumes a particular angle of vision, and this account of her life is no exception. It is haunted by two images. One is of the impressionable child in 'The Bathe', the tale which introduces her last major work, *Growing Pains: Sketches of Girlhood*. This story focuses on a crisis of self-identity, and a dawning, fearful realisation of the burden of gender which the female child is destined to assume. It opens with a naked prepubescent girl, frolicking in the shallows beyond the restricting shoreline. Observing her from the beach are two mature women. Enticed by her heedless pleasure as well as by the inviting natural scene, they decide to strip and join her. Layer upon layer of clothes is cast off to reveal tired, blotched, misshapen bodies marked by the trials of sexual maturity:

> Splay-legged they were, from the weight of these [physical] protuberances. Above their knees, garters had cut fierce red lines in the skin; their bodies were criss-crossed with red furrows, from the variety of strings and bones that had lashed them in. The calves of one showed purple-knotted with veins; across the other's abdomen ran a deep, longitudinal scar. One was patched with red hair, one with black.[5]

For the child it is a terrifying revelation. Before this, she has no more seen a naked female body than grasped what adulthood might mean for her.

Now she stares with 'horrid fascination' at 'something ugly'—socially and biologically inscribed females. Her concluding thoughts are at once comprehensible and mockingly impossible: 'Oh, never … never … no, not ever now did she want to grow up. *She* would always stop a little girl'.[6] The story is the climax of decades of engagement with women's experience, with suffragette ideology and with the dramas of heterosexuality which Richardson knew equally from literature and from life. The association of childhood with insecurity and rude awakenings had other roots. These stretched back to the author's own traumatic upbringing, when the sea was a source of refuge and joy, the land a site of harrowing insights into an adult world which, after promising nurturing protection, had shown a dark and shocking underside which the young girl never forgot.

The other seminal image is of the secluded work-space, the sound-proofed room of her own upon which she insisted. There, shielded from disturbances by closed doors and a well regulated household, Richardson sifted and reshaped the remembered past into the work for which she is justly famed. For the best part of forty years her mornings were devoted to writing, her afternoons to recreation. This rigidly maintained routine, however, was singularly poor in raw life experience. For this she had to reach back into the rich store gleaned during eleven crucial years spent on the Continent, and even earlier to the mixed blessing of a youth spent in Australia. The importance of these two periods is duly reflected in this study, as it was in the subjects and settings of her novels, and their literary appropriation provides a perfect illustration of Nietzsche's adage: 'In solitude grows what one brings into it, also the inner beast [*Vieh*]'.[7] Richardson, who drew many of the epigraphs for *The Getting of Wisdom* from this same passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, undoubtedly knew Nietzsche's dictum. She would have recognised its personal application, and she went to considerable lengths in her fiction to conceal the varied and often dark sources of her inspiration. Her earlier self, Ettie or Ethel Richardson, was even eclipsed in daily usage by her later pseudonym Henry, and my subsequent use of these two names is intended not only to follow her family's practice, but also to underscore her distinctive avatars as Ettie and Henry Handel.

To the outside world her authorial existence may have seemed conventional and withdrawn. But its results show her to have been a mature version of the intelligent, disenchanted woman in her tale 'The Professor's Experiment' which concludes: 'behind her locked door, Annemarie continued to indulge thoughts and hatch plans of the kind that herald revolutions'.[8] In Richardson's case, fictional probings were fuelled by a deep

sense of something having gone 'wrong in the making', both in herself and in the nature of things.[9] This translated into social criticism and an extreme drive for privacy. Her writing-name was at once a mask and a buffer. 'This Henry Handel is the man of straw I have set up for the critics to tilt at, while I sit safe & obscure behind.'[10] In practice, however, she felt keenly the barbs and criticisms launched at H.H.R., but her stratagem did distance her family life and doings from public scrutiny. When urged to reveal details of her own existence she quipped: 'Time enough for more when I am dead & gone'.[11] It was a reiterated plea, as was the wish for more than 'the ordinary sleek biography': 'I decline to be whitewashed, when the time does come. The whole truth for me'.[12] Sixty years after her death and a decade after the release of her embargoed papers, it is time to reconsider her life, to progress further towards the tantalising but elusive goal of 'the whole truth'. Her correspondence is now published, her novels and other family documents have been carefully edited, her life-story partly told. Yet many of its most important phases still remain largely unexplored and her assertion that 'the books are me, & outside them there is little worth knowing' has been too seldom challenged.[13] To refute it is one aim of this biography. More generally, it seeks to reveal the human and revolutionary dimensions of her life, though to do this we must first understand what it was that she carried with her, and confronted daily in her creative solitude—the problematic but richly instructive legacy of 'growing pains' in cultures and lands far removed from inner London where she passed her most creative years.

CHAPTER ONE

Blood Lines

ONCE, DURING AN ILLNESS, Lillian Richardson remarked: 'blood tells'. 'People were very kind', she conceded, but in pain and need it was her sister, the novelist, whom she wanted beside her.[1] Henry Handel Richardson reciprocated the feelings, except for her blood counted in the deeper sense that only her family's past could help her make sense of her own compulsive needs and her drive to succeed. Three distinct lineages had shaped her, drawn from England, Ireland and Scotland, though they gave little inkling that the family would one day boast a famous author. The arts played little part in the lives of her ancestors; the Continent, for all they availed themselves of it, might have been oceans away, and even in 1890 the visit of a maiden aunt to Mary and her girls in Leipzig was regarded as a momentous undertaking. Yet in the nineteenth century restlessness had seized her once sedentary family members and propelled them to the far reaches of empire. On her father's side relatives helped pioneer Western Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Then maternal kinsfolk joined them in rushing to Victoria after the discovery of gold, leaving Richardson's grandparents prematurely childless and aching for news: 'Write often, I do not care how little; if I know you are *alive*, it quickens my prayers'.[2] Write they did, and their letters inspired a telling recasting of events in Richardson's fiction and her late autobiography. For the latter contains, in the words of one commentator, 'few real facts about her family background',[3] which creates a situation where the gap between facts and their refiguration affords important clues to her personality and her practice as a writer.

Her father's pedigree was good. Whereas other parvenus in the colonies might have had grounds for concealing their parentage, Walter could boast

of aristocratic and solid professional antecedents. His stock was closely associated with the Protestant hegemony in Ireland. There the Richardsons had held land, clerical livings and military offices, while a measure of their standing was intermarriage with the highly regarded Lindesay family in the eighteenth century. Walter inherited the family's pretensions and aptitudes, rather than direct wealth. His father Alexander (1758–1827) was a professional soldier, whose first commission had been handsomely paid for by his father John, himself a captain in the Dungannon Volunteers as well as High Sheriff of County Tyrone. Alexander served as lieutenant during the American War of Independence and by 1805 his eldest son, another John, was serving under him in the Royal Tyrone Regiment of Militia. Alexander, who sired fourteen children with four successive wives, became the subject of family legend. Richardson, attributing to him only two marriages, recalled erroneously that his wild sons 'contrived to run through the family inheritance' and that, 'at the age of seventy-two', he had married 'a girl of eighteen'.[4] Victorian sensibilities evidently baulked at his uxoriousness. But the reality was less far-fetched and more intriguing. On marrying his fourth wife, Lucinda Sirée, on 29 January 1816 he was fifty-seven, she almost twenty and apparently well able to defend her own interests. She needed to be. For she shared their Dublin home with at least five of his children from earlier unions. Three years and one son later the couple was legally separated, Lucinda with a liberal annuity of £200. A reconciliation, however, was effected and three further children followed, the last of whom was Walter. He was born at 'Clairville' in Malahide Parish, north of Dublin, but his father died before Walter's first birthday.[5]

Walter's mother, Lucinda, must have been a captivating, gifted woman. After only ten months of widow's weeds she married a former acquaintance, Dr Bayne Cheyne. For her second husband, a confirmed bachelor for almost forty years, the acquisition of an instant family marked a radical change. Fully aware of the heavy responsibility he was assuming, he strove to allay his own family's misgivings with a mixture of wit and common sense:

> As matters now stand you may conceive perhaps, that I have hit upon the very worst means that could be devised for effecting a cure of the complaint which constrained me to take flight from Edinburgh. Or in other words that a wife & four children is the most inefficacious remedy that could be presented for sleepless nights & the Nervous feelings therewith connected. You will have learned however through the medium of Cicy's letters that my procedure has not been so desperately foolish as

> it may at first sight appear. The eldest child a very fine boy is at a boarding school. The other three are the quietest & most tractable creatures I have ever seen & are not addicted either to the annoying practice of romping by day, or the still more disagreeable one of screaming by night.[6]

Though Lucinda's health was 'delicate & her nerves weak', Cheyne was drawn to her 'Irish buoyancy & liveliness'—as Walter would be to similar traits in Mary twenty-seven years later. We will never know whether blind love, diplomacy or actual observation shaped the doctor's sanguine words, but their marriage endured for almost forty years and opened up unexpected vistas for Walter. He, moreover, loved his mother dearly and recited a litany of her accomplishments to his wife-to-be: 'she has been the *finest* & the *cleverest* woman of her day … she sang as I never heard *woman* sing, played the piano, harp, flageolet, accordeon, danced … [and] played whist'.[7] In temperament and talent Lucinda was, as Cheyne remarked, his perfect complement.

This second marriage ultimately directed Walter's attention towards medicine and the heritage of the Scottish enlightenment.[8] Medically the Cheynes were distinguished. Bayne's father was a surgeon, his maternal grandfather a Fellow of the College of Surgeons and his older brother, John, rose to be Physician General to the Forces in Ireland. Bayne practised in Bristol, enabling his new family to live in the respectable suburb of Clifton. Presumably he also recounted how the portrait of an ancestor hung in the hall of the College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and praised the University of Edinburgh warmly. Its renowned medical school had been founded by men trained in the Netherlands and by the 1720s its colleges were promoting remarkably independent and flexible courses of study,[9] so that in 1789 Thomas Jefferson could declare from Paris that, in scientific matters, 'no place in the World can pretend to a competition with Edinburgh'.[10] The eighteenth century also saw the emergence of a score of formidable Scottish thinkers, of whom the best known today are David Hume and Adam Smith. Predominantly from middle to upper-middle class and professional backgrounds, they were concerned with the rational advancement of all branches of knowledge rather than with revolution. Their forward-looking but moderate liberalism stamped the intellectual institutions of the Scottish capital and was in turn imparted to Walter Richardson who matriculated as a medical student in Edinburgh in 1845.

During the next four years Walter's appetite for learning was fed by a range of advanced scientific and speculative subjects. In particular he

Dr Walter Richardson

gained a thorough grounding in surgery and learned much from Dr James Simpson's obstetrical procedures—such as the revolutionary use of chloroform inhalation during labour—which led Walter later to describe him as a 'master mind, whose name is associated with every thing novel in midwifery'.[11] Less orthodoxly William Henderson, Professor of Pathology, was vigorously promoting homeopathy and William Gregory, Professor of Chemistry, gave a stirring weekly extracurricular lecture in which he often discussed mesmerism and the healing power of animal magnetism. This was an infinitely fine fluid thought to permeate the creation. Tracing its putative effects prompted the investigation of psychic as well as otherworldly occurrences, and could lead, as in Walter's case, to the realisation that 'mesmeric phenomena' were 'spiritual manifestations'.[12] A rival but related theory was Baron von Reichenbach's discovery of 'odic force', which allegedly flowed between the living and the deceased and animated the ouija board that Walter and Henry Handel Richardson later used.

Eventually Gregory's lectures were prohibited, but he continued to experiment with mesmerism as a way of inducing trance-like states and hence of accessing super-rational truths. The ferment caused in medical circles by such ideas was considerable. A mesmeric hospital, for example, was opened in England in 1869, the medical uses of hypnosis were much discussed and great advances by Freud's precursors in Paris were only a decade away.

After graduating in 1849 Walter's prospects were meagre. First he gained further experience as a surgeon and physician in Edinburgh's Maternity and Cholera hospitals. Next he worked as a medical assistant: for six months in a Welsh practice, then for over a year in Kent with Dr Thomas Heckstall Smith. An avid book-buyer, Walter acquired works related to his profession, as well as delved into theology, botany and astronomy, noting in his journal his intention to spend 'money on acquiring knowledge and time in acquiring experience'.[13] But there was an oversupply of medical graduates. To maintain the standing of a gentleman-doctor often required an independent income, while the usual scale of charges open to a general practitioner in the country promised, at best, a slow accumulation of capital.

Edinburgh exerted an abiding influence on the young man's attitudes. Most obviously it shaped his approach to medicine and fostered his inquiring mind. Following Professor Simpson's teachings he used 'chloroform in cases of eclampsia in 1851—years before this treatment was discussed in journals',[14] and he kept a detailed *Register of Midwifery Cases*. This doubled as a professional and legal record of his daily conduct and supplied data for later essays like 'On Flooding after Delivery' and 'A Contribution to the Statistics of Midwifery: being notes of 630 cases of pregnancy'.[15] In Edinburgh, too, he encountered presumably the 'higher criticism' that was challenging traditional understanding of the Bible, and became fascinated with the esoteric frontiers of science, familiarising himself with the theories of 'Mesmer, Hahnemann and Gall, the latter two having respectively developed homeopathy and … phrenology'.[16] Finally, his studies kindled an intellectual ardour and idealism which made him a lifelong enemy of incompetence, knavery and injustice, and inspired his varied scientific contributions, ranging from essays on the treatment of uterine cysts, dysentery and cholera to a carefully reasoned plea for protecting Melbourne's water catchment. Less positively, the urbane Georgian vistas and rich history of the Scottish capital imprinted on him a social model which, together with the pretensions nurtured by his Irish Protestant family, left him dissatisfied with the makeshift, popularist conditions of the colonies.

The English background of Richardson's mother Mary was more humble, but she shared Walter's tenacious sense of caste. She was born on 28 December 1835 in the provincial city of Leicester to John and Elizabeth Bailey (née Robinson). Her mother 'was the unusually literate daughter of a farmer who wrote books'; her father was reputedly a solicitor (actually a solicitor's clerk) whose airs earned him the nickname 'Gentleman John'.[17] His death at forty-two left Elizabeth with ten children whom she contrived to support, according to Richardson, by running a small school for ladies. This suggests a reasonable level of education, while good looks completed her legacy. Lucinda Cheyne recognised these at once: 'Mrs Bailey has been a beautiful woman, and is now *very* handsome, I would have known her anywhere from Mary's picture, she interests me *greatly*, and I felt quite drawn to love her, she is *gentle*, *sorrowful* & dignified with a countenance full of benignity and sweetness'.[18] Richardson concurred. Glad to have missed the pudding faces and long upper lips of the plain half of the family, she praised her mother's ivory complexion and chiselled features set off by rich black hair. Mary did, however, have the massive, square 'Bailey brow', which was offset by wonderful eyes that 'twinkled always as if she had Bella-donna in them'.[19]

With few prospects at home, the Baileys looked to emigration as a means of bettering themselves, as did other forebears of Richardson. In her memoirs she exaggerated this pressure, dispatching her mother at the tender age of fourteen and 'quite alone, in charge of the [ship's] Captain' to Melbourne.[20] Circumstances, however, were not that desperate. The discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851 decided the two eldest Bailey brothers, John and Edward, to set sail in March 1852, and fifteen months later Mary and two other siblings joined them there. So, too, did several Cheynes in the 1850s, though not before the family, on the other side of the continent, attained a prominence at Albany which is remembered in local names such as Cheyne Beach and Cheyne Bay. These relatives corresponded regularly with Dr Bayne Cheyne. Hence Walter, from his earliest years, heard news of Australia and favourable reports of the colonies' climate, career opportunities and living conditions. Then in 1851 came news of important gold discoveries there and he, in his daughter's words, was 'bitten by the prevailing unrest, and emigrated … in the hope of digging up a fortune'.[21] Walter arrived in Melbourne in August 1852, to be followed by his nephew Alick, his sister Lucinda and his half-brother John. This transplanted kinship group proliferated further in the colonies, so that three decades later, when Mary set out for Leipzig with her daughters, she left in Australia 'her oldest sister, two brothers and their