

# Prologue

THIS IS A STORY of two people. Their lives might have been told separately, since both Louis and Hilda Esson were very interesting people, and had their share of the historical significance normally required of a biographical subject. There are good reasons, though, for making them the subject of a single narrative. It is not just that they happened to be married to each other, though they did spend almost half their lives together. It has little to do with the particular intensity of their feeling for each other, though that was a powerful determinant of all that they did, or with achievements that were, to any unusual degree, shared or mutually dependent.

Two things in particular make their relationship a fascinating study. One is the power of the story itself; sometimes it looks like melodrama, but the strength and complexity of the feelings involved make it a very moving one. The other is the way in which the dynamics of the relationship shaped their creative and intellectual lives, and influenced both their self-assertion in the public arena and the kinds of private meaning they sought. Through all the complex ways in which they supported, threatened, loved and challenged each other, this was a relationship in which any bid for recognition by one of them seems to have rested on the frustrated ambitions of the other. There seemed to be room at centre stage for only one of them at a time. This is most apparent in their claims to prominence in the wider world, but it is a rhythm which also occurs, persistently and poignantly, in their attempts to make lives that were happy and rich.

While both achieved things that their society regarded as significant, only Louis has found a place in the conventional history. He is the subject of a book, *Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre*, a collection of his letters to Vance and Nettie Palmer, which Vance edited after Louis' death in 1943

and published in 1948. He is remembered as ‘the father of Australian drama’, and occupies an obligatory chapter in any historical account of it. The theatre historian Leslie Rees’ title for his version of that chapter, ‘The Legend of Louis Esson’,<sup>1</sup> implies that there is myth as well as substance in Louis’ reputation, but it does reflect his place in the pantheon. The Pioneer Players, the company in which he was the leading light, is the most famous of all the attempts to found a genuinely Australian theatre against the odds; the Pioneers’ brave defiance and inevitable disappointment seems to define Australian theatre history.

Louis’ plays, and his programme for a theatre that would represent the distinctive experience of his culture, have inspired a modest collection of articles, and he is given prominence in a number of accounts of nationalist intellectual life in the first half of this century. His determination to swim against a theatrical mainstream dominated by commercial values and imported products is commemorated in the Louis Esson Prize, a prestigious annual award given for drama by the Victorian State Government.

Louis’ qualifications as biographical subject and star of his own show are impeccable. Yet his own perception of his life would have focussed on its failures and disappointments. From the time of his early successes with one-act plays at William Moore’s Annual Australian Drama Nights, he was by general agreement the country’s leading dramatist, and the man most likely to build a national theatre. Then, when the Pioneers collapsed in 1926, he was a playwright without a stage. The second half of his career is littered with manuscripts that nobody particularly wanted to read, let alone perform. He would have been pleasantly surprised at all the posthumous recognition, and he would have appreciated it as something of a cosmic joke that his expectations of oblivion after his death were disappointed as thoroughly as his hopes of fame while he lived.

There are no books about Hilda. She appears among the supporting cast in several biographies and editions of other people’s letters, but has never managed to become the subject of even a chapter. Her nearest approach to that distinction comes in Drusilla Modjeska’s study of a number of her more enduringly creative friends, *Exiles At Home*, in which Hilda is presented as the archetypal highly talented woman who subordinates her own needs and potential to those of the man she married:

Hilda Esson has appeared in this book as a friend of Nettie Palmer and Katharine Prichard, as a friend and doctor to Jean Devanny, and as the wife of the playwright Louis Esson. She was not writing in her own right; but she facilitated the writing

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of others, most notably that of her husband. As a young woman Hilda had wanted to be an actress, and for a while she worked without pay in Australian theatre, but she had no career as an actress ... There is no way of knowing, of course, what Hilda Esson would have done with her life under different circumstances ... This facilitating and supporting of others, this burying of her identity in another's run deep in a woman; to achieve for her husband, her children, is to achieve for herself.<sup>2</sup>

Hilda would have been taken aback to have found herself described as burying her identity, in that of Louis or anyone else. And while she saw herself as a shameless dilettante, she would surely have disputed the verdict that she had sadly wasted her talents. The letters she wrote late in her life make it clear that, given the choice again, she would not have done things any other way.

As she would have been aware, her failure to be famous is striking when she knew so many others who did become part of the public story. The circles in which she and Louis moved constituted a kind of literary *Who's Who*, and throughout her adult life she lived adjacent to the forces which shaped her culture. It was happening even when she was a girl, and used to dream with three very talented friends, Katharine Prichard, Nettie Higgins and Christian Jollie-Smith, of the great things they would all go on to do. Those three, like most of Hilda's friends, have found their way into the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Hilda appears twice in passing, as the wife of Louis Esson and the wife of John Dale.

Yet the impression of her submissiveness is a partial truth at best, and is countered by almost everybody who met her. Hilda brought great passion to everything she did in life, and she was rarely inclined to be demure or deferential. She certainly did not present herself as content to make her contribution behind the scenes or as a dutiful wife. She also had a great capacity to attract the love and regard of other people, and was a very powerful influence on those who knew her. While that can be seen as another kind of supporting role, another case of displaced identity, the issue is more complicated. Catherine Duncan, the actor and playwright who worked closely with Hilda from the mid-1930s, offers a very different perspective on her achievement:

Hilda belongs to that rare company of cultivated beings without whom artists cannot exist and grow, and without whom no people can boast of a national culture.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of influence is much more than the modest function of ‘facilitating and supporting’ the work of others. It is, in itself, a form of creative power. Louis, who had few close friends and was something of a solitary in his triumphs as well as his seeming failures, would never have pretended to distinction of that order.

But the claim that Hilda deserves a significant place in the story of her culture need not rest on intangibles, even very important ones. Mostly it can be based on evidence that came much later in her life than the comparable case for Louis: her career as Assistant Medical Officer of Health for the City of Melbourne, and her work as a director with the radical New Theatre movement in Melbourne. Hilda gained her first permanent position, as John Dale’s assistant, when she was forty, an age at which Louis’ career as a playwright was effectively finished. She directed her first play at the age of fifty-two, by which time Louis had begun to concede that the drama had left him behind, and for the next decade combined an astonishing amount of theatre work with a very demanding professional life.

A number of the contemporary assumptions about appropriate gender behaviour clearly placed some constraints on what a woman like Hilda could do. They are obvious enough in the public record. There is the familiar pattern of the career deferred while the demands of children and the hopes of a husband were being attended to. There is the related lack of professional recognition: John Dale was the same age as Hilda when he appointed her, and she remained in her suitably symbolic position as his assistant until she retired more than twenty years later. The success of the immunization campaigns against diphtheria which Hilda devised and conducted, and which spectacularly cut infant mortality in Melbourne, is recorded in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* among John’s more conspicuous achievements. There is also the fact that Hilda’s pioneering work in the theatre was entirely amateur. It was inconceivable that a woman could have directed professionally in Melbourne at that time.

Records can be rewritten, and the restoration of women’s achievements and women’s experiences to the official story of the culture has already gone quite a long way. But some limiting assumptions are difficult to revise. What distinguishes the careers of Nettie Palmer and Katharine Prichard from that of Hilda is in part the fact that they left a substantial amount of published material on which a reassessment might be based. Drusilla Modjeska’s remark that Hilda ‘was not writing in her own right’ not only provides a very good reason why she should be a marginal figure in a book sub-titled *Australian Women Writers 1925–1945*, but indicates a major difficulty in redressing the injustices of a skewed historical record.

Hilda's importance was all ephemeral. Behind the emphasis on that kind of evidence is an assumption that the supposedly permanent status of a literary career is more significant than the kind of professional public life and amateur artistic one that Hilda led.

These considerations, of course, beg the question of the values by which the success or failure of a life is to be assessed, and the lives of Louis and Hilda Esson raise that question directly. One measure is the conventional one, of public prominence and substantial achievement. Another criterion, which recognizes the patent limitations of that model, is the emotional richness of the private life. But while that issue is inevitably a central and recurrent one in the telling of their lives, it is not something that can be measured easily or accurately. The yardstick, whether it is a supposed consensus wisdom or more frankly the biographer's own value system, is not of much relevance.

People who were as articulate about themselves as the Essons offer another way of judging the value of their lives – that is the assessment they made themselves. Sometimes it was explicit, a deliberate act of stocktaking. More often it was expressed through a subtlety of tone in a letter, or through something conspicuously left unsaid. They both talked a lot about what they wanted from life, and that makes the task of reading the sub-text less tricky than it would otherwise be.

The expectations that Louis wrote about were mostly to do with being a playwright. He said very little in his letters about more obviously intimate matters. This could be attributed either to conventionally male habits of emotional reticence, or to a lack of emotional depth; he could feel bitterness strongly, though, and despair, and that seems to suggest that his needs were real enough. He tried hard not to make himself vulnerable, and yet he wrote plays in which love made his people terrifyingly so. He was profoundly hurt by two women, his first wife Madeleine and Hilda. Sometimes he blamed them intensely for that, but he was just as inclined to feel contempt for his inability to keep their love.

He would probably have pronounced himself a failure, in art and in love. His solitariness was at once a confirmation of this, and his only defence against it. From his mid-forties, if not earlier, his ways of living with an acute sense of personal failure were virtually the dominant strategic concerns of his life. His early plays, from which he won his modicum of fame and his place in history, he saw as his apprenticeship. The later ones, which he felt proud of, were associated with the knowledge that his career was effectively over.

In telling Louis' story, it is as important to understand all his shifting perceptions of its patterns as it is to get the facts straight. The events of

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every life become contained by dramatic irony when one looks back at them from their ending; love letters are touched in retrospect by the pain of separation, ambitions by the knowledge of a later disillusionment, and all the best-laid plans by the unconsidered facts of change and mortality. Louis, who was well-attuned to irony, saw a number of those patterns as they emerged in his life, better and sooner than most people do. But he missed some, too. One of the dangers in recounting them is that they can become subsumed by the dominant irony, and caught in the rather facile wisdom of the omniscient narrator. If the events and the feelings are to have anything of the quality that they had in the moment, they need to have some of their innocence restored.

Hilda did write about emotional needs as well as ambitions, and in some of her surviving letters to Katharine Prichard in particular she discussed the quality of her life with great candour. Her perceptions shifted, of course, perhaps even more radically than Louis'. For the second half of her adult life she faced continually the old impossible challenge of reconciling the immovable object and the irresistible force; her commitment to Louis remained, but it was changed permanently by the fact that she loved somebody else. She would have been aware of many of the ironies, too, and in her case they were, at the end, quite devastating. But the context for her self-examination was different. When she wrote to Marie Davison that she felt 'content ... to be quite anonymous',<sup>4</sup> it was not so much a recognition that she was unworthy of fame as an indication that she had no need of it. And while she talked about great regrets, she was not thinking of lost opportunities, but of the pain which others had to feel for the things which she had to do. It was not a complacent attitude, or even a particularly fatalistic one. It seems to have reflected a passionate conviction that a life lived with some intensity was by definition one that was worth having lived.

They were very different kinds of people, and their contrasting ideas of personal success and failure was just one area in which that was strikingly evident. They had in common some aesthetic commitments, a circle of friends, and a number of powerful shared experiences. They were both brilliant talkers, Louis witty and erudite, Hilda enthusiastic and never equivocal. But they were poles apart in temperament. And of course, like all intimate relationships, theirs exaggerated the contrast. The patterns of mutual dependence, the standing jokes, the codes and the habits on which they built a life together, all worked to reinforce the sense of difference. As man and woman, husband and wife, invalid and nurse, depressive and positive thinker, dreamer and doer, wary recluse and ready confidant, they

constructed each other almost to the point of caricature. That process gives another dimension to the pattern of reciprocity that determined which of them, at any point, felt able to command the centre of the stage.

Louis and Hilda were no more bound by the selves they showed to each other than they were by the characters they play for posterity on the public record. They created themselves in different ways for other people. Louis in his correspondence with Vance Palmer is Louis the theatrical visionary and cricket buff; with the poet and scholar John Le Gay Brereton he is Louis the eager student of Elizabethan drama and antiquarian; with A. G. Stephens, critic and sometime editor of the *Bulletin Red Page*, Louis the angry young man who can never grow old; with Katharine Prichard, Louis the wise old bird; with Dymphna Cusack, Louis the paternalistic gallant; with Hilda, in the few letters which have survived, Louis the desperately reproachful lover. Hilda, in her letters, seems more often 'herself', but that may just mean that the roles were subtler. With her two best women friends, Nettie and Katharine, she maintained a long and brilliant correspondence which looked like intimacy. The nakedness of the letters to Kattie, though, throws into relief the more selective and judicious revelations of those to Nettie. Hilda's sense of their personalities partly shaped the self she felt able to show to them, and her letters take on Kattie's passion and Nettie's prudence as different facets of herself.

The letters are crucial, since few other kinds of evidence have survived. Louis died in 1943, half a century before this story of his life was written. Hilda died just ten years later. Not many of those who knew them are left to speak of them, and those who can had their own youthful self-preoccupations at the time, and looked at them as people who had probably never been other than old. Even among that small group of first-hand witnesses, there are very different perceptions. Leslie Rees remembers 'dear old Louis', a playwright past his best but taking on the role of elder statesman with kindness and good humour,<sup>5</sup> where Ric Throssell, Katharine's son, remembers Louis as a sad and crotchety figure, hiding behind his sickness and his sarcasm from the bitter realization that he had nothing more to give.<sup>6</sup> Catherine Duncan recalls Hilda as a woman who carried with her a kind of radiance; not just a wonderfully passionate influence for civilization, but a person of great beauty, which was crowned by the glory of the red hair that sprang 'like something alive upon her head'.<sup>7</sup> Betty Roland thought the hair 'probably dyed'.<sup>8</sup> She found Hilda irritatingly opinionated, and winced at the memory of an insistent voice going 'on and on and on'. Betty found it hard to understand what a superbly attractive man like John Dale could ever have seen in Hilda, while Catherine,

who thought John had some of Hilda's charm but little of her strength, thought the balance tilted decidedly the other way.

These conflicting testimonies, like the documents that are left, gain a disproportionate importance from the fact that they are available while others have been lost. What to make of them, which of them might be truer to the 'real person', is less of a problem than it looks. Bearing in mind the range of self-presentations that both Hilda and Louis offered in the letters, it seems best to accept all those impressions as parts of a larger truth. They reflect the perceptions of particular people, with particular kinds of self-interest, at particular times and occasions. Their value as glimpses of the person is as simple and as complex a matter as that.

Still, it seems a little unfair that the impressions made on other people, at other times and places, are not accessible to provide a larger picture. And there is a similar unfairness in the preservation of certain letters rather than others. Where that becomes a problem, rather than merely an inevitable source of regret, is in its repercussions for the weighting of the story. As a double narrative, this treatment presupposes the equal importance and interest of its subjects' lives. The notion of their reciprocal advances and retreats into the public arena, or into the territory of emotional risk, gives a reason for ignoring one of the Essons for a time, and concentrating on the doings and feelings of the other. Sometimes, however, the imbalance has no justification, only an excuse. It simply reflects areas in which the evidence, if it ever existed, cannot be retrieved.

This kind of unfairness takes two forms. The first favours Louis, and follows from the fact that Hilda 'was not a writer in her own right'. Louis proposed himself, and was recognized as at least a moderately important writer from quite early in his life. The people he wrote to were often distinguished writers themselves. They kept letters, and when they died their literary remains passed to the care of libraries. So while Louis was almost certainly a much less prolific letter-writer than Hilda, much more of his correspondence has survived. Hilda's letters appear with his in the Vance and Nettie Palmer collection, and in odd corners of the papers of people like Dymphna Cusack and Frank and Marie Davison whose primary connection was with Louis. The one distinguished friend who kept Hilda's letters entirely in their own right was Katharine Prichard, her closest friend through half a century, with whom she shared a vast and very candid correspondence. One of the conditions of that intimacy was that when either of them died, the other should destroy everything. Katharine had a horror of biography, the art of legitimized gossip. In the last few years of her life she did a great deal of sorting and burning of her letters, notebooks and drafts:

I am dreading having to go through them all. There is a lot more burning to be done ... I do not like to be seen in *deshabille* even in manuscript.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, she reneged just a little on the agreement with Hilda. She kept a little bundle of letters, almost all of them from the last decade of Hilda's life, on the grounds that they were of literary rather than personal interest. They have such intensely personal interest that one wonders what must have been in the hundreds that were burned.

For quite a lot of their story Louis for these reasons enjoys the privilege of controlling speculation about what he was thinking and feeling. He would have found it a dubious privilege, since he too was appalled by the invasiveness of the vulture-biographer. But it was probably preferable to being a totally helpless victim. And the consequence is that at those times, Hilda's life remains largely a matter of guesswork. Both the Essons wrote outstandingly well in their letters, though in very different ways, and in their narrative that ability becomes a guaranteed way of stealing the scene. In this way, Hilda remains even in this version of her story something of a casualty of the conventional history, which found her a woman there was no need to remember.

There is a second inequality, however, which partly counterbalances the first, and this time it favours Hilda. Louis' self-consciousness as a man-in-history has the disadvantage that there seems inevitably an element, or at least a suspicion, of great deliberateness about the way he talks about himself. He often seems to have half an eye on the reader over his shoulder, or even the dreaded biographer. That makes him perhaps less likely to make a fool of himself, but also less free to give a full sense of himself, and leaves room in which to wonder if some of the critical emotions are merely being withheld, or are not really being felt at all. His friendship with men like Leon Brodzky and Vance Palmer was not of the kind that encouraged much wearing of hearts on sleeves. They talk about their writing and literary politics. There is an oblique kind of intimacy in these letters, since the act of vigorously making common cause is understood to be a sacrament of friendship, and the lengthy discussions of sport with Vance go further to imply a kind of brotherhood. But access to Louis' feelings is at best indirect, and usually blocked.

The letters indicate very clearly that Louis, for all his articulateness over a glass of wine, was at least as disabled when it came to the expression of emotion as the stereotypical male. Hilda's letters, in accordance with those gender expectations, are much more personal and apparently candid than Louis'. Of course, even the most intimate and deeply-felt disclosures can

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still involve strategies of self-presentation. However, any tactics of that sort in Hilda's letters are at least based on the understanding that she is writing off the record. Whether her correspondence is therefore more reliable, and by extension more symptomatic of emotional well-being, depends a little on the reader's prejudices. It means, though, that the quantity of information which makes Louis a more suitable candidate for an extended encyclopaedia entry is to some extent offset by the quality of the material that supports a biography of Hilda. And it certainly makes for a lively plot.

So in these ways, too, their strengths and weaknesses, and their seemingly predetermined historical roles, complemented one another very well. At a number of points in the narrative, it seems best simply to let them speak for themselves. Hilda in her last letters to Katharine Prichard, for example, writes so well about her understanding of love that it seems presumptuous to intervene. Yet even in the periods in which they are less able to direct the inferences that can be drawn about them, it remains a moving story.

Hilda wrote about the possibility that one day somebody might write a biography about Louis. It was a modest suggestion, in which it did not occur that she should be anything other than anonymous, and in which Louis' claims were partly to do with the artistic culture in which he moved:

He made it all so vivid, that, if I were a writer, I could make a very good 'Portrait of the Artist', I would have an interest apart from the personal, because it covers a particularly lively period in our artistic life; but it is beyond me ...<sup>10</sup>

There were indeed a number of ways in which Louis and Hilda could be seen as important for what they reveal of the contexts in which they lived. They represent the awkwardness of the intellectual transition from colonial status, in the continuing conflict between their idealized versions of the new society and their appetite for the best that had been thought and said in the old one. They were trapped in the role of artists, cultivated people, in a community that they understood as by definition hostile to almost everything they believed in. They took on the burden of building a national theatre where there seemed to be not even a hole for the foundations, and when they failed, as they had to, they made it possible for other people to make something. They were entangled by all the inhibitions of their society's understandings of what it means to be a woman or a man: Louis, the frail Bohemian who would have loved to play centre-half-forward for Carlton, Hilda the dutiful daughter, who as a