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THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON

MAURICE GUEST

Edited by

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and

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INTRODUCTION

SINCE its first publication in 1908, *Maurice Guest* has retained a special, foundational status in the history of the modern Australian novel, and although there were five more novels from the same hand, notably the great trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, it has never been overshadowed by them. It continues to draw and hold the attention of the general reader and the critic. What impressed and continues to impress readers of *Maurice Guest* is its powerful fusion of artistic purpose and emotional intensity, rare enough in a first novel but even more unusual because this fusion is sustained over considerable length. Henry Handel Richardson herself was retrospectively astonished by her first novel, and some of its early readers were reminded of the French realist or naturalist tradition of Flaubert, Zola and Stendhal, or of the Russian novelists Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. If there were a sense that the disturbing power of *Maurice Guest* was somehow attributable to a 'European' origin, there was also a sense that its manner was not quite 'English'. What made it more puzzling at the time of its publication, and for many years thereafter, was that virtually nothing was to be known about its author, except that the name indicated a man.

Begun in 1896, this novel about student life in 1890s Germany, with the enigmatic Australian-born heroine Louise at its centre, took eleven painstaking years to complete. Its author, a somewhat reclusive expatriate Australian woman settled in London since 1904, had steeped herself in Scandinavian, German, French and Russian literature. Although the novel had immediately captured the interest of its London publisher William Heinemann, its

unusual length and, for its time, unusually frank treatment of certain sexual and psychological states had necessitated cuts of some 20,000 words. If many readers of the cut, published version believed they had discerned in it a fictional autobiography, they were broadly speaking correct: but without an identifiable 'author', little more could be said. Very few commented on, and even fewer could have guessed, the full extent of its intertextual richness, its literary and musical allusiveness; and none guessed that the author was a woman. Woven into its obvious topical references to the music-dramas of Wagner, there was a less obvious (and therefore largely overlooked) texture of ideas centred on the philosophy of art and on the nature of the artist. This was, to say the least, an unusual combination of themes and interests in a novel that looked, superficially, like a love story.

Until now, *Maurice Guest* has never been published in its original and intended form. But why, it might be asked, should we read another version of *Maurice Guest* (albeit the first critical edition), when it makes an already lengthy novel even longer? The first answer is that what appeared and has continued to appear until now under the title *Maurice Guest* is fundamentally and in important ways *not* the novel its author intended. It was the novel redrawn to fit the taste and demands of Edwardian England. 1908 was the year of Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. In her homeland, and in the same year, the prevailing fashion was for autobiographical writing such as E. J. Banfield's story of his isolated life on a Queensland tropical island, *Confessions of a Beachcomber*, and Mrs Aeneas Gunn's best-selling romantic narrative of the woman settler, *We of the Never Never*. In order to get her first novel published at all, Richardson was obliged to observe the commercial, literary and moral conventions imposed by those powerful arbiters of literary value, the circulating libraries of the day. All books are to some extent a compromise between author's wishes and external demands, but *Maurice Guest*, a misfit among its popular English contemporaries, was particularly warped by such pressures: its treatment of sexual identity in particular had to be muted, even obscured, in the process of revision; a good deal of the musical detail of the book

was cut away; and some passages crucial to the reader's understanding of the inner, psychological life of its main characters were cut, solely to save space. In short, artistic concerns had to knuckle under to market forces. We know this because Richardson kept a scrupulous and detailed record of the latter stages of the novel's making and remaking. Thus, if it is important to know how Richardson worked and what she wanted to say, anything less than a full text of her book would be an inadequate proxy. She carefully preserved two typescripts of the novel, meticulously recording alterations and excised passages, and we thus have an almost complete record of revisions and cuts – in all their variety.

Moreover, access to new materials and information may require us to read the uncut novel in new ways. As if consciously providing material for a future editor, Richardson began to annotate a copy of the novel, pointing out literary sources, supplying dates and identifying locations, giving some 'real' names for the 'fictional' characters, recording personal references and private feelings. As one might expect, she also wrote many letters in reply to correspondence from appreciative and sometimes critical readers in England, America and Australia. These illuminate several aspects of the writing and the subsequent reputation of the novel. Two exceptionally valuable sources of information have become accessible only very recently.

The first in order of importance for *Maurice Guest* is the correspondence between Richardson and Paul Solanges. Begun two years after the publication of *Maurice Guest*, Richardson here looks in great detail at her artistic self and at her first novel with the critical eye of the translator. She never met the man who had proposed and eventually completed a French translation of the novel, but (in addition to detailed linguistic queries) he put to her specific questions about meaning and intention of a kind that might occur to any perceptive reader. The difference is that he received detailed answers in writing. These answers are available to us, and although, as D. H. Lawrence said, the reader should trust the tale and not the teller, in the case of *Maurice Guest* we may now enjoy the luxury of an informed choice. Richardson's intense and dedicated assistance to Solanges in his translation of