

**“Jekyll Journo as a Literary Hyde by Night”<sup>1</sup>**

**Marcia Russell**

According to Riddell, it was on the strength of her youthful poems in the *Bulletin* and in the Christchurch *Sun* that, with no journalistic experience and no university degree, she was offered a job by Sydney newspaper proprietor Ezra Norton on one of his talent scouting visits to his New Zealand edition of *Truth* in Wellington. She sailed from Wellington on the S.S. *Maunganui* on 11 November 1927, her forthcoming departure noted in a brief paragraph in the Auckland *Sun*: ‘One of the most gifted of New Zealand’s younger poets, Miss Bettie Riddell, whose work is familiar to readers of *The Sun*’s Book Page, is leaving the Dominion on November 11 to break into the newspaper world in Sydney’.<sup>2</sup> There she joined the bohemian milieu of the Sydney press – a colourful community of poets, artists, political activists, anarchists, auto-didacts, neo-intellectuals and novelists – to learn her trade on what was arguably the sleaziest tabloid newspaper in the country at the time, the Sydney *Truth*.

While there are distinct echoes of a Jekyll and Hyde existence in Riddell’s hybrid working life, this does not look so remarkable in the context of Australia’s literary history. There is a clear consensus that literary Australia was largely a journalists’ Australia, and the phrases ‘serious poets, critics and journalists’, and ‘journalists, professional men and academics’ recur consistently in the historical record as symbiotic metaphors for the world of arts and letters. It was the journalists, Ken Stewart argues in a study of Australian literary production from 1855-1915, ‘men of letters whose voluminous journalism and commentary confirmed a literary presence by continually expressing the fear of its absence’ who stood as the colonial literati, forging the legend of the neglected artist in a practical, sports-minded community. ‘Throughout the 19th century, journalism remained in many respects the

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope Nelson, ‘Jekyll Journo as a Literary Hyde by Night’, *Weekend Australian*, 28-29 July 1990.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Clever NZ Girl Leaves for Sydney’, *The Sun* (Auckland), 6 September 1927, p. 10.

mainstay of colonial literary production'.<sup>3</sup> The hybrid nature of the Sydney newspaper world of the 1920s and 1930s fed Riddell's instincts for literature and for adventure:

I was hanging round on the fringes of things, poets like Kenneth Slessor, all sorts of people who were painting or writing [...] they drank a lot, they talked a lot, it was a very closed sort of society, one didn't see much of other people at all. [...] They were influential on me, but I was, and always have been in a way, like Hal Porter, a watcher on a balcony.<sup>4</sup>

What is striking about Riddell's small output of poetry during this time is an increasing sophistication of narrative style and an emphasis on lyrical sensuality combined with cool emotional detachment that will remain a distinctive signature in her work. Even though she appears to have published only eight new poems in the early 1930s, all but two directly explore narratives of sexual desire, love and its loss, with an increasing assurance and simplicity of expression. With regard to the factors that may have influenced the poet's development at this time, it is profitable at this stage to consider the context of her new working life as a tabloid journalist and to examine the cross-Tasman cultural links and respective social and literary environments that informed this period in her life.

Not surprisingly, Australia's nineteenth and twentieth century literary and journalistic history parallels the development of the 'Grub Street' newspapers and periodicals that proliferated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. Titles like *Tatler*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Spectator* and the *Monthly Review*, for example, provided employment for poets, novelists, critics and social reformers among them Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, Henry Fielding, Samuel Coleridge, Samuel Johnson, and Charles Dickens for example. The popularity of these periodicals was mirrored in due course in the colonies, particularly in Australia after the mid nineteenth-century gold-rush years and the accompanying population boom. The eclectic nature of the newspaper-cum-periodical genre in turn spawned a breed of gentlemen of letters and journalists, many of whom were accepted as equally representative of intellectual thought as university professors, poets and novelists, professions not yet strongly established in the colony in the early nineteenth century. The mix of news and ephemera with some formal literary heft and assessment also encompassed an acceptance of the 'offensively Australian' bias that became a signature of the colony's attitudes to imperial

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Stewart, 'Journalism and the World of the Writer: The Production of Australia Literature, 1855-1915', in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Laurie Hergenhan (Melbourne: Penguin Books Australia, 1988), pp. 174-93 (p. 179).

<sup>4</sup> *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*. Harold Edward (Hal) Porter (1911-1984) was a journalist, teacher, and librarian whose memoir *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony* (1963) was considered as an Australian masterpiece.

manners and mores.<sup>5</sup> By the 1770s, England was unable to cope with the sheer numbers of petty criminals whose crimes against property were subject to the most severe penalties.<sup>6</sup> Deportation was deemed a suitable equivalent for death and the first fleet of six ships carrying 775 convicts arrived in Botany Bay in January 1788. Over the next eighty years more than 165,000 men, women and children arrived under similar circumstances. These origins, at first something to live down, gradually became woven into sardonic and anti-authoritarian ballads and heroic legends of struggle and survival in the bush and the outback of the great ‘empty’ continent. Out of this unpromising landscape and environment emerged an irreverent but robust and inclusive literary environment in which Riddell, as a fledgling poet and tyro journalist, was able to rub shoulders with some of the most influential writers, editors and artists of the time: a factor that facilitated a rapid maturing of the young writer’s talents.

Unpromising though the Sydney *Truth* sounds as a dignified venue for a serious writer, it nevertheless embraced the same eclectic mix of news and comment as the English model. Among the murder, mayhem and seedy divorce scandals, the paper featured ballet, drama and book reviews; and the inexperienced young New Zealander, hired on the basis of her teenage poetry in New Zealand, was given a graded journalist’s salary and responsibility for arts coverage by her boss, Ezra Norton. Her arrival coincided with a shift of emphasis in the paper’s editorial policy to more family-oriented content, as its 1920s emphasis on male interests – sport, racing, and spicy court cases – was becoming less attractive to retail advertisers.<sup>7</sup> *Truth* was apparently never an outlet for Riddell’s poetry but the Sydney *Bulletin* (1880-2008) was a regular venue for both her early poetry from New Zealand and her later writing – not only as a poet but also as a literary critic and feature writer. Her last book reviews were published posthumously in the magazine in the two weeks following her death.

The weekly, known in its earlier manifestation as the ‘Bushman’s bible’, became an enduring example of the Grub Street model of publishing ephemera, paralleling the sociable coffee house reading of the popular press of the merchant city of London but with its own distinctive antipodean flavour. Intended as a journal of political and business commentary

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Furphy, letter to the *Bulletin*, 4 April 1897, in Manning Clark, ‘Furphy, Joseph (1843–1912)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/furphy-joseph-6261/text10785>.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> This pragmatic intersection of high and low culture in Australia is graphically encapsulated by one of Ezra Norton’s more colourful editorial directives delivered to the staff of his tabloid *Daily Mirror*: “What this fucking newspaper needs is more fucking culture,” he is reputed to have told his staff when he introduced an “Arts and Culture” section to the *Daily Mirror* in the 1940s.

with some literary content, it promoted anti-imperialist and insular attitudes, anti-clerical and masculinist points of view, mercilessly ridiculed snobs, feminists, and prohibitionists, and was indiscriminately racist in its editorial policy. The *Bulletin*'s masthead slogan, 'Australia for the White Man' remained on its front page until 1961 and became a national political credo known as the 'White Australia' policy. However, its reputation as an influential literary venue was centred on its famous Red Pages – the front of the book section of reviews, poetry, critical essays, arts news and terse rejection notes (Examples: 'A.A.B.: If that's the worst, send us the others; if it's the best, don't ....' and 'W.H.H.T.: Unlike Fifi, can't say we "like you too much" ...')<sup>8</sup> – and its regular inclusion of short fiction and serialised novels.

Although the *Bulletin*'s popularity in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century can be largely ascribed to Australia's rapid population growth, its influence was also likely to have been reinforced by a kind of quickening in the public pulse that occurs towards the end of an era – a fin de siècle instinct to reflect on the past while marching into the future. As the country moved toward federation, an impulse to examine the past in order to formulate cultural legends was reflected in a new surge of cultural nationalism: 'Something new [...] emerged into the light. A scattered people [...] had a sudden vision of themselves as a nation, with a character of their own and a historic role to play'.<sup>9</sup> This national reflectiveness was evident not only in the arts – painting, literature, and the historical record – but also in political thought, economics and international relations where new impulses toward unionism, federation and independence carried with them a dawning awareness that these ideologies were not ends in themselves but steps toward something more fundamental: a sense of cultural nationhood.

Australia's literature is said to have found its voice in the balladeers and story tellers who rejected the stilted and formal language considered appropriate for print in the old world and instead addressed their audiences in the popular idiom of the outback, of city slum dwellers and down-and-outs. In the last decades of the nineteenth century Henry Lawson (1867-1922), in a voice 'not raised to an unnatural pitch to catch the ears of people overseas', exemplifies an idiom that is said to have defined Australia's literary identity as the century drew to a close.<sup>10</sup> This same impulse to identify an organic 'coming of age' marked New Zealand's literary history with the widespread acceptance of the 1930s as the point in time which 'released – or tapped – a spring' and generated a wave of cultural nationalism that saw

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<sup>8</sup> 'Answers to Correspondents', *Bulletin*, 7 January 1931, RP2.

<sup>9</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

a rejection of the neo-Victorian and Georgian models in favour of a focus on New Zealand's 'own creative resources'.<sup>11</sup> In both countries, old myths were replaced by new ones as literary history interwove political chronology with social change, factional disputes with canon formation, and colonial progress saw both the rescue of forgotten literature and a simultaneous rejection of any disruptive strains that might undermine the nineteenth-century myths of pastoral mateship in Australia and the twentieth-century anti-feminist elitism of New Zealand's literary architects. In both countries a male monolith dominated critical reception and canon formation, and literary babies, usually female, were regularly thrown out with the bath-water.

The androcentric certainties of the times are typified by a 1923 feature on the *Bulletin*'s Red Page by-lined 'Arthenice' and entitled 'The Woman Novelist'.<sup>12</sup> It quaintly expresses the tragic disadvantages suffered by 'the woman of literary pretensions' and patiently explains why they appear to excel at modern fiction ('because it is a vehicle for the expression of the emotions and most women are highly emotional') but have failed to make any mark as great painters, musicians or poets because the tools involved in the first two pursuits are too 'complex and elusive' for women to grasp and the last requires an emotional restraint and discipline that is impossible for women to achieve. All of these failings, combined with a woman's limited experience of life, 'preclude extensive imaginative power', and rob her work of range and wit (other than in its female form of 'spite and malice') and transformative power. In conclusion the essayist generously concedes that the creative instinct 'is dominant in woman; but Nature, having endowed her with transcendent means of satisfying it no less than the creation of other human beings – seems to have decreed that she shall possess only in a modified degree the power of creating masterpieces in art'.<sup>13</sup> This wonderful example of fallacious argument makes the anti-poetess diatribe of New Zealand's Denis Glover in the *Arraignment of Paris* – 'Alas, New Zealand literature distils | an atmosphere of petticoats and frills | (or shall we say, to shock the dear old vicars | an atmosphere of brassieres and knickers?)' – look at least energetic and amusing, despite its slightly under-graduate smuttiness.<sup>14</sup> If the opinions of the *Bulletin*'s 'Arthenice' are typical

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<sup>11</sup> Allen Curnow, ed., *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, 2nd edition (Auckland: Penguin, 1960), p. 50).

<sup>12</sup> Arthenice, 'The Woman Novelist', *Bulletin*, 4 April 1923, RP.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Denis Glover, *The Arraignment of Paris* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1937); A.R.D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, and G.E. Fairburn, *The Woman Problem and Other Prose* (Auckland: B. & J. Paul, 1967).

of Australian literary critics of the 1920s it is scarcely surprising that the young Miles Franklin's brilliant career went 'bung' almost before it began.<sup>15</sup>

Today critics will acknowledge that, despite the romantic myths, the new century was well underway before a distinctive vein of nationalism began to be seen in the country's literary production, which, on examination, had remained relatively meagre throughout the nineteenth century. Vance Palmer, pointing out that Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River*, which had the widest circulation and most popular influence in Australia and beyond, was concerned less with a utopian future than a 'romantic pastoral past',<sup>16</sup> identifies two significant strands, post-1900, that he argued represented the mix of nihilism and idealism that the *Bulletin's* brand of populist nationalism reflected. One of them was Joseph Furphy's (Tom Collins) 1903 classic, *Such is Life*, with the author's own famously laconic description of it to the *Bulletin* editor, A.G. Stephens: 'Temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian'.<sup>17</sup> The other strand was the aspirational but earthy utopianism of the poet and academic Bernard O'Dowd, manifested in both his long 1912 work, *The Bush*, and his much anthologised short poem 'Australia', with their vision of a society that would become a model for free men:

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,  
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West  
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?  
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?<sup>18</sup>

This evocation of a better and different destiny for a young country will re-echo across the Tasman a quarter of a century later in Curnow's reflection on a New Zealand of the future in the 'Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch': 'Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, | Will learn the trick of standing upright here'.<sup>19</sup>

Most critics today agree that the *Bulletin's* taste in poetry tended to be unadventurous and hide-bound by received poetic imagery and conventions throughout the 1920s and 1930s: 'Australian poetry [...] spent a lot of time at the bottom of the garden – with the fairies – or

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<sup>15</sup> Miles Franklin, *My Career Goes Bung: Purporting to Be the Autobiography of Sybylla Penelope Melvyn [a Novel]* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1946). Written around 1902, this sequel to Franklin's highly successful *My Brilliant Career* was considered too hot to handle by her publishers and did not appear until 1946, by which time the author was 69. Franklin was emphatically feminist, dismayed by the inequities of marriage, and contemptuous of notions of romantic love.

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Furphy, letter to the *Bulletin*, 4 April 1897, in Clark, 'Furphy, Joseph (1843–1912)'.  
<sup>18</sup> Bernard O'Dowd, 'Australia', *Bulletin*, 12 May 1900, RP2.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Curnow, 'Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch', in *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 220.

in embarrassingly Hellenised bush settings'.<sup>20</sup> But its Red Page remained an important forum for literary criticism and discussion and continued to attract the work of both well-known poets and new voices, among them Mary (later Dame) Gilmore, Christopher Brennan, Vincent Buckley, E.J. Brady, Kylie Tennant, H.D. Fitzgerald, Zora Cross, Gwen Harwood, a young Judith Wright, and the New Zealanders David McKee Wright, Douglas Stewart, Nora Kelly (who as Nora McAuliffe also edited the *Bulletin's* women's pages), Frank Morton, Robin Hyde, A.R.D. Fairburn and Elizabeth Riddell. The fact that the *Bulletin*, or its literary Red Page, was edited by New Zealanders for a substantial part of its early twentieth century existence and was rarely without New Zealand writers in its pages and on its staff was further encouragement. Post-federation the influence of A.H. Adams and David McKee Wright, both New Zealanders who were literary editors of the *Bulletin* for 17 of the 19 years from 1907 to 1926, was striking and it was during this time that much of Riddell's early work first appeared in the magazine. She remained a regular contributor from 1923 to 1931, then her contributions lapsed while she travelled and worked in Europe. Simultaneously, the *Bulletin* became a less popular venue for New Zealand creative writers, a trend attributed by Marshall to the 'powerful growth of national literary consciousness in New Zealand' at the same time as an increase in the number of local outlets for publication such as *Art in New Zealand* and its annual spin-off anthology, *New Zealand Best Poems*, journals like the short-lived but influential *Phoenix*, the fortnightly journal *Tomorrow*, and the publishing initiatives of Denis Glover and the Caxton Press in Christchurch and Robert Lowry in Auckland.<sup>21</sup> During this period (post 1926) when Australians dominated the *Bulletin's* editorial chair, there was, however, a sprinkling of significant new contributors from New Zealand including Robin Hyde, Arnold Wall, A.R.D. Fairburn, Eve Langley and Frank Sargeson who published one of his best-known short stories, 'A Great Day'. Riddell's name (as Elizabeth Riddell) did not reappear until the mid-1940s when she became a regular contributor during the twenty-year literary editorship (1940-1960) of the New Zealand poet and journalist, Douglas Stewart, publishing twenty poems between 1948 and 1960 including the sequence 'Forbears' which became the title of her second volume in 1961. Her last poem for the *Bulletin* appeared in 1994. However, Riddell's early published work escaped attention in both countries, except for what many would describe as the dubious accolade of having two poems selected for inclusion in the 1930 New Zealand anthology of verse, *Kowhai Gold*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Matthews, 'Literature and Conflict', in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Laurie Hergenhan (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 303-18 (p. 314).

<sup>21</sup> Marshall, 'New Zealand Literature in the Sydney Bulletin, 1880-1930', p. 398.

<sup>22</sup> Pope, ed. *Kowhai Gold*, pp. 134-35.

By the time this anthology appeared, to mostly critical disparagement in both New Zealand and Australia, she was a working journalist in Sydney and had temporarily adopted the pen-name of Elizabeth Richmond for her poetry. Although she was contributing sporadically to the *Bulletin* when the anthology appeared, no one on the editorial staff of the weekly appeared to have connected ‘Betty Riddell of Maoriland’ to Elizabeth Richmond of New South Wales, and her contributions were not singled out for comment by the weekly when it reviewed *Kowhai Gold*, unfavourably, on the weekly’s Red Pages in January 1931. Arthur D. Wylie’s blunt views about the artificiality of New Zealand poets and their failure to acknowledge that they no longer lived in ‘primrose-bordered and slum-slimed England’ started a minor literary wrangle.<sup>23</sup> Stung by Wylie’s dismissive comments, the New Zealand poet, O.N. Gillespie – whose contributions to the anthology are mentioned in a tone of conspicuous irony – responded rather ambiguously that the criticism was unfair because it was ‘too easy to make’ and that at least New Zealanders preferred ‘London to Chicago or Hollywood as their literary capital.’<sup>24</sup> Wylie, in turn, responded with his opinion that judging by the many Maoriland poets he had met, their ‘literary merit was in most cases in inverse ratio to their respectability.’<sup>25</sup> This mini trans-Tasman argument did not go much further, proving little more than the subjectivity of literary criticism, but it is worth noting that both participants in the war of words were New Zealanders and, presumably coincidentally, on the same page as the above exchange, there was a poem by Riddell under her adopted pen-name Elizabeth Richmond that would become a familiar text to generations of Australian high school children. It is called ‘Lifesaver’ and I examine it in the context of her early Australian poetry below. These cross-Tasman intersections in the cultural orbits of the two countries and in the pages of the *Bulletin* itself were frequent and unremarkable at the time. The magazine regularly ran literary news and reviews of New Zealand books and writers and prompted sometimes lively cross-Tasman literary discourse in its Red Page correspondence.

In 1929, the influential Australian critic and short story writer, Vance Palmer, reviewing a recent issue of *Art in New Zealand*, declared ‘to an outsider the most remarkable thing about Maoriland writing is the originality and strength of the women and the relative feebleness of the men’. He cites as examples of ‘authenticity’ the poets Jessie Mackay, Eileen Duggan, Dora Wilcox and Blanche Baughan and the fiction writers Katherine Mansfield, Jane Mander, and G.B. Lancaster, but mentions only two names, Hector Bolitho and Alan

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur D. Wylie, ‘Maoriland, Her Poets!’, *Bulletin*, 7 January 1931, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> O.N. Gillespie, ‘Maoriland, Her Poets!’, *Bulletin*: 4 February 1931, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur D. Wylie, ‘The Real Maoriland Flavour’, *Bulletin*, 4 March 1931, p. 3.

Mulgan,<sup>26</sup> to support his opinion of ‘feeble’ male writers. In the six years since ‘Arthenice’ delivered his unattributed sermon from the mount about women’s failure to achieve great art and great literature there appeared to have been an attitudinal shift in the *Bulletin’s* editorial policy relating to gender, even though the cartoons and jokes continued to be as sexist and racist as ever. The article drew an indignant response from Quentin Pope, soon to launch *Kowhai Gold*, about Palmer’s ignorance of any male Maoriland writers other than Bolitho and Mulgan and listing a number of poets who he claimed easily outshone the examples cited by the reviewer, among them Robin Hyde, A.R.D. Fairburn, Alison Grant and Una Currie.

Occasionally, however, there were examples of solidarity and accord among Australian and New Zealand critics. A negative review in the *Bulletin* of Hector Bolitho’s non-fiction series *New Zealanders* drew a protest from a Bolitho fan, who pointed to enthusiastic reviews of the series by London *Punch* and the *Times Literary Supplement* as proof of the *Bulletin’s* flawed and biased assessment, but drew strong counter-argument from *New Zealanders* in support of the Australian critic’s view. ‘When the *Times Literary Supplement* says that Bolitho’s book [...] is a model for the series to which it belongs it merely establishes the incapacity of the reviewer to whom the book was dished out’ declared Quentin Pope, adding that the writer’s persistence in producing ‘the drivel of the *New Zealanders*, which nothing but an amazing cheek would have permitted him to undertake when he was superbly unfitted for it, deserves all the brickbats that float along.’<sup>27</sup> Another Maoriland correspondent bemoaned the New Zealand writer’s unfitness to be considered a model for anything:

Whenever Hector Bolitho’s name appears in the cables or in literary journals, many a Maorilander wishes that something could be done to prevent Bolitho running loose around the Cold Country spreading erroneous ideas of Maoriland.<sup>28</sup>

Despite what later literary historians declared was little or no *Bulletin* school of influence on New Zealand’s literary directions in the in the 1930s, there is clear evidence that the magazine did engage with New Zealand’s cultural production and in cross-Tasman literary criticism, even if there was less reciprocal activity from the other side. The list of New Zealand poets and novelists who found the *Bulletin* an encouraging venue and Australia a powerful magnet for their first steps away from the margins, testifies to a perception that

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Mulgan, a New Zealand poet, critic and non-fiction writer, was literary editor for the *Auckland Star* from 1916 to 1935. He wrote only one novel, *Spur of Morning* (1934) and a number of factual works. He was the father of John Mulgan, whose novel, *Man Alone* (1939) was hailed as the quintessential New Zealand novel of the post-war and post-depression generation of the 1930s.

<sup>27</sup> Quentin Pope appearing in ‘The Kick of the Kiwi’, Correspondence column, *Bulletin*, 17 April 1925, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Unknown correspondent appearing in *ibid.*

Australia and its publishing world offered more opportunities for those who felt the urge to move closer to the cultural centre: poets, fiction writers and journalists, among them G.B. Lancaster, Jean Devanny, Ruth Park, Dora Wilcox, Paula Hangar, Lilla Gormhuille McKay, Dulcie Deamer, Lola Ridge, Will Lawson, Mary Gurney, Eve Langley and Elizabeth Riddell were among some of the more distinguished New Zealand contributors who made Sydney their home.

The arrival of the energetic and enthusiastic Stewart in 1940 saw the *Bulletin* once again become a significant venue for literary cross-Tasman discourse and publication. Stewart's ideological position was not extreme – he was suspicious of moralistic Marxist ideology but also conscious that the sentimental lyricism of the twenties and thirties, epitomised by *Kowhai Gold* and much of the verse in the *Bulletin*, was febrile and desiccated. His talent as a creative writer combined with his critical skills and journalistic nous revitalised the weekly's literary pages and, according to Marshall, restored the periodical to a 'centrality in Australia's literary life which it had not had for decades',<sup>29</sup> while his interest in exploring the nationalistic impulses of the times led to a lively critical engagement with both countries' literary cultures, even though much of the discourse went unacknowledged by the New Zealand literary establishment of the time.

Very little critical analysis of the *Bulletin's* role in New Zealand's cultural production has been done since, other than Theresia Marshall's comprehensive 1995 thesis which indexes nearly 6000 items, more than two thirds of them poetry, by New Zealand writers that appeared in the Sydney *Bulletin* in the period from 1880 to 1960 – a literary archive unmatched by any other individual magazine of the time. However, in 1983, the Wellington historian J.O.C. Phillips asked whether there was 'a *Bulletin* school in New Zealand' and concluded there was not: 'There apparently was a considerable audience in New Zealand for the *Bulletin* and some popular enthusiasm for its distinctive school of writers. But enthusiasm for that school did not penetrate far into New Zealand literary circles.'<sup>30</sup>

Phillips' view that the literary elite in New Zealand found the *Bulletin* style inimical to the genteel aspirations of the 'Britain of the South' is generally accepted as a reason for intellectual resistance to the influence of the popular Sydney weekly, but this very acceptance implies that a literary tradition is forged not by the people involved in literary production – the writers and artists themselves – but by a ruling intellectual elite. This may well have been the case in New Zealand, as Phillips concedes, at a time when the ruling elite tended to be

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<sup>29</sup> Marshall, pp. 411-12.

<sup>30</sup> J.O.C. Phillips, 'Musings in Maoriland – or Was There a *Bulletin* School in New Zealand?', *Australian Historical Studies*, 20.81 (1983), pp. 520-35 (p. 523).

gendered male, coloured white and despite a burgeoning nationalist ideology, still substantially underpinned by aspirational middle-class values that included a distaste for association with convict settlement and the judgements and habits of the lower classes. Patrick Evans notes how Australia's anti-English subversion was seen by New Zealand's literary elite as 'coarse and vulgar – [...] sex obsessed and lower class in fact – and completely at odds with the conception of art as British as well as High'.<sup>31</sup> The stereotypes drawn by these social concepts had time to harden, simply because the issue of 'class' was then, and remains, the elephant in the room in New Zealand's social and literary discourse. New Zealand's literary elite may not have liked it but, as Terry Sturm argued in 1985, the *Bulletin* needs to be seen as a significant outlet for New Zealand popular culture rather than high culture and part of an 'ongoing trans-Tasman influence that received less acknowledgment partly because of a high cultural predisposition in literary criticism in New Zealand'.<sup>32</sup> Allen Curnow's dismissive view of the weekly in the 1960 edition of *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* perhaps exemplifies the negative view from across the ditch. 'The Sydney *Bulletin* eventually assumed the inexpensive role of patron of New Zealand poesy: it printed verse from New Zealand, labelling its country of origin with the pet name of Maoriland'.<sup>33</sup> The faintly defensive position taken by New Zealand's literary community in the 1930s, as it strove to define its identity and move from imitation to a more muscular expression of national relevance without conceding any high cultural ground, tended to feed the *Bulletin* school's impression of Maoriland, as propounded by Wylie in his 1931 review.

Australia, generally, was healthier and wealthier. It could afford to pay contributors reasonable rates for their work, a distinct advantage for struggling freelance writers who, without private means or academic protection, needed to earn their daily bread. New Zealand with its smaller population and rather more segregated publishing industry – struggling literary journals and university student publications for 'serious literature' and the daily press for matters of war, state and gossip – provided fewer opportunities for financial reward. The prolific New Zealand novelist and short fiction writer, G.B. Lancaster (Edith Lyttleton) for example, complained to a friend that New Zealand was 'death on native writers'.<sup>34</sup> Lancaster, whose short stories appeared regularly in the *Bulletin* in the first half of the twentieth century,

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990), p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Terry Sturm, 'The Neglected Middle Distance: Towards a History of Trans-Tasman Literary Relations', *Ariel*, 16.4 (1985), 29-46 (p. 31).

<sup>33</sup> Allen Curnow, *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Terry Sturm, *An Unsettled Spirit: The Life & Frontier Fiction of Edith Lyttleton (G.B. Lancaster)* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), p. 4.

was unequivocal about the reasons why: 'New Zealand would never publish a thing, even without pay, had no copyright laws, took no interest, gave no encouragement. Australia helped me no end'. Other New Zealand wordsmiths felt moved to describe the *Bulletin* offices as 'the gates of literary paradise'.<sup>35</sup> Like Lancaster, Riddell would complain later in life that she did not get paid for her work in New Zealand. 'I never got paid for anything until I came to Australia.'<sup>36</sup> Similarly Robin Hyde, who contributed to the *Bulletin* in the 1930s, wrote in *Journalese*: 'The *Bulletin* was the first journal that ever paid me a cheque; I mean a cheque one could flourish, a cheque for a guinea for a poem'.<sup>37</sup>

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Riddell wrote little new poetry in Australia in the two years after her arrival. The near silence testifies to the economic turmoil of the times and her need to learn her trade as a professional journalist. She taught herself how to type 'in a two-fingered way' and simply 'did everything I was told'.<sup>38</sup> Like many journalists she was seduced by the smell of printers' ink and the urgent roar of the press in those pre-computerised, pre-photoset times and found the hot metal process of newspaper production romantic, and the challenge of learning new competencies exciting. She quickly learned respect and gratitude for the skills of old-fashioned printers and compositors: 'It was the printers who got me through. It was hot metal then and they could make you or break you. Your page could go late if they didn't like you'. She was given a page of her own at *Truth* and to begin with did theatre and ballet reviews even though she claimed she knew nothing much about either art form:

I didn't have any critical facility whatever [...] People should really know how journalism functions – how you're told to go and cover a play and the next day you're sent to the stock exchange or to interview a lottery winner or something. You don't have any particular talents for these things but you were told to do them and so you'd go and do them [...] I suppose because journalists have to know a bit about everything. Not much about everything. Just a little bit about most things.<sup>39</sup>

Reviewing the arts, predominantly films and books as well as television, would eventually become one of her specialties; and literary journalism enabled her to continue working until the end of her life, but soon after joining Ezra Norton's *Truth* Riddell left the employer who had apparently paid her fare to Australia and two weeks' accommodation, and given her a job

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick Anthony Lawlor, *Confessions of a Journalist, with Observations on some Australian & New Zealand Writers* (Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1935).

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, *Tall Poppies*, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> Robin Hyde, *Journalese*, 1st edition (Auckland: National Printing, 1934), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

without insisting on a cadetship. She moved to the Smith's Newspaper Group, publishers of *Smith's Weekly* and its associated publications, the *Daily Guardian* and the *Sunday Guardian*, for an offer of more money.

It is likely Riddell was conscripted by her first editor, *Truth's* Frank Marien, who also left *Truth* to become editor in chief of the Smith's Newspaper Group in 1928. The group's original publication, *Smith's Weekly*, was a famously bellicose periodical known as the 'digger's bible' because of its resolute commitment to the legends of ANZAC. Its editorial policy was described as 'populist, egalitarian, crusading and aggressively nationalistic' and it was internationally known for its artists and illustrators – among them Virgil Reilly, Frank Dunne and George Finey – whose irreverent brand of humour and graphic skills allegedly made them among the highest paid illustrators in the world.<sup>40</sup> *Smith's Weekly* was a Sydney institution where Riddell worked as a general reporter and feature writer alongside the eminent poet and journalist Kenneth Slessor and experienced author/journalists like Colin Simpson and Colin Wills, reviewing films and books, writing features and trying to establish a niche in the newspaper world at a time when secure employment was under constant threat.

The changing fortunes of *Smith's Weekly* in the late 1920s and early 1930s provide a good example of the precarious nature of the world of the press at the time and serve as a graphic illustration of the environment in which Riddell found herself, as the impact of mergers and take-overs and the onset of a world depression combined to steadily erode the number of publications and the number of jobs available to working journalists.<sup>41</sup> Riddell, like most journalists at the time, found herself in a constant struggle for work, as the battle for ownership of the major newspaper publishing houses of the country began in earnest. *Smith's Weekly* would turn out to be critical in the naissance of one of Australia's two monolithic publishing dynasties – Frank Packer's ACP – and instrumental a few years later in the northward spread of what would become Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. How Riddell managed to survive through the shifting loyalties and allegiances of those times is worth reviewing in this context.

*Smith's Weekly* had been a spectacular success story since its launch in 1919, a success driven largely by its founding editor, Claude McKay and the managing editor, Clyde Packer. The proprietor, Joynton Smith (later Sir Joynton), a self-made millionaire and a

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<sup>40</sup> Graham Seal, *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology* (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2004), p. 22, 97.

<sup>41</sup> In 50 years as the Australian population doubled the number of newspapers fell by one-third. The trend accelerated from 1923 when there were 26 city daily papers owned by 21 independent owners to 1950 when 15 city dailies survived with 10 owners [Henry Mayer, *The Press in Australia* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1964), p.31)].

former Mayor of Sydney, had no newspaper experience but wanted a publication that would reflect his views. When it made a profit after two years, Smith rewarded McKay and Packer by giving them each one third shares in the company. In 1927 there was a falling out over editorial interference that had all the hallmarks of a quintessential Australian barney fostered by the unrepentant larrikinism of the tabloid press. A former *Smith's Weekly* journalist, George Blaikie, in a biographical history of the weekly, records that Sir Joynton was under pressure from some of his rich business associates and influential advertisers to rein in his paper's boxing writer who was persistently editorialising against the newly popular sport of wrestling, describing it as corrupt and nothing more than a phoney racket.<sup>42</sup> The editor, McKay, a stubborn man, would not accept editorial pressure or interference from anybody. He refused to muzzle the reporter and publicly invited the complainants to take out a writ against the paper. The stand-off between owner and editor reached a deadlock and Smith decided to resolve it by offering to sell out his one-third interest in the company to his fellow shareholders – McKay and Packer. McKay, apparently to everyone's surprise, declined and instead offered to sell his third share to Packer and Smith. He resigned and his editorial job was taken by Marien who moved from *Truth* bringing a young Betty Riddell with him. This shift in the composition of the successful triumvirate of Smith, McKay and Packer at a time when the company's stable of papers, which now included the *Daily Guardian* and the *Sunday Guardian*, were easily outstripping their Sydney competition, had a domino effect. Soon after, when *Smith's* announced it was intending to break into the evening paper market, Associated Press, owners of the existing evening paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, decided to buy off the enemy. They made a bid of £575,000 (most of it in preference shares) in return for the *Daily Guardian* and *Sunday Guardian* and a guarantee by the *Smith's* directors that they would not try enter the evening newspaper market. The bid was accepted and Smith and Packer were left with only *Smith's Weekly* while Associated News merged the *Guardian* papers into their own daily and weekend papers. Riddell, by this time working largely for the *Guardian* papers under the editorship of the former New Zealand journalist Eric Baume, was among the writing staff who became surplus to requirements almost overnight. She recalled those turbulent times in an interview about her early career in journalism:

Two morning papers were merged, so there was two of everybody. If you had a round then you had to compete with an opposition [journalist]. I didn't get mine because I was doing casual jobs, I didn't have a regular round. Every week I expected the sack but with a bit of luck I came up with something. I

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<sup>42</sup> Gordon Blaikie, *Remember Smith's Weekly?* (Melbourne: Rigby, 1966).

hung on in there, I hung on [...] somehow I survived. This is one of the things I learned about myself, I have great survival qualities.<sup>43</sup>

In a curious way, the heavy drinking pub culture of the Sydney press, and women's exclusion from it, worked to Riddell's advantage as she fought to stay employed. She used the problems caused to news editors by the drinking rituals of her male colleagues (many of whom used to write their copy at their favourite bar and send it to their paper via a messenger boy) by hanging around the news-desk and making herself available for assignments they would not, or could not, cover. This led to tabloid-type scoops and sometimes took her into lurid scenarios of death and violence. She recalled Baume sending her out to cover a horse racing accident in which three jockeys had been killed: 'It was a big Saturday-night-for-Sunday-morning story because of racing. I was out there with a photographer and bits of jockeys lying around. People were going around picking up fragments of bodies.'<sup>44</sup> She also famously interviewed both aggressors and victims during what became known as Sydney's 'razor wars' at the beginning of the 'thirties.<sup>45</sup> At one point Baume allegedly persuaded her to take drugs as an experiment and write about the experience.<sup>46</sup> Baume also lost his job when the *Guardian* was merged with the *Telegraph* in 1930 but was recruited back to the Associated News stable the following year and was instrumental in creating Riddell as the newspaper's 'sob-sister'. Riddell later declared that his idea, and his support, saved her from being side-lined into the women's pages, or sacked.

[It was] the sort of thing that is now in the tabloids, but wasn't then. You would do an interview with somebody whose wife has just been murdered or something. Television does now, what I did then. And he produced me. So, when all the male journalists were playing billiards, pool, or in the pub, there I was and he sent me out on the good jobs ... jobs that you got into the paper. It was a tabloid in a sense, but nothing like they are now [...] we didn't steal photographs from people. We asked for them occasionally. But we didn't say to a woman, whose child is lying dead at her feet, "How do you feel?" We were not as stupid as that.<sup>47</sup>

Baume's invention, influenced by American trends at the time, clearly consolidated Riddell's reputation as a hard-nosed, hard-working reporter and she managed to stay

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<sup>43</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, *Tall Poppies*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Tony Stephens, 'Accidental Journalist, Poet without Pretence', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 1989, p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> Paula Hamilton, 'Journalists, Gender and Workplace Culture 1900-1940', in *Journalism: Print, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Anne Curthoys and Julianne Schultz, UQP Australian Studies (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1999), 97-116 (p. 109).

<sup>47</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

gainfully employed throughout the worst years of the depression. The take-over, however, had not worked well for the new owners. They found the mix of the titles and merged operations were not working and the company's share price and market share dropped dramatically. At this point, Associated News turned to Clyde Packer, now a shareholder in both companies as a result of the buy-out deal, and invited him to take control of the post-merger operations as managing editor. He sold his interest in *Smith's Weekly* back to Sir Joynton and joined Associated Newspapers. This left Smith with only his original publication and no idea how to run it. Enter Claude McKay again, tired of a life of leisure in England and prepared to lend a hand. But the new editor, Frank Marien, and the commercial advertising manager Frank Packer – who happened to be Clyde's only son and also by now a shareholder in Smith's – objected to McKay's return. Smith once again resolved the dilemma with hard cash by buying out Frank Packer's shares. The young man went off to join his father at Associated Newspapers where he re-instated Eric Baume as a news editor. By 1932, Clyde Packer had turned things around at Associated Newspapers, and in 1933 his son founded the phenomenally successful *Australian Women's Weekly* for the company. Clyde Packer died a year later but his son carried on and the chain of events ignited by an argument over wrestling coverage at *Smith's Weekly* led, eventually, to the rise of a dynastic media complex that is now Australian Consolidated Press. *Smith's Weekly* lasted until 1950 (its fortunes temporarily boosted by the advent of World War II and a re-ignition of Anzac jingoism) when it was sold to Keith Murdoch of the Melbourne *Herald* who wanted Sydney premises from which to expand his growing inter-state newspaper empire. *Smith's Weekly* disappeared and another organisation that would become the media monolith now known as News Corp began its invasion of Sydney.

By the time *Smith's Weekly* closed, Riddell was a distinguished and sought-after journalist and broadcaster as well as a regular contributor to prestigious literary magazines and periodicals. But as a young journalist at the end of the 1920s she was enjoying the freedoms of a single working woman in an exciting city with colourful colleagues who were close to where things were happening. Riddell would later say she just 'lived and breathed journalism' in those early years, and it is clear she took it seriously as a way to learn, and a way to earn, by writing. But she took poetry seriously as a way to say what she was learning about life. Both impulses seem to steadily coalesce once she arrived in Australia with ambitions to live by writing, to see the world and to describe what she was seeing and feeling. The effects of her new life can be perceived in her poetry: in a departure from the moribund neo-Victorian themes and dutiful recitation of classical tropes to an increasingly clear-eyed and compelling conflation of the rules of journalistic reportage – brevity,

organisation, observation, and an epigrammatic directness – with a restrained lyrical instinct. These qualities begin to show in her poetic output in the next two years in a handful of transitional works which, in their combination of romanticism and pragmatism signal developments in her poetic and personal style that will inform her hybrid working existence for the rest of her life.

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**“Of man’s life a thing apart ...”<sup>48</sup>**

Poems by Bettie Riddell of Maoriland continued to appear in the Sydney *Bulletin* after she arrived in Sydney, one of them more than a year after she had arrived, indicating that they were probably submitted from New Zealand and been held in galleys for use as and when space dictated – a not unusual practice when poems were regularly used as fillers for a short-falling article or a sudden gap in the paper because of an advertising drop-out. However, the first indication of the poet’s new address appears four months after her arrival in March 1928, with a poem by Bettie Riddell of New South Wales. ‘The Historian’ is worth examining in the light of her romanticised earlier works about ancient cultures and exotic places such as ‘Vanitas’<sup>49</sup> and ‘Thaïs in Pace’<sup>50</sup> and for a subtle but significant shift in the poet’s stylistic approach. Instead of placing the writer’s emotional view at the centre of a token male point of view – as in ‘The Happy Warrior’<sup>51</sup> – which tends to destabilise the authenticity of both protagonists, the historian’s inner voice is expressed from an intimate perspective in which the poet does not interfere. The self-absorbed plaints of ‘Immunity’<sup>52</sup> for example, have been replaced by the detached voice of an observant witness or reporter and the position of the object has been embedded in the meditation of the subject:

Many a night I wander while you sleep,  
Until my heart is warmed by ancient fire  
From immemorial torches, flickering out  
Beyond the windy battlements of Tyre.<sup>53</sup>

The poet has yielded the point of view to the narrative voice in a way that avoids the mimicry of her early attempts to adopt a male perspective. The clear acknowledgement that the driving image of the poem – the sleeping woman – has no agency in the meditation other than as a

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<sup>48</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, c1.194 (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 94

<sup>49</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘Vanitas’, *The Sun* (Christchurch), 23 March 1923, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘Thaïs in Pace’, *Bulletin*, 14 May 1925, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘The Happy Warrior’, *The Sun* (Christchurch), 8 August 1924, p.12.

<sup>52</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘Immunity’, *Bulletin*, 30 June 1927, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘The Historian’, *Bulletin*, 28 March 1928, p. 45.

prompt for yearning about the past, enables a more convincing and authoritative internal monologue by a man preoccupied with the cult of the warrior and chafing at his current status as perhaps a husband or an exile from his previous life:

Blood calls to blood across the Carthage heights,  
For these are my blood-brothers, walking slow  
With hearts upon the gusty clouds above  
And eyes upon the wicked rocks below [...]  
I am at home with restless Romans by  
The river's edge where the white iris blows,  
Where, crushed in goblets with a dark design,  
I drink the wine-red lustre of the rose ('The Historian').

The poem evolves naturally into a reasoned meditation on the differences that can both ignite and extinguish the responses of lover to beloved and vice versa without self-conscious interventions by the object in the tableau. Here the male gaze is uninterrupted by special pleadings even though the gendered aspect is clear:

And so I find you cold. Not your smooth skin  
Nor all the secret curving of your mouth  
Means half as much as one thin thread of song  
From old romances of the scented South ('The Historian').

The traditional attributes of beauty and desirability – smooth skin, seductive mouth, tiny hands, bright hair – once possessed have no particular claim to enduring, all-absorbing passion no matter how many convenient myths are woven around the concept of romance as an ultimate destination and reward. Here the poet takes on a male persona to render romantic love as a second rate inconvenience by comparison with his real passion.

Sleep on, sweet lady. I am happier so.  
Swung down the ages on a passionate dream.  
Your small hands smudge the lovely colours out,  
Your bright head blots a more enduring gleam ('The Historian').

The theme is an exploration of the Byronic assertion – 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, | 'Tis woman's whole existence'<sup>54</sup> – where the poet inhabits the perspective of the historian to illustrate the futility of believing that the universe of romantic love has everything needed for the centre to hold. The treatment is worth comparing with an earlier dissertation on the condition of being 'alone in a state of intimacy' published in the *Bulletin* less than six months earlier. In 'The Changeling', the self-aware position of the writer as subject is unconvincing because subtle gender ambiguities disturb the narrative and produce an impression of self-serving pretence simply because it is difficult to work out who is

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<sup>54</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, c1.194 (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 94.

speaking. The theme is the same – a distant or distracted response causes anxiety and forces re-assurance:

Beyond your body's closeness  
Your soul strays,  
Seeking the magic of the far-off days[.]<sup>55</sup>

But the conviction of the voice is weakened by the subject's special pleadings and a too literal, almost clumsy, analysis of the source of the unease. It does not ring true.

I caught your fluttering hands,  
I kissed your mouth;  
But restless, out of still and secret lands  
Drift all the lovely languors of the south.  
You are the conquering child, uncrowned, unclaimed;  
Alas for me, untamed! ('The Changeling')

As a result the treatment is oddly reductive: the reader is left only with the irritating sound of somebody complaining about their lot, whereas in 'The Historian' the separateness of individuals and the boundaries of possession and 'knowing' are acknowledged with a mature dispassion, suggesting a stylistic shift that is arguably the result of Riddell's developing skills as a journalistic observer and possibly to a more worldly life-style. It is a change of gear that demonstrably drives the remaining poems published in the first few years of her new life in Australia, where her characteristic directness of attack shows signs of being applied to something more tangible and relevant than the fairy-tale world of romance she inhabited as a young woman.

Six months after Riddell left New Zealand for Australia, the *Bulletin* featured a Riddell poem that speaks powerfully of new beginnings. It is the last appearance of the name Bettie Riddell in the weekly. 'To Keep Me Unafraid' invokes a lapsarian theme with Miltonesque imagery of burning angels and swords to frame inner uncertainties while belligerently acknowledging possible peril:

Out of a lily-bed and out of fire  
I drew this thing I love, the fighting song  
Of Christ and Adam – epic of desire  
Listened for overlong.<sup>56</sup>

Although lilies are said to be synonymous with purity and innocence they also figure in Greek legend as a metaphor for temptation and for the gates of Hell. Persephone was gathering lilies when Hades abducted her to the Underworld, for example, and Apollo's catamite Hyacinthus was transformed into a red lily, symbolising unlawful or profane

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<sup>55</sup> Bettie Riddell, 'The Changeling', *Bulletin*, 10 November, 1927, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Bettie Riddell, 'To Keep Me Unafraid', *Bulletin*, 9 May 1928, p.58.

passion. Here the lily as an ambiguous symbol of spiritual or physical love is invoked as a trope for a personal battle between the notions of Adam and Eve's lapse and the redemptive love of Christ. It appears to be an example of the poet re-thinking a convent education and challenging accepted behaviours and beliefs:

A burning angel from the gates of God  
Leaned down. For my reward  
I saw a flower blossom from the sod  
And, in my hand, a sword ('To Keep Me Unafraid').

The defiant tone of a warrior is muted in the final verse and the source of the belligerence is revealed as insecurity and self-doubt, like a tremulous child whistling in the dark. The avenging imagery abruptly converts to a something more like a peaceful shrine and the evocation of a personal mantra.

I have lit a candle in my heart  
To the song, the flower and the blade –  
A candle, blowing bravely and apart,  
To keep me unafraid ('To Keep Me Unafraid').

In this and other poems from the early 1930s Riddell appears to be experimenting with her poetic voice and control of narrative – a quest that carries with it the need to examine distinctions between sentience and intellect. Kendrick Smithyman compared the process to the symbolic operations applied, in formal philosophy, to testing the logic or otherwise of an ethical proposition, '... a poem is a means of knowing, of learning as well as of expressing'.<sup>57</sup> The intersection between making a statement and arousing an emotional response can be the flashpoint for that moment of perfect balance between poet and audience – the flash of recognition – provided the poet is comfortably in control of both impulses. In this poem, Riddell manages the sharp disjunct between the imagery in the last line of verse two, '[...] in my hand a sword', and the first line of verse three, '[...] a candle in my heart' to emphasise an epiphanous moment without over-promoting the emotional intensity of the mini-prayer embedded in the final verse. The work revisits the tentative apprehension of possible divine retribution manifest in 'Rendezvous' written two years earlier,<sup>58</sup> where '[...] God's eyes | search in the darkness for a sight of one | twisting a thorn for torture of His Son' and progresses the internal discourse to a position of moral self-determination and a rejection of the notion of omniscient judgement while keeping fingers firmly crossed. There is a faintly confessional tone to this poem and the essentially flippant gestures of defiance against

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<sup>57</sup> Kendrick Smithyman, 'Wellington and the Fifties: The True Voice of Feeling', in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. by Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), 29-42 (p. 30).

<sup>58</sup> Bettie Riddell, 'Rendezvous', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 22 January 1926, p. 10.

sentiment evident in earlier words like ‘The Little Death’<sup>59</sup> and even ‘The Happy Warrior’ are transformed into a more considered poetic register that balances mood and narrative without unnecessary posturing.

The confessional tone persists in the next published work by Riddell, ‘Windy Nocturne’, where a storm evokes expressions of vulnerability and loneliness.

Day, lately dead amid the smoke of sunset,  
Flings a pale moon above the slated roofs.  
I hear the rush of wings, the whispered singing,  
The pounding goat-god hoofs.<sup>60</sup>

An unguarded memory bank of fairy tales and nursery rhymes – bogeymen, ghosts, fears of the stormy dark – spills over as nature in a wild mood feeds childhood fancies prompted by the shapes and movements of clouds and trees being tossed by an urgent wind:

Mysterious light! Trees glimpsed through veils of amber  
Are ghostly, ghostly. Evil is abroad.  
Winds scatter odours from a secret cabinet  
Where wizardry is stored (‘Windy Nocturne’).

Like Longfellow’s evocation of ‘cloudy fancies’ that ‘Suddenly shape in some divine expression’ or the despairing sense of irredeemable loss raised by W.B. Yeats’ in ‘All the wild witches, those most noble ladies | For all their broom-sticks and their tears, their angry tears are gone’,<sup>61</sup> resurgent imagery of childhood fears evoked by a stormy evening prompts a further unlocking of barriers against memory and nostalgia and the final verse evolves into a spontaneous emotional reaction to an unexpected *recherche du temps perdu*.

The witches ride the piled clouds bravely, blowing  
Wild laughter down the sky like a falling star.  
All joy is lost in the shadows, and I am crying  
For things remote and far.<sup>62</sup>

Natural phenomena, in particular furious storms, feature again in Riddell’s poetry and although there is no evidence that she suffered any particular phobia it is worth noting an early poem included in her first collection in 1948 called ‘Storm Over Stone’ in which the same childlike fears are recorded:

No brightness of lightning over the waters to warn me,  
No flash in the leaves,  
Only the dark and hidden storm rolling upon me,

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<sup>59</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘The Little Death’, *Bulletin*, 2 December 1926, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Betty Riddell, ‘Windy Nocturne’, *Bulletin*, 11 July, 1928, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘Lines Written in Dejection’, in *The Wild Swans at Coole and Other Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919).

<sup>62</sup> Riddell, ‘Windy Nocturne’.

The flimsy skyscraper heaves,  
There is nothing to do but cover my eyes and stand,  
Give me your hand.<sup>63</sup>

The chronology of Riddell's early Australian work is interrupted in December 1928 by the appearance of another contribution to the *Bulletin* by 'Bettie Riddell of Maoriland'. 'Finis' has all the hallmarks of a much earlier work with its vague gestures toward the notion of universal human sadness:

The late moon climbs along a track of glory,  
And a hushed wind is full of unshed tears.  
There is heartbreak at the end of every story,  
And quiet night to crown the flying years.<sup>64</sup>

It is almost certainly one she submitted from New Zealand before she left. However, its belated appearance after her promising debut works as a Sydney writer may have prompted the poet to disassociate herself from her early works by taking a new pen-name. In 1930 the poet re-emerges as Elizabeth Richmond (her father's Christian name and her own middle name) in the *Bulletin* after an absence of nearly two years.

Logically, the silence can be attributed to the poet's pressing need to learn her trade and stay employed during the onset of the depression and the effects of a newspaper war. A young working woman could be forgiven for losing sight of her poetic muse at such a time and there were probably other distractions. Asked later in life why she had stayed in Sydney and made Australia her home when times were so hard, Riddell admitted it had not been just the allure of journalism that kept her. Fifty years later she told an interviewer: 'I fell in love with a man of forty-seven, an editor ... a very travelled and experienced married man with a child'.<sup>65</sup> The unidentified lover too was affected by the mergers of Sydney's daily papers in the early 1930s and like many of his colleagues had to leave Australia for work. He sailed from Sydney in the early 1930s to take a job on one of Frank Packer's news bureaux in London, a move clearly recorded in the final verse of 'Interior Decoration' (below). The evidence of a seminal romantic liaison is manifest in three of the last poems published under the name Elizabeth Richmond, and their biographical nature is difficult to ignore. The first of them, 'Attics', also reflects an increasing worldliness suggesting a rejection of the taboos of a conservative childhood based on respectable behaviour, and the development of a personal moral code.

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Riddell, 'Storm over Stone', in *Poems* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1948), p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Betty Riddell, 'Finis', *Bulletin*, 8 December 1928, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

Attics were made for poets. Little rooms  
High up above the pigeon-breasted clouds,  
Yet not too high to hear the clamorous crowds  
Nor see how beautifully the violet blooms.  
Open to the sun's story and the moon's.<sup>66</sup>

The intensely celebratory mood of 'Attics' carries with it a heady resolution to 'surrender-without-guilt'. Embedded in this poem is the powerful sense of admitting sexual desire as part of an aesthetic consciousness instead of something to be denied.

Throw wide your naked windows, throw them wide  
To the great legend-eyed gold ghosts of song,  
As to the late small star that stares inside! ('Attics')

The sense of sexual and emotional abandonment is manifest in the imagery of 'naked windows' thrown wide 'welcoming' the eyes of ghosts and the 'staring star' while sexual denial is personified as a grey malevolence – the thief of love – and placed in a wry conjunction with enduring poetic symbols of sexual restraint and unconsummated passion.

If down your street a shadow greyly hovers  
Matching his errant step with stumbling lovers,  
Hale him into the lamplight – he's a thief  
Who steals their sighs, who follows and discovers  
Where Laura trod, and where the burning Beatrice  
Lies locked in grief ('Attics').

The co-option of the legendary female muses, Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura, as lodestars of poetic vision, underlines an instinctive recourse to ancient tropes of romantic love but their deployment here questions their force and relevance in the portraits of pedestal images drawn by their poet admirers, waiting futilely to be awakened to life. Autumn, similarly, is invoked not as a symbol of dormancy and mature contentment but as something rather more fecund and vibrant:

And watch for autumn. She comes by in tears,  
Sweeter than any tears that springtimes spill.  
She speaks in thunder and the splash of rain. She hears  
The chantings beaten out with broken spears  
By dark men on some tattered midnight hill ('Attics').

The poem works subversively against traditional metaphors, rejecting distant worship in favour of more earthy and potentially dangerous passions with the imagery of atavistic rites of passage – 'chanting', 'spears' and 'dark men' at midnight – in some primitive enactment of ancient rituals. The high tension of this penultimate verse, as in so many Riddell poems, is

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<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Richmond, 'Attics', *Bulletin*, 25 June 1930, p. 50.

then abruptly ruptured by an almost disingenuous – but I suggest quite deliberate – switch in tone that enables another one of those *c'est la vie* shrugs. Ultimately the ancient muses in conjunction with the primal drums emphasise oppositional and mutually exclusive notions about love that act as a launching pad for a wry acknowledgement about the way in which high art and intellectual inspiration are not always proof against more earthy and urgent demands of the flesh.

Attics were made for poets – narrow rooms,  
Wan under moonlight. Through the open door  
Slips beauty. Pages flutter to the floor ('Attics').

'Attics', like three of the four poems from this period, uses a device of image-repetition where the opening line, or driving image, recurs in the final verse like an echo: 'Attics were made for poets [...]' in this instance acting as book-ends for the fragmented stream of consciousness embedded in between.

The same recurrence of the opening refrain occurs in the next Elizabeth Richmond contribution to the *Bulletin* four months later. 'Interior Decoration' pursues the same theme – that of love nests and domestic intimacy – but the narrative drive, instead of being anticipatory, appears to be a kind of epilogue to an affair. Just as in 'The Historian', there is evidence of the detached reporter describing the environmental manifestations of what is no longer – or perhaps has never been wholly – a shared space for lovers.

Between the window and the wall  
There are long curtains and a bed,  
There is the cushion for your head.  
The chair that knew your length, the tray  
That took the greying ash away  
From dying flames of cigarettes.<sup>67</sup>

Another development, and a very journalistic strategy, is the use of inventory to create impressions of a shared life – a technique that intensifies throughout the poem.

There is the bookcase, there the books  
With covers blue and red and gold,  
And some are new, and some are old.  
The things they tell you inside are true  
Of you – and me and you ('Interior Decoration').

The deft use of a masculine caesura forced by the em-dash in the final line of the first verse suggests increasing technical competence when viewed against earlier Riddell works where the device tends to be used at the end of a line as little more than a slapdash gesture toward a

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Richmond, 'Interior Decoration', *Bulletin*, 22 October 1930, p. 45.

new thought. Here it serves to subtly emphasise the central theme of separation – the ‘us’ of an affair is ruptured and all that remains is an empty space between the window and the wall. ‘Interior Decoration’ has a fine narrative economy – it is almost a ‘list’ poem – reinforced by a rhythmic patterning that suggests impulses for panic and self-pity are being restrained by sheer rhetorical discipline: describing, by an act of will, prosaic items of domesticity instead of exploring the emotional trauma. As a result its most striking achievement is the calm recitation of the minutiae of a location to produce a palpable sense of a once intimate space:

There is the little broken lamp.  
And, strictly practical, the clock  
Breaks into silence with the knock  
Of tiny hammers. Time swings on.  
There is your picture on the shelf.  
And there the cards you used to play,  
Between the window and the wall,  
Between the night-time and the day;  
While people hurried home below,  
And supper was an hour away (‘Interior Decoration’).

The containment of the rhythm and rhyme in verse two sustains the detached voice of the reliable reporter but the quotidian ‘colour’ added by the final two lines – ‘While people hurried home below, | and supper was an hour away’ – subtly transcends the standard recitation of facts, the ‘who, when, where, how and why’ of a news story, and indicates a finely tuned instinct for story telling within the constraints of objective reporting. It cleverly paves the way for a switch in voice that is all the more poignant for being framed in an apparently level-headed and detached narrative:

There is the mirror that flung back  
Your smooth dark head. Now I, alone,  
Peer into it, faint-hearted to see  
Your own dark eyes stare back at me (‘Interior Decoration’).

The voice of the reporter is abruptly re-directed into a first person account of the emotional meaning of the scene with the introduction of an uncompromising ‘I’ into the penultimate verse, and finally the repetition of ‘Between the window and the wall’ as a metaphorical ‘container’ for the memorabilia of a love affair intensifies the sense of empty desolation without overstatement and demonstrates a maturing confidence in narrative control:

This is the room in which you said  
That you must go abroad for bread.  
This is the room that will belong  
To us when we are but a song  
Blown out upon a blowing wind ...  
Between the windows and the wall  
There was but love, and love was all (‘Interior Decoration’).

One further poem published under the name Elizabeth Richmond in the *Bulletin* probes rather more trenchantly what appears to be the same chapter in her life. Four months later, 'Of No Importance' appeared in the *Bulletin*. It is a crisp salutary tale about the complexities of affairs with married men delivered in the third person with a metaphorical shrug: it reads like a prayer written as a preamble to a curse:

Every day she heard a new promise,  
And all the promises are broken.  
All the old lies have been told her,  
And all the words spoken.  
There is nothing left but an echo  
Of a song they both once heard.  
There is nothing to say that is important –  
Not even her last word.<sup>68</sup>

All the indications are that at the same time she wrote this series she also penned a long poem – dated 1930 and examined below – that would not be published until 1940 in a single poem limited edition. Instead, in 1931, she turned her attention to Australiana and in March her first poem to engage overtly with her new country appeared in the *Bulletin*. 'Lifesaver' was one of the earliest serious works to deal with a feature of Australian life previously unexplored by poets and novelists: the surf life-saving culture. The poem became a familiar set text for generations of Australian school children in the 1960s and 1970s with its powerful metaphors of a familiar scene: that of bronzed young men patrolling the beloved beaches of the country and practising their rescue drills on one another.

He was brought up out of the sea,  
His tall body dead.  
He was carried shoulder-high  
Between the sea and sky.<sup>69</sup>

The cadences of 'Lifesaver' have an appropriately funeral march tempo and the words an almost monosyllabic quality, once again like a journalist reporting the facts or the short marching steps of the lifeguard parade. It is possible that Riddell was on an assignment to cover the tragedy – either that, or she reframed the standard ritual enacted routinely on the beaches of Sydney in a dark irony. The very simplicity of the repetitive metaphors mirror the superficially hedonistic and uncomplicated culture of sea and sun and sand in a vivid rendering of a familiar tableau: the lucky country at leisure. Death's entrance is made shocking by the contrast:

His eyes were dead, and his lips  
Closed on death, and his feet

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Richmond, 'Of No Importance', *Bulletin*, 2 February 1931, p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Richmond, 'Lifesaver', *Bulletin*, 4 March 1931, p. 5.

Chained with death, and his hands  
Cold with death ('Lifesaver').

The mock ritual of life-saving technique is transformed into the reality of a lifesaver losing his life. The potential for poetic irony in the concept is easily perceived, particularly in the imagination of someone examining cultural icons through the eyes of a stranger.

... He is one with the ships  
And the bones of pirate bands  
Steeped in salt and knavery.  
One with fish and fern and pearl  
And the long lonely beat  
Of the waves that ever curl  
On the shell and weed and sand  
Of the deep drowned land ('Lifesaver').

For Riddell, there may have been another prompt from a memory bank that sponsored this poem: that of her father who died as a result of drowning when she was six years old. The potential for a metaphorical conflation of the images of the life savers and unsaved lives may have proved impossible to ignore.

He was carried shoulder-high  
Up the alleys of the sun,  
And the heat  
Washed him over from his head to his feet.  
But you cannot give the body back breath  
With a flagon full of sun.  
He is drowned, the tall one.  
Thin brother Death  
Has him by the throat  
On the sand, in the sun ('Lifesaver').

The alignment of the sun washing the dead body on the sand and 'thin brother Death' deployed as an obscene contrast to the tall, bronzed surf hero, transforms the mood in a few chilling lines that underline both the irony and tragedy of the unfolding drama. Although the chronology of its publication (March 1931) suggests that the poem was written after the love affair had ended and after the metaphorical 'hand-washing' gestures in 'Of No Importance', it may also have been submitted to the *Bulletin* earlier and held over for several months. However 'Lifesaver' does appear to signal a re-awakening to another world beyond the love-nest scenario that sustains in the next, and last, poem by Elizabeth Richmond to feature in the *Bulletin*.

Just as 'Lifesaver' is the first work to be unequivocally situated in Australia, 'The Storm at the Point' is the first work with an identifiable Sydney setting. Miller's Point is a

promontory on the east side of Darling Harbour almost under the south-side approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge and directly opposite McMahons Point in North Sydney. The poem is a meditative piece on the power of nature to transform ways of seeing and feeling. By conflating the exhilarating physical sensations of a buffeting storm with the emotional effects of an inner turmoil, the poem operates as a rhythmic mantra for oppositional notions: the wind whipping ‘sorrow from your heart’ and simultaneously ‘tears into your eyes’.

At Miller’s Point on stormy days  
Wind whips the sorrow from your heart,  
The tears into your eyes; the drays  
Clip off along the rain-swept street,  
And the small sound of human feet  
Is lost along the sky.<sup>70</sup>

Polarities of size are reflected in a city-scape that dwarfs men and, in turn, a sky and sea-scape that dwarfs a city.

Man is a little crawling thing  
With pivoting mad arms and legs,  
And the high wind and its alarms  
Makes his head ring and his heels ring,  
And the tall bridge looks down on him,  
And past him, out to the mystery  
Of the long cloud that, loitering,  
Slides down into the sea (‘The Storm at the Point’).

The physical immanence of a massive steel structure is metallically echoed in man’s progress, making ‘his head ring and his heels ring’, while the bridge looks down and then up and out to an unseen horizon that remains mysterious to all but the clouds sliding down into the sea. One is reminded of the cityscape setting of one of Riddell’s early poems in the *Christchurch Sun*, ‘Beauty Bewitches’ (1927)<sup>71</sup> with its unusual – for the times – urban and industrialised setting used to frame an heroic female. It opens: ‘At night, far up along the scaffolding | When riveters are all gone home to dream’ but does not develop beyond an over-romanticised depiction of a different kind of setting for an old fashioned love-goddess.

‘The Storm at the Point’, by comparison, has a stability of structure which complements the setting it evokes with a precision that enables the reader to negotiate the introduction of disrupted time frames and conflicting, but oddly relevant, imagery, without being shaken loose from the super-structure of the poem: the immense Lego construction of the bridge that links the eye with the clouds and the horizon but not beyond.

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<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Richmond, ‘The Storm at the Point’, *Bulletin*, 29 April 1931, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Bettie Riddell, ‘Beauty Bewitches’, *The Sun* (Christchurch), 27 May 1927, p.10.

Man laughs a little, and then dies  
On a last chuckle at life's jest;  
But the hooves of old horses go  
On roads for ever to and fro ('The Storm at the Point').

The final verse sustains and intensifies the sense of the engineering mastery of both man and nature with the framing repetition of the opening lines enclosing the human view. Note, too, how those lines are reeled in backwards at the end:

And the long ragged gales reel  
Laughing in the teeth of steel,  
Whipping sorrow from your heart  
And tears into your eyes,  
At Miller's Point on stormy days  
Is the wind, and the wind's ways ('The Storm at the Point').

The end of the affair and this poem coincides with the disappearance of Elizabeth Richmond, and marks the beginning of a nine year silence from the poet. Then, in 1940, Betty Riddell re-emerged briefly with the publication of a narrative poem, *The Untrammelled*, produced by Viking Press. The volume is one of four illustrated limited editions each containing a single longish poem, and Riddell's contribution is a cathartic account of the love affair of ten years earlier; the end of the poem carries the date 1930. This places it, chronologically, around the time that 'Interior Decoration' was published (October 1930) and before the curtly dismissive take-no-prisoners eight line verse, 'Of No Importance' (February 1931). The publication drew some limited critical attention to Riddell's work for the first time. An unsigned review of the set of four prestigious and expensive publications in the *Bulletin* describes *The Untrammelled* as 'outstanding among them'.<sup>72</sup> Another review of the four volumes in *Southerly* praised the poet's 'sharp directness of attack' and 'acute insight'.<sup>73</sup> What is interesting from a longer and broader perspective of the poet's work so far – a perspective unlikely to have been shared by the reviewer at the time – is that there is less sharp directness in this work than in most others she produced in the early 1930s and more rage and intensity. The poet chose to use her original pen-name, Betty Riddell, for the 1940 publication thereby assigning the poem, one suspects quite deliberately, to a past life and separating the young woman who had written it ten years earlier from the experienced woman of the world, Elizabeth Riddell, who succeeded her. It is also the last public appearance of Betty Riddell, who disappears along with Elizabeth Richmond.

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<sup>72</sup> 'Viking Press Poems', *Bulletin*, 12 March, 1941, p.2.

<sup>73</sup> Thelma Herring, 'Preludes – To What Music?' *Southerly* 2.2 (July 1941), 31.

*The Untrammelled* is a sprawling, at times bewildered account of the affair, which Riddell in later life reluctantly acknowledged was autobiographical. She expressed a dismissive view of the work in her 1992 interview for the *Australian Biography* series.

I think the title is enough to put you off, it certainly puts me off at this stage, because it's rather pretentious. It's a dreadful word really, I don't know where I dug it up from. It was published and I don't think anybody bought it.<sup>74</sup>

The long narrative poem departs significantly from the style of her other works from that period, particularly in its lack of form, rhythm or rhyme. It is a cathartic stream of consciousness – possibly influenced by prevailing bohemian interpretations of poetic modernism – minutely examining the seminal and doomed affair, stages of which the poet had also explored in 'Attics', 'Interior Decoration', and 'Of No Importance' with a great deal more economy. It also differs substantially, in terms of narrative, from her insouciant account of the love affair in an interview more than 60 years later.

[He was] a very travelled and experienced married man with a child. And I just disregarded everything and I think we got a flat together eventually. He wanted me to come and live with his wife and child. He would then have two of us in the house. But I rejected that. I had enough sense for that. [...] he was very romantic and I stuck around with him for quite a long time until I saw the man I married. In fact he got a good job in Fleet Street again running a thing for Frank Packer. [...] And took his wife and child and went off and said, "You'll come won't you?" And I said, "Yes". And then I put all his photographs away and relaxed and didn't go. I knew it was over but he didn't know it was over and I didn't tell him. It's the mean thing that people do.<sup>75</sup>

The calculated vagueness of 'I think we got a flat together' and the ambiguity of her recital of the sequence of her first encounter with her future husband, the lover's departure from Sydney and his pleadings for her to join him are revealing when examined in relation to the narrative poem written at the time of the affair. When she recounts this episode to the television interviewer Riddell is 85 years old and a doyenne of Sydney's literary and journalistic worlds. She is known for her unsentimental and spare prose, her sharp tongue and what was rumoured to have been a colourful love life, She had developed a highly tuned

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<sup>74</sup> *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

<sup>75</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

journalist and broadcaster's ear for the good quote and the compelling sound bite; and the impulse to position herself as an agent, rather than a victim, in the affair was probably by then instinctive.

In *The Untrammelled*, the affair is described from an omniscient third person position but has a strongly female perspective that acknowledges the dangers presented by over-possessive and over-insistent love, not unlike the underlying theme of 'The Historian'. It begins with a metaphorical breaching of the private bower – an importunate lover climbs the garden wall – in a small explosive line that characterises Riddell's openings. He is portrayed as a free spirit looking for a worldly affair, or at least a diverting dalliance. His new love sees it differently:

He had begged a wild compassion at her gate,  
And presently he was over behind the wall,  
And the moon and the stars sailed by forgetting him ...<sup>76</sup>

The euphemisms for impediments to surrender – walls and gates, and towers and moats – appear for the last time in Riddell's poems. From the start it is clear this affair is not going to end with the protagonists living happily ever after, and the traditional motifs of romance are being hauled out of the metaphorical corners and examined with some rigour.

He had not meant to stay. He had only thought  
To hold her an hour, pull her bright head down  
On to his shoulder, strain back her throat and taste  
Just for an hour a woman's passionate waste  
Of love on his mouth (*The Untrammelled*).

It is an old story. His new conquest did not understand the rules of the game. The quest-romance myth that had brain-washed women into seeing their virginity as a sacred gift that, once bestowed, earned them the right to life-long devotion from the recipient, despite all the evidence to the contrary, remained persistent until the 1960s. If she had 'done it' it had to be 'true love'. Otherwise, it was a 'sin'.

But the arms crept round and clung,  
He drank the tears on her face, and then he knew  
The fire gone out. Round him the grey ash blew  
And his mad companion moon went sailing on ... (*The Untrammelled*).

The doomed ending is already foreshadowed. The deployment of 'ash' as the depressing residue of a dead fire is apt for the colourless and alienating emotion of pity that has seeped into his responses to her importuning. He feels uneasy and trapped – possibly even a little

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<sup>76</sup> Betty Riddell, *The Untrammelled* (Sydney: Viking Press, 1940).

guilty as the final lines of the next verse indicate – as he belatedly perceives she does not understand the rules of engagement.

He heard the wind that shuffled along the alleys.  
He looked back again to the lawless valleys  
And the ragged hills stacked up against the sky.  
He saw the masks of the people hastening by  
And he took her face in his hands, kissed her and saw the smile  
He had only wanted for a little while (*The Untrammelled*).

The relationship has nowhere to go and the protagonists now see one another through lenses distorted by anxiety to please, on one side, and impatient forbearance on the other.

Like a bewildered Eve in Paradise,  
Lonely, swinging upon the broken gate  
Of dreams, she used to watch for him,  
This strange Adam, who was mingled with her fate  
And yet eluded her.  
[...]

Her arms might creep  
About his neck; but there was a secret in his eyes.  
The dull cold amber veil, refusing her,  
Fell down across his eyes (*The Untrammelled*).

The ponderous repetition of ‘his eyes’ is mirrored in the next verse where ‘try’ completes two lines, and ‘mind’ another two lines, without any apparent anchoring pattern to sustain them as a poetic device. Blank verse is mixed with rhyming couplets; here and there is an a/b/a/b grouping, verse eight has 11 lines none of which rhyme at all, suggesting sometimes an incoherent babble of impulses and reactions. But there is a scattering of red hot lines that sustain the narrative tension and lyrical intensity of personal revelations. Most of all, it is difficult not to read in *The Untrammelled* a final, uncompromising rejection of romance-quest narratives once and for all as the poet tracks through the strategies employed by women to maintain their equilibrium in a heterosexual relationship.

She never knew the reason. She used to try  
Trailing her satins at his heels, scented and picturesque,  
And then she’d try a brisker fashion,  
Keeping the garden weeded and the paths trim,  
But she never caught the elusive soul of him  
That had slipped between her fingers  
And fled in panic from her, long ago (*The Untrammelled*).

Sometimes the voice turns into a pre-adolescent howl, where the recurrent phrases – the ‘secrets of his mind’ in verse five for example – imitate the persistent whining of a disconsolate child-like Ginsberg-ian howls against discomfort and dissatisfaction. These are

not necessarily gendered complaints – Tennyson whined a bit in ‘Locksley Hall’, and so did Byron in his much anthologised ‘When we Two Parted’. Housman’s unrequited homosexual love is a source of complaint in Poem 30 of *The Shropshire Lad*. However they are expressed, the complaints, the laments and the questions stem from bewilderment that the realities do not fit the expectations: the dreams do not run together.

Even on slattern days, when the dust blew  
Hotly across the roses, she would try  
Picking at the folded secrets of his mind,  
Pondering a while, then saying with a sigh,  
‘Why don’t you ever tell me anything?’  
Saying, ‘You do not love me any more’.  
And he would turn his eyes from her, and blind  
Would be his eyes, hiding his secret mind (*The Untrammelled*).

The adoption of biblical syntax, with the reversal of subject, verb, object, in ‘and blind would be his eyes’ is a curious stylistic diversion that suggests the poet does not know yet where the poem is going. But the tempo is suddenly re-energised in the next verse when the mood moves from passive to active and the rhythms enable a more coherent rhetorical pattern. The poet’s instinct for lyrically musical phrasing is given some rein:

The girl-ghost of the garden locked in night  
Had turned into a woman with a woe  
In her blue eyes (*The Untrammelled*).

And the haunting sadness of this descent from grateful ecstasy to bewildered despair is placed in conjunction with a packed description of the other’s frame of mind. The travelling man is temporarily grounded and the itch to move on is reflected in a verbal kinetic energy like the jolting images of an old silent film or the exaggerated routines of a circus clown.

She never could discover  
What alchemy had turned her vagrant lover  
Into the remote adventuring man  
Whose mind went crowding, leaping  
Beyond the immediate table, static chair  
To the horizon where all weeping  
Is muffled in the long clouds’ spreading hair (*The Untrammelled*).

Once again the poet’s affection for cryptic lists rescues the narrative from a ponderous gravity. ‘Adventuring’, ‘crowding’, ‘leaping’, ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘horizon’, ‘weeping’, ‘clouds’, ‘hair’: the words tumble like a hasty shopping list of concrete and abstract images summoned as metaphors for notions of imprisonment and promises of escape. The world is not to be waited for, but made, not understood, but rearranged, tossed around to make pleasing patterns or a convenient version of Eden, which may or may not suit in the end.

Dimly, she knew this man's imagination  
Juggled the foolish worlds one with another,  
Sending them spinning down the soundless air;  
Playing with jovial scorn at being god –  
Grouping the universe as fancy planned,  
Destroying with one hand ... (*The Untrammelled*).

There are signs of an awakening consciousness in the 'dimly' perceived difference between male and female subjectivity: charismatic man dictates the order of the universe to suit his own imagination and the female sphere is an element to be 'juggled' into a satisfactory pattern. This oscillating place in someone else's design leads to desperate measures, like jumping through hoops or running through flame, like circus dogs or driven horses baffled, afraid, but trying to please:

At first she tried to find  
The uncertain dangerous doorway to his mind,  
But, having wearied, all enjoyment turned  
Into a hot resentment, and it burned  
Kindness away (*The Untrammelled*).

Once the routines lose their challenge and go stale, and the passionate rage no longer revitalises the loving, then all that remains is exhausted, helpless, silence. The poet delivers a cool précis of the final stages that signals an effective barrier against sentiment and self-pity:

So, as with wisest and with most unwise  
Cold anger bloomed between them like a flower  
Nourished in ice, and all words froze and died.  
He had learned over each note in her voice,  
But not in love. It was a million years  
Since he first turned back from the moon to see  
Her bruised lips, and her white face washed with tears (*The Untrammelled*).

The menacing imagery of a vulnerable and cornered animal in the final lines of this verse are redolent of what Adrienne Rich calls the condition of fascinated terror with which women regard men when the andro-centricity of the universe in which they find themselves spinning begins to dawn. It is the point at which enchanted thralldom can metamorphose into emotional abasement. By attempting to steady the oscillating geography of her position, the female lover enacts all the behaviours that lead to familiar epithetic metaphors for women: whores, angels, shrews. *The Untrammelled* maps this progression – the temptress 'trailing her satins at his heels', the nurse-servant 'keeping the garden weeded and the paths trim', the hectoring mistress "“Why don't you ever tell me anything?”" and the final stages of recrimination followed by a deafening silence:

There had been small comfort in his arms for her,  
Though comfort was the only coinage  
That passed between them when the flame went out  
From her shoulder, and the flesh of her curved breast.  
And it was over now. Like candlelight  
On which a hand descends too carelessly  
It was gone out; but lingered bitterly  
As does a flame, in spirals of thin smoke (*The Untrammelled*).

At the end, there is only the exhausted recognition of a woman who kissed a prince and found a frog and to her great surprise discovered she was the one who had been transformed from the desirable ‘girl-ghost of the garden locked in night’ to ‘a woman with a woe | In her blue eyes’. The only remaining evidence of an incandescent affair turns out to be a parched emotional landscape:

So she, from windows curiously dull  
Stared at the outside and sane-seeming day  
And saved herself from sorrow with a sneer.  
And, empty-handed, robbed and left most free  
He passed out of the garden and away  
With his pale moon and faunish company (*The Untrammelled*).

It is difficult to imagine this work getting space in any late twentieth-century anthology of women’s work. Its apparent lack of feminist bite, its display of victimhood endured without any overt expression of sardonic anger would, at the time, have militated against a sympathetic feminist reading even though it encompasses, within the narrative, the seeds of now familiar mantras in feminist theory.

It is clear, from what is known about her personal life through her recorded interviews and the recollections of some friends and colleagues, that Riddell liked men very much and loved being in love too. Her reputed early hostility to the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s can be readily assigned to a generational, and inevitable, by-product of a tension between the majority of women of her era for whom heterosexual identity was unquestioned and went un-analysed in political terms until the emergence of a counter culture in the form of increasingly visible and vocal challenges by homosexual women. Nobody now pretends there was no conflict among women, as the issues of sexual orientation, gender and class politics were worked out in endless consciousness-raising sessions in the 1970s, or that the discourse of sexual politics did not sometimes lead to hardened doctrinaire positions – on the one side ‘man haters’ and on the other the despised collaborators, ‘women who slept with the enemy’. These extreme polarities eventually settled back into a more inclusive women centred ideology – one confident enough to be able to identify the misogynist woman as well as the non-misogynist man without feeling like a traitor to the cause – and to understand

better the need to protect the margins as a place to retreat to, even while heading for the centre. By the time the anxieties and the defensive rhetoric of the movement had evolved into something more supportive, Riddell was in her late seventies and had re-thought her convictions, confessing that it was the language of feminist ideology she disliked, what she called ‘gender speak’, just as she disliked jargon of any kind. She was never aware, she said, that Australian women journalists were given a hard time because she had always been assigned to the big stories and given by-lines. ‘Like Christina Stead, I didn’t know I was a feminist. I was pushing my way up and doing what the men did, but I didn’t know that I was doing these things for that reason. [ ... ] I had been an honorary male’.<sup>77</sup>

Her feminist reading was predictably mainstream: she admired Germaine Greer and Doris Lessing but disliked Simone de Beauvoir: ‘I find her school-mistressy. I can’t stand preachers, male or female’.<sup>78</sup> Despite her own middle class background she was suspicious of feminism’s middle class origins and what she felt was a failure to reach working class women and the immigrant woman factory worker ‘with water swirling round her feet canning fish somewhere’.<sup>79</sup> In 1992, she was suspicious of corporate women: ‘I don’t know what they’re doing except wearing corporate clothes’. But in 1943 she was entranced by the ‘snazzy uniform’ she was issued as an Allied war correspondent attached to the American Press Corps in Brussels and northern France.<sup>80</sup> It was not until she was working for Rupert Murdoch in London in the 1970s that she felt the full impact of the British women’s movement, and by the time she returned to Australia it had taken root among her younger colleagues and friends too. ‘I’m totally sympathetic to it’, she said in 1984 ‘but I’ve never felt that I knew anything about it, because I missed the bus. They were women in their thirties and it was important to them. But you can see that it never affected my life’.<sup>81</sup> Such assertions look faintly disingenuous in the light of Riddell’s long career where it quickly becomes obvious that her output of poetry increased in volume and emotional range after she reached her seventies and was no longer distracted by love. The second wave of feminism may not have affected Riddell’s life but I suggest the choices she made about her life – her vocation, her career, her marriage, her friendships – were materially influenced by an instinctive rejection of the role of victim: a recoil that was innately feminist.

This response is nascent, but discernible, in *The Untrammelled*, which I argue deserves to be read as an example of a twentieth century continuum in which women writers

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<sup>77</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

<sup>78</sup> *Tall Poppies*, 41.

<sup>79</sup> *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

<sup>80</sup> *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

<sup>81</sup> *Tall Poppies*, 41.

began to re-evaluate the cultural structures that were repressive for women. Instead of recycling the received quest-romance myth, or replicating the mid-nineteenth century ideology of compromise of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* with its fusion of successful artist and self-sacrificing woman ('Art is much but Love is more')<sup>82</sup> – a nineteenth-century take on the late twentieth-century notion of 'having it all' where a marketing lie persuaded women they could multi-task more easily than men and therefore deserved to hold down several jobs at once: wife, mother, lover, bread-winner, chef, chauffeur, muse, secretary, nurse and comforter. Riddell's rendering of a doomed love affair hints at a more pragmatic analysis of the male condition in relation to the female condition and foreshadows a philosophical rejection of the myth-making tradition of romance narratives. When the abandoned woman in *The Untrammelled* 'saves herself from sorrow with a sneer', the line carries more than just a slight excess of sibilant onomatopoeia. It hints at a rejection of thralldom to androcentric myths of mating and courtship that will form part of the ideological position of succeeding generations of women as they undertook a re-examination of the powerful connections between the political and the personal in their lives. *The Untrammelled*, I suggest, explores with a kind of untutored, non-doctrinaire innocence, all the conditions of the heart and mind that baffled and perplexed women reared on the romanticised construct of female sexuality in traditional quest and romance narratives – what Rachel Blau duPlessis describes as the 'debased, ironized and fetishistic couple-based romance' traditionally and overwhelmingly privileged by male poets and novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>83</sup> For this reason it sustains a feminist reading that is as illuminating for its time as the later more challenging and polemical works of poets like Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, Adrienne Rich and Diana Wakowski.

It was this need to re-vision a gendered ideology by entering an old text from a new critical direction that drove Rich, among others, to urge re-reading as a strategy for feminist survival in the 1970s. The re-visioning enabled late twentieth century writers and scholars not only to identify and define the assumptions that had informed women's reading and writing over generations but also precipitated strategies for rupturing the mute acceptance of androcentric traditions, particularly in terms of sexual identity. As Rich put it, knowing the past differently enabled women to break the hold of those traditions instead of simply passing

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<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, *Verse Viii* (London: J. Miller, 1864).  
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html#8>

<sup>83</sup> Rachel Blau duPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) p. xi.

them on and allowing the old political order to continuously reassert itself.<sup>84</sup> That rupture as a result of re-visioning of texts was central to the second wave of feminism in the latter half of the century and if poets and writers of Riddell's generation were less active in, or more impatient with, the re-mapping project – what Rich called a 'new psychic geography' – they nevertheless contributed to the destabilisation of the myth of the 'special', or token, woman by working through what they learned about life via the subversive territory of the female imagination: the one place where they could claim their own authority.

Elizabeth Riddell did not publish for eight years after the 1940 appearance of *The Untrammelled*. But during that time she was gathering experience that shifted the parameters of her political and personal sensibilities. In this second life she began to fulfil her dreams of travel through her ambitions as a journalist and the mix conflates in some war poems of blistering female intensity and poignancy written when she was a war correspondent covering the Normandy invasion at the end of the war in Europe in 1944. These, with others on travel and the vicissitudes of returning to her home and husband after nearly four free-wheeling years as a foreign correspondent, first in New York and later in London and France, feature in her second collection, *Poems by Elizabeth Riddell*, published in 1948.

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<sup>84</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), pp. 166-77.