

K. B. (THEA) HEADLAM

MY AUNT – KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD*

Although Katharine tells in her autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane*, how she took charge of the squalling infant that I was soon after birth while my mother recovered, my first clear memories of my aunt begin when I was five. I was sent home from Ceylon, where my father was manager of tea plantations, because my stomach troubles seemed to need good, fresh West Australian fruit, cream, eggs and so on, and although I boarded at school in Perth, Greenmount, with Katharine and Unc, was my real home and refuge.

I remember the feeling of sanctuary and love that those two offered and I loved Greenmount. I was five years older than Ric, their little boy, but in many ways we formed a family group which included my younger brother. I can not remember that we were ever punished, and yet we felt very strongly if ever we had really disappointed Katharine and Unc with our behaviour. We must have been little horrors at times, and I in particular because I always led the other two. On one occasion the three of us went bush when my aunt was expecting visitors bringing two spoilt children whom we detested. I remember very clearly how disappointed Katharine was that we had not stayed to help her with the two little visitors. She was very balanced about children, and unlike some other strong-minded women writers, she seemed to have no problems with the idea of motherhood.

It was perhaps ideal that she and Hugo – who was always called Jim – were so much in love and that Ric came early in their marriage. In her autobiography she tells how she gave birth to Ric on the dining-room table and I remember being told about the table which was still at Greenmount for many years. Ric was a darling of a child, but not in the least spoilt.

The house at Greenmount was an old cottage built by convicts and originally comprising only four rooms. Later Katharine and Unc opened up one of the rooms and built a broad verandah in timber. When Katharine's writing made

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enough money she added another verandah in stone on the other side. It was a large, broad open terrace which acted as a kind of pergola for climbing plants. Near the house was a small orchard with figs, apricots, quinces, grapes and the passionfruit which climbed on the back verandah making a lovely enclosed shade.

Katharine loved flowers and the front fence soon became a hedge of tiny pink geraniums and pale blue plumbago. She had some very carefully tended violets in a special place under the verandah, and there were always red roses in the garden. She also loved wildflowers and when she took us out to the hills at Greenmount she always knew the botanical names of the flowers and would instruct us in their proper names. We were still quite young then and I wondered if she had carefully swotted them up in order to teach us. She was particularly fond of a little lemon-gold orchid, which she said was the only scented orchid in Western Australia.

Katharine and Unc seemed to me, and still do, to be a very wise couple with children. As a little girl I had a rather miserable time boarding with one or two other children in the home of two very prim and proper maiden ladies in Perth. One day I came out to Greenmount in severe trouble. Another girl boarder, the sister of Lang Hancock, had left school and wrote back to me "How are you getting on with that old buggar Ida." It sounds ridiculous to make such a fuss now, but it was rather different then, and unfortunately the poor woman found the letter in my drawer, or fallen out of my pocket, and read it. A tremendous storm ensued and it was as if I'd said the word myself. They were going to have me expelled and they were going to sue me and goodness knows what else they were going to do. I couldn't get out to Greenmount quick enough, and I was too young to see that they could not in any case sue the recipient of the letter. Katharine and Unc soothed my shattered nerves and even made me see that the poor old ladies were very much to be pitied with nothing much in their lives except the prospect of looking after ungrateful little school-girls. I must admit, though, that after that I sometimes made up cheeky letters and left them lying about where the two old dears could find them.

My aunt never forced information on us, and I think it was she who told me about menstruation and the facts of life, which

she did very naturally and sensibly. She was always calm and sensible about the home, and never seemed hurried or distraught although there was a great deal to do. I think she always had a lady in to do the washing, an old Mrs Singleton, who, on one occasion obligingly dressed up like a gypsy and told fortunes at a party that Katharine and Unc held in the garden. But it was not until much later that she had a girl in to help with the housework and cooking, and even then if she had special guests in, one of her writer friends or artists or circus people, she would cook the meal herself. Often it was a very special chicken dish for which she was famous.

Katharine loved riding and there are some well-known photos of her on her horse Wyburn, which Unc had given her. She did not drive their car at all as far as I remember. But when she wanted a little peace of mind, she would ride Wyburn up into the hills and go off by herself for a while.

Katharine was a good-looking woman, but she wasn't vain about her appearance although she always took pride in the way she looked. Even about the house she looked well-dressed and neat, and although she wasn't very tall she always carried herself well and moved with a kind of grace. She did not grow plump in old age and was always very well-groomed and erect. For years she had the same hairdresser, a woman called Iris Hunter who had grown up in Greenmount, and while she could Katharine never went to anyone else. She liked feminine things like powder, rouge, perfumes and lipstick but, for some reason or another, she could not abide nail varnish. One of her rings I remember in particular. Unc gave it to her and she never took it off as far as I could see. It was a great solid opal, a beautiful stone, set in a plain band of gold. The stone was done with a head of Minerva in intaglio and by the end of her life the head was hardly discernible, which I thought was a pity because Minerva seemed such a good emblem for her.

She was not a very strong person, in fact, but you would never have thought so. She drove herself a good deal of the time by inner energy, and occasionally this would catch up on her when she had one of her dreadful migraines. These attacks could last for days, and all she could do was lie in her bedroom with cold compresses on her head and the blinds drawn. We would creep round the house without a sound and play no noisy games. Her migraines were probably brought on by the

feeling of responsibility she had to maintain the family, because Unc had little success with finding work in the depression years after the war. But I can remember her referring to only one of her books as a pot-boiler – that was *Moon of Desire*.

Unc was wonderful with children and in fact he had a good deal to do with bringing us up. He was always there when Katharine was writing, and he was always ready to take us roaming around the hills and if he went to do some carpentry or digging somewhere in the paddock he would take us with him. He was very good at making us observe things and getting us to solve difficulties. As my brother and I did not see much of our own father at this time, since he was in Ceylon, Unc was really our father in many ways. He taught Ric and my brother to box, and my brother was middle-weight champion of his university when he was doing his medical studies.

After the war Unc did not do very well in the job market because he had no specific training for anything except war, and the depression years made things even more difficult for him. Hugo Throssell, of course, won the Victoria Cross during the war, but he was a hero in a different sense too. I think he carried on with one disappointment after another until, perhaps, his heart was broken. He had so many schemes to make a living. One was breeding horses for trotting, which was a big thing in Western Australia then, and I have often seen my aunt and mother setting off to the trots elegantly gowned in flowing dresses and huge hats. But that was later, when Katharine's books began to support the family with some security. One lovely little horse Unc had was called Bluebell, and we used to help wash its feet which were covered in long, silky white hair that we well and truly shampooed and then dipped in blue. Sometimes too Unc kept turkeys that used to roam the bush across the road. The big white turkeys reminded me of white peacocks, but they all roamed away eventually and so they didn't make any money. He also tried to work in real estate for a while, but that was not successful either.

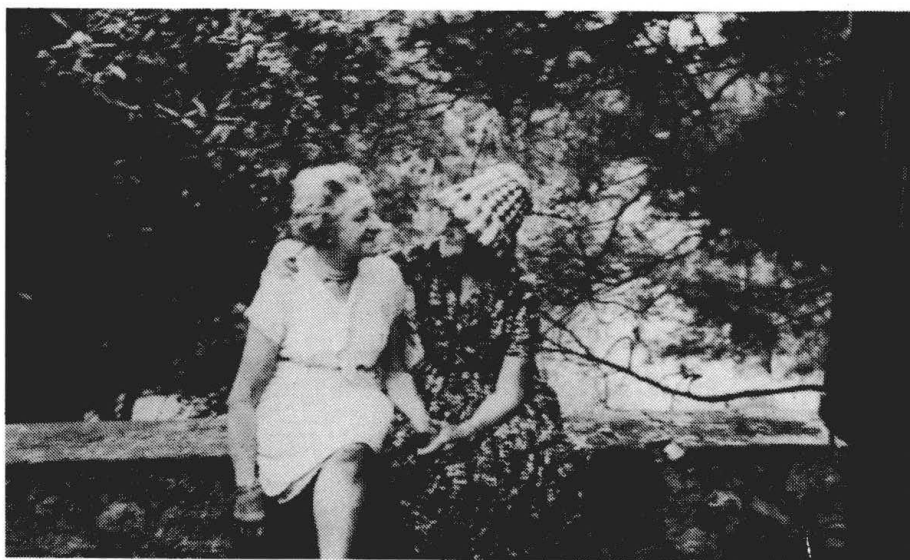
He had been badly wounded in the war and was full of shrapnel and knew what it was like to be terribly ill. I remember once when I had the mumps, and although I didn't feel sick I had to stay in bed with a face like a football. Unc used to come to see me, staying well away at the door, and he said "You know, Bid, you shouldn't stay in bed unless you feel so sick

that you could sit on a potty in front of the Queen and not care a bit." It's a good way to sum up the feeling of being absolutely washed out and desperate. Ric is now writing his father's biography, which will be, I'm sure, a fascinating account of the life of a remarkable and well-loved man.

I don't know how much Katharine and Unc talked about her books, but some of her ideas must have seemed rather strong to him, although the two of them seemed in sympathy about almost everything. Hugo came from a very conventional background and he was the youngest of nineteen children born to a quite well-to-do family. There were only three or four boys among the children and all the sisters were highly interested in Hugo's new wife. They would look to see if her house-keeping were up to standard and say, "Dear, where are your preserves? I suppose you've preserved your apricots and your tomatoes?" and so on. And of course she began to feel that she couldn't let Hugo down by not being as good a housewife as his family expected and so she decided to show them that as well as being an authoress she could also be a darned good housewife if she wanted to. She did bottle apricots and make jam out of all the fruit in the orchard, and the big cupboard in the bathroom was lined with thousands of bottles of preserves.

When I look back it seems that Katharine was very energetic. She was well organised and I think Unc helped in that and was a very great support to her in so many ways that he didn't realise himself. They did not entertain very lavishly but often had visitors, and I remember one children's party in particular because Katharine made wreaths of wild-flowers for all the little girls. The children's party in the play *Bid me to Love* sounds rather like that one, and the cat at Greenmount, Phoebus Apollo, seems to have found his way into the play too.

In almost every way Katharine was a moderate person but she was probably in advance of time with her ideas about the rights of Aborigines and the place of women, although in today's climate she would probably not please the extremists in either cause. She was just naturally a believer in equality and never doubted that men and women were absolutely equal or that Aborigines should have an equal place with whites in Australian society. But in her books she wrote about things as they were, not as they should be. It was only in her belief in socialism and communism that she was extreme. She did not talk to



Katharine Susannah Prichard and her sister Beatrice, 1967.



Katharine Susannah Prichard and grandson, Jim Throssell.

us about communism in the sense that she tried to convert us; she simply told us what she believed but made it very clear that most Australians disagreed with her. Of course that became plain enough during the violently anti-communist years in Western Australia when the police often came out to Greenmount and searched the house. Recently I came across a postcard with an engraving of Tolstoy's head, and it reminded me of how funny we had thought it when the police on one visit solemnly went off with this postcard for investigation. Katharine warned us, too, that if we came out to Greenmount and found her gone, it was not because she had forgotten we were coming, but because the police had taken her away for questioning.

Communism was her faith and to me it was the only thing that she was one-eyed about. My father used to tease her about it. I remember once I asked her, in a rather brash school-girlish way, what she would do if she had to choose between the life of her son and communism, and she thought for a long time, and then said she would choose communism. But I knew that if it came to the crunch that was not how it would be. Nevertheless her communism was a deep faith from which she derived a great amount of comfort, because she was continually distressed by the poverty and the fate of the poor in the world, and she believed communism was the only answer. But she was never a fanatic and always answered my father's teasing gently and patiently, even when he persisted in shooting awkward questions at her so that my mother would get serious and say, "Stop it at once. Stop teasing Katharine." It was strange that even over the Hungary invasion she remained dedicated because she believed so implicitly in Stalin, and yet she was one of the most compassionate people I have ever known. She did not go often to meetings or speak in the street, but she did not cry off taking part in anything she was asked to do. I think she came to realise, however, that it was foolish for her to spend time stamping round the streets when she could be writing about her beliefs.

I suppose it is right to see her novels as the work of a socialist realist writer, but I believe they are more than that, because she was dedicated to people rather than to ideas, no matter what she said when she was defending her integrity as a communist. Her books are sometimes wrongly criticized for their narrow outlook on Australia and on socialist answers to problems, but I find them more interested in people's behaviour

and in the large questions that trouble people everywhere in the world. To me she was an international writer and an international person, and if you had seen the many visitors to Greenmount from all over the world you would have thought so too. I think she was more important to literary people in other parts of the world than she was to Australians. Western Australia, apart from Professor Walter Murdoch who always liked her work and encouraged her, really ignored her totally.

She was hurt by ill-founded criticism of her books but she did not brood over it, as far as I could see. I told her that I did not like the Trilogy, because I thought her characters for once were subordinated to her ideas and so they were wooden and incredible, taking second place to theory. But she would not even consider that, and quoted other people who thought quite differently, and yet she also told me of some critics who agreed with me. The thing was that she really believed that changes could be brought about by writing books setting out ideological solutions. She worked harder on the Goldfields Trilogy than on any other book it seemed to me and so they are very coherent stories, very well worked out – but of course that is their problem. Her research was not only into communism as it is shown in the Trilogy but into Australia's goldfield and economic history. People sometimes forget what a dedicated patriot she was – she was much more dedicated to Australia than to communism when it came to the point.

Her writing was always based on her research and personal experience of a place and occupation and yet it was not autobiographical in the raw sense. There was, of course, a great deal of controversy over *Intimate Strangers* because in the first version the husband, Greg, kills himself with his revolver when all his attempts to support the family fail. She gave me a manuscript copy to read, and I immediately thought that it was very like us. The woman was her, this was Unc and the two children were Ric and myself. When I asked had she built the book on us as a family she said no, that she didn't work that way, and that no one character was ever taken straight from real life. The characters in *Intimate Strangers* were not based directly on the family, although bits of conversation and incidents may have been. When the same terrible ending happened to her own marriage in real life people insisted that she could not leave the original ending, and so she had Greg and Elodie reconciled

through their work in the socialist party. Perhaps that is the way things should have been in real life but that is not the way that book should end. The second ending is forced and unnatural. But *Intimate Strangers* is a better book than the Goldfields Trilogy where the natural feelings of her characters suffer at the expense of politics – in *Intimate Strangers* everything is natural until the ending forced on her by the acrimony and criticism of her friends.

I don't think there was a great division in Katharine's life between her enormous compassion and her adamant belief in communism, because that was based on her deep concern for the poor and materially helpless people of the world, a constant preoccupation which was very painful to her. She herself did not like blood sports and would not kill the ducks and fowls for the table and I don't think she ever killed a snake, although there were plenty of them at Greenmount.

After she had her first heart attack she had to watch her health more carefully and then she had a stroke that might have incapacitated her terribly if she had not been so determined to overcome it. She had difficulty in walking and in speech and with writing, and as her writing had always looked like the tracks of an intoxicated ant it became quite illegible. But gradually her tremendous will-power helped her to regain control of all her faculties. Although she looked a delicate little person, and on meeting her your first impression was of a sweet, kind person, underneath she had a will of iron. She was a fighter, as many gentle people are.

Katharine never married again, although she enjoyed the company of men, and perhaps in some ways she was lonely. But no one would have known because she did not talk about herself in that way. She did have one very dear friend and he was a great comfort to her for many years. I remember her as a gentle, loving, intelligent woman, with a nice sense of humour and an enormous capacity for hard work. She lived her life with dignity and consideration for others, and that is not very easy for a woman who has a militant belief in an unpopular ideology.