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Prichard, Katharine Susannah

(1883 - 1969)

Born	4 December, 1883, Fiji
Died	31 December, 1969, Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Journalist, Writer

Summary

Katharine Susannah Prichard, author, pacifist, Communist, indefatigable political activist, chose to live on the outskirts of Perth, Western Australia, for fifty years, from 1919 until her death in 1969. Her life is one of courage, determination, hard work, great joy and satisfaction, and tragedy. During her lifetime she developed an international reputation as a novelist, she was recognised as one of Australia's foremost writers, and she established an almost legendary reputation locally as a political activist whose initiatives made a profound impact upon the lives of many West Australians. In the midst of such physical isolation and unsophisticated conservatism, how was her brilliant light able to shine so readily?

Details

Katharine Susannah Prichard was born on 4 December 1883, the first child of Edith Isabel Fraser, a talented painter, and Tom Prichard, a journalist with the *Fiji Times*. In her autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane* (1964), she attributes her own strength of character and political idealism to the complex interaction of the immense securities and insecurities of her early childhood. The Prichard and Fraser families had migrated to Australia from Britain on the sailing ship Eldorado in 1853, a ninety-four day sea voyage of astonishing hardship. Tom Prichard was the second youngest son of ten Prichard children, 4 years old on arrival in Australia; Edith Isabel Fraser was the fourth of nine Fraser children but the first to be born in Australia. Katharine Susannah recalls that her father used to say he had fallen in love with Edith when she was a schoolgirl, and made up his mind then that she was the girl he wanted to marry. The Prichard and Fraser families had remained warm friends after their long and hazardous sea voyage to a new land : they became inextricably linked when the eldest of the Prichard sons married one of the elder Prichard girls, and a younger Fraser boy married one of the Prichard girls. Tom Prichard's marriage to Edith Isabel Fraser added to the complex interrelatedness of the family: for Katharine Susannah, growing up in the centre of a large and loving web of aunts, uncles, cousins and their relatives meant great security.

By her own definition, Katharine Susannah Prichard was a child of the hurricane. In her autobiography, published in 1964, she describes her birth on 4 December 1883 in Fiji thus:

Dawn threw wan light on the devastation caused by the hurricane; the township bashed and battered as though by a bombardment, the sea-wall washed away, the sea breaking through the main street, ships in the harbour blown ashore or onto the reef, coconut plantations beaten to the ground. But in that bungalow on the hillside, natives gazed with awe at the baby the hurricane had left in its wake. "Na Luve ni Cava," they exclaimed. "She is a child of the hurricane."

Born into a charmed circle of calm out of a wild and tempestuous night, Katharine Susannah Prichard seems to have been able to combine these two qualities – passionate criticism of social injustice and determination to expose and rail against unjust laws, with a sweet and gentle disposition. In her autobiography she stresses her strong will, and her early ability to charm through the sheer force of her personality. She attributes many of her later characteristics to the early Fijian experience – particularly her love for the natural world, and her instinctive sympathy…for people of the native races. She was particularly attached to her devoted Fijian carer, N'gardo. Maybe N'gardo is responsible for the instinctive sympathy I've always had for people of the native races. It is, I think, a tribute to that dark, protective presence in my early life.

But tragedy struck early in her life : the decision for the 2 year old Kattie to travel to Victoria with her mother for the birth of her brother Alan left N'gardo inconsolable, certain she had gone forever, and in his grief he died. This was the first of several tragic deaths of significant men in her life.

During Katharine Susannah's childhood, following her journalist father's searches for work, her immediate family moved from Fiji to

Tasmania and finally to Melbourne, establishing always a lively circle of friends and acquaintances for whom ideas were centrally important.

Her awakening to injustice is recorded in one of her early novels, The Wild Oats of Han, in a scene recalling her own family trauma where Han and her brothers are returning from a delightful picnic with a servant to find cartloads of the family furniture rolling down the hill, sold because the family could no longer make ends meet. Unemployment, injustice, ill-deserved poverty – all troubled the young Katharine. This incident seems to have bred in the young girl a desire to be strong and influential in her adulthood. She felt helpless and yet responsible for finding a way out of their troubles. From this time on Tom Prichard's mental health was precarious , and a constant source of worry to the family. Her autobiography suggests it was the combination of being so well loved, and yet insecure because of her father's unpredictably uncertain health, which caused Katharine Susannah to be so determined to right the world's perceived injustices. This determination, accompanied by a prodigious intelligence fostered at appropriate times, a thirst for knowledge, an eye for detail and an early desire to write, created a woman whose passionate idealism shaped all that she did.

Katharine Susannah Prichard's literary talents were displayed early. Before the family left Tasmania she published her first short story in the children's page of a Melbourne newspaper. Her second story, "The Brown Boy", won a prize, and caused quite a stir in her family. Most importantly of all for the young Kattie, she had earned a guinea for the story, which she proudly passed on to her father. She decided then to become a writer. Although neither parent took her stated ambition seriously at that stage, her mother fostered in her a love for words, for rhythms, for imaginative writing, by keeping up a constant supply of books by British poets and novelists. The love of learning and for ideas thus instilled, remained with her throughout her life.

At age 14 Katharine Susannah won a scholarship to South Melbourne College. There, under the tutelage of the principal, J. B. O'Hara, she embarked upon the happiest and most valuable years of her school life, and was greatly encouraged in her writing. Her determination to be a writer seems to have guided her from this time on. Although she wanted to go to University, there was not enough money in the Prichard family for all four children to go, and in spite of the relative emancipation of the family's views, as a girl Katharine Susannah stepped aside to allow her younger brothers Alan and Nigel to have a university education. Instead she went to night school, and kept in close contact with those of her friends who had gone to university.

In 1904, aged 21, determined to broaden her experience of Australian people and landscape, Katharine Susannah Prichard took a series of jobs as a governess in outback Australia, all of which provided useful material for her writing.

After several years she returned to Melbourne to live with her family and became a journalist. ln 1907 her father committed suicide.

In 1908 she was sent to London to cover the Franco-British exhibition for the Melbourne Herald. This taste of cosmopolitan life exhilarated her, and in 1912, aged 29, she returned to London, hoping, as Drusilla Modjeska points out, like so many other talented Australian women of her generation, to find ways of living professionally and independently in the comparative freedom of London. Although life was hard, for Katharine Susannah it was a life full of passionate exploration of ideas. She became part of a circle of artists and writers, and embarked upon a systematic study of socialist ideas, so providing a great background for her subsequent study of Marxism. Her pacifism was confirmed when she travelled to northern France and saw the atrocities of war at first hand.

As a writer the climax of her London stay came in 1915 when she won the prestigious Australian section of the Hodder and Stoughton All Empire novel competition with The Pioneers. For this she won 250 pounds, a considerable sum, and with renewed confidence in her Australian future as a radical writer she returned to Melbourne. Here, in spite of her clearly articulated controversial views, she was welcomed back into the bosom of her family – support she considers worthy of recording in her autobiography:

Kattie's had the opportunity of learning more than we did, Lil," Mother replied placidly. "Perhaps the old ways and ideas are good enough for us, but she belongs to a different generation."

That was how mother reconciled my unorthodox views to her own conceptions of right and wrong. So wise and gentle she was in her acceptance of the sincerity of my convictions, even when she didn't sympathize with or understand them. Her love and loyalty always defended me if anyone dared in her presence to criticize what I thought and did.

Such family harmony was disrupted when tragedy struck again with the death of her beloved brother Alan on the battlefields of France.

In 1917, Katharine Susannah was greatly affected by news of the Russian revolution. In her autobiography she writes:

That the revolution was an event of world-shaking importance, I didn't doubt….press diatribes against Lenin, Trotsky and Bolshevism indicated that they were guided by the theories of Marx and Engels. I lost no time in buying and studying all the books of these writers available in Melbourne…Discussion …confirmed my impression that these theories provided the only logical basis that I had come across for the reorganisation of our social system.

My mind was illuminated by the discovery. It was the answer to what I had been seeking : a satisfactory explanation of the wealth and power which controlled our lives – their origin, development, and how, in the process of social evolution, they could be directed towards the well-being of a majority of the people, so that poverty, disease, prostitution, superstition and war would be eliminated; peoples of the world would live in peace, and grow towards a perfecting of their existence on this earth

In London Katharine Susannah Prichard had met a dashing young Australian soldier, Hugo Throssell, who had been awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery. On his return to Australia in 1919 they married and together went to live at Greenmount, a hills suburb

on the outskirts of Perth, Western Australia. Here, in the most isolated city in the world, she lived for the rest of her life, passionately committed to her writing and her political activism, balancing these activities with the inevitable demands of home, family and friendship.

Drusilla Modjeska records that when Katharine Susannah Prichard arrived in Perth in 1919, two major industrial disputes, one on the goldfields and one on the waterfront, were reaching their climax. Trades Hall was flying a red flag, and arrested miners from the Kalgoorlie goldfields were being brought to Perth for trial. These were turbulent times. The wharfies' strike in May 1919 resulted in the conservative Colbatch government ordering mounted police to advance on the barricaded strikers. One striker was killed and seven were wounded. Katharine Susannah Prichard, as one of the first Marxists to arrive in Perth, was quickly in demand as a public speaker. Her talks on the waterfront with the strikers were amongst the first encounters between a Marxist and these striking workers. Drusilla Modjeska records that Katharine Susannah Prichard's first political pamphlet The New Order (1919) was written in response to the demand for accessible information on Marxism. It was reputedly anecdotal and descriptive, rather than being analytical and politically sophisticated, but it was optimistic and enthusiastic about the possibility of revolution. With like-minded people from the Eastern states of Australia, Katharine Susannah Prichard had been a founding member of the Communist Party of Australia. At all times her husband supported her political stance. This was not always without complication. In her autobiography she recalls a time immediately after their arrival in Western Australia when Hugo Throssell was being hailed as a war hero, and was invited to speak at the Armistice Day celebrations being held at his hometown of Northam. To the assembled crowd in the street he described the horror and misery of war, and declared that the suffering he had seen there had made him a socialist. These sentiments from a national war hero, son of a respected conservative former State Premier, were radical indeed.

By 1922, Katharine Susannah's hopes for revolution in Australia had diminished. In May 1922, Katharine Susannah Prichard's and Hugo Throssell's only child, a son, Ric Throssell, was born. For the rest of that decade, she devoted herself to her writing and her family. It was not until 1933 after Hugo Throssell's tragic death, that she threw herself headlong into fulltime political activism again.

Katharine Susannah Prichard's first decade in Western Australia seems to have been an exceptionally busy, fertile and happy period of her life. During this time she wrote what are considered to be her best novels : Working Bullocks (1926), Coonardoo (1928), and Haxby's Circus (1930). Intimate Strangers was completed by 1933, but not published until 1937.

Literary critics who hail the novels from this period as her best, allude frequently to the creative tensions found here in the blending of a romanticism and elemental sexuality whose origins lay in the work of D. H. Lawrence, and an Australian realism motivated by a desire to portray the real lives of Australian women and men. For Katharine Susannah Prichard, committed as she was to the Communist Party and its ideals, writing fiction served a political as well as a literary purpose. She wrote about class and race relations, and about the relationship of white and black Australians to their landscape. She took her research seriously: for Working Bullocks she lived with the timber cutters in the south west karri forest; for Haxby's Circus she travelled with Wirth's Circus; and for Coonardoo she stayed on a station in the northwest, becoming familiar with the landscapes and the people inhabiting them before using them as settings for her novels. Her pride in Australia and her focus on the harsh realities and extraordinary beauty of the Australian bush, forest and desert earned her the admiration of other writers and intellectuals. Drusilla Modjeska, whose focus as a literary critic has been on Australian women writers prominent in the 1930s, tells us that these writers assumed a central position in Australian cultural life because they, Katharine Susannah Prichard especially, helped develop a sense of national identity, and deliberately raised in their novels cultural questions which had not been raised before.

Coonardoo provides one of the earliest articulations of the indigenous Australian people as real human beings capable of genuine human emotion, morality and intelligence. In this novel, set in the vast cattle country of the northwest of Australia, the heroine, Coonardoo, is a young Aboriginal woman whose attraction for the young white landlord, Hughie, is posited as elemental, instinctual and inevitable. Hughie's failure to follow his instincts and to accept Coonardoo as his lifelong partner is frequently read as a metaphor for the invading Europeans' failure to understand or develop empathy for this ancient and harshly beautiful land. Coonardoo was serialised by the national journal The Bulletin in 1928, but such was the conservative and imperialist nature of the white Australian population that it caused an uproar of indignation and protest.

Although her writing met thus with public protest, Katharine Susannah Prichard's skill and courage in writing about crucial and controversial issues earned her the admiration of contemporary critics. Thematically and stylistically her work was admired by her literary colleagues. Drusilla Modjeska records that as early as 1925, writer Louis Esson wrote to colleague Vance Palmer that he and Hilda Esson were reading the manuscript of Working Bullocks and found it astonishingly good. It is most unconventional, and it is less like an ordinary story than like actual life. You feel you are living in the karri forests. On reading the novel himself, Vance Palmer wrote excitedly to the poet Frank Wilmot:

I hope the book gets a good spin in Australia, for something tells me it marks a crisis in our literary affairs. Nettie Palmer shares their excitement, giving it a more detailed assessment: Working Bullocks seems to me different not only in quality but in kind. No one else has written with quite that rhythm, or seen the world in quite that way. The creative lyricism of the style impresses me more than either the theme or characters. From slang, from place names, from colloquial turns of speech, from descriptions of landscape and people at work, she has woven a texture that covers the whole surface of the book with a shimmer of poetry… It is a breakthrough that will be as important for other writers as for KSP herself.

Later, in 1953, the critic Wilkes wrote in the Australian journal Southerly, Vol 14 No 4…[KSP] has become the foremost of the school, the novelist who has striven most consistently to make the continent articulate through her writing. The critic H.M. Green wrote of Working Bullocks as having …a kind of warmth and glow which seems to be a reflection of heat and light and the colour-effects of the landscape. Much later, in 1960s, as Ric Throssell records, Vance Palmer wrote: Young people of today may not be fully aware of the flood of new life which KSP poured into our writing… If a change has come over our attitude to the

Aboriginals it is largely due to the way KSP brought them near to us.

Intimate Strangers is the only one of her novels to deal explicitly with white middleclass marriages and relationships, and is thought by many critics to be significantly autobiographical. It was written at a time of crisis in her marriage. Hugo Throssell was deeply troubled: his employment prospects had been severely damaged by his and Katharine Susannah's very public political activities, and he was plagued by financial worries. Once again the novel plays out the tensions between romanticism and realism, but this time it has tragic consequences. The bankrupt husband in Intimate Strangers kills himself and Elodie is thus freed to pursue a more satisfactory sexual liaison. Katharine Susannah had completed this manuscript before travelling to Russia for six months in 1933. In a cruel replay of the events of her earlier family life, on her way home from Europe she learned that her husband, deeply troubled by terrible financial debts, had suicided. She was devastated. Thirty years later in her autobiography she wrote: I could not have imagined that…he would take his own life. I had absolute faith in him and don't know how I survived the days when I realised I would never see him again. The end of our lives together is still inexplicable to me.

After her husband's death, Katharine Susannah Prichard took up political activism with renewed intensity. The cumulative world crises of the 1930s – the Depression; fascism with its assault on freedom of speech, its censorship and brutality, and its persecution of German and Italian writers living in Australia ; and the Spanish Civil War – made a huge impact upon Australian writers. Katharine Susannah Prichard was one of the founding members of the Movement against War and Fascism which had been inaugurated in Amsterdam. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War she organised the Spanish Relief Committee in Western Australia. During the 1930s the Fellowship of Australian Writers was taken over by the Left, and Katharine Susannah Prichard was supported in her opposition to fascism in Europe and a reactionary government at home. One of the rallying points of this period concerned the visit to Australia of the internationally renowned Egon Kisch. Kisch had come to Australia to speak at an anti-war congress in Victoria in 1934. He was refused entry into Australia by a conservative and frightened government who went to extraordinary lengths to exclude him, using a language test in Gaelic to exclude this highly cultured and educated man who was fluent in seven languages. His exclusion offended the hospitality and international solidarity of Australian writers. Katharine Susannah Prichard was reportedly on the Fremantle wharf to greet him, and, when his ship docked in Melbourne, she was amongst a small group or radicals who spirited him away after he had jumped onto the wharf, breaking his leg. The incident captured the public imagination, and Kisch addressed huge public meetings in the Eastern States of Australia. In spite of the apparent public support for freedom of speech, however, in the early 1940s the Communist Party was outlawed in Australia, and individuals were persecuted and arrested for having Marxist literature in their possession. There was no doubt that at this time mainstream Australia disapproved of the ideals which Katharine Susannah Prichard passionately believed in.

One of the fascinating aspects of Katharine Susannah Prichard's life was that although she undoubtedly sought and received support for her political views from around Australia and indeed around the world, in Western Australia her activism was specific, practical and widely admired. One of her most significant initiatives for local women was her establishment of The Modern Women's Club in the 1930s. This group met in central Perth for lunch one day each week, and guest speakers were invited to stimulate discussion on an enormous range of social issues. Here women from the Left mingled with much more conservative women whose desire for peace, or for the overturn of some perceived social injustice, had brought them together. This club continued for decades. My own oral history research indicates that the networks thus established arguably had a profound impact upon the lives of individual Western Australian women, and fed directly into the Vietnam Moratorium movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the establishment of the Women's Liberation and Women's Electoral Lobby of the early 1970s, and the more broadly based peace and Green movements of the 1980s and 1990s.

The literary work of Katharine Susannah Prichard after the 1930s is often considered by critics to have been undermined by her adherence to the Communist Party and its Stalinist directives that all literature reflect socialist realism. Certainly in the trilogy The Roaring Nineties (1946), Golden Miles (1948), and Winged Seeds (1950) the earlier focus on sexuality gives way to a focus on work. Perhaps the most significant conflict for Katharine Susannah was that whereas writing demanded solitude, Communist activism demanded collectivity.

Ironically, friends and associates of Katharine Susannah Prichard's have suggested that the smallness and isolation of Perth, which many residents found limiting, may have been one of the most significant factors in her being so visible and may well have contributed to the local community's acceptance of who she was and how she chose to express her marvellous gifts. Katharine Susannah Prichard, for all her gentleness, was a larger-than-life figure. She belonged to a world community. In 1943 she became a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee. In 1959 she was awarded the World Council's Silver Medallion for services to peace. When she died in 1969, aged 86, her coffin was draped with the Red Flag and she was given a Communist funeral. Her ashes were scattered on the hillslopes near her home at Greenmount.

Published resources

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Murdoch University
Irene Greenwood talks with Grant Stone

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Records, 1938-1973 [manuscript]

Papers of John and Roma Gilchrist, 1927-1984 [manuscript]

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National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Katharine Susannah Prichard, 1851-1970 (bulk 1908-1969) [manuscript]

Papers of Katharine Susannah Prichard, [1899-1974] [manuscript]

Papers of Nancy Cato, 1939-1995 [manuscript]

Papers of Nancy Cato, 1939-1995 [manuscript]

Papers of Hazel de Berg, 1959-1963 [manuscript]

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Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University
Ian Turner Collection

James Cook University of North Queensland, Library Archives
Jean Devanny Archive

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Digital resources

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