

**Nathan Hobby. *The Red Witch: A Biography of Katharine Susannah Prichard*.  
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Early in the Constance Garnett translation of *Anna Karenina* a few lines appear that suggest something more historically significant than Anna's emotional turmoil. Anna is travelling back from Moscow to her husband and son in St Petersburg, just after a ball where her romance with Vronsky begins. She has been in Moscow to help repair her brother's marriage; now her own is at risk. "Moments of doubt were continually coming upon her, when she was uncertain whether the train were going forwards or backwards, or were standing still altogether . . . 'What's that on the arm of the chair, a fur cloak or some beast? And what am I myself? Myself or some other woman?'" A cloak is protective. It can be fashionable. A beast is a dangerous monstrosity; terrifying and unknowable. The same object flickers between these poles, and the viewer, herself in a state of extreme personal uncertainty, must stabilise her vision, for the object cannot be both things. At the same time there is some confusion about the actual progress of the train. Is it going forward? Is it going backwards? Is it going nowhere? This dire uncertainty also applies to Soviet Russia, which at one time seemed socially protective, progressive, indeed fashionable to many outsiders, before Stalin's monstrosity came into full view. Some of these outsiders, Katherine Susannah Prichard included, never really emerged from under Stalin's cloak.

This is one of the central issues about Prichard—how could she travel so widely, commit so staunchly to her politics, write and contribute so much, and see so little? Other important questions arise from her rejection of feminine containment—she was an assertive, mobile, confidently opinionated and disciplined writer, at a time when women's domesticity prevailed. What sustained her? There are questions, too, about her place in Australian literary history. Later in her life she may have felt like a realist relic, in the light of the critical attention received by Patrick White and Randolph Stow, but Nathan Hobby, in the Preface to *The Red Witch: A Biography of Katherine Susannah Prichard*, writes that when he began his research he "found a breadth and vitality [in her work] which surprised me," and Hobby makes a convincing argument for her literary significance.

Prichard wrote copiously and professionally: thirteen novels, mostly grounded in careful research including extensive fieldwork, four short story collections, plays, poetry, a non-fiction work on Russia and a thin autobiography. In *The Red Witch*, a timely and meticulous account of her life, the autobiography is extended and much about her circumstances and her motivation is made clear.

I first heard about Prichard as a theatre studies student. Our young British lecturer invited us back to his house and passed wine around before he introduced us to our new curriculum, which was firmly based on his own enthusiasms. Before long some of us were working on a performance about a polar explorer—so memorable that I can still hum the chorus—and we were also deep in the work of Katherine Susannah Prichard, whom he had just discovered. I read *Brumby Innes*, her short and devastating play about the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, and "The Cooboo," an uncomfortable story about a black stockwoman's choice between work and maternity. Prichard's novels lack the voltage of these highly compressed pieces, but we responded to her immersion in her country and her strong sense of social justice. We were all interested in Prichard's writing, but what we found out about her life fascinated us.

She was born in Fiji, where her journalist father was working, but she grew up in Melbourne, making strong connections with other young literary women and several older men.



“Her devotion to him is disturbing to read today.” Indeed. She seems to have been incapable of the radical personal doubt Tolstoy gives to Anna on that journey to Moscow. She saw nothing menacing in her affiliated world, although others did.

*The Red Witch* is a factual, deeply researched, lengthy and conventional biography. There’s nothing meta about it. But there is something extraordinary, even humbling, about the years required to produce a book like this—the thoughtful historical fidelity, the plain, calm informative style, paragraph after paragraph, the lack of slippage. Nathan Hobby has written a very fine book.

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