

**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.

She worked as a teacher, a governess and a journalist, travelling to London twice, and to America, writing all the time. Before she turned thirty, she had marched with suffragettes, visited a hospital in France during the First World War, and won a major prize with the manuscript for her first published novel, *The Pioneers*. She was determined, courageous, emphatically Australian and also, in many ways, international. This trajectory was thrilling for eighteen-year-old students. It seemed so independent, so decisive and effortless.

The effortlessness was an illusion. As Hobby's account makes clear, she also had a capacity to manage relations with difficult men and she was unusually—for her time—sexually active. Her early adult life was partly determined by a long connection with a histrionic older man she calls, with some irony, her "*Preux Chevalier*," and there was a price to pay for his support. Nor were her travels without incident. She had to fend off a sexual assault, London was squalid and at times she barely had enough to eat. But in 1916, after the success of *The Pioneers*, she came back to Australia as a literary celebrity, feted by the Victorian Premier. The following years—a time of industrial turmoil in Australia and elsewhere, and revolution in Russia—extended her political views. She read the *Communist Manifesto* and joined in the radical and disputatious conversations of the time. She gave a speech against conscription—which she had, at one point, supported. It was, as Hobby points out, a period of "revolutionary urgency," a time of challenge, resistance and attempted suppression. For Prichard it was also time of loss, as her brother Alan died in France. This may have reinforced her connection with Hugo Throssell, a Western Australian VC winner and a member of a politically conservative family. She met him in London. After she returned to Australia, he courted her in letters from Egypt. Throssell's brother, too, was a war casualty. Prichard and Throssell were reunited in Melbourne and they married three months later, moving to Greenmount, outside Perth, where Prichard would be based for most of the rest of her life.

In Western Australia Throssell publicly—and controversially—spoke up for a socialist future, but his political activism receded to a large extent. (Prichard, however, described herself as "the first communist in Western Australia.") After fifteen years of civilian life, during which his flamboyant financial plans came to nothing, Throssell suicided on the verandah of their Greenmount home, when Prichard was travelling in Russia. Their son Ric, named for Throssell's soldier brother, was eleven years old. Was this suicide in some way noble—a Roman gesture? It guaranteed his wife and son a military pension at a time when his poor decisions had made a bad financial situation worse. Was his state of mind exacerbated by her writing? A draft of her novel about a floundering marriage might have shocked him into a conclusive act of self-destruction. However, Hobby demonstrates that Prichard's marriage was far from simple and very few people pass through wars with entirely steady minds. Prichard lost her husband, and at the same time an epistolary romance which she was conducting with the poet Hugh McCrae finished abruptly. She must have been dazed, as well as desolate. In Dorothy Hewett's 1969 obituary she wrote that after Throssell's death Prichard "willed her own creative death . . . The sensuousness of her imagery dries up and her style becomes arid and blind." This is unkind and unfair, and doesn't fully represent Hewett's own position. Prichard was a vigorous anti-war activist, although her health was poor and her campaign was, of course, unsuccessful. (Her son Ric served in New Guinea.)

In her final decades she worked tirelessly for the Communist Party and kept up her Soviet connections, which resulted in surveillance by ASIO and, at one point, a raid on her home. Yet she finished a softened version of the marital novel she had been working on, wrote a potboiler with the wonderful non-arid name *Moon of Desire* and researched and completed her Goldfields Trilogy. Her autobiography was finished just before she turned eighty and her last novel was published—to variable praise—at eighty-four. At no time did her commitment to Stalin waver and when he died, she wrote that he was "incorruptible, fearless and completely devoted to the service of the Soviet peoples." In a single understated sentence Hobby reflects:

“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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