

## Patricia Hackett: A Life (1908–1963)

Charles McLaughlin

### **Editors' note**

In *Westerly* 1, 1965, the editors announced 'the establishment of an annual prize, the Patricia Hackett Prize of one hundred guineas to be awarded "to the writer of the contribution which in the opinion of the Editorial Board of *Westerly* is the best original creative contribution published in an issue of *Westerly* for the previous year"' (p. 6). The prize was to be awarded from 'a sum of money...presented to the University to form an endowment for a prize in memory of Miss Patricia Hackett' (p. 8). The prize has been awarded annually since then from that endowment, and although its value has increased the spirit of the award remains unchanged. With the announcement in this *Westerly* of the 2009 Patricia Hackett prize-winner it seems timely to review the life of the woman in whose memory this award was established.

An engaging way to gain an appreciation of the woman who was Patricia Hackett is to read her volume of poetry, *These Little Things* (1938). Many of her values and attitudes about life are discernible in its 42 poems. They include musings on physical and emotional

pain, falling in love, death of a loved one, self-esteem, workaholics, sexual politics and many other timeless topics, along with a sequence of eleven poems proclaiming her enduring love affair with the Solomon Islands. The meticulous taste and care that is evident in the presentation of this book also says more about its author than any biographer could tell. It is a book that is difficult to obtain (only 200 copies were printed) but the search is worthwhile. Also included are five drawings by Rex Wood, a South Australian painter and printmaker, who was little known when the book was published.<sup>1</sup> Wood found fame after leaving Australia to live and work in Portugal. His work is now represented in the National Gallery of Australia Collection.<sup>2</sup>

While Patricia Hackett wrote poetry, her principal focus in the arts was on theatre and drama and this coincided with a busy career as a lawyer. Born in Perth in 1908, she was the daughter of Sir John Winthrop Hackett, proprietor and editor of *The West Australian* newspaper and principal benefactor of the University of Western Australia, and Deborah Vernon Drake-Brockman. After her father died in 1916, her mother married the prominent South Australian lawyer and politician, Sir Frank Beaumont Moulden, and moved with her children to Adelaide.<sup>3</sup> Hackett's study for a law degree had a shaky start at the University of Adelaide when she was dismissed, in 1925, for sitting her sister's Latin examination. After recovering from this setback she successfully completed her studies in London and was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple in 1930 and admitted to the South Australian Bar in the same year. Hackett made her theatrical debut two years later with Adelaide's Repertory Theatre, and scarcely two years after that, in 1934, she opened her own 150-seat theatre, the Torch, in Adelaide's Claridge Arcade. Her first production was Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, a play that was then still widely banned.<sup>4</sup> The new impresario favoured anti-naturalistic, physically stylised productions and this did not sit well with some of Adelaide's conservative theatregoers and critics.

Two encounters between Hackett and critics attracted considerable publicity. The first occurred in September 1934 shortly after the Torch

opened. When Sidney Downer, a Cambridge-educated journalist who worked as a parliamentary reporter and theatre critic for *The Advertiser* newspaper, panned Hackett's staging of Geza Silberer's *Caprice*, she hit back by seeking him out at Parliament House and flinging a bottle of ink over him. Downer, who was also a member of the family that owned *The Advertiser*, brought charges against her for assault. In her defence, Hackett claimed that she had simply used the same weapon (ink) that had been used against her. She received a hefty fine, considering relative money values then and now. The second incident involved Max Harris, Adelaide's youthful *avant-garde* poet, proponent of modernism and co-publisher of *Angry Penguins*. In 1944, just days after the Ern Malley literary hoax had made Harris a world-wide laughing stock for publishing the 'Malley' poems in *Angry Penguins*, another mighty blow fell upon him as a result of a critical attack he launched on Patricia Hackett in the University of Adelaide's student newspaper, *On Dit*. The Harris attack was centred on Hackett's involvement with a series of plays for the University's Theatre Guild and, in particular, her performance in *Guild the Mask Again*. It was a scathing piece and some injudicious use of language landed Harris in serious trouble when Hackett threatened a libel action. Harris at first pleaded poor proofing and typesetting, but Hackett rejected this and issued a writ for libel. Facing possible financial ruin, Harris agreed to publish a public apology in newspapers designated by Hackett in which he admitted that he had attempted to shield himself from the consequences of his actions by claiming printing errors. Hackett then discontinued the libel action and declined to accept damages.<sup>5</sup>

The outbreak of World War II established new priorities for Patricia Hackett when she assumed responsibility for caring for her sister Verna's three children who had been sent to Australia from England for safety. To accommodate them she purchased a disused house in the Adelaide suburb of Hackney, at 69 Hackney Road, that had been owned by Wilhelm Nitschke, a prominent Adelaide identity who had established South Australia's first distillery, operating from adjacent



Self portrait, Patricia Hackett

premises. There was a large cellar below the house that had been used to store wine and after refurbishment of the property over a number of years, this below ground area became home for Patricia Hackett's second Torch Theatre, in 1952. Critics were banned from attending performances at the new 50-seat theatre.<sup>6</sup> Actors appearing in the various productions included the poet and Professor of English at the University of Adelaide, Charles Jury, and the young lawyer and future Premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, who shared her law chambers from 1952.<sup>7</sup> Hedley Cullen, who lit the theatre and served as its official photographer has recorded an account of Hackett's working methods. According to Cullen, recorded music or sound effects were never used. When music was required, 'live' musicians provided it and sound effects were created manually. Hackett designed and painted all of the scenery and made or supplied costumes from a vast collection of period garments she had accumulated, including authentic Chinese costumes. There was no



Patricia Hackett reproduced her drawings on Torch Theatre program covers. This illustration was also used on the cover of *Westerly* 1, 1965.

prompting and if an actor got into a mess, he or she had to get out of it one way or another. Productions recalled by Cullen included *The Motherly and Auspicious*, *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, *The Sons of David*, *The Gioconda Smile*, *Spring in Laos*, *Medea*, *Lord of Three Worlds*, *The Old Ladies*, *And So to Bed* and *Tobacco Road*.<sup>8</sup> The second Torch theatre staged about four productions a year from 1952 until 1958 when its program was wound down.<sup>9</sup>

Patricia Hackett's involvement with the Solomon Islands began in 1936 when she was invited to perform some legal work in Tulagi. This led to the forging of a strong emotional link with the natural beauty of the Solomons and her decision to take out a 99-year lease of the small island of M'bangi in Tulagi Harbour. For the next six years she spent up to four months on M'bangi each year, until forced to evacuate the island with minutes to spare by the Japanese invasion in

April 1942. Some of the fiercest battles of the Pacific war were fought in the Solomons and Hackett never saw 'her' island again. Patricia Hackett died in August 1963 after some years of ill health.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Patricia Hackett, *These Little Things* (Hunkin, Ellis & King Ltd., Adelaide, 1938).
- 2 Wood, Rex, National Library of Australia, @ <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2356783>
- 3 Stephen Atkinson, 'Grande Dame of SA Theatre,' *The Adelaide Review* @ [http://www.adelaidereview.com.au/archives.php?subaction=showfull&id=1181267524&archive=1182472766&start\\_from=&ucat=2&](http://www.adelaidereview.com.au/archives.php?subaction=showfull&id=1181267524&archive=1182472766&start_from=&ucat=2&)
- 4 Jo Peoples, 'Hackett, Patricia (1908–1963)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography—Online Edition* @ <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A140397b.htm>; Atkinson, *Grande Dame*.
- 5 *Ibid.* (Peoples; Atkinson); Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), pp. 167–171; Max Harris, 'East Lynne at Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Plays at the Hut,' *On Dit*, June 30, 1944, p. 2; Max Harris, 'Apology by Max Harris,' *On Dit*, 21 July, 1944, p. 3.
- 6 Atkinson, *Grande Dame*; Dr Andrew Brown-May, 'Our House: Histories of Australian Homes,' Australian Heritage Council Publications, @ <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/publications/commission/books/ourhouse/sa02.html>
- 7 Peoples, 'Hackett, Patricia (1908–1963)'; Atkinson, *Grande Dame*.
- 8 Cullen, Hedley, 'The Torch Theatre at 69 Hackney Rd.' *Westerly*, no. 1, May (1965): pp. 41–44.
- 9 Atkinson, *Grande Dame*.
- 10 *Ibid.*