

## THE RED WITCH OF GREENMOUNT

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*I feel myself ... a dreamer.*<sup>1</sup>

Katharine Susannah Prichard was born in Fiji in 1883, as a fierce cyclone allegedly swept across the island. Her father, Tom Prichard, was editor of the *Fiji Times*. The family was by no means a wealthy one, Tom suffering ill health and frequent periods of unemployment, but during her later teenage years Prichard moved in a literate middle-class circle in Melbourne, where her family had by then relocated. A young woman ‘full of romantic illusions’,<sup>2</sup> she would sometimes walk from South Yarra to the city in animated conversation with the rapidly ageing prime minister, Alfred Deakin, a friend of her mother’s and thirty years her senior, ‘tall and stooping then, already worn and disillusioned’, ravaged by the demands of high office, a role in which he was a reluctant but essential actor.<sup>3</sup>

Like Prichard, Deakin was a ‘dreamer’.<sup>4</sup> He had been instrumental in the accession to power, and the undoing soon after, of the world’s first national Labor government, which had governed Australia for four months in 1904, the year Prichard found her feet as a journalist. Prichard’s political colours were somewhat different from Deakin’s, but they were friends nevertheless. They shared a love of poetry and Deakin, like ‘Kattie’, had been a working journalist who aspired to being a great writer. When Prichard travelled to London in 1908 in search of work, Deakin would provide her with two important letters of introduction: one carrying the prime ministerial seal and addressed ‘To whom it may concern’; the other an introduction to a literary idol of hers, eminent British author George Meredith.

Prichard had been troubled from a young age by the poverty and social discord she saw around her, in Melbourne particularly. Later, she would be appalled by the conditions of slum dwellers in London and Paris — ‘the people of the abyss’, as American novelist Jack London referred to them. But unlike many middle-class writers of the Left, Prichard was never ‘romanced by poverty’.<sup>5</sup> Given her father’s circumstances, her family had felt its sting.

It was in Paris, in 1908, that the then twenty-five-year-old Prichard had her ‘first contact with socialist ideas’ to graft onto her ‘vague humanitarian

philosophy'.<sup>6</sup> Here she renewed an acquaintance with the Austrian socialist writer Dr Rudolf Broda. His interest in Australia stemmed from its international reputation, through the early part of the twentieth century, as an advanced progressive social democracy. Australia and New Zealand had been the first countries to legislate a minimum wage, in 1896. Early Russian revolutionaries and political theorists, including Lenin, had examined Australia as a social and political laboratory, admired by many for its advances and innovations in arbitration, its improved working conditions, its 'living wage' and its social welfare and electoral laws.

Broda and American academic Clinton Hartley Grattan, with whom Prichard would later become acquainted, took a particular interest in adult suffrage, working conditions, trade unions and education in Australia. The early formation in Australia of a union-affiliated Labor government, which came into political power within a relatively short time, was radically out of step with the rest of the world.

Broda was a cultured man and stimulating company for the curious Prichard. His political views impressed her, and she began to look into some of the social parity and political questions taken up by his investigations of social services, wages and international labour laws. It was at Broda's flat in the Latin Quarter of Paris that she first heard from Russian socialists-in-exile of the plans, then seemingly so remote to her, to overthrow the Czarist government in Russia and impose their own political and social system.

In 1912, after her return to Australia, Prichard resigned from her position in Melbourne as editor of the women's page of *The Herald*, and travelled to London for a second time to seek work as a journalist on Fleet Street. It was there in 1915 that she wrote her first published novel, *The Pioneers*,<sup>7</sup> a work that won her the Australasian prize in the prestigious Hodder and Stoughton All Empire Novel Competition. This acclaim, along with her emerging political activities — she took up with the substantial suffragette movement in London, for which she wrote a one-act agitprop sketch — attracted the attention of the British and Australian intelligence organisations.

After the outbreak of the First World War, Prichard became an active campaigner for the anti-conscription movement and spent time visiting the war wounded in London hospitals. In late 1915, the now thirty-two-year-old Prichard met Lieutenant Hugo ('Jim') Throssell, still recuperating from serious wounds he had sustained with the Australian Light Horse.<sup>8</sup> Throssell's bravery during a battle on the Gallipoli Peninsula, in which waves of men were cut down by Turkish gunfire, had earned him a Victoria

Cross.<sup>9</sup> Originally from the town of Northam in Western Australia, he was the prototypical ‘digger’ — the brave, handsome, affable Anzac larrikin later eulogised as a national archetype. He was described on Wills’s cigarette cards as ‘seven feet of gallant manhood’.

Prichard returned to Melbourne towards the end of 1916 to be feted as an internationally recognised writer. Between Cape Town and Fremantle she began a shipboard romance with Guido Baracchi, then Australia’s leading socialist theoretician. The relationship lasted a little over a year. Baracchi’s passion for Marxism proved contagious, and it was this encounter that escalated Prichard’s politics. After her return, one Melbourne evening in 1917 while crossing Princes Bridge over the Yarra River, Prichard saw newspaper posters announcing the socialist revolution in Russia.<sup>10</sup> She would later write:

It had happened. That dream of the exiles I met in Paris, so long ago, had come true. There was a gash of gold in the cloudy sky.<sup>11</sup>

Prichard immersed herself in the works of Marx and Engels, and became convinced that Marxism ‘provided the only logical basis that I had come across for the reorganization of our social system.’<sup>12</sup> She joined a Melbourne group, headed by the dynamic Bill Earsman, that was planning the formation of an Australian chapter of the Communist Party.<sup>13</sup>

On her return from England in 1916, Prichard had moved into a bush cottage outside the town of Emerald in the Dandenong Ranges on Melbourne’s outskirts.<sup>14</sup> It was here, between 1916 and 1919, among a literary circle of close friends that included Louis Esson and Vance and Nettie Palmer, that she applied herself in earnest to long-form writing. Her romance novel *Windlestraws* was published in 1916, and was followed by *Black Opal* in 1921.

When Hugo Throssell was medically repatriated back to Australia to great fanfare in April 1916, he courted a somewhat reluctant Prichard. He was eager to return to the fighting, however, and in February 1917 rejoined the battered 10th Light Horse in Egypt before its deployment to the desert campaign against the Turks in the Middle East. Throssell was wounded again during the Battle of Gaza in April 1917 (in which his brother was killed) and invalided back to Australia still carrying a torch for Prichard, and the pair fell into a spellbound romance.

On a walk from the Emerald cottage in November 1918, the couple saw the armistice flares sent skywards from the city, some fifty kilometres away, marking the end of the war and any impediment to their future

together. They married in 1919 and spent their honeymoon at the cottage, from where they could see the glow of bushfires burning nearby.

Soon afterwards the couple moved to Throssell's home state of Western Australia, where he was feted as a hero. The Throssell family was a respectable fixture there, and Throssell was well provided for after his father's death in 1910. He was invited back to his hometown of Northam, around 100 kilometres east of Perth, as guest of honour for the town's Peace Day celebrations marking the cessation of the War. Almost five years earlier he had led a procession through the town's streets of the first eighteen local men to enlist, of whom seven, including his brother, were not to return. Now he led the Peace Day parade on horseback, dressed in full Light Horse uniform.

During his subsequent speech, Throssell's announcement to the adoring crowd that the War had turned him into a socialist and a pacifist was met with a bewildered silence. As Prichard later wrote to her friend Nettie Palmer:

The Premier on the platform [was] an old friend of Jim's. You could have heard a pin drop. Jim himself was ghastly, his face all torn with emotion. It was terrible — but magnificent.

It was a shock to the crowd and humiliating to Throssell's family. His father, George Throssell, had been a revered figure in the town: having served as mayor, as conservative local representative in the state parliament and, briefly, as premier of Western Australia. He had also been responsible for the diversion through Northam of the railway line between Perth and Kalgoorlie. An intelligence report would later theorise that the probable cause of Throssell's purported political shift was either the meningitis he had contracted before his return or 'his mind perhaps having been affected' by a blow to the head at Gallipoli.<sup>15</sup>

In October 1920 the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was formed in Sydney, and Prichard was immediately informed by means of a telegram from foundation head Bill Earsman that she was a foundation member. She subsequently established a short-lived CPA branch in Western Australia.

Around this time Throssell purchased two acres of hillside orchard land at Greenmount, about twenty kilometres east of Perth on the edge of the Darling Range. A Colonial-style house of jarrah weatherboard and corrugated iron was perched on the fairly steep and bushy block, overlooking the flat coastal escarpment on which the city somewhat

uncomfortably sat and the Indian Ocean beyond. Surrounding the house was a verdant tangle of native bush and overgrown gardens, described many years later as:

2½ acres — of waving grass, gumtrees and wattles, old fruit trees, and creepers such as bougainvillea, honeysuckle, periwinkle and asparagus fern gone wild and creeping over fallen trees [surrounded by] grass-clad and bush-clad hills ... green-and-scarlet kangaroo paw, flowering shrubs — white and purple and gold, spider orchids and enamel flowers in profusion.<sup>16</sup>

Here Prichard settled back into writing, albeit in a place where she felt she was ‘taken more seriously as Jimmy’s wife than as a writer’.<sup>17</sup> She felt keenly the seclusion of Greenmount and the isolation of Perth, and dearly prized her correspondence with friends in the eastern states and overseas, complaining in a 1927 letter to one such friend that she was ‘very high and dry from all literary and intellectual associations’ in Western Australia.<sup>18</sup> She wrote despondently to another friend in May 1930:

There are so few people in the West who care ... for intellectual adventure of any sort. Nevertheless, I love the country and my life here. Am by the soil — and don’t wish to be otherwise. A good peasant, at best, probably — and fairly content if I can get the latest Russian & French books and ‘the Modern Quarterly’ occasionally. Or blow across to Melbourne and Sydney to yarn with Louis Esson, the Palmers, Hugh McCrae and Bill Dyson.<sup>19</sup>

To assuage this sense of intellectual isolation, Prichard was a frequent visitor to the city’s Booklovers’ Library, the literary and intellectual hub of sleepy Perth. When D.H. Lawrence stayed in Perth in 1922 he used the bookshop as his base there.<sup>20</sup>

Another consolation for Prichard was the freestanding dedicated writing room that Throssell had built for her in the orchard below their Greenmount home, overlooking its own stand of colourful Darling Range scrub. The writing of speeches, letters and political tracts here took up most of Prichard’s time and helped allay her despondency at being so far out of the swim. Her detractors at the time would come to refer to her as the Red Witch of Greenmount.

In 1921, after the ill-fated initial iteration of the Western Australian CPA branch disbanded—principally, it seems, due to political differences among its organisers—Prichard founded the Labor Study Circle of Western Australia with the help of future Labor prime minister John Curtin. The group ran with limited success for about eighteen months until Prichard, heavily pregnant with her first and only child, Ric Throssell, was forced to pull out and the venture folded.

Curtin had earlier renounced his Catholicism and embraced socialism after turning to the comforts of the Salvation Army and alcohol to mollify his easily frayed spirit. As an active member of the Victorian Socialist Party—which had played a major part in the formation of the CPA—he had led the anti-conscription campaigns in Victoria during the First World War, for which he had been briefly jailed. Worry about Curtin's drinking had led Melbourne Labor figure Frank Anstey to organise what he'd thought would be a placid political sabbatical for Curtin in the barely bubbling political cauldron of Perth, to which Curtin moved in 1917 to take up the position of editor of Labor journal the *Westralian Worker*.<sup>21</sup>

In Perth Curtin continued his public opposition to conscription, and in the editorial pages of the *Westralian Worker* he continued to proselytise. 'Russia is a star of promise for the world, a beacon light for our future guidance,' he wrote, and 'the democracy of tomorrow is the democracy of the workplace'. But he soon became convinced that the revolution had passed the Australian proletariat by.<sup>22</sup> Despite Australia's relative isolation, its advances in suffrage and social equity and its election of very early Labor governments had rendered the notion of a proletarian revolution superfluous.

Curtin could no longer support Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat, and he began to concentrate on reform through more conventional means within the parliamentary Australian Labor Party (ALP), putting him at odds with many of his former socialist colleagues.<sup>23</sup> He publicly declared his opposition 'to every form of dictatorship,' and for this the fledgling CPA derided him as a 'social fascist of the vilest type'.<sup>24</sup>

In 1928 Curtin was elected to the federal seat of Fremantle. He lost the seat in 1931 but was re-elected in 1934. In 1935 he was elected federal parliamentary leader of the ALP.

The Western Australian branch of the CPA was re-established in 1925, but it did not rise to any great heights until 1931, when its members became agitators in the rising anti-government activism that led to sometimes-violent demonstrations in Perth.

In 1929, as Western Australia celebrated its centenary of British colonisation, shockwaves radiated out from the economic collapse of New York's Wall Street stock exchange. The Great Depression polarised political opponents and created enormous social stratification, and Western Australia — as one of the country's poorer states — was severely affected. New populist movements in politics and the arts, intent on erasing the old order that had given rise to the devastation of the Great War and the Depression, were born in the years that followed.

Many sought solace in alternative systems of belief. Marxism became a political sanctuary to some, and the Communist Party offered an elaborate distraction from the discomforts of daily life. Party life was sustaining and all-encompassing. It was highly structured and rigid, with strict controls placed upon language and behaviour, but it also provided liberation from the repressive social mores of the time and offered itself as a source of spiritual nourishment.

For a generation that had known only depression and war, Marxism provided both explanations and solutions. It provided a plan for living, not just for society but also for the party member. It gave many the radiance and utter conviction of religious faith, and it seductively offered intellectuals and artists influence and esteem. There was a purity of purpose for those who craved action, and it offered action immediately, the chance to make history. Above all, it spoke to people of high moral purpose, desperate to see an end to poverty, ignorance and war.<sup>25</sup>

The Depression also served to reconsolidate the notion, for many, of a 'working class'. Economic and class stratification created bitter resentments, but also cemented loyalties and camaraderie.

The Depression quickly began to bite into day-to-day life in Perth, as it did elsewhere in Australia and beyond. John Hepworth, a member of the Workers' Art Guild, vividly recalled its effect on Perth:

The abrasive effect of the Depression was probably as vitalising an element as anything. Order had been taken away ... Death and war pervaded every Australian homestead. Then the economics of our society collapsed around us. [Perth] was a seething society. There was a great deal of ferment. The Depression led to a renaissance of thought and argument. Coffee shops and parks were places where politics was talked about all the time. Art is politics; whether you

eat or not is politics. The sort of class distinctions that you had in England were never manifest, perhaps, but the class distinction was still there ... It was a brutal time — not having enough to eat; not having clothes to wear; not having shoes to wear; not having anywhere to sleep was commonplace. There was no protection from Government as there is today. The difference in labour was enormous. The greater percentage of the people then lived by labour, many of them by manual labour, and the manual labour of those days was what today would be considered incredibly beastly, brutal in its physical demands. The master and man attitude still was in the workplace.<sup>26</sup>

Perth-born economist and later prime ministerial advisor Herbert ‘Nugget’ Coombs recalled the effects of the Depression on the city somewhat differently. Although Perth felt the economic effects ‘just as bad as everywhere else’, its social effects were, he recalled, somewhat less extreme.

You could go and catch fish in the Swan River, you could catch crabs and shoot birds along the banks of the river. Some young couples, who couldn’t find a house, would camp in the bush, and the weather was so good, you weren’t going to freeze, even in the winter ... Western Australia had that egalitarian feel about it.<sup>27</sup>

Coombs’s view, though, was perhaps mitigated by the fact that he spent many of the Depression-ravaged years in London, where its effects were indeed brutal.

Financial relief for the Depression’s dispossessed was minimal. The federal and state governments drastically cut expenditure during the Depression and social welfare was all but non-existent. With Australia attempting to trade its way out of debt, wages were also cut through the arbitration system and employers pared back working conditions. The high standard of living that Australia had hitherto enjoyed was arbitrated away during the early 1930s.

Perth’s placid veneer and impression of social cohesion belied the stark reality of political conflict and social malaise. As the Depression bit hard into the community, it took a terrible economic and social toll on vast numbers of Western Australians. In 1930, the Western Australian Government dismissed 2172 of its employees, and in 1931 alone there were more than 100 suicides in the sparsely populated state directly attributable

to the effects of the Depression. A consequent rise in revolutionary zeal and political activism led to a proportionate tightening of political control in an attempt to maintain social stability.

The Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB; precursor to ASIO), which was responsible for domestic security, concentrated its resources particularly on the CPA through the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Military-style right-wing groups that also sprang up in Australia during this time were left relatively undisturbed. The CPA posed a threat quite disproportionate to the forces gathered against it, its membership being relatively small. The threat that it posed was economic — the organised withdrawal of labour.

The federal government's *Crimes Act 1914* had been amended in 1926 to allow political organisations to be declared 'unauthorised', its primary target being the CPA. The Crimes Bill, though rarely invoked, enabled the jailing of participants in serious industrial disturbances and the deportation of participants not born in Australia.

By the 1930s Prichard's intense involvement in politics left her little time to devote to her fiction writing. The re-established CPA in Western Australia had become increasingly dependent on her, and she complained to her friend Vance Palmer in 1935 that she could only manage a day a month of writing since she was spending about eighteen hours a day on CPA affairs. Her high profile and popularity in CPA circles also brought her increasingly under the gaze of the police and intelligence agencies.<sup>28</sup>

The CIB had begun surveillance of the CPA and its members soon after the CPA's inception, with local police given responsibility for a lot of the surveillance work.<sup>29</sup> Simultaneous raids were made on Prichard's Greenmount home and premises associated with the local branch of the CPA in September 1932, and material confiscated. These would be the first of many such raids.<sup>30</sup> The CIB also infiltrated CPA conferences and meetings, and assembled lists of names and personal files on CPA members. The movements of CPA officials, including overseas travel, were monitored and their luggage frequently searched. British security agency MI5 also monitored visiting Australian CPA officials.

A series of major protests by the marginalised, some of which turned riotous, took place in Perth through the early part of the decade. Western Australian author Peter Cowan recalled these troubles as the 'expression of general discontent and anger rather than political belief and allegiance',<sup>31</sup> but increasing shows of defiance by growing numbers

alarmed governments attempting to impose cuts in wages and working conditions, and the political response became increasingly fierce. Bert Moxon, the CPA's national secretary from 1929 to 1930, had encouraged attacks on police during these protests.

Left-wing activists led a number of the demonstrations, and the CPA saw this rise in activism as an opportunity to recruit the disaffected. Thirty-six-year-old John Ernest ('Jack') Stevens arrived in Perth in January 1931 to take up the position of local organiser for the CPA, carrying with him a letter of introduction to Prichard. He had been sent by the CPA's Central Committee in Sydney to oversee the growth of the CPA in Western Australia, and he quickly 'became a marked man in unemployed demonstrations'.<sup>32</sup> Within six months of his arrival in Perth, Stevens was convicted of vagrancy and jailed for six months on a charge of being a person of 'evil fame'.<sup>33</sup> He left Western Australia in the mid-1930s, travelling to Spain soon afterwards to fight with the International Brigade in the Civil War there.

The large unemployed group camps around Western Australia were fertile recruitment grounds for the CPA during the Depression. The state government, in an attempt to slow the growth of the CPA and fracture its influence, split these large camps into a number of smaller camps spread more widely across the state, but CPA members carried on their work in the smaller camps unencumbered, and demonstrations were organised within these camps by predominantly Communist agitators.

One of these camps was located at Blackboy Hill, below Prichard and Throssell's home at Greenmount. The facility had served as a military training camp during the First World War, but since then had stood relatively dormant until it was revived as a camp for unemployed single men in June 1930. Its wooden huts, built in 1915, accommodated unemployed men recruited in the 1930s to work on improvements to the nearby Greenmount National Park. This was one of a number of government projects initiated to provide a sustenance allowance to the large pool of unemployed, and to occupy what was seen as an increasingly menacing group by the government.

Within four weeks of opening in mid-1930, the community of makeshift dwellings housed 800 men from around the state, and by 1931 it had quickly filled to capacity, accommodating in cramped conditions 1000 men wearing ragged cast-off army coats dyed black to denote their station.<sup>34</sup> When near-starving and penniless men were turned away from the crowded camp, they sometimes made their way up the Greenmount hill to knock on Prichard's door seeking food and work. Prichard would serve

ready-made soup, such was the frequency of their visits. The Blackboy Hill camp was closed in 1933 after the Labor Party won government in the state.<sup>35</sup>

In April 1933, Perth sweltered through its worst heatwave in recorded history and bushfires flared on the outskirts of the city. On the evening of 18 April, Prichard lectured students at the University of Western Australia on 'The Development of Communism'. The talk was presided over by the university's former vice-chancellor and professor of history and economics, Edward Shann. Known affectionately by his students as 'Inky' Shann and by his detractors as 'Bolshie Teddy', Shann had been a socialist in his younger days but was by no means a card-carrying member of the CPA. Like many of his liberal colleagues at the university, he was open-minded about the politics of the Left. He supported a number of causes that sprang out of the Left and he had addressed Prichard's Labor Study Circle in the past. His critics saw his support for left-wing causes as a dalliance with lunacy for a man of such standing in the community, but Shann mixed just as readily within Perth's conservative business community and was not given to entrapment by dogma. Historian Geoffrey Bolton would later write of Shann:

few of his colleagues had thrown themselves more wholeheartedly into the Western Australian community. ... [He] had a lively mind given to keen enthusiasms, and stirred and stimulated his students by a mixture of charm, nervous energy and a spare lucidity of style.<sup>36</sup>

Shann was an unorthodox man of broad vision who had 'predicted, unthinkable in 1929, that one day Australia would look for her trading partners in South and East Asia rather than the British Empire'.<sup>37</sup> His presence at Prichard's lecture was appropriate for a political discussion of Marxist doctrine that preached as integral the symbiosis of history and economics.

On this balmy April evening, Prichard 'traced the evolution of the Marxian doctrines, their embodiment in the Communistic manifesto, and the application in Soviet Russia of the plan laid down in the manifesto'. She presented 'a picture of improvements in Russia', notably Moscow's reduced death rate, and in particular its infant mortality rate. Like many political activists before and since, 'she deprecated the apathy which existed among university students in connection with social problems'.

Prichard joked with her audience that she was unable to fully prepare for the lecture as 'all [her] papers having reference to Communism ... are

in the hands of the police' as a result of the early-morning CIB raid on her Greenmount home in September the previous year.<sup>38</sup> She wrote to a friend of the raid:

The police arrived in force the other morning before I was awake, 'to search the premises'! Can you see the criminal, sitting up in bed ... passing the time of day with the inspector in charge of the job, herself in yellow silk pyjamas & a black silk gown embroidered with golden dragons? It looked like the first act of a play — the verandah hung with wisteria, & long sprays of dog roses. The only protest I made was that none of your letters, or Hilda [Esson]'s should be read, as they were entirely personal. The which [*sic*] was respected. But the days have been strenuous, & it looks as if you'll be hearing of an arrest, before this reaches you. My Communist activities, of course, the cause. But so long as I fight the good fight, what does that matter?<sup>39</sup>

On 22 May 1933, Prichard left Fremantle for London on the steamship *Baradine* to flee the turmoil. Her departure came after a particularly draining time in Perth. Tensions had arisen within the CPA and some local members had levelled an official complaint against her of 'conduct unbecoming a Communist'. There were also more pressing personal tensions. Her marriage to Throssell had become strained, the family was suffering from financial difficulties and Prichard had written to her friend Nettie Palmer some eighteen months before her departure that she was 'worn to a frazzle ... not sleeping and trying to work ... Jim with no job and colossal debts, having to be sheered ... off nervous breakdown all the time working myself to keep things going'.<sup>40</sup>

Prichard sailed towards a continent undergoing much more political tumult than that which she left behind. From London she was to travel through to Berlin. By 1932 National Socialism had become a mass movement in Germany, and in January 1933 Adolf Hitler had come to power as leader of the movement's National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party. Prichard intended to be away for about twelve months, and her passport contained visas for the British Empire, France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). She kept authorities from knowing that she was also to travel to the Soviet Union, fearing that had they known they may have stopped her from leaving Australia.