

The Letters of Rachel Henning

Have We Been Conned?

Readers would be familiar with that Australian literary classic, The Letters of Rachel Henning, which initially appeared as a series in the Bulletin during 1951-2 and was subsequently published in book form by Angus & Robertson in 1953, with illustrations by Norman Lindsay. In 1986 a full-colour illustrated version appeared. What most people do not realise is that the published letters are a 'deleted, distorted and defaced' version of Rachel Henning's original writings. As some of the letters

were written from Illawarra (she lived for a period at Figtree, whilst her brother Biddulph had a farm on Bulli Mountain), this matter may be of some local interest.

A recent article by Anne Allingham, entitled "Challenging the Editing of the Rachel Henning Letters' (Australian Literary Studies, May 1994, 262-79), reveals that David Adams, then editor of the Bulletin, was responsible for the preparation and editing of the 90 letters which subsequently appeared as The Letters of Rachel Henning. However Ms Allingham discovered that there are in fact 176 known extant letters by Rachel Henning, the majority of which were deposited with the Mitchell Library during 1953 and have not been referred to since Adams' transcript originally appeared.

In comparing the original manuscript with the published version, Ms Allingham found numerous discrepancies and omissions. Mr Adams, being a journalist and perhaps concerned with issues of defamation, took many liberties with the editorial process. Apart from the common insertion of punctuation, paragraphs and capitals, he also deleted large chunks of letter openings and conclusions, containing as they do many references to Rachel's family and friends. He changed the date of a letter to fit in with his published chronology. He distorted the written word by actually rewriting parts of letters. For example, when Rachel wrote '.... she produced the very hideous bucket-shaped thing that you must remember....', Adams transcribed it as '.... she produced the design for the gold cup you must remember.' When Rachel continued; '....I have not been able to get the inscription on the gold cup as Biddulph keeps it at the bankers....', Adams re-wrote it as; 'I have been able to get the inscription on the gold cup The inscription is as follows....' This not only changed the meaning, but also added extraneous text, where a footnote was warranted.

Such gross alteration of a manuscript is, in 1994, deemed totally unacceptable. However it seems to reflect the fact that Adams, the

journalist, was editing the Henning letters as he would any other piece for the Bulletin, with scant regard for academic and literary protocol. He gives no explanation of his editorial method, therefore the impression is given that the letters as published accurately reflect the original manuscript and the feelings of the author, yet this is not so. According to Ms Allingham, Adams deleted much of the 'spice' from Rachel's letters - her numerous vitriolic descriptions of other women, discussion of family feuds, and distain for the Colony in general is mostly omitted. We are left with a sanitised version of the letters and of Rachel Henning. Perhaps of most concern is the fact that Adams used Rachel's actual letters as his working copy, rudely scoring out unwanted pages, paragraphs and words with blue pencil, and inserting his own revisions above Rachel's lines.

In light of the above, perhaps it is time to 'rediscover' Rachel Henning's Illawarra letters, and prepare a fulsome transcription - a 'warts and all' version which is comprehensive, accurate, and fully reflects the intent of the original author. Such a version should have been issued back in 1951-2.

Michael Organ