

‘The memory of a storm’: *The Wild Oats of Han* and the childhood of Katharine Susannah Prichard, 1887 to 1895

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Despite the significance of Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) as an Australian novelist, a comprehensive biography is yet to be written. The two book-length accounts of her life come from Prichard herself in *Child of the Hurricane* (1963) and her son, Ric Throssell, in *Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers* (1975). In narrating Prichard’s childhood, both *Hurricane* and *Wild Weeds* draw heavily on an earlier work of Prichard’s, *The Wild Oats of Han* (1928), ostensibly a children’s novel. In his biography, Throssell writes of Prichard’s childhood that ‘[t]here is little that I have been able to add to her own account of the time’ (*Wild Weeds* x). Yet she left many clues and gaps in *Wild Oats* and *Hurricane*, the two works illuminating each other when compared and suggesting fresh lines of enquiry. Using recently digitised newspapers of the period to gain new insight, this biographical essay offers a fuller picture of Prichard’s childhood from ages three to eleven, a key stage in her development. A better understanding of this period of her life could enrich future studies of her work by detailing formative influences, including a more comprehensive account of the shadow of her father’s troubles, culminating in an auction she was to see as the beginning of her political awakening.

In the foreword to *Wild Oats*, Prichard states that she wrote it in 1908, although it was only first published in serial form in 1926. It has been largely overlooked by critics and the public, perhaps because it is too subtle for a children’s novel, ‘a book about childhood rather than a book for children’ (Pownall 18). Prichard invites an autobiographical reading of the work in a way that further complicates its generic status, writing in the foreword:

The first thing children ask about a story is usually: “But is it true?” And this one, it can be said, is a truly, really story. Katharine Susannah would stake her breath on it. Just here and there a few details stray from the strict path—Rosamund Mary’s little songs, for instance. (n.p.)

There are some more significant details which ‘stray’ as well—from Han’s grandmother

dying after exerting herself helping the needy stricken by a flood to the political and moral lessons given to Han by Sam the woodcutter. Yet my research shows the possible historical basis of a number of incidents in *Wild Oats*.

Wild Oats is narrated in third person through the viewpoint character, Hannah Frances Barry, a fictionalised representation of Prichard.¹ Casting herself as a character in a story for children seems to have made it easier for Prichard to write about her life. Han's personality and perception of the world are conveyed vividly in *Wild Oats* using the techniques of characterisation Prichard had learned from writing fiction. In contrast, Prichard seemed to think formal autobiography should be composed of anecdotes and she fills *Hurricane* with them. Joy Hooton identifies eight forms of Australian women's life-writing developing in the late nineteenth century, including the autobiographical novel and children's texts, and *Wild Oats* has elements of both (22–50). While the conventions of fiction shape *Wild Oats*, it can also be approached as a form of autobiography and this essay will consider Han as a representation by Prichard of her childhood self.

As autobiography shaped into a children's novel, *Wild Oats* is an amalgam of childhood experiences, incidents from throughout Prichard's childhood added to her actual nineteen months in Launceston from 1893 to 1895. Prichard depicts her childhood as a painful gaining of conscience and responsibility. She begins with 'no conscience, any more than the birds or possums who lived in the great silver gum-trees' (1928, 1) but as a twelve year-old, 'the weight of the world' descends on her shoulders and she must go 'down into the great mysterious world they had talked so much of, to take her part in the joy and the labour and the sorrow of it' (214-15). This trajectory that she compresses into the Launceston years for *Wild Oats* stretched in life from her early childhood to the sacrifice of her university ambitions at the age of nineteen in order to help her family.

Katharine had just turned three when she left her birthplace of Levuka, Fiji and arrived in a booming Melbourne with her mother Edith and younger brothers Alan and Nigel in January 1887. For the next two and a half years, they lived without her father, newspaper editor Thomas Henry Prichard (1851-1907). His absence is unmentioned in her autobiography, but must have affected her, even if she forgot it in the jumble of her earliest memories. As she came to awareness of the world she was living in her grandparents' house, 'Clareville', in the suburb of Caulfield, the same house her mother had grown up in. Along with her grandparents, Simon and Susan Fraser, two unmarried aunts, Lil and Chris, were also living

there, and many other relatives nearby.

In *Wild Oats*, her parents are backgrounded characters, ‘absorbed in each other’ (13). Her mother, Rosamund Mary in the novel, ‘had never been required to consider domestic affairs’ (13). In one interpretation, she is ‘so lacking in motherly authority... that the child refuses to call her mother’ (Hooton 120). It is Grandmother Sarahy, based on Susan, who keeps the household running. She ‘dusted the mantelpieces, ordered the meals, mended, darned, made jam and the children’s clothes, except when Rosamund Mary had what she called “twinges of conscience”’ (*Wild Oats* 13). Katharine called Susan ‘the first person I became really interested in, perhaps because she was interested in me’ (*Hurricane* 25). Possibly, the implication is that her parents were not interested enough in her.

The era of her grandmother and the Victorian era were one. Melbourne and the rest of the empire was celebrating Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee in 1887, with over 125,000 people converging on the Melbourne city-centre to witness its illumination (*Argus*, 28 June, 1887, 9). Katharine makes this comparison: ‘As I remember her, Grandmother looked like the pictures of Queen Victoria. She wore her hair in silver wings over her forehead, and a little lisse cap on her head. Her dress was usually dull black silk, with a tight bodice and voluminous skirts’ (*Hurricane* 24). Her grandmother and the queen were to die within months of each other in 1901 when Katharine was seventeen, entwining them further.

Han’s grandfather is absent in *Wild Oats*, even though Katharine’s grandfather, Simon Lovat Fraser Esq, was a significant presence in her early life. Despite the family’s middle-class lifestyle, he was a fourth-class clerk (the entry level was fifth-class) made redundant in 1880 at the age of sixty-two during a downsizing of the department. ‘An old curmudgeon’ in her recollection, he liked to trip his grandchildren up with his hooked stick, but he also fried potatoes for Katharine when she woke hungry at dawn (*Hurricane* 21-24). Boycotting Katharine’s aunts’ weddings in December 1891 and January 1892 to go fishing, a newspaper story from 1865 records that he caused ‘quite a commotion’ by catching a ‘monster’ of a bream, said to be the largest ever taken in the Saltwater River at that early point in Melbourne’s history (*Australasian*, 2 Dec 1865, 2).

After the queen’s golden jubilee in 1887, the celebrations restarted in August 1888, as Melbourne, the flourishing ‘younger sister’ to Sydney, took centre-stage for the centenary of colonisation (McQueen 2). In the Exhibition Building and the fourteen hectares of temporary annexes there were ten thousand exhibitors from thirty-eight colonies and nations, displaying both cultural works and wonders of industry and technology. The origin of the Australian

colonies was commemorated with a life-sized tableau of Captain Cook's landing rather than Captain Phillip and the convicts. Illuminated by the marvel of electric light, the visitors could see thousands of art works from around the world, including artists such as Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts, and Arthur Streeton who would come to be known as the Heidelberg School (Dugan 4–9). Hailing the opening, an editorial in *The Argus* praised 'the progress of art and general culture' since the 1880 exhibition, claiming:

In a nation's history, intellectual and artistic culture comes last. First there is the stern necessity of manual work, then the adoption of every invention that renders labour more economical and more valuable, and in the end the production of a specific art and literature, and the cultivation of those things that conduce to the highest and most refined greatness of a people... [T]he nation must come to some maturity before it can develop an art or literature that is distinctively its own. (2 Aug 1888, 7)

The Argus looked forward to the emergence of 'a poet who will draw his [sic] reflective words from the slow and winding rivers of a country whose physical characteristics are unique.' Although a writer of the wrong gender working in the wrong genre, three decades later Katharine was to make a strong case to be the one *The Argus* looked for in her distinctively Australian novels which, ironically, celebrate 'the stern necessity of manual work' and make literature out of labour.

The great exhibition ran until March 1889, with two million people passing through, four times the city's population. Katharine doesn't record visiting the exhibition, but she surely would have. We can imagine her as a five year-old brought into the busy grandeur on the train by her mother, excited and confused by the lavish display of the achievements of Australia and the world.

In 1887, when the rest of the family returned to Melbourne, Tom had moved to Suva, the new headquarters of *The Fiji Times*. In September, he came to Melbourne leading a delegation calling for the annexation of Fiji by Victoria (*Argus*, 28 Sep 1887, 5). When the mission was unsuccessful, it seems he decided to stay in Australia, but couldn't find a job in Melbourne. In one of the gaps in the record between 1887 and 1889, he served briefly as editor of the local newspaper at St Arnaud, a gold mining town 250km west of Melbourne.² In May 1888 he took the position of editor at *The Daily Telegraph* in Launceston. Tom's tenure as editor lasted less than six months; by November, he had been replaced by an ambitious twenty-six

year-old named William James McWilliams. The *Cyclopedia of Tasmania* records that Tom left due to ‘ill health’, which could have been the depression which plagued the rest of his life and eventually led to his suicide in 1907 (81).

Tom returned to Melbourne and ‘found a house for us before he found a job’, a small, rat-infested house in a ‘dreary’ suburb (*Hurricane* 29). By August 1889, he was editor of a suburban weekly paper, *The Sun*, and the new job allowed the family to move to a ‘larger, more comfortable house’ in the seaside suburb of Brighton (*Hurricane* 21). Tom was in his element at *The Sun*, composing the satirical column ‘Madcap Rhymes’ each week; Katharine recalls that old journalists later told her it was ‘the liveliest, wittiest weekly published in Melbourne’ (31).

However, things went wrong, as they often did for Tom and in about 1892 the new owners of *The Sun* turned it into ‘a merely social weekly’ and Tom was sacked, leaving him ‘broken in health as a result of over-work and depressed by the failure of the paper’ (31). Ironically, *The Sun* was eventually to end up in the hands of socialist journalist Henry Hyde Champion from 1897 to 1899, and become the sort of newspaper the adult Katharine would have approved of, if not for loyalty to her father.

Katharine still didn’t know where babies came from when her younger sister, Beatrice, appeared at this time (31). In *Wild Oats* Katharine adds the memory of this family crisis to a later crisis in Launceston, with Han’s mother telling her, ‘We’ve no money... we don’t know when father will get any more work to do. We haven’t even a house to live in... and a little sister is coming to you soon... and there will be no home, no food—’ (*Wild Oats* 212). Beatrice was born on 2 November 1892, sandwiched between two deaths in the family in six weeks—Harry Williams (Aunt Lil’s new husband) and Simon Fraser (Katharine’s grandfather).

In the midst of the hardships of this period, Tom published his first and only novel, *Retaliation: A Tale of Early Melbourne*, in May 1893.³ Why was the Sun Printing and Publishing Company publishing a novel by the man they had only recently sacked? Katharine sheds no light; despite devoting so much attention to her father in her autobiography, she is conspicuously silent about *Retaliation*.

Retaliation is a popular romance which periodically lives up to the promise of its subtitle by mentioning the streets and settlements of ‘early Melbourne’. While competent and representative, it is not especially memorable. The lofty chapter epigraphs from the likes of Shakespeare, Shelley, and Wordsworth suggest Tom had literary aspirations out of keeping

with his talent and chosen genre. A mistreated orphan girl is turned out of her house by her stern guardian, only to be picked up and drugged by a scoundrel with evil designs. Jumping from the carriage just in time, she is rescued by a kind and wealthy widow, who takes her away to the Grampians and changes her identity. After a fire and a deathbed confession by a co-conspirator, the heroine finally has her revenge on the scoundrel (who cannot recognise her, so beautiful she has become) by making him fall in love with her, only to humiliatingly reject him—this being the ‘retaliation’.

It would have been glamorous to nine year-old Katharine that her father had published a novel. Publishing novels would have seemed like something a person could do, something she could aspire to. Her silence about *Retaliation* as an adult suggests that she later recognised its shortcomings. As if to prove herself to her father after he was dead, her first three novels were also romances, all of them superior to *Retaliation*, but bearing a striking resemblance in their coincidence-driven plots of beautiful damsels under threat from scoundrels.

As Victoria suffered a banking crisis and a real-estate collapse, Tom finally found a new job in July 1893, back at the *Daily Telegraph* in Launceston—only this time, contrary to Katharine’s memory, he was the associate-editor, under the oversight of his successor to the editor post, William James McWilliams, and the owner, James Brickhill. McWilliams was elected to state parliament that year; he would go on to a career in federal politics, becoming the first leader of the Federal Country Party (now the Nationals) (Neilson).

‘After a dark and troubled time that was like the memory of a storm, Peter Barry had climbed the hill which rose from the sleepy old township of Launceston and had chosen the house built right at the top of the hill...’ (*Wild Oats* 9). Peter’s real-life counterpart, Tom, called that house ‘Korovuna’, even though he was only renting it (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 Aug 1894, 2). It seems he was intending to stay in Launceston. According to Katharine, the name means ‘place of peace’ in Fijian, but it actually means something more like ‘beginning place’ (*Hurricane* 43). He would later give the same name to the more permanent family home in Melbourne.

Tom and Edith were determined to establish themselves as pillars of the community. Tom was in a flurry of activity, involving himself in a myriad of committees and causes.⁴ He became president of the Tasmanian branch of the Australian Institute of Journalists, an active organisation, and gave a speech on the aims of journalism. He was elected as a churchwarden

to the new Anglican church in Trevallyn, St Oswald's, as well as offering his skills as a mimic at a church-building fundraiser. He was a member of the City and Suburbs Improvement Association, which put on a fancy dress ball to raise funds. He gave lectures on Fiji with lantern slides. He continued to write fiction, publishing Christmas stories in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1893 and 1894. Edith exhibited 'beautiful water-colour copies' at an art show, and belonged to the women's committee at St Oswald's. Katharine's feeling that 'children had come to them in the nature of accidents' may have been caused by her parents' constant activity (*Wild Oats* 13).

Early impressions would have counted in the town, and Tom and Edith wanted to appear better-off than they were. They hired a 'general' named Jessie to do the housework; Katharine mentions her only in passing in *Child of the Hurricane*, but she is a minor character in *Wild Oats*. Their later financial crisis, culminating in an auction of a long list of quality furniture, suggests they over-extended themselves borrowing money to set their house up and give the impression of middle-class solidity (*Launceston Examiner* 21 Feb 1895, 8).

They lived next door to Tom's brother, Frederick, and his family. Frederick had taken up a role as editor of the rival Launceston newspaper, *The Launceston Examiner* (Ferrall). Yet amongst all the uncles and aunties and cousins who receive seemingly random anecdotes in her autobiography, Katharine does not discuss him. Did she have no stories to tell about him? Was she envious of the comparative stability and success he enjoyed as the editor of the *Examiner* for nearly three decades? Or did the brothers fall out with each other?

The house on top of the hill was in the locality of Trevallyn, backing onto the bush around the scenic Cataract Gorge. 'The hills which rose in misty, timbered brakes and ledges behind her home, were Han's happy hunting-ground' (14). Katharine was enchanted by the trees, the flowers and the birds and the lizards, an enchantment which was to flow through her writing in the years which followed, and Han is the same: 'She scarcely knew the world of the real from the world of the unreal; both were blended in the crystal of her mind' (22).

Han's encounters with goannas in chapter four of *Wild Oats* symbolises much of her childhood world. Attempting to provoke goannas into spitting fire, Han and her brothers throw rocks at them, until, one day, 'Two sharp stones had hit the goanna and made gaping crimson wounds in his silver side. Something human in his suffering, helplessness, mute and impotent anger, struck her' (25). She decides he is an enchanted prince and returns each day to feed him. However, 'instead of changing to a knight at arms, although his coat was of

burnished mail like the coat of any *preux chevalier* in history or fairy tale’ a goanna ‘became the source of all Han’s misfortunes, and the immediate cause of her going to school’ (27). Soon after, she lashes out at a neighbourhood boy when he kills a goanna on the path in front of her. When his mother complains, she is punished for her stand against injustice, her family deciding it is time she is sent to school.

When Katharine came to revise *Wild Oats* forty years after its first publication, she did not make many changes, but she did feel the need to delete the phrase ‘*preux chevalier*’ (‘gallant knight’). In between the two editions, she had published *Child of the Hurricane*, where she writes of a love affair with an older man, a friend of her father’s. Showing her around Sydney, he designates himself her *preux chevalier*, which she uses as his pseudonym (93-95, 143-145). They arrange to meet in Paris, about the time she was writing the first draft of *Wild Oats*. Her gallant knight ‘become intensely self-centred as their affair went on; made her promise never to marry, on the threat that he would shoot himself if she broke her promise’ (Throssell, *My Father’s Son* 62). A reptile, a girl’s delusion, a nickname, a loss of innocence—we read the scene differently after *Child of the Hurricane*.

On 17 November 1893, Fillis’s Mammoth Circus and Menagerie, a South African troupe, arrived in Launceston for five days of shows. ‘Tier upon tier’ of ‘delighted spectators’ watched a lion, a tiger, five elephants, ‘Lilliputian marvels’, a woman shot from a cannon, and acrobats (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 Nov 1893, 2). In *Wild Oats*, Han

was living in a world of enchantment, and could not think or talk of anything but the circus. At night, and in the morning, she could hear the wild beasts roaring in their cages. From the veranda of her home, the circus tents looked like a crop of mushrooms in the township, and at night, when they were lighted, they glowed a very elfin village. Music of the band drifted up over the town to The Hill (136).

She decides her great ambition in life is to be an acrobat, and she rehearses in her backyard, until she jumps from the tree before her watching family and falls hard to the ground. The visit of Fillis’s Circus was the beginning of an ongoing fascination with the circus for Katharine, culminating in her 1930 novel *Haxby’s Circus*.

In *Wild Oats*, the circus is paired with Han’s brief attraction to another romantic vocation—the life of a missionary. She listens to Rev. Percy Peyton’s stories of horror and martyrdom in ‘darkest China’ and decides she wants to ‘convert the heathen from his blindness.... I want to carry the light of the gospel to far Lao Tzu. I want to be noble. I want to be a martyr. I want to die by the sword of the Pig-Tailed Barbarian’ (145).

In life, Rev. Joseph King, the London Missionary Society agent in Australasia, and Rev.

T. Lord, a missionary from Madagascar, visited Launceston three months before the circus in August 1893. They spoke at church services and at an inter-denominational Sunday school meeting for children. Katharine was to reject Christianity from a young age, but perhaps she was momentarily taken by King's vision:

A true education, he said, was a slow and gradual process, so gently and by degrees was the dawning of Divine truth upon the minds of men.... To every land, the preacher urged, must the standard of Christianity be borne, every country invaded. His followers, animated by a noble spirit of conquest, must assail every position held by the enemy and rest not until the seal of the Creator had been impressed on every brow. (*Daily Telegraph*, 28 Aug 1893, 3)

To the adults, at least, he spoke of martyrdom—not death at the hands of ‘pig-tailed barbarians,’ but the more mundane death the previous year of the saintly Miss Lois Cox, a woman of twenty-seven who, according to her obituary, ‘during her sojourn in the land of the rajahs...had an attack of fever, from which she never thoroughly recovered’ (*Advertiser*, 12 Aug 1892, 6). King declared ‘her career was intense while it lasted and her influence would not soon die’ (*Launceston Examiner* 28 Aug 1893, 7). For a nine year-old girl working out her place in the world, the life of a missionary momentarily offered both adventure and a great cause. Even though the desire to be a missionary quickly left Katharine, the preacher's zeal and breadth of vision anticipates the communist gospel she was to embrace more than twenty years later.

Katharine was to look back on her early teachers as benignly inept. Before the Prichards left Melbourne, she had started attending a school ‘run by a gentle spinster’ in Brighton, and then a school run by her Aunt Lil (*Hurricane*, 29-30). By her own unreliable reckoning, she was the late age of eight years old when she started, but she had already learned to read and write and had French lessons with her grandmother. Katharine makes her first known appearance in print (besides a birth notice and passenger lists) on 23 December 1893, as ‘Katty Prichard’, the most awarded student at Miss Littler's private school in Trevallyn (*Daily Telegraph*, 6). Despite the portrait of a rebellious Han who frequently runs away from school, in her first year at Miss Littler's school, she was voted by her fellow students ‘Best Conduct’ for the entire school. Katharine was always a polite rebel. She also won the reading award, the only award given to Class IV, and beat her two brothers (who came second and third) for best buttonhole-flower exhibit. Katharine remarks that the school

...was very much the same as the ones I had been to before, conducted by 'an amiable, not very young woman, who helped to support a widowed mother.' Good-natured people on The Hill took her teaching qualifications for granted. If the school was not all it should be, they were satisfied, as they said to each other, that 'it kept the children out of the way and out of mischief for the greater part of the day.' (*Hurricane* 34)

If Miss Littler was so amiable, it seems strange that Katharine was to give the name 'Miss Whittler' to the mean-spirited landlady who becomes Han's nemesis in *Wild Oats*. But perhaps it's just a coincidence.

On 13 August 1894, Katharine makes a second newspaper appearance as 'Katie Prichard' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2). She was one of the organisers of a children's bazaar, held at her family's house to raise funds for the poor. She and her friends made crafts and toys, selling them for a penny each. The event raised over a pound and the journalist (probably Tom) holds it up as an example to the rest of the community. The charitable, community-spirited Prichard family living at Korovuna on top of the hill look so assured of their place in Launceston society in 1894, seemingly unaware they were about to tumble.

In her autobiography, Katharine claims the *Daily Telegraph* was 'on its last legs, and it was hoped Father would revive it', only for the paper to cease publication (106). In reality, the newspaper kept going without Tom right up to 1928. In late 1894, the owner, James Brickhill, was in financial trouble and the Christmas Day issue of the paper declared that it had been seized by new owners. Two weeks later, a Hobart newspaper declared that 'Mr. T. H. Prichard, editor-associate and 'Aramis' of the *Daily Telegraph* severs his connection to that paper today. The tomahawk has been pretty freely used in the various departments since the old management, and the old sub goes back to his chair.' (*Clipper*, 12 Jan 1895, 5) While the editor, McWilliams, stayed on under the new regime, Brickhill's demise was also Tom's.

Six months after the bazaar at the Prichards' house to raise money for the poor, almost everything they owned was auctioned onsite. The advertisement placed on behalf of Tom in *The Launceston Examiner* for an auction of 'the whole of his household furniture' is a comprehensive and sad list: 'comprising walnut sideboard (mirror back), mahogany telescope table, dining room suite, new Brussels carpet, oil paintings (superior), mahogany wardrobe, cedar chest drawers, bedsteads and bedding, commode, dressing tables, washstands, fenders, curtains, poles and rings, kitchen utensils, dresser, garden tools, and sundries' (21 Feb 1895, 8). Neither Edith's beloved piano nor the family's books are included, but everything else

seems to be for sale as the family prepares to return to Melbourne.

In *Wild Oats*, the crisis awakens Han's sense of responsibility for her family, making her feel she must do something to help them, although she wonders just what a twelve year-old can do. She decides 'when she was grown up and if she learnt a great deal at school, she could help Rosamund Mary, Peter, the boys, and that little sister' (214). The crisis comes simultaneously with the death of Han's grandmother and the discovery she has a younger sister on the way. In this way, *Wild Oats* amalgamates the 1895 crisis with both earlier and later incidents in Katharine's life. As already mentioned, Katharine's grandmother, Susan Fraser, died in 1901. In 1902, Katharine won four subject prizes at South Melbourne College (the secondary school she attended after the family returned to Melbourne) and was expected to continue for another year to win an exhibition to university, but instead Katharine writes: 'My hopes were dashed to the ground. Mother was suffering from sciatica when I should have returned to school. She lay in bed for six months, and I had to stay at home, do everything for her and look after the housework. There was no possibility of winning an exhibition after that.' (*Hurricane*, 63) While her three close friends all went on to attain degrees, Katharine missed the opportunity. It was a sacrifice she was to feel keenly for the rest of her life.

When Katharine gave a testimony of her conversion to communism sixty years later, the auction stands out as a landmark, her awakening to injustice in the world. It adds another layer to her interpretation of the event. She and her brothers had been sent out to play in the bush all day. On their return, they 'saw the family furniture piled on carts driving along the road, and a red auctioneer's flag over the gate' (*Why I Am a Communist* 3). Her mother's grief stirred her to the realisation of 'some dark mysterious trouble' which she must prevent hurting her family (4). Katharine is only able to tie the auction of the family furniture to communism in a loose way, claiming 'editors in those days earned only a small salary' and focusing on the period of hardship which followed (4). The tribulations of a family with bourgeois aspirations are not the orthodox trigger for revolutionary sentiment. Despite their hardships, the Prichards returned to Melbourne not in steerage but saloon class on 7 March 1895.

Compared to the plots fiction demands, lives are too repetitive. In writing about her life in the form of a children's novel, Katharine shaped the events of early 1895 into the decisive crisis of her childhood. In life, this crisis in the Prichard family was one of many, the circularity suggested by the 'memory of a storm' right at the start of *Wild Oats* as the family arrive in

Launceston. The culmination was to come years later when Tom killed himself in 1907. Katharine lived her childhood with the memory of storms. Tom's difficulty finding work when he moved back to Australia from Fiji in 1888 was one; the loss of his job at *The Sun* in 1892 was another. This time, Katharine understood some of what was happening to her family and the knowledge was bitter. In her memory, leaving Launceston became an exile from paradise, cast out from a care-free existence playing in the bush and forced back to suburban Melbourne with a new sense of responsibility. *Wild Oats* is a 'truly, really' account of Katharine's childhood not just by some historical measures but also in conveying her personal mythology so well.

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¹ While living in Melbourne before and after Launceston, Katharine was next door to a cousin named Hannah Frances Davies (born 1882) (*Hurricane* 30).

² One of the review clippings for Thomas's novel *Retaliation* is from the *St Arnaud Times* and it mentions he is a 'former editor of this journal' (*Papers, 1884-1899*).

³ The book itself is undated and library catalogue records list its publication date as 1891, but the only reviews and advertisements occur in May and June 1893.

⁴ On the other hand, the Prichard family's public lives in Launceston are unusually well-documented, with Thomas and his neighbouring brother representing a good proportion of the local media. Their activities were mainly recorded in the *Launceston Examiner* column 'Current Topics'.