



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES- ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

The place has aesthetic value in the rambling gardens which were initially designed by Katharine Susannah Prichard provide a counterpoint to the dark weatherboard of the buildings and the rough granite stonework. The old pine tree which dominates the garden also has a landmark quality and acts as a sign post, marking the site for the surrounding district. (Criterion 1.1)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The place has a close association with Australian writer and prominent political activist Katharine Susannah Prichard, whose association with the place spanned the last fifty years of her life and covered her most productive years as a writer. (Criterion 2.3)

The workroom has particular significance, as it was constructed expressly for Prichard's writing activities. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

The place is held in high regard for its association with prominent Western Australia writer Katharine Susannah Prichard, a bronze plaque has been placed on the wall in her memory. *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* is held in high regard by groups such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers (W. A.) and the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation. (Criterion 4.1)

The remains of the 1890s four-roomed house and the associated wash-house demonstrate a typical 'Hills' lifestyle', in the combination of dark timber and granite stonework construction materials and rambling garden setting. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Katharine Susannah Prichard's House, with its separate workroom, can be regarded as representative of a writer's particular way of life. The separate workroom demonstrates the writer's need for isolation and solitude. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

An internal fire in the house, in August 1993, did not cause any structural damage and the smoke damage has since been rectified.¹ The separate washroom is in sound condition; however, the water closet is collapsing under the weight of a vine covered pine tree. The workroom is in sound condition following major repair work carried out in 1988.

Recent restoration work, funded under the National Estate Grant Program, has ensured that *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* is in sound condition.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Although there has been a change in use, from private residential to that of a writers' centre and residence, *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* retains a high degree of integrity.²

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

In nearly 100 years of occupation, the property has undergone a number of modifications and alterations, and lost some of its original detailing, but the changes that have occurred reflect the evolution of the place over time. Overall the buildings and grounds have retained a reasonable degree of authenticity.³

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Katharine Susannah Prichard's House comprises a single-storey, weatherboard building constructed circa 1896, a separate wash-house and

¹ Refer to Campbell, R. McK., and van Bremen, I. H., 'Katharine's Place, Greenmount: Conservation Report', (June 1993) for further details regarding the condition of the place.

² *ibid.* for further details regarding the integrity of the place and recommendations for requirements for the retention of significance.

³ *ibid.* for further details regarding the authenticity of the place.

water closet (thought to be of the same era), and a separate workroom constructed in 1929.⁴

The site on which the buildings stand was originally part of a land grant of 4,000 acres, Swan Location 16, made to Captain James Stirling in the 1830s.⁵ The land was purchased by Edward Brockman in the 1880s and, in the 1890s, a portion north of the Old York Road was sold to James Morrison. Morrison allowed a tenant to build a four-room house close to the road on land. The land was later surveyed into one acre lots. The lot which included the house was lot 51.

Lots 51 and 52 were purchased, in 1910, by the Reverend Percy U. Henn, founding Headmaster of Guildford Grammar School. He used the house as a weekend retreat. It was in 1919-1920 that Captain H. V. H. Throssell purchased lots 51 and 52, and 140 acres over the road to the south.

Captain H. V. H. Throssell (Jim), the son of George Throssell of Northam, was a returned soldier from Gallipoli who was the first West Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery. Katharine Susannah Prichard first met Throssell in London in 1916. She had already made a name for herself in Australian literary circles with the prize-winning novel *The Pioneers* (1915).

Throssell and Prichard married in Melbourne on 28 January 1919, and they made the Greenmount house their permanent home. According to her biographer (and son), Ric Throssell:

Katharine ... fell in love with the view across the plain to the distant lights of Perth from the tiny front verandah of the weatherboard house ... Jim saw the surrounding paddocks as orchards ... The red clay would be right for fruit trees. There was already a lemon struggling to take hold alongside the wash-house.⁶

Prichard's move to Western Australia did little to diminish her political and literary energies.

Prichard's early political and literary experience saw her exploring socialism, communism and the writings of people such as Marx and Engels. As a founding member of the Australian Communist Party, Prichard helped found the party's Western Australian branch at the end of 1920. When she joined the Communist Party, her husband joined her as a speaker supporting unemployed and striking workers. "The combination of her award winning novels and Communism, and his Victoria Cross, brought them fame and notoriety."⁷

In the first ten year period of their residence, Prichard wrote and published the works that are considered to have firmly established her reputation as an Australian writer.

It appears that *Working Bullocks* (1926) was the first major work conceived and written at the house. It was closely followed by *Brumby*

⁴ RAlA, 'Architectural Evaluation for the WA Heritage Committee ' (April 1987).

⁵ Campbell and van Bremen, p. 2.

⁶ Throssell, R. *My Father's Son* (1989) quoted in Campbell and van Bremen, p. 3.

⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 12, 1891 - 1939, p. 224.

Innes (1927) and then *Coonardoo* (1928). *Coonardoo* is now said to be central to her literary reputation and the work of hers which is most studied, and, most translated today.

During the 1920s, the Throssells made some changes to the house, and established the garden. Ric Throssell, biographer, describes a wide verandah added to the north. In 1929, with some of the Bulletin prize money for the novel *Coonardoo*, a separate workroom was built for Prichard in the orchard, away from the distractions of the household. Throssell describes the workroom as:

... a one-roomed oiled weatherboard house with ceiling-high cupboards for her manuscripts, lined with bookshelves and warmed in winter by a huge stone fireplace. There was a jarrah writing table, a bit uneven and rickety on its pins, ... a couch covered by a possum skin rug and a couple of saffron cushions.⁸

Further additions were made to the house in the early years of the 1930s.⁹ However, following Jim Throssell's suicide in 1933, while Prichard was in Russia, Prichard spent much time away from the house. Prichard's outspoken political beliefs and often controversial literary works saw her often criticised and relegated to the fringes of society. Between 1933 and 1946 Prichard wrote only one new novel, *Moon of Desire* (1941) aimed in vain at Hollywood as a means to relieve the poverty caused by Throssell's debts.¹⁰

She spent time in Sydney in the early 1940s, preparing a trilogy on the goldfields. In 1946, Prichard returned to Greenmount, intending to sell the house. However, as written in a letter to Ric, she rediscovered her enchantment with the area:

Home again. And you've no idea how heavenly it feels to be in our little kipsey again. Everything much as we left it - except trees and shrubs grow old and straggly ... A hot still night, but a little breeze coming through the dining room door, as I sit in the famous Hamlet chair and look out to the dark trees over Greenmount.¹¹

According to Throssell, the house acquired a certain notoriety in the 1940s and was identified as the place where "the red witch, that Throssell woman lived", alluding to Prichard's communist affiliations. The 1960s saw Prichard work on her last two major works while living in the house; her autobiography *Child of the Hurricane* (1963), and *Subtle Flame* (1967). While working on the novels she wrote to Ric:

The sweet peace of home enfolding me again ... Here I am reclining on the verandah with the garden looking at its beautifullest - lavender, cerise pelargonium and Christmas lilies, pink honeysuckle and nasturtiums all mixed up and growing wild together. A golden-breasted whistler pouring out his song, too! I'm so grateful for the peace and loveliness.¹²

⁸ Throssell, R. *Wild Weeds and Windflowers - The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1975) quoted in Campbell and van Bremen, p. 3.

⁹ See physical evidence section.

¹⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 11, 1891 - 1939, p. 292.

¹¹ Throssell, R. *Wild Weeds and Windflowers - The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1975) quoted in Campbell and van Bremen, p. 5.

¹² *ibid.* p. 6.

In her last years Katharine Susannah Prichard expressed her thoughts on the future of the house and its garden, "I feel it would be a mistake to try to keep this place as a memorial - or museum - anything of that sort ... We must not be sentimental about the old place."¹³

Prichard died in October 1969, and since her death many of her works have been republished and newly translated. "Her writing has found new critical interpretations and new readers and the dichotomy between her literature and her politics has increasingly been set aside."¹⁴ Prichard summed up her association with the house and garden in her autobiography *Child of the Hurricane* saying, "The happiest years of my life were spent in our home at Greenmount in the West. My best literary work was done there."¹⁵

In 1970, the place was purchased by P. and S. Lewis who cut back the garden and carried out a few alterations to accommodate using the building as a gallery. The Lewis' named the place *Megalong* and it was opened in 1974.

In 1983, the W. A. Fellowship of Australian Writers celebrated the centenary of Prichard's birth by visiting the Greenmount house and placing a bronze plaque on the wall in her memory. In 1986, lot 51 was purchased by the State Government, who vested ownership in the Shire of Mundaring, to lease to the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation for 21 years.

The place is used by the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation, as a writers' centre, with an office and a writer's room off the hall at the front (west end) of the house. When there is a writer-in-residence, the double room in the centre of the house is used for Foundation meetings and other functions and the rest of the house serves as living quarters. The workroom also becomes the writer's work space. When there is no writer-in-residence, the larger living room in the northern addition to the house is used as a meeting room.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, , p. 293.

¹⁵ Prichard, K. S. *Child of the Hurricane* (1963) quoted in Campbell and van Bremen, p. 7.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The place consists of a timber and iron house, with outbuildings, constructed circa 1896, a detached wash-house, thought to be of the same era (now with modern carport attached), a separate timber and iron workroom, built in 1929, to provide Prichard with a retreat in which to concentrate on her writing, and a separate water closet now collapsing under the pine tree and its vines.¹⁶

The buildings are set in a rambling garden on the Greenmount slope off the Old York Road. The wash-house is set into the hillside a couple of steps up from the backyard. The workroom is situated, in isolation, some distance from the house.

The House, Wash-house and Workroom form a loose group in the overgrown garden - a characteristic mixture of the man-made and the natural that has long been typical of the "Hills" lifestyle. The dark weatherboards contrast with the foliage and the odd pieces of rough granite stonework are of the place.¹⁷

The original house and the workroom are simple timber buildings of architectural character typical of the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century. The main hip roof of the house sheeted in corrugated iron of short lengths, marks the original four room house circa 1896. It sweeps down to the low pitch lean-to roof that was once the back verandah, now completely enclosed. Three external walls of the house still have jarrah ship-lap weatherboards (west, south, east). A join in the boards at the back door marks the extent of the original kitchen enclosure.

Inside the house, the four main rooms of the original house still have lath and plaster ceilings, without cornices or ceiling roses. They have lath and plaster walls with timber skirtings, all of one pattern, and timber floors that generally slope down to the north-west. The internal doors in this part of the house are four-panel softwood doors consistent with the 1890s house, but several have been stripped and varnished.

The wash-house is of timber frame construction, roofed in corrugated iron and clad in weatherboards, unlined inside, and could be of the same generation as the 1890s house. The wash-house has an entrance door, one four-pane window on the east, a high opening on the north, and a pair of double doors opening onto the carport. There is a traditional copper with an external brick chimney and a double bowl concrete trough.

The workroom is a single room of timber frame construction with a gable roof. The external walls are still ship-lap weatherboards. The ceilings and walls are lined with fibre-board. The tall cupboards built into the west wall are the original manuscript storage cupboards.

Over the years, the buildings have undergone a number of changes, including additions, alterations and restoration work.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, information in the physical evidence section is taken from Campbell and van Bremen.

¹⁷ Campbell and van Bremen, p. 13.

Additions made by Mr and Mrs Lewis to the north, in the 1970s, are clearly identifiable by the low pitch skillion roof, fibrous cement cladding and aluminium sliding windows and patio door. There are steel tube stumps supporting the floor to these extensions.

The Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation was the recipient of two grants for conservation work under the National Estate Program, in 1987/88 and 1989/90.¹⁸

In 1988, the narrow front verandah of the west side of the house was extended by one metre and most of the fabric was replaced in the process. The south pergola also had work done to it. In addition, major work was carried out on the workroom which included the replacement of rotting stumps and timbers supporting the floor, replacement of rusted timber work, minor internal repairs, and the renewal of the electricity connection to the house.

In 1989/90, the fireplace was conserved. The stone fire surround and chimney were rebuilt and a chimney flue installed. Repairs were made to the ceilings and walls and the interior and exterior of the workroom was painted. In addition, the electrical wiring within the house was checked and repaired, the roof repaired and other minor repairs were made to the woodwork.

In August 1993, a fire in the living room caused by a spark from an open fire, resulted in smoke damage to most of the interior. A conversation with writer and tenant Don Eade, shortly afterward, indicated that the damage required most of the interior of the house to be repainted. In addition, the living room fire place which had been damaged in the incident, was replaced.¹⁹

For further evidence regarding the fabric of the buildings, refer to Campbell, R. McK., and van Bremen, I. H., 'Katharine's Place, Greenmount: Conservation Report', (June 1993).

13.3 REFERENCES

Campbell, R. McK., and van Bremen, I. H., 'Katharine's Place, Greenmount: Conservation Report', (June 1993).

National Trust Assessment Exposition, December 1983.

¹⁸ These are detailed in: Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation, 'Final Report: Conservation of Katharine's Place (Funded under the National Estate Program 1987/88)' and a similar report for the work carried out in 1988/90.

¹⁹ Telephone conversation Don Eade, resident writer, on 7 January 1994. All repairs have been completed.