



HERITAGE
COUNCIL
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES

Interim Entry

1. **Data Base No.** 1681
2. **Name.** *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* (1896, 1929)
3. **Description of elements included in this entry.** Original house, wash-room and W.C., and 1929 studio/workroom and gardens, and the land on which they stand being Reserve 39144.
4. **Local Government Area.** Shire of Mundaring
5. **Location.** 11 Old York Road, Greenmount
6. **Owner.** Shire of Mundaring
7. **Statement of Significance of Place (Assessment in Detail)**

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Katharine Susannah Prichard's House includes a single storey, weatherboard building, the original section being built in c.1896, a separate wash-house and W.C., and a separate workroom, 1929.¹ 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.² 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 that was later surveyed as lot 51, amongst other one acre residential lots.

Lots 51 and 52 were purchased in 1910 by the Rev. 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, including the house, 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 had been awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery, the first V.C. in Western Australia. Prichard met the wounded Throssell in London in 1916, married him in Melbourne on 28 January 1919 and they made the Greenmount house their permanent home. Prichard's early political and literary experience saw her discovering socialism, communism and the

¹ RAIA, *Architectural Evaluation for the WA Heritage Committee* (April 1987)

² Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *Katharine's Place, Greenmount: Conservation Report* (June 1993)

writings of people such as Marx and Engels, ideas that were to shape her future philosophy.

Katharine Susannah Prichard had already made a name for herself in Australian literary circles with the prize-winning novel The Pioneers (1915). 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."³

Prichard's move to Western Australia in 1919 did little to diminish her political and literary energies. 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 Innes (1927) and then Coonardoo (1928). Coonardoo is now said to be central to her literary reputation and the work most studied and translated today.

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."⁴

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."⁵

Further additions were made to the house in the early years of the 1930s.⁶ 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 placed on 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.⁷

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."⁸

³ Throssell, R. *My Father's Son* (1989) quoted in Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *op. cit.* p.3.

⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 12, 1891 - 1939, p.224.

⁵ Throssell, R. *Wild Weeds and Windflowers - The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1975) quoted in Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *op. cit.* p.3.

⁶ See physical evidence section.

⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 11, 1891 - 1939, p.292.

⁸ Throssell, R. *Wild Weeds and Windflowers - The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1975) quoted in Campbell, R. MK., and van Bremen I.H., *op. cit.* p.5.

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."⁹ 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."¹⁰

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."¹¹ 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."¹²

In 1970 the house 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 house *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 (with conditions) for 21 years.

The house is used by the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation, 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.

The buildings and garden were classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) in 1983. The place was entered into the Register of the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission in 1991. The place is considered as having historical value by the Shire of Mundaring, which has included it in their Draft Municipal Inventory.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The site consists of a timber and iron house, with outbuildings, constructed in c.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

⁹ *ibid.* p.6.

¹⁰ *loc.cit.*

¹¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography, op.cit.*, p.293.

¹² Prichard, K.S. *Child of the Hurricane* (1963) quoted in Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *op.cit.* p.7.

with a retreat in which to concentrate on her writing, and a separate W.C. now collapsing under the pine tree and its vines.¹³

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."¹⁴

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 of c.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 joint 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. In addition to the entrance door, the wash-house has 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. Ceilings and walls are lined with fibre-board bowing away from its battens and from the skirting boards. 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. In addition, the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation has been the recipient of two grants (in 1987/88 and 1989/90) under the National Estate Program allowing badly needed conservation work to be carried out.

House - The original narrow front verandah of the house (west side) was extended by one metre in 1988 and most of the fabric was replaced in the process. The south pergola also had major work done on it in the 1988 renovations. The 1970s, Lewis additions on the north 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. During the 1989/90

¹³ unless otherwise stated, information in the physical evidence section is taken from Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *op cit*.

¹⁴ Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen I.H., *op. cit.* p.13.

renovations the electrical wiring within the house was checked and repaired, the roof repaired and other minor repairs were made to the woodwork.¹⁵

Workroom - Major work carried out on this building in 1988 included: replacement of rotting stumps and timbers supporting the floor; replacement of rusted roof, down piping and related timber work; minor internal repairs; and, renewal of electricity connection to the house.¹⁶ In 1989/90, the conservation work carried out in this building centred on the fireplace. The stone fire surround and chimney were rebuilt and a chimney flue installed. Repairs were made to the ceilings and walls and all painting was done both inside and outside the workroom.

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).

It should be noted that in August 1993, a fire in the living room caused by a spark from an open fire, resulted primarily in smoke damage. A recent discussion with writer and tenant Don Eade indicated that the damage required most of the interior of the house to be repainted. In addition, the living room fire place that was damaged in the incident, was replaced.¹⁷

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.

1. AESTHETIC VALUE

The place has some aesthetic value in that 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 place also has a landmark quality in that the huge, old pine tree dominates the garden and acts as a sign post, marking the site for the surrounding district.

2. HISTORIC VALUE

The place has high historic value for its 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.

The workroom has particular significance, in that it was constructed expressly for Prichard's work and is a direct result of her activity.

3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

¹⁵ Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation, *Final Report: Conservation of Katharine's Place (Funded under the National Estate Program 1989/90)* for the WA Heritage Committee, outlining the work that had been carried out.

¹⁶ Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation, *Final Report: Conservation of Katharine's Place (Funded under the National Estate Program 1987/88)* for the WA Heritage Committee, outlining the work that had been carried out.

¹⁷ telephone conversation on 7 January 1994. All repairs have now been carried out.

4. SOCIAL VALUE

Katharine Susannah Prichard's House is held in high regard by groups such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers (W.A.). Although not unique, the specially constructed workroom adds significance to the place as it can be regarded as a demonstration of a writer's particular way of life; illustrating the need for separation and solitude.

The remains of the 1890s four-roomed house and the associated wash-house have a lesser degree of social value for their demonstration of a turn-of-the-century way of life that in rural areas remained unchanged for many decades.

5. RARITY

6. REPRESENTATIVENESS

CONDITION

Following recent restoration work, funded under the National Estate Program, *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* is in sound condition. An internal fire in August 1993, did not cause any structural damage and the smoke damage has since been rectified.¹⁸

INTEGRITY

Although there has been a slight change in use, from purely residential to writers' centre come residence, *Katharine Susannah Prichard's House* has retained its integrity as the writer's house.¹⁹

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 overall the buildings and grounds have retained a reasonable degree of authenticity. The changes that have occurred reflect the evolution of the place over time.²⁰

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Katharine Susannah Prichard's House has cultural heritage significance for the following:

the place demonstrates a particular aesthetic relationship between the buildings and the site, and the wild and varied character of the garden;

¹⁸ Refer to Campbell, R.McK., and van Bremen, I.H., *op. cit.* for further details regarding the condition of the place.

¹⁹ *ibid.* for further details regarding the integrity of the place and recommendations for requirements for the retention of significance.

²⁰ *loc. cit.* for further details regarding the authenticity of the place.

its long and close association with the important Australian literary figure and political activist, Katharine Susannah Prichard;

the building demonstrates a turn-of the-century way of life, and the writer's way of working and living; and,

the place is held in some esteem by the local community and by particular literary groups for its association with writer Katharine Susannah Prichard.

8. Register of Heritage Places

Interim Entry 08/04/1994

9. Conservation Order

10. Heritage Agreement

11. References

National Trust Assessment Exposition

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