

CHAPTER 8 PROFILE – THISTLE HARRIS STEAD

'Before we can lead our children along the paths of truth, we must travel it ourselves ... it is the rebels, those who cannot accept the dogma of the already-formed doctrines of their teachers, who will lead us out of this entanglement into which we have been led.'

T. Y. Harris, 1941

It could be said that Thistle Harris Stead's life force with all its passions, projects and polemics took root when she was sixteen years of age. One crucial event gave direction and commitment to her life, dictated the career she was to follow, the books she was to write, the excursions she was to take and the contribution she was to make to conservation in Australia. Thistle Stead's consuming passion would often drive her to extreme lengths in confrontation with her contemporaries; it would engage all her energies until forced to give in to old age.

What was this crucial event? A dedicated teacher from her school took the sixteen-year-old Thistle Harris to a meeting of the Naturalists' Society of New South Wales and there she met, among other committed field naturalists, the self-taught naturalist, socialist and idealist, David George Stead, who at forty-one years of age was in the prime of his life.

Thus began a twin love affair, one with a man who was married to someone else for the first thirty-three years of their association and the other with ideals and commitment to wildlife preservation that were firstly his, but appropriately, hers also. Thistle Harris was a botanist by profession and inclination, while David Stead was primarily a marine biologist and here they differed, but their adherence to the ideals of peace, the need to save wildlife and its habitats, and a stand on atheism and socialism gave them a common direction in life.

THE EARLY YEARS

Thistle Yvette Harris was born on 29 July 1902, the second daughter in a family of three girls. 'My Mother was a person who liked fanciful names,' Thistle explained. 'The name was given to me because I had a godmother, a stage actress, whose name was Thistle Anderson. My second name, which no one pronounces properly, I do not know where that comes from.'¹ The family lived in Mosman, a Sydney suburb and after primary school education at Mosman Superior Public School she gained a place at the selective North Sydney Girls' High School in 1915. Thistle was immature and minor misdemeanours soon led to regular detentions and frequent reports to the Principal. The latter apparently made a complaint to the Department of Education and a letter was sent to the parents before the end of the year. Father Harris decided to send his recalcitrant daughter to Redlands private school at Cremorne to follow in the footsteps of her older sister, Nan. After more restless behaviour, and an unexpected failure in the Intermediate Certificate of 1918, Thistle was more conscientious in her final two senior years.

¹ De Berg Tapes, National Library, Side 2, p. 8

Sometime in 1918 Thistle's English teacher, Constance Le Plastrier, took her to a meeting of the Naturalists' Society. Constance's first love was botany and she was an excellent field botanist. In 1916 she was co-author with Agnes A. Brewster in the production of a radical new book, *Botany for Australian Students*, a book on Australian plants for Australian schoolchildren, not only stressing descriptive botany, but stressing the importance of the ecology of Australian plants. Thistle met David Stead and life would never be the same for either of them. She was sixteen years old, and he was forty-one, the father of seven children.

Thistle realised her potential in the Leaving Certificate of 1920 and was dux of Redlands school. During this final year she realised she wanted to teach, and success in the Leaving Certificate led to the award of a scholarship which enabled her to enrol at the University of Sydney in the Faculty of Science. On 29 May 1924, Thistle graduated as Bachelor of Science, having gained Distinction in Botany in each of her three years of study. The year 1924 was spent as a student at Sydney Teachers' College, gaining her Diploma of Education.

Murwillumbah Intermediate High School was Thistle's first country appointment as a science teacher from 2 February 1925. David Stead, working in Brisbane at the time, visited her on at least one occasion. They spent that first weekend camping on Mount Warning. At the beginning of 1929, Thistle received a posting to Broken Hill High School and during the time there she struck up an association with a local botanist, Albert (Bert) Morris, who introduced her to the western flora. It was Thistle's association with Bert Morris in Broken Hill that gave her an introduction to an appreciation of the significance of ecology; her knowledge broadened to include a study of not only what plant was there, but how and why it was there. However, in August 1930, Thistle was appointed to St. George Girls' High School at Kogarah, a suburb of Sydney. Her parents having separated, she shared a room with a friend, Daisy McCulloch, in a boarding house in Rockdale. Back in Sydney there could be more frequent meetings with David Stead. They would go out in her car, attend meetings, sometimes see a show, but more often just enjoy walking out together.

THE CONSERVATIONIST AND AUTHOR

Residence in the city of Sydney enabled Thistle to become actively involved in many conservationist organisations. She was on the Council of the Wild Life Preservation Society, of which David Stead was either President or Secretary. She joined the Australian Forest League and became interested in their young members, the Junior Tree Wardens, and compiled and edited the publication *The Junior Tree Warden* for its first release in May 1937, continuing as its editor for several years. In 1935 she became Honorary Secretary of the Illawarra-Bankstown Federation of Junior Tree Lovers following a move by Mr. W. J. Campbell, Honorary Secretary of the Schools Branch of the Australian Forest League to encourage co-operative efforts between schools and other bodies.

In 1931, Ada Stead, David's wife, had moved out of their Watson's Bay home and gone to live with her cousin at The Entrance. David was now a free agent to pursue his romance with Thistle, who had now taken up residence with her sister, Nan, and nephew, Alan, in Darling Point Road, Edgecliff. In 1934 the trio moved to Vaucluse.

Alan often became one of the party on Thistle's five to six weeks camping trips, Alan cramped in the back seat surrounded by specimens. 'We'd go all over New South Wales, to Kosciuszko, up the Namoi looking for platypus,' said Alan Clark as an adult in later years. 'We often camped on a private farm, never asking permission, and one day a farmer came down with a shot gun.'²

On 14 March 1938, Thistle took up a position as lecturer in Biology at Sydney Teachers' College, a position she held until 1962. There she was able to influence generations of student teachers in favour of the environment (including one such student, Joan (Miner) Webb, emphasising the value of hands-on experience and activities in the field. During her time there she wrote her first book, *Wild Flowers of Australia* (1938) which made a great impression on those who were interested in Australian natural history.

In early 1939 Thistle took a bold step and moved into *Boongarre*, David Stead's home at Watson's Bay. Other members of the Stead family, including married couples, were also living in the house. Thistle's father, already very ill, came to the house and made a huge fuss.

Thistle embarked on postgraduate studies and obtained a Bachelor of Education in 1943 and a Master of Education in 1945. Two books were published in 1945 – *Nature Problems* and *The Handbook of Nature Study* (for teachers). Both books stressed the value of field work for children, an aspect of teaching and learning in which she was vitally interested.

In May 1951 Ada Stead, David Stead's wife, died of a stroke and a month later Thistle and David were married. She was forty-nine years old and, since David had been out of work for many years, she continued to be the breadwinner.

During 1953 Thistle wrote her first book for the garden, *Australian Plants for the Garden*, but it was criticised for giving the wrong information on soil and habitat requirement and for having an inadequate knowledge of the plants concerned. On the other hand, C. T. White, Government Botanist in Brisbane, wrote in his Foreword that 'few people have done as much and probably none more than Thistle Harris to popularise the study of our wild flowers'. Thistle herself later said of this book, 'I realise I knew very little about the cultivation of Australian plants at this time ... but I felt that this simply had to be done, that the Australian people needed some guide in this sort of field and even if it wasn't a very good guide, it was something, and I do think this book helped to set the culture of Australian plants on a good footing'.³

Throughout her busy life of teaching, studying, and writing, Thistle continued her trips around the country, usually in her own car, always with one or other of her women friends. During the 1950s she made friends with several mature age students at Sydney Teachers' College and two of these women were to accompany her on a number of trips.

² Interview with A. Clark on 23.1.96

³ De Berg tape, Side 1, p.11-12

Another book had its genesis in the 1950s. In July 1949, as President of the Wild Life Preservation Society, Thistle had written to Angus and Robertson to suggest the W.L.P.S would produce as a joint effort a 'good handbook for bushwalkers – *Naturecraft for the Bushwalker: a guide for the nature-lover, the bushwalker, the student and the teacher*'. George Ferguson replied that Angus and Robertson would be interested if Thistle would be the editor and Angus and Robertson would pay ten percent royalty to the Society. The revised title was *Naturecraft in Australia*. It was published in 1956, a book ahead of its time before general environmental awareness became a phenomenon in the seventies.

In August 1957 David Stead died, aged eighty. Thistle was so devastated she refused to go to the funeral. From being a person easy to live with, Thistle became distant from the family, her trips away became more frequent.

NATURE'S ADVOCATE

Thistle was such an energetic and involved person that it is impossible to do more than list some of her activities from 1950 onwards. Following is a selection.

- 1949-1952 President of the W.L.P.S.A.
- 1957 The Society for Growing Australian Plants was launched and Thistle was much involved, being awarded an honorary life membership.
- 1958 The David George Stead Memorial Fund was established. Thistle, still in full-time employment as a lecturer at Sydney Teachers' College, was Honorary Secretary of the W.L.P.S.A. and Editor of its publication, *Australian Wild Life*.
- 1958 Thistle represented the W.L.P.S.A. in a move to declare a Primitive Area within the Kosciuszko State Park. The Society had long been working actively for the elimination of grazing from the alpine areas in Australia.
- 1960 Woollahra Municipal Council proposed to set up a womens' bowling green at Gap Park, Watson's Bay. Thistle led a very active opposition to the proposal and finally the Minister for Lands refused permission for the Park to be used in such a way.
- 1961 Thistle retired from her position at Sydney Teachers' College.
- 1962 Land was acquired at Bargo, New South Wales, on which a memorial sanctuary for David Stead was established, Wirrimbirra Sanctuary.
- 1963 Thistle was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion by the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, having been nominated by the Wild Life Preservation Society. Thistle continued her visits to Kosciuszko and campaigned against the destruction being caused by engineering works allowed by the Snowy Mountains Authority.
- 1966 Vincent Serventy became President of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia and Thistle was Vice-President.
- 1967 The Tasmanian Government in April 1965 had put forward a proposal for the flooding of Lake Pedder and opposition was strong. In June 1967 Thistle and Vincent Serventy went to Tasmania to lend their support to the 'Save Lake Pedder' campaign and they gave evidence at a Parliamentary Enquiry into the Gordon Scheme. In July, Thistle wrote to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) seeking their support.

- 1970 After many years of research, Thistle's book *Alpine Plants of Australia* was completed and published by Angus and Robertson. She acknowledged the generous assistance she had received from many people, including government officials and personal friends.
- 1970 Thistle prepared evidence to give to the Select Committee on Wild Life Conservation chaired by Mr. E. Fox (the Fox Report). She attended as a representative of the Stead Foundation and again on behalf of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia.
- 1971 The Lake Pedder Action Committee was formed, but the Tasmanian Premier refused any reconsideration of the issues. In 1975 Lake Pedder was flooded.
- 1971 A Field Studies Centre to cater for visiting schoolchildren was opened at Wirrimbirra in September.
- 1972 Thistle made another submission to the Fox Report, including eight recommendations, the most important of which were:
 - That the Commonwealth Government undertake a survey of land use throughout the continent with recommendations for future usage, including provision of national parks, nature reserves and recreational areas.
 - That the Commonwealth Government initiates a research program in conservation education techniques and processes at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

There being a change of Government in December 1972, the recommendations were unable to be addressed but the Fox Committee contributed to the deliberations of the Hope Committee set up in 1973 by the Whitlam Government to look into the nature and state of the National Estate. Once again the Wild Life Preservation Society and the Stead Foundation contributed to the discussion.

- 1973 A teacher was appointed from the Department of Education to cater for school groups at the Field Studies Centre at Wirrimbirra. Thistle devoted much time, energy and finances to the David Stead Memorial at Wirrimbirra.
- 1976 Thistle became President of the Wild Life Preservation Society in 1975 while Vincent Serventy was overseas. Serventy returned in January 1976 to be alerted that Thistle intended to wind up the Society and merge it into the Stead Foundation. The move was not successful.
- 1977 Thistle published *Gardening with Australian Plants*.
- 1980 Thistle was awarded an AM for services to wildlife conservation.
- 1985 Wollongong University awarded Thistle an Honorary Doctor of Science degree for her contribution to teaching, research in natural science and wild life preservation.
- 1990 On 5 July Thistle died from a heart attack, aged eighty-seven. All her assets and the Wirrimbirra Sanctuary were left to the National Trust of Australia so that David Stead's memorial could be looked after in perpetuity.

THISTLE HARRIS STEAD

Thistle Harris Stead was a contradictory character: dedicated, passionate and intolerant; energetic yet slapdash; a user of persons, yet a facilitator for their talents; a mediocre scholar, yet the supreme educator. She was forthright, courageous and charismatic, but turned aside from those whose opinions or beliefs were in opposition to hers. Her life was controlled by two passions – her love for the Australian environment and her love for David George Stead.

For many years in her role as an office-bearer for the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, Thistle wrote, spoke and acted as an advocate on many issues touching wildlife and its habitats. Her aggressive attitude on many occasions did not endear her to either colleagues or adversaries, but her sincerity and tenacity were never in doubt.

There was a whole generation of teachers who profited from her pragmatic approach to the teaching of science, both primary and secondary. Her uncompromising belief in the value of outdoor education, the hands-on approach, the encounter with the natural world beyond the classroom was handed on to aspiring teachers who took her ideas into the schools of New South Wales.

One such student is now a Regional Councillor for the Society, Max Blanch of Newcastle, who joined the Society in 1952. He wrote a note early in 2009 to say:

‘Thistle and Vincent were always writing and carried on the fight in traditional fashion. Thistle introduced me to many of her influential contacts. She always aimed to bring people together. She introduced me to Glen Ingram, later our Regional Councillor in Queensland, to Pat Burke, ornithologist, to Mrs. Sourry and the Gosford Naturalists Club (when I was living at Woy Woy) and to anyone she thought might be helpful. Thistle was an educator. At Teachers College, lecturers stood in front of classes lecturing on the need to involve students, the desirability of hands on practical experience. Thistle was the one who did it, by taking us out of the classroom, into the field. She set me on the path I followed as a teacher.’

One old friend summed her up. ‘A country needs people like Thistle. Ordinary nice people don’t leave footsteps in the sands of time. People who are a bit different and prepared to walk over people are the ones who make history.’