

# SHIRLEY HAZZARD FAHA

1931–2016

HONORARY FELLOW · ELECTED 2011



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The distinguished writer Shirley Hazzard died at her home in New York on 12 December 2016. Although she was born in Sydney, she spent only the first sixteen years of her life in Australia, apart from a few short return visits. She attended Queenwood School for Girls in Mosman but left in 1947 to move overseas with her family when her father was appointed Australian Trade Commissioner in Hong Kong. While living there, she did clerical work for British Combined Services Intelligence and fell in love with a much older British army officer. They were separated when the Hazzard family moved first to Wellington in New Zealand, and then to New York, after her father became the Australian Trade Commissioner there in 1951. Hazzard later claimed that her love of poetry saved her during this and other difficult periods of her early life. She worked for the United Nations between 1952 and 1962, mainly in New York but with a year's posting in Naples from 1956. She formed an enduring attachment to that city and its inhabitants.

In 1963 the novelist Muriel Spark introduced Hazzard to the leading American literary scholar, biographer and translator Francis Steegmuller; they were married later that year. Until his death in 1994, they lived part of each year in Italy and wrote five essays about their joint love

of Naples, collected in *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples* (2008). Hazzard also wrote a memoir about her friendship with the English author Graham Greene whom she met in Italy, *Greene on Capri* (2000).

Shirley Hazzard's literary career had begun in a most auspicious way when, as an unpublished writer, her short stories were accepted by the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine. Later collected in *Cliffs of Fall* (1963), these, like her novels, are highly cosmopolitan literary works, featuring sensitive heroines usually attempting to recover from a disastrous love affair or some other calamity. Hazzard's second collection, *People in Glass Houses* (1967), based on her experiences working for the United Nations, is much more satirical. While each story centres on a particular individual, certain characters recur, providing a devastating portrait of an institution staffed by petty-minded and often tyrannical people concerned to shore up their own positions at the expense of others. Any idealism in those who join this organisation is soon lost. Hazzard's verbal wit is well displayed in 'The Meeting' where she invents farcical sections within the institution with oxymoronic titles like 'Forceful Implementation of Peace Treaties' and 'Peaceful Uses of Atomic Weapons'. She became a vocal opponent of the United Nations, later writing on its flaws in *Defeat of an*

*Ideal: A Study of the Self-Destruction of the United Nations* (1973) and *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* (1990).

Hazzard made the transition from short to longer fiction via two short novels, *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966) and *The Bay of Noon* (1970). Both are love stories set in Italy and reflect her love for that country and its people. She won international attention with the first of her two major novels, *The Transit of Venus* (1980). It follows the personal lives and careers of two Australian sisters who move to England, covering several decades and reflecting Hazzard's interest in ideas and politics. Although this novel was highly praised and won a US National Book Critics' Circle Award, Hazzard did not publish another until *The Great Fire* (2003), a complex story of characters trying to re-establish their lives following the disruptions of World War II. Unlike her other novels, this allows the central characters in its love story to reach an only slightly qualified happy ending. It won both the fiction section of the US National Book Awards and Australia's Miles Franklin Award.

Shirley Hazzard returned to Australia for two months in 1976, when she was invited to attend the Adelaide Festival's Writers Week. Then, she was favourably impressed by both the Adelaide of Don Dunstan and the impact on Australian cultural life of the Whitlam years. Her 'Letter from Australia', published in the *New Yorker* on 3 January 1977, while especially focused on Patrick White, also mentions the work of younger writers such as Murray Bail, Frank Moorhouse, Les Murray and David Malouf. In 1984 Hazzard again returned to Australia to deliver the Boyer Lectures for the ABC, subsequently published as *Coming of Age in Australia* (1985). Interviews she gave then show that she was much

less impressed by the 'greed is good' Australia of the 1980s and then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who would have seemed a throwback to the type of brash Australian male she had known in the 1940s. Her first lecture, 'An Air of Disbelief', dealt with the Australia of her childhood during the Depression and World War II. She describes Australians of that period as decent and courageous but intolerant; Australia was a place where there was no acknowledgement of 'thought, art, intelligence', so anyone interested in these matters was forced to go overseas. A number of the points made by Hazzard in her remaining lectures have been taken up and endorsed by others since, such as her emphasis on the need for Australia to reject nationalism in favour of becoming part of the 'mainstream of civilisation' and in particular to reject 'a certain sentimental image of Australia as innocent, blameless, and chronically victimised.' But in 1984 such criticisms were resented and her lectures were not especially well received.

In 2005 Shirley Hazzard was awarded the William Dean Howells Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In the same year she was honoured by the New York Public Library with a Library Lion Award. She was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2011. She was also a Fellow of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the British Royal Society of Literature. A volume of selected essays, *We Need Silence to Find Out What We Think*, edited by Brigitta Olubas, was published by Columbia University Press in 2016. Like all of her work, in whatever genre, these essays display her fierce intelligence, wide knowledge and love of literature and the arts, and stylistic grace.

ELIZABETH WEBBY AM FAHA