

PIXIE O'HARRIS

Pixie O'Harris, a household name across Australia to generations of young Australians, has died in her 88th year, leaving more than twenty books to bewitch and delight little ones everywhere.

Pixie was an enchanting and an enchanted person. Throughout her whole life she retained the gift of youth, always bright-eyed and eager for the next adventure.

She was a poet, painter, author, illustrator and muralist for children's wards in hospitals. During her lifetime she painted more than 50 day nurseries, children's homes, schools and hospital wards. She liked working in hospitals — inspiring hope in the young patients with her elves and fairies and little bush animals. She treasured the comment of one sick little boy who said: 'Are you allowed to draw on the walls here?'

She painted her own walls too. Her kitchen at Vaucluse was a fairyland of colour. She once coped with a dripping tap by painting an elf with a pipe so that the annoying drip became his music.

Pixie was born Rhona Olive Harris in the Welsh village of Surry and although she came to Australia at the age of sixteen she always kept the Welsh music in her voice. This beautifully modulated voice with its undertone of laughter will be remembered by everyone who knew her or heard her reading her books at writers' gatherings or on radio.

Pixie came from a family of artists. Her father George F. Harris was a portrait painter and a Royal Academy man. Pixie herself at the age of 14 was the youngest member ever selected by the Royal Art Society of South Wales.

By the time Pixie arrived in Australia she was already an accomplished artist and she was

soon illustrating and exhibiting. She began publishing in her twenties such books as *Pearl Pinkie and Sea Greenie* and *The Fairy Who Wouldn't Fly* and she continued until her mid-eighties with her autobiography *Was It Yesterday?* and *Our Small Safe World — Recollections of a Welsh Childhood*.

Pixie was married to the late Bruce Pratt, editor of the *Australian Encyclopaedia*. She had three daughters, Halycon, Robin and Megan and she combined an intense working life with complete family involvement. Indeed, she is survived by her three daughters, eight grandchildren and three great grandchildren who remember her as 'the most wonderful mother and grandmother' who was never too busy for them.

In fact Pixie was never too busy for any of her friends or for young writers, artists and actors who flocked to her side. At her home at Vaucluse near Parsley Bay, Sydney, she held a continuous and welcoming open house. Afternoons with Pixie in her charming, flowery living room, drinking tea from fine china cups or sipping a glass of sherry while listening to her quoting her favourite poetic quips, is a memory that many succeeding generations of creative people share. One of her quotes was from a card sent to her by Ogden Nash: 'Devoid of warhead/ comes this Polaris/ Across the sea/ to Pixie O'Harris.'

There was always work in progress in Pixie's house: paintings, poems, stories — the very air was alive with creativity. She worked constantly and as she grew older, she seemed to do more. She once told me she felt like ancient Rome — with the barbarians at the door.

She left a significant body of work which some art historian will take delight in

cataloguing. Her unpublished poems and letters will provide a treasure trove of fascinating material for literary sleuths. Pixie was known to everyone and her friendships spanned seventy years of Australia's cultural life.

One cannot help but recognise that, had Pixie O'Harris remained in the United Kingdom, her fairy books and tales of wonder would probably have been known by now throughout the world. In her adopted country she suffered the fate of all Australian writers both of her generation and today, who must accept small print runs, lack of adequate publicity and isolation from the great markets of the world.

Nevertheless, she was much loved in her Australian world and was showered with medals: the Coronation, the Jubilee and an MBE. She was also made a patron of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children.

A true mystic and gifted with second sight which gave her an uncanny ability to understand people, she once opened the door of her home to find a distraught young girl who asked if she could live with her. 'Yes,' said Pixie. 'Come in.'

A long time neighbour of Pixie O'Harris said that she had brought magic into his life. 'She actually knew that the old mulberry tree in her back garden was full of elves and fairies — and I almost felt I could see them too. She was a true magician. We can do without the politicians and the economists. We could probably live without philosophers and poets and even musicians but we can't live without the magicians.'

Alas, now we must live without Pixie, though fortunately she has left us all a little magic from her full and well-lived life.



' TREE PEOPLE '

P.W. O'HARRIS