

## FOUNDING MOTHERS: KATHERINE GALLAGHER ON TWO STALWARTS OF AUSTRALIAN POETRY GWEN HARWOOD AND JUDITH WRIGHT

In Australia, the Anglo-English tradition of poetry has steadily developed into a complex multicultural one, exhibiting especially over the last seventy years continual pushes towards increasing diversity and expansion of styles and voices, including Aboriginal ones. Two poets who have especially contributed to the development of a distinguished women's poetry tradition are Judith Wright, (1915-2000) originally from Armidale, Northern N.S.W. and Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) originally from Brisbane, Queensland and later from Hobart, Tasmania. Very different in their backgrounds and tastes, both have stood out by their productivity, range and gifts, and their commitment to Australian poetry. Here I can provide only an outline of their importance as poets, but their works are well represented in the South Bank Poetry Library and online.

I consider Judith Wright to be my poetry 'grandmother', a splendid role-model whom I had the honour of meeting, firstly at an Australian literature seminar at the University of New England, Armidale in January 1967 and later at the University of Adelaide, 1968, when I did a workshop with her. Wright was well-represented in school texts, the brilliant 'token' woman familiar in every culture. She gave me the usual valuable advice to an aspiring poet: to read widely, observe well, keep a notebook, and to write from the senses. She also commented on a few of my poems and gave me even more valuable advice: *to keep going*.

From her first book *The Moving Image* onwards, she became a prolific poet, literary critic, anthologist, editor, children's writer, short-story writer, supporter of the Aboriginal land rights' cause and active conservationist. Her steady influence as a committed conservationist and poet cannot be underestimated. In a Sydney *Bulletin* Review, the critic Douglas Stewart acclaimed the poems of *The Moving Image* 'for their lyric beauty, brilliant craftsmanship and emotional honesty', a review typical for her work overall. Wright, born into a pastoral family whose roots went back on her paternal grandmother's side to the early settlements near Sydney in the 1820s, took with her into her poetry a great 'love of the land but also guilt for the invasion'. In addition to pieces such as *South of My Days* and *Bullocky* extolling the nation-builders, she also wrote about the scandal of dispossession – of how the Aborigines had been brutally driven from their land. Thus, as early as the 1940s, she represented the two strands, 'love of the land and the guilt of the invasion' that had become part of her and was to epitomise the conflict through her life and poetry which led to her advocacy of Aboriginal land rights and conservation.

### **Eroded Hills** by Judith Wright

These hills my father's father stripped;  
and, beggars to the winter wind,  
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped –  
humble, abandoned, out of mind.

Of their scant creeks I drank once  
and ate sour cherries from old trees  
found in their gullies fruiting by chance.  
Neither fruit nor water gave my mind ease.

I dream of hills bandaged in snow,  
their eyelids clenched to keep out fear.  
When the last leaf and bird go  
let my thoughts stand like trees here.

There's an element of virtuoso, of dancing on a pinhead, about the poet Gwen Harwood (1920-95):

Language is not a perfect game  
and if it were, how could we play?  
The world's more than the sum of things  
like moon, sky, centre, body, bed,  
as all the singing masters know.

from *Thought is Surrounded by a Halo*

Intelligent and intense, her poetry twists and turns in a catch-me-if-you-can verbal-chase. And there's a whiff of the Furies – edgy, persistent, with their overtones of a passionate drive for truth and justice. Harwood's oeuvre – mercurial, sensual, and multifaceted – is remarkable. A great trailblazer, she has long been one of my heroines and she deserves to be better-known in the UK.

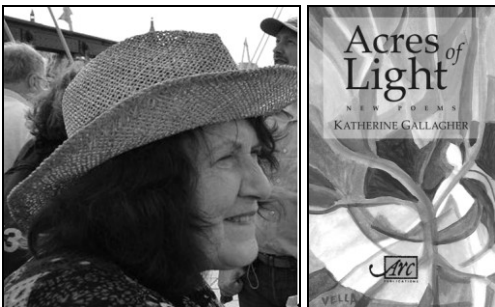
When I started writing poetry in Australia in the mid-sixties, there were few role models for women poets. So, it was interesting to discover that the Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood had been writing under various masks, mostly male, for some time. As she said in a 1970s talk, 'I like disguises, I like wigs and beards'. Her first poem was published in 1944 at around the same time as Judith Wright was making waves with great poems illuminating women's experience. Harwood, by contrast, little heard of in the 1940s and 1950s, first came to prominence in 1961 as a result of hoaxing a national literary magazine editor.

By taking on pseudonyms, especially male ones, Gwen the poet-wit often made strong feminist points in a climate where women poets had to struggle for visibility. Although she continued writing her other poems, she didn't come out from behind her masks for years. Her main pseudonyms were three males: Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer and the young sixties anti-Vietnam protester, Timothy Kline. Her only female pseudonym, Miriam Stone, was particularly famous for the poem *Burning Sappho*. The following extract from *Burning Sappho* attests to the tensions for Harwood of being poet and mother:

The child is fed, and sleeps. The dishes  
are washed, the clothes are ironed and aired.  
I take my pen. A kind friend wishes  
to gossip while she darns her socks.  
Scandal and pregnancies are shared.  
The child wakes, and the Rector knocks.  
Invisible inside their placid  
hostess, a fiend pours prussic acid.

Later, Harwood claimed back her pseudonyms in various collections of her work.

Her technical deftness, lyric range and overall poetic talent and achievement were acknowledged by the late Peter Porter in a review of her *Collected Poems, 1943-1995*, when he declared her to be 'the outstanding Australian poet of the twentieth century'.



*Mappings of the Plane: New Selected Poems*  
by Gwen Harwood (ed. by Gregory  
Kratzmann & Chris Wallace-Crabbe) Fyfield  
Books, Carcanet Press, 2009

*Collected Poems*: by Judith Wright, Carcanet  
Press, 1994