Introduction

Gwen Harwood is recognised both in Australia and abroad as one of the finest poets of the twentieth century. Her work has had a widening readership since her first books were published in the 1960s; it is highly crafted, lyrical, and often challenging, yet it attracts an unusually broad audience. The tonal range and variety of her poetry leads to an interesting paradox. On the one hand she writes poetry which is strongly allusive, deeply grounded in her interests in European poetry, music, and philosophy, so that she is very much a "poet's poet", whose work has been the subject of extensive critical debate. On the other hand, much of her poetry appeals to a wider audience.

Her work is characterised by a strong sense of voice, and many of her readers have been led to it by hearing her read aloud at a variety of public occasions. Romantic as her vision is, Gwen Harwood was no Shelleyan nightingale "who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds." She lived the life of a busy wife, mother and secretary; and her poetry, no less than her letters, testifies to a keen interest not only in the life of the intellect and the imagination, but also in the delights and frustrations of daily social life. Her circle of friends, as the dedications of many of her poems demonstrate, included some of the major Australian literary and artistic figures of the middle and later years of the twentieth century. Her poetry repeatedly asserts the value of friendship and of strong and durable human relationships as defences against the randomness of fate and the destructiveness of time.

Gwen Harwood was born in Brisbane in 1920 and died in Hobart in southern Tasmania in 1995. She moved to Tasmania in 1945 following her marriage at the end of World War II, and there she and her husband Bill Harwood brought up their family of four children. The warmth of Brisbane — its blue skies, jacaranda blossoms and orange trees — is the northern pole of an imaginative locus; its southern counterpart is the estuary of the River Derwent, beautiful but chilly, grey and overshadowed by towering Mount Wellington. Yet although nostalgia for a warmer climate and the lost

world of childhood is a recurrent theme in her poetry, some of her finest work was written and set at "Halcyon", the small farm at Kettering, south of Hobart, overlooking D'Entrecasteaux Channel, where she and her husband lived from 1976 to 1985. Gwen Harwood can be claimed by both Queensland and Tasmania as a regional poet because of the ways in which her writing embodies universal issues in vividly evoked particular settings. As she says in the first poem of the sequence "Oyster Cove Pastorals",

> If by some chance I wrote
> a fine immortal poem
> it would have a mortal theme.
> All that excess of life
> in museums of the mind
> still there to contemplate!

Her poetry is firmly located in the particular, the domestic and the mortal, and the desire to defy the transience of the natural world and of human relationships characterises her attitude to art. Painting, poetry and music can preserve experience in "museums of the mind" and are thus of supreme importance for her.

At the time of her death in 1995, Gwen Harwood had published six collections of poetry at approximately six-yearly intervals. Her first collection, *Poems*, was published in 1963. *Poems/Volume Two* appeared in 1968 and was followed in 1975 by *Selected Poems* which incorporated poems from the first two volumes and included a previously uncollected section of "New Poems". This was later retitled "Poems 1969–74", as subsequent volumes — *The Lion's Bride* (1981), *Bone Scan* (1988), and *The Present Tense* (1995) — demanded a revised definition of what was new.

Her first collection, *Poems*, was published in 1963 when she was forty-three. It should not be assumed, however, that, as a poet, she was a late starter. Her first published poem, "The Rite of Spring", appeared in *Meanjin* in 1944 under her maiden name, Gwendoline Foster. Her friends at All Saints' in Brisbane, where she was the organist during the later years of World War Two, recall that she used to entertain them on Sundays with elegant satirical verses about the congregation and church events. In 1945, with her marriage and move to Hobart, she continued to publish in journals and

periodicals, at first under the name of Gwendoline Harwood, and finally, with the publication of "Windy Night, Fern Tree" in 1955, as Gwen Harwood.

These variants of her own name, however, are not the only ones under which she published. During the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, she wrote under a series of pseudonyms, all of which had carefully constructed separate personalities and backgrounds. (The four, three male and one female, had a curious genderless antecedent in one W. W. Hagendoor — an anagram of "Gwen Harwood" — whose work was submitted for publication in 1959 but not accepted.) Most of the poems of Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, and Miriam Stone were included in *Poems* (1963) or *Poems/Volume Two* (1968). The poems of Timothy Kline, however, were, with one exception, omitted by their author from collections that bear her name. In this volume, the collected and uncollected poems of all four have been included and attributed to the poets who were originally supposed to have written them.

Our intention has been to give as full a picture as possible of Gwen Harwood's poetic development. The six published collections are therefore included in the chronological order of their publication. The contents of each volume have been left in the order in which Gwen Harwood originally arranged them. *The Present Tense*, compiled by Alison Hoddinott and published only a few weeks before Gwen Harwood's death, is the only exception to this principle. With the omission of the short stories originally included in it, the poems have been re-arranged in chronological order according to their dates of first publication.

Many of Gwen Harwood's numerous uncollected poems belong to the nineteen-sixties — a remarkably varied and productive period of poetic creativity for her. We have placed uncollected poems published between 1943 and 1967, including those by Walter Lehmann, whose short career lasted from 1960 to 1961, Francis Geyer, whose work was published between 1960 and 1965, and Miriam Stone whose poems continued to appear from 1962 to 1965, between *Poems* (1963) and *Poems/Volume Two* (1968). *Poems* includes ten Walter Lehmann poems and *Poems/Volume Two* includes nineteen poems by Francis Geyer and seven by Miriam Stone. The seventeen poems of Timothy Kline, published between 1968 and

1975, have been placed immediately after *Poems/Volume Two* to indicate that they belong to the period following the publication of that volume.

Uncollected poems published under her own name between 1970 and 1995 have been placed immediately after *The Present Tense*. This group includes some of the occasional poems she wrote with increasing frequency from the mid-eighties onward to mark notable events such as book-launchings, anniversaries, Christmas parties, the retirement of friends, as well as the conferring of her own three university honorary doctorates of letters. Indeed, it is frequently difficult to draw a distinction between her 'serious' poems and her occasional poems and light verse, because of her quicksilver talent for leaps and transitions between the comic and the serious, the particular and the general. Increasingly from the mid-seventies onward, she wrote poetry arising out of special events or addressed to particular people. The elegant fourteen-line stanza she favoured for the longer occasional poems enabled her to combine witty comment on the occasion with discursive exploration of deeper issues. Some of her lightest verse seems to move effortlessly from the comic situation to serious issues of poetry, music and the passing of time. In this way, her later occasional and light verse can be seen as an extension of poetry which, from the beginning, was concerned with the way in which larger issues are embodied in the detail of particular relationships and events. Gwen Harwood's talent for lyric and metaphor was recognised from the beginning, but like A. D. Hope, she had an equally strong gift for the discursive Augustan mode. These late poems often embody profound and witty insights into the mysteries of language or reflections on the nature of creativity, history, or time. In the conclusion to a verse lecture "On Poetry", for example, she expresses her belief in poetry as the supreme instrument of human communication:

Poetry isn't propaganda,
nor is a poem an act of will.
Though it may help us understand a
poet, it stays a mystery still.
We're caught, as Wittgenstein reminds us,
in the net of language. Language finds us
chirruping at our mother's knee,

captures us in the nursery.
Everyone's called, but few are chosen
to wrestle, from our common speech,
the brightness of the word, to reach
the life that lies beyond our frozen
habits of thought, to show with love
much that can not be spoken of.

The uncollected poems fall into two groups. Firstly, there are those poems which were published in journals and magazines but were omitted from the six collections. Secondly, there are unpublished poems which were included in letters to friends or given directly to them. The first group can be ordered according to the date of publication. This is a fairly accurate guide to the date of composition, although there are some notable exceptions to the principle. In her last years, for example, she published several poems, including "The Owl and the Pussycat Baudelaire Rock", that had been written twenty years earlier. The dating of the second group poses a more difficult problem because, in many cases, the poems have been separated from their accompanying letters and Gwen Harwood did not usually date the typescript of her poems. All of the groups of uncollected poems have been arranged as nearly as possible in chronological order with their dates, as far as they can be determined. Reluctantly, we have decided to exclude most of the poems which Gwen Harwood wrote to friends on postcards. A delight in incongruous juxtapositions led to the creation of a distinctive Harwoodian form, her own contribution to the art of the verse letter: the Sappho card. These cards are hand-made, often featuring a woodcut from a Victorian ladies' magazine glued to a piece of card. Many of them are 'talkies', with balloon speech bubbles cut from her children's comic books.

Gwen Harwood was insistent that the involuntary nature of poetic inspiration meant that, once written, a poem should not be altered. But, while she rarely made major alterations, she frequently changed the punctuation and sometimes altered a word or changed one or two lines. Her alterations to punctuation are usually designed to make the sense of a passage clearer or to guide the placing of emphasis or pausing in the reading of a poem aloud. The details of variants in punctuation have not been noted here, as to have done

so would have made this volume even longer than it is. However, as a general rule, when there is a difference between the punctuation of the first published version of a poem and a later one, the later one has been preferred unless there is a strong case for the superiority of the earlier version. Similarly, when a particular word or a whole line or lines have been altered, the revised version has usually been preferred. Two exceptions to this principle are "Burning Sappho" and "Variations on a Theme", where the altered versions, published in *Poems/Volume Two*, represent a reluctance to offend rather than a concern for literary merit. In most cases of altered words or lines, the alternative version has been supplied in a footnote.

A challenge in our preparation of this edition has been our desire, on the one hand, to respect the poet's habits of self-editing (she excluded many works when preparing the various editions of her *Selected Poems*), and on the other to provide a comprehensive view of a much larger and more varied output than the number of her published volumes and the contents of the *Selected* suggest. The present volume contains nearly 200 poems which do not appear in the most recent edition of the *Selected Poems*, compiled by Gregory Kratzmann. Gwen Harwood excluded many fine poems from the individual volumes when she came to prepare her own selections for publication, and indeed she regretted some of the excisions that resulted from the exigencies of publication. (She lamented, for example, her publisher's failure to reprint *The Lion's Bride*.) Now, when even the most recent of the volumes are virtually unobtainable, fine poems are lost to view. The difficulty is compounded by her willingness to have her work published in journals which were small and short-lived, or in places which were beyond the mainstream — university newsletters and the parish magazine of her local church, for example. She was particularly generous when friends and younger poet-editors asked for contributions. For this edition we have tracked down (with assistance of unpublished bibliographies) some poems which would otherwise be unknown. In letters and in personal conversations she professed a concern for the fate of her uncollected works; when as editor of her letters Gregory Kratzmann gave her a copy of poems which had been written as letters to friends or included in letters,

she was delighted, and prepared to see some of them published in the last collection of her work. Although she remarked that the many occasional poems which she wrote after the 1980s were inseparable from their occasions, she was prepared to allow some of them, too, to be included in *The Present Tense*. The decision to exclude "Sappho cards" from the edition has already been mentioned. A more contentious exclusion is the numerous librettos which Harwood wrote for operas and other choral works by the composers Larry Sitsky, James Penberthy, John Kay and Ian Cugley. These, particularly the Sitsky librettos, she regarded as some of her best work; this is hardly surprising, given her musical training and the strong place which music occupies in her system of belief. She regarded the music, however, as an indispensable accompaniment of the words. This view commands respect, but it has to be added that some of her words for music add a valuable dimension to an understanding of her non-operatic poetry.

Gwen Harwood employs a highly sophisticated variety of complex poetic forms and delights in the subtleties of rhyme and metre. She frequently plays with a traditional form such as the sonnet, the ballad or the fourteen-line Pushkin stanza or invents her own variant of an intricately rhyming stanzaic form. Bored by the predictability of pentameter, she often writes in tetrameter and, in some of her later poems such as "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell", she experiments with an individual form of hexameter. Characteristically, she avoids monotony in her use of regular stanzaic form by breaking the verse in unexpected places and running sentences across line and stanza divisions. Her use of indented lines is subtle and significant. An indented line or passage can signal a different speaker, a different time frame, or an altered perspective. All this demands particular attention to the layout of her poems.

Attention to her wide range of references and allusions is no less important for a full understanding of the poems. The meaning of many of her poems depends on an acquaintance with European art, music and literature, as well as the King James Bible of 1611. For a member of her generation such knowledge would not have been unusual. However, even by these standards, some of her references are obscure and are related to her extremely wide reading,

particularly of biography and works of philosophy and linguistics. German lieder and the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein provide important recurring points of reference.

Although she sometimes spoke as if poems should not need annotation, in practice she was always ready to give the explanation of an obscure reference or to provide information about the background to a poem, as the notes at the end of this volume demonstrate. They include many of Gwen Harwood's own comments on particular poems, especially on passages where she thought there was a danger of misreading if the reference was an unfamiliar one. By noting these remarks we do not suggest that the poet's own reading of her work is necessarily privileged over other ways of reading, but we do believe that her own interpretations provide important insights and points of departure for other readings. Gwen Harwood's letters frequently allude to the personal experiences which prompted the writing of poems, but in general we have chosen not to link the poems closely with her lived experience.

None of this, of course, is a substitute for the direct experience of the poem. Our aim throughout has been to add to the understanding and, above all, to the enjoyment of the poetry of one of the most versatile and important Australian writers of the twentieth century.

Those who are familiar with Gwen Harwood's poetry will know that all of her published volumes, with the exception of *The Present Tense*, are dedicated to Thomas Riddell, her close friend for more than half a century. It is therefore appropriate that this volume also be dedicated to him.

Alison Hoddinott
Gregory Kratzmann