

## Iris Wilkinson (*Robin Hyde*)

1906 – 1939

Iris Wilkinson, better known by her pen-name of Robin Hyde, was one of New Zealand's major poets and writers. During her short, tumultuous and incredibly productive life, she was '*brilliant, beautiful, difficult and doomed*', according to the biography<sup>1</sup> co-authored by her son Derek Challis.

Her parents emigrated here from South Africa when she was a baby. They rented a series of dingy houses in Newtown, Melrose and Berhampore and she went to South Wellington School and Berhampore School, where she was dux in 1918. She later wrote about her early life in her autobiographical novel *The Godwits Fly*.

In 1919 her father bought their first home (92 Northland Road), using a Government war service payment. Wilkinson attended Wellington Girls' College, where her writing was encouraged, although she later described the school as stodgy and cold. Many of her poems and stories appeared in the school magazine between 1919 and 1922; in 1921, she was called 'the Schoolgirl Poetess' when *The Dominion* recognised the quality of her writing.

Wilkinson briefly attended Victoria University, then – aged 17 – joined *The Dominion* as a journalist on the women's pages. She had a love affair with one of her father's protégés, Harry Sweetman, which was fictionalised in *The Godwits Fly*. They planned to go to Europe together, but following a knee operation she spent months in hospital, leaving on crutches, lame for life, dependent on opiates for pain relief, and discovered that Harry had gone alone.

Wilkinson became pregnant during a brief affair and in 1926 moved to Sydney, where her son was stillborn. She named him Robin Hyde, then adopted his name as a gender-neutral pen-name. On return to New Zealand, she had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised at Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs.

She found occasional work as a jobbing journalist in Wellington, joining *NZ Truth* then, after being sacked, got a job on the women's page of the *Christchurch Sun*. In 1929 the *Wanganui Chronicle* employed her, and she inserted controversial interviews or subversive comments into the society and shopping columns.

In 1929 Wilkinson's first book of poetry, *The Desolate Star*, was published, although its sales were poor.

In Wanganui she became pregnant after an affair with a married journalist who suggested she pay half the cost of an abortion. Wilkinson refused and took six months' sick leave, claiming 'a dicky heart'. Her son, Derek Challis, was born in October 1930. Rumours about her affair and pregnancy resulted in her being made redundant and she briefly returned home penniless, not telling her family that she had a son. Derek was put into a nursing home, and later fostered in Auckland. The pressures of work, her son's needs, sordid boarding houses and the lure of morphine proved too great and in mid-1933 she tried to drown herself. She spent six weeks at Auckland Hospital before voluntarily entering a mental hospital. After discharging herself in 1937, she lived on 'bread and butter, tea and the tin opener' in various baches in the greater Auckland area for a year.

Between 1935 and 1938 she had five novels published: *Passport to Hell*, *Check To Your King*, *Wednesday's Children*, *Nor the Years Condemn* and *The Godwits Fly*. Wilkinson used Māori and Pakeha history and stories to find a distinctive New

Zealand voice. It was a very different style to her contemporary male writers, who often copied British writing styles. Wilkinson considered herself primarily a poet, but she made more impact as a novelist.

She wrote an autobiographical novel about her adult years, *A Home in this World* (unpublished until 1984), plus passionate articles and letters denouncing the planned removal of Māori from their land at Ōrākei. She began studying Māori and wrote letters and articles about her feminist and socialist views.

In early 1938, against medical advice, Wilkinson decided to experience life in England and meet her publishers. She travelled to Hong Kong, planning to take the trans-Siberian train to Europe. Instead, she went to Japanese-occupied Shanghai then travelled across the war zone in China, ending up in Hsueh (now Xuzhou) just before the city was taken by the Japanese. She escaped by limping 80km along the railway lines and was eventually escorted by Japanese officials to the port of Tsing Tao (Qingdao), where she was handed to British authorities, and resumed her journey to England.

Wilkinson was seriously ill and penniless by the time she reached England. She moved in and out of hospital, suffering from depression, dysentery and anaemia. War was imminent, so writer and Labour politician John A Lee secured government assistance to bring her back to New Zealand. On August 23, 1939 the New Zealand High Commissioner arrived at her London bed-sit to confirm travel arrangements. He was too late. Wilkinson had taken her own life earlier in the day with an overdose of Benzedrine. She was 33.

Iris Wilkinson is buried in Gunnersbury Cemetery, London.

*'The volume, range and originality of Robin Hyde's writing has only recently been recognised. In 10 years she produced 10 books of poetry and prose, as well as countless published and unpublished articles and letters. She offered a piercing personal vision of an inner life, yet also conveyed a strong sense of place and an understanding of the historical forces that shaped her world. For Hyde, New Zealand's future lay in the Pacific, not crouching 'in the shadow of the old world'. She wrote feelingly of those victims of greed and war living on society's margins. As one who had suffered personal loss, illness and poverty she identified with the dispossessed, and in a hostile world longed for community and reintegration. The sense of a personal quest through writing informed her work. Robin Hyde consciously lived her life as a 'user of words', a 'maker of words', and above all, a 'fighter with words'.<sup>ii</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> 'The Book of Iris – A Life of Robin Hyde', Derek Challis & Gloria Rawlinson, Auckland University Press

<sup>ii</sup> Jacqueline Matthews. 'Hyde, Robin', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, first published in 1998. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4h41/hyde-robin>