

Wild Honey

Wild Honey
Reading New Zealand
Women's Poetry

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For Elizabeth Caffin, Michele Leggott, Tusiata Avia and Carole Beu

There is a lost matrix of women poets whose presence in our literature needs urgent reappraisal. How it was lost, and why, are absorbing questions; but more important still is the matter and nature of matrix, with its suggestions of support, nurture and numerousness.

— Michele Leggott¹

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Introduction

CALLING YOU HOME

This is not a house to be afraid in
It is a house
in which i will gather
strength i will
pull it to me
wrap myself in it
like armour
like armour
like love

Time travels quickly
in this house
Things go missing
and only sometimes
reappear

This is the house
where we discover
one another
and ourselves
The house where
we turn from each other
and turn back again

Here is a rotting bridge
here a wall
but here is a door
and a place i call home

— Helen Rickerby¹

For the cover of *Wild Honey*, Sarah Laing painted a group of women poets sharing a picnic. On the front, Selina Tusitala Marsh lies daydreaming on the grass while Alison Wong talks with Ursula Bethell; Elizabeth Smither and Fleur Adcock are in conversation with Airini Beautrais; Jessie Mackay observes Blanche Baughan in company with Robin Hyde. On the back cover Tusiata Avia and Hinemoana Baker are conversing, Michele Leggott is with her guide dog. Anna Jackson is reading in a tree and Jenny Bornholdt is lost in thought. Above them a wild beehive hangs, the home of the bees that make the wild honey of the book's title.

The notion of the hive in relation to women writing poetry resonates on many levels. The hive is a container of dark and light, and of activities that are both in view and hidden from view. The transformation of nectar to honey is akin to the transformation of words into poetry; not necessarily sweet, not at all, but fluid and fluent, and highly textured.

The hive is also a house of endeavour: bees collect, build and transform. This book is about the endeavour of New Zealand women poets over one hundred and fifty years of published poetry. Some of these women have slipped from public view, and many were not paid the honour they were due in their lifetimes. The book is neither a formal history nor a theoretical overview of New Zealand women's poetry, but is instead a celebration and engagement with poems through my readings. In writing this book, I built a house. I moved through the rooms — collecting, building, recouping, revaluing — in order to travel through a broad range of published poetry. The doors and windows of the poetry house are wide open, because these are readings of discovery, making new connections between poets, poems and ideas.

When I entered each room, hand in hand with the poets, I wanted to challenge my senses, my expectations and, most importantly, the way I write about poetry. As I moved through the rooms, the themes accumulated: politics, poetics, the domestic, self, relations, illness, love, death, location, movement, impersonations, the maternal, home, voice. I then moved out of the house into the wide open air. Movement from the house into the garden, city and countryside is an essential part of my reading. I paused in the hammock to share books I have recently loved, to underline my life as an active poetry reader. I end with the sky and its infinite possibilities. Every room tested my preconceived notions, and I welcomed that.

This book is a creative assemblage. I linger over some poets, allowing room for biography and more in-depth readings, but also include cameo appearances. I devote the opening chapter, for example, to Jessie Mackay, the first New Zealand woman

poet to have a book published, and I then draw her into a contemporary context by making links with Hera Lindsay Bird's acclaimed 2017 debut collection, *Hera Lindsay Bird*.² Later, I read Ursula Bethell in her garden in the 1920s and 1930s, then offer garden interludes with contemporary poets Holly Painter, Diana Bridge and Louise Wrightson. In the airing cupboard there is a chorus of political voices, while by the hearth there is Robin Hyde, Joanna Margaret Paul and Manon Revuelta. The sky poetry features Hinemoana Baker, Louise Wallace, Dinah Hawken and Nina Mingya Powles. My gathering of women includes those who broke new ground and took risks, women who have received multiple honours and awards, women who have only just come to public attention, women who were ignored in the past, women who have published numerous books, and women with one debut collection.

Wild Honey is in a way a corrective to the neglect and misreading of women poets from the past. Women have been criticised for adopting lightweight language and unworthy subject matter, in particular anything related to the domestic sphere; for getting too personal and for exposing excess feeling. In 1995, Michele Leggott published 'Opening the Archive: Robin Hyde, Eileen Duggan and the Persistence of Record', a groundbreaking essay that showed how to value the competence of women poets from the past.³ Leggott wrote as both poet and academic, from both heart and intellect, and the effect on me has been long-lasting.

My selection of women is not only founded on the poetry I loved before I began researching and writing, but also considers poetry I have recently discovered in the shadows, especially the poetry of Māori women from decades ago that has largely been ignored. I turned to archival research in order to find entry points into poetry from the past. To draw closer to these women writing, I needed to absorb both the personal and the wider contexts in which their poems were written.

I wanted a clear connection between poets and New Zealand as I made my selections for *Wild Honey*: my framework for inclusion was that the poet had lived or been born here, had been published here and may or may not have presented 'New Zealand' engagements in their writing.

New Zealand's first local poetry anthologies — such as W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie's *A Treasury of New Zealand Verse* (1906 and 1926) and Quentin Pope's *Kowhai Gold: An Anthology of Contemporary New Zealand Verse* (1930) — showcased women with diverse publishing histories.⁴ Around a third of the poems in the former were by women and in the latter there were more women than men. However, in 1945 Allen Curnow dismissed what women were doing when he included just three — Bethell, Hyde and Ruth Dallas — alongside twenty men in his

canon-building anthology, *A Book of New Zealand Verse*.⁵ Yet to place the blame for the banishment of women poets from public view on Curnow's shoulders alone is to ignore the attitudes of some of his male contemporaries. The poets Denis Glover and A. R. D. Fairburn, for example, entrenched notions of gender hierarchy, in which women were weak in voice and options, in writings such as *The Arraignment of Paris* (1937) and *The Woman Problem* (1967).⁶ But if most women poets were ignored by the literary powerbrokers, some literary men, including editor and journalist Pat Lawlor, and writer, journalist and broadcaster Alan Mulgan, offered a more positive history of support and admiration conveyed in personal letters and reviews.

Most early women poets disappeared from sight at this point, and only a handful returned with republished volumes, thanks to the diligent efforts of scholars such as Damian Love (Baughan), Peter Whiteford (Eileen Duggan), Lydia Wevers (Hyde), Michele Leggott (Hyde), Vincent O'Sullivan (Bethell and Katherine Mansfield), and Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Mansfield).⁷ Other women with published books who appeared in the early anthologies, such as Mary Colborne-Veel, Dora Hagemeyer, Alice A. Kenny, Maud Peacocke, Mary E. Richmond, Dora Wilcox and Anne Glenny Wilson, may not be familiar at all.⁸

To address the disappearance of early women poets from view, I have selected three women — Jessie Mackay, Blanche Baughan and Eileen Duggan — to stand as the foundation stones of my house. I place these women here at the start of my travels, in order to approach early writing afresh. While there is a risk that my selection grants the work of these three women greater status than the significant work of others, such as Bethell and Hyde, this is not my intention. These foundation stones are a starting point, and Bethell and Hyde are also residents in my poetry house.

I have been hard-pressed to find a New Zealand poetry anthology that gives equal representation to women and men, although the situation has improved immensely. Three key survey anthologies published in the latter part of the twentieth century indicate that more than a handful of women were writing poems, but the men still dominate. Vincent O'Sullivan's *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* (1970, 1976, 1987) features almost twice as many men as women.⁹ Miriama Evans, Harvey McQueen and Ian Wedde's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* (1989) includes over a third women and, for the first time, a number of poets writing in te reo.¹⁰ Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien and Mark Williams' *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English* (1997) also includes around thirty per cent women.¹¹

Does this underrepresentation come down to the inherited and subjective gauge of what makes a good poem? Is it because men were held to be poetry authorities

and were inevitably tagged as the major figures in the field? Was it because women were still, to a significant degree, lost in the shadows, and to retrieve them would have required considerable archival research? I understand the implications of the latter: in the end I had to draw boundaries around my own research and leave further excavation for a later date and for someone else, particularly in relation to the women poets without published books.

Alan Brunton, Murray Edmond and Michele Leggott's anthology *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960–1975*, with its time-specific and avant-garde focus, its fruitful hunt through boutique presses and little magazines, also produced a lopsided equation, with women making up less than a quarter of the poets.¹² How to explain the ratio? The *Big Smoke* poets with solid histories of publications, awards and visibility are all men: Peter Bland, Brunton, Edmond, Sam Hunt, Bill Manhire, Hone Tuwhare, Ian Wedde, Albert Wendt. Jan Kemp was one of the few women to maintain visibility in this period, but you are unlikely to see her name in any list of significant twentieth-century New Zealand poets. Janet Frame was coming to our attention as a fiction writer, not a poet.

Yet in the 1960s and 1970s women were strengthening their voices, collectively and individually: protesting, narrating, documenting, inventing, theorising, and placing themselves in stories, poems and nonfiction on their own terms. Writers such as Fiona Kidman and Rachel McAlpine caught the attention of women readers; McAlpine made *Big Smoke* with her distinctive inventiveness, but Kidman, with her attachment to the domestic, did not. Both poets, however, sought to liberate words for women.

In 1977, Riemke Ensing edited *Private Gardens: An Anthology of New Zealand Women Poets* to showcase unpublished and hard-to-find work.¹³ She omitted poets such as Baughan, Bethell, Duggan, Hyde, Mansfield and Paul Henderson (Ruth France), who had appeared in earlier anthologies, in favour of emerging writers such as Fleur Adcock, Christina Conrad (Beer), Marilyn Duckworth, Peggy Dunstan, Lauris Edmond, Paula Hanger-Birch, Kemp, Kidman, McAlpine and Elizabeth Smither. (Janet Frame and Ruth Dallas refused to give permission because they did not like the idea of a separate category for women.) By the time Ensing's groundbreaking anthology appeared, most of these women had debut collections out, and the project was an important step in making women poets visible.

I find much to celebrate in Ensing's anthology. Fleur Adcock introduces us to poetic dexterity that demands wit, observation, feeling and thought, while Anne French uses sharp-wittedness to signpost the knotty process of writing, self-doubt and personal experience. Lauris Edmond, nimble on the line, manages grief, home, inner states and significant places with perspicacity and a keen ear. Ensing and

Kemp couple prodigious reading and roving intellects with linguistic playfulness. Poets such as Kidman, McAlpine and Smither write as musicians with eyes and heart on alert to the world. Helen Shaw's image-rich lines are threaded to personal experience and classical narratives, whether overt or in hiding. Hilaire Kirkland's poems become a storehouse for the sensual, for shifting subjects, while Merlene Young demonstrates a similar exuberance as her poems mark the sensations of place, body and experience. Finally, and with a generous serving, Mary Stanley writes out of the isolating 1950s, out of motherhood and marriage, to produce poetry imbued with love, musicality, a history of reading, personal revelations and searing gender politics. The poem, in her adroit hands, is both a weapon and a point of solace.

A decade later, in *Yellow Pencils: Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women*, Lydia Wevers assembled a collection of poets that again seems utterly significant.¹⁴ She moves beyond Ensing's cautious introduction, where gender was neither a strong political nor poetic issue, to foreground it. The context in which the selection was made had changed: the women's protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s had acquired intellectual dimensions in the academy. Rape, violence, inequity, classism, femininity, feminism itself, and gender and ethnic stereotypes and roles were being challenged in an academy of ideas more than on a placarded street.

Many of the poets I loved in *Private Gardens* are in *Yellow Pencils*, and most of the poets in the latter have influenced my own writing. The seeds of poetic choices that affected me in *Private Gardens* flourish in Wevers' selection. This again moves me. Wevers rightly amplified the differences between the anthologies in her introduction — the impoliteness of the poems she had chosen, the experimentation, physicality, lack of sentimentality, the poet's visible awareness of making the poem — but many decades on I am fascinated by similarities and connections. I relish the link between the language play of Young, Kirkland, Kemp and Ensing and that of Leggott, Cilla McQueen, Joanna Margaret Paul. I dart between the political bite of Stanley and Meg Campbell. I catch the subterranean feeling in Edmond and Paul, the writerly awareness of French and Dinah Hawken, the physicality of Conrad and Roma Pōtiki, and the personal and linguistic movements of McAlpine and Janet Charman. Both anthologies reinforce my mantra: there are no set rules for writing poems, whatever the decade, and poetry might absorb the changing circumstances of specific times.

Three decades after Wevers celebrated the explosion of women's poetry, our literary landscape is moving closer to gender equality. The improved visibility of women poets, in reviews, journals and published books, is to be praised, but we still need to pay attention to inequities, especially the underrepresentation of Māori, Pasifika and Asian women poets.

For some women gender may be of no consequence, but it remains acutely relevant that men still achieve greater representation in some areas. With the appointment of Selina Tusitala Marsh as the New Zealand Poet Laureate in 2017, women almost match the appointment of men to that post (five out of eleven),¹⁵ but the number of women recipients of the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Poetry is underwhelming (five out of fifteen).¹⁶ As Janis Freegard demonstrates with her annual poetry-book statistics, in most years, men still have more books published. The 2015 list, published in 2017, showed that 43 per cent of poetry books were published by women and, more disturbingly, that 91 per cent of all poetry books were published by Pākehā poets.¹⁷

In the 1970s, I was a long-haired, long-skirted woman coming of age, listening to Joni Mitchell and reading Doris Lessing. I wrote and drew copiously in secret notebooks that resisted all literary labels, and barred thoughts of potential publication. I was writing for the sake of writing, without the courage to call myself a writer, to seek out other writers or to review my notebooks with confidence. How many other women followed this course across the twentieth century? When I hit thirty, after five years of living and teaching in London, I fell apart and realised the only way to survival was to understand my drive to write; to call myself a writer.

Drawn to foreign languages and literatures, I enrolled at the University of Auckland, where I studied and wrote until there were no more degrees to hold me there. After receiving the University of Auckland Literary Fellowship, I walked out with my box of belongings, my Italian doctorate and my debut poetry collection, into the bright light of Symonds Street, knowing my future would be a weave of motherhood and writing. My university life had reinforced my girlhood love of playing with words and ideas, taking risks and paying the utmost attention to the treatment of women. My writing doubt is still here but, like many contemporary women, I now have the confidence to go public. How many women with their secret notebooks and stockpile of doubt did not, for whatever reason, become writers in public as well as in private?

For me, a poem is an open door and any poetic rule is utterly negotiable. A poem can do anything, yet some poems stick because they affect us in multiple, charismatic ways. They might make exquisite music, refresh the page of the world, offer fertile gaps and the allure of mystery, relate pocket-size stories, poke us under the skin with polemical or political challenges, savour feeling, get personal, invent everything, favour clarity or layer density. As readers we track our own routes through a poem, or if we so desire, especially with the assistance of endnotes or autobiography, bring the poet into our reading engagements.

Rather than produce a book that skates over the surface of many things, I have chosen to focus on less in order to delve a little deeper. That means some beloved women poets have scant time under my spotlight and not all poets have been included in the book. Because my readings have focused on published books in English there are gaping holes: I have had to overlook the rich history of women's waiata and poetry in te reo, the fact that some women have opted to perform rather than publish, and some have only appeared in print and online journals, magazines or newspapers, particularly the early poets and those just starting out. I felt a keen loss at these omissions, but my house would have needed extensions to cover the missing poets and themes: rooms for science, grief, fear, rituals, family relations, communication, time, conflict, exile, silence, storytelling and beyond that to weather, ecology, mountains, oceans.

This book is written for fans of poetry, whether emerging or experienced, readers or writers. My key aim is to spark the reader into reading and rereading poems; to taste the delights of wild honey.

