

**Made in New Zealand:
The Early Poetry of Elizabeth Riddell (1907-1998)**

Marcia Russell

Editor's Note:

This essay is taken from Marcia Russell's Master of Literature thesis (2012) at the University of Auckland. We are very pleased to have Marcia's permission to publish this work. The whole project was to have been a Doctoral thesis and no one was better placed than Marcia, with her literary and journalistic expertise and understanding, to write about and recover for us the life and work, and especially the New Zealand context and origins, of Elizabeth Riddell, poet and journalist. Sadly Marcia died towards the end of 2012 and was unable to complete her undertaking. We are grateful to Marcia's supervisors, Dr Jan Cronin and Professor Michele Leggott, for enabling this publication and to Heidi Logan for her copy editing on the text.

- Murray Edmond

Part One: ‘A writing life but not a literary life’¹

Elizabeth Richmond Riddell was born on 21 March 1907 in Napier, the second daughter of Violet Whitbread Riddell (nee Williams) and Richmond John Sydney Riddell. Her father was an accountant and solicitor for a Napier stock and station agency, her mother was the third of five children born to George and Emily Williams, all of Napier. Violet’s three sisters, Rose, Myra and Leslie all lived, like the Riddells, on the hills above Napier; the youngest sibling, Patrick, eventually married and settled in Wellington. Riddell’s paternal grandfather, George Riddell, who was the deputy-registrar in the Napier Lands and Deeds Registry, died unexpectedly while cycling to Western Spit on the Petane Road, the year before Riddell was born. Her father, Richmond Riddell also died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-eight in 1913, just seven years later, as the result of a boating accident in Napier harbour when Elizabeth was six. Elizabeth and her elder sister Margaret (Peggy) Riddell found themselves quasi-orphans and their mother Violet found herself without means of supporting them. Richmond Riddell had left nothing but debts. The family home was sold and Violet Riddell had to go out to find work. As a upper-middle class woman trained to do little else than run a household with help, give dinner parties and play bridge, her prospects were limited. Her two daughters were sent to live with elderly relatives, on a farm at Maungaturoto while Violet found a job selling insurance. The family was reunited only intermittently over the ensuing years until Riddell left for Australia, never to return.

The poet and journalist gave some accounts of her early life in several broadcast television and radio interviews in later life as well as in extended interviews for newspapers and books – notably for a series on Australian poets, made for the Australian Council in 1975 and in a Film Australia television production for the ABC series *Australian Biography*, in 1992. The following excerpts have been taken from these recorded and transcribed interviews and abridged in some places to avoid repetition. In none of them does Riddell express any sentimental attachment to New Zealand but rather the opposite: ‘It’s a beautiful place, but it’s like Switzerland: it’s a bore. I wouldn’t go back and live in the place I was born, Napier. That’s an awful town.’² By her account, her New Zealand childhood was lonely, insecure and, apart from a precocious appetite for books, emotionally and (she implied) culturally arid.

My background is middle class New Zealand and that really explains a lot. It explains a lot about me. My father was a company secretary and a company

¹ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell* (1992) <http://australianbiography.gov.au/riddell/script.html>.

² *ibid.*

lawyer. His people originally came from Carlisle. And then they came to New Zealand via America. And my mother's people were sort of upper middle class public service types. It explains them if you say they always said 'we're going home this year'. They didn't mean they were going to Wellington or Invercargill or somewhere, it was England. They were going 'home'. New Zealanders still say that. I don't think Australians say it although they did once. We lived in this small town called Napier and we had this big house and we were rather pampered in a way. And then my father went yachting one day and didn't come back, he was drowned at sea.³

In fact her father died of pneumonia as a result of the boating accident. He was vice-commodore of the Napier Boating Club and sailed regularly in the port. Riddell recalled little about him in later life:

My father was a solicitor who was also a yachtsman, so I never saw him. And my mother just entertained for him and played bridge. So I don't remember him, except once I saw him riding on a fire engine, because the house in the street was burning and he was in pyjamas and he had gone out to give the call. That's the only thing I remember about him. He was a very good looking man. I used to have a picture of him. It's gone now. I don't remember him even talking to me. I don't remember a thing about it. I remember the maid and I remember my mother early. I've got a vague idea of what she looked like.⁴

She did, however, remember the consequences of his death for her immediate family.

Things rather came to pieces in a way because he was heavily in debt – he didn't tell my mother anything about this – we didn't own the house, we didn't own anything, so she went to work. The only thing she could do was sell insurance, she got a percentage, [and] she later sold advertising, because she was totally untrained. We'd always had a servant and my mother lived a very social life and entertained a lot.⁵

³ Elizabeth Riddell interviewed for the Australia Council, *The Writers II: Elizabeth Riddell*. Directed by John Erichsen.

⁴ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

⁵ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

The two small girls, aged six and eight, were separated from their mother and did not see her again for two years. Riddell described it later as a ‘curious little enclosed life’ on the farm with the animals and a couple of farm workers and the old relatives. But it was not the casual country life more traditionally associated with New Zealand farming – milking the cows, collecting the eggs, helping to muster and care for motherless lambs – but rather more like a squire-archy with a pig stud and sheep stud and horse stud and all the farm work done by employees. ‘I wasn’t a farm child. We simply were brought up there.’⁶

Maungaturoto is a small country town situated on the eastern-most reach of the Kaipara Harbour at the end of the Otamatea River and not far, as the crow flies, from the old timber milling town of Kaiwaka. The picturesque rolling farmland – once dense with kauri but now pasture – stretches across to the Brynderwyns. The original Maungaturoto School still stands on the town’s highest point but there is no trace of the farm, Grey Stoke, where Riddell and her sister lodged while their mother went out to make a living. The elderly relatives, Ettie and Thomas MacDonnell, also had Ettie’s widowed elderly mother, known as Granny Pharazyn (Mrs Robert Pharazyn, formerly Emily Lomax) in the house. The children, Margaret (Peggy) and Elizabeth were housed in a child-sized annex with child-sized furniture and ate their meals with the housekeeper. Peggy in later life recalled the way in which as young girls they were expected to sit with the family matriarch in her bedroom while she reminisced about her life in London. It had included attending soirées at the English country home of Princess Eugenie of Russia and a daughter who married a Tolstoy, a cousin of Leo.

We kids [...] had to take our “work”, usually those awful cambric nightgowns all made by hand – and sit in Granny’s room while she told us stories about England. But by the time I was thirteen and living at Milford Beach she had had a stroke and we never saw her – she lived upstairs and died there – aged 98. We kids by that time were pretty neglected and were pretty wild. And it was then that we went to live with Fiddie [Violet], which was pretty disastrous too.⁷

The sense of displacement and dislocation for two young girls who had lost their father, been separated from their mother, and transferred to a household full of elderly relatives who rigorously maintained the standards of their glory days in English and European society, must have been extreme after the casual familiarities of life among the

⁶ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell.*

⁷ Family correspondence, Margaret Karaitiana Simson (nee Riddell) to Elizabeth Mohi, 6 February, 1983. In Rose Mohi collection. ‘Fiddie’ was the family name for Margaret and Elizabeth’s mother, Violet Riddell.

maternal aunts on the Napier hills. The picture that springs to mind is redolent of Allen Curnow's description of 'the spirit of exile' in 'House and Land'. Whether or not the two exiled young girls experienced an awareness 'of what great gloom/ stands in a land of settlers | With never a soul at home',⁸ it is apparent from Riddell's own account of those years that her memories of the time were not fond. 'We had a pony each and we had ourselves but we didn't get on, we quarrelled. So I suppose I really had a quite unhappy few years then ...but it didn't matter. It may be an advantage to have an unhappy childhood. I'm not sure it's not an advantage because it throws you on yourself doesn't it?'⁹ Significantly, she will revisit the people and the landscape much later in her life with some striking poems, one of which has distinct echoes of the Curnow meditation on exile and the transplanted social graces of English society.

Life on the Maungaturoto farm is recalled enthusiastically for just one thing: her introduction to 'grown-up' books. Although there was no formal library at Grey Stoke, there was an eclectic miscellany of books and magazines left behind by house guests over the years, as was the way in country houses of the period. These had been stacked on shelves in the housekeeper's room which Riddell remembered as 'the warmest room in the house'. Books became her companions and a refuge. 'It was marvellous. I read them. My sister read them too. But I think I was the more voracious of the two. I remember reading books that I knew I shouldn't have been reading. There was one with a pink cover called *Confessions of a Court Modiste*. Now I don't know how I knew I shouldn't be reading it, but I did.' Riddell hid the book under her mattress but it was discovered by her aunt on a mattress turning inspection. The young Elizabeth was reprimanded and the book taken away. But two days later it was discovered under her mattress again: 'My sister had put it there as a trick on me. My sister was only two years older than me but she was an absolute expert, at that age even.'¹⁰ By Riddell's account her elder sister's teasing verged on persecution.

Because she was two years older, she bluffed me and sort of tortured me in a way that you couldn't explain to anybody else. We used to have cold baths for instance. She used to always make me go first to the cold bath. That meant I had to get up ten minutes before her. Now she did this by saying, 'If you go first to the cold bath, you can read my book about rabbits'. And I believed that this was the way life was. So I was continually put in a position of being the

⁸ Allen Curnow, 'House and Land', in *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 234-5 (p. 235).

⁹ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

underdog. Probably she teased me because she was bored stiff. She was very intelligent. She treated me like a ... as if I was a favourite mouse. She told me my mother didn't love me. And she persecuted me in quite a nice way into stuttering. I couldn't speak for a while. I couldn't speak at all. I used to whisper to people or do a kind of singing.¹¹

She would later say she knew that she had been a victim but that she had always been at the mercy of grown-ups. 'They'd fix what sort of clothes I wore, what I ate ...' Much later she would concede she had probably had a kind of 'baby nervous break-down'. When her mother came to visit after two years she was sufficiently alarmed by her younger daughter's condition to decide to take her daughters back with her to live in Auckland at a North Shore boarding house where children were expected to be seen but not heard. Riddell became a pupil at a small church school and soon began to play truant.

I would be put off to school every morning and then I would leave school and go to the library or go into a department store and steal to make my mother love me. I stole things for her. I stole beautiful things. She caught on, of course. So she went to see my teacher and my teacher said, "Oh she doesn't come much to school".¹²

On reflection in later life Riddell conceded her mother probably did love her but believes that she was not meant to be a mother. 'She was quite a good mother, but she wasn't terribly interested in it. And the whole family had children and they were, none of them, very interested in their children. They had them as a matter of course. They wanted their children to be clever and make good marriages, but that's all they wanted.'¹³

Violet Riddell tried several schools for her wayward younger daughter without success, and Peggy Riddell recalled later how her younger sibling was 'always being threatened with being sent to a convent and sure enough it happened.'¹⁴ The young Riddell was sent to be a boarder at the Timaru Convent of the Sacred Heart school, an international teaching order dedicated to the 'education of young girls in boarding and day schools, and the

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell.*

¹⁴ Margaret Karaitiana Simson (nee Riddell) to Elizabeth Mohi, 6 February, 1983.

gratuitous instruction of the poorer classes’¹⁵ and the first of the convents to be established in New Zealand by the France-based mission of the Sacré Coeur in 1880. Riddell always claimed she was 11 years old when she went there and that she stayed until she was 18. But the records of the school, which was closed in 1935, tell a different story. Riddell enrolled in June 1919 at the age of 12 and left in December 1923 when she was 16.¹⁶ Photographs of the convent, which is no longer extant, show an impressive two storied building described in *The New Zealand Cyclopaedia*, as Italo-Gothic in style, 50 feet high and with a 121 foot frontage with forty three rooms all ‘large and lofty’ set in nine acres of grounds, which ‘command a beautiful view of the ocean and distant snowy mountains’.¹⁷ Here the rebellious teenager with a bad stutter came under the care of nuns of various nationalities – French, Chinese, Japanese, and English were among those she remembered later - who were dedicated to women’s learning at a school which had a ‘very good library’. Books again became a refuge and a form of therapy. One of the nuns helped cure her stutter by sending her out to the convent paddock to sit under a tree and read *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury* aloud to herself. ‘She told me [...] don’t read for the punctuation, or the sense, just read aloud in a monotonous voice. I used to do it once a day. And it worked.’¹⁸

Riddell was not a Catholic but the school accepted Protestant students. There were several girls of her religious denomination and they did the same things as the Catholic students except go to confession or communion. She remembered being romantic about Catholicism ‘because I was a romantic child’,¹⁹ and enjoyed the rituals and the spectacular chapel at the school but claims she never joined, although the school register records that Betty Riddell was received into the Church on Holy Saturday, 15 April, 1922, took her first communion in the convent chapel the following day and was confirmed there in December that same year. It is not clear whether she was confirmed in the Anglican church or the Catholic church although the following year, her final at the school, in addition to winning the prize in essay writing, French and history she won the senior prize in Christian Doctrine.²⁰ Riddell recalled in a 1992 interview: ‘The nuns were horrified when I won the Christian Doctrine prizes. Here’s this Protestant winning the Christian Doctrine prize. But it was only another lesson.’

¹⁵ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand (Canterbury Provincial District)*, ‘Convent of the Sacred Heart’ (Christchurch: The Cyclopaedia Publishing Company Ltd, 1903), p. 983.

¹⁶ Society of the Sacred Heart MS-Group-1215, Series 1. Timaru Schools 271-02; 271-03. ATL.

¹⁷ *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*, p. 984.

¹⁸ Susan Mitchell, *Tall Poppies* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 29.

¹⁹ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

²⁰ Society of the Sacred Heart, MS-Group-1215, Series 1, Timaru Schools 271-02; 271-03. ATL

Riddell remembers a solitary but enjoyable life at the convent school. She liked the nuns, the library, the flexibility of the curriculum, and the absence of academic competitiveness:

We were well taught but the nuns didn't care about exams so it wasn't very competitive schooling. They didn't make you do what you didn't want to do and I didn't like maths and I didn't like science. I liked geography, history and English and I liked to read French but I didn't like to speak it, or the grammar. So I got right up to my last year at school and my mother said I couldn't go to university – I think she'd got sick of paying for us both by then – so I didn't study in my last year and I failed my matric. She then said, oh you can go to university, I'll do it but then I failed.²¹

She would later claim she did not make close friends.

I was such a self-interested, abstracted child. And that continued. I fell in love with a nun, but that's not making friends, is it? A handsome young nun. But she wasn't a lesbian. She liked me as a child because I think we liked the same things. We liked the same books. She was beauty. And her father had been at Gallipoli and she was young. [...] I used to watch her praying in the chapel. I can't remember her name now, of course. And she went over the wall later on and she came to Australia and she came to see me. And she was so uninteresting when she wasn't in her, whatever they call it, habit.²²

She also began writing poetry. She recalled, on different occasions, publishing by the time she was 'eight'²³ and by the time she was 'eleven or twelve'²⁴ in the *New Zealand Free Lance* magazine, 'a terrible paper'.²⁵ The earliest contribution I have been able to discover appeared on 17 November, 1921 when Riddell was 14, although there are some undated early poems in a family scrapbook that may have appeared in the weekly paper's children's pages.²⁶ Riddell would later declare 'it was the most awful stuff. I haven't got any thank goodness and I'm sure nobody else has. It was so derivative. Anybody who'd got beyond my stage would have known at once the sources from which my poetry came, because I'd been

²¹ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

²² *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

²³ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

²⁴ Mitchell, p. 28.

²⁵ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

²⁶ Family documents, Rose Mohi collection.

reading all the people that everybody reads and I was absolutely awash with the music of words.’²⁷ Her self-appraisal sounds very like Allen Curnow’s critique of Robin Hyde in his influential 1960 anthology *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*: ‘she fought to free her vision from its literary swathing – and in verse her worst enemy was the passionate crush on poetry with which she began’.²⁸ It is true there are strong thematic and imagist parallels to be drawn in the early works of the two young New Zealand writers. Hyde was born just one year before Riddell, both were journalists and their first published poems appeared within seven weeks of one another in the *New Zealand Free Lance*. Robin Hyde’s ‘Flanders’ Poppies’ was featured in April 1922 and Riddell’s ‘A Triolet’ appeared in June of the same year.²⁹ Like Hyde, Riddell would later complain she did not get paid for her contributions: ‘I never got paid for anything until I came to Australia.’³⁰ Hyde also wrote wryly about the response of the editor, James Geddis, when she went to ask him for payment for her Anzac poem. ‘But that was for a patriotic object. We didn’t think you’d want *money* for that.’³¹

Robin Hyde (then Iris Wilkinson), in 1923 and again 1925, was working in Wellington for the *Dominion* as a journalist. There are no indications that these two young women ever met or corresponded, but Riddell’s byline in the Christchurch *Sun* from 1924 clearly indicates that she was also in the Capital for most of those years. It is unclear what she was doing. It seems her mother, for part of that time, tried her hand at running a restaurant catering for businessmen’s lunches in Wellington and Riddell’s great-niece, Rose Mohi, believes the young Elizabeth may have been helping her with the business. This may have been the most sustained period of time Riddell and her mother spent together. When asked by Robin Hughes, interviewing her for *Australian Biography*, if she ever became close to her mother, Riddell replied, rather enigmatically, that she ‘lied a lot to [her] about what I was doing, where I was going and who I was seeing.’ But she quickly added that on these occasions, such as being late home at night, ‘I wasn’t seeing boys. I don’t know what I was doing in my holidays. You see it was only in holidays [...] after [I finished] school my life was over here and I was working.’ This insistence on maintaining the impression that she had emerged from convent school and was ‘flung into journalism’ appears to be part of the self-reinvention that accompanied her transition from New Zealand to Australia. It elides four years in her life after finishing school and leaving for Australia. However, her published

²⁷ *Elizabeth Riddell: The Writers II*.

²⁸ Allen Curnow, *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 57.

²⁹ Hyde’s Anzac poem ‘Flanders’ Poppies’ was published on 26 April, 1922, p.10. Riddell’s ‘A Triolet’ appeared on 14 June, 1922.

³⁰ Mitchell, p. 29.

³¹ Robin Hyde, *Journalese*, 1st edition (Auckland: National Printing, 1934), p. 19.

poetry during those years, most of it in the *Sydney Bulletin* or the *Christchurch Sun*, shows evidence of a much more free-wheeling life than she was prepared to admit. Riddell's claims that she arrived in Sydney as a wide-eyed innocent abroad ('I never saw a boy the whole time I was at school. Never went out with a boy. Never got out of the convent to learn swimming even')³² are undermined by much of the sexually and emotionally charged verse she was producing during those years. I propose to examine these poems in the next section, 'Something English ... something out of a book', and to parallel close readings of selected Riddell poems with some of the early works of Robin Hyde to illuminate the themes and stylistic archaisms that reflect the kind of reading romantically inclined young women in early twentieth century New Zealand would have had access to, and the prevailing conventions of the time.

There was another intersection in the working lives of Riddell and Hyde that would have significant implications for both. Hyde had been employed by *New Zealand Truth* in 1928 – the same year that Riddell would start work in Sydney – as a filing clerk and 'became, variously, editor's secretary, shopping reporter, unofficial lady editor and freelance contributor.'³³ Hyde was fired by proprietor-editor Ezra Norton when he arrived on a visit to his New Zealand edition 'because I refused [him] complete power of life and death over all my work, when I met him just after a rough crossing had played the very dickens with his picturesque liver'.³⁴ In 1927 Elizabeth Riddell had been hired by Norton, to work on his Sydney edition and set off on what would become a luminous career in Australia. 'One of his flunkies in New Zealand had read some poetry by me, awful poetry, and it was the custom of newspaper owners to hire people from New Zealand because they thought the education was better than Australia'.³⁵

Part Two: 'Something English ... something out of a book',³⁶

³² *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

³³ Redmer Yska, *Truth: The Rise and Fall of the People's Paper* (Nelson: Craig Potton, 2010), p. 75.

³⁴ Derek Challis and Gloria Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris: A Life of Robin Hyde* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002), p. 125.

³⁵ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*. The 'flunky' referred to was Henry Bateson (1904-1974) formerly of the *Wellington Dominion*, who took over as editor of *New Zealand Truth*, in 1929 and was later a correspondent for the *Daily Mirror* in Europe during World War II. Bateson, who was also known as an amateur maritime historian, published a comprehensive set of reference books on Australian maritime disasters in 1972. His work in this field was carried on by J.K. Loney.

³⁶ Elizabeth Riddell, 'Kauri', *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p. 90.

Research in early twentieth-century New Zealand and Australian newspapers and periodicals has yielded some seventy Riddell poems and one short fiction, written when she was a teenager and published under the name Bettie (and sometimes Betty) Riddell in the *New Zealand Free Lance*, the *Christchurch Sun*, the *Auckland Sun*, and in the *Sydney Bulletin*, the latter a favoured outlet for many New Zealand writers in the early twentieth century.³⁷ Two of her poems were included in the 1930 New Zealand anthology, the critically disparaged *Kowhai Gold*.³⁸ None of these early poems have been reprinted in any of the seven collections of her work published in Australia between 1940 and 1994 nor are they acknowledged in otherwise extensive bibliographic records of her work in Australia even though more than forty of them appeared in the *Sydney Bulletin* between 1925 and 1928. I propose to parallel close readings of selected Riddell poems with the early work of her New Zealand contemporary Robin Hyde, another hybrid poet-journalist-novelist, who also featured in *Kowhai Gold* with nine poems. There are some striking parallels and coincidences in their early New Zealand lives and on cursory examination similar conventional themes and stylistic archaisms in their early work that reflect the kind of reading, as well as the stifled sexual yearnings, romantically inclined young women in early twentieth century New Zealand would have experienced at school and at home. But despite the thematic and stylistic similarities in predictable themes— pastoral idylls, Lancelot and Guinevere, sad Columbine, gay Pierrette, happy wanderers, lost lovers – there are distinct differences in emotional tone and verbal complexity between the two contemporaneous New Zealand women writers that I believe will facilitate my critical reading of Riddell’s early work in the context of New Zealand’s literary climate and provide clues to her later development as a lyric poet of distinction.

The intersection in the pages of *Kowhai Gold* is not surprising, given that both were regular contributors to the *Christchurch Sun*, notably Hyde whose first volume, *The Desolate Star and Other Poems*, was collected, with the help of the newspaper’s literary editor, J.H. Schroder, from her *The Sun* contributions.³⁹ The anthology attracted a great deal of derisory

³⁷ Forty five of the Bettie Riddell poems published in the *Bulletin* are identified by Theresia Liemlienio Marshall, in ‘New Zealand Literature in the Sydney Bulletin, 1880-1930,’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Auckland 1995). Five of the Bettie Riddell Sun poems are noted by F. W. Nielsen Wright, in *An Account of the Aotearoa Poet Betty or Bettie Riddell, 1910-1998, with Examples of Her Poetry* (Wellington: Cultural and Political Booklets, 1998). Two Bettie Riddell Poems from *Kowhai Gold* (1930) and *The Untrammelled*, as a single poem edition, (1940) are on the record. All other poems identified through Marcia Russell’s research. See appendix for details.

³⁸ *Kowhai Gold*, pp. 134-35.

³⁹ Robin Hyde, *The Desolate Star and Other Poems* (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1929).

comment on both sides of the Tasman. Arthur D. Wylie in the *Bulletin* declared: ‘There is in *Kowhai Gold* a lot of Sitwell and soda and strong strain of Rossetti and rubbish [...] Fernland’s poets of today are incurably artificial. One reason for that, possibly, is that the incipient Lawsons and Daleys of the Dominion were strangled at birth’.⁴⁰ Allen Curnow, retrospectively, described it as ‘the diligent scrapings of a small pot’s bottom’.⁴¹ Charles Brasch agreed, also years later, that *Kowhai Gold* was ‘nearly all of it bad in an effete literary way ... [it] shamed us in the eyes of the world’.⁴² D’Arcy Cresswell in London (who was not included in the collection after a public dispute with the editor, Quentin Pope, about the proposed choice of poems) called it a ‘labouring mountain of verse, but no mouse, no squeak of the Muse’.⁴³ In literary terms *Kowhai Gold* was a bit like the single shot that set World War I in motion. It became a metaphor for everything that was wrong with New Zealand verse and arguably a catalyst for a mini-revolution that would change the direction of New Zealand literature.

The ascendancy of cultural nationalism caused literary divisions as the Georgian model of romantic neo-classicism yielded to a new and urgent call for literature that reflected ‘a degree of cultural self-reliance’.⁴⁴ This translated as a more masculine tradition. As with all revolutions there were victims, most of them women, and among them Hyde, Eileen Duggan, Jessie Mackay, Paul Henderson (Ruth France) and Ursula Bethell. Since the 1980s there has been widespread acknowledgement that the gendered hostilities were driven by a conviction that women writers were more oppressed by, or obsessed with, the gentility, ornament and sentimentality of the Georgian and neo-Victorian tradition. What Curnow described as ‘the cosmopolitan whimsies of suburban *grandes dames*’,⁴⁵ Fairburn and Glover dubbed ‘the menstrual school of poetry’.⁴⁶

Kowhai Gold was a convenient target for the cultural nationalists, featuring as it did the works of 28 women and 28 men writers, an unusual demonstration of even-handed gender selection in the context of New Zealand anthologies at the time (by comparison just two out of 15 contributors to Allen Curnow’s 1945 anthology were women, three out of 23 in the 1951 edition, and seven women out of 36 poets were included in his influential 1960 *Penguin*

⁴⁰ Arthur D. Wylie, ‘Maoriland, Her Poets!’, *Bulletin*, 7 January 1931, p. 4.

⁴¹ Allen Curnow, ‘Aspects of New Zealand Poetry’, *Meanjin Papers*, 2 (Summer 1943), 20-6

⁴² Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir* (Oxford University Press: Wellington, 1980), p. 186.

⁴³ D’Arcy Cresswell, review, ‘Kowhai Gold’, *New Zealand News*, 18 November 1930, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Allen Curnow, ‘New Zealand Literature: The Case for a Working Definition’, in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. by Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 139-54 (p. 140).

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), p. 87.

Book of New Zealand Verse).⁴⁷ Eileen Duggan is undeniably the feature poet in *Kowhai Gold* with 16 poems. Mansfield is over-represented with 12 works chosen, one suspects, on account of reputation rather than intrinsic merit, with the exception of the haunting ode to her brother, 'To L.H.B., 1894-1915'.⁴⁸ Two poems by Riddell did not attract any comment from either New Zealand or Australian critics, although by then she had been a regular contributor to the *Bulletin* for several years (at least one of her poems in the collection was first published there). But the tendency, remarked on by the historian Keith Sinclair to confine critical appraisal to people who were already in the putative 'literary club' – the 'abominable custom of asking poets to review poets; novelists, novelists; and critics, critics [...] each assures us of the other's merit and the other of his undying regard'⁴⁹ – meant Riddell's contribution was of little interest, and by the time *Kowhai Gold* appeared she was in Australia and writing under a different name as Elizabeth Richmond. Riddell escaped the shots being fired in the early rounds of the battle for a literary high ground and became immersed in a literary world across the Tasman where, if Wylie is to be believed, poets were not strangled at birth.

There is no particular reason why Riddell's contributions to *Kowhai Gold* should have been noticed, approvingly or otherwise. They are slight works with prosaic and un-alluring titles. 'Old Man' and 'The Cripple' are remarkable less for literary excellence and transcendent revelations than for the evidence of a direct and somewhat transgressive voice that stands out among the sentimental attitudinizing that characterises many of the works, by both men and women, selected by Quentin Pope for the anthology. 'Old Man', a young woman's take on elderly death, concludes on a note of unusual ferocity mocking hypocritical sentiments about peaceful resignation – an acknowledgement that somebody departing life might still want to protest against its sometimes bitter taste.

Being dead, they'll clog your mouth lest you arise,
 Made bold by dealings with the worms and dust,
 And shout, with soil still crusted on your eyes,
 How both the ploughshare and the sword are rust,
 And God as aimless as a drifted shell.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Allen Curnow, *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923-45; A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1950; The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, 1960.

⁴⁸ Katherine Mansfield, 'To L.H.B., 1894-1915', in *Kowhai Gold*, edited by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p.31.

⁴⁹ Keith Sinclair, 'The Intelligent Reader's Guide to New Zealand Criticism', *Here & Now*, 3.11 (1953), 26.

⁵⁰ Bettie Riddell, 'Old Man', in *Kowhai Gold*, edited by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 134.

The provenance of ‘Old Man’ is not clear. I have been unable to find it in any early newspapers or periodicals and Pope may have solicited it directly from the author. ‘The Cripple’ however was first published in the *Bulletin* in February 1926. The poem has distinctive innocence in theme and execution that avoids naivety largely because of the directness of attack in the first line and the confident control of form even when forcing out predictable rhymes, foreshadowing what will become a stylistic signature in Riddell’s poetry.

Not for me a roof-tree, child or lover,
But only this white room
And all the patient stars
Peering through the bars
Into my prison’s gloom -
This whiteness, and the magic night for cover.⁵¹

In the context of *Kowhai Gold* there is a striking simplicity about this poem. At the same time, ‘patient stars’ and ‘prison bars’ notwithstanding, it demonstrates a degree of structural innovation that was rarely a feature of young writing at that time in New Zealand where the a/b/a/b quatrain tended to be the arrangement of choice. Riddell’s management of the a/b/c/c/b/a rhyme pattern is as confident as the voice is empathetic but not sentimental.

In both works there is a refreshing absence of English or classical imagery (with the exception of the biblical ‘ploughshare and the sword’ –Isaiah 2:4) no swathing of self-conscious yearnings for somewhere else ... ‘English lanes ...lit up with golden daffodils’, thrush singing of ‘English fields’ and ‘songs of English nightingales’. Instead, in ‘The Cripple’, we have the organic sturdiness that inheres in the archaic symbolism of the ‘roof-tree’ as a metaphor for hearth, home and family – the elements of quotidian life denied the cripple. This metaphor effectively distances the tone of the poem from the dutiful recitations of romantic and traditional imagery in ‘hyacinthine hills’ and ‘woodland ways’ that typically represented a poetic ‘Home’ in the mind’s eye of so many of Riddell’s New Zealand contemporaries of the time: the derivative clichés in Ivy Gibbs’ poem ‘The Thrush’, for example, that ‘sang of English fields I’ve seen | Oft in my dreams, dew-pearled and green’ and provoked yearnings to

⁵¹ Bettie Riddell, ‘The Cripple’, in *Kowhai Gold*, edited by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 135.

roam one lovely hour
through English lanes, o'er English hills
Lit up with golden daffodils⁵²

or Doreen Price's agony of exile when the careless raptures of Spring crowd the elm-tree
boles of England and

my heart swift-winged with longing flees
Over the night's rim, brooding, dim, star sown,
To where, beyond a waste of chanting seas,
It's Spring at Home.⁵³

There is no evidence of these recycled homeland metaphors in Riddell's work in *Kowhai Gold* or in any other of her published works in the 1920s – nor are there in the single contribution of another New Zealand poet who like Riddell later made Australia her home. Lilla Gormhuille McKay's 'Mountain Night', is a cluster of southern hemisphere co-ordinates painting, in four lines, not a dream of England but a reality of New Zealand:

When Ruapehu speaks the Pleiades,
And Taranaki hears a star-born croon,
And Aorangi's gleaming brows are spanned
By a young sickle moon.⁵⁴

Such unapologetically Maoriland referents are rare in *Kowhai Gold*. There are the occasional tui, kowhai, rata, and gorse bush, a blast of home sickness by J.C. Beaglehole while travelling in the Cotswolds where 'it is beautiful, this old, old land: | These houses root their being in the earth' but '... my deaf ears hear Orongo-rongo's stones – | Bloom bursts on wind-swept hills within my mind' and a deft paean of praise for the town of Akaroa by Mona Tracy but one which focuses more on the French flavour than the New Zealand-ness. The precision of McKay's geographically distinctive settings compares strongly with Riddell's more conventional interior world of traditional nineteenth-century romance narratives, expressed in derivative tropes involving fauns and Pierrettes and Egyptian maidens, or in hero-worshipping ballads about gallant warriors and their ladies. A southern location is invoked

⁵² Ivy Gibbs, 'The Thrush', in *Kowhai Gold*, ed. by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 150.

⁵³ Doreen Price, 'Exile', in *Kowhai Gold*, ed. by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 70.

⁵⁴ Lilla Gormhuille McKay, 'Mountain Night', in *Kowhai Gold*, ed. by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 159.

almost cursorily in allusions to bracken and fern, dreaming bays. The limitations of the terms of engagement in this uneasy struggle between the impulse to express the normal, but unsanctioned, erotic yearnings of a passionate young woman and still comply with the acceptable models for single women at the time left few options but to place desire in an exotic historical context and assign the impulses to somebody else – Helen of Troy, Penelope of Ithaca, Thais the Alexandrian concubine, Carthaginian slave girls, or female muses on pedestals shrouded in layers of pious rectitude. The other trick was to envisage a ‘fairies-at-the-bottom-of -the-garden’ scenario where the wicked predations of cavorting fauns and piping Pans could be blamed for causing temporary insanity or hysteria in otherwise prudent women. This way of dealing with received romance narratives was a widespread female adaptation to traditional proprieties and served to distance the poet from reflections on sexual identity by assigning them to somebody else who existed in another time and place. It also helped reinforce traditional quest and romance narratives rather than challenging them.

Riddell’s 1927 poem, ‘Envy’, with its somewhat fevered description of young Grecian women on display at a Carthaginian slave market being observed by a woman who had once been in the same circumstances, is a classic example of this strategy for safely expressing post-adolescent sexual imaginings:

The slow tears fell. Her lord was kind, but old
Ah, could she be a slave again to know
Suspense, surmise, adventure – wondering where
The dainty gift that was herself should go?⁵⁵

The coyly expressed erotic fantasies that transfer overheated sensuality to somewhere, and somebody else, can have the effect of conveying an ersatz delicacy that is at odds with the real engine of the poem: a fastidious denial of its heart. The reader is consequently nudged into feelings of distaste or discomfort sensing the ambivalence inherent in the transfer of erotic fantasy to elsewhere, and connection with the poem is lost. This form of disguised sensuality was not unusual for the times. In a 1993 radio script about the poems of Mary Stanley and Robin Hyde, Michele Leggott draws attention to Stanley’s haunting and celebratory poems about babies and sexual passion and asks why Hyde’s poems about both her lost baby and her living child and her love life are so masked and encoded. Leggott

⁵⁵ Bettie Riddell, ‘Envy’, *Bulletin*, 27 January, 1927, p.7.

decides it is because of the safety conferred by conjugal status, whereas ‘An unmarried woman had to find other ways of writing these areas of her experience.’

The right to write about women’s experiences once safely married, of course, had its own drawbacks. As Leggott points out:

[T]he permission carried with it an automatic demotion: poems about babies joined a multitude of lullabies, cradle songs and effusions about curly heads and winsome smiles. *Women's poetry*. Poems about sex written by women always raise the eyebrows of a good taste which would prefer silence on the subject. If deterrents fail, it can always be laughed off as *boudoir poetry*.⁵⁶

Even when properly married, a woman writer’s record of female of sensuality or motherhood could still prompt expressions of hostile dis-ease on the part of male critics. When Ruth Gilbert, a 39-year-old mother of two, draws attention to mature female fecundity and a quickening womb in her 1955 collection *The Sunlit Hour* she was rebuked by C.K. Stead in *Landfall* for being ‘embarrassingly’ honest: ‘... the invitation to eavesdrop on such things as a mother’s brooding over the child in her womb must be declined. Art demands some objectivity, however slight’.⁵⁷ He does not specify which of the several poems about a new life quickening in the womb made him queasy, perhaps ‘Lullaby’ with its unequivocal introduction:

As the frond curled in its fern
As the bud in its bough,
As safely, as secretly
Sleep in me now.⁵⁸

Objectivity, based on female experience it seems, is not objective enough. Nor is it poetic enough (Stead declares Gilbert guilty of a “complete absence of poetic imagination”) and here is the critical rub – whether to be objective or imaginative, or both. Or should the unimaginative, un-objective woman poet try to avoid the whole thing by coding her messages as, for example Robin Hyde does in, ‘Half-Moon’ where satyrs and fauns and piping Pans –

⁵⁶ Michele J. Leggott, ‘This Grave Festival My Word Praises: Mary Stanley’, in *‘But don’t forget the girl is a genius’: Re-reading New Zealand Women Poets #2*, Concert FM, 12 August 1993 (Auckland: NZBC, 1993). From an adaptation of the broadcast script at <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz>.

⁵⁷ C.K. Stead, review, ‘The Sunlit Hour, The Secret Parable, Two Poems, Fragments of Living Peking’, *Landfall*, 10.2 (June 1956), 151-154 (p. 152).

⁵⁸ Ruth Gilbert, ‘Lullaby’, in *The Sunlit Hour* (London: Allen & Unwin: 1955), p.12.

not real men please note – are blamed for seducing the unwary into into ways where tall gods:

Would wear your beauty like a flower
To crush with jests and cast aside
In one unpitying, splendid hour.⁵⁹

Riddell too provides another example of this transference in a 1925 poem published in the *Bulletin* as ‘Thaïs in Pace’ (sic). Thaïs was a legendary Alexandrian concubine, said to have lived in the fourth century, who became St Thaïs of Egypt after being converted to Christianity. The story, which is the subject of Anatole France’s 1890 novel *Thaïs* and an 1894 opera of the same name by Jules Massenet, provides a classic vehicle for religious eroticism. Thaïs is pursued by an ascetic young Byzantine monk who is determined to convert the legendary sinner, a worshipper of Venus, to Christianity. He succeeds but in the process finds himself overcome by sexual lust and his baser nature is revealed just as Thaïs demonstrates her own saintly purity. In the legend Thaïs dies, with a despairing, now lapsed, monk at her bedside, but has a vision of a host of angels opening the gates of heaven as she does so, helpfully reinforcing the notion that perhaps being a courtesan does not mean eternal hellfire and damnation. It has all the elements of a traditional romance narrative that could be safely deployed in the context of early twentieth century restraints with sufficient gestures toward piety to mask the religious eroticism. Riddell evokes her death bed scene in restrained, lullaby cadences:

Let her lips rest – she is so tired of laughter -
O gods that laugh above!
She needs soft sleep and some sweet dream hereafter
Who has her fill of love.

There’s peace in this white-raftered desert dwelling
Where sand blows round the door;
Her mirror, knowing beauty past all telling,
Lies idle on the floor.

Vermilion and kohl in pewter glowing
Stand in a gaudy row;

⁵⁹ Robin Hyde, ‘Half-Moon’, in *Kowhai Gold*, ed. by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), pp. 74-75.

And henna, for her fingertips fair showing,
This lady placed them so.⁶⁰

The voice behind this detail of the concubine's last hours sounds female, familiar with the arts of vermilion and kohl and henna, companionable and sensitive. But it seems neither Thaïs herself nor a female companion can be trusted to speak. The omniscient voice is that of an old lover who has the last word on her life and her dying thoughts:

I was her lover. Desert winds are singing
Her death-song; I am old,
The sunset light has found her lips, is clinging,
Sleep, Thaïs in your gold! ('Thaïs in Pace')

Riddell uses the trope of Thaïs in at least three early poems, along with other sexually charged examples of errant but long dead women – sometimes using several together in the same poem. In one of her rare overtly 'Maoriland' poems for the *Bulletin*, Riddell manages to slip Melisande into a poem about Rana and Hinemoa. To be fair, Melisande is used as a metaphor for an unlikely figure to be found in a romance of the New Zealand bush:

Never a Melisande in this deep green!
But in the dim ways where the tui calls
Young Hinemoa lifts her dear, dark head
To catch an echo from the whispering walls.

And Rana comes one gusty night in June
When the wild earth's asleep; and soft they lie,
Deep in the bracken, while the windy moon
Chases the young stars in a clouded sky.⁶¹

The ploy is the same. Profane, or unsanctioned love, is transferred to famous or infamous lovers and, frequently we leave them entwined in death somewhere.

Now Hinemoa and her lover lie
Asleep beneath the grass of yesterday

⁶⁰ Bettie Riddell, 'Thaïs in Pace', *Bulletin*, 14 May 1925, p. 7.

⁶¹ Bettie Riddell, 'Once Long Ago--', *Bulletin*, 9 December 1927, p. 48.

Mayhap they waken when the wild duck fly
Into the sunset on the dreaming bay! ('Once, Long Ago—')

This is one of only two early poems with distinctively New Zealand imagery. The other is a lament that sits oddly amongst the distinctively English or classical motifs of most of the early works

Sweet mother, sweet brown mother
My home is broken about me,
Mother of falling waters,
My lover is gone without me.
(The rata rots in the valleys,
Down in the deep green alleys)
Wahine, Maori mother.

He struck my mouth from his mouth -
I am alone and lonely,
And there is naught to comfort
But the wind in the trees only -
(Love bleeds in the shallow waters
Mother of many daughters)
Wahine, Maori mother.⁶²

There may be some connection between this unexpected diversion into Maori imagery and the fact that Riddell's older sister Margaret married Kauru Karaitiana Simson in 1922 in Wellington's Anglican Cathedral. The bride was seventeen, the groom twenty-five. Riddell was home from the convent for the event and after leaving school in 1923 Riddell lived with the Simsons for a while, until they left to live in New Plymouth where their first child, and Riddell's first niece, Elizabeth, was born in 1925. An increasing awareness of Maoritanga is not surprising, given that Kauru (also known as Mickey) was the last surviving male of a chiefly Kahungunu family with mana and property and that Riddell, while living with the young newly-weds, had plenty of opportunities to meet other young people. What is surprising, however, is the intimacy of the poem, particularly the dark allusions in the 'the

⁶² Bettie Riddell, 'Lament', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 16 July 1926, p. 6.

rata rots in the valleys’ and ‘Love bleeds in the shallow waters’ in combination with its uncharacteristically – for the poet – oratorical cadences:

The gold in the sun shall snare him
And bring him to my sighing,
The dark of the storm shall conquer
One who turned from my crying -
(Mother, burn magic brightly
For one who loved me lightly)
For the love of love, for aroha
Wahine, Maori mother (‘Lament’).

There were, however, no further poems invoking Maoriland imagery or oratory until much later in Riddell’s life. Much of her earliest work continued to invoke mythical women from the past, particularly wayward women, to interrogate the nature of love and its legacy. ‘I’m Asking these Ladies’, published in the *Bulletin* in 1927, reads like a litany for women who in death might have wished for different legends to follow them to their graves. The poet sketches a five line verse of their persona followed by a five line verse which interrogates their memories:

Under bland heavenly skies
Thais, slim-bodied and fair,
Thais with soft, sleepy eyes,
Thais with tawny bright hair,
Thais the Beautiful, lies.⁶³

The question for Thais probes whether the harsh desert life she embraced after her conversion to Christianity was fulfilling or whether there was regret for her courtesan past:

Does she dream of the desert’s bare drouth
And the hot dust that stifles and blinds,
And the clouds that sweep up from the south,
And the sting of the terrible winds,
And a kiss on her mouth? (‘I’m Asking These Ladies’)

⁶³ Bettie Riddell, ‘I’m Asking These Ladies’, *Bulletin*, 22 December 1927, p. 19.

Thais is replaced by the Roman beauty, Poppaea, said to be the second wife of Nero, who died after the emperor in a fit of rage, reportedly kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant with their second child:

There is Poppaea, queen of a day
And queen of the legions of dead;
But the light in her eyes is less gay
And sorrow is bound on her head;
And her heart's far away ('I'm Asking These Ladies').

Nero apparently bestowed divine honours on Poppaea after her death and had her entombed at the Mausoleum of Augustus with a full state funeral. Ten years worth of Arabian incense production is said to have been used at the rites but despite the divinity and honour acquired in death, the poet speculates that Poppaea, despite her post-death sanctity and honours, may have preferred some simpler rewards:

Does she long for a fine curving comb
And the gilt sandals under her feet?
Does this red-haired light lady of Rome
Find the lips of a lover more sweet
Than Heaven's high dome? ('I'm Asking These Ladies')

The techniques in this poem foreshadow a journalistic instinct for story-telling led by questioning, an instinct that will be consolidated in the next few years. But more obvious is the deep interest in the real lives of aberrant but exciting examples of womanhood. The third of them is another favoured mythical heroine, Helen of Troy:

She is white as the moon's whitest beam
In the garden of stillness and light –
Helen, who worshipped the gleam
Of a blade, and a hilt diamond-bright;
Helen, alone with her dream! ('I'm Asking These Ladies')

Once again the question is asked: how does Helen feel now that the excitement is all over?

Is she tired for the towers of Troy
For the music and magic and gold,
For a gallant and hot-headed boy,
And the tall armoured princes of old,
And a night's memoried joy? ('I'm Asking These Ladies')

Another strategy for disguising youthful sexual enthusiasm was to serve up romance narratives with a salad dressing of exotic imagery, using evocative symbols of indulgence and sensuality to carry subtle hints of sexual mastery and domination. It is a technique Riddell uses two years later in a second poem about Thais, 'The Courtesan':

The scent of pomegranates, grapes and musk,
The gleam of porphyry and jade; and light
My arm beneath your fair head in the dusk,
Wooing the soft night.⁶⁴

The extremes of Thais's life as a courtesan and then a nun is clearly an appealing narrative for a romantic young poet but there is a hint of increasing sophistication and worldliness in the irreverent twist applied to the story of Thais's acknowledgement of, and acceptance into, heaven. Visions of saints are a useful disguise for the real message in verse two:

If every kiss were but a prayer, I'd climb
The balconies of Heaven, and there see
White saints go walking in the summer-time,
A dream, a mystery ('The Courtesan').

The notion of wanton behaviour providing a stairway to heaven is an unusually irreverent metaphor for a young New Zealand woman to use to frame the legendary exploits of a Carthaginian concubine, but this encoding of sexual adventures and profane notions was the only possible currency for a young unmarried woman in New Zealand at the time.

Thais the Courtesan am I; the rest
The wide world knows not, cares not.
Shadows creep;

⁶⁴ Betty Riddell, 'The Courtesan', *Bulletin*, 20 December 1927, p. 6.

And I, your yellow head upon my breast,
Drift into sleep ('The Courtesan').

So the classic myths and medieval legends that were standard fare for New Zealand schoolgirls provided both poetic tropes and models for a passionate life on which young women could safely drape their fantasies and fears. The other safe territory was patriotism – few newspapers failed to include a poem when Anzac Day came around – and both Hyde and Riddell would have been encouraged while at school to compose poems and essays on the subject of national pride, courage and sacrifice of World War I and its aftermath. Hyde's first published poem, 'Flanders Poppies' appeared in the *New Zealand Free Lance* in 1922:

Pass lightly where they lie,
Soft wind, that wak'st again
Red flame of poppy flowers
Against the golden grain.⁶⁵

Two years later Riddell's meditation on Gallipoli, 'Anzac Easter', featured in the *Christchurch Sun*:

The young gods of the new mythology,
Asleep beside the sea ...
Our Lenten lilies break
In crimson fire, and shake
The dreams of Anzac to the waiting sky –
Over the graves of Anzac, let the flaming petals lie.⁶⁶

The similarity in sentiment and execution of these commemorative verses which national occasions of celebration or remembrance prompted in the years following World War I is not surprising. Young and old were affected by the impact of that terrible conflict and both Hyde and Riddell were children of an era when the young men of a generation went away to die, if need be, for the Empire. The catharsis inherent in a romanticised view of carnage conflated with celebrations of victory and peace was one way of resolving the disjunct between national mourning and national pride. It is worth noting that both poets were to become war

⁶⁵ Robin Hyde, 'Flanders Poppies', *New Zealand Free Lance*, 26 April, 1922, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Betty Riddell [sic], 'Anzac Easter', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 24 April, 1924, p. 8.

poets and war journalists in the next two decades – Hyde reporting from the Sino-Japanese war in the late 1930s and Riddell from western Europe during the Normandy invasion in the 1940s – and experienced close up some of the realities of war. They both produced, as a result, some of their most memorable works. It is instructive to examine some of both women’s early work in New Zealand that reflects the cultural inheritance and educational conventions that informed their youthful poetics.

Hyde’s *Kowhai Gold* contribution, ‘Paris and Troy’, and Riddell’s treatment of the same classic Greek legend in ‘The Happy Warrior’ are good examples. Both adopt the male persona to explore the potency and subjectivity of the male gaze, but to strikingly different effect. For Hyde, the perspective is woman-focused and the male gaze is tender and sensitive:

Suddenly, as the Cyprian spake and smiled,
I had a vision of a golden room
Where sate no splendour, but a fated child
Whose eyes were steady from the eyes of Doom.
For all her shadows, innocence’s grace,
And youth were like white flowers in her hand.⁶⁷

In an uncharacteristically compressed and concentrated poem the poet sustains her portrayal of vulnerability and pathos with a simple metaphor that resolves a complex story:

So now the many standards are unfurled,
The deaths of Kings I had not recked are told,
And lowered flags stream past that I may know
What star-topped trees that blind, sweet hour laid low.
What does it matter? Here in Troy I hold
One flower’s frailty from a hurricane world.⁶⁸

If Hyde borrowed a metaphor here from Shakespeare’s monumental lament against the depredations of time in Sonnet 65 – ‘how with this rage shall beauty hold a plea/whose action is no stronger than a flower’ – her invocation of youth, innocence, and grace wrapped together

⁶⁷ Robin Hyde, ‘Paris and Troy’, *Kowhai Gold*, ed. by Quentin Pope (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 78.

⁶⁸ Robin Hyde, ‘Paris and Troy’, p. 78.

like ‘white flowers’ raised against a ‘hurricane world’ nevertheless reveals a sophisticated woman-centred approach to warrior legends. The contrast with Riddell’s approach in ‘The Happy Warrior’ is extreme and indicates subtle differences of gender politics on the part of the two poets, despite the thematic similarities of their early works. Hyde’s take on Helen – innocence, frailty, childish grace – contests depictions of Helen as treacherous and wanton and is sympathetic to the ‘lonely child’ of Homer. Riddell’s iteration by comparison maintains the warrior-like ‘Helen of Sparta’ image expressed with a defiant nonchalance and an opening verse of breathless contradictions:

Ah, then my love was Helen,
My Lady of the Spears;
Who sent me forth with laughter
And called me back with tears,⁶⁹

This Helen is a warlike ‘Lady of the Spears’, insensitively light-hearted (‘sent me forth with laughter’) pathetic (‘called me back with tears’) and completely lacking in character. The image of a warrior woman is instantly undermined. Either the male gaze is deficient or deluded:

Beyond the broken legions
I saw her like a flame,
And, blazoned in the reeling blue,
A splendid lie I thought was true –
The writing of her name.⁷⁰

The te-dum-te-dah cantering rhythms that resonate with the drum beat cadences of Henry Newbolt’s martial odes suggest some clumsy experimentation with conventional epic form – there’s even a pallid echo of the galloping rhythms of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*:

Why should I turn and hate her,
Who set my soul aglow?
There are as gallant battles,
And hearts are not more slow.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Bettie Riddell, ‘The Happy Warrior’, *The Sun* (Christchurch), 8 August 1924, p. 12.

⁷⁰ Bettie Riddell, ‘The Happy Warrior’, p. 12.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

But the final line veers right away from any attempt at a mood of romantic heroism to an unexpected anti-climax that teeters on the edge of bathos:

And though they called her wanton,
And praised her body's white,
I know – when plumed battalions ride
Across the world in pomp and pride –
She taught me how to fight.⁷²

The effect is oddly satisfying, even humorous – like a snappy headline – and foreshadows an epigrammatic quality that will become a hallmark of Riddell's poetic style: romantic impulses are paradoxically signalled by a sudden switch from lyrical praise to a metaphorical shrug of the shoulders. As a result the banal predictability of the verse becomes more parody than epic, self-consciously undermining any potential for a romantic reading.

The impulse – already evident in her schoolgirl poetry – to put herself on the perverse side of the text remained with Riddell. The following is another early example of her provocative tendency to rupture the mood of the poem by pre-empting any possibility of sentiment or affectation. 'The Little Death' – published in the *Bulletin* when the poet was 19 – is a typical lament about emotional growing pains and the dramas occasioned by young love and precocious disappointments expressed mostly with coy obliqueness:

Against my eyelids I can press
The tender velvet of the night:
She brings no pain with her caress –
The guerdon of the golden light
Is sorrow burning through the sweet
When faith and disillusion meet.⁷³

So far, so banal. The mood of over-stated self-pity continues and we discover 'the little death' is not copulation but Lethe being invoked as a way to forget the 'The dull remorse, the sharp alarms,' of quotidian life:

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Bettie Riddell, 'The Little Death', *Bulletin*, 2 December 1926, p. 7.

Soft-sinking into cradling arms,
I close my eyes, forget the day,
The dull remorse, the sharp alarms,
The bitterness along my way.
My soul sinks back, bereft of dreams,
On to the breast of Lethe's streams.⁷⁴

The repetitive expressions of self-pity are beginning to pall – and it seems the poet feels an urge to have an end with it. The poem closes with another of those flicks of self-mocking irony that ungracefully destabilises the apparent emotional register of the poem in a most un-Victorian or Edwardian manner:

Here for a while I may find peace,
When sun and shadow both depart;
Here in the little death's release
Forget my unforgetting heart –
A space in fields of asphodel
May cool feet that were scorched in Hell.⁷⁵

The concluding line is like a successful crash landing – bumpy but ultimately comical. Hyde, by contrast in 'The Desolate Star' constructs a monumental conceit and externalises her lament about lonely suffering by placing it in an extra-terrestrial context among the stars on which light does not fall, the invisible mass dominated by a halo of dark matter:

Little winds of dawn come gently to them
All the living stars – the other stars.
Dim rains passionate with scents bedew them,
My brother stars.
And I go lonely.
Steadfast and clear their shining –

⁷⁴ Bettie Riddell, 'The Little Death', p. 7.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

Are the shadows, and the song of the wind's pining
Forever, mine only?⁷⁶

The abstract lament in the voice of the lonely star on the dark side of the moon is sustained through the first two stanzas evoking the imagery of a black hole in space shared with 'brother' stars who drift endlessly on untrodden 'blue road's descending' – a community of lost souls in galactic isolation, unreflected by sun or moon. But in the final verse the poet reveals the real source of the voice in this meditation on loneliness in a shadowed universe where 'the life fires glow not'. The shift in perspective is subtle but emphatic:

Purple-plumed, the nesting twilight covers
All their golden windows. One last gleam
Shows me quiet gardens, where walk lovers
With eyes adream -
And I go, lonely -
Remembering lovelit faces -
Is the sound of the wind's going in empty places,
Forever, mine only?⁷⁷

When 'one last gleam' from the 'living stars' reveals a glimpse of humankind basked in the glow of reflected light, the sequential and detached invocations of 'I', 'my', and 'mine' are disrupted and re-contextualised. The masterly deployment of 'me' in line three of the final verse shifts the view to an earth-bound perspective. The poet is ventriloquising the star's voice in what resolves as an intensely personal lament. Both poets frequently express the view of the emotional 'outsider', the alienation of the stranger in what is meant to be a familiar land. The alienation in the 'The Desolate Star' is more intensely drawn, more raw and Riddell's almost jaunty rendering of 'The Little Death' has a Scarlett O'Hara 'fiddledy-dee' flourish that verges on self-mockery. But both poets will discover through travel and experience, the way in which the 'strange' becomes familiar and how the stranger in a strange land can find in this condition a transcendent voice that operates not from self-conscious navel gazing but from the observant, and generous, gaze of the wayfarer and bystander.

⁷⁶ Robin Hyde, 'The Desolate Star', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 3 February 1928, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Robin Hyde, 'The Desolate Star', p. 4.

There is one more thematic thread in their early poetry that is worth examining here because of its strong association with the socially puritanical environment in which both young women grew up. Riddell's 'One Way of Love' was published in Australia when the poet was 17 and Hyde's 'Wine of the Moon', first published in *Spike* in June 1928 when Hyde was 22. There is an inevitable difference as a result of age but both express trepidation about the price to be paid for emotional abandon. The poems are simultaneously excited and admonitory and reflect the stop-go signals of repressed sexuality in a constraining neo-Victorian ethos. Riddell approaches from a youthful naivety in a faintly prim explication of the same old story in a rhyme and rhythm that teeters on the edge of doggerel and is saved only by the more adventurous form. Both poets adorn their advice with archaisms and classical tropes – for Riddell the incipient carnality is draped in rondeaux, roses, peacocks and porphyry and beamed upon by star-shine and moonshine – lacking only Pan and fauns. I pick up the poem at verse three.

Oh, the gay coming and the gay farewell.
The soothing satin and caressing silk.
The rondeau and the peacocks on the lawn.
The clinging arms that loosened with the dawn –
The tender road to Hell!

Oh, the last coming as the slow stars gleam,
The moon ashine on gold and porphyry!
The crystal vases splinter as they fall:
My lady has her cloth-of-gold for pall –
My lord an easy dream!⁷⁸

Riddell's seventeen-year-old take is less lyrical than Hyde's 22-year-old self but the imagery is the same. Dangerous bacchanalian fancies precipitate notions of danger and evoke the conflicting responses of fascination and resistance. Like Riddell, Hyde invokes the standard tropes of seductive temptation – moon shine and starlight, fauns, music and chaliced wine in yet another versioning of the sentiments in 'Half-Moon'.

Down in the darkness, azalea trees

⁷⁸ Bettie Riddell, 'One Way of Love', *Bulletin*, 9 October 1924, p. 7.

Stand with the starlight awash at their knees-
Lady, tread softly! The cold silver moon
Drowns your bright buckles and laps at your shoon!

For earth is a bowl with the stars on its rim -
The night-gods have filled it with wine to the brim,
A faun in the grasses lies piping a tune -
Come drink, pretty lady, the wine of the moon!⁷⁹

Hyde's real life experience is reflected in the wry bitterness of a young woman who has drunk the wine of the moon and paid a price, a pregnancy and still birth at the age of 20. In her correspondence with her close friend Gwen Mitcalfe Hyde described the unexpected crossing of that particular Rubicon: 'I thought love-making was absolutely nothing but changed my mind – of a sudden. The moment he wanted me to, I suppose. I never found it a tender thing [...] an exultant and mysterious physical thing it did become – and it's the *ancientry* of love and love-making that has always impressed me.'⁸⁰ The poet invests this poem with those intimations of 'ancientry':

Tis nymph-feet have trodden your draught from the flowers
That open strange petals in perilous hours –
The hot perfumes quiver, the bright bubbles shine -
Come drink, pretty lady, of Arcady's wine!

Moths of the night flutter close to the bowers
And honey-sweet lips of carnivorous flowers
Your dreams hover nigh in the dangerous draught!
Ah hear! In the darkness, the faun-music laughed.⁸¹

Once again Hyde places herself and her own predicament at the heart of the poem. The perils of drinking Arcady's wine were all too familiar for her as an unmarried mother in 1920s New Zealand where the branding iron of social and familial disgrace delivered a

⁷⁹ Robin Hyde, 'Wine of the Moon', *Spike*, 28.53 (June 1928), p. 17.

⁸⁰ Derek Challis and Gloria Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris*, p. 67.

⁸¹ Hyde, 'Wine of the Moon', p. 17.

permanent scar. Even more poignantly for Hyde, when she confessed the truth to her mother and tried to excuse her lover on the grounds that he was drunk and ‘didn’t know what he was doing’ her mother called her ‘a drunken harlot’.⁸² An epithet also used by her father some years earlier when he accused her of flirting with one of his returned servicemen friends. But the voluptuous reference to ‘carnivorous flowers’ in the third verse – a powerful feminocentric metaphor – defiantly acknowledges female sensuality as a vital force that will not be obliterated or humbled by the moral judgements of a fading neo-Victorian tradition even though the final verse carries with it a cautionary tale:

The world is a chalice with stars on its rim,
The clear silver light sparkles cold at the brim -
Lady, beware! Lest your gay-winged soul
Fall and be drowned in the blind silver bowl.⁸³

In this respect both poets embedded biography in their early works – Hyde’s less quotidian in atmosphere and rendering than Riddell’s but the palette is the same and the classical motifs almost endemic. Both complain about the vicissitudes of love and rejection but Hyde’s reflections are more opaque, more masked by imagery than Riddell’s early attempts at describing emotional pain. Take, for example, her 1927 poem ‘Immunity’, which appeared in the Sydney *Bulletin*. It is wrung through with self-pity and over-wrought emotional posturing:

Oh, I’ve been hurt. To wake at dawn and know
Terror descending like an eagle’s wing:
And then the long day’s agony, the slow
Sinking to darkness, where the grey ghosts cling.⁸⁴

An earlier contribution to the *Bulletin*, in the same year, about faithless lovers and the bleakness of love lost, is similarly self-absorbed:

⁸² Challis and Rawlinson, p.71.

⁸³ Hyde, ‘Wine of the Moon’, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Riddell, ‘Immunity’, *Bulletin*, 30 June 1927, p. 6.

Always the broken dream, and the slow rain falling
Over the grave we dig for the bond of a lifetime's thralling.
This is the end of it all – a voice in the night calling.⁸⁵

Both Hyde and Riddell will eventually eliminate the flourishes and stale conceits from classical mythology but neither will eliminate biography in their work even though maturity and experience increasingly enables them to channel an instinct for story telling into a poetic form that make no special pleadings for the 'self'. The trials of growing up – the *bildung* – are embedded in many of the poems by Bettie Riddell of Maoriland that appeared consistently in the *Sydney Bulletin* in the 1920s. None of these early works are included in otherwise exhaustive bibliographies of Riddell's work in Australian databases and anthologies and it is clear the poet refused to acknowledge them once she had constructed a new trans-national identity as Elizabeth Riddell.

Part Three: 'Rendezvous'

The last poem published in the *Christchurch Sun* with the by-line 'Bettie Riddell, Convent of the Sacred Heart, Timaru' was called 'Vanitas', a meditation on what was the most fascinating archaeological revelation of the decade, Howard Carter and George Herbert's 1922 discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. The poem focuses on the younger female mummy found in the tomb, and probably reflects the palpable curiosity aroused in impressionable young women about the life and the fate of this unidentified member of the Tutankhamen household, known then only as 'The Younger Lady':

O small Egyptian maid,
You lie beneath the sand,
And quiet are your eyes,
And quiet your restless hand.

And kings and chariots
And slaves without your gate,

⁸⁵ Riddell, 'Tomorrow and ...', *Bulletin*, 10 February 1927, p. 7.

Are caught with scarce a sound
Into the net of fate.⁸⁶

In many ways the poem foreshadows another lifelong passion for Riddell – that of travel and exploration and the historical record – all of which become familiar themes in her journalism and her poetry in later years. But for the as-yet untravelled so-called schoolgirl there is only herself to put at the centre of her writing and it is in many of them that Riddell's efforts to occlude her New Zealand past are betrayed.

'Rendezvous', Riddell's first overtly biographical poem, was published in the Christchurch *Sun* in 1926. The by-line locates the poet in Wellington – as do all her locally published poems from 1924 undermining her own assertion that she travelled to Australia straight from convent school in Timaru. 'Rendezvous' indicates, at least, that the strictly supervised social life that she led as a convent schoolgirl – 'We were chaperoned all the time. I never had a thing to do with men while I was at school' – didn't apply in 1926.⁸⁷ By the time she wrote it, Riddell had been living, and possibly working, in Wellington for nearly three years. It is clearly a poem about parking up in a car somewhere with a lover: an unlikely scenario for a heavily chaperoned young convent schoolgirl. It begins conventionally but, typically, the setting and the mood are directly evoked:

Black sea and blacker sky. The engines' whir [sic]
Sobs into silence. What is this that sighs
Soft in my heart like a small bird astir?⁸⁸

The direct evocation of the mood is matched by a direct expression of defiance as tender stirrings of the heart are contrasted with the prospect of retribution:

The night is wise, and old and very wise
The stars look down on us. Perhaps God's eyes
Search in the darkness for a sight of one
Twisting a thorn for torture of His Son ('Rendezvous').

⁸⁶ Bettie Riddell, 'Vanitas', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 23 March 1923, p. 6.

⁸⁷ *Australian Biography: Elizabeth Riddell*.

⁸⁸ Bettie Riddell, 'Rendezvous', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 22 January 1926, p. 10.

The analogy of the thorn in the head of a crucified Christ as a metaphor for penetration is shocking in this context, disrupting the initially tender anticipation of a lovers' rendezvous as well as betraying any image of an innocent convent schoolgirl. There is also an echo of Hyde's invocation of the 'ancientry' of love-making in the opening lines where Riddell evokes the timeless omniscience of the night – 'wise, and old and very wise' – as a cloak for 'God's eyes' still searching for sin on earth. The poem displays a powerful streak of pragmatism working in opposition to sexual yearning as Riddell succinctly rehearses the internalised argument ignited by the choice between sexual surrender and self denial – the twin demons in a young woman's life at a time when the former impulse carried with it the real threat of social, and probably financial, ruin. Here the young poet finds herself on the sharp end of the fantasy experience she so jauntily pontificated on in 'One Way of Love' (see p. 12).

The cushions are dark comfort, and more dear
Your hand upon my shoulder. But the sea
Clasps to her bosom centuries of fear
And coldly smiles, and dream (sic) of you and me
Raped of our mortal gift of smile and tear
Cradled in darkness, in the silent deep
With love and terror and delight asleep ('Rendezvous').

Love and terror, fear and delight – the binary coupling of emotional responses to sexual awakenings – are weighed against a coupling in the back-seat of a lover's car:

Love passes, and the devil gets his due.
Let us go back. To-morrow we can sue
Time's favour for another rendezvous ('Rendezvous').

The undeniably personal tone of much of her published verse from the age of seventeen is a clear indicator that Riddell was by then a young woman with enough personal freedom to indulge in romantic liaisons and what was probably considered a fast 1920's lifestyle in Wellington. The self-professed '17-year-old innocent' who arrived in Australia in 1927 was in fact a 20-year-old woman who had experienced her share of romantic attachments and sexual experimentation. This thread of emotional awakenings and emotional partings winds through Riddell's most overtly self-referential poems between 1926 and 1928. The most

striking of them was one of the earliest, published in the Christchurch *Sun* in August 1926 when John Schroder, an influential mentor and publisher in Hyde's career, was the editor. 'The Useless Gift' again demonstrates Riddell's early operating power, delivering detail of an antipodean summer into an emotionally charged landscape.

My gift to you – the picture of our dreams
That turned to dust one February day.
A burning day. But, oh, the wind that crept
Like death across the blue sweep of the bay.⁸⁹

The place, the mood and the plot are laid out in four brief lines. The concentrated attack on the story again indicates a journalistic instinct to get to the crux of the matter without delving into abstraction or sentiment, so intensely compacted that if the poet had ended it right there with the juxtaposition of a chill wind creeping like 'death' into the 'blue sweep' of a New Zealand beach in summer the reader could still have felt the story had been told. But the terse economy is softened by some more fragile imagery:

There is a white house, neatly in a row
With other houses, and a garden set
With flowers that used to watch us when we laughed
Like other lovers – now the flowers forget ('The Useless Gift', 12).

The disarming simplicity of the story about a romantic fantasy unexpectedly undermined by intimations of human transience evokes a spiritual shiver that destabilises the emotional landscape even as it reinforces the permanence of the physical one, and the poet delivers it with a stunning economy.

And you forget. And, surely I forget.
Time clouds my memory, and all things pass –
Only the bay keeps its intransient blue,
And the white house stands dreaming in the grass ('The Useless Gift', 12).

By any standards – but particularly by the overwrought imagery and masked emotional responses of a mid-1920s woman in New Zealand – the limpid simplicity of that final line is

⁸⁹ Bettie Riddell, 'The Useless Gift', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 8 August 1926, p. 12.

like a mental shower. It falls softly at the point when a fusillade of philosophical ruminating and sentimental navel-gazing might have been expected from a lesser talent. This is a very adult assessment of a youthful domestic fancy about ‘living happily ever after’ and appears to signal a new awareness of the intricacies of life and love. The economy of expression avoids both sentiment and cynicism – despite the faintly self-pitying title – by building a mood of tenderness and resignation.

A similarly wry declaration of emotional self-discovery is apparent in ‘S.S. Tahiti’, clearly an account of a lover departing:

They’ve played the last tune, and the laughter dies
As sudden as a wind that sinks at night.
If only they would let the last ropes go
And set her sailing outward on her flight.
(The white ship that has carried love away
And brought love laughing home, this many a day).⁹⁰

Despite the overstrained rhyme in ‘many a day’ the analogy of love being carried away and love returning is apt in this context. Riddell, like any young woman who grew up during the first World War, would have been conscious of the historical significance of ships in the context of New Zealand. As a young woman with strong connections in Hawke’s Bay from where hundreds of young men had taken their favourite horses and joined the main body of New Zealand mounted rifles who sailed from Wellington at the outbreak of the Great War, the names and fortunes of the ten troop transporters which carried the men and their horses to the battle fronts in Egypt, and carried ill and wounded men home again during the conflict would have been all too familiar. Riddell’s predilection for story-telling – a journalistic habit that will be an increasingly notable feature of her poetic voice – may have informed her contextualising of this personal farewell. The S.S. *Tahiti*, like the *Maunganui*, the *Ruapehu* and several other vessels, which were part of that wartime history, remained familiar names in peacetime as essential passenger and freight carriers linking New Zealand with the Pacific, Australia, the west coast of America and Britain as part of what was called the Inter-colonial shipping service. The linking of those threads of maritime and civilian activity with ‘hell’ in the second verse subtly evokes the *Tahiti*’s role in World War I:

⁹⁰ Bettie Riddell, ‘S.S. Tahiti’, *The Sun* (Christchurch), 13 September 1927, p. 10.

Thank God for ships – that cut the thread of love
So sharply, aye, that do the work so well.
A million rolling miles, relentless, blue
It's easier to climb the stairs from hell
And clasp your lover, than to bid him hear
Your heartbeats, as the white ship leaves the pier ('S.S. Tahiti', 10).

The inexplicable interpolation of 'aye' in the second line is redeemed by the un-forced introduction of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend in the concluding lines of the poem, and by the self-deprecating wryness that will become a trademark feature of Riddell's later poetry and journalism.

Two weeks later in *The Sun*, another Bettie Riddell poem appeared. 'Beauty Bewitches' is unusual for a time when sylvan settings were favoured for poetic contemplation. It opens with the imagery of an industrial metropolis as the setting for another image of warrior-like womanhood converted by the male gaze into an objectified and idealised trophy.

At night, far up along the scaffolding
When riveters are all gone home to dream
Of towers in Spain, wild beauty walks awhile
Wrapped in a red moon-beam.

She is no pliant maiden, but steel-strong
With four winds chained forever to her wrist.
Her praise is sudden as her curling sword
That leaves blood where it kissed.⁹¹

Once again the echo of a classical and conventional education is manifest in the linking of heroic imagery to Greek goddesses – in this case the woman with the four winds chained to her wrist may be Eos, goddess of the dawn and legendary mother of the *anemoi*, the classical compass winds said to have saved Athens from the Persian fleet that threatened the city around 300 BC.

⁹¹ Bettie Riddell, 'Beauty Bewitches', *The Sun* (Christchurch), 27 May 1927, p. 10.

She stands and laughs amid the plaster shards ...
She sows the unforgetting seed that grows
Into a madness in man's heart. He dreams ...
He builds a living rose ('Beauty Bewitches', 10).

Despite Riddell's apparent affection for heroic women figures, there is no indication in her career of alignment with the feminist movement in the 1970s. She consistently declined to contribute to woman-only poetry anthologies until late in her life and sometimes expressed impatience with the women's movement, adopting – like many of her press colleagues – dismissive and apocryphal tags to describe women activists. It is instructive to draw attention here to the contrast between her gender politics and those of Hyde whose journalism consistently revealed a woman-centred approach. The difference may be explained by their respective life experiences and by the social and cultural differences in their living and working environments. It is possible that Riddell had never felt that 'crick in the neck' that Hyde described so graphically in her feature essay for *The Press* in 1937, 'Women Have No Star: Questions, Not Answers':

Perhaps the over-wrought, over-taut vision of the woman writer, at her very best, touches a humanity and insight which the serene male has not because he has never been obliged to look at life with a perpetual crick in his neck, like Lot's poor lady.⁹²

Hyde frequently protested about gender inequalities – particularly in regard to women and literature. For example:

The English could lose all of Joan of Arc except her heart and her tradition: the Greeks and the world of letters, could lose all of Sappho except her fragments and her tradition and there she stands, the exalted founder of a long line of very queer little poets.⁹³

Riddell rarely went in to bat on the side of the feminist argument against male hegemony. Undoubtedly Hyde's struggle for acceptance by the literary establishment in New Zealand

⁹² Robin Hyde, 'Women Have No Star: Questions, Not Answers', in *Disputed Ground: Robin Hyde, Journalist*, ed. by Gillian Boddy and Jacqueline Matthews (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1991), pp. 201-5 (p. 201).

⁹³ *ibid.*, p.201.

and the often misogynist personal attacks on her work and her character sharpened her pen, but the apparent differences between Riddell's ideological position and that of Hyde stand as cultural indicators of provincial New Zealand at that time. In Hyde we perceive the intelligent, politically aware and frequently proselytising writer from a working class urban background who instinctively presented images of 'woman-as-victim', and frequently embedded her own tortured angst in her poems. Riddell, whose upper middle class family entertained themselves at the horse racing, the sailing club, and at the bridge and dinner tables of Hawke's Bay society, had only the mores and manners of landed gentry as a social and political model for her writer's voice. As a pampered child in a household where a woman came to do the sewing and mending and a housemaid attended to the cleaning and cooking while the women in the family played bridge and entertained, there appeared to be no female victims until her father died and economic survival was threatened. The poet will re-visit these formative elements of her early life with some rigour later in her writing, when time and experience have transformed both her politics and her poetics; even among the scraps of work-in-progress found at the time of her death there is haunting evidence that she was still examining the metamorphosis in her social and political ideologies.

But Riddell, like Hyde, did acknowledge the pangs of love – and from around the age of 18 her poetry develops an increasing skill at negotiating a rope-walk between pragmatism and sentiment in the manner of Dorothy Parker – another poet-journalist of the 1920s – but without the often bitter and mordant wit. A degree of the latter will become a characteristic of Riddell's journalism, particularly in her books, theatre and television reviews later, but she may have taken her poetry too seriously to adopt an extreme worldly-wise cynicism in her youth. What does become apparent in the last poems from the New Zealand life is a growing confidence in elliptical and epigrammatic story-telling. 'Balance', published in the Sydney *Bulletin* two days after her arrival in Sydney and clearly written before she left New Zealand, is a short sharp meditation on disillusion.

We sped on moonlit roads towards the dawn,
And in the south there hung a starry cross:
I gave my heart away to you that night -
That was my loss.

We sped down mystic ways where water shone
By lilac hedges scented in the rain;

I found truth naked when the cross swung low -
That was my gain.⁹⁴

An increasing worldliness is apparent in Riddell's voice. The provocative juxtapositions of 'heart' and 'giving' with 'truth' and 'naked' linked to the binary oppositions of loss and gain is masterly. The relative insularity – and earnest politeness – of the *Kowhai Gold* school is dissipating just as the young poet's life is undergoing a personal metamorphosis. It remains a matter of speculation as to whether or not Riddell was familiar with Dorothy Parker's work, and I have been unable to establish evidence of this in what remains of her personal library. But the above poem has distinct echoes of the 1920s American writer's theatrical brand of irony – a feminist instinct modified, even muted, by what seems to have been a deep affection for men – and provides the reader with an opportunity to widen the critical framework for Riddell's work beyond the paradigms of Australia and New Zealand and situate it in a more international context. Consider the above work in relation to Parker's sardonic voice applied to a strikingly similar theme in her 1926 poem from *Enough Rope*, 'Post Graduate':

Hope it was that tutored me,
And love that taught me more;
And now I learn at Sorrow's knee
The self-same lore.⁹⁵

Both poets demonstrate a perverse instinct to destabilise any hint of sentimentality by switching suddenly from romantic hyperbole to rueful self-mockery, or a flash of anger. The latter is manifest in Riddell's 1926 poem, 'A Message to Ulysses'.

O wanderer, how many weary days
Must I look out, to where your purple sail
And golden prow sweep down the ocean-ways
And the pearl-hung horizons flush and pale?⁹⁶

What begins as a lament by an abandoned wife rapidly changes in tone and sentiment. The long-suffering Penelope, off-stage for so much of the *Odyssey*, declares she does not intend 'to hasten to unlatch the gate | Nor worship at your travel-bitten knee' and shows signs of a

⁹⁴ Bettie Riddell, 'Balance', *Bulletin*, 30 June 1927, p. 6.

⁹⁵ Dorothy Parker, 'Post Graduate', *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, ed. by Brendan Gill (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1973), p. 232.

⁹⁶ Bettie Riddell, 'A Message to Ulysses', *Bulletin*, 26 August 1926, p. 7.

rebellious jealousy festering as she weaves the never finished burial shroud of her father-in-law. 'Better you stayed and prayed the Circean sow | Than came to me too late, or came to me in pride'. The chaste icon of connubial fidelity for 20 years is running out of patience as well as effective new ploys for fending off a house full of unwanted suitors:

Be soon! I tire and there are other men
Worth my kindness. There are other lips.
Perchance you'll come to take your mistress when
She has forgot Ulysses and his ships ('A Message to Ulysses', 7).

The smooth reversal from lyrical hyperbole to a sharp scepticism in a compacted story echoes Parker's rendering of the same classical myth, 'Penelope', published in her 1926 collection, *Enough Rope*:

In the pathway of the sun,
In the footsteps of the breeze,
Where the world and sky are one,
He shall ride the silver seas,
He shall cut the glittering wave.
I shall sit at home, and rock;
Rise, to heed a neighbour's knock;
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
Bleach the linen for my bed.
They will call him brave.⁹⁷

This inclination to dramatize a situation by cutting through with a narrative voice that ignores or is unaware of, the cliché on which the verse rests, can be seen in Riddell's 1925 poem 'One of Many':

I'm one of many who have loved
Your eyes and lips and hair:

⁹⁷ Dorothy Parker, 'Penelope', *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, p. 222.

It's left for someone else to take
The treasure hidden there.⁹⁸

The same mood of romantic self-pity that suddenly reverses into a self-deprecating ruefulness is evident in Parker's 1926 verse, 'Prophetic Soul', where the thematic tropes and rhythms are strikingly similar.

Because your eyes are slant and slow,
Because your hair is sweet to touch,
My heart is high again; but oh
I doubt if this will get me much.⁹⁹

Riddell, like Parker, increasingly used what she was learning about life to develop a personal aesthetic that combined a summary opening, simplicity of diction and a rigour of form that mirrored the kind of technical craftsmanship and economy of storytelling that informs the best journalism.

At the end of her career, Riddell would say she had 'a writing life but not a literary life', but even at this early stage there is evidence that she was joining a long line of journalist-poets – from Coleridge to Whitman and Parker, as well as the New Zealanders, Allen Curnow and Robin Hyde – for whom the disciplines of workaday employment helped to hone and strengthen their control of poetic structure and content. The effects of this discipline are manifest in the next stage of Riddell's poetic development in a handful of poems written and published after her arrival in Australia. These transitional works – though small in number – herald another stage in Riddell's development as a writer setting out to resolve personal doubts and insecurities and to re-fashion her life according to a new set of expectations. She will work through these doubts and insecurities in what are best described as transitional and experimental poems, written during her first few years working in Sydney as a tabloid journalist.

⁹⁸ Bettie Riddell, 'One of Many', *Bulletin*, 26 March 1925, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Dorothy Parker, 'Prophetic Soul', *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, p. 102.