Ann-Marie Priest. *My Tongue Is My Own: A Life of Gwen Harwood*.
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When my year 11 literature class began studying Gwen Harwood, the teacher gave us a hand-out with factoids about the Australian poet. She was born in Brisbane in 1920 but lives in Tasmania; she has written under pseudonyms and is rather fond of hoaxes (yet we weren't told about her famous *Bulletin* acrostic, "Fuck all editors," which would have piqued our interest); and the themes of her poetry include engagement with the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (his thought summarised in a sentence), religion, music, and suburban domesticity. "I think," the teacher added hesitantly in those days of limited internet access, "she died recently." (It was 1997 and she had, in fact, died in 1995.) With this introduction, we began studying her poems. It was a thin framework on which to construct our literary criticism, although to be fair it is only now, decades later, that the first biography of Harwood has appeared. Ann-Marie Priest's *My Tongue Is My Own* is a rich narrative connecting and nuancing the factoids readers of Harwood have had to make do with until now. The restrictions on what could be said while her husband was still alive have lifted and a fuller story of her life is now possible.

Harwood was the beloved child genius of a middle-class family in Brisbane, growing up with a passion for music. As a young adult, she underwent an intense religious phase which culminated in six months in an Anglican convent. In 1945, she married Bill Harwood, "whose intelligence she found both daunting and dazzling" (73). In contrast to extroverted Harwood, Bill was a misanthropist who preferred his own company. His early academic interest in poetry turned to a focus on logic and artificial intelligence. They moved to Hobart where he took up an academic position and she would spend the rest of her life fighting against a sense of imprisonment, living in a place she did not love in a difficult marriage. Priest describes Harwood's poetry apprenticeship over the next twelve years, "trying on different voices, approaches, techniques and subjects." Moving past this,

> she began to give attention to what she would later call "the self that made my tongue my own." This was the self . . . whose contradictory and multiplicitous impulses, fed by music and literature and sex and friendship and her own fierce intellect, created all the characters and roles, all the loves and hates, all the interweaving voices of her poems. (4)

Harwood broke through to success as a poet despite the sexist responses to her work from the coterie of men who controlled the poetry world, despite the disadvantage of living in Tasmania away from the centres of literary activity, and despite the grind of domestic duties while parenting four children. Her male pseudonyms came out of rejections, as she began to suspect "editors were knocking her back because of their preconceived ideas about her as a housewife from Tasmania" (144). In a minor Ern-Malley-type hoax, she had "very pretty but quite meaningless" "oddments" published in *Meanjin* under the pseudonym Frances Geyer.

One of the challenges Priest faces is that Harwood's life was not particularly eventful. Yet Priest does a good job of conveying life's inevitable monotony and Harwood's recurring unresolved dilemma over whether to stay with Bill, without becoming monotonous. She traces Harwood's passions and preoccupations and their expressions in her poetry. Death was one, and we read how "[e]ven as a young child, she was troubled and distressed by death in all its guises" (19); this strand reaches a moving conclusion at the end of the book in Harwood's

response to her own imminent death. The enchantments of daily life were another—"[t]o Gwen, such heightened experiences were the truth of life, 'those moments when we wake / alive from the sleep of time'" (12). Sex, especially of the extramarital kind, was central to Harwood's life and poetry, and Priest handles it skilfully, giving context to poems which speak about particular trysts, and occasionally speculating in informed, appropriate ways without being prurient. In a farcical example of the intimacy of Australian literary circles, while having an affair with Harwood in 1977, the academic and poet Norman Talbot "secured a university grant to go to Tasmania to interview her for a planned paper on sex in her poetry"; the paper could be viewed as a project in the spirit of Harwood's hoaxes (291). The biography also offers much insight into Harwood's literary process and spends as long on the pain of the barren periods as the joy of the fruitful ones.

A second challenge Priest faces—a somewhat welcome one—is a surfeit of archival sources. Harwood began to keep a daily diary in 1977 and was "able to convey the tone of her day without a wasted word," offering the biographer both a precious record and an excess of detail (316). True to the title of Harwood's selected letters—*A Steady Storm of Correspondence*—Harwood was a prolific and accomplished letter writer. So many of her letters have survived, giving Priest honest and eloquent accounts of Harwood's life and windows into her relationships as significant friendships and affairs unfold over correspondence. Almost every major name in postwar Australian poetry makes an appearance in *My Tongue Is My Own*, the biography tracing a literary network with Harwood as its node.

Priest's unshowy dedication to research is evident throughout the book in its hard-won details and texture. In the acknowledgments, she thanks her husband John "who has traipsed with me through churches in Hobart, cemeteries in Mornington, fields at Morpeth and second-hand book shops in Uralla" (386). She was the recipient of the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship in 2017, marking another significant biography to have been supported by the bequest from Rowley, who was one of Australia's finest biographers.

Priest writes that it was Harwood's "deep conviction that her poems could stand alone: it was not necessary for her readers to understand anything about her personal life to understand the poems. All they needed to do was read attentively" (344). Yet *My Tongue Is My Own* enriches our understanding of Harwood's poetry, allowing her poems to take on new contexts and associations. This is not to say the biography exists only to illuminate Harwood's poetry; it also stands on its own, as all good biographies should, as a moving story of a significant life.

Nathan Hobby, University of Western Australia