

## FROM *THE oxford companion TO new zealand literature*

**Tuwhare**, Hone (1922–2008), is New Zealand's most distinguished Maori poet writing in English, and also a playwright and author of short fiction. He was born in Kaikohe into the Nga Puhi tribe (hapu Ngati Korokoro, Ngati Tautahi, Te Popoto, Uri-o-hau). When his mother died his father moved to Auckland, where Hone attended primary schools in Avondale, Mangere and Ponsonby. He spoke Maori until he was about 9, and his father, an accomplished orator and storyteller in Maori, encouraged his son's interest in the written and spoken word, especially in the rhythms and imagery of the Old Testament. During his time in an apprenticeship (1939–44) at the Otahuhu Railway Workshops Tuwhare met the poet [R.A.K. Mason](#), who encouraged him to write, and like Mason he became politically involved in trades-union organisations. For much of the 1950s he worked on hydroelectric projects on the Waikato, and until the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 was a member of the Communist Party.

In this year Tuwhare began writing seriously. His earliest poems appeared in Northland Magazine, the *New Zealand Poetry Yearbooks*, Te Ao Hou (though the Maori Affairs Department initially banned his work because of his Communist affiliations) and in the [NZ Listener](#). His first published collection, *No Ordinary Sun*, appeared in 1964 to widespread acclaim and was reprinted ten times during the next thirty years—one of the most widely read individual collections of poems in New Zealand history. From the late 1960s he began a long association with the Otago region when he was awarded the Burns Fellowship in 1969—and he held it again in 1974. In Dunedin he met the Maori painter, Ralph Hotere, who provided illustrations for his next four volumes—*Come Rain Hail* (1970), *Sap-Wood & Milk* (1972), *Something Nothing* (1974) and *Making a Fist of It: Poems and Short Stories* (1978).

In the 1970s Tuwhare became actively involved in Maori cultural and political initiatives. He was an organiser of the first Maori Writers and Artists Conference at Te Kaha in 1973 and participated in the Maori Land March of 1975. There were also invitations to Germany and to China, both of which he revisited in the 1980s. His earlier poems were kept in print (and new ones added) through *Selected Poems* (1980), *Year of the Dog: Poems New and Selected* (1982) and *Mihi: Collected Poems* (1987). In 1983 he worked on the Edward Shortland papers as Hocken Library Fellow, and this revitalised and extended his interest in Maori history and language. His full-length play, *In the Wilderness Without a Hat* (perf. 1985), is a highly original, deeply personal, marae-based tribal drama, begun in the wake of his participation in the Land March and published in *He Reo Hou: 5 Plays by Maori Playwrights* (1991). *Short Back and Sideways: Poems Prose* (1992) was new work prepared during his tenure of the University of Auckland's Literary Fellowship in 1991. A second collection with new poems, *Deep River Talk* (1993) was followed by *Shape-Shifter* (1997), consisting of poems and stories.

When Tuwhare's poems first began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s they were recognised as a new departure in New Zealand poetry, cutting across the debates and divisions between the 1930s and post-war generations. Much of their originality came from the Maori perspective. This was not simply a question of the subject matter of some poems ('Lament', a reworking of an older waiata tangi, 'Tangi' and 'Mauri'), but of their direct lyrical response to landscape and seascape, their vivid evocation of Maori myths and images ('A burnt offering to your greenstone eyes, Tangaroa'), and their capacity for angry protest at the dispossession of Maori land and culture ('The mana of my house has fled, / the marae is but a paddock of thistle'). The poems were also marked by their tonal variety, the naturalness with which they could move between formal and informal registers,

between humour and pathos, intimacy and controlled anger (as in the anti-nuclear theme of the title-poem of the first volume, 'No Ordinary Sun') and, especially, in their assumption of easy vernacular familiarity with New Zealand readers.

In his next three volumes (of the earlier 1970s) Tuwhare added to this repertoire a distinctive longer form of 'conversation' poem, often deploying narrative elements but containing the same variations of tone, feeling and register: playful humour, edged satire and moments of sustained elegiac intensity. Some of these poems were elegies (like those for his mentor Mason, and for James K. Baxter)[Author]; others were intimate 'conversation poems', like 'Country Visit' (a visit to his sister's family), 'Sandra' (a birthday poem) and 'A korero on the beach with Phyllis'); yet others ('occasioned by the newness and press of contrasts') were sparked off by places visited overseas: including Western Samoa ('Village on Savaii') and China ('Kwantung Guest House: Canton'). In one of his best known poems, 'To a Maori figure cast in bronze outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland', the same elements were deployed in a dramatic monologue, remarkably rich in its edged allusions to the political, economic and class contexts of race relations in New Zealand, and in its imaginative play with formal and colloquial English and Maori idioms, and with the cultural meanings carried by particularities of location in urban and suburban Auckland. The assumption of a familiar context shared unselfconsciously with his New Zealand readership is crucial to the effect of this poem (as in all Tuwhare's mature work); because of the density of local allusion and idiom almost every line would require annotation for overseas readers.

Tuwhare's later poetry continued to expand the range and subtlety of his distinctive style. His interest in Maori self-determination was intensified by participation in the Land March, which produced a series of celebratory poems in *Making a Fist of It* (1978), alongside that volume's angry political title-poem, on *South African atrocities at Soweto and elsewhere*. Yet Tuwhare's work resists identification in terms of any separatist notion of 'Maoriness'. Increasingly, especially at the level of language, his poetry represents (and often playfully invents) moments and scenes of (multi)cultural exchange and interaction, suggesting a local world of shifting, multiple identities and identifications. His affiliations to the language and aspirations of ordinary working-class New Zealanders have remained strong, however, and his major, recurrent concerns—emergent through the extraordinary cultural diversity of the poems' occasions, the richness of their sense of location, and their highly inventive use of New Zealand demotic idioms—have remained those of the age-old lyric tradition: love, friendship, the life of the feelings, the experience of loss and death.

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