



# Elizabeth Harrower

edited by

ELIZABETH McMAHON  
AND BRIGITTA OLUBAS

SYDNEY STUDIES IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Elizabeth Harrower

## SYDNEY STUDIES IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

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# Elizabeth Harrower

## Critical Essays

Edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas



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Cover image: Elizabeth Harrower photographed returning to Australia in 1959 on board the *Southern Cross*. Courtesy of Elizabeth Harrower.

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

## Rediscovering Again: Reading Elizabeth Harrower Across Time

2014 saw the long-awaited first publication of Elizabeth Harrower's final novel, *In Certain Circles*, written nearly four decades earlier and withdrawn by the author shortly before its scheduled publication by Macmillan in 1971.<sup>1</sup> This belated publication itself enacted a form of literary revival, not least in bearing the impress of international endorsement in the form of a "Rediscovering Harrower" essay by James Wood in the *New Yorker*.<sup>2</sup> Just ahead of this publication, Harrower said in an interview with Susan Wyndham that part of the reason she withdrew the novel from publication might have had to do with the death of her mother, which had left her "frozen" with grief; she also claimed to have forgotten the novel, and to be no longer interested in it, or in her writing life, or indeed in writing at all.<sup>3</sup> Two years earlier, she had spoken about the recollected novel with some finality and an intimation that it was somehow futural, yet to be (or not be) authored: "There are a lot of dead novels out in the world that don't need to be written";<sup>4</sup> a point which plays suggestively alongside her claims not to remember the novel: "I looked up the blurb and it said it is 'an intense psychological drama,' and I said, 'That sounds like me'". She was more explicit, if also casually ironic, in the account she gave of changing her mind in the face of repeated requests from Michael Heyward, the publisher at Text, to see the manuscript, returning again to the figure of mortality as the natural frame for a writing life: "And I'd say, 'No Michael,' just automatically, and finally I thought, well, I'll be dead soon and he'll be able to look at it then, so if it would please him, yes, have a look, Michael". Harrower's chatty, canny shifts in tense here work to create a temporal space – an anticipated, inevitable future and a conditional readership – for that (long-lost), last novel, while at the same time her thoughtful locution invites readers to reconsider the question of a writing career as a larger arc of moving in and out of the public eye.

The publication of her short story "Alice" in the *New Yorker* in early 2015 came with an attached audio file of Harrower reading the story, a performance of writerly presentness

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1 Elizabeth Harrower, *In Certain Circles* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2014).

2 James Wood, "No Time for Lies: Rediscovering Elizabeth Harrower", *New Yorker*, 20 October 2014. <http://bit.ly/1Cqu4W0>.

3 Quoted in Susan Wyndham, "Elizabeth Harrower Doesn't Want Spoilers to Her Own Novel", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 2014. <http://bit.ly/2mJmnJn>.

4 Quoted in Helen Trinca, "Novelist Elizabeth Harrower Has Lived Dangerously but Kept Her Words to Herself", *Australian*, 27 October 2012. <http://bit.ly/2nXG9IE>.

and liveness – even aliveness – that resonated with those intimations of loss and mortality from the previous year. The recording of Harrower’s voice brought the fineness of her prose sharply into the present. It also inflected and complicated the apparent diffidence of her interview commentary and the tenacity of her withdrawal from the writing life through the signing of her work with death and forgetting; it announced her as a writer of the present and at the same time a voice from the past. Later in 2015, Text published *A Few Days in the Country*, a collection that includes Harrower’s first but hitherto unpublished story “The Fun of the Fair” alongside stories previously published in various Australian magazines and anthologies, and “Alice”, published in the *New Yorker*, as noted above. In the years just before this, Text had republished Harrower’s four earlier novels: *Down in the City* (1957; 2013), *The Catherine Wheel* (1960; 2014), *The Long Prospect* (1958; 2012), and *The Watch Tower* (1966; 2012). These late and fortunate reappearances of Harrower’s work inflect the longevity of her writing career; they invite her readers to read *with* her work *across* time, to consider questions of duration in relation to the practices and purposes of writing, and to attend to the shifting contexts of her work in real time.

The years in between the two main periods of Harrower’s publishing career – from the mid-1960s to her 2014 return to literary prominence – provide a further set of coordinates for her readers, along with the conundrum of what we are to make of her four decades of apparent literary silence. The often-quoted inscription from her great friend Patrick White – “To Elizabeth, luncher and diner extraordinaire. Sad you don’t also WRITE”<sup>5</sup> – might intimate, provocatively, a criticism of her deployment of time through these years; however, this should not be taken at face value. It might rather be seen in the context of the extraordinary range of literary friendships that she maintained across her adult life: with White, famously, but also with Christina Stead, Kylie Tennant, Judah Waten, David Malouf, Shirley Hazzard, Vivian Smith, Antigone Kefala and many others, along with a large number of artists, arts writers, journalists and significant figures from the left of Australian politics. While Harrower’s circles are more properly the focus of a biography, their extent and depth should be noted here, as they help deepen and inform any understanding of her profile and significance for contemporary readers. The letters she wrote to Shirley Hazzard across those four decades provide an extraordinary record of these networks of friendship,<sup>6</sup> and of the literary and political life of the period. The correspondence between the two writers merits mention here for the ways it shows their negotiation of national and international letters, art and politics. Indeed, Harrower’s letters provide a wealth of sharp and informed insight into the upheavals of the artistic and political worlds in the wake of the 1972 election of the Whitlam Labor government, and the enormous changes wrought by this across the nation. Her exhilaration speaks to the keenness of her understanding of the shared public spaces where politics are lived, which sit in apparent contradistinction to the intense and tortured interior spaces of her novels, but which are nonetheless, as she intimates here, always of a piece with them:

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5 Quoted in Wood, “No Time for Lies”. White’s comment was of course intended to be provocative, and to be viewed within the context of a close and supportive friendship.

6 Harrower’s letters to Hazzard are in Shirley Hazzard’s papers, currently held by Hazzard’s executors, to which Brigitta Olubas has been given full access; Hazzard’s letters to Harrower are held with Harrower’s papers at the National Library of Australia, currently under embargo.

I must tell you that I . . . and half the population are THRILLED about the change of government. At last. And they are speaking so rationally, simply, unaggressively, unoratorically – it’s heaven. It can’t last perhaps, but it has started very, very well. From not being able to read an Australian newspaper, I am reading four a day. You become so used to living in a condition of public shame, vicarious shame, that you forget what – no, have never known what – it might be like to agree with those who speak for us. I found myself in a little local bus – all strangers, all Labor voters . . . all so varied, we were bosom friends by the end of the journey . . . It had to happen, but it seemed too miraculous. And that’s how it continues.<sup>7</sup>

Later letters from Harrower, often with clippings from the Australian press, record the devastation of the left after the dismissal of the Whitlam government on 11 November 1975, but also provide wider commentary – always informed and engaged – on international politics, and on local and international arts. Harrower’s thoughts and observations are everywhere evident in the essays that Hazzard went on to publish about Australia, often as a direct, though unacknowledged, source.<sup>8</sup> As well as informing our sense of the depth and density of Harrower’s place in the Australian scene through this period, and the sharpness of her insights, this correspondence speaks to her complex position as a writer working both within and outside Australia, and in international literary contexts. Harrower takes up this point in one of her earliest letters to Hazzard, where she muses on the view, expressed by an acquaintance about Hazzard but clearly applying just as aptly to Harrower herself, in a comment which illustrates her acuity as a reader. It provides a further reminder to her readers of how her fiction speaks of and to the larger world through the domestic and the intimate:

Someone was arguing the other night to the effect that Australian writers had to live abroad if they were to write anything of any consequence. Your name was then brought in to support this idea . . . If people write about public events, I suppose this is true, but if they write about people, the only handicap here or anywhere else is a lack that no change of continent would be likely to alter. Since your work seems to me at all times extremely private, I was taken aback to hear this, and could only feel that you had been misunderstood by my acquaintance.<sup>9</sup>

*Elizabeth Harrower: Critical Essays* takes up the invitation to read and re-read Harrower’s fiction offered by her new books and the republication of her earlier work. The collection opens with eloquent tributes by two acclaimed contemporary novelists, Michelle de Kretser and Fiona McFarlane. Their reflections, as writers of fiction working and publishing, like Harrower, in Australia and internationally, bring the complex and inflected labour of reading firmly into view and remind us of how important it is for the work of a great and still-living author to be available to readers. De Kretser traces the delicate imbalances of *The Watch Tower*’s presentation of the inner and outer worlds of her characters, their psychology and the material objects with which they surround themselves through the “flickering glamour” and “dangerous magic” of the commodity form. She

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7 Elizabeth Harrower to Shirley Hazzard, 5 December 1972.

8 See in particular Hazzard’s “Letter from Australia”, *New Yorker*, 3 January 1977.

9 Harrower to Hazzard, 16 November 1966.

uses this to observe that Harrower is writing of her contemporary world, the 1960s, even though her plot is set two decades earlier, and she opens up the questions of timeliness and anachrony that resonate across Harrower's publishing career. McFarlane's point of departure is the astonishing quality of Harrower's evocation of place, particularly Sydney, which she reads through the lens of her own departures from and returns to the city. She notes the "very tangled and very tender" knowledge of place invoked in the reader and wonders, resonantly, "if this knowledge gives Harrower a special access to *me* as a reader". Her comment, and the insightful connections de Kretser draws between Harrower and her location in an earlier period, provide an appropriately thoughtful starting point for the rest of this collection.

The shifting sense of writerly time and place plays out across all the essays, with several critics taking up quite directly the extended time frame demanded by the project of reading Harrower; the differing ways her work has come back into focus across the last several decades. Ivor Indyk notes the different effects that the dire expressivity of her prose has had on him over time; its intensity leading him in recent re-readings to "step back from the closeness with which she observes the emotional restlessness of her characters", and to examine larger questions such as morality, godlessness and the processes of human thought. Elizabeth Webby draws on the longevity of her experience of reading and teaching Harrower to reflect on the remarkable record these novels provide of specific social and historical periods, of the topographical and experiential spaces of postwar Sydney and their changing vistas. Webby is particularly interested in the ways that female characters are placed in these spaces, with the interest in the changing experiences of women a particularly salient feature of the mid-century in and of which Harrower was writing.

Nicholas Birns on the other hand traces the centrality of masculine power in Harrower's novels through the historical lens provided by feminist politics. Here is another instance of the ways Harrower's work provides diverse and historically rich perspectives, ways which are also always complicated by the insights and priorities of later, or different, points of departure; her fiction takes us into recognisable historical moments while at the same time recalling to us the contingency of those moments and sites. Robert Dixon offers a broad perspective on Harrower's work and the range of contexts within which it has been produced and consumed, but turns attention to the ways that these novels scope the international worlds across which they move in terms of "metageography", that is, using representations of physical space to unsettle and complicate understandings of national and communal forms and entities. Dixon approaches Harrower's novels via the rubrics of Neal Alexander and James Moran's argument that modernist novels "shuttle restlessly between multiple and overlapping spatial frames: local, regional, national, and international", through the operations of irony, and in the process outlines the formal mechanisms by means of which this work opens itself and its readers out to the world.

There are therefore larger arguments to be made about the working of time and space in Harrower's fiction, and these are most resonant when approached through a consideration of the whole of her work. The republication of Harrower's older novels alongside a new novel and stories provides us with an oeuvre which constructs a dynamic, multidimensional map of the world and of experience; a vision of being in the world that is itself embedded within the structures of her fiction. The opening lines of the first story Harrower ever wrote, "The Fun of the Fair", wire a single experience of an unloved child into the vastness of the earth's weather systems and then into cosmic blackness.

This centrifugal expansion operates to highlight both the insignificance and the grave importance of one young girl within the magnitude of space and time. Across the oeuvre, narrative dimensions and processes constantly collide, misalign, obscure and illuminate each other. The narratives dilate, contract and traverse domains from the individual and everyday domestic experience to societal formations, world history and the cosmos. Importantly, the dimensions and energies of this global and cosmic, this *natural* world, are not ahistorical constructions in Harrower's fiction. Rather, the elements of fictional construction – character, plot, figuration – are animated by the particular energies of the postwar, Cold War mid-century. The dark night experienced by the young girl in “The Fun of the Fair”, for instance, is produced by both an electrical storm and an electrical blackout; that is, electricity appears as both meteorological event and modern technology.

The myriad forms of connection across space, time and experience in Harrower's narratives challenge understandings that they can be treated separately in fiction and, indeed, in human history. Megan Nash's reading of *The Watch Tower* takes up the explicit association made between that novel's tyrant, Felix Shaw and the historical figure of Adolf Hitler, arguing that this association does not deny the magnitude of difference in terms of effect between the two, but rather that it refutes a mutual exclusivity of domestic and political tyranny. Elizabeth McMahon notes the charged coming together of forces in the epiphanic moments that recur throughout Harrower's fiction, in which characters connect across conventional boundaries designed to separate them. In these moments, McMahon argues, there is often a shift to a more poetic register, which draws the reader into these intense moments of contact. For instance, in the final scene of the short story “Alice”, a young bride visits the elderly Alice in an acknowledgement of friendship: “Even after the girl left, in clouds and drifts of white, nothing seemed substantial. A buoyancy, an airiness, something quite amazing surrounded Alice. She had no idea what it was called”.<sup>10</sup> The final sentence here returns both Alice and the reader to the everyday world of grounded reason from the poetic interlude of an “airy” lightness of being.

The novels trace the effects of these moments as they play out over time – and in forms quite different from that of the fleeting epiphany. In *Down in the City*, the fairytale awakening of Esther by the gaze and touch of Stan at their first meeting proves to be the prelude to a narrative of her prolonged debasement. In *The Long Prospect*, the immediate, profound recognition between twelve-year-old Emily and the adult Max, which occurs in the half-shadows of Emily's cinematic fantasies, is ultimately shut down and Emily is transplanted into the tedium of suburban realism. These epiphanies are part of a larger experiential discrepancy traced in Harrower's work between interior and exterior realities, between domains of fantasy – including sanctioned entertainments such as the cinema and fairytale – and quotidian routine. The points of these intersections are often perilous, as we see played out repeatedly in the “romance” thread of her narratives, and the confusion regarding their translation into daily life and in its fictional forms. Julian Murphet's reading of *The Catherine Wheel* in terms of “generic interference” historicises this point to argue that the novel stages a “qualitative leap out of the lumbering ethical narratological circuits of 1950s fiction” into the future of new media and new ways of being.

The figurative constructions of Harrower's fiction also perform complex and dynamic interconnections that serve to mark, *inter alia*, her position at the crossroads between

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10 Elizabeth Harrower, *A Few Days in the Country and Other Stories* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016), 30–1. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

modern and postmodern relationships to the world and experience.<sup>11</sup> In these texts, modern people and modern energies are both produced by and part of the postwar industrial world.

New technologies actively enter into the minds and bodies of characters, and the spaces they inhabit and traverse. Harrower can be read in the naturalist tradition of a steely-eyed, forensic, realist dissector of human experience. But her characters are nonetheless almost cyborgian in their interconnection with the atmosphere around them, as Kate Livett argues; with contemporary technology, with telecommunications, and with cinema and postwar media. The telephone is a prosthetic “extension” of Clem’s body in *The Catherine Wheel*; and, again in *In Certain Circles*, when Zoe receives the phone call telling her that Anna is in fact alive, she is described as being “only astonishment and relief listening to sounds through a black machine”; and in Christian’s repeated invocation of “Stella, Stella” in *The Catherine Wheel*, character and text are merged with the cinema and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as Murphet argues.

Three essays address the significance of the interconnectivity of electricity and media, linking the specificity of Harrower’s mid-century locations to wider, elemental dimensions. Brigid Rooney investigates the centrality of electricity in *The Watch Tower* and *The Long Prospect* to show “how modern circuitries of electrical power reconfigure the relationship between urban and suburban spaces”. Moreover, Rooney claims, electricity is an “analogy for the emotional truth” in Harrower’s fiction. However, as she argues, connectivity and emotional truth do not necessarily create expansion, potential or enlightenment. On the contrary, the grids of connection create matrices that hold the female protagonists captive. “Shocks” of human connection and insight do not necessarily produce the momentum needed to reach a space outside the grid. Brigitta Olubas argues that alcoholic addiction is tied to electricity as a mode of self-articulation, “a form of connectivity, a flow, like the telephone; declarative but distracting, misleading, unreliable”, and ultimately necessary for the illuminations of art and thought to be generated. Through the mechanics of fire, which is linked to both alcohol and electricity, the novel strains towards the articulation of mythic dimensions of quotidian existence. Murphet reads Christian Roland as a character primarily from cinema, even a radio signal. He is part of “a speculative cultural future woven of electronics, mass mediation, and an utterly transformed public sphere”. Accordingly, Murphet argues, he is “less a literary character than a loosely assembled media construction projected into Clem’s two rooms by the power of electrical circuitry”, a point which gestures again to the contrasts of scale and reach that characterise Harrower’s larger view. Harrower’s profoundly modern understanding of the world does not, then, negate or underestimate primitive and elemental forces. Her characters are propelled by the imperatives of myth and, as Indyk notes, by primitive emotions. In her discussion of the will to power in Harrower’s fiction,

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11 See Ihab Hassan’s classic list of the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987) in which metaphor is the defining mode of relation in modernist thought whereas metonymy is the defining relationality of the postmodern (48, 91). In Harrower’s fiction, for instance, the metaphoric connection between human experience and electricity undergirds *The Long Prospect* and *The Watch Tower*. However, this connection is also metonymic in that human experience and electricity are not only terms of comparison but each is also a part of the other. Further, these metaphorical and metonymic relations are constantly shifting in terms of scale, as seen in the tropological chain of electrics, alcohol and thought in *The Catherine Wheel*.

Kate Livett charts how human drives are connected to “the meteorological fluctuations within and without the human person” in a relationship of profound mutual elementality. Here, too, we find the complicating shifts between metaphor and metonymy with the weather as a symbol of the contest of human wills as well as being co-material with the human in a relationship of mutual interactivity.

In this interplay of forms, genres and figures, both readers and characters are required to shift from the literary contract set up by the conventions of one system of meaning to those of another – and then another. In this maze of systems and their attendant conventions, the heroines of Harrower’s fictions find that the truths of one system, one narrative, one domain of experience, are not transferable to others. In this intensely dynamic literary imaginary, characters become stuck in the interstices of form. Some seize opportunities to escape or, at the very least, to participate in a script of their own choosing. Most often, this proves to be destructive but it does allow the exercise of will. Occasionally, also, her protagonists experience moments of clarity, but not coherence. The publication of *In Certain Circles* in 2014 provides a great revelation as to how Harrower envisages these moments of insight might be translated into the world. It is a revelation full of time, including the time of our waiting.

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