James Watson review of Helen Trinca, *Looking for Elizabeth: The Life of Elizabeth Harrower*; and Susan Wyndham, *Elizabeth Harrower: The Woman in the Watch Tower*

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Although she regularly professed that she did not want a biography written about her, the novelist Elizabeth Harrower would be pleased to know she is now the subject of two. As Helen Trinca's *Looking for Elizabeth: The Life of Elizabeth Harrower* (2025) and Susan Wydham's *Elizabeth Harrower: The Woman in the Watch Tower* (2025) make clear, Harrower had a complex relationship to fame, friends and success, spending large parts of her life cultivating companionship and desiring attention, only to spurn her admirers and purposefully sabotage her public and private lives. Intelligent, stylish and neurotic, Harrower's life was sad enough to justify two biographies, if not a few more. Using almost identical archives (published writing, personal letters and diaries, and interviews with Harrower and her friends), Trinca and Wyndham have produced two works that mirror each other in certain aspects but diverge significantly in others. Read together, these two works not only provide insight into Harrower, but into the biographical practice itself.

Harrower was born at Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1928 to the rotten marriage of railway worker Frank Harrower and nurse Margaret 'Daisy' Hughes. By the time she was 10, her parents had divorced and abandoned her, Frank moving to the countryside and Margaret to Sydney. Elizabeth lived temporarily with her grandmother, Helen Hughes, a hard-nosed landlord who exposed young Betty to the adult world of alcohol, money and sex. As a teenager during World War II, Harrower relocated to North Sydney to live with her mother and her new husband, Richard Kempley, an abusive conman who ran black market liquor sales and real estate scams. When he was not in gaol, he ran the Kempley household as a 'tin god' (Wyndham, p. 160), hurling profanity and violence at his family, then showering them with clothes, jewellery and holidays in apology. Harrower gained her independence on a family holiday to the United Kingdom in the 1950s, during which she decided to stay in London and live with her cousin, the writer Margaret Dick, and pursue her childhood love of reading and writing. In a flurry, she wrote and published *Down in the City* (1957), *The Long Prospect* (1958) and *The Catherine Wheel* (1960)—all of them featuring female protagonists in toxic relationships with men—to positive reviews in England, but only limited recognition in Australia. Harrower and Dick relocated to Sydney in 1959, where they lived together for decades, became friends with important literary and political figures (including Patrick White, Kylie Tennant,

Shirley Hazzard, Christina Stead, Gough Whitlam and H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs), and found literary recognition. In 1966, Harrower published *The Watch Tower*—recognised then, and now, as a masterpiece of postwar Australian literature.

And then, with the Australian literary scene at her fingertips, she stopped publishing. Harrower submitted a novel, *In Certain Circles*, to her publisher in 1971, but, believing it to be inferior to her previous work, and being too much consumed by grief following her mother's death, the trauma of her stepfather's death, and the labour of nursing Shirley Hazzard's manic-depressive mother, she withdrew the manuscript from consideration, deciding to lock it up among her papers at the National Library of Australia. She told friends and reporters that she was still writing, and a few short stories did appear in journals, but she otherwise spent the rest of her life in a long, drawn-out crisis of self-doubt, sitting at the typewriter each day to write reams of letters to friends, but never the next novel. When her books were rediscovered in the 2010s by Text Publishing, *In Certain Circles* (2014), as well as a collection of short stories, *A Few Days in the Country and Other Stories* (2015), were finally published to warm reviews and awards. Amid her late fame, Harrower wondered, as did many of her readers, why she had ever stopped writing. She died in a Drummoyne nursing home in 2020 at the age of 92.

Harrower's abrupt ending to her writing career is one of the central questions in Trinca's and Wyndham's respective biographies. The latter asks: 'How did this good-humoured woman write such disturbing novels? And why did she stop?' However, Wyndham goes on to suggest that these are the 'wrong questions' to be asking (p. 4). She asserts, quite rightly, that Harrower had no obligation to continue writing if she had nothing to say: 'If she really had something urgent to share with the world she would have put her work before all else. But the urgency had left her' (p. 244). For Wyndham, Harrower was a messenger delivering morality tales about the evil men can work upon women, and once she had delivered her message, she withdrew from public life.

Trinca, to put it lightly, sees Harrower differently. Her Harrower is not 'good-humoured'; rather, she is a deeply anxious, repressed, lonely and xenophobic woman, who struggled with inner demons throughout her life. Harrower's premature resignation was not a 'decision' to stop, but rather the manifestation of the poor mental health that plagued all aspects of her life. Her novels, in addition to being moral messages, were also forms of intense self-criticism, in which she identified as much with her male torturers as with her female victims. After spending too many years looking directly at the sun, Trinca suggests, Harrower had to look away and retreat to the shadows.

How have Trinca and Wyndham come to such different conclusions about the same subject, using the same archives? There are three reasons. The first is their different interpretations of Harrower's sexuality and romantic life. Harrower had no known physical lovers; her only life partner was her cousin Dick, with whom she lived

for most of her adult life. She nonetheless pined for connection, and she filled her romantic needs with an array of 'emotional affairs' with men and women, including Kylie Tennant and H. C. Coombs (the latter even proposed to Harrower later in life). Wyndam interprets Harrower's singledom as the product of her parents' abusive marriage. Believing all male–female sexual partnerships to be potentially abusive, she instead chose a life of independence.

Trinca, on the other hand, understands Harrower as a repressed lesbian. For evidence, she unearths a trove of letters and diary entries that profess an intense (if not explicitly sexual) longing for various women in her life, including her cousin. Wyndham, by contrast, does not quote these letters, and she dismisses contemporary rumours that Harrower was gay and in a relationship with Dick. Given the existence of the letters, this seems to be a mistake—not because they confirm a relationship with Dick, but because they suggest that Harrower had an uncomfortable relationship with her sexuality, her body and her friends. This uncomfortableness reveals much about her characters' revulsion to sex, a characteristic that Patrick White noticed in *The Watch Tower*.

The second reason for Trinca's and Wyndam's contrasting conclusions is their interpretation of Harrower's politics, especially her views on migrants and Indigenous Australians. Harrower was a Labor supporter for most of her life, but she never had strong political convictions. Instead, she admired the aesthetics of politics, especially Whitlam's rhetoric about equality, his height, and his fluency in Ancient Greek and Latin. Wyndham argues that Harrower was not a 'joiner', and that she simply cheered Labor politics from the sidelines, but Trinca sees something darker. In the 1980s, influenced by Geoffrey Blainey's *All for Australia* (1984), Harrower started to adopt strong prejudices against migrants and Indigenous Australians that would continue to the end of her life. As she wrote to one friend in the 1990s, she was 'quite fed-up' seeing 'Greeks and Macedonians and Yugoslavs and Croats brawling away and looking ferocious in the streets of Sydney and Melbourne' (Trinca, p. 200). She retreated into her Scottish heritage and was 'irritated' by 'fore-lock tugging to "ethnic" people', and the 'special and extended treatment' for Indigenous Australians 'about something that happened in 1788' (Trinca, p. 216). Wyndham smooths over these imperfections in Harrower and uses euphemisms to avoid the subject. By doing so, she removes the anger and jealousy that plagued so much of Harrower's life, creating a version of Harrower that feels less fully formed.

The third reason is their assessment of Harrower's mental health. Harrower battled with loneliness and depression for much of her life, but where Wyndham minimises these experiences, Trinca sees them as integral to Harrower's life and art. Trinca's quoting of Harrower's late-life emails to friends, pleading with them to alleviate her loneliness after Margaret Dick's death, is heartbreaking: 'Dear David trouble is I am lonely. And I am miserable. I had Margaret and I am lonely. I can't get used to it. Help if you can. Love. Elizabeth' (p. 271). In Trica's book, Harrower is a very

vulnerable—and very human—woman who feels the weight of death's approach. She wants to go back to redo her life, but knows that time's arrow only has one direction. Where Wydham's Harrower is confident until the end, Trinca's is scared and regretful.

I admired Wyndham's prose, structure and research, but Trinca's book is the stronger of the two. Trinca's Harrower is a real human who cries, drinks and bleeds. She lives in a permanent state of calamity, bashes out novels in a mania, and only stops when she cannot face another battle with herself. In *Looking for Elizabeth*, I found a deeply human figure whose life story often forced me to tears; in *The Woman in the Watch Tower*, I found an individual who I only sometimes recognised as human.

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