

# Performing Tuwhare — [Hone Tuwhare: A Biography](#)

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[Hone Tuwhare: A Biography](#)

[Janet Hunt](#)[Auckland](#): [Godwit](#), 1998.

I hate being stuck up here, glaciated, hard all over  
and with my guts removed: my old lady is not going  
to like it ...

For [Hone Tuwhare](#)'s biographer, [Janet Hunt](#), these words—the opening words of his well-known poem '[To a Maori figure cast in bronze outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland](#)' (1972)—must have reverberated as a powerful warning, reminding her in no uncertain terms that like his 'Maori figure', [Hone](#) did not wish to be put on a pedestal as a larger-than-life monument, but sought a representation that allowed him to keep his 'guts', that re-presented his very physical and 'real' presence.

A guideline though they might have offered her, these warning words also made her task rather difficult, for [Tuwhare](#)'s living and breathing 'presence' could not easily be re-presented. According to [Hunt](#), [Tuwhare](#), 'like Maui, ... inhabits a shifting and multiple identity' (7) that forever escapes the focusing lens of the biographer:

Every time I meet someone who has known Tuwhare, I realise that each of his many friends has a version of him that is uniquely their own. And every time I meet or speak with him, I realise again the impossibility of translating this real, flesh-and-blood, larger-than-life human personality, in its rich diversity, contrariness and depth, into ciphers on a page. (8)

Given the difficulty of the task, [Hunt](#) has done a superb job. Instead of producing a conventional celebratory biography, she has written—or assembled—what she aptly calls an 'auto/biography'. Hone Tuwhare is held together by [Hunt](#)'s biographical framework, but fleshed out by the voice of the poet in countless poems, interviews, letters and notes.

Like many Maori of his generation, [Tuwhare](#) grew up the hard way, surrounded by poverty and a Pakeha ideology of assimilation that forced Maori to renounce their own cultural identity. Motherless from the age of five, he lived with his father in ever-changing circumstances as the country slid into a depression. Schooling was irregular, but thanks to a keen interest in reading [Tuwhare](#) graduated from primary school as top of the class in English. However, as there was no money for further education, [Tuwhare](#) had to leave school and learn a trade, instead. He became a boilermaker—a profession that kept him in bread and butter for most of his life.

Though in his early years [Tuwhare](#) was surrounded by te reo Maori, he was soon discouraged from speaking the language, because his father Ben—like so many others at the time—‘believed that English was the language of the future for his son’ (28).

[Tuwhare](#)’s poetic beginnings similarly display an unquestioning acceptance of an assumed European superiority. In one of the most memorable anecdotes in the book, [Tuwhare](#) relates how the poet [R.A.K. Mason](#), a fellow member of the Communist Party, inspired him to try a few verses himself:

Having freed himself from these constraints, [Tuwhare](#) set out to find and refine his own poetic voice. [Hunt](#) guides the reader through the major events, both real-life and literary, in the remarkable journey of this emerging Maori poet. From [Hunt](#), the biographer, we learn about his trips overseas as a boilermaker, the break-up of his marriage, his son’s schizophrenia, and finally, his countless trips overseas as a poet. And from [Hunt](#), the scholar, we also learn about [Tuwhare](#)’s poetry and are given a critical assessment of individual collections. Each of [Tuwhare](#)’s ten collections is given due attention, from his first collection, [No Ordinary Sun](#) (1964),—reprinted a sensational eleven times—to his most recent one, [Shape-Shifter](#) (1997),—winner of the 1998 Montana Award for poetry. Thanks to both this attention to his publications and a number of in-depth, thematically grouped discussions of individual poems, Hone Tuwhare offers not just the usual biographical context for [Tuwhare](#)’s work, but also serves as a splendid introduction to the poetry itself.

The book is beautifully produced (following [Hunt](#)’s own design). The choice of colours — black, white and a few touches of red — subtly underlines [Tuwhare](#)’s Maori identity. The wide margins left by the main text are utilised in two ways: firstly for the aforementioned thematic discussions of individual poems and secondly for the ‘auto’-part of this ‘auto/biography’: numerous reproductions of photos, poems, first drafts, notes and other important documents from [Tuwhare](#)’s life.

As a reader, I initially found these margins and their diversions from the 'main' narrative rather frustrating, because they kept interrupting the flow of my reading. However, I have since come to appreciate these interruptions as yet another of [Hunt](#)'s strategies to bring [Hone](#)'s own voice to the fore, and thereby recreate for the reader an *experience* of his life and personality. This sense that [Hone](#)'s life is being offered to us to experience is even more striking, when we take into consideration that the very *process* (of interrupting the main narrative) mimetically reproduces [Hunt](#)'s own experience of the poet, such as she described it in an interview with [Iain Sharp](#):

He would go off on a tangent and I would try to steer him back to the original question ... But when I listened to the tapes later I found he was often heading in a more interesting direction anyway. So I decided it was best just to let him talk, putting in occasional comments of my own to keep the flow going. ([Sunday Star-Times](#) 22 Nov. 1999, p. D2)

How much easier it would have been for [Hunt](#) to gloss over all those ramblings and diversions and create a coherent, linear narrative celebrating the life of one of Aotearoa/New Zealand's favourite poets; how much easier in other words, to 'cast him in bronze' and put him up on a pedestal for us all to look at. Yet [Hunt](#) decided to pay tribute not only to [Tuwhare](#)'s life and poetry, but also to his personality. The result is an auto/biography in which [Tuwhare](#) is indeed allowed to keep his 'guts'. The book, as [Hunt](#) rightly points out, 'is thus a platform for another [Tuwhare](#) performance', allowing [Hone](#) what his 'Maori figure cast in bronze' was refused, namely to step down from the pedestal that elevates (and thus separates) him from what he most longs to be part of—life itself:

If only I could move from this bloody pedestal I'd  
show the long-hairs how to knock out a tune on the  
souped-up guitar, my *mere* quivering, my *taiaha* held  
at the high port. And I'd fix the ripe *kotiros* too  
with their mini-*piupiu* -ed bums twinkling: yeah!  
Somebody give me a drink: I can't stand it