

[The Book of Nadath](#)

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[The Book of Nadath](#).

[Robin Hyde](#).

Edited by [Michele Leggott](#).

[Auckland](#): [Auckland University Press](#), 1999.

[Robin Hyde](#) wrote [The Book Of Nadath](#) during 1937, a prolific period for her, in which she completed [The Godwits Fly](#), worked on [Nor the Years Condemn](#), and began the autobiographical [A Home in This World](#). When she went to China in early 1938 she may have taken a copy of [Nadath](#) with her, and a copy may have been left with her mother. After her death in London in August 1939, her papers were returned to New Zealand, and ended up in the care of [Rosalie](#) and [Gloria Rawlinson](#). In 1947 [Gloria Rawlinson](#) prepared an edition of [Hyde's](#) poems, [Houses by the Sea and the Later Poems](#) (Caxton Press, 1952), intending to follow this volume by a second, to include longer pieces, including [The Book of Nadath](#). A typescript and introduction were submitted to Caxton, and later (late 1958 or early 1959), to [Louis Johnson](#), then proprietor of the Capricorn Press, but the work never appeared. In 1951 [Hyde's](#) son [Derek Challis](#) took over literary executorship, and his papers were deposited in the Auckland University Library in 1961. There were three versions of [The Book of Nadath](#)—a manuscript, [Hyde's](#) typed copy with hand-written corrections, and a carbon copy of [Rawlinson's](#) typed somewhat modified transcription.

[Michele Leggott's](#) edition combines these, and also takes into account two draft fragments. The typescript that [Rawlinson](#) gave to [Johnson](#), found by [Leggott](#) in his papers in the Turnbull as she was completing the editing process (surely an editor's worst nightmare), is referred to but not used, as it is substantially the same as the carbon copy version. But [Rawlinson's](#) introduction is included as an appendix. [Leggott](#) has made some reasonable editorial assumptions, chiefly concerning the break—possibly from lost or damaged pages—towards the end of [Hyde's](#) typed version. [Rawlinson](#)—incorrectly, [Leggott](#) feels—conflates two sections, where she no longer has [Hyde's](#) typescript as template, and ignores the evidence of the manuscript. [Leggott](#) has reconstructed what she feels is a preferable reading of these sections using the manuscript as base text. The manner in which the text is set out, with courier type indicating material sourced from the manuscript, and endnotes giving

alternative readings from whatever version is not being used in the main text, is exemplary. We feel that we are reading a poem, restored to its textual integrity, rather than, as is in fact the case, encountering an intricate, complex and highly scholarly piece of reconstruction.

[Leggott](#) is not as successful in the contextualisation she gives to [The Book of Nadath](#). Her introduction is lengthy and detailed. While there is a good deal of interesting autobiographical material, and lengthy reference to other [Hyde](#) poems, there is little attempt to explain what the work is: or its relationship to the literary tradition. We are invited to view it as something beyond such influences. Yet influences there are, interesting ones: the [Bible](#), of course—[Hyde](#) described her work as like the Scriptures 'only of course more elevated'. But any nineteenth- or twentieth-century author who configures their work in terms of scriptural cadences is surely working out of [Blake](#), 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 'The Book of Thel', or 'The Vision of the Daughters of Albion'. [Shelley](#) seems to me a strong influence, in the politically inflected prose works, but especially in his long poem 'Alastor', whose vaguely delineated persona and dreamlike quasi-metaphorical wanderings are very close to the tone and style of Nadath. Both [Shelley](#) and [Blake](#) would have commended themselves to [Hyde](#) as part of that counter-canon of British radical literature, which, as [Stuart Murray](#) has pointed out (*Never a Soul at Home*, 1998), was an important influence in left-wing circles here. [Whitman](#) is another obvious influence, and [Pound](#) and [Eliot](#) seem insistently present. [The Waste Land](#), with its complex form involving discrete sections which can nevertheless be read as parts of a whole, its shifts in tone and narrative position, its layerings of apocalyptic, political, personal and spiritual fragmentation—all these seem obviously part of Nadath's ancestry. The Indian connection, seen most insistently in the section entitled '[The Three Who Come](#)', suggests not just an awareness of 1930s political issues, but also the connection of the work to that nexus of eastern spiritualism and western occultism current in late nineteenth and early twentieth century poetry. Poets such as [Yeats](#) are an obvious link here. [Leggott](#) refers in the introduction in passing to [Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet](#) (1923) and briefly in footnotes to [Krishnamurti](#) and [Tagore](#). These connections seem to me very suggestive, and worth following up. [Tagore's](#) 1914 novel was called [The Home and the World](#), a possible parallel to the title of [Hyde's](#) autobiographical work, [A Home in This World](#).

Several sections of [The Book of Nadath](#) have a strong New Zealand and Maori referent, yet [Leggott](#) seems to resist seeing the poem as part of the literary nationalism of the thirties. I feel this needs to be argued. [Fairburn's](#) '[Dominion](#)' is not perhaps as unlike [Nadath](#) as [Leggott](#) suggests. It is just that

[Nadath](#) seems less modern and modernist, more reminiscent, perhaps, of the Maoriland writers of the turn of the century, with their construction of the local in a synthesis of Maori myth, Victorian Romanticism and eastern-influenced occultism. [Leggott](#)'s discussion of [Hyde](#)'s use of the figure of Io, a conflation of Maori and classical sources, is interesting, but we should note that this was not a new association. [Jessie Mackay](#)'s poem '[The Noosing of the Sun-God](#)' ([New Zealand Verse](#), ed. [Alexander](#) and [Currie](#), 1906,144) talks of 'Io, the Nameless, the Father, /To whom the eyes pray/ But whom the tongue names not.' [Hyde](#) may have talked disparagingly of Maoriland's ornamental use of Maori motifs, but she read their work and may have been more sympathetic to their purpose than previously allowed.

Does [Leggott](#) exclude these authors—or much discussion of influence beyond the obvious—because they are not the kind of context she wishes to see [Nadath](#) in? Or is it because influence itself conflicts with her view of [Hyde](#)'s genius as self-generating? The critical reading of the poem displayed in the introduction seems to view [Hyde](#)'s work as a seamless unity, any part of which can illuminate any other part. This leads to some odd assumptions, in particular, a suggestion in the introduction that, in the place where there is a break in [Hyde](#)'s typescript, we can substitute verses cut from an entirely different poem, justifying this with the principle 'Let one textual disappearance speak for another.' This is not the technique [Leggott](#) has followed in her scrupulously orthodox editing process, so what are we to make of it? Is it a suggestion that we modify our reading practices, that we imaginatively create our own text? In which case, why do we need the authority of hers?

An uneasy fusion of poetic practice and scholarly criticism seems widespread in this introduction, leading to a muddy and often misleading argument. For example, what does [Leggott](#) mean when she describes [Nadath](#)'s 'formal oddity, poem [*sic*] doing prose work, resolutely unmodern in its address to the modern condition' but then says it is 'odd, moving, lyrical, ahead (out of joint with) its time'. Can it be both ahead and unmodern? What does it mean to describe the work as 'flickering impersonation'. Of what? Why flickering? Can one say that the poem both 'belongs to and enlarges' [Hyde](#)'s other poetry and that she 'worked deep moral convictions in each but to different ends'? Do sentences like 'Nadath, the false prophet anagrammatically *at hand*, Hebraically (*nadach*) expelled, slipped or moved away, had spoken truth and the mark of it endured in dust' mean anything? What about the sentence, 'The poem is delirious; it sets out with no undertaking to be truthful but may of course speak truth in delirium, a late-come wisdom text struggling with ideas about wisdom'? Does this contain any critical judgement or is it literary mysticism?

There does seem to me to be an assumption contained in these passages that has real critical force and is at the same time highly arguable. [Leggott](#) would like to read [The Book of Nadath](#) as an unstable text, not just historically—in the sense that [Hyde](#) may not have finished it and certainly did not prepare it for publication—but in essence. [Hyde](#)'s typescript contains problems—the first 16 pages are numbered continuously, but the remaining pages are numbered within the sections. Thus after page 16 there is no assurance that the order of the sections is fixed or correct. But can this be reasonably interpreted to mean, as [Leggott](#) argues, that [Hyde](#) 'gave up on linear decorum and gave in to the lateral reach of [Nadath](#)', that 'she became fascinated by the field of its discontinuous narrative' and that 'there are two [Nadaths](#) and there is in each case one place to start reading but very soon there is the pleasure (or anxiety) of choosing a path through the sections and responding to that version of narrative events'? (Why two? Doesn't this position open the possibility of multiple reading, even infinite readings?) This point is reiterated as the introduction concludes: 'A god, a woman and a poem may have two titles, two versions, and two fates; one visible, another obscure. There are two [Nadaths](#), one printed here not without crucial assistance from the other.' [Leggott](#) then goes on to suggest that the millennium is an auspicious time for [Nadath](#) to appear, to describe the auguries that [Hitler](#) witnessed at the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and concludes 'But now the other prophesying woman will be heard, and the words will be spoken for a memorial of her. There are always two versions'.

In his 1969 essay, '[Printers of the Mind](#)' ([Studies in Bibliography](#), ed. [Fredson Bowers](#), 2), [Don McKenzie](#) quotes [Karl Popper](#) quoting a nineteenth century scientist: 'A nice adaptation of conditions will make almost any hypothesis agree with the phenomena. This will please the imagination, but does not advance our knowledge.' There are two versions of this edition of [Robin Hyde](#)'s [The Book of Nadath](#). One is an exemplary work of scholarly detection, preparation and presentation. The other is a work of the imagination.