

FILM

Of birth and belonging

In a new film, Robin Hyde's secret son speaks about his mother and her dream of home.

by SARAH CATHERALL

Until now, the story of writer Robin Hyde and her secret son has been told only in writing, both about her life and in her own work. Now, at 87, the son gets to speak for himself.

Derek Challis was the writer's "illegitimate" child, born in secret in 1930, and smuggled in a basket on the ferry from Picton to Wellington. Some in Hyde's family, including her own father, never knew he existed.

Challis's perspective on the mother-and-son story gets a big-screen airing this month when a short documentary, *A Home in this World*, premieres in the Doc Edge Festival.

From his home nestled in bush in West Auckland, Challis tells viewers his birth mother had always dreamed of living in the bush, and that was one of her reasons for shifting to England when he was just seven years old. She hoped to finally make a decent living from her books, and return to buy a bush hideaway for the two of them.

By then, Challis was living with his Auckland foster parents, who eventually adopted him. A year after he talked with his mother for the final time on a park bench in Auckland Domain, Hyde died tragically in London, taking her own life after years of morphine dependency, depression, and periods in a mental hospital.



Above, Robin Hyde and Derek, c 1933. Left, Derek Challis says Hyde "was like a fairy godmother" to him.

Born Iris Wilkinson in 1906 – she adopted the name she had given to her first child, a son who had died shortly after his birth – Hyde produced 10 books of poetry and prose, and countless unpublished writings. As a journalist, she wrote passionately about those living on the margins of society, a world she inhabited.

The film's director, Juanita Deely, had been drawn to Hyde's writing over the years, and resolved to find out more about her secret son.

Challis, who co-wrote the 2002 biography of his mother, *The Book of Iris: A Life of Robin Hyde*, says he now understands why his birth mother kept him a secret. "She was a well-known person by this time. She was quite a public figure because of her writing. Had it come out, it would have damaged her reputation. She would have lost her job. Women were fired if that happened. She was a single woman, with no background support from her family, who had to make her own way," he says in the film.

"She had no accommodation, nothing

... that was a fairly hard grasp for a woman journalist in those days."

Challis says he didn't see much of his mother during his childhood, and was in foster care from age two. "Before she left for England, she spent most of the previous three years in the Avondale mental hospital [later Oakley, then Carrington] and it wasn't considered a proper thing for a child to visit.

"She was a single woman, with no support, who had to make her own way."

"When she went overseas, she was like a fairy godmother, because she would send me presents. I was very fond of my mum but I didn't have an intimate relationship with her."

Her autobiographical writings left him a message: "For my son. I want that he should be loyal in friendship and gentle in love. And for his own life, bitter or sweet as it may be, the greatest gift I ask is courage." ■

A HOME IN THIS WORLD screens in the Doc Edge Festival in Wellington on May 20 and Auckland on June 3.