

Australian poet Judith Wright (1915-2000): an appreciation

Tony Cornwell
31 August 2000

Judith Wright, a respected Australian poet and writer on poetry and latterly better known as a conservationist and campaigner for aboriginal rights, died in hospital in Canberra on June 26 at the age of 85. Her achievement in translating the Australian experience into poetry led in her best work to a rich inheritance of lyricism and directness.

She was born in 1915, in the New England region of northern New South Wales. Her family, wealthy pioneering pastoralists, were the descendants of, in Max Harris's words, "half pay military types, younger sons of the gentry, adventurers ... the pioneers, the frontier openers, inspired by an image of their own class, hauling their books and ambitions into the bush who tried to wring permanence out of a hostile recalcitrant environment."

Wright described the family as descendants of the liberal humanist tradition: "They were those who chose to adapt themselves to the new environment rather than superimpose their class values of Englishness upon it. They were ... set against the squattocracy ... and underwent a convulsive change in social values and patterns and from them came not only an authentic patriotic fervour, but a tradition of warmth, hospitality and egalitarianism."

She began writing poetry at the age of six to please and cheer her ever-ailing mother. She was first educated at the home station (large farm) and then by relatives at another of the family properties. When her mother died she was taken in by one of her aunts.

After her father remarried she was sent to New England Girls School as a boarder. She was then 14. Her sole consolation "and only thing I had to treasure was poetry and the knowledge that I was going to be a poet."

Following school she moved to Sydney and studied philosophy, English, history and psychology at university; "all of which, I thought, might offer a useful insight into society and its mysterious failures and achievements."

She found the Depression near its peak. "Poverty was something new to me ... in the streets of Newtown and Redfern or in Paddington or Surry Hills, poverty could actually be smelt, as a kind of dark-grey sourness ... it was not possible not to wonder what had gone wrong."

On the declaration of World War II her father, hit by the manpower shortage, intimated that he wanted her home. It proved to be a turning point for her.

"As the train panted up the foothills of the Moonbis and the haze of dust and eucalypt vapour dimmed the drought-stricken landscape, I found myself suddenly and sharply aware of it as 'my country'. These hills and valleys were—not mine, but me; the threat of Japanese invasion hung over them as over me; I felt it under my own ribs. Whatever other blood I held, this was the country I loved and knew." This sense of identification with the land gave her poetry an intimate and personal feeling.

Through stories told by older workers on the property she learnt of the pioneers' part in both the destruction of the land and the dispossession and murder of the aboriginal people. The sense of fear she felt at invasion enabled her to understand, at some level, how the Aborigines would have felt.

The threat of invasion and the new relationship with US imperialism had put on the agenda the need to express Australia as not just "sun browned British" but as something distinct. Many were stimulated to explore the issues. But there were limits placed on the width and depth of exploration, some by the artist and some by the times.

Every artist in the immediate post-war period had a lot of problems to confront. What was anyone to make of it all? Why did people fight wars? How could anyone make a lamp from human skin? How could anyone drop a bomb that killed thousands of people in one flash?

For a poet these weren't easy questions to grapple with. A poem must convey reason and emotion and while it was easy to feel emotion about what had happened, what was the reason, or reasons, for it? There were two choices it seemed. Either there was something wrong with humans—either innately or through their conscious activity—or there was something wrong with the world.

Obviously enough, to find out if something is wrong in the world you've got to be able to discuss—freely and openly—what is happening to you and around you. In this period free and open discussion of the nature of society was not encouraged or allowed. Many turned inwards in response, striving to find within that which would explain the "curse of Cain".

In Wright's case there was also as part of her wealthy humanist background something of the noblesse oblige. That her life, wealth and education were based on slaughter and pillage never sat easily with her. She possessed honesty and integrity, which would not, and could not, allow her to ignore or gloss over these issues.

But her way to an examination of the societal roots of the problem was blocked. The general stifling of debate and the inability of the humanist tradition to deal with these issues; to present reasons for both what had happened and what was happening, left her feeling impotent. A sense of guilt grew. If she could not make it right in the outer world, she would make it so in the inner.

She would scapegoat herself and take the sins of her fathers upon herself, expiating their bloody heritage through her work. She would do the land honour and defend the rights of the indigenous people, sing of its flowers and its people. She turned her back on the problems of the day and entered into struggle with the problem of "language and the forces of land utterly alien to it."

Poetry has the ability to connect reason and emotion by a mixture of rhythm, rhyme and image in such a way that we are forced to see and feel things anew. To take the world inside, so to speak, and in this, it has no peer. As Shelley put it: "It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know."

Wright set out to resolve through her poetry the tension between the worlds, in David Malouf's words, of "environment and place on one hand, and on the other all the complex associations of an inherited culture. We have our sensory life in one world, whose light and weather and topography shapes all that belongs to our physical being, while the larger part of what comes to us through language for example, and knowledge,

and training, derives from another.”

There was, as Wright was to later write, “except for the wattle... very little mention of trees, flowers and birds by name or by recognisable description in Australian verse during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.” “Currawong and Banksia carried no charge of emotion like the ‘nightingale’ and the ‘rose’.”

The “possessing of the land imaginatively”, to connect “the life within as the life without”, the translation of Australia into consciousness, to try and affect a convergence of the non-indigenous and indigenous imagination or Dreaming was to form her early poetic work.

In 1946 her book *The Moving Image* was published. The poems have a lyrical and unforced beauty, as in the well-known *South of My Days Circle*:

*South of my day's circle,
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
Full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.*

The next project was the three-part *The Generations of Men*, which traced and outlined the history of her family and the area. “We live through our past,” she said, and “the trouble with our relationship with Australia is we still don't live there.”

In her second book *Woman to Man* she introduced a distinctly female perspective as in these beautiful lines from *The Maker*, which celebrates her pregnancy with her daughter Meredith:

*I hold the crimson fruit
and plumage of the palm;
flame- tree, that scarlet spirit,
in my soil takes root.*

*My days burn with the sun
my nights with moon and star,
since into myself I took
all the living things that are.*

None of her following books were as enthusiastically received as these and she grew irritated by constant comparisons with her earlier work. “It dropped off several incarnations ago” was her usual response. “I had turned away from the simple nationalistic poems of the 1940s and was entering fields where no one wanted to follow...”

The middle period of her writing saw essays on Australian poetry (*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* and *Because I was Invited*) and the books *The Gateway*, *Two Fires* (with the haunting *At Cooloolah*), *Birds*, *Five Senses* and *The Other Half* (where she looked at the unconscious, the “self that night undrowns when I'm asleep”). All have admirable moments. In *Shadow*, the last of these, she begins to tackle some of the issues of the day, mainly the Vietnam War.

She had moved from the “isolated sensibility, the lone poet ... exploring inwards towards an impossible peace” to “a rage against destructiveness and blind obedience.” But once again, limitations to her understanding of the core issues meant she could only scratch at the surface of things.

In *Christmas Ballad*, a poem expressing horror at war, we see her exasperation boiling over. If the unnamed soldier weren't so “blindly obedient” then she would not have to write and grapple with the ideas and forces underneath. Gone are the luscious words and phrasing of *The Maker*, replaced by a chatty, determinedly low-brow tone. “Look—I'll spell it out for you. War is no good! (When will you people ever learn?)”

*Now, Son, we'll send you home.
With the hair brushed over the crack in your head
you look as good as you ever did.
You're the luckiest bloke was ever born.*

*Home he came and on the wharf
in her best bri-nylon stood his wife.
Darling you look well, she said;
only the children ran and hid.*

The old problems had not got easier to write about. In the early 1970s

her next book, *Alive*, saw her move from issues like the Vietnam War to questions of society and the forces that are exerted on people. In *Tableau* is a story of a man staggering in panic and despair, being ignored by the passing crowd. Wright examines her reactions and how she fights against the dehumanising conditioning of society to go to his aid.

*Holding him up as he asked till the ambulance came,
among the sudden curious crowd, I knew
his plunging animal heart,
against my flesh the shapes of his too-young bone,
the heaving pattern of his ribs. As still I do.*

Here it appears as if she is on the verge of finding a way through the whole mess and beginning to ask one of the questions that matter: “What has been done to us, to make us do this to each other?” But at this point she abandoned poetry. There were many reasons. Following her husband's death she no longer felt “inspired to write” and she had seen that her poetry—or anyone else's for that matter—made little difference in the immediate scheme of things.

But I don't think this was the major reason. It was the moment when the Australian liberal humanist tradition in poetry finally ground to a halt. The world had moved far beyond any point of reference for the tradition, beyond any point of reason within its ken. The world was complicated, unpredictable and there were some things you were better off not knowing about. It was all too confusing.

She turned to protest and began promoting the reading and writing of poetry in schools (“How do they ever leave school with any love of poetry?”), work on conservation and publicising the plight of the indigenous people. Up until the end of her life she still took an active part, attending the Reconciliation rally in Canberra on May 28.

However, as she deserves to be remembered for her poetry and her literary criticism more than for protesting, I'd like to quote *Request to a year*, a poem that is not part of her much-feted scenic nationalistic canon. Deceptively casual, it demonstrates her craft; the discipline, wit, grace of expression and, above all, her gift with images.

I think in a way it reflects what her life must have felt like; surrounded by disasters and horrors and unable to directly contain, confront or control them. It places you there on the spot; watching your child drift away on an ice floe. What do you do? Shriek ... run up and down—all very understandable—but it won't solve the problem. The common understanding of this poem centres on its heartlessness, how inhuman, etc. I think this misses the point.

The mother in the poem has let the boy go exploring, to find himself and the world, and when he gets into trouble she's too far away to do anything except give him “life through art”, so to speak. The essence is, an artist—or anyone else for that matter—cannot give way to self indulgent helplessness.

*Request to a year
If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
of my great- great- grandmother,
legendary devotee of the arts,
who having eight children
and little opportunity for painting pictures,
sat one day on a high rock
beside a river in Switzerland
and from a difficult distance viewed
her second son, balanced on a small ice flow, drift down the current
toward a waterfall
that struck rock bottom eighty feet below,
while her second daughter, impeded,
no doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(which luckily later caught him on his way).
Nothing, it was evident, could be done;*

*And with the artist's isolating eye
My great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.
Year, if you have no Mother's day present planned,
Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.*



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact