



*Judith Wright McKinney*

*Photograph: Terry Milligan*

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## *Judith Wright McKinney* (1915–2000)

In Judith Wright, who died in Canberra on 25 June 2000, Australia lost one of its major poets. She was also a leader of public opinion in such significant areas as conservation of the environment and reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians, someone never afraid to speak her mind on issues she saw as vital to the future well-being of the nation.

Judith Wright was born at Thalgarrah Station, near Armidale in northern New South Wales, on 31 May 1915, into a pastoral family whose members had first arrived in Australia in the 1820s. She grew up on another New England family property, Wallamumbi, learning that love of country which is so strongly expressed in many of her poems. Later, the fact that some earlier works, such as 'Bullocky' and 'South of My Days', could be fitted so readily into a literary tradition which celebrated the bush landscape and the Australian bushman brought Wright much anguish. So much so, that she eventually refused to allow 'Bullocky' to be reprinted, feeling it had been used to glorify a pioneering tradition she increasingly wished to disown. Her deep love for her New England birthplace only made more unbearable her growing awareness of the bleaker consequences of her ancestors' pioneering—Aboriginal dispossession and the resulting degradation of both the landscape and its original owners.

Judith Wright's mother, who had been an invalid since contracting Spanish influenza in 1919, died in 1927. A year later her father remarried and Judith went as a boarder to the New England Girls' School in Armidale; earlier she had been educated at home via governesses and her own wide reading. She had also begun writing poetry under her mother's encouragement. A serious riding accident during her final year at school meant that she failed mathematics and so did not matriculate to the University of Sydney. Nevertheless, she spent three years at the University, from 1934–36, studying English, Oriental History and Anthropology, where lectures by Professor P R Elkin and Bill Stanner began to develop her interest in Aboriginal cultures.

After travelling in England and Europe during 1937–38, Wright worked in Sydney until 1942 when war-time labour shortages led to her return to New England to help manage the family properties. Reconnection with the country of her childhood, now under threat from Japan, produced poems which were increasingly finding publication in the *Bulletin*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the new literary quarterlies *Southerly* and *Meanjin*. Late in 1943 she moved to Brisbane, in large part to assist Clem Christesen with *Meanjin*, after obtaining a job with the Australian Universities Commission. Through Christesen she was introduced to Brisbane literary life, to Australian writers

more widely, and to the self-taught philosopher Jack McKinney, with whom she lived, had a child and later married.

In 1946 Judith Wright's first collection of poems, *The Moving Image*, appeared under the *Meanjin* imprint. It received an enthusiastic reception, with fellow-poet Douglas Stewart, then literary editor of the *Bulletin*, referring to Wright's poems as ones which 'promise anything, everything, the world'. Over the next decade and a half new collections appeared at regular intervals from the then-leading publisher of Australian poetry, Angus & Robertson: *Woman to Man* (1949), *The Gateway* (1953), *The Two Fires* (1955) and *Birds* (1962), followed by her first selected poems, *Five Senses* (1963). By then Wright was firmly established as one of the top two or three contemporary Australian poets.

During the 1950s Judith Wright was also engaged in research into both her own family history and the history of Australian poetry. The first fruits of this work began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *The Generations of Men* (1959), based largely on family papers and reminiscences, especially the journals and letters of Wright's grandfather, was one of the first detailed studies of an Australian pastoral family. A monograph on the leading nineteenth-century poet Charles Harpur published in 1963 was also groundbreaking in drawing attention to the significance of his work, after years of neglect. As well, Wright contributed the survey chapter on 'Australian Poetry to 1920' to Geoffrey Dutton's influential *The Literature of Australia*, published by Penguin Books in 1964 just as Australian Literature was beginning to find a toe hold in the expanding universities. Wright's *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), based on Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures given at the Universities of New England and Queensland, was particularly important as one of the first extended critical studies of Australian poetry. A selection of the poems of John Shaw Neilson published in 1963 and the jointly-edited *Witnesses of Spring: The Unpublished Poems of Shaw Neilson* (1970) helped to make better known the work of another very significant early poet.

In 1969 Judith Wright was elected to the Academy in recognition of both her international reputation as a poet and the importance of her critical and scholarly work. During the 1960s, however, she had become increasingly involved with the new environmental movement and had also met the Aboriginal poet Kath Walker, later Oodgeroo Noonuccal. In the 1970s and 80s, Wright's work for conservation and for Indigenous rights was to bring her increasing recognition as a public intellectual. It was also to take up much of her time and energy, at the expense of her more literary and scholarly work. Ignoring the comments of many of her friends, Wright sat on numerous committees, gave many speeches, some later collected in *Because I Was Invited* (1975), and wrote letter after letter. In the late 1950s she had helped found the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland; later, as its President, she campaigned to preserve the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island, as recorded

in her book *The Coral Battleground* (1977). In 1966 she became a founding member of the Australian Conservation Foundation and in the early 1970s served as a member of the Whitlam government's Committee of Enquiry into the National Estate and wrote most of the subsequent report.

Wright's husband Jack McKinney had died in 1966 and a few years later their daughter Meredith moved to Canberra to study at the Australian National University. During the 1970s Wright also spent much of her time in Canberra, where she developed a strong friendship with H C Coombs. In 1973 he had been appointed chairman of the newly created Australia Council, of which she was also a member. Coombs was also heavily involved with the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, an area with which Wright was becoming increasingly concerned, thanks to her continuing friendship with Kath Walker. In 1978, along with Coombs, her former university teacher Bill Stanner and a number of others, she formed the Aboriginal Treaty Committee to help work for recognition of Indigenous land rights. She also began a rethinking and rewriting of Australian history, and her own family's contribution to it, which was to result in *The Cry for the Dead* (1981). She subsequently published *We Call for a Treaty* (1985) and a collection of essays, *Born of the Conquerors* (1991), the title of the latter coming from her poem 'Two Dreamtimes (For Kath Walker, later Oodgeroo Noonuccal)'.

Despite all of her other commitments during the 1970s and 80s, Wright continued to write poetry, if less regularly than before, publishing her tenth and final collection, *Phantom Dwelling*, in 1985. Her first *Collected Poems* had appeared in 1971; an expanded version was published in 1994. After 1985, as her long-standing deafness got worse and her eyesight also began to deteriorate, Wright devoted herself to prose. In 1989, when I invited her to contribute to the special Fiftieth Anniversary issue of *Southerly*, the journal which had in 1940 been one of the first to publish her adult poems, she sent an introduction written for a selection of Australian poetry to be published in China. By then, of course, her poetry was being widely studied outside as well as inside Australia, and a number of critical studies of it had appeared. A biography by Veronica Brady, *South of My Days* (1998), has provided much of the information for this obituary.

In 1992 Judith Wright was the first Australian to be awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry. From 1956 onwards she had received honorary doctorates from eight Australian universities: Queensland (returned when they subsequently gave one to Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen), New England, Sydney, Monash, the ANU, NSW, Griffith and Melbourne. Many other honours and awards came her way; she accepted them in large part because she believed they added legitimacy to her campaigns for what were then often seen as ratbag causes. In 1985, opening the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, being held that year at the University of New England, Wright had declared 'Conservation, Aboriginal rights, human

rights, and the defence of freedom of speech ... are as important to me as poetry, and indeed indispensable to the writing of poetry.' My favourite memory of her comes from that same conference, doing a kind of Spanish dance with her shawl during the final dinner. That, like her poetry, and all that she fought for, was a sign of Judith Wright's passionate involvement with life in all its forms.

*Elizabeth Webby*