

**Fiona Capp. *My Blood's Country: a journey through the landscapes that inspired Judith Wright's poetry*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010, 217pp.**

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Judith Wright was a classroom poet for Australian schoolchildren in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the 'Six Voices' in the school textbook (with A.D. Hope, Douglas Stewart, James McAuley, R.D. FitzGerald and Kenneth Slessor) for many students she represented the idea that poetry could be home-grown, rather than the 'long ago and far away' achievements of Donne, Keats or Eliot. The proximity of these Australian poets could be exciting—I remember my English teacher (in a Canberra high school) commenting, as we read A.D. Hope's 'Persons from Porlock', that he could imagine Hope over in Arthur Circle, Forrest, growing frustrated by interruptions to his writing. The traditions of poetry might run from Coleridge through Hope to within a few kilometres of teenagers at an Australian high school.

Fiona Capp experienced this thrill as a schoolgirl, when she realised that 'Judith Wright was not only a woman and an Australian but she was alive. The whole lofty business of writing felt suddenly much closer to home' (4). Clearly, she hadn't read the warning in Hope's 'Persons from Porlock' because, in her final year at school, she was bold enough to send Wright a bundle of her own poetry. Wright replied with clear and supportive advice. The same year, her school principal invited Wright to speak to the senior classes and a friendship, mainly through correspondence, was established. By this time, Wright had given herself to the public causes of conservation and Aboriginal rights, but Capp's enthusiasm for the poetry continued.

This admiration and longstanding friendship, eventually including Wright's daughter Meredith McKinney, draws Capp into a journey to the places that are important to Wright's life and work. After describing her personal relationship with Wright, Capp travels to the places that matter to Wright's poetry—New England, Brisbane, Mount Tamborine and Boreen Point, Mongarlowe and Canberra. In each place she examines what she knows about Wright's life experience and quotes a little of the poetry that derives from it. Wright's nieces help her explore the Wright properties, Wallamumbi and Wongwabinda, in New England but Capp's research adds to our understanding of the poetry. She quotes in full a poem Wright wrote when she was ten that not only indicates the talent of the young writer but also suggests the pain that the loss of her mother must have brought:

Isn't it fun when mummy comes  
In the flickering candle-light?  
All the bogies fly when they hear her tread.  
She stoops and kisses the top of my head  
And tucks me up in a nice warm bed  
In the flickery candle-light. (55)

Capp notes that Wright's correspondence at the time gives no hint of the child's experience of her mother's suffering and death—and her later writing keeps the painful memory under firm control. Capp also finds the detail behind Wright's 'Nigger's Leap' poem, with an account of the driving of an Aboriginal tribe over Darkies' Point in F. Eldershaw's *Australia As It Really Is* (1854). In a sense, too, she completes the story of *Generations of Men* (1959) discussing Wright's changing attitude to her pioneer grandmother, May, and describing how the properties May fought to establish have now passed out of the family's hands.

Her account of Brisbane and Mount Tamborine follows Wright's romance with Jack McKinney with a fine sensitivity to social attitudes of the 1940s and 1950s. Once again, Capp is alert to Wright's vulnerability as well as her strengths. Believing herself unfit for the conventional aspirations of love and marriage, Wright devoted herself to a man who pushed her intellectual abilities and gave her an education outside of the institutions of learning. Jack McKinney was an 'amateur' philosopher, an

autodidact who kept his distance from any institution; their relationship began with Wright borrowing books from the University of Queensland library for him. Following his lead, Wright was to become one of the most important literary critics in Australia without submitting to the limitations (or demands) of the universities. On Mount Tamborine her passion for nature conservation was developed, and Capp walks in the forest thinking about the way Wright's early Tamborine poems connect the natural world with the human psyche. She sees these poems as just as political as Wright's later work because of their recognition of the connection between the inner consciousness and the world around us, a view strongly influenced by McKinney's philosophy

In Mongarlowe and Canberra, Capp finds a more familiar world. She had visited Wright at her house at The Edge, as well as her final home in Canberra. This later period of Wright's life was one of political activism and involvement in government committees. It was through this committee work that Wright became close to 'Nugget' Coombs, sharing his commitment to the improvement of conditions for Aboriginal people and teaching him about conservation issues. They were lovers until Coombs' death twenty-five years later, though the relationship was kept 'secret' and, once again, Wright was engrossed in an unconventional relationship with an intellectual man, passionately committed to improving the world. When Coombs died, she did not attend the state funeral held in his honour (Capp says she was not invited, suggesting that state funerals are by invitation only).

Capp is alert to the new readings that this context of passionate political and personal affairs may give to Wright's late poetry. She picks up a line from Wright's 'Prayer' ('Let love not fall from me though I must grow old') and provides satisfying evidence that Wright's relationship with Coombs was mutually happy. Capp was given access to letters between the two—a substantial correspondence since they were often apart—but she treats the relationship with careful respect. As a result, we have a stronger picture of the paradoxes of Wright's nature—a confident, public woman who was also secretive and inclined to conspiracy theories, a rational intellectual driven by passion. Capp also gives a sympathetic account of Wright's abandonment of poetry (or its abandonment of her) and her painful decision that poetry could not change the world: 'the 'mythopoetic connection to the landscape' she had once hoped to foster could not save the planet.' (158)

Some of us, like Capp, were lucky enough to glimpse the warm human being behind the earnest public campaigner and revered poet. Those present at the ASAL dinner in Armidale in 1985 can never forget Wright performing a mock veil dance—where Alec Hope also sashayed across the room with his glass of red wine. Increasing deafness and poor eyesight, combined with the seriousness of Wright's concern about our destruction of the planet, tended to distance people from the friendly, often amused, woman. Capp retrieves this perspective, sometimes paraphrasing dream diaries as well as letters and poetry to find the private woman. In *My Blood's Country* Wright is not so much the anguished author of *The Cry for the Dead* (1981) or *Born of the Conquerors* (1991) as a poet and woman.

Capp has written an affectionate reader's memoir to complement Veronica Brady's more conventional biography, and Wright's own memoir *Half a Lifetime* (1999). This is not a book of literary criticism, nor a biography, but a sensitive reader's attempt to understand the relationship between the poetry and the life of an extraordinary Australian woman. Admirers of Judith Wright's poetry, and anyone who had personal contact with this generous and courageous woman, will enjoy its reinvigoration of her life and art.

*Susan Lever, The University of Sydney*