

***With Love and Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright.* Ed. Patricia Clarke and Meredith McKinney. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006, 600pp.**

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This book is an important scholarly resource and a treasure trove full of insights into the life of one of Australia's greatest poets. With the exception of three childhood letters published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1925 and 1928, the correspondence covers a period from 1942 till Judith Wright's death in 2000. It is presented in chronological sequence, gathered into groups of eight to ten years, with each group preceded by a poem and a brief editorial account of major events in the author's life during that particular time. There is a preface by Meredith McKinney and, at the end, a list of Wright's correspondents together with a useful index.

The letters reveal a close, sustaining net of relationships: "there are those I love, of many different kinds and persuasions, and without them I would have no ambience to live in" (247). Judith Wright's correspondence demonstrates close family bonds with her father Philip, brothers Bruce and Peter, her cousin Tina and, of course, her husband Jack McKinney and daughter Meredith. There are also a number of intimate friends with whom Wright corresponds over the years: Kathleen McArthur, an authority on wild flowers who shares her passion for conservation, Barbara Blackman and Dorothy Green. She also writes regularly to John Blight, Martin Robertson (an English academic and poet) and the conservationist Len Webb. There are letters to people who have sought explanations of her poems or advice on how to publish and a mass of political correspondence on environmental issues and justice for Aborigines.

For Judith Wright, "Poetry . . . is a way to live, and one can't at the moment live all that purely, too much to be said and life not organized enough emotionally for one to be able to play the harpsichord and expect oneself to sit and listen" (70). As a collection, these letters convey how poetry entwines itself throughout a varied and complex existence. One constant thread is Wright's deep, emotional response to landscape, as in this account of Boreen Point.

Those lovely lakes, so horizontal blue and shadowy over the other side with tall tall sandhills covered in trees. And across the lake we went in a motorboat for three miles and over to Laguna Bay, a beach forty miles long untouched by human hand as it were with acres of huge pinky shells; and up the other end of the lake one dives in a boat into

a big overhanging tree and there is the Noosa river, narrow and clear black like a mirror and covered with black swans and black duck and bordered with huge tufts of ferns and flowers with overhanging trees reflected exactly in detail; and for miles and miles are queer deserted waterways and lakes, all different. (83)

Such love of landscape inspires both her poetry and her passionate environmentalism.

Writing is also inserted into a busy domestic life. “Fact is that things and doing things increase on one in any case as time goes on—like barnacles on a ship—even if one hasn’t a business to look after; even our few hundred fowls and the books and ordering and so on attached to them seem to invade my spare hours almost to none. At any rate they pay a little better than writing but then that doesn’t pay at all. Nevertheless I still do it . . .” (103-4). Throughout her letters Wright comments regularly on poetry and the state of Australian literature. Although she preferred to avoid direct participation in literary life—“The Australian Literary Scene is full of dogmatists, hangers-on and plain bad poets” (134)—she is keenly interested in its development, mentioning in one letter that she subscribes to eight literary journals. Although caustic about some contemporary writers, she is still more so about society’s general disregard for literature. In 1976, with the Fraser government in office, she tells Barbara Blackman that prospects for writers don’t look good: “. . . but after Patrick I have a feeling that writers are Out—let alone Frank Hardy. Let them win a Nobel Prize if they want to earn a living” (295). She is also keenly aware of how the literary world disadvantages women—“poetry by women is the pits as far as public appreciation or publishers’ cooperation is concerned” (410)—and recognises the restraints imposed by female socialisation. “Women have it dinned into them from babyhood on that they have no right to refuse any demand made on them—especially by a male” (385).

While perceiving herself as an outsider—“I am a natural Third-class Passenger through life” (207)—Wright never hesitates to address public figures, including State Premiers, Cabinet Ministers and Prime Ministers, from Robert Menzies to John Howard, to exhort or reprimand on political matters. Although ideologically at odds with the pastoral aristocracy she was born into, she clearly draws great confidence and assurance from that background, taking for granted her right to challenge the powerful and the orthodoxies they insist upon. Privately, she endows some with nicknames like, the Peanut, Freezer and Raucus Hawkus. Essentially irreverent herself, Wright hated the reverence accorded her as a public figure: “I refuse to have labels stuck on me, and as for that Judith Wright she turns me up” (109). Elsewhere she

describes the public Judith Wright as “a disguise I don’t fit into” (159). To be embalmed and enshrined as lady poetess and national icon is to be set apart from ordinary life, a semi-sacred figure whom no one need bother to engage with seriously. One of the great pleasures of reading these letters is discovering how funny Wright can be and how keen her sense of the ridiculous. In 1984 she writes to her daughter:

The phone rang this morning. Caller verified it was me, introduced himself as the Australian Jockey Club. I said Ha ha, now tell me who you really are. But it was indeed a representative of the AJC, charged with finding an Australian Poetess willing to have a new handicap race named after her and having been given by the Society of Authors a choice between Zora Cross (long dead but he didn’t know that) and Rosemary and me. Since the racing game is not in v. good odour at the moment—ring-ins and crook bets and drug connections and what all—and in any case I was too taken aback to say anything useful, I gave him Rosemary’s number and rang to warn her. The upshot is that we both strongly recommend the Zora Cross Handicap if anything. With the Judith Wright Handicap I would be a dead ringer (to use the idiom) to have a major scandal blow up over horse-pulling or doping or something and it’s not a connection I want to have made. But it has given me and Rosemary quite a good giggle for the time being. It’s lucky Zora Cross can’t object, and since nobody remembers the poor woman, the good name of Poetry can’t be involved. (395)

Wright is frequently criticised for subordinating poetry to political activism, but the letters make it clear that her intensive work and campaigning on behalf of the environment and Aboriginal rights springs from the same impassioned view of life which inspires her poetry. Correspondence from her latter years reveals an indefatigable and indomitable spirit. Despite undergoing a mastectomy and suffering from cataracts, severe arthritis and the deafness which plagued her nearly all her life, she continues to throw herself wholeheartedly into life and political activism. When in 1997 Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, proposed measures to restrict payments of Public Lending Right to authors, she writes to Lynne Spender, executive director of the Australian Society of Authors, offering to join the Society’s delegation. “I am not really mobile enough to get to the meeting or to the National Press Club, but with a couple of good strong arms I could make an appearance at least. I have what is known as a Heart (it might be dangerous if really annoyed), but that might be even more impressive mightn’t it? I mean, falling at the Minister’s very doorstep would demonstrate the plight of the Aged and Infirm? Say if you think you could use me—with two strong arms to escort me of course” (535). She did participate in the delegation, later expressing her delight at its successful outcome.

This collection of letters forms a valuable addition to Veronica Brady's biography of Wright, *South of My Days* and Wright's own autobiography, *Half a Lifetime*. Although containing only a fraction of Wright's correspondence housed in the National Library of Australia and other archives, *With Love and Fury* is still a substantial volume. Embarking on it may appear, on first sight, a formidable undertaking, but I can recommend it as a delight to read.

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