

INHERITING THE LAND? - SOME LITERARY AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE USE OF INDIGENOUS MATERIAL BY AN AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S WRITER, 1960-1990

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Until the mid-century Australian children's writers in the main ignored the country's Aboriginal people just as writers for adults did. When they did not, they depicted Aborigines as the savages to be fought by heroic whites in adventure tales or as childlike servants on homesteads such as Mary Grant Bruce's *Billabong*. Maurice Saxby suggests that by 1941 the presentation of the Aborigines as savages, "noble or corrupt, was disappearing but lingered on vestigially. More frequently authors tended to regard the aborigines as cultural oddities or curiosities although there was a growing tendency to take them seriously" (p.183). During the 1950s several children's writers took them seriously, a decade ahead of writers for adults such as Peter Mathers and Thomas Keneally. Rex Ingamells, of the Jindjorobaks, published a novel of traditional life in the Northern Territory, *Aranda Boy*, in 1952. Kylie Tennant wrote of the Torres Strait Islanders in *All the Proud Tribesmen* in 1959, and Nan Chauncy wrote of the attempted extinction of the Tasmanians in *Tangara* in 1960. But Patricia Wrightson has been most consistent of all in her use of Aboriginal characters and themes. In 1960 she attempted a more difficult task than her colleagues in writing *The Rocks of Honey*, dealing with characters not distanced by unfamiliarity or time. Instead, she wrote in 1960 of a credible, contemporary, Europeanized, part-Aboriginal child among white children at a primary school on the north coast of N.S.W. and between 1973 and 1989 produced a series of fantasy novels that was to take her through many of the positions occupied in this century by writers who draw upon indigenous material. Wrightson's *Rocks of Honey* and her fantasy novels since 1972 offer a useful and extended case study of an Australian author whose use of Aboriginal material has been scrupulous rather than exploitative, but remains problematical.

Wrightson has been conscious from the beginning of the process that using indigenous material involved ethical considerations and has been increasingly conscious of the reasons that may underlie the use of indigenous material by non-indigenous writers in general. She might well be uncomfortable with my contention that some of those reasons are religious, yet her motives have been fundamentally religious if the word connotes such considerations as making sense of humankind's individual and collective relationship to the universe and of individual suffering, and exploring the purpose of individual life.

Wrightson's use of Aboriginal characters and folklore supports an attempt to restore a sense of completeness to readers who are, in Myron Abrams's words, "heirs of a very old and expanding tradition ... that it is the lot of man to be fragmented and cut off, but haunted in his exile by the presentiment of a lost condition of wholeness and community" (p.313). In Wrightson's expression of individual purpose, indigenous characters and reference support a creed of stoicism and of individuation in the Jungian tradition, offering, in *Behind the Wind*, an alternative to the Christian view of sin and retribution as part of a narrative that is readily described in Jungian terms. She has sought to create her own version of what Peter Beatson calls "legend" —fiction that portrays "the descent of the spirit of a people into their land" (p.64) —and therefore her work is an excellent example of what Terry Goldie calls the literature of "indigenization" (p.13) —fiction that seeks to bring European inhabitants of such countries as Canada and Australia and New Zealand into imaginative contact with the lands in which most of them were born, but in which, by comparison with their indigenous peoples, they are aliens. Inevitably Wrightson's indigenous characters bear out Goldie's contention that "[t]he indigene of the white text is the indigene for the white text" (p.218), and her use of Aboriginal folklore raises both literary and ethical questions relating to the imaginative adaptation of indigenous material by a European author.

The Rocks of Honey had its beginnings in Wrightson's experience of small town life in northern N.S.W. and in her desire to alter what she calls the "peculiar, perhaps defensive, lack of appreciative response, that strange white-blindness, that deprives [Aborigines] of human dignity" ("When Cultures Meet" p.189). It also shows what I contend is a fundamentally religious desire for "a lost condition of wholeness and community". Wrightson depicts the main Aboriginal character of *The Rocks of Honey*, Eustace Murray, as having a mystical affinity with the country that can become a sense of unity

with the natural world; he feels "the might and power of the old land" (p.81) as a kind of heartbeat on one occasion, and at the end of the novel hears the "great voiceless words" (p.174) of the land, words that express the belief that it will bring together all its people, white and black, in mutual respect. Interestingly, though, both these occasions draw heavily upon Romantic conventions of the sublime and of the moment of illumination: the first occurs at sunset, within sight of the imposing rocks that give the novel its title; the second occurs at dawn, high above a mist-filled valley that recalls Wordsworth's experience of illumination on Snowdon (1805 *Prelude* 13.40-45).

If the main Aboriginal character of the novel has a special affinity with the land, his ancestors had more: an enviable "condition of wholeness and community." Wrightson recalls an Aboriginal society founded on altruism, co-operation, and duty (p.85). Each of its members has a clearly defined role, from the children who learn "their lessons with enjoyment" (p.66) to elders who "care for" the land "in the ceremonies" (p.87). The world of the idealized past is unfallen: "alive, laughing, stern, and very full of magic" (p.67), a timeless world like that of European pastoral, set in a country "beautiful as it will not be again," a land "full of life and food and water" (p.82).

Clearly, Wrightson's depiction of Aboriginal characters and of traditional Aboriginal society reflects European, and specifically Romantic literary traditions and strategies: in placing her characters "alone in an open prospect, responding in spirit to the attributes and alterations of a landscape, and ... made aware of a new stage in ... growth by coming to a new accounting with the natural scene" (Abrams p.92), and in the value she places on the primitive.

I believe that Wrightson was also seeking some way to "indigenize" her white characters. Barney, the son of the dairy farmer on whose property Eustace lives with his uncle and aunt, begins to understand something of the connexion between Aboriginal people and the land, and thereby begins to have a relationship with that land other than one of conquest or theft or exploitation. But the means by which Wrightson asserts that relationship —by using indigenous characters in fundamentally European ways —exemplifies the paradox of Goldie's notion of "indigenization": what he calls "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (p.13).

Thirteen years after publishing *The Rocks of Honey* Wrightson published *The Nargun and the Stars*, a novel that in Brenda Niall's words marks "a turning point in Australian children's literature"

because of "its evocation of authentic bush magic" (p.5). The core of the novel is that commonplace of children's literature, the growth and healing of an orphaned child, and those processes occur in a form in which they often occur in European literature, the pastoral. The child, Simon, must face the anger and despair he feels following the deaths of his parents—in Jungian terms, he must face his "Shadow"—and he does so in an isolated setting with the help of two wise adults. To that extent there is nothing unusual in the text. The unusual enters in the "evocation of authentic bush magic". Wrightson takes a step beyond the use of an Aboriginal child character; she also uses what may best be described as figures of Aboriginal folklore to produce a fantasy that could credibly be set in Australia.

The magical characters of Wrightson's novel are not those of what Langton calls "Once-Upon-a-Time", the kingdom somewhere in "northern Europe sometime between the fall of Rome and the invention of the internal combustion engine" (p.437) that one finds in the novels of such writers as Alan Garner, Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Ursula Le Guin. Wrightson's magical characters in this and later novels are drawn from her reading of readily available sources such as Aldo Massola's *Bunjil's Cave*, Roland Robinson's *The Feathered Serpent* and *The Man Who Sold His Dreaming*, Bill Harney's *Tales from the Aborigines*, and from slightly less accessible sources such as L.E. Threlkeld's account of the Awabakal people of Lake Macquarie or Ethel Hassell's memoir of early settlement in the Stirling Ranges of Western Australia. As Wrightson explains in the author's note preceding the first novel of the *Wirrun* trilogy, these spirit characters are "not the ritual figures of the creative myths but the gnomes and heroes and monsters of Australia"; they are "spirits not held to be secret or sacred, not involved in creation or preservation, but only in the chanciness of daily life" ("Accident" p.612). In citing the sources of her spirit creatures and limiting herself to those which had been described in discussions of folklore rather than religion, Wrightson shows commendable scrupulosity, but she is also aware of the need to claim "a writer's leave to employ them in [her] own stories in [her] own way" (Author's Note, *The Ice is Coming*).

Like *The Rocks of Honey*, *The Nargun and the Stars* deals with matters that can be described as religious and "indigenizing," and the spirit creatures are associated with both. The beginning of the central character's healing occurs most dramatically on a mountain top in a moment in which he experiences a sense of unity with the natural

world, feeling "the earth rolling on its way through the sky, and rocks and trees clinging to it, and seas and strands of rivers pressed to it, and flying birds caught in its net of air" (p.61). While musing on the spirits he also gathers a sense of his impermanence and of a lost Eden: "[p]eople might come and go," but the spirits had "belonged here always," and in the past "they had lived hidden in a wide world of forests instead of fleeing from one small scrap to the next" (p.62). In two underground journeys, Simon literally descends into the land and faces his "shadow" in the form of the Nargun. Through the Nargun he also comes to understand Wrightson's bleakly stoical view of human isolation and the supreme value of uncomplaining endurance: "to bear all age, all emptiness, all evil and good; without hope or despair; with rock-like patience" (p.134).

Further, through his contact with the spirits, through his understanding of the brevity of human life and of the need to be "in charge" of land rather than an owner and exploiter of it, and through his courage in dealing with the threat of the Nargun to the well-being of the place and its spirits, Simon also earns some sort of spiritual claim to the land — a notion further supported by Wrightson's comparison of Simon's cousins, who care for the land and know the spirits, with other people who damage it for short-term gain. As in *The Rocks of Honey*, however, the spiritual claim to the land is basically made through Aboriginality. While the spirits of the land are associated with its natural features such as water, stone, and trees, they are drawn from Aboriginal folklore and linked by authorial comment and by language and appearance with Aboriginal people. Wrightson's use of the Nargun as an outgrowth of the natural world and as a symbol of endurance and stoic patience also caused an ethical problem of which she is acutely conscious. She had made the Nargun a creature something like an enormous boulder; further reading indicated that the Narguns of the Aboriginal folklore of eastern Victoria were like people, though made of stone. Though, as she herself says, it "seems fantastic that [her] own personal Nargun could alter or damage the real one", she cannot now take it back ("Cultures" p.197). Nevertheless, her scrupulosity may have caused the Aboriginal author, Jack Davis, to encourage her in 1978 to "[b]e bolder" in her use of Aboriginal folklore (Norst p.205).

Wrightson was by then embarked on a trilogy that was to take her five years to complete, an Australian "high fantasy" rivalling the work of Le Guin or Tolkien. She is careful to append author's notes to each novel indicating her sources and explaining any invention. Significantly,

though, Wrightson's central characters are now contemporary Aboriginal people rather than Europeans; she has gone beyond using Aboriginal folklore to presenting what purports to be an Aboriginal view of the land and its spirits. In the first book of the trilogy she postulates three kinds of Australians with decreasingly proportional claims to the land: the People (the Aborigines, who have a mystical union with the land), the Inlanders (farmers and graziers who depend upon the land for their livelihood), and the Happy Folk (urban Australians who take little notice of the land at all). The second and third novels of the trilogy, however, concentrate almost exclusively on the hero-tale of *Wirrun* and upon Aboriginal or spirit characters and use increasingly remote settings.

The *Wirrun* trilogy attempts what Beatson calls the development of "legend": the "imaginative fusion of the soul of a nation with its country" through a literal "descent of the spirit of a people into their land, experiencing completely its unknown content of beauty and terror" (p.64). As an Aborigine, Wrightson's *Wirrun* has a mystical claim to the land from the beginning. He is unaware of that relationship at first, and becomes conscious of it in the by now familiar setting of a mountain top. After defending the land against uncontrolled spirits, *Wirrun* learns that he has achieved the equivalent of initiation and that his claim to the country is not local, as it normally is in Aboriginal society and religion, but extends "[f]rom sea to sea" (Water p.36). That claim is reinforced through his marriage to the land in the form of the Yunggamurra, a spirit creature drawn from the folklore of Aborigines of the Northern Territory, through his return to a traditional Aboriginal way of life, and through stoical endurance of suffering —suffering to the point of death—in accepting what appears to be the loss of the Yunggamurra and in fighting against a man-made but powerful magical creature called *Wulgaru*. As noted earlier, the hero tale also exemplifies the Jungian process of individuation, ending in *Wirrun*'s becoming part of a life beyond what Jung sees as the limited existence of the individual ego (Jacobi p.125). Through *Wirrun*, Wrightson also makes explicit the indigenizing intention of the novel, presenting him, in his own words, as "a sort of bridge between white men, People, earth-things, the lot" (Wind p.44).

In addition to using *Wirrun*'s story to establish for her readers an imaginative and spiritual connexion with the land, Wrightson uses it to develop a post-Christian world view that regards humankind as outgrowths of nature (Ice p.11), death as a return to nature (Water p.178), and self-realization as the highest good (Wind p.148). Through

Wulgaru, Wrightson rejects what she describes as the "tormenting hazard" (Wind p.113) of notions of sin and judgment, considering them to be, like Wulgaru, terrifying but man-made. As usual, Wrightson carefully notes her sources and is meticulously careful not to alter any detail of the stories. No matter how careful she might be, however, Wrightson is also associating indigenous stories (admittedly at two removes) with her own view of humankind as mortal outgrowths of a self-sufficient universe and of salvation as self-realization through endurance of suffering. Significantly, the novels following the Wirrun trilogy seem to limit inheritance to indigenous people: *A Little Fear* shows the defeat of a white character in a struggle for the land, and *Balyet* is centred around an Aborigine, Granny Willett, the traditional custodian of a sacred site. Since 1989, Wrightson has avoided using figures from Aboriginal folklore, and in a letter of January 4, 1990, expressed the intention "to invent fantasy figures that take Australian authenticity only from a background of known Australian folklore."

Wrightson's care with the use of Aboriginal folklore, her eventual expression of indigenizing reasons for using it and her intention not to use it further, bring the ethical bases of that use into discussion. As an indigenizing author, caught between the necessity of using Aboriginal material and the impossibility of stepping outside the view of the indigene as defined by white culture, Wrightson is contributing to an ideological climate of which Aborigines and whites are now much more aware than they were in the past. In 1960 her use of Aboriginal material was admirable because it sought to bring Aboriginal people and their experience into the world of young readers, and because few if any Aboriginal people would have or could have written as she did at that time. But Wrightson is now in the position of the anthropologist as described by Clifford Geertz:

The entry of once colonized or castaway peoples, (wearing their own masks, speaking their own lines) onto the stage of global economy, international high politics, and world culture, has made the claim of the anthropologist to be a tribune of the unheard, a representer of the unseen, a kenner of the misconstrued, increasingly difficult to sustain (p.133).

Further, while Wrightson's use of sources has been careful and open, each source has inevitably been shaped by its author or collector and its time and place in the colonial history of Australia and then reshaped by Wrightson's use of it to such an extent that in hindsight

her desire for "authenticity" seems impossible to attain. Because "authenticity" is almost impossible to define, the contention that it can be found only when indigenous people write about indigenous people is dubious—quite apart from the difficulties of defining who is and who is not an indigene in a country of mixed antecedents and cultures and in a literature inevitably shaped by the language and forms of Europe. Also, Clifford Geertz's words about anthropology apply again:

Ex ante prescriptive criticism—this is what you must do, that is what you must not—is as absurd in anthropology as it is in any other intellectual enterprise not dogmatically based. Like poems and hypotheses, ethnographies can only be judged ex post, after someone has brought them into being (p.147).

If nothing else, literary theory has destroyed the illusion that novelists or anthropologists describe what is "there", and has made us aware of the effects of inevitable asymmetry of power in descriptions of colonized peoples by colonizers or even by the peoples themselves. Wrightson's scrupulosity may well reflect not only her respect for Aboriginal culture and people and a concern not to misrepresent either, but also a realization of that asymmetry. As Catherine Berndt puts it:

The increasing interest in Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal stories is long overdue, but it must be balanced by transmission within the Aboriginal scene—not allowed to slip out of Aboriginal hands. Otherwise, it could become something that exists only in books, or in the minds of non-Aborigines, in a new and subtle kind of takeover, a new phase of the old colonial relationship (p.149).

As with her *Nargun*, Wrightson cannot now take back thirty years of writing—nor should she wish to do so, even though she is in the strange position of being cited in the same article as a writer whose work encroaches, to some degree, upon the culture of Aborigines and as an example of a person sensitive to Aboriginal rights and needs (Singh p.13, p.16, p.17). That sensitivity has led her now to leave the field of writing of indigenous experience to those who may have a better claim to express it. But her work has done much, despite its inevitable limitations, to lead to the desirable end that Geertz suggests:

"to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way" (p.147). Getting out of each other's way, however, may not be enough. Rather we should continue to encourage indigenous people to express their view of things, thereby giving the dominant white culture a more varied and subtle understanding of indigenous culture and a greater awareness of the difference between indigenous experience and that of the white majority. Greater understanding and awareness may lead white Australians to acknowledge the colonial history of the past two centuries and to be content to share rather than inherit the land. And with such a development I believe Patricia Wrightson would be well content.

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