

Rewriting the Landscape: Judith Wright's Fragile Land and Haunted Self

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When I was writing this paper and admitted that my choice of author was Judith Wright, people sometimes responded with a quizzical silence. Or was it an embarrassed silence? Maybe I am exaggerating, but even so, I do get the distinct impression that for many people Judith Wright is *passé*—a bit like poetry itself. As far back as 1971 the headlines of a review in the *Canberra Times* stated 'Judith Wright, No Poetic Hasbeen'. When Maurice Dunlevy addressed a class of high school students one of them called her 'Bloody old Grandma Wright,' only to add, 'she's a has-been' (14).

Wright, whose major publications date from 1946 to 1992, is no has-been. On the contrary, she has been a writer ahead of her time. She understood the need to re-imagine the landscape as fragile. She also understood the importance of Aboriginal Australians' relationship with the landscape and the need for non-Australians to come to terms with the unwritten aspect of pastoral history—the absent narrative of indigenous dispossession. My topic focusses on Wright's desire to amend the situation through her writing.

For Wright to be branded as a has-been in 1971 suggests that students learnt very little about her. Maybe all they knew was that she was responsible for *that* poem, 'Bullocky' (CP 17). Obviously it was not common knowledge that 'Old Grandma Wright' co-founded the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) and was president of this organisation from 1962 to 1976. One of the Society's major concerns was to prevent oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef (Walker xiv). In 1970 she was appointed as counsellor of the Australian Conservation Foundation. And in 1971 she protested against the visit to Australia of the Concorde, the Springbok tour and the appointment of the Duke of Edinburgh as foundation president of the ACF (xvi). Not bad for an 'old grandma'.

Judith Wright's political activism demonstrates her commitment to environmental issues and to Aboriginal Land Rights. However, she is aware that for whites love of land is a complex issue:

Those two strands—the love of the land we have invaded and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country. We owe it repentance and such amends as we can make, and one last chance of making those amends is to keep as much of it as we can, in the closest state to its original beauty. (*Conquerors* 30)

Wright's love of land represents a desire for integration with the environment, and by implication, reflects a nostalgia for 'home'. Home for Wright is complicated by her feelings of guilt which prevent a harmonious fusion of self and landscape. The positioning of the statement 'it is a haunted country' creates ambiguity as it suggests that Judith Wright herself is also 'haunted country'.

The place where Wright feels at home is also an invaded land. Eden is stolen territory: to live in a stolen Eden is to harbour guilt. Guilt of invasion stems from two main reasons: theft of territory and the subsequent murder or dispossession of the original owners. Guilt is further complicated by the absence of narrative—or should it be the absent narrative, the largely unspoken and unwritten aspect of nineteenth-century pastoral history. The continuing failure to acknowledge this aspect of Australian history results in a failure to confront contemporary issues between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

For Wright, this is a highly personal experience, as her great great grandparents and those following, including her own brothers, were pastoralists whose holdings were at one time traditional tribal grounds. In the Introduction to *Born of the Conquerors* Wright tells the following story of how a bora ring and sacred way survived 'not far from my grandmother's home, and the paddock was named Bora paddock—I wrote Bora Ring about that. I am told the ring area has now been ploughed; ... [it] was not thought worth preserving' (xi).

Judith Wright was born in 1915 and raised on a station not far from Armidale. She talks of her bush childhood days before mechanisation changed the local landscapes so that it seemed 'as close to Eden as humans could reach' (*Conquerors* 29). Home, therefore, connotes an experience close to a romanticised primal origination. Pete Hay comments that 'we have a deep need to be 'at home'—or at least to have a home to which we can periodically return' (11). Hay argues that the need is 'primary and fundamental, and the rootless, itinerant character of modern existence is a pathological condition' (11-12).

No matter how much the critics might disagree about her other poetry, they do agree that 'South of My Days' is one of her finest poems:

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite—
clean, lean hungry country. (CP 20)

The intensity of her emotional bond with her childhood landscape is depicted as a source of spiritual origination. It is one of the many poems from *The Moving Image*, (CP 3-24) published in 1946, which earned her the reputation of being one of Australia's finest poets. It also positioned her as a regional poet, although reviewers have never suggested parochialism of vision.

Judith Wright has also written a different type of regional 'landscape poem', one which voices her concerns about environmental degradation. 'Eroded Hills', published in *The Gateway* (CP 69-116) in 1953, is also set in the New England tableland, but in this poem Wright depicts a landscape in its death throes. This contrasts with the landscape of 'South of My Days', that 'high, lean country/full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep' (CP 20).

In comparison with the tableland country in 'South of My Days' which rises to create a 'high delicate outline', the 'Eroded Hills' crouch, as the first stanza of the poem demonstrates:

These hills my father's father stripped,
and beggars to the winter wind
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped—
humble, abandoned, out of mind. (CP 83)

Judith Wright's love of landscape is an essential part of her very being. Her fears for its future date from her first book of poetry, *The Moving Image*, as the following lines from 'Northern River' illustrate. 'Where your valley grows wide in the plains/ they have felled the trees, wild river./ Your course they have checked, and altered/ your sweet Alcaic metre.' (CP 6). As early as the 1940s Wright demonstrated a concern for the fragility of the Australian landscape.

Judith Wright addressed the issue of the unwritten history of indigenous dispossession in her two family histories, *The Generations of Men* and *The Cry for the Dead*. Indeed she explains her writing of the second text as deriving from a desire to rewrite the pastoral migration as a pastoral invasion. Her research for both texts relied heavily on her grandfather's journals. Albert Wright kept records of his life as a pastoralist from 1867 until his death in 1890. Despite her self criticism, many passages in *The Generations of Men* expose the killings and dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. *The Generations of Men* was written in 1949 but was not published until 1959, because Wright could not find a publisher interested in her version of pastoral history. *The Cry for the Dead*, published in 1981, included historical research as well as family perceptions of the often savage dispossession of indigenes (Cry 3).

Wright describes her father as one of the few people who knew something of the unwritten history of the eastern side of the New England tableland. He told her how Darkie Point, just across from Point Lookout, got its name:

Long ago, he said, the white settlers of that region of the tableland had driven the Aborigines over its cliffs as reprisal for the spearing of their cattle. That sank as deeply into my mind as did the splendor of the cliffs and forests into which that Aboriginal band had fallen. Long afterwards, I wrote a poem about it, titled 'Nigger's Leap, New England'—another local name, disused for obvious reasons. There is another cliff face, near Tenterfield on the northern highway, where the same summary method of disposing of the 'rural pests' had been used ... Maybe my father's oral testimony to what happened at Darkie Point is the only record of that other day of murder. I have never been able to find any written reference to it. (*Conquerors* 30)

Point Lookout, an innocuous name for a scenic spot, seems to imply a bounded perception of wilderness beauty reminiscent of the conventional European definition of landscape—a panorama seen from one point of view—a perfect spot for the artist or tourist. Try to imagine the moment when the naming of Point Lookout occurred. Was the name thought up in haste, by an unimaginative clerk? Did they run a 'name-the-scenic-spot' competition in the local newspaper? Was it meant as a sly cover for the day of murder across at the neighbouring point by someone with a strongly developed sense of irony? Someone who saw in the term 'Lookout' the understatement which for most, slips easily into non-statement—part the containment of our unrecorded pastoral history.

At Point Lookout there floats among the scenery the silence of that unspoken and unwritten history of Darkie Point. The sign itself, 'Point Lookout', becomes a site of irony. Historically, the warning is too late, although in terms of white and black reconciliation it translates into a foreshadowing, especially in terms of the present government's desire to extinguish the right to claim native title co-existence on certain pastoral leases. The racist slur contained in the name 'Darkie Point' continues. The name suggests indigenous ownership of the point, yet it is a site of violent dispossession of local Aboriginal people. Today you can read a brief account of what happened

at Darkie Point when you visit Point Lookout. However, for years, according to Wright, no written records were available. The absence of documentation of the killings reinforces the concept of *terra nullius*. For the site of 'Point Lookout' other meanings float beyond its inscription on a signpost. It is these other meanings which resonate for Wright with the guilt of the invasion:

The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun.
 Night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay
 and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea
 against this sheer and limelit granite head.
 Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.
 Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
 that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
 and then went silent, waiting for the flies.
 ('Nigger's Leap, New England' CP 15)

To measure 'our days by nights, our tropics by their poles, love by its end, and all our speech by silence' (from the second stanza of 'Nigger's Leap, New England') is an acknowledgement of the unspoken, the 'other' history, which, unlike the bodies of the dead, must not be blanketed and forgotten. With the process of telling can come the moment of synthesis.

The synthesis of the massacred with the silence of the darkening landscape, however, amounts to a synthesis of negativity. Wright's use of darkness and the 'bone and skull/ that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff' evokes an image of disgorging of frightened human flesh into the darkness which, for the Aborigines, was both the known—it was their land—and the unknown—death. The familiar 'lipped cliff' becomes the personified monster, gorging and disgorging, and within the darkness it becomes the destructive unknown, or at the very least, the passive servant of those to whom Wright refers in 'Two Dreamtimes' (CP 315-18) and 'At Cooloolah' (CP 140-1) as 'the conquerors'.

The 'presence' of negativity, of silence and absence as tropes are testimony to Wright's concerns about the unwritten pastoral invasion. The act of the forced leap over the cliff face changes Judith Wright's Eden into a place where indigenous absence challenges the very concept of an Australian Eden. Eden as home becomes unstable, a place of ambivalence. With the projection of self onto the landscape, Wright remains a haunted self. The Romantic desire for fusion—love of the country invaded and guilt of the invasion—is a desire for 'healing' of the fissure which fragments the self and fragments the landscape.

The site of Point Lookout is, therefore, a site of Wright's haunting. The voice given to narratives which emanate from the 'dark places'¹ also sings the dirge of an invaded landscape, the cry for the dead, or at least it is an attempt to whisper the horror tales of the ghosts, as Wright does in her poem 'At Cooloolah', from *The Two Fires*, published in 1955.

In both her family histories Wright tells the tale passed down to her of when Albert Wright, while riding across the country, saw the ghost of an Aboriginal warrior. This tale, upon which 'At Cooloolah' was based, is constructed as a reflection in *Generations*:

He imagined a whole civilisation haunted, like the house haunted by a ghost of a murdered man buried under it. The thought recalled to him suddenly when he had seen—or imagined—that tall warrior standing on a plain where no warrior could have been, beckoning him across to nothing but a low tussock and the teas-

ing heat-waves of shimmering air. He was overtaken by a deep shudder at that enigmatic memory. Yes, they were all haunted—his generation. Perhaps his sons would be able to forgive, to lay that ghost in themselves; perhaps it would remain forever at the root of this country, making every achievement empty and every struggle vain. (*Generations* 183)

Judith Wright shows a clear understanding of the need for whites to confront the unrecorded history of conflict between whites and blacks. The need to lay 'that ghost within themselves'. If land is spirit,² then hauntings are manifestations of separation between land and spirit. Hauntings suggest a state of exile. Dispossessed indigenous Australians haunt the landscape, as do the spirits of the exiled Europeans. Invasion of the landscape prevented a sense of 'homeness' from developing because the land was stolen.

Wright's grandfather's vision of an Aboriginal warrior floats among the texts of her family history and poetry. The word 'haunted' also suggests a violent disjunction between the body and the soul—hence the many ghost stories of hauntings at the site of murder. This makes Wright's phrase 'haunted country' particularly apt, as references in both family histories testify to a particularly bloody contact with Aboriginal communities, as the following quotation from *The Generations of Men* illustrates:

They [the Aborigines] had scarcely made even the show of resistance. Looking back, he could never see how it had been necessary to the whites to magnify that resistance, to keep alive in their minds the memory of the few killings, the few hostilities, to imagine dangers that had never existed. Only in that way could they justify themselves for killing, keep their own self-respect. He thought of one man who spent his life in laying strychnine-baits of flour cakes wherever he went, wiping out whole tribes, whole camps of blacks; insane, obsessed by a terror far beyond anything that the reality could have inspired, he had died warning the world against 'those treacherous devils'. (*Generations* 182)

Veronica Brady asserts that the early settlers' fear of Aboriginal presence represented a primitive anxiety: 'something at once alien and terribly familiar, a part of oneself which has been suppressed but which returns with devastating effect'. Moral authority based on brute force suggests that 'our hatred of the blacks may be self-hatred' (*Caught in the Draught* 34).

European records of Australia, produced well before white colonial settlement occurred on a large scale, helped construct the 'new' country as a commodity, another jewel in the crown of Empire. The colonising culture's self interest precluded any serious attempt to produce a written history which records the perceptions of the indigenous 'other'. Colonisers had no desire to challenge the trope of European heroics. Indigenous people were regarded as either adversarial or naively accommodating. Such attempts at indigenous erasure were predominately unrecorded and therefore float as spectres within the space enclosing the printed word of European Australian history. This was much easier to achieve when Australia was represented as a *tabula rasa* out of which the concept of *terra nullius* emerged.

Justice Blackburn in the case *Milirrpum and others v Nabalco Pty Ltd & the Commonwealth of Australia* (1972-73) ALR 65 states that one of the principles which was used to justify the appropriation of new colonies was that of *terra nullius*: 'that the whole earth was open to the industry and enterprise of the human race, which had the duty and the right to develop the earth's resources; the more advanced people were therefore justified in dispossessing, if necessary, the less advanced'.

The perception that the so called 'more advanced' people had not only a right, but indeed, a *duty*, to 'develop' the whole of the earth's resources, is deeply embedded in Judeo-Christian ideology. Approximately two hundred years after white settlement and black dispossession, Judith Wright's poetry and prose expose a part of Australian history which until recently has remained unwritten. The silence surrounding the scenic charm of places like Point Lookout and Darkie Point is broken: the guilt of the invasion is confronted. Albert Wright's musings demonstrate this:

To forgive oneself—that was the hardest task. Until the white men could recognize and forgive the deep and festering consciousness of guilt in themselves, they would not forgive the blacks for setting it there. The murder would go on—open or concealed—until the blacks were all gone, the whites forever crippled. (*Generations* 182)

Wright's poetry and prose are attempts to fuse love of an invaded land and guilt of the invasion. Her confrontation of 'the line of blood' enables her, to some degree, to rectify the issue of attempted indigenous erasure (Reynolds 196). Her nostalgia for a lost Eden is not so much a longing for Europe's Christian Eden as it is a need to make amends for the assumed lost Eden which Andrew Taylor describes as 'the site of Aboriginal people's life within a pre-European harmony marked by a deep spiritual coincidence of people and place' (200).

Notes

- 1 Wright describes how 'reading and research took me into dark places, into which historians are only recently beginning to throw some light' (*Cry* 4).
- 2 In 'The Meaning of the Word Sacred' Wright examines the different ways that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians 'see the country' (*Conquerors* 137-9).

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