

Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country* (Allen & Unwin, 2010)

Judith Wright is both the inspiration and the object of the journeys which Fiona Capp recounts in this book, searching for 'the wellsprings of her art and activism in the landscapes she loved' (139). There are three parts, corresponding to the three areas of Australia in which the great poet lived and worked – the first, New England, is where she grew up, the 'clean, lean hungry country' of the high Tablelands where her family had established themselves as pastoralists in the 1860s, rendered unforgettable by the early poem from which Capp takes her title, 'South of My Days'. The second is Queensland, where Wright spent the middle thirty years of her life and wrote most of the poems for which she became world-renowned: two different landscapes here, the sub-tropical rainforest of Mount Tamborine, south of Brisbane, and the Noosa River system on the coast to its north. The third and final part, 'Canberra and Mongarlowe' describes her life at 'Edge', the home she made in the country around Braidwood near the national capital, and her final years in Canberra (where she died in 2000).

The poet's loves, too, correspond to these divisions – the childhood marked by her mother's premature death when Judith was twelve and her subsequent alienation, as a young woman, from her father and his second wife; her move to Brisbane during the war, where she found the direction that her life and art needed when she fell in love with Jack McKinney and gave birth to their daughter, Meredith; and after Jack's death and her grief, the move south and her later relationship with 'Nugget' Coombs, which remained secret until after both their deaths.

The beauty of the landscapes Wright loved was fraught with loss and grief, and so drove her lifelong search for spiritual and philosophical understanding. During the war when invasion seemed imminent she was struck by the perception that New England was not 'her country' as a possession but it was herself, it was her blood and breath. She and Jack went on to forge a new philosophy of social change that would begin in the emotions and be communicated by poetic language. As time went on she began to see the loved country as having been taken violently from its Aboriginal custodians and then ruined by misuse, by settlement, pastoralism, mining and other forms of 'development'. Powerful conflicting emotions for her 'blood's country' drove her poems. A passionate desire to right these wrongs drove the activism which eventually displaced poetry as her foremost commitment.

With her friend Kathleen Macarthur, Wright was active in the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. Her poem, 'At Cooloolah,' became 'a kind of anthem for the early conservation movement and was powerfully deployed in the campaign that stopped sand mining' around Noosa (136). During the Queensland years her friendship with Oodgeroo (Kath Walker), the pioneering Aboriginal writer, and her growing awareness of the massive injustices suffered by Aboriginal people, led to Wright's dedication to the cause of Aboriginal rights. Capp links the two strands of activism through Wright's philosophical concept of environmentalism in which 'every mark and feature' of the natural world is 'numinous with meaning', as it is for indigenous people (182). Country in this sense is the source of meaning and value, whereas the Western notion of landscape 'presumes a division between ourselves and the land, not to mention the rest of the cosmos.'

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Fiona Capp's journey through Judith Wright's landscapes is, then, a kind of biography of the poet and 'environmental visionary' (ix). More than that, it is also a memoir – for what inspired her to make this journey was her relationship to Wright. It began, she tells us, when she read poems that spoke immediately to her youthful feeling for nature, and realised to her amazement that the poet was an Australian, and still living. She sent some poems to Judith Wright, whose encouraging reply was 'the first in a correspondence that was to last almost two decades'. Then, by coincidence, Wright was invited to her school, 'and suddenly there she was, in a grey cashmere dress, having lunch with our small Year 12 Literature class and talking about the confrontation at Noonkanbah Station' between the Yongngora people and the mining company that wanted to drill a sacred site. Both poet and activist, 'the flesh and blood woman behind the poems I had fallen in love with had miraculously materialised and entered my life' (6).

The introductory essay, which tells the story of their correspondence and meetings, and something of Wright's role in Capp's development as a writer, maintains a fine balance between this personal reporting and her reflections on Wright's significance as poet and activist. Admitting that she 'assumed the right to make demands of Judith as my "literary" mother' (8) she nevertheless offers a captivating example of what Virginia Woolf might have meant when she said that women writers need to 'think back through our mothers'. What Fiona Capp achieves in this remarkable book is a fresh and intimate kind of literary criticism, which grows out the writer's emotional and intellectual engagement with the work of her subject and tells the story of the journey, both physical and spiritual, that she made in Wright's footsteps.

Susan Sheridan