

Philip Mead: Veronica Brady's Biography of Judith Wright

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LITERARY biography has both its friends and its enemies. Readers of the genre may be fans of particular authors, or may be addicted to literary biography in general, or perhaps both. The evidence of literary festivals and public libraries is that these readers are a numerous cohort of a surviving highbrow readership. For anyone, though, with any kind of investment in the subject of a literary biography, it is a dubious genre at best, if not a positively hazardous one. It is unable to be fully controlled at any stage. As in the Coen brothers' *Blood Simple*, 'something can always go wrong'. Authors frequently try to preempt the (potentially) incorrigible perspectives of the biographer either by writing their *autobiographies*, or by choosing their own preferred biographer (like Judith Wright). This may mean rejecting other aspiring biographers, and 'authorising' the chosen one. This can work out to the mutual satisfaction of subject and biographer, but it can just as easily lead to endless and fraught contests over the biographical subject, or to the rarely edifying spectacle of duelling biographers, and in the work of Janet Malcolm, for example, extended meta-biographical commentary — the Plath/Hughes pile-up is the paradigmatic example of our time.

Then of course there is the 'Salinger protocol,' where the author does all in his/her power to minimise and control all the auto/biographical material circulating both publicly and privately. This takes serious effort and may only throw kerosene on the fire of literary biographical desire, leaving the (hermit) author, and/or sometimes the (sleuthing) biographer who thought s/he had it all under control, without any eyebrows, or with a safe full of unpublished manuscripts. That's not the only way in which authors can be control freaks. The flipside to Salinger is perhaps best exemplified by George Bernard Shaw. Shaw happily (and manipulatively) collaborated with numerous biographers (including G.K. Chesterton), and in the case of the American mathematician Archibald Henderson, over decades. Henderson's biography of Shaw, *Playboy and Prophet*, fifty years in the making, was in large part 'actually drafted in the third person by G.B.S. himself' (Holroyd 212). Utterly shameless, Shaw also reviewed Chesterton's biography of himself. Finally, perhaps the least effective in these secular times, but certainly the least self-ulcerating for the author is the public curse on all (post-mortem) biographers. In 'One Cheer for Literary Biography,' John Updike in the *New York Review of Books* imprecates: 'as long as I am alive, I don't want somebody else playing on my jungle jim — disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings ... and getting everything slightly wrong' (3). Ironically enough, the allusion in Updike's title, to E.M. Forster, reminds us that it was Forster himself who said he couldn't care less what people said about him once he was dead. In general, the field of literary biography, then, seems to be strewn with anti-personnel devices.

This is no doubt variously infuriating and debilitating for those personally involved but it is fascinating, all the same, for both the literary biography/author fan and the academic analyst interested in the theoretical and institutional fate of a genre. As it happens, the interest in poetry and poets in this intensely charged field seems often out of proportion to the relative power of their actual poems. For obscure reasons, the 'poet's life' has been an attractive sub-genre of its own, at least since Samuel Johnson was handed, by his publisher, a list of poets to biographise. Perhaps the explanation lies in the apparent power of the aesthetic self to construct unfettered spaces for itself despite the disincentives of oppressive regimes. Like other aesthetic selves, 'lives of the artists' for instance, poetic lives are part of the early history of the individuation of the self in Western culture, part of the emergence of modern subjectivity in the immediate post-Renaissance period. Written poetic lives may also be one of the most digestible ways in which readers get their poetry. The embedded, often chronological, quotations in many biographies of poets tend to contextualise and package poetry more usefully (or less intimidatingly) than a selected or collected does. Or perhaps biographies of poets simply package their lives in ways that mean they can be read as quasi-novels. It is only

in *critical* biography, a relatively rare sub-genre in Australian literary studies, where critical readings of a poetic or fictional *oeuvre* are foregrounded. But a critical biography needs to have an argument about, or perspective on, the work of the author, as well as, pretty obviously, a relation to the multivocal discourse of literary criticism. Andrew Motion's meticulous re-reading of Keat's poems in his recent biography (1997), in terms of anti-Cockney School English literary and class politics, rather than 'Romanticism', is an example. The deployment of such professional literary criticism within the genre of biography, though, tends to cut across other (mainly publishing) imperatives that want to privilege the celebrity value of the biographical subject and the narrative drive of 'pure' biography, over the critical assessment (or re-assessment) of the work. David Marr's award-winning biography of Patrick White (1991) is a good example of such cross-tensions within the bio-sphere. We can see this even more clearly if we compare Marr's White with those monuments of modern critical biography, Richard Ellmann's Joyce and Wilde.

There is also a sense in which poetry and poetics could be said to be at odds with the project of literary biography, which has in common with any contemporary biographical project the essential strategies of unmasking and demystification. The phrase 'warts and all' has become a universally positive term in the field of documentary, biography and autobiography. Perhaps because of a sense of the high (if vague and residual) value of poetry and poets in our culture, biographies tend to arraign poets and the realities of their lives before the court of their poetic writings.¹ And the outcome can be serious. Probably the most notorious instance of this in recent memory is Lawrance Thompson's three-volume biography of Robert Frost. Thompson's treachery in portraying, not a Yankee hero, but a monster — 'selfish, egomaniacal, dour, cruel, and angry' — was doubly compounded by the fact that he had been invited by Frost to be his 'official' biographer. As Jay Parini's biography of last year demonstrates, the readjustments to that shocking act of biography are still being made (Motion 29). Or contrariwise, the careful and critical work of a biographer can be compromised by fugitive evidence of the fallibility of poets, as in the case of Philip Larkin, where the publication of his letters shrunk the poet to a nasty Thatcherite racist. Try as we might to keep our biographical knowledge of Frost or Larkin, say, sealed off from our reading of the poetry, it's impossible. This was acknowledged recently by Randolph Stow in his review of Frances de Groen's biography (not critical study) of Xavier Herbert. Stow asks the question whether or not the academic biographer's revelations — of egregious lying in the case of the absurd, detestable Herbert — 'do not detract from the work' enough to question the fundamental value of the biographical project (Stow 6).

Both Judith Wright and Veronica Brady have negotiated this minefield of literary biography with some success. As much as she was able, Wright has coordinated both the strategies of authorised biography and autobiography by managing to have Veronica Brady's biography appear in the same year as her autobiography, *Tales of a Great Aunt* (1998). In the case of the biography, there is no danger of the Judas kiss. Veronica Brady was always going to be an admiring and politic biographer. Judith Wright is a case of relative openness about these relations of writers to their 'lives', just as Brady is candid about her privileged access, as biographer-by-appointment, to the many traces of her subject's life: 'Disliking the idea of someone else writing her life, she decided to anticipate the "self-proposed biographer ... by doing at least some of the job myself by getting in ahead of her. As I simply don't want my biography written ... an autobiography seems the only answer, but what a nuisance [...]"' (Brady 433).² Also, 'it seemed as if she might not be able to complete her autobiography (which she had been working on intermittently) and would have at last to give in and allow someone to write her biography. Several people had already requested permission, which she had [unlike G.B.S.] refused' (Brady 485). Wright is forceful and open about such matters, while being aware of their several nuances. Brady, also, is candid about her sincere admiration for Wright and anticipated some critics would read her life of Wright as a hagiography, rather than as taking a 'respectful approach' (Bui 12s).³

Some reviewers have found Veronica Brady's approach to writing the life of Judith Wright too uncritical. This is as much a symptom as anything, since the major problem with the book, oddly enough, given Brady's qualifications as a professional literary critic and Australianist, is its lack of generic focus: it is neither a (non-critical) biography nor a critical study, but a mushy hybrid of both. But as the first full-length biography of Wright it has many uses, not the least of which are its sorting of the Wright archive and its account of the intellectual collaboration between Wright and Jack McKinney. It is a wide-ranging and detailed history of a life which many Australians have had some contact with, because of the popularity of

her poetry. This biography begins the work of understanding what Judith Wright's long and richly varied life might mean. Brady's beginning point is very much aligned with Judith Wright's own version of committed humanism: poetic values are fused in the self as a way of knowing and living in the world (ix); human and poetic values can be renamed 'environmental values' (ix), an 'awareness of our relationship to and responsibility for the living world around us' (ix). With her own very public commitments to Australian literary culture, to a certain version of feminism, to activism in relation to social justice, the media and indigenous Australians, Brady seems like the ideal biographer for Wright. This manifests itself on almost every page of the volume as a kind of admiring sisterliness and is one of the most attractive aspects of the writing.

As Brady's version of Wright's life unfolds, it falls into three main stages. All such divisions are, of course, a crude imposition and Brady is good at suggesting the way in which a life is processual and unfolding. Nevertheless, to the reader there is a noticeable sequence of a first stage which includes her young life in New England, her university years and travel in Europe in the late 1930s, her return to New England and the writing of *The Moving Image* poems. A second stage begins with her life with Jack McKinney, whom she meets in 1943/44, the birth of her daughter Meredith and the writing of the bulk of the poetry and creative and critical prose for which she is widely known. Much of this stage is spent at 'Calanthe' on Mount Tamborine. The third stage, whose beginning coincides with the death of McKinney in 1966 is the stage of involvement in many public causes and debates, and continues right up to the present day.⁴

Wright was born in the year of Gallipoli into one of the most successful squatting families of New South Wales and Queensland. Her attachment to the New England district, the property, 'Wallamumbi', and to her family history is well known both from her poetry and from *The Generations of Men* and its much later revision, *Born of the Conquerors*.⁵ Brady traces the detail of Wright's family history, including her mother's life as an invalid, the result of Spanish influenza, and her death when Judith Wright was twelve. She had an elder brother, Bruce, and a younger one, Peter. Philip Wright, Judith's father, was married again the year after his first wife's death, to 'Dora Temperley of Ballina' (39). Wright's relationship with her step-mother wasn't close; they were like 'oil and water' (Blakeney 3). Amongst the many narrative details of Wright's early life and ancestry, the mention of her love for Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* seems emblematic (30). Once again, the narrative of Sybylla Melvin — talented, intelligent, feminist, non-metropolitan, determined — provides both consolation and inspiration for an Australian girl. And Brady, adapting the template of Sybylla's childhood and adolescence to Judith Wright's declares, the 'first step to liberation was education' (42). This education was undertaken in her earlier years by governesses or by older women members of Wright's family, before she was sent to board at the New England Girls' School in 1928. However unhappy school was, Wright already had a strong determination to get to university and therefore stayed the extra year at school in order to matriculate. Brady describes the serious fall from her horse which Wright suffered in 1932, in her last year of school. Wright's pelvis was broken and the complications meant she had to be taken to hospital in Sydney. Wright had already had a serious break to her arm from an earlier riding accident, and this second fall, together with Brady's later descriptions of Wright's ectopic pregnancy (always life-threatening), breast cancer, early onset of deafness (otosclerosis) and later blindness and arthritis, all borne stoically by Wright, provide a moving bass-line about the body to this story, even if sometimes the account of medical details is rather coy.

Wright went to Sydney University at the beginning of 1934 and lived in boarding houses and later at Women's College for the three years she was a student. She was involved in many of the activities of what was then a small university (5,000 students) including working on and publishing in *Hermes*, although she was, incredibly enough, a non-matriculant student. Brady makes no suggestion that this fact worried Wright. Wright's unconcern about her enrolment status, together with her interest in non-canonical subjects like Anthropology, and in Andersonianism and the idealist politics of the 1930s seem typical of her — slightly to the margins of the institution, anti-bourgeois, globally politicised, yet active and contributing at the local level. It is a pattern she repeats throughout her life. At the beginning of 1937, Wright travelled to Europe where she saw at close quarters English and European writers' involvements in the Spanish civil war and experienced at first hand the rise of fascism in Germany. As Europe was preparing for war, Wright returned to Australia, but rather than return to New England, she worked in Sydney as a market researcher, maintaining her financial independence. In 1940 she moved to a secretarial job at Sydney University.

As the war in the Pacific began to impinge on Australia, Wright moved back to New England to help run the main family property. 'Wallamumbi'. The eighteen months she spent back in New England was a time of great creative release for Wright and as far as one can tell from Brady's chronology is the time when most of the poems in *The Moving Image* were written. Late in 1943, Wright applied for, and got, an administrative job at the University of Queensland. In 1944 she moved to Brisbane — warm, corrupt, cheerful, dirty — closer to the war in the Pacific than any other Australian capital city (Brady 105). Wright already had contacts with Clem and Nina Christesen and the newly born *Meanjin*, and was also part of the *Barjai* group, just forming around Barrie Reid and including Laurence Collinson, Charles Osborne, Charles and Barbara Blackman, and Jack McKinney. The story of Jack McKinney and his part in Judith Wright's life is one of the most important strands in this biography. While Wright's relation to McKinney and their intellectual partnership has been alluded to before by Wright, and acknowledged by Shirley Walker in her critical study *Flame and Shadow*, it is here for the first time that the story of their relationship is presented in some depth.⁶

McKinney, a veteran of the First World War and over fifteen years older than Wright, was born in Melbourne (in 1891) and worked, before the First World War, as a knockabout journalist and outback worker. His father had been a journalist on the Melbourne *Argus*. McKinney was in France in the First World War, where he was wounded; he received a small disability pension from the army for the rest of his life. He seems to have suffered badly, physically and mentally, from war trauma. McKinney married Myrtle Gallagher, shortly after his return to Australia in 1920, but she left him, taking their four children, after their unsuccessful attempts at soldier-settling near Kingaroy during the Depression. When he and Wright met he was living by himself on the Gold Coast, studying philosophy, and in regular contact with the Christesens. McKinney had published a novel in 1935, *The Crucible*, about his war experience. He was also a playwright, which Brady omits to mention. Their relationship was an unconventional one for Queensland in the 1940s and they had to negotiate McKinney's continuing, if estranged, relationship with his wife, his rejection of a conventional job and the role of bread-winner, his disabilities, his work as an amateur scholar. What the relationship obviously provided for Wright was an intense intellectual partnership, a non-bourgeois (but non-bohemian) family life at a remove from mainstream and metropolitan Australian life throughout the 1950s and 60s. (McKinney and Wright were eventually married in 1962.) They seemed to have been fully aware of the topographical aspect of this slightly distant relationship to society represented by their living on Mount Tamborine (at 'Quantum est' and 'Calanthe'), above the south coast hinterland.⁷ For the rest of her life Wright would remain faithful to the ideological frameworks worked out in McKinney's philosophy and committed to keeping his writings in circulation, partly in relation to the theoretical foundations of her own work. Christesen had dawdled about publishing McKinney's first book, *The Challenge of Reason*, so Wright published it through their own Mountain Press, in 1950, the same year that their daughter Meredith was born and shortly after she had published her second volume of poetry, *Woman to Man* (Angus & Robinson, 1949). After McKinney's death, in 1971, Wright, with the assistance of Charles Osborne, was able to arrange publication in England of his second volume *The Structure of Modern Thought*, much of which had appeared as separate articles in the journal *Mind*

The second part of Brady's biography details Wright's evolving commitments to various political causes, particularly environmental and indigenous ones, as well as her continuing life as a poet, family historian and national literary critic, her time in the English Department at the University of Queensland, and her life with Meredith, in the years of her childhood at Mount Tamborine and at Mongarlowe ('Edge') near Braidwood, and, later, in Canberra. There is an intriguing account of Wright and Meredith caught in Paris during the worker-student uprising of 1968.

This third phase represents more than thirty years of Wright's life and seems to comprise a double movement: an evolving political activism across a range of issues and, simultaneously, an historical uncovering of personal and national history. On the eco-political front there is her founding in the late 1950s, with lifelong friend Kathleen McArthur, of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, and its early publishing extension *Wildlife* magazine, in response to mindless exploitation of the Noosa district and then the threat to the Great Barrier Reef from limestone and oil miners, opposed by her work in the Littoral Society. She was also a foundation member of the Australian Conservation Foundation (1966); was active in the 1969 fight against Conzinc Rio Tinto and the Bjelke-Petersen State government over development at Cooloola and Noosa, against damming and wood-chipping in Tasmania throughout the 70s,

against Australia's involvement in Vietnam, against sand mining on Fraser Island in 1970, and against the flight of the Concorde over central Australia in the early 1970s. She was active in the early organisation of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and was a member of the early 1970s Inquiry into the National Estate as part of her close association with the Whitlam government and with H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs. She protested against uranium mining in Kakadu, boycotted the 1988 bicentennial celebrations (in solidarity with Aboriginal Australians), was a patron of the Campaign Against Nuclear Power, campaigned against global population explosion, acted as patron of Women for Wik and fought several local battles against development on Mount Tamborine and the threatened resumption of mining at Mongarlowe.

Her work for various Aboriginal causes is paralleled by her long and very close friendship with Kath Walker, later Oodgeroo, and with Nugget Coombs. This began with supporting Oodgeroo's cultural centre, 'Moongalba', on Stradbroke Island and also encompassed the advocacy of Aboriginal writers at national and international forums and support for Land Rights legislation and the founding of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee (Makarrata) in 1978. There was also her work as a founding member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and for the Copyright Council of Australia, for the Public Lending Rights scheme, and for various women writers' organisations. All this work, much of it in the vein of protest, involved considerable travel, organisation, negotiating and public speaking, endless letter-writing, conference-going, occasional publication and lobbying, and was frequently followed up by summary and influential publications, eg: *The Coral Battleground* (1977), the Report of the Inquiry into the National Estate (1974), *The Cry for the Dead* (1981), *We Call for a Treaty* (1985) and *Born of the Conquerors* (1991). The latter third of Brady's biography is a detailed and invaluable record of this vast amount of public work.

Yet at the same time as Wright was involved in all these public issues, forging alliances and influencing the ideas of scientists, politicians, bureaucrats and other intellectuals, she was persistently working away at the archaeology of her family and its relations to the history of dispossession and settlement by whites in Australia. She was trawling through the archives and documenting a history that contradicted the myths of national origin and progress that had grown up so powerfully in the 1940s and 50s. As even a superficial acquaintance with her poetry would suggest, her imagination seems to work equally well on two axes: the present and the historical. In that sense, it represents a kind of white woman's dreaming. Wright was always testing and contextualising her protest work on environmental and indigenous problems against her own knowledge and experience of the Australian landscape and her family's long and complex history of settlement, place and landcare. The ambivalences she felt towards her family's squatting history are perhaps best expressed in the late poetic sequence 'For a Pastoral Family' from *Phantom Dwelling* (1985). One of the discoveries Wright makes in her revisionary researches into her family is about the sources of her own strongly felt imperatives to public duty. For Wright, it is personal (including family) history that generates (national) responsibility.⁸ Brady collates this record of activism against the poetry, but it is little more than a thematic gesture and is often merely illustrative.

Underpinning all Wright's work, whether as a poet or as a political activist, was the particular version of humanist ideology she had worked out in conjunction with Jack McKinney and that inflected her strong advocacy of feeling in art and politics. This ideology has complex historical affiliations but it is essentially anti-Enlightenment and left-libertarian-individualist (anti-collectivist). Adapting one of Jung's titles, and Jung was a strong influence on 1950s Wright-McKinney thinking, one could say that Wright's evolving humanism might be termed 'modern woman in search of a soul'. Other sources came through McKinney's reading in eighteenth-century philosophy (Kant), Wittgenstein, Lévy-Bruhl, Adorno and Owen Barfield (of *Poetic Diction*), all under the heading of the modern 'crisis'. This crisis was both a crisis in language and in Western culture more generally, and was coeval with the beginnings of the nuclear age, the age of potential global self-destruction. Modern — that is logical, rational, scientific — thinking, which had been launched by the Enlightenment bore within it the seeds of its own destruction. Despite the abstract, civilising potential of classical reason it had been betrayed, in the actual history of the West, into fuelling self-destructiveness, through industrialisation, mechanisation and, eventually, nuclearisation. The sense of crisis McKinney shared with many Western intellectuals of the time was intensified by the stresses and strains of the nuclear age. The Manhattan Project had begun in 1942, a year recalled in Wright's own marking of her poetic *oeuvre*: *Collected Poems 1942–1985*. Wright and McKinney both thought that 'Western culture had reached an impasse and the only way out was [a] "change of heart"' (157), a new regime of feeling. The debased reason of modernity, the source of all inhumanity, in this sense, needed to be challenged. The only hope for

mankind was in a fundamentally revolutionised reason, a new human reason, that was in fact much closer to poetic thinking (127). This new reason would be the source of a new Enlightenment, simultaneously producing a new consciousness within the polis (Mohanty 3):

Owen Barfield, whose Poetic Diction they read and admired, for instance, argued that: the possibility of man's avoiding self-destruction depends upon his realizing before it is too late that what he let loose over Hiroshima, after fiddling with its exterior for three centuries was the force of his own unconscious mind. [...] So long as a 'nothingness within [matched] the nothingness without', [...] he argued, the world would be in danger. What was necessary was 'to live in harmony with the unconscious depths of [our] being', and the way to this was through the 'participant knowledge' of poetry, which enables us to 'live in harmony with nature, as distinct from riding — or being ridden — roughshod' [...] over it, which is characteristic of our culture. Read in this light the poems in Woman to Man take on a different complexion. They are not just poems about 'women's experience' though they begin there, but attempts also at the 'felt change of consciousness' Barfield speaks of, 'the full meanings of which are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames — ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them'. (Brady 136–37)⁹

At the core of this version of humanism, at least in its earlier stages, is a concern with language which Brady might have drawn out more, especially the episode of *Language* magazine in the early 1950s, a two-issue project edited by the obscure figure Geoffrey Alan Mill and including work by Wright, Harry Hooton, and Sylvia Lawson, amongst others. The other important text here in relation to the centrality of language to the modern crisis, and which Brady doesn't mention, is J.L. Hevesi's edited collection of translated essays by Proust, Valery, Sartre, Paulhan, Ponge and Parain, *Essays on Language and Literature*, of 1947. This collection was a crucial link between Wright and McKinney's thinking and contemporary thinking in Europe. Brady does, though, offer useful and suggestive readings of poems like 'Unknown Water' and 'The Two Fires' through the lens of these intellectual concerns. Brady's account of the intellectual position expressed through McKinney's writing and Wright's poetry is fuzzy around the edges, but it at least suggests some of the contextual understanding that the poetry deserves.

It is a great pity Wright did not continue her intellectual inquiries after McKinney's death and into the poststructuralist era in Australia. Such an extension of her thinking might have allowed her to develop, in tandem with her political activism and the liberation movements of the early 70s she had so much sympathy with, a 'positive elaboration of the human', including the aesthetic and social justice (Mohanty 137–38). What happens instead, and this is probably bound up with the complex question of the falling away of her poetic productivity, is that the version of humanism she is committed to is increasingly emptied out of effective discourse and leaves her painted into the corner of an old-fashioned (if genuine) aesthetic ideology (poetry is art; art is for understanding individual human lives) and, before long, anti-intellectualism. This dilemma was already there, in miniature, in her and McKinney's earlier thinking. The 'Age of Enlightenment' had originally impelled the techno-scientific trajectory in the West that Wright so abhorred, but it also expanded the universe and embodied the discovery of the immensity of time that Wright is so captivated by in her meditations on nature, meditations that always situate the present within a universal economy of the temporal.

Also at the centre of this Australian humanism, forged by McKinney and Wright, is a prophetic imperative for a change of heart and consciousness on the part of all human beings. This leads, at the level of Brady's account of much correspondence and conversation between Wright and her many interlocutors, to querulous and rather wearying calls for humanity to reconstitute itself: 'the canker in Western society is greed and materialism' (Bui 12s); 'we have a crisis of values in our country at the moment' (Blakeney 3) etc etc. Often Wright sounds like a one-woman superego. But in the hands of the political activist, humanist indignation can provide powerful and adaptable strategies for use against institutionalised forms of state and national racism (in favour of indigenous rights) and the excesses of economic rationalism. It can very easily be inflected, for example, for indigenous values. Perhaps one of its greatest strengths, as Wright insists, is its resolute anti-transcendentalism. For all her advocacy of the values of poetry, of poetry *as* a value, and of the conjunction of human and environmental values (404), there is never even the hint of a recourse to any transcendent or higher being/world/authority. It is a very grown-up ideology in Kant's sense, of an

emergence, by man, from self-inflicted immaturity. One thing it can't do, though, is situate poetry within the mainstream of Australian culture. And that is something which Wright sees, and feels, acutely. For all the force and depth of her poetry — or any poetry — it doesn't look like changing the world. This is part of the unexamined aesthetic assumptions of this version of humanism, which has to begin from, rather than question, the value of the aesthetic. Wright can never, for example, ask questions about the social ideologies incarnated in poetic form, rather than poetic content (Eagleton 27).

As I mentioned, there are some problems with this biography. It doesn't give the reader enough of a sense of Wright within her intellectual and literary context. Contemporaries (broadly speaking) like Hope, McAuley, White, FitzGerald, Dobson, Manning Clark, Oodgeroo are mentioned, but Wright's work is rarely calibrated in either its concerns or its milieu against the rich culture of writing and social change she has lived through. James McAuley, for example, only two years younger than Wright, was formed by the same national and global discourses as Wright, from Sydney Andersonianism in the 1930s to Cold War apocalypticism in the 1950s and 60s. He also was involved in political activism at crucial periods of his adult life and in writing about the 'crisis' in Western culture, including the ideology of poetic form, although in his case in the registers of anti-modern polemic and Catholic revelation. Wright may have been an instinctive, sometimes feral, individualist but that doesn't mean that the substance of her intellectual and aesthetic work doesn't have crucial relations to the development of Australian political and artistic culture generally. The history of humanism in Australia, for example, which is central to the cultural history of Australia from 1940 to 1970, could take Wright as its exemplary instance. With all her ancestral ties to Australia's settler past, Wright begins writing at a time when, within the crisis of values (European derived), poetry has a high cultural value and an ability to sustain faith in its efficacy as a way of knowing. The split that occurs, though, as its power to address political institutions and discourses wanes, produces (in Wright) a stoical aestheticism, or (in McAuley) an hysterical propheticism. Then there's the instructive instance of A.D. Hope's academic, that is non-public, defence of discursive poetry in relation to Wright's public embodiment of the lyric, prophetic voice. That Brady barely alludes to any of this intellectual intermixture is all the more disappointing given Wright's own pioneering work, for example, in literary scholarship and interpretation in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965) and *Because I was Invited* (1975). Wright's reading of Australian poetry, history and authorship, particularly in *Preoccupations*, remains one of the most intellectually forceful and brilliant works of Australian literary scholarship. As well, Wright's writing about Australian literature also evinced a critical interest in the institutions of literature in this country (for example, education, public policy, copyright) long before academic literary criticism did. There are many aspects of Wright's career as a writer that are crying out for study under the heading of literary production.

Brady also gives very little sense of the specifics of Wright's development as a poet. One of the obvious things about Wright is the astonishing completeness of her talent, from the very first poems, and in some ways that makes it difficult to talk about 'development'. But Brady tends to treat the poems, not as belonging to individual volumes with their own poetic and material micro-histories and possibly to biographically analogous moments, but too much as occasional expressions of self. Thus, there is far too much heedless swapping over from the account of the life-events to the merely illustrative quotation of the poems. That is, Brady doesn't really take up the complex implications of Wright's own point in her 'Foreword' to her *Collected Poems* about her 'poems having been written out of the events, the thinking and feeling, the whole emotional climate and my own involvements of that time'. Brady tends to reduce them to occasional expressions of self.

At the level of the genre of biography there is often a problem with the style. Readers of biography need to know *how* the biographer knows what s/he is relating. This isn't a matter of citation, although that's part of it. The sourcing of this biography is, as far as I have checked, compendious and accurate. The problem is with a great many locutions — such as 'Judith loved the coast' or 'Judith worried about ...' — that suggest a kind of privileged access to the actual Judith Wright's thinking at the time. Of course, Brady did have authorised access to Wright's papers and even to the writer herself in personal conversation, and the biographer has to work with this fiction some of the time, but the reader can't quite believe such continual biographical claims. There grows up the unconvincing spectre of a biographical self rather than the convincing illusion of the real self as comprised of various textual and photographic traces. Lastly, it has to be said that while Brady has written a 'respectful' biography, one that is sympathetic and inclusive to its subject, this has meant she hasn't been able to write a very searching one. The way in which she walks

around intimacies is one sign of this (Blakeney 3). At the same time as the intellectual and poetic life of Judith Wright is blurred into the 'life as a whole,' the intensity and intimacy of Wright's relationship with McKinney and with other men and women before and after that predominant relationship is veiled. Brady is quite well aware of this, of course, and as she acknowledges, other, different lives of Wright will be written. There will no doubt be accounts of Wright's life that focus much more psychoanalytically on her sexual and emotional life and on the symptomatics of her activist writing in relation to her poetry and fiction. But it's also true, as Brady shows us, that this is a life of monumental significance.

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Notes

- 1 The public debate about the style and content of the proposed new preamble to the Australian constitution has involved the Prime Minister, John Howard, in consultations with 'respected wordsmiths' within our culture. It was Les Murray to whom Howard turned in search of literary endorsement, just as Michael Tate, a Labor minister, had previously done. Perhaps 'wordsmith', with its bluff and workaday associations is a less risible term, in John Howard's mind, than 'poet'.
- 2 Brady is quoting Wright in a letter to Barbara Blackman, September 1984.
- 3 ' "I've had quite a lot of arguments with numbers of people who believe in the publish-or-be-damned school of thought. I'm afraid I don't, since I felt I owe a great debt of gratitude and honour." These are the drawbacks of "being chosen", she continues. "Other people will write a different kind of biography"' (Blakeney 3).
- 4 See for example a newspaper report about some women's responses to the draft pre-amble to the constitution: 'Yesterday Ms Wright, 83, told *The Australian* "To use the term [mateship] in the preamble would seem to me to assert a pre-feminist stance for all Australia," she said. "We're all Men from Snowy River it seems. I hope women will stamp on this one" ' (Rintoul and Harbutt 5).
- 5 Brady spells it 'Wallamumbi' throughout: Shirley Walker, in *Flame and Shadow*, favours 'Wollomombi'.
- 6 In Walker's Appendix, she quotes a letter from Wright to herself: 'Since, as you've observed, there was so much of the influence of Jack's work in the poems, I've despaired of the kind of criticism I've had so far; just as I've despaired

of Jack's work being recognized for itself' (213). Walker, though, makes almost nothing of this in her critical study of Wright.

7 'Quantum est', 'it is enough', 'Calanthe', the rare rainforest 'flying dove orchid' (126, 150).

8 There is a degree of paranoia in this context, rightly or wrongly, that Brady relates: 'the incident [of Manning Clark being falsely accused of being a Soviet agent] brought back old fears of persecution. She had long believed that her work for the environment and for Aborigines had made her powerful enemies who would stop at nothing to discredit anyone who got in their way, and she was convinced also ASIO kept an eye on her: to be involved in these issues, she believed, was "more than enough" to warrant its attention, [...] and this attention she believed, was thorough. She also remembered from her researches for *The Cry for the Dead* how facts inconvenient to the Establishment had been suppressed and documents removed from archives' (514).

9 The actual sentence from Barfield reads: 'The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames — ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them' (*Poetic Diction*, 1951, 75). [Ed.]

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