

# Judith Wright (1915-2000)

## Judith Wright: A Memoir in Parenthesis and Three Parts

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### 1. Judith Wright was the first real poet I ever met.

I'd come down to The University of Queensland to finish a degree, after seven years of isolation in the mountains of Papua New Guinea, and I was as wide-eyed as a schoolgirl at this sophisticated new world of culture and scholarship. (All this was a long time ago, I remember, but set down this, set down this...)

Australian Literature – what a radical idea! As the late and much lamented Cecil Hadgraft was mythically reported to have said when the proposal was first mooted, 'But what will they do in second term?' At the University of Melbourne, where I had begun my first degree, there was none of this modern stuff – poetry stopped with T.S. Eliot (well, they might have had a point there), and that was it. (All this was a long time ago, etc. etc.)

I sat through lectures on Henry Kendall ('I list the tinkle of the dingle bird', surely the worst line of poetry ever written) and the bush poets, suffered Laurie Hergenhan extolling the merits of Rolfe Boldrewood, and learned about Henry Lawson's drinking problem (they didn't tell us that at primary school).

And then one day Laurie ushered in a mousy little woman with a hearing aid and a sibilant voice. She looked like a suburban housewife and, in the full naïveté of my intellectual snobbery, I wondered what she was doing there.

Then he introduced her, and all my prejudices fell away. This was Judith Wright! THE Judith Wright! She who knew about mad apocalyptic dreams, and martyrs singing out of a bush of fire, and that women believe in the moon...

She who produced the truest love poetry ever written, because it expressed fear of its tenuous nature. She who brought the Australian landscape alive in ways that

no whitefella had ever done before, who (in the words of my mate Val Vallis) ‘took the horse shit out of the bush’.

Here she was, speaking without condescension to a class of undergraduates, rightly refusing to explain the poetry to us (‘if it has to be explained, it’s not speaking for itself’), but talking about her love of country, telling us some of the experiences that inspired her to write, and reading the poems with a passion that transcended that sad and irritating voice.

## **2. ‘They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead; they brought me bitter news to hear, and bitter tears to shed.’**

A cold coming we had of it, on Friday 30 June 2000, but we rugged up warm for Judith. She had died some weeks before, but this was a gathering at the Wordsmith’s Café at UQ, where her Queensland friends and admirers could pay tribute to her. They told stories about her and read her poetry – Arts Minister Matt Foley was in his element, and Val Vallis reminisced about going shopping for ironmongery with Judith in her UQ days, and read ‘The Old Prison’ while the wind blew past us like an angry bee.

Paul Sherman declaimed (no other word is possible) ‘Legends’ in fine style, old friends came up to the microphone and shared their stories, everyone tried to warm themselves up with cups of coffee and, as the stone low wall I was sitting on grew colder and the wind more bitter, I became even more conscious of the weight and waterfall of ceaseless time.

As a memorial service for Judith Wright, it was as you would expect – lots of pious platitudes from people who didn’t know her very well, lots of love in the cracked voice of the white-haired old man who had loved her best, lots of self-conscious claimings of her friendship, and lots of genuine expressions of admiration.

But in the middle of it all, a magpie flew down and perched on one of the sandstone blocks commemorating Queensland writers that stand around the Wordsmith’s Café. It wasn’t crass enough to perch on Judith’s particular stone, but it sat there, head cocked curiously to one side, listening to Matt Foley read.

Later, Paul Sherman wrote a poem for me about the moment, and he has let me reproduce it here (I have to admit, with all modesty, to being the critic mentioned in the poem).

### **Magpie Moment**

The magpie’s mask of milk and black  
outspoke our dour obituaries. The bird  
promptly on cue, left his perch in the poem  
to bend the winter branch roofing our readings  
and you, with critic’s glee spotting an upstaging,  
noticed him first, his feathered zest

rinsing our tinted rituals, topping  
our chiselled tributes. The poet's words  
we webbed with ours, uneasy patchwork  
of earnest moths circling a silent candle.  
The bird hung up a wordless wreath.

### **3. Last month, I took my grandchildren for a holiday to Rainbow Beach.**

I told them the Kabi people's legend about the Coloured Sands, how they were formed when the Rainbow Spirit Yiningie, who was racing in from the sea to protect the young girl he loved, was killed by his rival's boomerang and was shattered into a hundred pieces.

This impressed them no end, to the extent that they didn't even attempt to climb the cliffs and slide down, although they did insist on buying a glass bottle filled with the same coloured sands tortured into unspeakable patterns, which they discovered when we stopped at the hot dog van parked near the wreck of the Cherry Venture.

We drove back to our hotel via the sandy track of the Cooloola National Park, stopping frequently along the way so they could be explorers of the bush, while I saw the written track of a life I could not read on the trunk of the scribbly gums, and the plumed reed and paperbark on the shores of Lake Poona, the immense tower of antique forest and the gum trees stripping, and was reminded afresh that sacred spaces are there for all of us, but that sometimes it needs the love of a poet to bring them alive.

I have no words to praise you, Judith Wright, except your own, for 'wisdom shells the words away ... to watch the place at which these silent rituals are.'

And just as words are not meanings for a tree, they are not meanings for what you have done for the whitefellas of this country. I can never adequately express the debt we all owe you for bringing our land alive for us, and for teaching us that, even in the busy world of words in which many of us live, we can still be quiet and not look for reasons past the edge of reason.