Torn between Art and Activism

TIM BONYHADY

‘Art’ and ‘activism’ are now often paired together. The Two Fires Festival in the New South Wales country town of Braidwood in March 2005 celebrated their connections. Its focus was the late Judith Wright, one of Australia’s great artist-activists. Yet for all her pursuit of environmental and Aboriginal causes and belief in the importance of political engagement, Wright did not think of herself as an ‘activist’ for most of her life. It was neither part of her vocabulary nor used as a term for her.

The reasons are historical. When ‘activism’ emerged as a term in the early 1900s, it was used either to identify a brand of philosophy—a theory that assumed the objective reality and active existence of everything—or to describe any form of energetic action. It was only later, perhaps after World War II, perhaps only in the 1960s, that it became a term for a form of political activity, almost always on the left, dissenting, the stuff of a fervent minority, starting it seems with union activists and anti-war activists, and followed only later by environmental activists, Aboriginal activists and even judicial activists.

*The Coral Battleground*, Wright’s book about the campaign to stop mining of the Great Barrier Reef which occupied her from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s, fits this trajectory. She records how the advocates of protection of the reef began by being dismissed as ‘cranks’ who were ‘anti-progressive’. Before long they were known as ‘vocal’ and ‘obdurate protectionists’, a label they wore with pride. Soon they were known as ‘conservationists’. ‘Activist’ was not used at all.

Wright’s one major use of it was in ‘The Writer as Activist’, a lecture delivered at the University of Western Australia in 1988. While Wright discussed many writers in that lecture, her prime subject was the early colonial poet Charles Harpur, whom she celebrated because of his political writing. She lauded Harpur for wanting to inspire colonial New South Wales ‘on its course towards democratic freedom’, and his advocacy of universal suffrage, social justice and equal rights to education and opportunity.

This lecture raises the question whether the creation of art—whether poetry or prose, painting or photography—can be enough to make someone an activist. Is it sufficient to write with political intent, with persistence and passion, even with
the intention of challenging attitudes and changing actions? I think that activism requires more direct social and political engagement—which made Wright an activist where Harpur was not.

She had some natural advantages. If she was ‘born of the conquerors’, as she first put it in the early 1970s, she was also bred to be a conservationist. Her father, Phillip, was a life member of Australia’s first Wildlife Preservation Society, and was primarily responsible for the creation of the New England National Park in 1931. He was also at the forefront of combating soil erosion—experimenting with a range of measures to stop erosion gullies destroying his property, Wallamumbi, outside Armidale in northern New South Wales.

Nature itself contributed—above all, the phenomenon we now know as El Niño, which was unusually intense in the early 1940s. When Wright returned to Wallamumbi from Sydney early in 1942, New England was drought-stricken. A year later, when she again went south, ‘fire and erosion were more obvious than ever’, heightening Wright’s ‘conscience over the treatment of the land’. Late in 1944 she was in Brisbane when it was struck by one of Australia’s worst series of dust storms.

Little wonder that, when Wright began writing seriously in 1942, dust became one of her key symbols and erosion one of her recurrent subjects. Little wonder, too, that 20 years later she played a key role in establishing the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland and then served as its president. By 1970 she was one of Australia’s foremost environmental campaigners. With good reason, The Australian identified her as the person who had ‘done more to arouse conservation anger in Australia than any other’.

Her pursuit of art and activism—the landscape a source of inspiration for her art; environmental protection the focus of her activism—was far from new in Australia. The writer and artist Louisa Anne Meredith, who arrived from England in 1839, has strong claims to being Australia’s first environmental activist. In addition to writing about an array of environmental issues with passion and persistence, Meredith also secured new environmental laws through her husband Charles, a member of the Tasmanian parliament, and established Tasmania’s first society for the protection of animals.

Wright may well have been a great campaigner without her status as ‘the greatest [then] living poet of the Australian landscape’, ‘Australia’s greatest woman poet’, and even ‘the greatest woman poet since Sappho’, but her literary identity helped. As she observed in The Coral Battleground, she had ‘curiosity value’, ‘the special advantage of being a kind of … showpiece in the conservation movement’. ‘News’ had ‘to be made, and it was easier to make it with some figure well known beyond the environmental movement itself’.

Yet Wright’s activism posed particular problems for her because she was not just a much greater writer than most of the artist-activists who had preceded her, but also a much greater activist. She, more than anyone before in Australia, perhaps more than anyone since, was torn between the two. While she wanted to do both, she often found she could not. Day after day, week by week, year after year, she had to decide which would take precedence. Was it possible for her to campaign in the morning and write at night? Should she put her poetry before her politics?
Should she abandon poetry for politics?

The possibility was there in 1970 when there was a by-election for the Queensland State seat of Albert, traditionally a safe Country Party seat. Just a few months earlier, Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had dismissed protection of the Great Barrier Reef as an election issue. Albert offered the chance to prove him wrong because it included the Gold Coast, where there was a very active branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society. But when Wright’s fellow conservationists pressed her to stand, she declined, at least partly ‘out of respect for her true vocation’.

Even so, Wright had almost no time for poetry as an activist. ‘I was quite unable to do much of my own work,’ she wrote of 1969 in *The Coral Battleground*. Through 1970 she was, by her own account, ‘a full time conservationist’. In mid-1971 Brisbane’s *Sunday Mail* reported that she had not written a poem for months. A year later she finally had a new collection in manuscript but poems were still only occasionally ‘squeezed’ out of her. The reason was that, unlike many other writers and artists, she was not just an intermittent activist who confined her political engagement to occasional high-profile performances, a figurehead for causes she supported. Instead, she bore the grind of daily campaigning.

Wright herself began dwelling on these costs late in 1970. ‘I am a writer and all I want to do is write,’ she declared. ‘You can’t write a poem on the run.’ In one interview after another, she emphasized her desire to abandon activism. ‘I will be thankful when the end of my conservation work is in sight,’ she said. ‘I’ll be grateful when I’m no longer a conservationist.’ It was ‘no fun’, she wrote, being ‘an office-bearer in a small, voluntary, spare-time organisation’ which had no money to employ a secretary, let alone rent an adequate office. ‘No Christmas holidays for us!’ she exclaimed, overwhelmed by how ‘every night meant work’.

Wright, however, also believed that these were ‘crunch’ years when political engagement was imperative. To begin with, she did not want to quit until the Great Barrier Reef was safe from drilling for oil. Before long, new environmental threats were also occupying her. In 1972 she declared that stopping the Concorde—because of its impact on the ozone layer—would be her ‘last effort’. A year later, as old-growth woodchipping emerged as a major issue, she became national president of the Campaign to Save Native Forests.

Many of Wright’s friends believed that she was wasting herself. Australia’s finest literary critic, Dorothy Green, wrote to her in 1970 that she hated to read of Wright ‘vanishing under the wild waves of conservation’. A few years later, Wright’s literary agent, Alex Shepherd, implored her not to become a member of the Hope Inquiry into the National Estate established by the Whitlam Government. ‘There are plenty of good horses, Clydesdales even, to do that,’ he declared. ‘It isn’t a job for a thoroughbred.’ Patrick White added that there were ‘enough Clydesdales, they just have to be prodded into work’.

Wright responded by advising White, who shared many of her environmental concerns, that he should remain a novelist instead of becoming, as she was, ‘too harassed and driven by the battle to concentrate on writing’. When they both spoke at one rally, she warned White: ‘Once you put your foot on the flypaper
you’ll never shake it off’. Meanwhile Wright joined the Hope Inquiry and edited its report, which immediately resulted in new federal legislation creating the Australian Heritage Commission. She only curtailed her activism after turning 60 in 1975. Her birthday resolution was, as usual, to find more time for writing and gardening, but finally she acted, as part of quitting Queensland for Braidwood in New South Wales.

This new life did not help Wright’s poetry. *Fourth Quarter*, published in 1977, was one of her weakest collections. When the poet Robert Gray reviewed it for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, he recognized that her political poems had ‘a flat, complaining, nagging tone’, and suggested that she might have done better had she written ‘full-blooded “crude” broadsides’. A year later, the Queensland academic Peter Abotomey declared that Wright, the conservationist, had become ‘destructive’ of Wright, the poet, bringing her ‘to a standstill’.

Wright, however, was still a major writer. *The Coral Battleground*—first published in 1977 and reprinted in 1997—is the best extended account of an Australian environmental campaign. *The Cry for the Dead*, her family history, is a great book. Written in lean prose without any histrionics, it is one of the most compelling accounts of the destructiveness of the pastoral frontier.

Wright dwelt on the significance of this writing at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in 1985, around the time she abandoned poetry altogether. Wright maintained that prose—including her own devoted to environmental and Aboriginal issues—was ‘as important ... as poetry, and indeed indispensable to the writing of poetry itself’. It was time, she suggested, to adopt ‘a wider and less primly exclusivist approach to the study of Australian writing’.

Wright’s academic audience was deaf to this argument. Too many of them had based their own careers on the established hierarchy in which political writing was suspect—lucky to occupy even a bottom rung on the literary ladder, excluded from school and university syllabuses, ignored in literary journals and histories. While the usual practice of the Association was to publish the opening address at its conferences, it failed to print Wright’s paper.

‘The Writer as Activist’—her 1988 lecture in Perth—was one of the many occasions when Wright returned to this argument, as she deplored how ‘partisan and activist art’ had no place in the literary canon. She reminded her audience that Charles Harpur had written that his poetry had ‘never been a mere art with me, but always the vehicle of earnest purpose, the audible expression of the inmost impulses of my moral being’. Harpur reinforced her argument that writing ‘was a seamless whole, not to be divided into separate strands, the one allowed to be true art’, leaving the activist ‘other to be disregarded’.

Before long, Wright was arguing that activism was at least as significant as art, however one defined it. When *The Sydney Morning Herald*’s Richard Glover interviewed her in the early 1990s, he asked again why she had not stuck to poetry. ‘There are so few great poets and so many activists,’ he ventured. ‘But there aren’t,’ she instructed him. ‘I get poetry flooding my desk every day, most of it no good, but a really good activist ... ’ Just a week before she died in 2000, Wright was even more extravagant in her deprecation of poetry, if
not her applause for activism. Having just taken part in Canberra’s Walk for Reconciliation, she declared: ‘Anyone can write poetry, but to be an activist is far more important’.

Tim Bonyhady is Director of the Australian Centre for Environmental Law at the Australian National University. His books include the prize-winning The Colonial Earth.