Fanning the Flames of Compassion and Creativity

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The Murri (Queensland Aboriginal) writer Wesley Enoch suggested that when John Howard first became prime minister he suddenly realized he was not big enough to lead the country. So he set about making Australia smaller! Since his government won control of the Senate in the 2004 elections, the prime miniature has pursued his vision with even greater determination. But his enthusiasm has not been infectious. Those who are worried about being mortgaged beyond their means may feel as though they are less likely to get into trouble with Howard at the helm. But are they feeling relaxed and comfortable? The radical changes to industrial relations legislation are creating new stresses and strains, and a deep anxiety. There is a growing sense that our involvement in the war in Iraq has meant that the ‘war on terror’ will soon reach Australian soil. The news on global warming is even more alarming than eco-pessimists had predicted and parents worry about the future for their children. There is not much in the current political climate to make the spirit soar. Some time ago the veteran qualitative social researcher Hugh McKay said that he has never felt less inspired by the character of discussions going on in his focus groups and things have probably gone downhill from there. It seems that collectively we appear to be suffering a bad case of atrophied imagination.

Re-enchantment and Reconciliation

Richard Eckersley agrees with Hugh McKay. The problem, they concur, is that our society no longer has a ‘guiding story’ that can inspire us. According to Eckersley’s take on it, ‘the quest for material progress’ probably worked as a guiding story for western nations in the past, especially for the ‘newer nations’ such as Australia and the US. But he doesn’t think it works any longer. Perhaps he is right in suggesting that the problem has been brewing longer than John Howard’s medicine. Some might call this the death throes of modernist illusions but that doesn’t give us much cause for hope. Perhaps it is better to think that we are suffering a bad dose of disenchantment because that would suggest that re-enchantment is possible. We certainly need to retain a robust sense of humour because there is something in what one wit recently wrote on the back of a toilet door in Glebe: ‘Let’s leave pessimism for better times’.
The re-enchantment we need must be very different from escapism, because we’ve had plenty of that and it changes nothing. It needs to be based on a good understanding of the deep sources of our current sense of discontent and remind us what it takes to dream up another story. The singer/songwriter Neil Murray once went on a pilgrimage from his home in western Victoria to spend some serious time living with Aboriginal people in Central Australia because he had a hunch that he needed this kind of immersion therapy if he wanted to write meaningful songs about the land that he loves. He quickly learnt that any romantic understanding he had accumulated about how Aboriginal people live needed to be jettisoned because what he found was tough and uncompromising. However, he felt the experience gave him a much deeper, yet pragmatic, understanding of what it means to live with respect for the land and when he came to prominence as a member of the Papunya-based Warumpi Band he was greatly encouraged to see the positive response to the stories the band was telling through their music. Of course, a surge in popularity for bands like Warumpi, Coloured Stone and Yothu Yindi during the 1980s may have been partly based on a rather shallow curiosity that has not been sustained. Murray is not surprised by the fading of interest because he says that contemporary Aboriginal music is never going to be ‘comfortable’. However, at its best, he says, it is ‘hard-edged and incisive’ and capable of drawing the listener into a previously unknown world.

What Judith Wright Sought and Found

Long, long before it was popular to take an interest in contemporary Aboriginal art and music, the great Australian poet Judith Wright tried to imagine what had become of the people who had lived so long in the empty landscapes she wandered as a child growing up in ‘New England’. She never forgot the experience of riding with her father near the edge of a cliff on the eastern edge of the escarpment one day when he told her, in a lowered voice, that it had gained the name ‘Nigger’s Leap’ because white settlers had driven Aboriginal men, women and children to their certain death over the cliff. As early as 1946 she wrote a poem about that place, which included the verse:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.

She remained haunted by a deep sense of guilt about what her own ancestors had done to both the people and the land they conquered. And, in 1955, she published one of her most enduring poems, called ‘At Cooloolah’, which began with her watching a blue crane fishing at a coastal lake one twilight. She imaged the crane as being ‘the certain heir of lake and evening’:

But I am a stranger, come of a conquering people,
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
and made uneasy for an old murder’s sake.
In this rather gloomy poem, Wright could imagine a redemption in which we are ‘justified only by love’ but baulked at the possibility because ‘oppressed by arrogant guilt, we have room for none’.  

The problem Wright had in imagining her way to a reconciliation of past horrors was that she was trying to communicate with the disappeared; the ghosts of what had been. Then one day in the 1960s she picked up a manuscript of poems that had been sent to her for review by Jacaranda Press and discovered that instead of the ‘general run of largely boring and cliché-ridden verse that thudded on to publishers’ desks’, these poems by the unknown Kath Walker gave voice to the voiceless; the unknown people she had tried to dream up. Wright not only insisted that the poems be published, she also insisted on meeting Walker (who later took the name Oodgeroo Noonuccal) and the two women became lifelong friends. In one of her most powerful poems Wright described Walker as ‘one of the dark children I wasn’t allowed to play with’ and remembered times when her friend was:

Sitting all night at my kitchen table
with a cry and a song in your voice,
your eyes were full of the dying children,
the blank-eyed taken women.  

‘Two Dreamtimes’ is an unsettling poem because the stories that Wright heard from her friend were even worse than she had imagined. A space is created between Wright and Walker in which embodied pain and sorrow can be spoken and heard, yet there is a turning point in the middle of the poem when a sense of loss is shared:

Over the rum your voice sang
The tales of an old people,
their dreaming buried, the place forgotten …
We too have lost our dreaming …
If we are sisters, it’s in this—
our grief for a lost country,
the place we dreamed in long ago,
poisoned now and crumbling.  

Along with her great friend H.C. Coombs, Judith Wright tried to kick-start a movement for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in the 1980s that only really gathered steam in the 1990s. However, her 1973 tribute to what she had learnt from late nights at the kitchen table with Kath Walker made it clear that reconciliation is not a matter of charity for the oppressed but rather a realization that as long as we see ourselves as conquerors we will remain ‘unloved by all [our] eyes delight in’. Reconciliation involves the courage to face a ‘hard-edged’ challenge to our legitimacy yet it does hold the promise of the recovery of a dream worth having, worth celebrating with a creative impulse. Wright ended her tribute to her friend with the lines:

The knife’s between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country’s bones.
I have no right to take it.

But both of us die as our dreamtime dies.
I don’t know what to give you
for your gay stories, your sad eyes,
but that, and a poem, sister.¹¹

Celebrating Judith’s Legacy

In troubling times people look to creative thinkers or people with some kind of moral authority for inspiration and Judith Wright was both of these. Many of her admirers have felt that we have not done enough to keep alive her vital legacy since she died in 2000 and so, in 2003, plans were hatched for a festival aimed at celebrating and extending her legacy. Named the Two Fires Festival of Art and Activism, it set out to explore her legacy in regard to place awareness, nature conservation and reconciliation in particular but more broadly it wanted to work with the creative tension between art and activism. The festival was held in the small NSW town of Braidwood, where Judith lived for the last three decades of her illustrious life, and it had the appearance of being several different festivals in one. It included a writers festival headed by Rodney Hall, Kate Grenville, Arnold Zable, Jackie French and the poet Mark O’Connor. It was a festival of music, featuring the performers of the year from the previous two Port Fairy Folk Festivals—Kavisha Mazzella and Shane Howard—along with David Bridie, the Stiff Gins, opera singer Angela Giblin and Canberra’s Chorus of Women. It attracted some of Australia’s leading Aboriginal performers, writers and activists—including Richard Frankland, Gordon Briscoe, Anita Heiss, Bobby McLeod, and Romaine Moreton—and it acknowledged that the event was being held in the country of the Walbunja and Yuin peoples, who were represented by Yuin elder Uncle Max Harrison.

A cluster of top Australian academics working in fields related to Judith Wright’s legacy—including Veronica Brady, Val Plumwood, Tom Griffiths, Tim Bonyhady, Deborah Bird Rose, Nonie Sharp, Stuart Rees and David Brooks—headed the bill for an academic conference that was a ‘stream’ within the festival. A festival ‘cinema’ screened some of the best contemporary indigenous and environmental films; activists were able to gather daily to swap experiences and insights under the title ‘The Art of Activism’; Braidwood-based writers and performers put on performances at venues in and out of town; and special exhibitions of art and crafts were set up in a range of Braidwood galleries. Every day, festival participants had the option of going on short or long guided walks, with a highlight for many being a walk to some of Judith Wright’s favourite places in Half Moon Wildlife Refuge led by her daughter, Meredith McKinney.

Activities took place in twelve different venues (not including the galleries) and some were held outdoors in places such as the Monga Forest and Bicentennial Park. Each morning, panels of prominent speakers addressed daily themes, such as place and environment work in Australia, and the state of play in regard to the movement for ‘reconciliation’ between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The wonderfully ambient National Theatre also hosted evening concerts, and, for many, a highlight of the festival was a street parade featuring a large number of bird puppets made by around 200 children from the local
schools. The Melbourne-based community art workers, Burning Sensations, spent three weeks working in the schools to oversee the making of the puppets (some of which were up to four metres tall) and to prepare the show that marked the end of the parade in Ryrie Park. Members of the Brazilian percussion and dance troupe Tumbarumba also held workshops in the schools to train volunteers in sounding out the rhythm that drove the parade along Braidwood’s Wallace Street.

It was the richness of Judith Wright’s legacy that made this rather complex and ambitious cultural event possible. It had a very serious intent in addressing issues and concerns related to the themes of environment and reconciliation; aiming to ‘rekindle compassion’ at a time when compassion doesn’t appear to be travelling too well in Australia. However, it also revelled in forms of creativity that can make activism more effective and more sustainable for its practitioners. While it was never easy for Judith Wright to maintain a balance between her work as a writer and her calling to take action on ‘causes’ that were close to her heart, it was probably her attention to both of these ‘two fires’ that makes her legacy so broadly appealing and the festival sought to demonstrate the power that lies within the interplay between art and activism.

Some of the speakers at the festival who knew Judith Wright well thought that as rather ‘feisty old lady’ she may not have appreciated the attention being paid to her specific life and work. However, Meredith McKinney told the organizers that the festival had been just the sort of party that her mother would have enjoyed. Indeed, she suggested:

> It would have delighted Judith to witness how the passions that fed her own life could take on new life in this festival. It’s been a wonderful way to move her legacy forward and strengthen its purpose.

Around 1000 people participated in the festival. Of those who completed a survey form, a high 62 per cent rated the event as being ‘inspirational’. Confirming the importance of Judith Wright’s legacy to the success of the event, 91 per cent of respondents listed the festival’s ‘philosophy and aims’ as being a major positive. One of the complexities of this festival was that it needed to be organized at the local level in Braidwood and at a national level at the same time because interest in Judith Wright’s legacy ranges from the local to the national. It certainly attracted national attention with reports of the project being carried in *The Bulletin, The Sydney Morning Herald, Artlook, Habitat, Overland*, and *Island Magazine*. Interviews were also carried on ABC Radio National’s *The Deep End*, on ABC radio in Canberra and on the south coast of NSW, and on 3RRR and 3CR in Melbourne.

Both the writer Arnold Zable and the musician Shane Howard—who have performed at a huge number of festivals between them—made a point of telling the organizers that the Two Fires Festival had been different to any other festival they had attended. The Aboriginal writer and teacher Anita Heiss described the festival as being ‘soul food’ that ‘helped to fan the flames of passion and enthusiasm amongst those who see life’s journey as one including the need to change worldviews’. The musician Kavisha Mazzella wrote that she had not known what to expect when she arrived in Braidwood but was delighted by

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what unfolded. She wrote:

It was a kind of gentle atmosphere and at times very moving and stirring ... It was moving and inspiring to hear what others have been doing to make our world safer, better, more unified, healthier ... and I think that anything that brings together all the people who are battling for the greater good of all is really almost revolutionary in this selfish world atmosphere. I felt really inspired and would like to see it happen again. I felt awakened by my own peers and I was feeling how rare it is to have all those unusual people together.

**Extending Judith Wright’s Legacy**

This edition of *Local–Global* includes a selection of articles, mainly based on talks given at the Two Fires Festival, relating to the legacy of Judith Wright. It also includes a number of the papers presented in the academic conference stream of the festival that have been subjected to academic review. While these papers relate to the festival theme of arts and activism they only relate indirectly to Judith Wright’s legacy. The feature essay by Braidwood region resident and internationally renowned ecophilosopher Val Plumwood demonstrates what can happen when we start to dig up the stories of an apparently tranquil rural cemetery, and the essay by Christopher Scanlon, Martin Mulligan and Nicky Welch reflects some work carried out in the Globalism Institute at RMIT University on the role that the arts can play in creating more resilient local communities.

The Globalism Institute was one of the sponsors of the Two Fires Festival of Arts and Activism because it is interested in understanding different ways of working with local communities in an era of uncertainty and change. The Local/Global Community Sustainability research project of the Globalism Institute is a long-term, multi-site, international, comparative and ambitious attempt to understand the complexities of contemporary community life, under the broad concept of ‘community’. This research is located through identified sites in Victoria and globally with a particular emphasis on the Asia Pacific region. Increasingly, such work in these places takes us to innovative agencies and activists who embody a lifeway that goes well beyond economic concerns, engaging with problems of disempowerment, marginalization, violence and history. Such people appear to embody new ideals of social justice and community life; standing out as teachers and mobilizers of new ways forward to social transformation. The work of Judith Wright embodies such teaching and, for us, learning into the way ‘arts and activism’ can help us, through extending her legacy, to reclaim the flames of compassion and creativity.

**Endnotes**

1 As cited by Richard Frankland at a public performance in Melbourne, October 2004.

2 In an interview on the ABC television program *Compass* that went to air the day after the 2004 federal election.

4 Neil Murray talked of his experience in going to live and work in Central Australia in an interview on the ABC radio program Summer All Over, January 18 2004.


6 ibid., p. 140.

7 ibid.


10 ibid.

11 ibid.

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