Some events, the words, the example of some people pull upon our sleeves stirring, even propelling us into action. One response is in giving, as in recent tragedies; sometimes calling upon depths of the spirit we may be unaware of in ordinary circumstances. Like Coleridge’s ancient mariner, they concentrate our senses. ‘Do unto others ...’ may reach a pinnacle in Christian universalism, yet the spirit of giving is fed by springs of long, long ago.

Rachel Carson keeps returning to my mind. She was a woman who felt for the earth, listened to its voice and responded courageously and with a clear mind to the ‘agents of death’. Rachel felt an imperative to leave off writing poetically about her beloved sea. She took up a theme of urgency in the mid 1950s: the deadly effects of chemical sprays, especially DDT. *Silent Spring*, a classic of our times, a plangent voice calling us all to action, left its mark on the conscience of the world perhaps forever.

The arc of Judith Wright’s life is inspired by a similar vision. Each was inspired, prompted — charged — with an injunction coming from the natural world to enter a sphere of heightened awareness, of activism and political writing. It is their feeling for the earth, their agonized awareness of the ravaging of nature, its treatment as a thing that stirs them—and us. And this is because both Rachel and Judith feel for and with nature. Was it the literary imagination that stirred a sense of the ethical? A poet’s sense of the meaning and source of a pervasive threat to the earth? I go for yes!

Rachel Carson, a writer of the sea, captured wonderfully ‘the haunting beauty of a tide pool, a lone crab on the shore at night’—her biographer’s comment on her early books *The Edge of the Sea* and *The Sea Around Us*. Is it accident or omen that words of John Keats inspired the name of a book that touches the hearts of generations not then born? ‘The sedge is wither’d from the lake/And no birds sing’.¹ A poem of two-and-a-half centuries earlier. With *Silent Spring* she became a witness for nature under siege.

Carson, a shining star, is in the tradition of nature writing stretching back to Henry Thoreau. At the heart of its vision ‘is a sober and attentive rhapsody’, a commitment that we cannot help but be obligated by.? These are writers of the
heart as much as the head. Rachel Carson came to see the interrelation of fact and feeling in a special way. Looking back at *Silent Spring* she reflected in *The Sense of Wonder*:

> If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and impressions are the fertile soil in which the seeds grow.³

Again and again over fifty years Judith Wright spoke out for the poetic imagination: cultivate your ‘poetic faculties of feeling and emotion’, she told women writers in 1980.⁴ Ten years later she explained the association between poetry as ‘the voice of feeling and empathy’ and the nurturing of the environment.⁵ The depth of her feeling for place, for the earth, nourished her sense of disquiet at the entrenched view of nature as a resource to be exploited in the name of progress. Narrow, destructive and ultimately unfulfilling of human happiness—as anyone can now see, fifteen years after she made that connection for us. In this same short statement in the foreword to *Going on Talking*, she makes the association between environmental loss and the ‘increasing neglect and unpopularity’ of poetry.⁶

And well might we ask today, where are the roots of poetry’s decline? Why did the Romantic poets give voice to a profound sense of disquiet at Newton’s icy rationality? Even more his unweaving of the rainbow? Did they see in the prism the demise of the mysteries that were *their* province? Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley—and most of all, Blake—reacted with feeling. Blake both loathed Newton and revered him—the great scientific thinker and the ‘enemy of the imagination’.⁷ Newton’s brilliant insights both symbolized and provided a bridge into a social life increasingly removed from the natural world, the conservatory of poets. A world that came to turn everything into a utilitarian value, which we of the twenty-first century inherit.

‘Poetry’, Judith wrote in 1989, a few years after she’d stopped writing it, ‘has to show a way down into, back and beyond or it’s not poetry’. And as she reflected then, poetry isn’t welcome ‘when none of us want to look at the reality of ourselves’.⁸ Did she seek other means of encouraging us to look?

• • •

Her love of place begins in the New England of her childhood. ‘South of My Days’ speaks of the build-up of a sensibility, an aesthetic, an accretion of feeling for place, of ‘the high lean country/full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep’. These are memories embedded in and feeding her poetic imagination; they are also the foundation of Judith’s sense of place in the world. A sense of place that grew in the years with Jack McKinney at Mount Tamborine. ‘All her life, the memory of their years at Quantum held a particular glow for her,’ Meredith McKinney wrote in 2004.⁹ Judith Wright’s love of persons grew into a love of place. ‘In the end, there’s little difference between growing into the love of a place and growing into the love of a person,’ the words of poetic writer, Barry Lopez, whose place has long been in Western Oregon.

Judith was neither stationary in her thinking and acting nor in her physical personhood. Her move to Mongarlowe—‘Edge’, as she called her new place near Braidwood, 80 kilometres from Canberra—at the end of the 1970s, was a sign
of changes in herself. The move was also to change her. Her poetry changed, coming to an end in 1986, her gardening changed, her developing attachment to a differently lovely place to the lush sub-tropical Mount Tamborine, created a new commitment to protect and nurture it, to live, learn and reflect upon its story. In turn this played a major part in creating a fresh sense of place: ‘my soul home in the eucalyptus forest’ she wrote to a friend some fifteen years later. What she fought for in the environmental movement had its vivid and special expression in her growing fondness for the snowgum countryside at ‘Edge’; its rock formations ‘with all manner of wildflowers’, reminded her of her New England childhood. In ‘From the Ridge to the River’ (we walked there with Meredith McKinney during the Two Fires Festival in March 2005), she tells the story of this land by taking us to the highest point of the ridge, where the hip-high dark bush known as Casuarina Nana grow thickly there and along an almost invisible path among quartz and ironstone boulders to the summit. ‘A deep-green in summer ... through bronze and near-purple ... Its flowers are little paintbrushes of dark red’. At the summit, crouching in the shelter of the rocks are her beloved sun and donkey orchids, a few ancient Gondwana plants on the shaded rock ridge—‘necklace ferns, mosses and lichens’.

The latter inspired her poem, ‘Lichen, Moss, Fungus’ — plants that flourished as ‘a delicate crushable tundra’ of many shapes and colours. New ways of seeing, new beauties of nature were absorbing Judith: her prose, her poems, her public efforts to defend a countryside, the earth took on a new quality as love of the landscape grew in her. No wonder she no longer felt the need to reshape what nature provided, as she had in her garden, ‘Colanthe’, at Mount Tamborine. Her poem ‘Rockface’ reflects this change in her:

    Of the age-long heave of a cliff-face, all’s come down
    except this split upstanding stone, like a gravestone.

    Sun-orchids bloomed here, out and gone in a month.
    For drought-stricken years, I haven’t seen those flowers.

    Walking here in the dark my torch lights up
    something massive, motionless, that confronts me.

    I’ve no wish to chisel things into new shapes. The remnant of a mountain has its own meaning.

Judith gained strength from the land to which she was bonded. Yet she came to see another side of her love of place, and there began her cry for the dispossessed. This did not come directly from her experience in growing up. No, as she herself said, it was a new awakening in her adulthood, and a painful one at that. Long before I met her in 1981 her concern was land rights; she saw the need for a treaty with Indigenous Australia. Her vision became a universal, a cosmic one. Much of it can only be appreciated by those who have experienced and shared in the life of the natural world. Like ‘Rainforest’, written in 1983: ‘the forest burns, the tree-frog dies,/yet one is all and all are one’. It was this vision that gave her a heightened sense of the earth endangered, and the thorough-
going disrespect for its living forms became her grave and urgent concern. In her
eyes, underlying these was the Western obsession with material progress and in
our age, the infinite powers of destruction. To this she counterposed ‘the poetic
imagination’. In the light of her life it is easy to see how her feeling for the earth,
her revulsion at the nuclear age, her empathy with the suffering of and injustices
to Indigenous peoples, had the same wellspring as her poetry.

This is the link between the earlier and the very much later Judith Wright who
stopped writing poetry. I believe there is no dichotomy between her poetry and
her so-called activism—itself probably a term too narrowly political to do justice
to the depth and clarity of her commitment. The poetic imagination is part of and
comes from her ‘blood and bone’: it took different forms in different periods of
her life and, in drawing upon feeling and experience, this imagination grew.

The poetic imagination in Judith reaches towards a cosmic unity. Her
engagement and hence her commitment bring together the world of living
creatures with the spiritual in a union where the two may become the one. ‘The
Pool and the Star’ is a poem that reaches out towards this union:

I wait for the rising of a star
whose spear of light shall transfix me—
of a far-off world whose silence
my very truth must answer.

Her body ‘had spoken in her poetry’ — Veronica Brady’s apt words¹⁶ — and its
rhythms were moving her in a new way. Like Rachel Carson, she was gripped
by the certainty that what she had to say was urgent. And the best way she could
follow the impulses of her heart and soul was in prose and speech. ‘Prose’, she
wrote at this turning point in her life, ‘is the natural vehicle of argument’.¹⁷

Writing of Judith’s shift in the last decades of her life from poetry writing to
nature conservation, Meredith McKinney goes to the heart of things: ‘the deep
responsiveness and love of the natural world’ are ‘the seeds’ from which her
later concerns budded and grew.¹⁸ Is this another way of saying she came to live
her poetic vision in the daily round and the wider world of nature conservation
and Indigenous people’s rights to their lands? Another expression of an
imagination that had touched people’s hearts in her poems.

In these years, Judith Wright came to live on many planes at once, seemingly
inexhaustible (writing twenty-five letters a week)¹⁹, a formidable woman, a poet
devoted to the earth, an often incisive critic, an acid tongue. Yet always a kind
heart. In Going on Talking, a collection of eighteen essays based on her talks on
the earth and the human condition between 1972 and 1991, she returns again and
again to the urgency of developing the values of feeling against the domination
of economic and technological progress. In those nineteen years, when she was
still writing poetry, she’d begun to see the need for a new relationship with
nature, and with it the creation of a different kind of humanity.²⁰ Feeling lay
behind Judith’s sense of herself in the world, and its intensity — linked with
understanding — made her act, sometimes like a shot out of a gun. Suddenly
aware of the urgency of a treaty with Aborigines, she said so loudly and clearly:
'We’ve got to do something. I’ll see Nugget [H.C. Coombs], and jumping into her little car she was on the way to Canberra.\textsuperscript{21} Waiting for the High Court’s decision in the \textit{Mabo} case was extremely painful for her; she accepted silence.

The depth of her love of the places she’d become attached to—New England, Mount Tamborine, ‘Edge’—coalesced with her feeling for the planet and its encircled danger; her love and caring for Indigenous people combined with her sense of the evils of conquest reinforced one another. She became proud of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, her friend; she was proud too of E.K. Mabo, whom she knew only a little: ‘please tell Koiki that [we] ... who know him only as a hero will be wishing and hoping for him’\textsuperscript{22}, she wrote, as he lay on his death-bed in January 1992. And she left her mark on us all. I walk with a mutual friend along the beaches of her faraway island. ‘Don’t tell Judith,’ as she breaks off a branch for me to use as a walking stick.

\ldots

I am sitting beneath a rare tulip tree. It’s February 2005 in Melbourne’s Botanical Gardens and I’m thinking of Judith’s strength and listening to a young woman—a teacher?—telling a school group why people shouldn’t use poisonous sprays. They’re all listening and a few ask her questions. Good ones. As I think of Judith (of Rachel too), I feel happy. Judith of the 80s and 90s; that’s the one I knew from the exquisite, if dangerous, first moment of the \textit{Mabo} story at James Cook University in August 1981. Her eyes spoke to me even before words reached our lips.

Not a stationary, Judith but an awakened soul growing imperceptibly in a spiral of awakenings. \textit{Not} two Judiths—the poet and the environmentalist-anti-nuclear campaigner-Indigenous rights advocate—but one in different moods and times that made up a lifetime as they continued to shape her. The same sensibility that may create a poem may also give shape to a wildlife preservation society, a treaty committee, the thought behind a land case, a poem of homage to Oodgeroo.

And certainly her life as activist-campaigner-conscience-of-a-people was fraught with troublous tasks, like writing up the Treaty Committee’s story. Judith as stoic, who \textit{suffered} I believe (even though she seemed to be pain-proofed!) living in the corridors of University House; being meticulous about unpoetic detail; and then facing the travail of approaching one publisher after another. And—only months after \textit{We Call for a Treaty} was published—facing surgery that leads many women to begin winding up their affairs. Not Judith.

She lived, I believe with difficulty, for another fourteen years, not writing poetry but giving talks, writing endless letters, intervening. There seemed to be no outward signs of regret, tension, diminishment, even nostalgia for her poetry-writing days. If her body spoke in her poetry, it also told her what to do at decisive moments of her life.

In thinking of Judith’s life, of the equal head and heart, I am drawn back to the words of one Yolngu land-sea owner from Arnhem Land who sought to explain just the way he felt about his place at the hearings presided over by Mr Justice Toohey: ‘This is my blood and my body telling me what to do’.\textsuperscript{23} At the deep
level of Judith Wright’s poetic vision there is a unity — one that found different expressions at different times. One that endures beyond one’s personal allotted time. Because it comes ‘from a level you don’t know about’?

... ...

The unique richness of her life, its message to those yet to come, gathers meaning in pondering the differences between her era and those gone by. From long ago, poets have celebrated the grandeur, the beauty, the paradoxes of life and nature. Profound feeling pervades the haunting landscapes and seascapes of Euripides’ poetry of the fifth century BC, of the Romantic poets, of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex, or of Henry Thoreau — to name some of the immortals. Amidst the intrigues, deceptions, the pain of human beings, Euripides’ choruses depict the stark beauty of the halcyon alone on the cliffs overlooking the sea, the whiteness of the sea birds lonely on the sand.

Yet now is a time of unimagined threat to the earth, humanly inflicted, one that Thoreau sensed 150 years ago, that Carson spoke of eruditely in the 1950s. Over the next fifty years, Judith’s ethical sense is stirred. There is no turning back from her awareness. Today, five years since her death, the winds blowing upon the earth are chillier and grievously harmful. These spoke to her, pulling at her sleeve. A sense that came to reside in her later poetry:

‘Brighter than a thousand suns’ — that blinding glare circled the world and settled in our bones.

These words open ‘Patterns’, a last poem, a cry from deep in the heart. They resonate with words of the Bhagavad Gita uttered by nuclear physicist, Robert Oppenheimer on the occasion of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima: ‘And so I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds’. For where the loveliness of life is threatened by the truly unlovely:

‘Twisted are the hearts of men — dark powers possess them.

Burn the distant evildoer, the unseen sinner.’

After this there is no more poetry. Judith is entering a new sphere. Her wish is to rally the hearts and minds of women and men to hold back tragedy. A seeming inexorability that only a circle of wills can turn back. The wisdom of the ancients is revisiting us in our time of need for strength.

... ...

Through her poetry, Judith sought to understand her own life and its meaning; that of the reader too. As she said, that’s what poetry is about. It’s not only seeing, certainly not about facts — it’s about feeling. ‘We have not seen a thing until we have felt it,’ wrote Henry Thoreau, a writer with a poet’s imagination. Poetry is also about hope — about ‘an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep’.

With all Judith’s fears of human beings going in a wrong direction, of ‘the growth mania’ as ‘the creed of the cancer cell’ — a ghastly conclusion and key to her 25 letters a week and her many other actions — Judith retained hope. In 1991
she wrote of ‘small buds ... on the human psyche’ that may be encouraged to grow:

Humans have changed in the past; they are inventive and adaptable. With luck and with the changing tide [of life-offering attitudes], they may change again.30

Her heightening awareness did not lead to her rejection of humankind for our frailty, our misguidedness, our selfish concern with personal wellbeing and success. Her sense of the loveliness of life, of nature, of people at their best did not forsake her. ‘We’re an ignorant and evil lot on the whole, eh? But life’s still a joy,’31 she wrote, four years before her death.

I often think of her alongside the artistry and strength of the eucalypt, a tree she loved so deeply; the theme of one of her later poems, ‘The Eucalypt and the National Character’:

‘She ... follows a delicate bent
of her own ...

She has learned to be flexible, spare, flesh close to the bone.
Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,
she leaves herself plenty of margin.’32

Endnotes


6 ibid.


14 ibid.


16 V. Brady, *South of My Days*, p. 446.

17 ibid., p. 447.


19 As cited in V. Brady, *South of My Days*, p. 453.


24 Judith Wright, as cited by V. Brady, *South of My Days*, p. 446.


28 Carson as cited in F. Stewart, *A Natural History*, p. 188.

29 As cited in V. Brady, *South of My Days*, p. 444.

30 J. Wright, *Going on Talking*, p. 119.

31 Letter to Nonie Sharp, Braidwood, 26 November 1996.

Nonie Sharp’s present work focuses on nature, place and people. Her work with Indigenous people in north Australia over 25 years is published in four books, two of which were shortlisted for three major literary awards. She was one of the founders of Arena in 1963 and is currently an Honorary Research Associate at the School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne.