



**Judith Wright;
the basis of our nation?**



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Judith Wright is one of our finest poets, and I hope to say something about her poetry elsewhere in this series, but this essay concerns two prose works by her, both of them about an earlier generation of her family and what it was they did in opening up the land in New South Wales and Queensland.

Opening the land? It was already open, was it not? Hadn't the black people lived on it, in it, inside its many meanings, for sixty thousand years, or some such stretch of time?

Yes, they had, but this view of the occupation of Australia is not widely admitted by the later, invading, society, which preferred until recently to describe the country as *terra nullius*. How shall we translate? Nothing-land? Nobody's land? It isn't true, is it, but it was a convenient fiction.

Using the word 'fiction' opens up the question of the role of stories in human history. Everyone knows the saying that history belongs to the victors. Those who lose battles have their stories, their versions of what happened, wiped away. Accepting this idea for the moment, and applying it to the first of the two books under consideration, it seems to be true enough to explain what Judith Wright has to say. *The Generations of Men* is about her forebears, in particular her grandfather and grandmother, Albert and May. It's

a story of heroic struggle, it's about the opening up of the land, it's about a man who worked too hard for too long, and died too soon to see fulfilment. This arrives only after more years of work and calculation, and it is achieved by a woman whose endeavours are just that little bit less over-reaching, more carefully considered, than her husband's were. Towards the end of the book May Wright, who has made a success of Wongwibinda, takes her eldest surviving son – her first-born died a tragic death – into the office which is the heart of the station property, and suggests – it's a command, of course, but given a tentative-sounding voice – that they should make an offer for the neighbouring station, Wallamumbi. Her words conclude the chapter; it is clearly going to be done.

Judith Wright then allows herself an epilogue to consider the ending of May's life, and the resonances of the life running through later time.

The world that she has built, the century that she encloses, combine to warm her with the sun of this last autumn.

For it is her last. By the end of the year she will have gone to her grave on the hill-slope near Wongwibinda – the grave she chose, as though even in death she must overlook what is being done on her beloved property. As for her world – perhaps by then it will have fallen and smashed with the prices on the world's stock exchanges, perhaps it is already vanishing from round her on the quickening tide of change.

But she at least is secure; whatever changes, she and her century are unalterable now.

She is entitled to her triumph, then. No one can rob her of her conquests, of the awe that she is held in, of the love that is rendered to her by right. She may expect, perhaps she does expect, that not only her children but her grandchildren and their children too – for who knows how far ahead the ripples of her influence may travel? – will all carry a certain stamp, a mark that singles out even the most distant or rebellious of them for her own.

One wonders where, exactly, Judith Wright placed herself on the line between ‘distant’ and ‘rebellious’, but the fact that the book ends with this invocation of the grandmotherly spirit watching over her beloved property, with the heart-shaped lawn in front of the house as a reminder of her late husband’s adoration, and need, for her, shows clearly enough that the poet is proud to be descended from Charlotte May Wright (Mackenzie), and proud to tell the story she creates from the writings left behind. Although Wright ends her introduction with the usual disclaimer – the grandparents may be said to have written this book themselves, while any errors belong to Wright alone – there are many bold pages in which Wright takes hold of their imaginations, their feelings, from within, and shows the world as they experienced it at the time, as the successes and disasters were still developing and the serene conclusion could only be hoped for, being by no means assured.

Wright uses her grandparents’ papers to show them as they thought about themselves, and she uses her inherited knowledge

of them, together with her own memories, to show them as they were remembered. We can sum up this process with two words less opprobrious than *terra nullius* – ancestors and pioneers. The first word carries at least some approval worldwide, and the second is a mark of respect in settler societies such as Australia was and is. In a settler society, everybody comes from somewhere else ...

... except of course, the indigenes, the aborigines: how is their story to be told?

They lost, didn’t they, or is it better to pretend that they were never there? Can we not only say, but maintain, that they were black people *nullius*? Simply leave them out of the story? Or shall we include them as one of the problems faced by the early settlers, those industrious and sometimes successful pioneers, a difficult problem, certainly, but eventually overcome? This was the approach taken by white Australians for several generations, when it was confidently expected that either the blacks would die out (the simple solution) or by well-managed inter-breeding become invisible. But our blacks did neither. They resisted, in the early years, sometimes boldly, sometimes not very competently, weakening all the time until they were beaten. Surprisingly, that was when they were most dangerous: here is a passage in which Judith Wright takes possession of her grandfather’s thoughts, or is it the other way around? My question is not rhetorical, it’s one I put to you, dear reader, because the precise origin of these ideas is by no means clear, and yet they are inescapably *there*.

He thought of one man who had spent his life in laying strychnine baits of flour-cakes wherever he went, wiping

out whole tribes, whole camps of blacks; insane, obsessed by a terror far beyond anything that the reality could have inspired, he had died warning the world against 'those treacherous devils'.

Albert began to understand that this was where the danger lay, the mortal wound that the blacks had known how to deal in return for their own dispossession. 'You must understand us or you must kill us,' they had said; and understanding would have meant – something beyond the powers of the white men, some renunciation impossible to be made. Not for many years, it seemed to him, could that wound be healed. It lay at the bottom of the hatred and contempt that so many men held for the blacks, and which, as he thought of it now, he had himself used as a refuge when it was necessary to condone some wrong or other, some injustice convenient to himself.

To forgive oneself – that was the hardest task. Until the white men could recognize and forgive that deep and festering consciousness of guilt in themselves, they would not forgive the blacks for setting it there. The murder would go on – open or concealed – until the blacks were all gone, the whites forever crippled.

Wright goes on to develop her grandfather's thoughts in an unexpected way, which I will take up somewhat later. For the moment, I think one can say that her earlier account of her settler ancestors shows an awareness of the people her family displaced, but this occurs in the musings of grandfather Wright, and is not the core of the tale. When *The Generations of Men* came

out in 1959 it was seen as essentially filial, probing perhaps, but not challenging, because it told, with love and admiration, a story which like-minded people knew quite well, possibly from their own families' stories. *The Cry for the Dead*, published in 1981, is harder to digest, and it's meant to be. Here is a sample.

... the remnant of the Kamilaroi crept down from their shelters to regard what had become of their old camp-sites and their loved river-banks. They were dirtied, eaten out by sheep, trampled into dust, haunted by plagues of flies and scattered with dry carcasses. On Collyblu, that creek whose name meant Belah-water, the tall trees which had given it its name had been hacked down for huts and sheepyards, fuel to feed the big, hot cooking fires, which were always so much greedier than the small campfires the Aborigines made, and finally as fodder to keep the sheep alive. Waterholes were dry, or muddy and slimy with dung ...

Often they did not know where their own dead lay, burned or thrown into common pits, and this was a terror to them, for their spirits were searching for vengeance and had not been mourned or properly farewelled. At dawn, the camps woke to a fainter and more wavering version of that ancient cry which had traditionally mourned the dead; there were few left to raise it. Moreover, starvation was taking even more, for the yams which had once been plentiful were killed out, grass-seed, shellfish, fish themselves were hard to find. Nothing would ever again be as it had been.

The second of those two paragraphs has a peculiar resonance because Wright places at the beginning of her book a quote from a pamphlet published in 1865: *The Aborigines of Australia in their*

original condition and in their relations with the white men, by Gideon Lang: here is what Lang has to say.

They have peculiar chaunts which they sing in honour of the recently dead, generally just before daybreak, and some of these are very touching. I was told an instance of this by a gentleman who formed one of a party who went in pursuit of a tribe among whom were the murderers of two shepherds. They reached the black camp before dawn, and while waiting for daybreak one of the natives rose, lit a fire, and commenced to sing one of these chaunts for the dead. Almost immediately afterwards, one fire was lit and one voice joined another, until a line of fires gleamed down along the edge of the scrub, and the whole tribe joined in the melancholy dirge.

The observers, unusually appreciative in this case, were presumably ready to launch an attack on the blacks' camp, because it was an article of faith on the Queensland frontier that no attack on white people could go unpunished. White settlers were outnumbered, they were usually many miles apart from each other, the stabilising and supporting features of a settled civilisation hadn't been established, and the land itself was as unpredictable as the blacks. Judith Wright's book makes endless reference to aborigines being 'dispersed', meaning shot or shot at. One wonders how long the camp described by Gideon Lang was allowed to sing, undisturbed, before shooting and yelling broke out, with a few more of the indigenous people turned into memories and chants.

It was a two-way battle, of course, and the white settlers had good reason to be horrified by events at Hornet Bank in 1857 and Cullin-la-Ringo in 1861, when eleven (Hornet Bank) and twenty (Cullin-la-Ringo) white people were killed in surprise attacks. One wonders whether the aboriginal war parties had any idea of what they were going to unleash upon themselves.

... there was no precedent for what followed Hornet Bank. Those who rode out in the weeks of slaughter included most of the squatters of the Burnett and the Upper Dawson, their employees, and their 'tame blackboys' ... Men like Tom Murray-Prior, who as an immigrant in earlier days had been befriended by the Wyndhams, and other arrivals from English families which could find no suitable professions in England for their younger sons, rode out beside their own stockmen and shepherds in days and nights of bloodshed which spared no Aboriginal camp. It was not, remembered Murray-Prior's daughter, a very long war, but it was a thorough one, though it went largely unrecorded.

In scraps of reminiscence written down long years later, men recalled the great bottle-tree around whose trunk dozens of Aborigines were handcuffed, to be killed off at leisure; the swamps into which others were driven, the mountains where they stood at bay to be killed. Pearce Serecold and his party roped together a dozen or more men, led them into open country, and let them loose to run as moving targets for the carbines. Serecold, more imaginative than other men, swore that on that day he had seen black men rise and run, leaving their own bodies on the ground. Few of the squatters were haunted by such ghosts and memories.

The events Wright refers to mostly took place in the country inland of the Dawson River, something over a hundred miles south-west of Rockhampton, in south-central Queensland; this is where Albert Wright held the properties of 'Nulalbin', but Albert is not the central figure in this second book as he was in *The Generations of Men*; Wright has already told his story and devotes her space to things she didn't say, and for the most part wasn't aware of, until she revisited the story.

Story? Stories? How many are there? How many of these tales do we need to get a grip on if we are to understand the settlement of Australia by the white civilisation emanating from the British Isles? Driving through such areas today, whether in Queensland or elsewhere, there is little enough to remind the traveller, the amateur historian, of what frontier life was like in the decade or two of battles, killings and revenge attacks. The frontier seems tame enough now. There are highways, cars filling up at service stations, hotels and motels, trains carrying loads of coal for export, there are maps, hospitable people, shops full of unpretentious goods ... The fighting and fury of those earlier times seems to have been forgotten, dismissed, as if it has nothing to do with the realities of today, yet ...

Yet?

Yet what?

It's time, I think, to go back to Albert Wright's musings, which I quoted earlier, and then cut short. Judith Wright is occupying the minds of her grandfather and grandmother as she causes them to reflect on the people they were displacing:

They ate with the dogs, they had no pride, May thought; yet there was pride in the way they spoke and acted.

Could they have souls? Albert thought so; he treated them sometimes almost as equals, speaking many dialects of their language, which she had never tried to learn. She remembered what he had once told her – how, riding over bare plain in a drought, without long grass or cover anywhere, he had seen to his surprise a warrior standing alone by the one dead tree on the plain. He had called out and ridden across, for he did not know of any tribe near, but when he came close there was no one there, and never could have been. If they had ghosts, they must have souls; yet it did not seem possible to her.

This is perhaps the time to return to Pearce Serecold, already referred to as one of the organisers of a punishment party after the killings on Hornet Bank station, in 1857. Wright describes him as 'more imaginative than other men'; here is what he wrote, presumably many years later.

When the news of the "hornetbank massacre" went around the district all the squatters turned out, and the native black police from different tribes acted with us, and a considerable number of blacks were shot.

It was a necessity to make a severe example of the black leaders of the tribe, and about a dozen were taken into the open country and shot. They were complete savages and never wore any clothes, and were so much alike that no evidence could ever be procured to enable them to be tried by our laws. These men were allowed to run, and they were

shot at about thirty or forty yards distant.

I saw a black man run and he fell as he was shot, but I saw his figure still running on. I watched most carefully and saw the same extraordinary sight several times, and I went up and saw the bodies lying dead. The only explanation I can give is that as St Paul says: "there is a natural and there is a spiritual body". What I saw was the latter. The Psychical body was visible to me by clairvoyance. (1)

What are we to make of this? Did the black men's spirits keep running after their bodies were felled, or is Serecold 'merely' recording a disturbance taking place inside his own psyche? He was, presumably, the only one of the shooting party that saw the spirits running after their bodies had fallen. Or did others, too, see what he saw, but dismiss it? Did they, seeing what couldn't possibly be there, blink their eyes once or twice until the treacherous visions disappeared? Did they, perhaps, silence their own psyches, overpowering them so that they didn't have to deal with any returning spirits, challenging the control they'd re-established over a situation that had gone horribly wrong for as long as it took the blacks to establish a brief dominance, upsetting, temporarily, a new regime that had no intention of being blocked?

Serecold wrote down what he saw, and Judith Wright wrote down what her grandfather thought he saw, and ours is a written culture, so that what was seen, or imagined, and wondered about, is there forever, a question upsetting, subverting, even the most reassuring realities of modern highways, train tracks, and towns.

That black man that Albert Wright saw beside the dead tree ... is he still there? Are Pearce Serecold's spirits still scampering at speed across the land that once was theirs? The answer is surely no, they're not there any more, yet ...

Yet?

Yet what?

It's time, I think, to consider another aspect of Wright's story in *The Cry for the Dead*, and that is the nature of the two civilisations she shows conflicting. The European invaders would never, of course, have allowed that the black people whose land they were taking constituted a civilisation at all. Good heavens! Look at them ... But now that an environmental consciousness is creeping into the dominant white civilisation it is becoming a little easier for us to see the virtues of the black people's way of living. They appear not to have separated themselves from the range of living creatures and influences they lived among; that is, they didn't see themselves as dominant in the European way, whose idea of mankind was that it – them, us – had been created in the image of God. This is a conceited claim and it leads to the position that other creatures exist for the service – and the pleasure, and also the table – of man. Man thinks he knows a great deal, and what he doesn't know is understood by God, to whom he is connected. It's a position without too many gaps for humility to approach man's consciousness, much as man may claim that there is always a need to be humble. Why? Humility is appropriate in the face of God but not when confronted by inferior peoples. Most other

peoples were seen as inferior by the Europeans, who must have seemed amazingly arrogant to those they invaded.

But this is the moment to remind the reader that what took place on the Queensland and other frontiers was not a meeting, or confrontation, of two civilisations, whereby each could see, and test, the other. In the case of Europeans pushing their sheep, cattle and horses onto the plain beyond the Dawson River, the country of the Wadja people, the situation is that a very long-established civilisation, one with a remarkably full understanding of every component of its daily and annual life cycles, found itself challenged by the outriders of something which the Wadja people could never see, because most of it was on the other side of the world. The European invaders may have thought themselves superior to the blacks, but the elements of the civilisation that gave them the superiority they claimed were simply not there. They'd never reached Rockhampton, let alone its puzzlingly difficult hinterland. The soaring spires of Christian Europe, the poetry, theatre, the operas and songs, the philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and experimental science, the great libraries and palaces housing the knowledge and the grandeur of Europe, were reduced, by the time Rockhampton was left behind and the settlers crossed the Dawson, to two-room bark huts, horses and carts, an endless diet of meat, damper and heavily-sugared tea, and little more to vary the diet but rolled oats. Porridge, with a little milk if there was a cow or two. Most of the settlers could read and write, even if their servants – the shepherds who protected the sheep – could not. The subtleties of English law

and the English way of conducting politics were far away and far behind the settlers struggling to get their animals across flooded streams. To put it simply, the invading whites could show the puzzled blacks very little evidence of the superiority they claimed other than the weapons they used when things got difficult or strained. Guns. Guns, guns, guns. Mounted men on horses shooting blacks on foot. The aborigines could throw spears, they had the advantage of being able to slip through the bush by day or night, knowing where they were in a way the whites couldn't match, and they had a healthier diet than most of the whites could provide for themselves, but they didn't have the firepower of the invaders. Guns, again. All arguments about the relative values of two civilisations come down to guns. The whites could shoot the blacks, and they did, calling it, always, dispersal. Groups of blacks, especially, though not always, groups without women and children, were 'dispersed'. Far and wide, near and far, they were dispersed. White settlers built their dwellings and their sheds on the same waterholes in the rivers that the blacks depended on, and this led to another conflict, in the minds of the white invaders: should they allow the blacks to live near the station properties, as they often wanted to, or should they drive them away?

Some station owners were sympathetic to the blacks, and understood, at least in part, what the white invasion had meant to them. Others said that blacks were not to be trusted, they'd do something treacherous the moment you took your eyes off them, so they should be driven away.

Dispersed.

Moving through well-settled Australian countryside today, with the evidence of earlier battles forgotten or covered over, it is natural to think that the dignified, well-established homesteads were always there; that they were the natural expression of the European settlers – invaders, if you insist – taking over the holdings they sit on and turning them into the well-managed, well-fenced and serviced areas they are today. This point of view is not entirely wrong, but it overlooks certain realities of Australian settlement. The first white settlers were, for the most part, men without women, and they were not as independent as they appeared. Most were acting for English entrepreneurial companies that wanted Australian wool, hides and wheat and cared not a rap for the means or effects of these goods being produced. The Australian invasion was conducted by men who had next to no idea of the range and variability of Australia's seasons, even in good times, men who were willing, at the least sign of a bad year or two, to shift their flocks to some other property, perhaps further out, which happened to be vacant. Despite Judith Wright's love and loyalty for her forebears, and despite the admirable qualities that many of these invaders possessed, the fact is that the first quarter of a century of establishment, in many and perhaps most parts of Australia, was in the hands of buccaneers. A financial system which worked in its own cruel way in Europe was meeting a landscape, an environment, which had not produced it and for which it was highly unsuitable. The evidence for this litters every chapter of Judith Wright's book, and she is certainly aware of it, but *The Cry for the Dead* was written, correcting the earlier,

simpler, book, just a little too soon for Wright to have seen all the implications of what she is telling us.

To put it simply, if the terra isn't nullius, what sort of terra is it? I am raising a difficulty on which it is hard to get a focus. Most matters of controversy are discussed in ways that lie within the terms of consideration developed by the civilisation that has the problem. That is, a civilisation deals with its difficulties in ways that are suitable for itself. This cannot happen when two civilisations are involved, two civilisations that do not even share, let alone agree on, any common terms. In recent years, many Australians have realised that their occupancy and enjoyment of our hard yet beautiful land was achieved by the displacement (and dispersal!) of black people, and have sought to find some sort of reconciliation. So far so good, but reconciliation on whose terms?

This takes us back to the thoughts of Albert Wright, as interpreted by his grand daughter Judith, our famous poet.

He thought of one man who had spent his life in laying strychnine baits of flour-cakes wherever he went, wiping out whole tribes, whole camps of blacks; insane, obsessed by a terror far beyond anything that the reality could have inspired, he had died warning the world against 'those treacherous devils'.

Albert began to understand that this was where the danger lay, the mortal wound that the blacks had known how to deal in return for their own dispossession. 'You must understand us or you must kill us,' they had said; and understanding would have meant – something beyond the powers of the

white men, some renunciation impossible to be made.

One of the worst features of the European conquest of the land was that it was partly achieved by using blacks – black troopers riding and shooting under the control of white men – to hunt and destroy other blacks. Consider this.

Young Featherstonehaugh had ridden out from the Isaac to take up more country at the junction of the Suttor and Belyando, and there lost two men to aboriginal spears. Lieutenant D'Arcy Wentworth Uhr of the Native Police had brought his Black Lambs across country to the rescue, fought a memorable engagement and killed thirteen men. A number of gins were captured for the pleasure of the troopers, and Featherstonehaugh and the Lieutenant shared their dinner that day among the corpses, while the gins, roped and helpless, scowled defiance nearby.

Reconciliation, desirable as it may seem to whitefellas today, is usually offered on terms devised by whites alone. I am not aware of any moves from the aboriginal side towards a form of agreement about the shared and shameful past. In the terms proposed by Judith, or was it Albert, Wright, “‘You must understand or you must kill us,’ they had said; and understanding would have meant – something beyond the powers of the white men, some renunciation impossible to be made.” What renunciation does she/he mean? I think that the Wrights, Judith and Albert, are calling on white people to give up their sense of being superior to the blacks. In an age of philosophical relativism, this may not be as hard as it would have been in Albert’s time. It shouldn’t be too hard for a civilisation that is living, environmentally, far

beyond its means to recognise the innate wisdom of a people that lived within the means provided, indeed, drew its grounds for operating from the ever-changing circumstances inside which they had to live. ‘Man’ and ‘nature’ had a unity which European thought divides, foolishly, and unfortunately, in my view. I have already said that the definition of the problem, and certainly the solution, was not entirely within Judith Wright’s powers when she told her story for the second time, but lest this be taken as a criticism I want to end by saying that the writing of her second book on the same subject, the opening up of areas of Queensland and New South Wales by early white settlers, including members of her own family, was an act of great integrity for which she is to be honoured, admired, and most of all, thanked.

- (1) Unpublished manuscript, quoted in *Carnarvon and Beyond* by Grahame L Walsh, Takarakka Nowan Kas Publications, Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland, Australia, 1999