



JUDITH WRIGHT: FROM POET TO ACTIVIST

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FEATURE ARTICLE

I want to tell this story of protest because it quickens the fire in my own heart, a fire that smoulders fitfully, but often seems grey ash, dying for want of oxygen or fuel, smothered by timidity, despair, inability to hope and failure to face up to the truth of 'sacrilege'. To name the exploitation of Earth as sacrilege (Wright 1977, 188), a despoiling of that which is sacred, is to lay bare my hiding places. A sacred Earth evokes my love, but if I do not act in her defence, what is the meaning of this love? What could set me free to act?

The story is told in Judith Wright's book *The coral battleground*, an unemotional account of resistance to the commercialisation of the Great Barrier Reef. I am not an expert on Judith Wright, one of Australia's most

'(F)ighting to keep those crystal waters ... from sacrilege

well-known and loved poets, nor an experienced activist, nor a marine scientist. I am however unable to shake off Clive Hamilton's words at the end of his *Requiem for a species* (2010), a response to the truth of climate change. We need to act. Resisting the powers that are destroying Earth is a fight worth having. But this action is a choice that must now be made in the face of despair. To despair is human. He proposes three steps – despair, accept, act. So, I am drawn to a woman of my time, a woman passionate in her love for her country Australia, whose poetry is steeped in compassion and a hard honesty, a woman who increasingly committed her time and energy to protest rather than poetry.

In 1963 Judith Wright aged 48 helped to form a conservation society called the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ). They were a small group aiming to start a

magazine to be a forum for conservation and for educating people in the value of wildlife. At the time such people were dismissed as anti-progressive visionaries, rat-bags, standing in the path of the unassailable values of development. Though troubled by the destructiveness about them, few of the members had professional qualifications in these fields. Soon however they were joined by those who did – biologists, botanists and naturalists.

Concern about the Reef initially arose as the numbers of coral and shell collectors rapidly increased. Responsibility, such as it was, lay at the time with the Queensland State Government. The WPSQ raised the question of national marine parks (at the time there were few in the world) but there was no interest. By 1966 the group were being called conservationists and had grown to 600 members. 'It was easy to see'



Wright reflects, 'that the shibboleths of growth and progress needed a balancing force ... Progress was the cry and progress we got, no matter how destructive and planless' (Wright 1977, 4).

Wright and others met Dr Francis Ratcliffe of CSIRO at a conference and learned that he was working to establish a national conservation body. The decision by the WPSQ to support an alliance between scientists, conservationists and community leaders was the beginning of the Australian Conservation Foundation and Wright was invited to be a member of the Provisional Council. 'All of us began to feel we were no longer lone operators ... we were full of the euphoria that comes to small embattled groups when the idea they are working for begins to break through' (1977, 5).

The discovery, by a member of the WPSQ, of an application for limestone-mining in the Great Barrier Reef plunged the group into a battle that would take their time and energy for many years. Coral is almost pure carbonate of lime, and lime was used extensively by the cane-growers all along the coast of Queensland. Unlike mainland lime, coral needed little treatment beyond crushing, and was therefore economically of great interest. Clearly, dredging and blasting for limestone would severely damage any cherished hopes for the Reef to be made a national marine park. Oil drilling also endangered the Reef but applications for drilling were not required to be lodged for objection as was this one for limestone mining.

Judith Wright was engaged with many global and national issues, but here was one both local and dear to her heart. She and her colleagues committed to the fight, a long complex story that is told in the 196 pages of her book. While groping towards a new understanding of relationships between the human and the natural world, their hopes and dreams were continually frustrated and also slowly took form. They accidentally learned that most of the 1900 km of the Queensland coastline had been quietly leased to developers by the Queensland Government. Pressures for oil drilling mounted and the battle intensified. The Federal Parliament passed a Continental Shelf Act in 1968, legislation which gave the Commonwealth some responsibility.

By 1969 public opinion was starting to shift. 15,000 'Save the Barrier Reef' bumper stickers were sold, and a petition to the Queensland Government not to permit further drilling without proper environmental protection gained 13,000 signatures in just a few weeks. There were still long periods of desperation, with no let-up and no holidays, but the Australian Broadcasting Commission and major quality newspapers took up the cause. An unexpected ally appeared when the Queensland Trades and Labour Council placed a black ban on drilling. Nevertheless, after 14 years of 'bloody battle' she wrote 'there seemed no end in sight'. A stalemate existed for no-one really understood the complexity of the dual powers of State and Commonwealth. A Royal Commission was established, though the final report was delayed until 1974, by which time the issue had lost its momentum. The report was divided in its findings.

Much however had been accomplished. The preservation of the Reef had become a matter for national and international concern, and the Whitlam government had declared the whole Reef a Marine National Park. Without this campaign the Reef would not exist today in all its vast and incredible beauty (Blair, 2007, 192).

Now, as we know, the Reef has World Heritage status, though it remains under threat, particularly from new insidious enemies (still ourselves) in the form of global warming exacerbated by damage from run-off from coastal cane-farming. The Reef is 'both particular and a microcosm of the fate of the planet, and the battle to save it is itself a microcosm of the new battle within ourselves' (Wright 1977, 186). Perhaps in 2012 the battle does not feel 'new' so much as numbingly familiar. The issue of my own engagement or non-engagement, whether I acquiesce with or fight (protest) the destruction of the planet, does not leave me.

'People save what they love'¹ and the question of 'whether we will be able to love the others enough to want to save them is dire and urgent' (Rose 2011, 59). Part of the compelling nature of the story of *The coral battleground* lies for me in the dogged, factual, unadorned everydayness of letter writing, phone calls, learning to read scientific papers, interviews, writing articles, political allies made



Spanish Dancer nudibranch

and lost. These tasks required humility, resilience and endurance. Judith Wright was a poet, but 'poetry was no substitute for politics' (Rigby 2009), and political activism was what in her view was most urgently required. These ordinary enough actions led to 'saving' the Reef.

But what drove this commitment? What were the sources of energy or perhaps devotion? What sustained these protesters through so many years of wearying struggle? Wright addresses this question in a half page in the final chapter entitled *Finale without an ending*.

Some of us ... had not even seen the Reef. I myself had seen only a very small part of it, in the fringing reef of Lady Elliott Island many years before ... but one image stays in my mind. On a still blue summer day, with the ultramarine sea scarcely splashing the edge of the fringing reef, I was bending over a singly small pool among the corals. Above it, dozens of small clams spread their velvety lips, patterned in blues and fawns, violets, reds and chocolate browns, not one of them like another. In it sea-anemones drifted long white tentacles above the clean sand, and peacock-blue fish, only inches long, darted in and out of coral branches of all shapes and colours. One blue sea-star lay on the sand floor. The water was so clear that every detail of the pool's crannies and their inhabitants was vivid, and every movement could be seen through its translucence. In the centre of the pool, as if on a stage, swayed a dancing creature of crimson and yellow, rippling all over like a windblown shawl.

That was the Spanish Dancer, known to scientists as one of the nudibranchs, a shell-less mollusc. But for me it became an inner image of the spirit of the Reef itself.

As the battle for the Reef progressed, all of us who were fighting to keep those crystal waters from sacrilege became welded in a very deep companionship, and that in itself helped to keep us at work. But perhaps all of us had some such image to hold and to inspire us when we thought of the shadow that menaced the Reef.

(Wright, 1977, 187-188)

This image surely is so vivid, so readily accessible in such exquisite detail, because it was an encounter, an encounter with an Other, a meeting of such intensity that can only be called love. This one image 'holds' and 'inspires' (gives spirit-breath). To protect what is recognised and known as sacred, to fight to keep from sacrilege – this is our calling. This the claim of love and awe upon us ■

Endnote

¹ Deborah Bird Rose works with this claim by Michael Soulé in her recent book *Wild Dog Dreaming*.

References

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- Wright, Judith. (1977). *The coral battleground*. Nelson. (a second edition was published 20 years on with a new and hopeful Foreword)
- Jan Morgan was Centre Director of Clinical Pastoral Education at Peter McCallum Cancer Institute, and has now completed doctoral studies at the Melbourne College of Divinity, with her thesis entitled *Earth's cry: prophetic ministry in a more-than-human world*. She is currently conducting a course with Pat Long, under the auspices of EarthSong, called Growing an Ecological Identity.