

The Voices of Women in the Night: Veronica and Judith

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I quite often leave the radio playing all night on the bedside table; my only company in an all too empty house. It shuts out the noises of the night: the cry of the great owl in the rain-forest trees, the scurrying of possums on the roof, or the rustle of the neighbourhood carpet snake, a beautiful multi-coloured python, slithering into or out of the roof-space. I'm used to him (or her). She's harmless —just another presence in the night.

One night recently, waking suddenly just after midnight, I was galvanised by Veronica Brady's voice on the radio. It was an old interview, recorded when Veronica was on the Board of the ABC. That familiar voice, its clarity, its utter conviction, has been lost to her friends for years: those of her reclusion and final illness, then the sad time since her death.

But right now, the voice of Veronica was washing over me in the quietness of the night, bringing with it a flood of memories.

There were those of the many conferences, here and in Europe, where Veronica spoke of her speciality —Australian Literature— with knowledge and conviction. At the same time, and often in the same presentation, she spoke with great sadness about the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians: the loss of their lives, their land, their language and culture. Both of these concerns —for literature and for the loss of Aboriginal culture— came together in her last major work, her comprehensive biography of the poet Judith Wright.

In *South of My Days* (1998) two of Australia's most important women writers —poet and biographer— came together in a major undertaking. They were a perfect match.

South of My Days is the life-story of one of Australia's most brilliant poets, a sustaining poetic voice for well over sixty years. It's also a love story, of Wright's long association with Jack McKinney, the birth of their daughter, their life together at Mount Tamborine and their association with prominent literary and artistic people. It also provides a detailed account of Wright's ancestral heritage: that of the Wyndham and Wright families. As prominent pastoralists for generations, Wright's ancestors were certainly involved in Aboriginal dispossession and would clearly have been aware of Aboriginal massacre. Judith Wright concedes this herself, with great sadness (Brady 1998, p. 191).

This ancestral material is so detailed and so authentic that it must have been provided by the poet herself. At the same time, there are significant omissions. There is no mention, for instance, of Wright's long and passionate love affair, towards the end of her life, with Nugget Coombes, Australia's most influential economist and public servant. This was so sensitive a matter at the time that I cannot imagine Veronica Brady opposing its omission (Capp 2009).

Also, and possibly most importantly for Veronica and Judith herself, the biography charts Wright's leading part in the struggle for the preservation of Queensland's flora and fauna and the battle to save the Great Barrier Reef from mining and other predatory activities. It also analyses the way this struggle is reflected in the poetry.

South of My Days, comprehensive, detailed and beautifully written, is in my opinion the major achievement of Veronica Brady's academic career. While Wright's poetry has been the subject of exhaustive literary analysis for over half a century, *South of My Days* not only provides analysis of individual poems, it also provides the background and immediate context of their creation.

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An example is the poem *At Cooloola*, very much in my thoughts at this time because of a recent conference at Caloundra, north of Brisbane, which concentrated on the writers associated with that area.¹ The poem was written when Wright was spending long stretches of time at Boreen Point, near Caloundra, and was deeply involved in the formation of the *Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland*. She was also, after a long road-trip with Jack McKinney around Central and North Queensland, acutely aware of the family's personal involvement in the appropriation of Aboriginal land and the destruction of Aboriginal culture (Brady 1998, p.186). They would also have been, at the very least, well aware of notorious massacres during the establishment of their Queensland holdings.

I quote from *At Cooloola*:

*The blue crane fishing in Cooloola's twilight
Has fished here longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
And he will wear their colour till he dies.*

*But I'm 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 . . .*

*White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark,
Clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan –
I know that we are justified only by love,
But oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.*

*And walking on clean sand among the prints
Of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear*

*Thrust from the water; and like my grandfather,
Must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.*

South of My Days provides the emotional context of this poem (pp. 187-190). While the blue crane is the 'certain heir' of this place, the poet, because of the 'arrogant guilt' of her ancestors will always, sadly, be estranged from it.

Because of its emotional power and its sadness, this is one of my favourite Wright poems. It too sings in my mind in the quietness of the night.

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At many conferences in Australia and overseas, and specifically at the Oviedo EACLALS Conference in 1996, Veronica Brady spoke with great feeling and conviction about the loss of Aboriginal languages.

Happily, this is not the case in the area where I now live. The tribal lands of the Bundjalung in northern NSW stretch from north of the Clarence River to above the Queensland border. While the British place-names are an obvious act of appropriation, the retention of Bundjalung place-names —Wollongbah, Newrybah, Billynudge and so on— are a gesture, perhaps merely a token gesture, but still an acknowledgment of Aboriginal culture. The retention of the Bundjalung language is a different matter. It is still a living, a spoken language.

Some forty years ago, linguists working on the various Bundjalung dialects² were astonished to find that not only were the old people still speaking the language, and still are, so too were the children. The languages have survived and live on. Meanwhile decades of linguistic study have resulted in the publication of the dictionary and grammar of the various Bundjalung dialects.³ For Veronica, this would have been totally reassuring.

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So now to my voices in the night —the great owl, the possums, the tribal snake, the poet and her biographer— I can add the soft murmur of the old Bundjalung women, singing in the quietness of the night from Wollongbar to Mullumbimby, from the Clarence River to the Border Ranges.

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The night is full of meaning.

Works cited:

Brady, Veronica 1998. *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.

Capp, Fiona 2009. 'In the Garden: Judith Wright and Nugget Coombs', in *The Monthly Essay*, June.

¹ Conference of ASALvets, Caloundra, 17-20 April, 2016. ASAL is the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

² Professor Bill Hoddinott of the University of New England, Armidale and Margaret Sharpe of Northern Rivers CAE, Lismore were both working in this area in the 'seventies.

³ Margaret C. Sharpe, The University of New England. *An All-Dialect Dictionary of Banjalang*. See also the many Google entries on the Bundjalung/Banjalang language and dialects.

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Bio Note: Shirley Walker is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of New England in Armidale, and she taught Australian Literature for over thirty years. She is a Past President of ASAL, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and the Founding Director of the Centre for Australian Studies. She has published numerous critical articles and four books on Australian Literature and is a specialist in poet Judith Wright. She now lives on the far north coast of NSW, where she has written two books of memoir, *Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle* (2001) and *The Ghost at the Wedding* (2009), shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards 2010.