There are two sorts of subjects that exercise particular allure to a biographer: those that do not want a biography written about them, and go to various lengths to thwart the efforts of a would-be biographer, and those who have written their own life story, or related aspects of that story, and for whom the telling of that story formed a significant part of their wider intellectual project. Judith Wright, as Georgina Arnott’s *The Unknown Judith Wright* reveals, fell into both categories.

In fact, Wright notoriously told, and then retold, her family’s story starting with the semi-fictional *The Generations of Men* (1959), later followed by the more historically robust *The Cry for the Dead* (1981), a sort of revisionist sequel. Moreover, these works were not simply amusing digressions or artistic marginalia, they were major contributions to twentieth-century Australian cultural identity. Through Wright’s ability to distil the vast physical and social landscapes of Australia into the intimate symbolism of a family story, the books did much to democratise—and problematise—what it was to be Australian. No longer was national identity the remote product of political manoeuvres but an unfolding story in which all had played a part and had a stake.

Moreover, Wright’s explicit use of, and appeal to, history in the service of storytelling did as much to interrogate the ambiguity between the two disciplines. So permeable did she render this boundary that Tom Griffiths, one of Australia’s most respected historians, was able to include her, with confidence, in his reflective tour of Australian history writing.1 As such, it is fair to suggest that Wright well understood the politics and poetics of life-history writing—the tensions between myth-breaking and myth-making—and proved herself exceptionally skilled in using them. This makes her a beguiling but tricky subject to tackle, setting the stage for a battle of wits.

Arnott embarks on this project in full understanding of this, confronting it directly from the outset: ‘Why a biography of someone whose legacy seems to resist it?’ (p. 2). For many reasons it would seem. Firstly, Wright both contributed to, and now constitutes, part of a modern Australian identity (she is even considered a ‘national treasure’). As Wright herself showed, national identity must have all its aspects continually interrogated to keep itself relevant, each new generation of men—and even women now too (!)—must pose new questions of elders and ancestors. And, as

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Arnott notes, there are some highly pertinent questions to be asked about Wright: what did *Generations* and *Cry* select and omit from the Wyndham-Wright family story and why? Why have Wright’s years as a student at the University of Sydney been neglected from public versions of her story?

Secondly, Arnott has questions of a more general nature concerning the significance of formative years in intellectual development. Show me the juvenilia and I’ll show you the mature writer? Wright herself did not seem to think so. Previous biographers and academic commentators seem largely to have followed this line, placing greater stress on the impact of World War II leading up to the publication of *The Moving Image* (1946), her breakthrough poetry collection. Much less reflection has been given to the non-formal learning of Wright’s youth and family life. This seems a strange omission given how generally accepted wisdom suggests that this is the primary crucible for forging values and dispositions. Nor has much close attention been paid to her student years that saw her make an emphatic break from her rural upbringing to immerse herself in Sydney’s fast-paced life and culture. Even if, like most undergraduates, the finer points of curricular content were not to have a lasting impact, as Arnott shows, the personal significance of such a move should not be underestimated. Moreover, that first blast of independence and detachment from familiar landscapes offers a good barometer for gauging the nature, depth and endurance of the family influence. In a welter of change and new experiences, what stuck? In short, *The Unknown Judith* invites us to be less literal about the intellectual development of a writer, reminding us that while mastering the technicalities of craft and piquancy of the market are important, aesthetic sensibility is a mysterious, amorphous entity with many sources.

The book also seeks to probe one further tension. While Wright, Arnott tells us, was committed to the ‘renunciation of ego’ (p. 2), illuminating through her writing the constraints imposed by history, land and culture on human action, literary critics have tended to view her as ‘a figure akin to the idealised Romantic poet who is born different, detached from her society, inspired’ (p. 1)—arguably a strangely stubborn tendency in artist biographies. This, it is argued here, has restricted understanding of Wright’s significance to modern Australian cultural history and, in the other direction, of that history’s importance in understanding Wright’s work.

As such there are two ‘historical’ gazes with relevance here. One applies a backwards reading to Wright the writer, deconstructing her as both product and producer of a particular cultural moment. The second adopts a ‘forward’, subject-eye-view of Wright’s life as she experienced it, small, ad-hoc connections amid contingencies. Arnott, taking the biographer’s privilege of intimate detachment, attempts to combine both. In doing so, she can advance challenges to conventional understandings in both Wright scholarship and Australian cultural history. Wright’s family life and history, she contends, was far more multifaceted, and the family mythology more influential, than previously acknowledged. The complexity of these relationships
invites a reconsideration of both her poetry and her life-writing in *Generations* and *Cry*. Further, Wright’s student days were more critical on her development as writer than previously thought, not least because of her exposure and response to Sydney’s cultural and literary modernism during this time, which, as Wright can reveal, contained an often-contradictory blend of implications for young women.

*The Unknown Judith* approaches this ambitious project confidently. One of the book’s great strengths is its sustained levels of quiet control, the richness and detail of the material is never allowed to overwhelm but is always directed back towards the larger questions at stake. One elegant example of this is the ongoing conversation maintained between the alternate sources of Wright’s life: Wright, Veronica Brady, the first biographer, and Arnott herself. Interweaving the perspectives of the autobiographer, first and second biographers creates a subtle reflective commentary on the politics of historiography.

Restraint does not stop Arnott indulging in some well-observed verbal miniatures that aptly illustrate her wider points. At the close of the first three chapters, for example, comes an exquisitely agonising description of Wright’s tortured teenage years (especially painful if you are or ever have been a teenage girl):

> By the time she arrived at NEGS, at fourteen, she was intensely self-conscious. Puberty had been difficult. Her periods were heavy and it took a stranger to tell her that she needed to wear a bra. Her sense of shame extended to more public manifestations of her physicality as well: ‘I knew, painfully as many girls know it, that at the ugly age of fourteen, I was not only condemned to wear glasses … but was tongue tied and spotty and beginning to bulge awkwardly’ (pp. 88–89).

*The Unknown Judith’s* instincts are right, its questions are pertinent and the technical execution assured. Yet, for all this, the book seems, at times, to have assembled all the relevant pieces without quite bringing them all together. This is especially the case in the chapters on Wright’s student years. One reason for this, perhaps, is the more fragmentary nature of source material, requiring of the author more creative use of indirect supportive material such as the accounts of other students approximately contemporaneous to Wright or slender biographical profiles of prominent lecturers. This, in itself, is fine provided it can do more than circumstantial contextualising. But, failing this, while such material fleshes out a picture, it is limited in servicing a more forceful argument. For example, in recounting the intellectual cultures surrounding Wright’s subjects of study, Arnott makes some shrewd observations concerning Wright’s critique of the heavily European content of the History and English syllabii and the controversial charisma of philosopher John Anderson.

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She noted also Wright's enthusiasm for anthropology under A. P. Elkin. Still, however, there felt like a further significance could be drawn out of this and connected more fulsomely to both Wright the student and Wright the mature writer.

Anderson and Elkin were, in their different ways, trailblazers. The former was, at this time, in the midst of developing his uncompromisingly empirical 'Australian Realism' which, while touching only lightly on a conventional undergraduate syllabus, was promulgated, in principle more than detail, through members of the Free Thought society that included several non-philosophers active in many other areas of university and Sydney's cultural life. The latter was the first Australian-born chair of the first Australian anthropology department, receiving the appointment based on his commitment to applied anthropology, put at the disposal (whether they wanted it or not, which they generally did not) of Australian administrators. As such both men, especially when contrasted with the drearily colonial inflected courses on offer in the History and English departments, were pioneering projects aimed at systematically rethinking Australian life. Regardless of whether Wright consciously followed their thinking in detail, this says something significant about the intellectual energy infusing the specifically Australian form of urban modernism that Arnott stresses as transformative for her subject.

By contrast, the first three chapters of *The Unknown Judith*, on family life, have a fluency and intensity that the later ones lack. In part this owes much to the richer availability of direct primary material from sources other than Wright, including publications, letters and diaries from Wyndham and Wright family members, local newspapers accounts of events or places referenced and Cedric Wyndham, a living descendent and family historian in his own right. Arnott also has more to push back against on this subject. While silence characterises the student years, there has been far greater assertion of the disjuncture between the 'left' wing Wright and her 'conservative' ancestors. This is, arguably, *The Unknown Judith's* most prized intervention into current Wright discourse, that, via her grandmother May and father Philip Wright, there was strong continuity between Wright and the historic Wyndham legacy. Such a claim might be of general interest to Wright scholars, readers and general appreciators, but it does not, at first glance, seem to fulfil the book's grander historiographical ambitions, nor is its significance as fully developed as it could be in the later sections.

There is, throughout this book, a sense of being haunted by something almost, but not quite, at hand, of a book shying away from the full implications of its own conclusions. This is not helped by the author's repeated defence of Wright against any possible charges of deliberate deception. More uncomfortable still, the 'Postscript' is made into a sort of apologia for Wright not being perfect and not having always held the same beliefs. At these points, respect and sensitivity tip over into anxiety that dilutes the potential force of the arguments at hand. There was, perhaps, something powerful to say here about the (re)making of Australian
identity in the mid-twentieth century, that may have provided the through-running thread needed to connect all the book’s rich dimensions. It could, for example, have helped Arnott collapse the binaries, country/city or traditional/modern, which she found unsatisfying in the previous interpretations of Wright’s life. It might also have allowed her to make the significance of the family continuities work harder.

The larger issue at stake here is the extent to which Australia, bucking recent trends in European theory, has, to some extent, always been modern, with each generation called upon to reinvent itself, from convicts to colonists, settlers to citizens, with comparative rapidity. The settings may change—from forging a life in the unforgiving bush of an ancient land to negotiating one in the modern city of a young nation state—but the need to continually improvise between the old and the new remained constant. This was the mercurial poetic truth which Wright, through her writing and activism, wove into potent cultural scripts, defining, and definitive, of her times. But, as Arnott shows here, she was only able to do this well because the private Wright was so deeply immersed in them. What The Unknown Judith does, even if it does not always signpost this explicitly, is to use Wright’s formative years as a magnifying lens into the micro-mechanics of cultural metamorphosis, the messy drafts before the polished edit. For all the affectionate elegance of its insights into a much-loved national figure it is, as ever it was, Wright’s ability to compress the political into the personal and, in doing so, show us ourselves in a new light, that is the true value of this book.
