

Judith Wright's Poetry and the Turn to the Post-Pastoral

TERRY GIFFORD

Postcolonialism needs a post-pastoral theory of ecopoetics, just as the challenges of climate change demand a postcolonialism that can engage with environmental justice. The current environmental crisis, in so far as it affects both our planet and our human population, both land and its inhabitants, both the human and the more-than-human, challenges culture to reconsider its conceptions of nature. Some of the boundaries that facilitated colonial exploitations of both people and land need to be collapsed if environmental degradation in all its forms is to be reversed. Meanwhile, some of the distinctive qualities of culture and of nature need to be identified and brought into dialogue if they offer signs of a rightful and just way forward, however painful this process may turn out to be in the short-term. Long-term survival of our species will necessitate newly refined values and relationships in spatial terms—that is, how we relate to land in its organic forms and processes. In this our inner nature might have to attune better to the lessons evident in outer nature. One aspect of culture's attunement is obviously science—assessing the best evidence for conceiving of the natural processes upon which we depend. Another cultural tool of attunement we now call ecopoetry. Older than writing, the practice of ecopoetry has always performed this function of attunement in many cultures globally, often in the form of songs. In Western literature ecopoetry took the form of the pastoral tradition of poetry. Its neglect and decline has been a feature of the industrial-technological colonisation of the planet's resources that has led to the present environmental crisis.

The debasement of the tool considered essential since the beginnings of Western literature—the rich and long tradition of pastoral poetry—calls for a rediscovery of what I have called 'post-pastoral' poetry. This is not 'post' in the sense of postcolonial, for it was present in the work of some writers even as some of their other work was part of the decline of pastoral. It is more conceptual than temporal. It is 'post' in the sense of being beyond the traps of the pastoral, of being aware of some of the problematics of the pastoral, of pushing into the complexities of celebration and responsibility, of being a part of nature and yet uneasy with relationships of ownership and exploitation. At risk of

appearing programmatic, and in a spirit of offering a critical tool with which to improvise its use elsewhere, I have provisionally suggested that post-pastoral texts typically tended to raise some or all of the following six questions:¹

1. Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?
2. What are the implications of recognising that we are part of that creative-destructive process?
3. If the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?
4. If nature is culture, is culture nature?
5. How, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?
6. How should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?

A re-reading of Judith Wright's poem 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' in the light of these questions might offer an opportunity to clarify the way in which postcolonialism needs a post-pastoral theory of ecopoetry. But first it is interesting to note a tendency to read Wright's work as colonial patriotic pastoral and the problems such readings make evident.

There is a recording of some poems by Judith Wright read by Peter O'Shaughnessy that includes the poem 'Bullocky' (O'Shaughnessy; Wright, *Collected Poems* 17). There is not a hint of irony in this respectfully straight reading of the poem. Indeed, it is a reading of such hushed reverence that the listener might be totally convinced that 'centuries of cattlebells' really had appeased the bullocky at his campfire (thus missing Wright's postcolonial joke). *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* reveals that 'the much-anthologised "Bullocky", a deftly constructed fable at whose heart is the archetypal figure of the ploughman [sic], can be read as a poem which gathers together the possibilities of several kinds of fruition, including the personal' (Hamilton 591). So a fable of fulfilment beyond the personal suggests that the fruit of the newly planted vines at the end of the poem symbolises some kind of social, even national, hope for the future. That Judith Wright's poetry has been appreciated by a generation of Australians for its archetypes of possible personal and national fruition was the starting point of Veronica Brady's essay sub-titled 'Judith Wright and the Search for Australia'. Brady sought to distance herself from 'our eagerness to read her poetry in patriotic terms' (Brady 14). It seems that the poet herself became

1 More fully elaborated in Gifford, *Pastoral* 146-174.

frustrated by this tendency. In a recent issue of the online journal *Colloquy* Jenny Kohn reminds us that Wright became 'distressed by those who took her poems as a simple valorising of the pastoral past, given her "own hardening view of it as a process of invasion"' (Kohn 118).²

The use of Kohn's word 'pastoral' is revealing here because it links Australian idealisation of settler landscapes with that very long European tradition of poetry that has been both revelatory and distorting in its representation of human relationships with land. Certainly the Biblical elevation of the bullocky into 'old Moses' on an archetypal journey with his suffering slaves suggests an idealisation of the poem's central figure. Indeed, the poem's ending rings with the promise of national fruition in the potent new vineyards on the slopes 'where the dead teams were used to pass'. So it is no surprise that the concluding lines have been read nationalistically: 'The prophet Moses feeds the grape, / and fruitful is the Promised Land'. The cadence of this echoes the ending of the classic example of English pastoral poetry, Alexander Pope's paean to the King's land, *Windsor Forest* (1713): 'Rich Industry sits smiling on the plains, / And peace and plenty tell, a STUART reigns'. Just as *Windsor Forest* is presented by Pope as a reincarnation of 'the groves of Eden', settler readers of Judith Wright would want to think of Australia as 'the Promised Land', especially in 1946, the year of the publication of 'Bullocky' in Wright's first collection. In this collection 'Soldier's Farm', 'The Hawthorn Hedge' and 'South of My Days' each apparently assert a hard-fought wresting of the Promised Land from less than promising land, a story that returning soldiers and their families would have been only too glad to read in this first collection by a young poet.

Yet doesn't the very elevation of those concluding lines invite an ironic reading of what began with an image of a cart-driver 'thirsty with drought and chilled by rain'? Jenny Kohn thinks so, as she draws attention to the madness of this 'Moses': 'The passage of time is threatening, here as in so many of Wright's poems; it makes the bullocky go mad' (Kohn 118). The Bullocky is 'widdershins', wrong-headed; he is deluded in seeing a road 'populous with fiends and angels'; he seems to see himself as Moses in his journeying; certainly he develops 'a mad apocalyptic dream'; he shouts 'prayers and prophesies'; and then there are those 'centuries of cattlebells' making their 'uneasy sound' in his head. So, by the end of the poem, the new vines (offering delusions to a new generation) are fed by the bones of those who thought they were Moses settling a Promised Land. Kohn concludes: 'To Shirley Walker the bullocky is a visionary; but in my view, the sense of unease throughout the poem demands an ironic reading' (Walker; Kohn 118).

2 Kohn is quoting Wright's biographer, Jennifer Strauss (Strauss).

After Kohn's analysis the poem begins to read as an anti-pastoral poem, in the tradition of poetry that seeks to act as a corrective to the idealisation of the pastoral, such as Stephen Duck's response to Pope in *The Thresher's Labour* (1736) in which he points out, in Pope's own poetic form, that some people have paid a price for that 'rich Industry' in hard physical labour: 'In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace, / Drops from our Locks, or trickles down our Face'. Three years later, of course, Mary Collier corrected Duck's anti-pastoral by pointing out that another section of the working population had been omitted from Duck's account when she published her own poem, *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck* (1739). The earnest bitterness of some anti-pastoral poetry propels irony into sarcasm, for example in the case of George Crabbe's lines from *The Village* (1783): 'Can poets sooth you, when you pine for bread, / by winding myrtles round your ruin'd shed?' In 'Bullocky' Judith Wright's anti-pastoral irony is so subtle that it can be mistaken for pastoral by readers who need a vision of Australia as a Promised Land. But even the term 'anti-pastoral' seems inadequate for a poem that is more complex in recognising that need, at the same time as denying it. The poem is not a straightforward corrective since it is more ambivalent towards the human capacities for adaptation and dream, as is so much of Wright's poetry. 'Ambivalent' is a word that commentators on Wright's poetry frequently find themselves using. This is surely derived from Wright's deep sense of settlement as invasion: 'those two strands—the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me' (Wright, *Born of the Conquerors* 30). Perhaps this is where we need a term such as 'post-pastoral'.

The American ecocritics Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell might argue that such a term is unnecessary due to the adaptive abilities of the pastoral mode itself. Marx has argued that 'the wholly new conception of the precariousness of our relations with nature is bound to bring forth new versions of pastoral' (Marx, 'Does Pastoralism' 222). Buell has suggested that American pastoral has persisted beyond 'the specific set of obsolescent conventions' ('American Pastoral' 23) because, as he put it in a later coinage, it is 'more strategised than mystified' (*Environmental Imagination* 44). Recognising that 'pastoral's ideological valance has become increasingly complicated', Buell believes that the 'US pastoral imagination can embed or prepare the way for ecocentric thinking' (*The Future* 145). Both critics point to the recent resurgence of American nature writing as the current extension of the US pastoral tradition. From a British perspective, however, Leavis's attack on the Georgian nature poets in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), together with Raymond Williams' landmark book *The Country and The City* (1975), have rendered 'pastoral' a pejorative term, as, indeed, it is used by Jenny Kohn in her phrase 'the pastoral past'. Leo Marx's potentially useful attempt to separate 'complex' from 'sentimental' pastoral has been ignored as much in the UK as it has by his fellow American critics of pastoral literature (*The*

Machine 32). To deal with texts that Marx might have referred to as 'complex pastoral' I offered the term 'post-pastoral' in 1994 to indicate that some texts could escape the closed circuit of the idealised pastoral or the corrective anti-pastoral (Gifford, 'Gods of Mud' 134). This new term offered to the American belief in an adaptive pastoral continuity a set of provisional criteria (the six questions above) by which to distinguish texts that lapsed back into a pastoral of the past and those that problematised their engagement with land.

I would now like to consider whether Judith Wright's poem 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' engages with questions one, three and six in particular of my definition of the post-pastoral. Such a mode of approaching the poem may provide not only a route of elucidation of the poem's nuances, but also require an alert evaluation of some of its strengths and weaknesses. Jenny Kohn has indicated that Wright herself might have hoped that readers could distinguish pastoral and post-pastoral qualities in her poems. Do her poems celebrate 'a simple valorising of the pastoral past' in land, or is land suggested to be an uneasy site of dispute as a result of a history of invasion? Indeed, might the subtle play of a single poem express the tensions between these two rather starkly stated positions? In this case might the eucalypt tree be celebrated, for subtle qualities we would do well to note, without being simply idealised for nationalistic purposes? Can a tree represent a national identity?

Since Wright's poem has its origins in the international context of a UNESCO conference, and also because I will argue that the poem has global implications for our environmental crisis, it may be worth noting the tendency for colonialists to seek a new national identity in a tree: Canadians in the maple leaf, New Zealanders in the tree fern. This may represent a colonial duplication of the 'naturalisation' of desired national characteristics in the home country. In Britain the oak tree has long been associated with national identity. The poet Geoffrey Grigson has pointed out that 'anciently pre-eminent among European trees, the Oak was sacred, sacredness reinforcing its strength, and strength reinforcing its sacredness' (250). He mentions a high point of oak veneration in Britain as the creation of a Royal Oak by Charles II in 1660 and its association with national character in the song 'Hearts of Oak' that dates from before the Napoleonic War. More recently British nature writer Richard Mabey has collected many examples of the important role of the oak in the folklore of Britain in his monumental *Flora Britannica* (72-77).

Perhaps of more significance to Wright's poem, the importance of individual trees to the mental and emotional health of those who have a relationship with them has a long literature of endorsement in Britain. One of the most perceptive is by Fraser Harrison who writes of personally living with a 'conker tree' and elaborates upon the idea that 'it is impossible not to sense a close correspondence between our family household and the vegetable life of the chestnut' (29). Most

recently, Richard Mabey's brilliant discussion of the cultural significance of the beech tree in his book *Beechcombings* (2007) engages with the issue of its place in relation to English national character associated with the oak. Beech is too wayward, unconforming to its archetype and unpredictable to qualify as a national tree, Mabey argues. In *Flora Britannica* Mabey had identified the 'grandeur, strength, duration and resistance' of the oak as the qualities that made it celebrated as a national tree (72-3).

These are matters upon which Judith Wright reflects in a foregrounded Australian context in her poem 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' (Wright, *Collected Poems* 362), which has its starting point as a response to a statement by a representative of the colonial establishment, Sir Otto Frankel. Used as an epigraph to the poem, a sentence from his presentation at the 1974 UNESCO Symposium on Man and Landscape, in Canberra clearly raises the hackles of the poet in the breathtaking hypocrisy of its evocation of a national 'informality':

I believe it is the casual informality of form, so much in keeping with what one has come to regard as the national character, which has given the eucalypts their unrivalled place in the Australian landscape, and in our perception and consciousness of Australia.

The first stanza of Wright's reply begins:

Yes, we do perceive her as sprawling and informal;
even dishevelled, disorderly. That may be because
we are still of two minds about militarism and class-systems.
When we are informal, we're half afraid of bad form.
She, on the other hand, follows a delicate bent
of her own. Worn by such aeons, dried by such winds,
she has learned to be flexible, spare, flesh close to the bone.

In relation to the first question typically raised by a post-pastoral text, in this poem Wright clearly expresses awe at the range of qualities that contribute to the adaptability of the tree. Its unpretentious creativity is used to critique a human society that tends towards 'militarism and class-systems' and thus the poem calls for a humility that might learn from the tree if it is to be associated with the Australian national character, as it has been by Sir Otto Frankel. His position as a titled knight of the realm has suggested a need for humility in the face of the persistence of those two Australian social tendencies named by the poet. Informality can disguise an arrogant complacency about various kinds of 'bad form' in Australian history and character. But unqualified awe for the eucalypt can easily become an idealisation in the classic pastoral tradition.

It is easy to see how Australian student readers of this poem have, in my experience, argued that the poem's praise for the qualities of the eucalypt tends towards idealisation. One might counter that the sharpness of the authentic biological points Wright makes about the tree could not be called idealisation, although this word might apply to Wright's view of the discourse of Sir Otto Frankel. Libby Robin has created the term 'Biological Cringe' for some attitudes towards Australian nature: 'The Biological Cringe is sometimes manifest in shame at the primitive and economically useless life-forms of the "continental museum", and sometimes also appears as an overcompensating patriotic strut about the Australian biota and its associated nation' (9). It is clear that any 'patriotic strut' associated with this poem is in its epigraph. Judith Wright's way of undermining this in her poem is to counter the male 'patriotic strut' of her epigraph with a female gendered tree in the poem. 'The toughest care' and 'the most economical tenderness' are hardly idealising, or, indeed, reductively feminine in the essentialist sense. Awe in this poem is used to counter the bombast and hubris of militarism and class-systems about which the Australian national character is apparently 'still of two minds'. But if humility is to be learned from the eucalypt, what forms might it take in Australian culture? Answers to this question might be found in a consideration of how the poem engages with the third issue raised by a post-pastoral text: if the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?

The dualisms of this poem appear to separate the inner human nature from the outer nature represented by the tree. The effect of gendering the tree as female is to associate the male speaker about national character with negative side of the poem's oppositions of nature/culture, tree/Australian society, fertility/destructiveness, wild/city and asymmetry/urban grids. These dualisms are apparently endorsed by the anthropomorphism of characterizing the eucalypt as female. But as Val Plumwood pointed out, anthropomorphism works both ways. It is the only way of giving voice to the other-than-human if we are to learn from its nature to inform our own inner nature. Plumwood extended the 'giving voice' or 'giving agency' potential of anthropomorphism even to particular stones, at the extreme of our notion of the concept: 'Much of the power human-centred reductionism has over us is gained by using concepts like anthropomorphism to enforce segregated and polarised vocabularies that rob the non-human world of agency and the possibility of speech, with departures from reductionist standards declared irrational and superstitious' (19). Plumwood argued that not only trees, amongst which she lived, but stones, with which she also lived intimately, should be invested with the agency that is channelled through anthropomorphism: 'A radical writing project should encourage us to think beyond these boundaries, to reinvest with speech, agency and meaning the silenced ones, including earth and its very stones, cast as the most lifeless

and inconsiderable members of the earth community' (19). To listen, in this spirit, to the eucalypt's qualities is to counter the aptness 'to turn crooks' that humans in Australia have so far exhibited, according to the poet's final line. It seems to me that this line acts as a challenge to an Australian reader in the face of the alternatives to be learned from the eucalypt. 'Apt' leaves the outcome open with Judith Wright's characteristic democratic ambivalence.

So we come to perhaps the most difficult, sensitive and topical issue raised by a post-pastoral poem in an Australian context: how should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other? The mind-set of exploitation of Other in nature and others in human society in Australia is certainly present in the poem in the form of references to militarism, class-systems, pine plantations, cities and the final sickness of being 'apt to turn crooks' implying the sicknesses (as in 'turn crook') not only of corruption, but a dishonesty to the earth and ourselves, the readers, as I suggested earlier. The replacement of eucalypts with 'regiments' of pine plantations speaks eloquently in this poem of the national character. 'Fat' 'gobbling' of native hills is a suggestive image for settler culture. But where in this poem is the voice of those who aboriginally inhabited those hills?

When I considered the aspects of the eucalypt that were missing from this poem I accumulated a surprising list: its 800 species; its role as a 'widow-maker' for settlers; its relationship with fire; its history of cultural representations, including the poem by Wright's friend Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'Municipal Gum'; and Aboriginal stories about the meaning of the trees in different places. Then I realised that the Aboriginal presence was probably in the tree itself. The qualities attributed to the eucalypt that enable it to survive its ecological conditions might also be those that humans might adopt to be characteristically Australian, the poem suggests by implication. Indeed, for centuries the original Australians already had been living precisely those qualities, not only to survive, but to enjoy a rich living dialogue with the land of the continent. Of course, these are qualities that are absent from the speech of Sir Otto Frankel when he refers to 'the Australian landscape'. The 'casual informality' that he attributes to the eucalypt is a white Australian characteristic and it is undoubtedly white settler culture that he has in mind when he refers to 'our perception and consciousness of Australia'. So Aboriginal character, absent from Sir Otto Frankel's mind, is perhaps present in its absence from Judith Wright's poem.

This realisation—that the adaptability of the eucalypt might represent a way of living with the continent's conditions that has already been achieved by Aboriginal culture—gives the poem a current urgency in the face of so much evidence of a need to live with our evolving planetary conditions, now called 'climate change'. It is clear that the original question of the Australian national character in which the poem has its starting point has become a global challenge

to the character of the human species for a contemporary reader of the poem. The climate variations currently being experienced by Australia might be seen as typical of those to be experienced by the rest of our species in the decades to come. Perhaps we need to learn from the eucalypt an 'asymmetrical artistry', as the penultimate line suggests, in our developing a [inter]national character in order to turn from being capitalist crooks to planetary survivors. Judith Wright's poem offers several crucial lessons from the eucalypt that might be suggested by that combination of 'artist' and 'asymmetry': a non-Western way of knowing that is beyond dualisms; a pattern of understanding climactic change that is other than the four European seasons; a 'tough care' and an 'economical tenderness'; an artist's way of intuiting knowledge; a flexible bending of values towards the changing conditions ('What is the good life?'). The final possibility is that poetry itself, as in the final challenge of this poem, might bring the writer and the reader closer, in Wright's words, to 'know ourselves no longer exiles, but at home in a proper sense of the term' (*Preoccupations* 123).

Of course, the nature of our global 'home' has changed as a result of climate change, and if the Australian experience of it is to be regarded as typical, Wright's poem about national character may have, as I have suggested, more prescience than she could know. Libby Robin concludes her book *How a Continent Created a Nation* with an observation that could be a commentary on the potential international contribution of Wright's poem:

Why has Australia's exceptional nature figured only trivially in the rhetoric of nationhood? While difference and distinctiveness are forged 'culturally', through Australian sporting prowess and war efforts, the potential for Australia's environmental difference to contribute seriously to global knowledge remains unrealised (215).

I owe to Kate Rigby the observation that the 'Australian exceptionalism' of the eucalypt, in being able to deal with unexpected climatic conditions, is what is going to be needed by the rest of the world in the coming decades. Indeed, the second stanza of Wright's poem might now be heard as a vocalization of tree (in Val Plumwood's terms); as what humans might learn from a tree; as a celebration of Aboriginal living with Australian land; and as a challenge to the contemporary international reader of the poem:

Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,
she leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,
symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends
whip-supple, pivoting, loose, with a minimal mass.
She can wait grimly for months to break into flower
or bloom willingly bloom in a day when the weather is right.
Meagre, careless, indifferent? With the toughest care,
the most economical tenderness, she provides for seed and egg.

Terry Gifford is Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester, UK and Professor Honorario at the University of Alicante, Spain. His books include *Pastoral* (Routledge, 1999), *The Unreliable Mushrooms: New and Selected Poems* (Redbeck, 2003), *The Joy of Climbing* (Whittles, 2004), *Reconnecting With John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* (University of Georgia Press, 2006) and *Ted Hughes* (Routledge, 2009). *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995) appears in a new edition in 2009 from C.C.C. Press.

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