

## Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

June 2014

### WE ARE RUINED BY THE THING WE KILL:

Judith Wright (1915-2000)

Although Judith Wright is widely regarded as one of the finest Australian poets of the twentieth century, she is still not well known in Britain.

She had a great empathy with the natural world and with the Aboriginals whose insight into nature she felt was far superior to that of modern Austrians. She did a great deal to make Aboriginal culture better known and respected and was at the forefront of moves to reconcile her country's present with its Aboriginal past. In the 1950's she wrote:

*The two threads of my life, the love of the land itself and the deep unease over the fate of its original people were beginning to twine together and the rest of my life would be influenced by that connection.*

In the 1960's, she helped Oodgeroo Noonucall become the first Aboriginal ever to have a collection of poetry published.

In her poem, *Bora Ring* she laments the passing of an original way of life – the Bora was an ancient initiation ceremony when boys became men.

Also in the 1960's, she helped to found the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. She loved to live in remote parts of Australia such as the plains of the southern Highlands and Tamborine Mountain, a scenic plateau in Queensland containing a rainforest lived in by Aboriginals for tens of thousands of years and which Ann and I were fortunate enough to visit a few years ago.

### BORA RING

The song is gone; the dance  
is secret with the dancers in the earth,  
the ritual useless, and the tribal story  
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up  
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums  
posture and mime a past corroboree,  
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone; the spear  
is splintered underground; the painted bodies  
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.  
The nomad feet are still.

Only the rider's heart  
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word  
that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse,  
the fear as old as Cain.

It's possible also that her increasing deafness, which began in her twenties, made her seek a more isolated way of life. However, she married at the age of thirty and with the help of her husband, she taught in various places in Australia as she felt it was vital that poetry should be given a more prominent role in schools and colleges. She felt that poetry has the power to heal old wounds and reunite people with the natural environment.

### TAMBORINE MOUNTAIN



Some of Judith's most distinctive poems explore the unequal role of women in Australian society. In *Portrait*, the domestic duties that were once a *heartfelt game* become through time, an *old habit* and a mere semblance of love.

In one of her finest poems, Judith returns to the imprisoning domestic role of women in small town Australian society where feminine dreams have to be folded away like laundered sheets.

At the age of 85, Judith Wright died of a heart attack in Canberra. Her ashes were scattered around the cemetery on her beloved Tamborine Mountain where the remains of countless generations of Aboriginals lie.

## SMALL TOWN DANCE

Two women find the square root of a sheet.  
That is an ancient dance:  
arms wide: together: again: two forward steps: hands meet  
your partners once and twice.  
That white Expanse  
reduces to a neat  
compression sitting in the smallest space  
a sheet can pack in on a cupboard shelf.  
High scented walls there were flapping white  
when I was small, myself.  
I walked between them, playing Out Of Sight.  
Simpler than arms, they wrapped and comforted -  
clean corridors of hiding, roofed with blue -  
saying, Your sins too are made Monday new;  
and see, ahead  
that glimpse of unobstructed waiting green.  
Run, run before you're seen.  
But women know the scale of possibility,  
the limit of opportunity,  
the fence  
how little chance  
there is of getting out. The sheets that tug  
sometimes struggle from the peg,  
don't travel far. Might symbolize  
something. Knowing where danger lies  
you have to keep things orderly.  
The household budget will not stretch to more.  
And they can demonstrate it in a dance.  
First pull those wallowing white dreamers down,  
spread arms: close them. Fold  
those beckoning roads to some impossible world,  
put them away and close the cupboard door.

## PORTRAIT

It was a heartfelt game, when it began -  
polish and cook and sew and mend, contrive,  
move between sink and stove, keep flower-beds weeded -  
all her love needed was that it was needed,  
and merely living kept the blood alive.

Now an old habit leads from sink to stove,  
mends and keeps the house that looks like home,  
and waits in hunger dressed to look like love  
for the calm return of those who, when they come,  
remind her: this was a game, when it began

## Fakenham Poetry Circle Open Poetry Competition 2014

1<sup>st</sup> Prize £140  
2<sup>nd</sup> Prize £90  
3<sup>rd</sup> Prize £50

Contact Kay for details and  
entry form at:  
[kayhathway@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kayhathway@yahoo.co.uk)

Closing date for entries  
14<sup>th</sup> July 2014

Adjudicator:  
James Knox Whittet

28<sup>th</sup> June  
10.30am – 2.30pm

Friends Meeting House  
Beccles

**Catherine Dell  
workshop**

**Stand and Deliver**

£16 members  
£18 non members

## Poetry at the Felixstowe Book Festival



**The Felixstowe Book  
Festival takes place on  
the weekend of 28<sup>th</sup> and**