

A fifth-generation Australian, Judith Wright was born in Armidale in northern New South Wales. She is recognized as one of Australia's leading contemporary poets, with twelve published volumes of poetry to her credit, as well as numerous pamphlets and books of prose. Her place in Australian literature has been acknowledged with the conferring of honorary degrees (D. Litt.) from the Universities of New England, Sydney, Monash and New South Wales, and the Australian National University.

Judith Wright has long been an active conservationist, and running parallel with her concern for the land has been an increasing involvement with justice for Aborigines, reinforced by research for her book, *The Cry for the Dead*. Since 1979, through her work with and for the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, she has tried to effect a change in European-Australian attitudes and understanding of the plight of Aborigines.



JUDITH WRIGHT

WE CALL FOR A TREATY

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The Aboriginal Treaty Committee closed its main programmes at the end of December 1983 and disbanded, but both before and after this, members gave me much help by reading and criticizing chapters. I am especially grateful to Dr Diane Barwick for her thorough and thoughtful help, particularly with Canadian and North American references. Mrs Heather Rusden, office secretary of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, was a great help in looking up references, preparing the index and locating files and documents. Mrs Ettie Oakman patiently deciphered my drafts and transferred them to the word-processor. Mr Stewart Harris provided various references, and as editor of *Aboriginal Treaty News* is the source of a number of press articles and references published in the News which otherwise would have been difficult to locate: Mr Chris Snow took over the editorship of the last two issues and continued this work. Mr Bill Day, editor of *Bunji*, provided newspaper references for the initiative of the Gwalwa Daraniki in demanding treaties with the Commonwealth. Dr H. C. Coombs has provided a final chapter which

sums up the conclusions and suggestions which emerged from the Committee's work and points to the 'unfinished business' which Australians have to undertake before justice and peace can be said to have begun for Aboriginal Australians.

The membership of the Committee changed from time to time over the four and a half years of its existence. I list on page ix the names of all those who were members throughout or from time to time.

As a wholly voluntary operation conducted in the spare time of otherwise busy people, the Committee could not have operated without the generosity of a great number of private donors, including artists, writers, and members of the many support groups which came into existence around Australia. On behalf of the Committee's membership I take this opportunity of thanking all those who helped and contributed.

Judith Wright McKinney

**FULL LIST OF MEMBERS OF THE ABORIGINAL
TREATY COMMITTEE, 1979-83**

**Dr Diane Barwick
Dr Maria Brandl
Mrs Dymphna Clark
Dr Herbert Cole Coombs
Mrs Eva Hancock
Mr Stewart Harris
Mr Paul Kauffman
Mrs Mildred Kirk
Mr Hugh Littlewood
Mrs Judith Wright McKinney
Dr Peter Read
Professor Charles Rowley
Professor W. E. H. Stanner
Dr Joseph Swartz**

Office staff during 1980-83:
**Mrs Heather Rusden
Mrs Jan Gammage**

Royalties from sales of *We Call For a Treaty* will go to the Aboriginal Law Research Unit, Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales, for use in assisting Aborigines to make use of research into their legal problems.

INTRODUCTION

This book will become an historic document. It will have, in time, great political effect. It will help Aboriginal Australians to create for themselves the independent life they want, within the nation which is theirs.

Judith Wright has written her book in a spare, disciplined way, because she was determined, I believe, to give it the intellectual integrity which would make it powerful. Her work, now finished, cannot be dismissed. It will have a long life, and it will be convincing. It will become well used. It will be quoted.

Judith Wright was born at Armidale in northern New South Wales, a district pioneered by sheep and cattle graziers who displaced Aborigines. Her grandfather, Albert Andrew Wright, and her grandmother, then Charlotte May Mackenzie, were born further south in the Hunter Valley, the first in 1841, the second in 1855. Their lives and the lives of other relations of Judith Wright have been recalled in her book, *The Generations of Men* (Oxford University Press, 1959).

More than twenty years later, in another book, *The Cry for the Dead* (Oxford University Press, 1981), she recalled the period and the people once again, this time emphasizing and documenting the impact of the settlers on the Aborigines they displaced.

All her life, and especially in that part of Australia where she was born and spent her early years, mustering sheep and cattle in the saddle, Judith Wright has known and understood the terrible meaning for Aborigines of 'The

Invasion of Australia', as the historian Keith Hancock (now Emeritus Professor Sir Keith Hancock) called the first chapter of his classic, *Australia* (Benn 1930, and Jacaranda 1961).

She studied anthropology at Sydney University and lived for some years at Tamborine, near Brisbane in Queensland, where she was co-founder and president of the Wildlife Preservation Society. Also, her leadership within the Australian conservation movement has often been crucial.

During 1978, many of those Australians who felt sympathy with the Aboriginal movement grew desperate and angry. For four years the Fraser Government had been making much more difficult the movement's work for the recovery of its people, after an encouraging period during the Whitlam Government of 1972-75. The Northern Territory's land rights legislation, proclaimed in 1977, had been a weaker version of the Whitlam Government's bill, and already it was being threatened by proposed amendments. Moreover, the proportion of the national Budget spent on Aboriginal recovery had been deliberately reduced by 30 per cent since 1975.

There had been much private discussion on possible ways of influencing what was happening. Early in 1979, I remember Judith Wright saying to me, 'We've got to do something... I'll see Nugget'; and she drove her little car to Canberra. Soon afterwards, the nucleus of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, among those who agreed that action was necessary, drew together in a voluntary movement, and elected Dr Nugget Coombs as chairman.

There was much to do, and this book reports what was done. It also reports a little of all that the Aboriginal movement was doing at the same time. The movement has been resilient and flexible over generations of defeat and oppression, and lately over decades of anxiety and disappointment, and continuing oppression.

After the Second World War, for example, Australia

accepted hundreds of thousands of displaced persons from Europe. They were given decent accommodation and jobs. But for Aborigines the struggle went on. They too were displaced persons, but they were not given decent accommodation and jobs, although they were Australian.

Later, after the Vietnam War, Australia accepted thousands of refugees from Asia. They were given decent accommodation and they were helped to get jobs. But for Aborigines the struggle went on. They too were refugees, but they were not given enough decent accommodation or jobs, although they were Australian.

Many had fought for Australia. They felt Australian, as well as Aboriginal. They had been colonized, as had the people of Papua New Guinea. But for Aborigines, scattered throughout Australia and often linked by blood with their fellow Australians, there is no hope of independence. And yet they remain a unique, invaluable people, who have a right to self-determination.

That self-determination, when it comes, will enrich the whole of Australia. Meanwhile, as Xavier Herbert wrote in 1978, six years before he died, 'Until we give back to the black man just a bit of the land that was his, and give it back without strings to snatch it back, without anything but generosity of spirit in concession for the evil that we have done to him — until we do that, we shall remain what we have always been so far, a people without integrity, not a nation, but a community of thieves'.

They are harsh words. They have to be. As Professor Charles Rowley wrote about the earlier Aboriginal struggle in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 1 September 1979, 'Their guerilla resistance along the frontiers was regarded as a state of war sanctioning government action against them, including killing them . . . The police were often given a free hand to kill, as in war. But when black killed white, that was murder. Tribesmen were, after capture, tried and hanged as British subjects'.

This guerilla resistance happened within living Aboriginal memory. Today, another kind of resistance has to go on and, behind the disciplined language of this carefully argued book, lies the author's knowledge of the contemporary Aboriginal resistance. Her Aboriginal friends are a part of it.

In Queensland, where Judith Wright lived for some years, I was camping in 1975 at Mapoon on Cape York with a Tjungundi man and his wife in the home they had built of bush timber and old iron. The iron was blackened by fire. It had been part of buildings at Mapoon mission which had been deliberately destroyed by fire in 1963, when Queensland police had taken the Aborigines from their homes at gun point, because their land (on a 'reserve') had been leased to a mining company. The people had gone back to reclaim their land and were living on it illegally.

Of course, the Aboriginal position within Australia generally is much better than it was. In 1978 I camped with Aborigines at Peppimenarti cattle station in the Northern Territory, a huge property which is owned and managed by Aborigines. But just across the border in Western Australia, Aborigines still own no land.

So discrimination goes on, *between* Aborigines, as well as against Aborigines. And today, as more and more Australians who are not Aboriginal sink below the poverty line and suffer from unemployment, it becomes more difficult for them to understand the special needs and rights of Aborigines. Inevitably, governments fear a backlash against policies which would do no more than give Aboriginal Australians their due.

As Professor Rowley has written, 'Those who seem to threaten the social order from below become objects of fear and envy'. This backlash helped to defeat the Whitlam Government in 1975. Today it makes the Hawke Government much too cautious.

Ultimately, therefore, there must be some instrument such as a treaty which will confirm for all time equal and just treatment for Aboriginal Australians wherever they live, putting their land and their rights beyond the reach of sovereign parliaments. There is no security for Aboriginal people in Acts of Parliament, which can be repealed or amended.

What is needed is an instrument like the track of a cable railway, which allows movement forward but prevents any movement backward, when the engine of progress becomes too weak for the climb or breaks down. A treaty would be such a track.

The Aboriginal poet and author, Kevin Gilbert, has written: 'Two hundred years after the original theft it is still possible for public opinion to make governments cease compounding the felony and make restitution to the victims'. He is right, and the time will come.

When it does, the work of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, outlined in this book, will have helped to make the time come.

Stewart Harris