# Caring for Country

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## Poetic Responses

edited by

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PHOENIX EDUCATION

*Caring for Country - Poetic Responses*

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In 1995 the Northern Land Council created the Caring for Country Unit to help Aboriginal landowners deal with challenges they faced and to consider environmentally sustainable development. The name quickly became a catchcry for re-establishing and maintaining traditional connections to the land while dealing with issues that have arisen since the coming of European settlers. A number of programs have paved the way for traditional ecological wisdom and contemporary scientific knowledge to be used side by side to combat environmental problems and find solutions. "Caring for Country" therefore suggested itself as an appropriate title for an anthology of environmental poetry. It has overtones of both love of country and the growing importance of issues of conservation to the survival of the land. Further, the collection represents an enterprise that brings Aboriginal and white poets together in a common cause, not dissimilar to the origin of its title.

We don't know how long Aboriginal people have inhabited Australia, possibly more than 60,000 years. What is certain is that the notion of self as inseparable from the environment has been, and is, predominant in their philosophy. Vast numbers of songs have now been collected, recorded and transcribed. Among these, the lyrical "Wonguri-Mandjigai Song" (or "Moon-bone Song"), translated into English by the anthropologist Ronald M. Berndt, is paramount. Throughout the poem, the people are contiguous with, part of, their landscape: "In the shade of the paperbarks, they are sitting resting like clouds". The places they visit are named after the flora and fauna that inhabit them: the Dugong, the Moonlight Clay Pans, Tree-Limbs-Rubbing-Together, the Sandfly, the Crocodiles. The Moon-bone grows to fullness at the place of the Evening Star, and:

> Sinking down in the sky, that Evening Star, the Lotus...
> Shining on to the foreheads of all those headmen...
> On to the heads of all those Sandfly people...
> It sinks there into the place of the white gum trees, at Milingimbi.

This is the aria of a balanced ecology. Any harm to the environment will be deeply felt by its people, who are no more than a part of the whole dynamic.

In 1788 a British culture was grafted onto the land. The first white settlers found the country alien and alienating, and early poetry reflects a nostalgia for the homeland. The birds and trees weren't English, the seasons were all wrong, the conditions far too harsh to evoke lyrical feelings. By the turn of the century poets had begun to feel acclimatised or, having been born in Australia, acknowledged her landscape as home. An interesting example is Henry Parkes, whose "My Native Land" , extolling England, was written at sea on the way out to Australia. By the time of "Solitude", he is clearly enjoying his rambles in "the savage glen" in

preference to the "social life" of the colony. Caroline Carleton was an early patriotic supporter with "The Song of Australia", and Dorothea Mackellar later wrote her well-known rejection of nostalgic, backward-looking ideals of Nature, in favour of empathy with her own wild country.

Even the desert was found beautiful. For explorer Ernest Favenc, the absence of expected signs of approaching dawn are forgotten when "With a dull haze hung on its furthest bound,/ Then sprang the sun into its steely blue." Barcroft Boake's "A Vision Out West" provides a deeper understanding of "this Land where silence reigns supreme". In "Day Flight", Aboriginal poet Jack Davis, looking from the plane window, sees his country spread out below:

> And most I longed for, there as I dreamed,
> A square of the desert, stark and red,
> To mould a pillow for a sleepy head
> And a cloak to cover me.

Bush balladists such as Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson were quickly welcomed for their popular imagery, possessing rather than possessed by the land, but even Lawson has moments of lyrical appreciation, as in "The Blue Mountains". The lyricism of Henry Kendall's "Bell-Birds" has long been acclaimed in school texts and anthologies, but comparison with William Russell's poem "Bellbird", where the bird takes on a deeper symbolic significance, exemplifies the difference between white and Aboriginal responses. As William tells it:

> Bellbirds tend to inhabit stressed margins of wet sclerophyll forest or rainforest; however, their habits can severely degrade areas of these forests. The Bellbird is a beautiful songmaker and is a part of the ecological structure of the east and south-east of Australia; however—and significantly in relation to the conceit in the poem—it has evolved into a bird that manages the environment, rather than living within it. Australians (most cultures) would say that they seek to be "stewards" of the environment, and also seek to harness the environment for their own benefit: whereas hunter-gatherers need tobe far more careful about their impact and so live within the environment as an integral part of it.... Further, farming cultures prohibit the functioning of hunter-gatherer societies: the former effectively destroys the ability of the latter to sustain itself. [1]

Roland Robinson was arguably one of the first poets to show an intense empathy with Aboriginal people and an understanding of the land we share. His poems consistently demonstrate his own love of the land, the connection

between country and its earliest peoples, and the need to protect this. He has been linked to the Jindyworobak Movement (active from 1937 to the 1950s), a nationalistic Australian literary movement whose white members sought to promote Aboriginal ideas and customs, particularly in poetry. However, his experimental range is not circumscribed and, at its best, rises well above basic ideology. "The Unlucky Country" is a savage criticism of environmental waste.

Mary Durack, brought up on Argyle station among Aboriginal people, gives dramatic voice to the distress created by government flooding of their homestead and surrounding Indigenous land, as part of the Ord River Irrigation Scheme. Her poem "Lament for the Drowned Country" is significant in capturing the intonation and cadence of Aboriginal speech in the mourning of old Maggie for the loss of her "born country". Brenda Niall, towards the end of *True North* [2], her biography of the Durack sisters, comments: "At a later time, her creation of a first person voice for Maggie Wallaby might have been questioned. In 1972 it was taken as she intended it, as a work of empathy and imaginative identification." In today's climate, this would be seen as appropriation, but Durack has given voice to a story that might otherwise not have been told.

Through her growing friendship with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Judith Wright took up the fight for Aboriginal Land Rights and environmental conservation, the poetry of both becoming part of the protest. In the 1985 poem "For a Pastoral Family", Wright takes to task the men of her own clan ("Our people who gnawed at the fringe/ of the edible leaf of this country") for clearing and eroding the land, not to mention poisoning it "with chemical silt". As early as 1966 she became part of the battle which had then begun to save the Great Barrier Reef, later writing in *The Coral Battleground*:

> If the Great Barrier Reef could think, it would fear us...We have its fate in our hands, and slowly but surely as the years go on, we are destroying those great water-gardens, lovely indeed as cherry-boughs in flower under the once-clear sea, but far more complex,
> far more alive, teeming with myriads of varied animal lives [3].

On Saturday 10th January 1970, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published lines from a poem Wright was working on (but does not seem to have continued with [4]**):**

> I crush the Reef. Its coral cool
> darkened where my shadow fell.
> The fronded live anemone
> furled itself and shrank from me.
> For death's my servant and my tool
> and, like my shadow follows me.

The battle for the Reef is ongoing today, with protests against the coal mining, dredging, dumping, pollution, coral bleaching and pest species that threaten its future. "Rockpool" and "Patterns" speak out about other man-made scourges of our times − the cancers, bombs, nuclear warfare and more to come. Many other of Wright's poems contrast the loveliness of the natural world with what we've made of it, and, as a reader for Jacaranda Press, she was instrumental in achieving publication for Oodgeroo's first collection of passionately political poetry. In "Municipal Gum" Oodgeroo addresses the gumtree as "fellow citizen", and identifies with the gum's enforced alienation from "the cool world of leafy forest halls/ And wild bird calls". In her collection, *My People* [5], the poem "Time is Running Out" is a savage indictment of mining and the rape of the earth for profit.

Of the living poets, a number concern themselves with objections to the 'rubbishing' of the land, and consumerist waste. Stephen Edgar's poem "Spirits of Place" discovers a forest creek, seemingly pristine, until the persona follows it through to a stormwater tunnel, in which

> Lies, naturally, the tossed
> And crumpled litter, bags and cans,
> One rusty shopping trolley, a dumped fridge,
> And a length of pipe that spans
> The gap beneath the bridge.

The irony in the word "naturally" carries the poem's message, the final image of the herons ("with slow and ghostly pace they wear / The folds of that grey fabric they step through") reflecting the difference between the natural world and the one that greets us. Similar in mood, though very different in the expression of it, is Samuel Wagan Watson's prose poem "Strange fish", where the deflated bladders of cardboard wine-casks ("*Goonius baggas")* litter the bed of the mostly dried-out Todd River. Like fish they have bulbous eyes, like the fish they "seemed to have perished in a pack, almost like lemmings, when the river disappeared into the dreaming of evaporation....and now their souls are bled too; shiny bodies, awaiting fossilisation." The quirky contemporary imagery underlies a requiem for the river and its fish.

Increasingly, there is emphasis on what has come to be known as ecopoetics, the poetry of ecology, of the changes to the environment brought about by the disastrous choices of those in power − the land-clearing, destruction of old forests and heritage trees, mining, oil-spills, nuclear accidents, a new highway

tearing through the Berrima koala habitat, and of course the horrific effects of anthropogenic climate change. Many previous poems and poets have expressed ecological concerns, were clearly ecopoetic in their stance, but only recently has ecopoetry emerged as a recognisable subgenre. One of its chief characteristics is that it views the world in a way that implies responsibility. Pam Brown's poem "Darkenings" addresses issues of personal responsibility and involvement:

nobody's thinking
that you're here reading reports
on indiscriminate transmissions –
avian flu, Hendra virus, lyssa virus –
insensible species' leaps,
no-bargains-pandemics,
no clues in the notes from darkening science

Natalie Harkin's poem "Climate Change" intersperses governmental statements of scepticism/ denial, and resultant budget cuts to renewable-energy, with the reality of what is happening to the planet:

fresh-water chokes
on salt-blooms
to season crops shrink lakes
offering white-crust-thirst
in its wake

Her conclusion emphasises our failure, or perhaps inability, to counteract these forces:

*Meanwhile…*
in my Adelaide suburban backyard
sub-tropical fruits now grow wild steamy
and smoke whispers sorrow on autumn winds
while distant strangers cling
to homes lands boats
watching livelihoods
watching lives
slip away.

There is a shared sense of outrage and guilt in these poems that communicates itself directly to the reader.

Undoubtedly, the activism and activist poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal have acted as a catalyst upon the mindset of many contemporary

poets, and increasing awareness of environmental disasters together with changing attitudes towards land ownership and conservation have fostered the need to write differently about country. The Maralinga atomic tests, uranium mining in Kakadu, the High Court's decision in the Mabo case and Prime Minister Keating's subsequent speech on its moral importance, Bob Browne's crusade against logging in Tasmania, the Fukushima disaster, current efforts to save the Great Australian Bight from oil and gas drilling − all have impacted on the public consciousness. Rallies, protest marches and petitions are an ongoing part of everyday life.

The poets in the final section of the anthology, both Aboriginal and white, have been specifically chosen because of their ability to communicate imagistically the enormity of what is taking place in the environment. Poets of both descent, most sensitive to Nature, are most sensitive to what has been lost. They are the canaries in the mine, alerting us to the dangers and battles that lie ahead.

END NOTES

1. email of 13/10/2016, from Rachel Russell. The Bellbirds are said to "farm" the honeydew secretion produced by insect larvae, using their tongues to remove it and leaving the nymphs mostly unharmed, to maintain a steady supply.
2. Published by Text, 2012.
3. *The Coral Battleground* (Spinifex, 2014), p.xxvi. Page references are to this re-edition of the Thomas Nelson (1977) and Angus & Robertson (1996) texts.
4. In fact, on p.110 of *The Coral Battleground*, she refers to it as "a fairly inferior and hurriedly-produced verse of my own", written to accompany a Charles Blackman cartoon against oil drilling.
5. John Wiley & Sons, 2008 (Jacaranda, 1970); www.poetrylibrary.edu.au

## Wonguri-Mandjigai Song (*The Moon-bone Song)*

The people are making a camp of branches in that country at Arnhem Bay:
With the forked stick, the rail for the whole camp, the *Mandjigai* people are making it.
Branches and leaves are about the mouth of the hut: the middle is clear within.
They are thinking of rain, and of storing their clubs in case of a quarrel,
In the country of the Dugong, towards the wide clay pans made by the Moonlight.
Thinking of rain, and of storing the fighting sticks.
They put up the rafters of arm-band-tree wood, put the branches on to the camp, at Arnhem Bay, in that place of the Dugong…
And they block up the back of the hut with branches.
Carefully place the branches, for this is the camp of the Morning-Pigeon man,
And of the Middle-of-the-Camp man; of the Mangrove-Fish man; of two other head-men,
And of the Clay pan man; of the *Baiini*-Anchor man, and of the Arnhem Bay country man;
Of the Whale man and of another head-man; of the Arnhem Bay Creek man;
Of the Scales-of-the-Rock-Cod man, of the Rock Cod man, and of the Place-of-the-Water man.

* * *

They are sitting about in the camp, among the branches, along the back of the camp:
Sitting along in lines in the camp, there in the shade of the paperbark trees:
Sitting along in a line, like the new white spreading clouds:
In the shade of the paperbarks, they are sitting
resting like clouds.
People of the clouds, living there like the mist; like the mist sitting resting with arms on knees,
In here towards the shade, in this Place, in the shadow of paperbarks.
Sitting there in rows, those *Wonguri-Mandjigai* people, paperbarks along like a cloud.
Living on cycad-nut bread; sitting there with white-stained fingers,
Sitting in there resting, those people of the Sandfly clan...