

# Long Paddock

**LAURA JOSEPH**

reviews Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country*, 2010, Allen and Unwin

The connectedness between humanity and the natural world is central to both the aesthetic and political work of poet and activist Judith Wright. It is thus fitting that a work about Wright be grounded in the places she wrote from. As in Wright's poetry, the natural world is the point of departure for Fiona Capp's journey through the landscapes of Wright's life. Capp's biographical work, *My Blood's Country*, gives literal expression to the understanding that the process of writing of biography is the process of mapping a life. Moving from New England in Northern New South Wales, to the "lush, tenebrous surrounds of Mount Tamborine" (101) and the Mongarlowe bushland East of Canberra, these terrains offer topographies of Wright's life, and take us to the places from which the sense of urgency and passion that informed her poetry and activism grew. In fleshing out the particular dimensions of Wright's relation to these places, Capp opens some new readings of the poems written from both places – understood as both imaginative and geographic locations. *My Blood's Country* gives us a sense of the deep interconnectedness of imaginative and real topographies, and of the ways in which external geographies are overlaid with internal ones, and vice versa.

*My Blood's Country* covers new terrain in terms of biographical work on Wright in its account of Wright's relationship with economist, government advisor and activist Herbert Cole "Nugget" Coombs. Until the release of letters between Wright and Coombs in 2009, this relationship was "one of the best kept open secrets in Australian literary history" (162). In their twenty-five years together "not once did [Wright and Coombs] attend an official function together as a couple or publicly declare their love" (164). Writing the sexuality of one's biographical subject is a difficult, often contentious task. The elision of this

aspect of Wright's life (although at Wright's request) was the source of some controversy surrounding Veronica Brady's biography of the poet and activist. Somewhat ironically, Kathleen Jordan's biography of Brady also drew criticism on this front. Capp's treatment of Wright's relationships with Jack McKinney and, later, Coombs is not reductive, rather gives another dimension to the passion that drives such inspired poetry and fierce activism. Capp paints both Wright's relationships with both McKinney and Coombs as based on a mutual sense of urgency and passion about the environment and Indigenous rights.

Grounded also in Capp's correspondence and, later, friendship with Wright, *My Blood's Country* uses the journey through the landscapes of Wright's life not to consolidate any particular vision of Wright, but open some new questions and possibilities for thinking about the life and work of one of Australia's greatest poets.

One of the great achievements of writing from the perspective of place rather than time is that Capp doesn't anatomise her subject, rather the work gives a sense of the terrain from which one of Australia's greatest poets thinks and writes.