Editorial

From a Post-pastoral Cowshed

Mark Tredinnick[1]

We've just moved to the country. Back to the country, I should say, from an unsuccessful attempt to love – and afford – the city. Down the back of the house there's a big old cowshed – a four-stand walkthrough, Ross, the builder, told me the other day when he came to dig a trench to bring the telephone wire down from the house. The shed, he said, would have milked sixty head twice a day a hundred years ago, but these days it's where I work, and I'm sitting here now – writing, not milking – and it's late April. Across the lane the elms flare yellow. The ground smells of poplar leaves and the aftermath of rain. The light is failing, and I must go soon to shut the hens in their coop, and down in the paddocks some heifers bawl. Soon the frogs will start up along the Wingecarribee, which snakes through the pastures and the willows and the birches down there not a kilometre from where I sit.

I'm still in Australia, but it's not easy to tell. Except for the name of that river and the way a mob of Eastern Greys bounds in its desultory panic away whenever you get close to them in the pastures by the river, and the way right now the possum drags its world-weary self into the nest it calls its own in the ceiling above my head. Except for something ineffable that is almost reducible to the smell of the rocks and the soil they make and the way those soils have been trodden and turned very gently forever and, just lately, intensively, but which is more than the smell of the trammeled earth. Something antipodean – which has nothing to do with "Australia," of course, but everything to do with the fact and the way that this place belongs to the natural history of this bend of this particular river on this particular continent under this bit of heaven in the present geological era, the Holocene, doomed and beautiful era of men – something antipodean, more than a scent, less than a voice, something like a sensibility, is immanent here, in the face of so much circumstantial evidence that this cowshed is set down somewhere in West Massachusetts or The Cotswolds. And I don't

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believe for a minute that I'd write the truth about this place, nor would I write truly *from* this place, if I didn't catch in my syntax and diction something of the cadence of that local, antipodean, Wingecarribeean intelligence, including the way it plays among these colonial cows and cowsheds, these immigrant trees and grasses and women and children and men, such as me, sitting here in my post-pastoral shed with my pale skin and my Cornish surname and my apple computer.

I have written elsewhere and often that although we have made in Australia a long and large literature of place, we have barely begun to write a literature in which Australian places themselves find voice. We haven't come home in our writing – in its ecology – to where we actually live; our sentences belong somewhere else; they do not speak for the places themselves where we find ourselves two hundred years after English first came here. We need to bring our sentences home – and I think we are doing it now, as this issue of PAN bears witness – for the sake of Australian places as well as Australian literature. Literature – in its semantic music, in its unique capacity to sway us with argument and rhythm and chant and reason and cant and rhyme and the vulgar meter of human conversation, with story and drama and plot and character and rationale and the irrational logic of poetics – has a special power to return us to ourselves and to our world. Literature, more than any other art form perhaps, has the power to change us, to change us, among other things, from anthropocentric to ecocentric beings, but it will only do that only if the work is true to its maker and to the world it renders. Specifically, in Australia, we want writing that speaks of Australian places in themselves. Otherwise we won't believe it; otherwise we won't know what it is we love and how it goes and how we need to live in it and what it is we need to save, if it is not already too late.

Someone called me last week and interviewed me about nature writing, and I found myself saying, according to the way she transcribed it in her article, this: "Judith Wright said in the sixties that you don't make a literature of any kind until you reconcile yourself with your land. Until then your literature will speak of your exile and of the places you're from rather than where you are. Australian poetry is certainly getting there now, thanks especially to Wright's poetry – you read many poems now, by people like Kevin Hart and Robert Gray and Louise Crisp and Louise Oxley, and you feel the country. But our prose has been dragging its feet through England until recently. Tim Winton's writing, though, suggests to me we're getting closer to home in prose, too."

Literature, as Judith Wright understood better than any Australian writer, is always an act of listening to the larger order of things; literature is a kind of joining in the poetry – as far as each writer is able to discern it in whatever it is in her world that draws her attention – of how the world coheres where the writer stands. And at the centre of that coherence is ecology, is geography, is the more

than merely human world upon which ours is premised. Literature will always be much more and much else than that, but if it is not in some way a fathoming of the world as it goes, physically and culturally, it will not be literature that lasts. So, whatever else he knows, a writer had better know the place he speaks from, especially if it's nature writing, or some variety of environmental literature, he's attempting.

The woman who interviewed me noted my concession that there are many modes of writing in the environmental field, "including the polemical, which has an important place in calling on people to make changes" in the way they inhabit the world, especially their piece of it. That sounds like a thing I would have said. The journalist goes on to say that "Tredinnick, however, celebrates the poetic mode." "Poetic writing," I said to her, "has the power to change us deep down, without telling us what to do. Words that are beautifully made will strike you with the same kind of force that nature itself does. People need to be stirred and moved like that," especially when it's the earth we're wishing they would remember and save.

The conference from which most of the pieces of writing in this collection arose was the first ever held by the Australian and New Zealand chapter of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, founded by Kate Rigby and Charles Dawson and me in late 2003. "Being True to the Earth" my colleague Kate Rigby named the conference, taking the phrase for Nietzsche, and being true to the earth is I guess what I've been talking about here, in my own fashion, as a lyric essayist and poet; it's what I'd like to see more of in Australian writing, and what I find plenty of in the poems and essays in this collection. It's what we all talked about at the conference, meaning many different things by "being" and "true" and "earth," but talking, all of us all along, about the same thing: how literature and other cultural pursuits can remember the earth and serve it, especially in times like these when time itself seems to be running out.

So, here you have a selection of papers and essays and poems, and some of them have pictures, and all of these writings and images are *about* truthful ways of being upon the earth; or else they *are*, themselves, these diverse pieces, ways of being truthful to or about the earth. If you read through this ensemble, as various in mood and aspect and topography as the Australian and New Zealand geographies they traverse, you will walk in and out of gardens; you will travel a train with your son through the stations of your own childhood; you will lie upon mountain tops and beside glacial lakes naked and foolish and beautiful; you will try to ride a camel through the eye of a needle; you will journey to an inland sea, ephemeral as myth; you will try to make a new home in an old place at the bottom of an island at the bottom of bigger island at the bottom of the world; you will name your favourite tree as if you named your original self; you will fish and swim and walk and orchard and haunt and claim country like a

poet; you will fight with French theorists for the gift of the earth, our eternal present; you will hear places as soundscapes tell us what they think of us; you will go outside and learn how we learn from the outside world what it wants of us; and you will journey along New Zealand rivers and hear their grief and longing and learn the language in which their salvation and our own must be spoken.

Even if time and water and oil are running out and ecosystems are poised at the edge of collapse; even if the world, unless we are swift and brave, may cease to be the bountiful home it has been for us so long; and even though none of the writing here will, on its own, change any of that, I can't think of a more important literature than the pieces on offer here belong to and engender. They speak from the belly of the world, and they sing and they argue and they seduce us round so that some of us, anyway, will find it hard to go on living the same old way and let the earth die.