



Speech by

Hon. M. FOLEY

MEMBER FOR YERONGA

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JUDITH WRIGHT—A TRIBUTE

Hon. M. J. FOLEY (Yeronga—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister for The Arts) (9.45 a.m.), by leave: I rise to pay tribute to Queensland poet, short story writer and critic Judith Wright McKinney, who died three weeks ago aged 85. Australia and the world owe a great debt to Judith Wright. Her poetry will continue to inspire Australian writers in the future, as it has writers of the past six decades. This evening at Old Parliament House in Canberra, I shall attend a gathering to honour her life and work. I know I am joined by the shadow Arts Minister, Joan Sheldon, in expressing deep respect for Judith Wright and her poetry.

Judith Wright's contribution to reconciliation between Aboriginal and white Australians and cohesion in Australian society as a whole made her unique. Many describe her as Australia's greatest poet, and I respectfully concur with that view. Last year I had the honour of inaugurating the Judith Wright Calanthe Award for Poetry at the 1999 Brisbane Writers Festival. At the time of the inauguration of the Calanthe Award, Judith Wright wrote—

"Poetry is a most important bridge between people and that my name should be given to this award is an honour indeed."

The \$15,000 Judith Wright Calanthe Award is presented annually for the best collection of poetry by an Australian poet in the preceding year.

Judith Wright was a child of the bush. Her early poems speak of bullockies, country towns and soldiers' farms. Born and raised on the New England tableland, she spent much of her life in Queensland. Ms Wright McKinney wrote 40 books and several collections of poetry and essays. Her poem *South of My Days* remains one of the best-loved works of Australian poetry, memorable for its profoundly emotional connection with the Australian landscape—"part of my blood's country", as she termed it. At her death, she was working on a second volume of autobiography despite profound deafness, waning vision and poor health.

Ms Wright took great personal pleasure in the fact that the Queensland Government named its poetry award for her home Calanthe at Mount Tamborine, which she had named after a local white native orchid. From her earliest days, Judith Wright wrote passionately about Australia and its environment, and she embodied this in her writing about Cooloola and her mountain home at Tamborine. As a poet, Judith Wright won deserved international acclaim for her championing of indigenous and environmental issues. Her poetry recognised Aboriginal people and their land rights as central to an understanding of Australian culture and she drew great inspiration from her personal friendship with the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

The first volume of Judith Wright's autobiography *Half a Lifetime*, published last year, finished with these words—

"To all of the peoples of the old and true Australia on whose land I have trespassed and whom, by being part of my own people, I have wronged, I plead for forgiveness. To all of them I owe that overweighing debt of life itself, and to all of them I now bend my head and say sorry. Sorry, above all, that I can make nothing right."

Her death diminishes us, but she taught us of things beyond mortality, as in the final words of her poem *Nameless Flower*, about the *Calanthe* orchid—

"The words are white as a stone is white
carved for a grave;
but the flower blooms in immortal light,
being now, being love."
