

# Love and vision

## The story of Kathleen McArthur's care for wallum country

Anne Collett<sup>1</sup>

In *Wild Dog Dreaming*, published in 2011, Deborah Bird Rose writes about 'Anthropogenic extinction' as 'a fact of death that is growing exponentially.'<sup>2</sup> She notes that 'we are entering an era of loss of life unprecedented in human history' and states that '[t]he question, of course, is: if we humans are the cause, can we change ourselves enough to change our impacts?' (2) Rose moves on to quote Michael Soulé's observation that '[p]eople save what they love', and asks with him, '[a]re humans capable of loving, and therefore of caring for, the animals and plants that are currently losing their lives in a growing cascade of extinctions?' She follows this question up with another, more imperative one, '[h]ow [are we] to invigorate love and action in ways that are generous, knowledgeable, and life-affirming?' (2) In interview three years later, Rose reiterates this view, urging her audience to take this moment, this challenge of the Anthropocene, 'to enhance our capacity for love, for care, for keeping faith with earth, keeping faith with life.'<sup>3</sup>

This combination of love, knowledge and care were understood by Kathleen McArthur in the 1950s to be the best drivers of life-affirming action that would 'keep faith with earth'. This is not in any way to give less credence to Rose's work, but rather, to understand her concerns and values in relation to a history of 'white' environmental activism in Australia that was in large part instigated and energised by amateurs like McArthur. It might also prompt us to ask how effective these drivers are, given the time lapse involved and the increasing urgency of need. This was an urgency that was also recognised by McArthur, and one that prompted her multi-dimensional campaign to 'save' the *wallum* country of south east Queensland. 'For those readers unfamiliar with the name, Wallum,' McArthur explains,

is the usually flat, badly drained, sandy country of the coast. It is an aboriginal word some say applied to all species of *Banksia*, and others say to *Banksia aemula*. The Wallum, being up to the present practically useless for commercial purposes provides our best wildflower shows; due, of course, to lack of interference from man and his introduced beasts.<sup>4</sup>

McArthur understood that the loss of wildflowers in the wallum country was a cultural loss. Nature and culture were understood to be entangled. We no longer speak of 'conservation' or of 'saving' the environment, hence the inverted commas, but for MacArthur the project of 'saving' was not one of patronising salvage by the superior white coloniser, but a project of personal responsibility related to the ethics of care for earth, and a recognition of the meaning of imminent loss.

In her first book, *Queensland Wildflowers*, published by Jacaranda Press in 1959, she writes:

The wildflowers of a nation play a big part in its culture...Ours [Australian settler culture] is still young and delicate and we must save the heritage of the land to nurture it. What is not recognisable will not be saved. So, with great urgency let us get to know our wildflowers and it will follow that we will love them and desire their preservation.<sup>5</sup>

In a subsequent volume of wildflower story in word and paint, *The Bush in Bloom*, published by Kangaroo Press in 1982, her sense of urgency had increased: 'there is no time available to be patient and wait for natural changes,' she writes, 'when our heritage of flowers is being destroyed so fast.'<sup>6</sup> It would seem that little if any significant cultural change had occurred over that twenty-three year period of dedicated work to alert a community to the urgency of need and the meaning of loss. Her campaign to save the wallum country she held so dear is a story dear to my own heart, as this is country that has much in common with the bush of the south coast of New South Wales in which I grew up. So the story that I want to pass on here is an entangled one of hers and mine and of all those others whose love of country bring them together in a special kind of kinship—not kinship by blood or birth, but nevertheless a kinship of heritage and the kinship of love. We might turn again to Rose, to whom story is integral. In that same interview of March 2014, she observed that, 'we are still part of the story [of earth, of life] and need to choose how we are going to be in that story.' The story I want to tell here is a story of grass-roots activism, and in particular, the story of a company of amateurs, myself included, who knew what part they wanted to play in that story of earth and life and understood the need to encourage others to join them. Like Carolyn Dinshaw's work on amateur readers of medieval texts, I offer this entangled story as:

a contribution to a broad and heterogeneous knowledge collective that values various ways of knowing that are derived not only from positions of detachment but also—remembering the etymology of *amateur*<sup>7</sup>—from positions of affect and attachment, from desires to build another kind of world.<sup>8</sup>

Kathleen McArthur is described by her biographer Margaret Somerville as 'a wildflower artist, environmental educator, author, playwright, theatrical impresario, biologist, historian, business entrepreneur and conservationist',<sup>9</sup> whose love for and concern about human impact on the fragile coastal environment of south east Queensland, led her to devote her life to the preservation of the area and the education of the populace. She did this through a huge range of activities that included campaigns 'to save' the Great Barrier Reef, the Pumicestone Passage and Cooloola (on the upper reaches of the Noosa River).

McArthur wrote letters, articles and books; she wrote and performed plays in her Lunch Hour Theatre; she co-founded the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland with Judith Wright<sup>10</sup> and David Fleay (1962) and founded the Caloundra group of the society (1963); she began a weekly column 'Wildlife and Landscape' for the local paper; she cofounded (1963) and contributed to the magazine *Wildlife* which is still published today as *Wildlife Australia*; she grew and sold native plants in her backyard nursery; she painted wildflowers and exhibited the paintings to raise funds for her campaigns; and she published books of these paintings with botanical and popular descriptions and anecdotes. McArthur dedicated her life to telling 'the story' of wallum country in as many ways and places as she could muster. This story was of course a necessarily incomplete one that could only tell what she knew. It did not pretend to be otherwise. McArthur was not an educated woman in the sense that she did not hold a degree in biology or botany; she did not have professional training in visual or performing arts; she did not attend classes in creative writing or scientific illustration. She was self-taught—she was an autodidact and an amateur. An amateur is someone who pursues something for the love of it. Kathleen was a woman who knew what she loved, believed that the love should be shared, and devoted her life to educating the Australian public to a better understanding and a larger consciousness of the beauty of the natural world in which they found themselves.

Four books were specifically devoted to wildflowers stories, including the visual stories of beautiful colour plates. Rejected by two publishers on the grounds that its language was 'too pedestrian' and its approach was 'excessively feminine',<sup>11</sup> McArthur's first wildflower book, *Queensland Wildflowers: a selection*, was published with the proceeds of a two-month long exhibition of her paintings in her own home. I suspect that the rejection by the publisher who found the book 'excessively feminine' might be understood as a devaluation that went hand in hand with the work of an amateur and writing that speaks 'from the heart'. When Lawrence Hamilton, Emeritus Professor of Natural Resources, Cornell University, writes a Foreword to McArthur's last published book, *Living on the*

*Coast* (1989), his discomfort with such a deeply personal account is evident. Although he praises the author's 'picturesque and felicitous language', 'the grumpiness, the tenderness, the frustration, the joy' that 'give life to words and events that can only come autobiographically,' he also remarks that 'I do not usually take to autobiographical work, and I have promised myself never to indulge in producing such a work of my own.'<sup>12</sup> Here speaks the professional in hedged praise of the amateur and the 'feisty woman'.<sup>13</sup> But McArthur's 'feminine' style won its first battle with significant accolade: *Queensland Wildflowers* received an Australian Book Publishers' Association Award for design at the 1960 Adelaide Festival of the Arts and was subsequently exhibited at the National Book League's International Book Exhibition in London. Passion and persistence paid off. The success encouraged her to pursue her desire to create an appreciation of wallum country generally, and a 'wildflower consciousness' in particular, among as many people as she could reach.

In the volume of wildflower paintings published in 1986 (*Looking at Australian Wildflowers*), McArthur introduces the reader to 'Wallum, The Old Man Banksia', with a recollection from her childhood in the 1920s:

there was a magazine called *Home*, rather high quality and expensive I seem to remember it, but those were affluent times before the world was hit by the Depression. In *Home* there were always articles featuring Australian artists and it was in one such I first saw Margaret Preston's banksias. As I wrote in the *Bush in Bloom*, nature has been emulating her art ever since. (Oscar Wilde I think!).<sup>14</sup>

She notes that Joseph Banks collected the type specimens of four banksias,<sup>15</sup> that the younger Linnaeus named the genus, and that 'the Aborigines of Wide Bay (between Noosa and Fraser Island), members of the Kabi tribe, called this large banksia, with the specific name of *aemula*, 'Wallum'.' (24)

The wallum was particularly precious to McArthur in part because of its ancientness, its archaic beauty, its variety, its fecundity, but also because of its fragility. Wallum country is particularly susceptible to damage done by cattle-grazing, sugar cane and slash-pine plantation and by urban development, being the country of coastal fringe—the first frontier of vegetated land behind the sand dunes. It clings to the coastal strip of north-eastern New South Wales (Port Macquarie) through south eastern Queensland (Caloundra and Noosa) up to the Tropic of Capricorn.

Wallum Country is beautifully described by McArthur's biographer, Margaret Somerville:

The silver sand track of the wallum winds bare through intertwining brush so dense it is impenetrable. Everything is dwarfed and gnarled from struggle; whole trees are just shoulder high. Tiny heath flowers and myrtles, bushes of tea-tree and banksia, dodder and old man's bear clamber over each other, all interwoven into a thick blanket. Crawling through to a bare patch under broad-leafed acacias, made clear by a dense mat of broken twigs, I crouch in mottled prickly shade. Near the ground I breathe in the sweet smell of wallum banksia in the still air while the wind ripples above in the acacias. I see the flicker of blue-faced honeyeaters, hear the chatter of a willy wagtail and the whistle of a brown honeyeater in the branches overhead.

The Kabi people of the sandy coastal plains called this country wallum. It is the Kabi word for a single banksia, *Banksia aemula*, or it can refer to the many banksias that grow in this country. It has also come to stand for the country itself, with all its flowers, birds, plants and living things.<sup>16</sup>

Wallum country then is banksia country—the country whose flora and fauna were anthropomorphised by May Gibbs in the *Snugglypot and Cuddlepiefie* series<sup>17</sup> and in which unfortunately, the banksia were vilified. I loved the Snugglypot and Cuddlepiefie stories, but the BIG BAD BANKSIA MAN was the terror of my childhood. Although McArthur remarks that, '[i]t is doubtful if young readers of today would be scared by the Banksia Man—possibly the reverse—for they have grown accustomed to his face,'<sup>18</sup> I was child who grew up in the bush. I was familiar with its scents, sounds and colours but stories have a powerful impact upon our imagination, and our perception of the world around us.

At this point, before telling you more about McArthur, and in particular her passion for wildflowers, I want to take you back to my childhood and my own love of country: I was born in Canberra and holidayed throughout my childhood on the south coast of NSW—Bateman's Bay, Merry Beach, Pebbly Beach, Pretty Beach. Finally, I lived at Bawley Point for two years where I attended Milton High School. I did not learn to love the Bush—the Bush was part of me: the spicy smell of eucalyptus, boronia, tea tree and wattle; the fragile wildflowers of white, purple, yellow, pink; the sounds and colours of lorikeets, rosellas, finches, wagtails, fairy wrens, honey eaters; sudden encounters with lizards, snakes, possums, wallabies, kangaroos, echidnas. The coastal bush of my childhood was the epitome of Charles Darwin's 'entangled bank', as described in the *Origin of Species* (1859). This was a book whose concluding lines impressed me with its poetry—it is a hymn to the beauty of nature. Think how much Darwin's bank resembles Margaret Somerville's description of Wallum:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. ... There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>19</sup>

My love of literature has also been an entangled thing—one that combined a visceral and aesthetic love of the natural world and writing about the natural world, with a love of story and a love of poetry. I have been, like McArthur, a passionate amateur—a naturalist and a child poet. My father encouraged me to write poetry from a very young age, a passion that was rewarded with publication of a poem, 'The Live Bush', in an anthology of *Verse by Young Australians*.<sup>20</sup> My father also introduced me to the poetry of Judith Wright—her poetry feels so much part of me that I hear phrases and lines in my head like an endless interrupted river that wends its way underground to bubble to the surface in unexpected places: Canberra was not unlike New England is 'a clean lean hungry country', and the latter part of Judith's life spent in the Braidwood area was part of my 'blood's country'.<sup>21</sup> But it was not until quite recently, while working on a research project on Judith Wright with my colleague Dorothy Jones, that I discovered Kathleen MacArthur. Kathleen and Judith 'met' in 1950 through the present of a book for Judith's child, Meredith—a love of reading began a correspondence and a friendship that would last a lifetime. Because they lived at a great distance from each other—Kathleen in Caloundra and Judith in Tambourine and later Braidwood—they did not meet as frequently as they would have liked, and so their friendship was maintained largely through writing and reading. An exchange of letters was an exchange of ideas, hopes, griefs, loves—a correspondence that ranged across the ordinary and the sublime. Their lives were entangled through their love of country, and more particularly, their love of what they came to call 'wildflowering'.

In November 1954 Judith wrote to Kathleen about an excursion into the country where she comes upon 'a narrow granite plain with big outcropping boulders everywhere ... absolutely massed with flowers of every kind... a most lovely fern-leafed boronia... big white tea-trees and yellow water lilies in the creeks, the yellow climbing orchid we found at Boreen ...'.<sup>22</sup> The names of wildflowers fill her pages as she travels in the car through swathes of colour: 'Harebells, purple verbena, scarlet salvia, evening primrose, white everlastings and yellow buttons, the plains were fairly covered with double tails, yellow ones; wild pansies; three sorts of pea ... orange and red, plain lemon yellow, brown and yellow...'.<sup>23</sup>

In her Foreword to Kathleen's wildflower volume, *Looking at Australian Wildflowers*, Judith speaks of their long friendship that brought 'joys of discovery, new knowledge, and shared appreciation.' She recalls 'those 'wildflowering days' at Tambourine Mountain, Caloundra, Noosa or Lake Cootharaba, when I was able to wander with her'; of days that 'helped train my own eye a little to her ways of seeing and her devotion to the flowers of the coast, the mountains and the wallum plains and swamps.'<sup>24</sup> Wright and McArthur

shared a passion for the importance of education and a belief that education of the eye, mind and heart is necessarily entangled. Drawing on Judith's observations in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*,<sup>25</sup> Kathleen writes in her introduction to *The Bush in Bloom* (1982):

Because our flowers have never settled into our consciousness they are not seen. People can drive through square miles of colourful, massed display of bloom and simply not see it. It is only when the mind opens that the flowers bloom. It follows that if the flowers cannot be seen, they do not exist in the mind, so there can be no thought in those minds of protecting and preserving them for posterity. It is an insuperable barrier to overcome and there is no time available to be patient and wait for natural changes when our heritage of flowers is being destroyed so fast.<sup>26</sup>

This passage is echoed (a reminder of my opening remarks about relationship between Deborah Bird Rose's perspective and McArthur's) in a recent interview with Tim Entwistle: 'the problem,' he explains, 'is [that] people don't really see plants. Now of course, they see a tree or a lawn... but they sometimes just see this green wallpaper so ... it's really about plant literacy.' Entwistle goes on to speak about the importance of increasing people's understanding of plants by telling stories; and the paper he subsequently delivers is titled, 'Curing Plant Blindness and Illiteracy'.<sup>27</sup>

McArthur understood that plant blindness was directly related to plant illiteracy, that is, lack of knowledge. She understood that vision and visibility are not just a matter of looking—seeing is a matter of consciousness, a state of mind. 'Seeing' involved a shift in consciousness; a recognition that our old glasses might blur our sight and restrict our vision. The difficulty was, and still is, to find a way of removing the blinkers, clearing the lens, opening the mind and heart. The Romantic poet William Blake knew well the difficulty of freeing us from 'mind-forged manacles';<sup>28</sup> but he nevertheless persisted in believing that 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to Man as it is, Infinite'<sup>29</sup>—if our eyes and hearts and minds were truly open, we could learn to see 'the World in a grain of sand/ and a Heaven in a wild flower'.<sup>30</sup> See and Wonder. Listen and Feel. The difficulty always lies in 'moving' the reader/listener to a place where they begin to truly listen, pay attention, appreciate the meaning of the knowledge that is being shared. Rose draws on the idea of *Tikkun*, or 'turning toward', elaborated by Emil Fackenheim, which she describes as 'a willingness to situate one's self so as to be available to the call of others'—a willingness toward dialogue, responsibility and 'a choice for encounter and response'.<sup>31</sup> I can respond to this call for 'turning toward' myself, but I cannot say how best to achieve this in others, I just keep trying different ways to tell life stories of country, and like Kathleen McArthur, Judith Wright, Deborah Bird Rose, Carolyn Dinshaw, Tim Entwistle and William Blake, I persist.

The concluding paragraph of McArthur's *Queensland Wildflowers* remarks on the important role of the Australian National Parks in the maintenance of what she describes as 'bushland ecology'. Their work, she writes, 'can be extended with benefit to all by sympathy and emulation from local authorities, groups and individuals until, as in Western Australia the entire State [of Queensland] becomes wildflower conscious. That is the ideal.'<sup>32</sup> A measure of the success of McArthur's campaign to achieve this ideal might be seen in the creation of an area of protected park, just north of Caloundra. On the Queensland State website the 'Currimundi Lake (Kathleen McArthur) Regional Park' opens with a description of the park as '[a] small remnant of wallum heath that was once a common plant community along the Sunshine Coast.' Here the public can enjoy 'Short walks, wildflowers, coastal birds, and views of the ocean beach and lake feature here. Vividly coloured heath wildflowers reach their peak flowering time in late winter and spring months.'<sup>33</sup> It is a bitter-sweet result, and one not uncomplicated by differing views about the value of such 'conservation' and the competing claims of belonging and associated 'rights'.

In conclusion then, I turn to Kathleen McArthur's introductory words in her first volume of wildflowering stories. She writes:

this little work is apparently the first popular book on Queensland wildflowers ... The State has been known for its fine [read 'professional'] botanists whose technical [read 'scholarly'] publications serve the specialist, yet little has previously been done to bridge the gap between scientist and the public who, in the end, are responsible for the preservation of our floral heritage, and the delay in serving them could be vital.<sup>34</sup>

McArthur here makes the point that responsibility for a flourishing world lies with 'us', that is, 'we'<sup>35</sup> must ensure that love and knowledge are shared. Her claim is that the professional only speaks to the elite few where the amateur can speak to the many. Amateur here does not necessarily mean less knowledgeable; rather it is a question of dissemination—the amateur speaks in a language that the many can understand, the amateur speaks in venues to which the public have ready access, the amateur is not afraid to speak of love; more, the amateur is interested in spreading the love, increasing the company of lovers. 'Love and knowledge,' writes Dinshaw, 'are as inextricable as the links in chain mail.'<sup>36</sup> That interlocked entanglement is our strength—that which has the capacity to save us. 'This precious living ground is the source for us all, and the winds that carry the fresh smell of spinifex [boronia] and sugarbag [tea-tree] tell us that every breath is an inhalation of creation', writes Rose (revised by me from the perspective of wallum country). 'Every breath is a gift unasked for, and an intersubjective call for us to give back: to offer loving care and respect because the life of country is the life of the world.'<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

1. Anne Collett is Associate Professor in the English Literatures & Creative Writing Program at the University of Wollongong. She edited *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing & Culture* from 1999-2012 (see <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/> for online free access). Recent publications include an article on Judith Wright and *Phantom Dwelling* in *JAS* (37.2) and an essay on photographic response to the Great East Japan Earthquake of 3/11 in *Social Alternatives* (31.3). The essay that follows is an expanded version of a talk she gave recently at the first Thirroul Readers and Writers Festival (March 2015). Email: acollett@uow.edu.au.
2. Deborah Bird Rose (2011), *Wild Dog Dreaming*, Charlottesville: Virginia UP, p.2.
3. See interview at the Sydney Environment Institute, March 23, 2014. Accessed 6/4/2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suSbvoAw0g4>
4. Kathleen McArthur (1959), *Queensland Wildflowers—a selection*, Brisbane, Jacaranda Press, p.2.
5. McArthur (1959), p.1.
6. Kathleen McArthur (1982), *The Bush in Bloom: A Wildflower Artist's Year in Paintings and Words*, Kenthurst, Kangaroo Press, p.8.
7. *OED*: '1775–85; < French, Middle French < Latin amātor lover, equivalent to amā- (stem of amāre to love)'
8. Carolyn Dinshaw (2012), *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Durham & London, Duke UP, p.6. I would like here to thank Louise D'Arcens for introducing me to Dinshaw's work that has ramifications for so much more than the study of Medieval texts.
9. Margaret Somerville (2004), *Wildflowering: The Life and Places of Kathleen McArthur*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, p.1.
10. Judith Wright (1915-2000) is one of Australia's most eminent poets. She devoted much of her life to the pursuit of furthering the rights of Indigenous Australians and the protection of Australia's often fragile environment from the impact of mining, industrial and urban development.
11. See Somerville (2004), p.72
12. Lawrence Hamilton (1989), Foreword to Kathleen McArthur, *Living on the Coast*, Kenthurst, Kangaroo Press, p.7.
13. Hamilton (1989), p.7.
14. Kathleen McArthur (1986), *Looking at Australian Wildflowers*, Kenthurst, Kangaroo Press, p.24.
15. The naturalist, Joseph Banks, accompanied Captain James Cook on the Endeavour's voyage of 'discovery' (1768-1771) that took him to the east coast of Australia where he collected plant specimens and recorded his scientific observations and impressions of flora and fauna native to Australia.
16. Somerville (2004), p.76.
17. May Gibbs [1940] (1990), *The Complete Adventures of Snugglypot and Cuddlepie*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson.
18. McArthur (1986), p.24.
19. Charles Darwin [1859] (1968), *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, London, Penguin, pp.459-60.
20. Anne Ridden (now Collett), 'The Live Bush' in Madeleine Kempster, Margaret Blackhouse & Ell Turnbull, eds. *Verse by Young Australians*, Adelaide, Rigby, p.41.
21. These phrases are drawn from Judith Wright's poem, 'South of My Days' in *Collected Poems: 1942-1985*. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994, p.20.
22. Quoted in Somerville (2004), p.59.
23. Quoted in Somerville (2004), p.62.
24. Judith Wright, Forward to McArthur (1986), p.7.
25. In her 'Introduction' to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne, Oxford UP, 1965) in which Wright quotes from Marcus Clarke's 'Preface' to Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (1867), she makes the claim that, '[b]efore one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and novelist's imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures.' (xi)
26. McArthur (1982), p.8.
27. See Tim Entwistle, Interview at the Sydney Environmental Institute, March 23, 2014, and talk, delivered

- at same. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_BNUUV2sFw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_BNUUV2sFw) Accessed 6/4/2016.
28. William Blake, 'London' in *Selected Poems*, Ware, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p.88.
  29. William Blake, 'A Memorable Fancy', *Selected Poems*, p.201.
  30. William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', *Selected Poems*, p.135.
  31. Rose (2011), p.5.
  32. McArthur (1959), p.2.
  33. <http://www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/currimundi/>
  34. McArthur (1959), p.1.
  35. In the 2014 paper, given at the Sydney Environmental Institute in March 2014, Rose speaks to the problem of reference to 'we', and observes that 'Caring for country is a conversation we need to be having' but that 'there are real difficulties with conversations that involve histories and ontologies across cultures and across species as well.'
  36. Dinshaw (2012), p.1.
  37. Deborah Bird Rose (2009), 'Journey to Sacred Ground: Ethics and Aesthetics of Country' in *Sacred Australia: Post-Secular Considerations*, ed. Makarand Paranjape, Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, p.94.

