

**“Keep Close to the Earth!” The Schism between the Worker and  
Nature in Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Novels**

***Karen Barker***

“It’s good to keep close to the earth,” Sophie Roumanoff tells her husband Potch in Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Black Opal* (1921; Sydney: Caslon House, 1946).<sup>1</sup> Prichard’s own reasons for wanting to keep close to the earth were ostensibly Communist and Marxist. In the year prior to the publication of *Black Opal* she had been a foundation member of the Communist Party of Australia, and shortly afterwards established a Labor Study Circle in Perth where she lectured a mainly working class audience on Marxist notions of historical materialism and industrial organisation.<sup>2</sup> Marxism for Prichard was closely connected to the human relationship with nature, or “the earth.” But this was neither early recognition of the Marxist concern with ecological sustainability nor the sort of environmentalism or eco-Marxism which attributes environmental disruption to the capitalist accumulation of wealth.<sup>3</sup> Prichard’s primary concern was not to protect the environment against the ravages of capitalist exploitation but to improve human welfare. Although her novels reveal a clear awareness of the environmental impact of large scale industrialisation and mechanisation, her first reference point is always human well-being. She considered stronger links to nature to be a fundamental prerequisite to improved social conditions and an essential component of her industrial reform agenda. Only under a socialist system, she believed, would Australia’s vast natural re-

sources be mobilised in support of a broader “human welfare,” rather than the financial profits of a few.<sup>4</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that Prichard’s commitment to the earth was founded solely on Marxist principles. As much as she was a Marxist, Prichard was also a vitalist, and the Marxist principles upheld in her novels are consistently refracted through her vitalist belief that a life lived close to nature is what keeps people in touch with the vital force. Although Prichard did not call herself a vitalist – in the 1920s vitalism was still the specialist terminology of scientific discourse – her novels are riddled with references to natural forces and life forces, to the flow and joy of life and the link between life’s fecundity and human creativity and productivity. Vitalism is only one of a number of lenses through which the full prism of Prichard’s Marxism can be viewed. Other commentators have remarked on how her championship of Marxist ideology has been informed and mediated by her gender and feminism, her status as a writer in the Party, the various fortunes of internal and global Party politics, as well as the broader tradition of radical socialism including guild socialism and syndicalism.<sup>5</sup> But vitalism is particularly important to understanding why Prichard believed so ardently in keeping close to the earth.

Prichard’s starting point was Marxist historical materialism, which holds that nature (rather than religion or metaphysics) is the source of life: “the world, and man and woman, and all living things have derived their being from Nature, the evolution of natural laws.”<sup>6</sup> For Prichard this was a vitalist materialism, with a vital force presiding over these natural laws, and underlying the natural processes. There are a number of obvious complementarities between vitalism and Marxism, not least of which is the way the collective ownership of the land under a socialist state would provide opportunities for all people to connect to the vital force in nature. Marxism shared with vitalism two other important links with natural processes: recourse to nature as a model for human creativity and productivity, and a notion of society in an evolutionary progression towards the perfection of the socialist state, mirroring the evolutionary push of vital force striving towards human perfection.

This association between vitalism and Marxism was not peculiar to Prichard. A number of other writers who were actively socialist or sympathetic to socialist principles incorporated vitalist elements into their social reform agendas, including socialist realist writers such as Jean Devanny and Communist fellow-traveller Dymphna Cusack.<sup>7</sup> Unlike these writers, however, Prichard was profoundly reluctant to admit that the surrender to natural laws might not provide a comprehensive solution to the social ills of capitalism. Prichard held tenaciously to the vitalist belief in the fundamental

unity of man and nature, whereas Devanny and Cusack were much more ready to acknowledge that the vital force could also subsist in the breach between man and nature, in the assertion of the human will over nature. Prichard's call to keep close to the earth reflects her dual allegiance to Marxism and vitalism. But while vitalism emphasised man's place in the natural world, the human participation in the processes of birth and growth and death, and in life's ceaseless evolution, Marxism theorises a more complicated relationship between man and nature. Prichard's novels reflect her increasing difficulty in reconciling the vitalist ideal of keeping close to the earth with her commitment to Marxist notions of man's working relationship with nature and, in particular, with the Marxist recognition that the complexification of the technologies of production would increasingly disrupt this closeness.

### **The Vitalist Promise of Emancipation**

Strictly speaking vitalism confines itself to the biological question "What is Life?" It starts with the premise that life is fundamentally different from non-life, and proposes that this difference is the effect of a vital force that pervades all living things, directing the course of birth and development. In 1913 the *Australasian* defined vitalism as a sort of mystery principle, an hypothesis to explain gaps in scientific epistemology. The vital force was only ever invoked when mechanistic laws of chemistry and physics were unable to account for particular phenomena, and the *Australasian* was not entirely convinced of its existence:

It is one thing to say of any set of phenomena that we cannot at present explain them in the known laws of chemistry and physics, and quite another to say that we shall never be able to elucidate them by such means but that they are due to "vital force." It is no use dogmatizing. We must experiment and wait patiently. We do not know.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of a vital force has long since fallen out of favour with scientists, perhaps irretrievably, following the discovery of DNA in the 1950s which provided an alternative account of biological development. Until then, vitalism continued to prove a compelling counterpoint to the excesses of mechanism which claimed to explain living organisms entirely in terms of chemical and physical processes. Outside the sciences, however, vitalism was readily adapted to the aims of philosophy and the social sciences, where it survived the loss of scientific credibility.

In the discursive shift from science to philosophy and the social sciences and, in turn, to literature, a number of the biological features of vital-

ism were redefined to suit a variety of literary purposes. Socialist realist writers found vitalism readily adaptable to socialist programs of social reform. The idea of a vital force pervading all life was understood to correspond to the notion of a brotherhood of man and to support a collectivist approach to social reform. Vitalism, which links life to action, movement and change, provided the rationale for the reform and even overthrow of anachronistic and obsolete social and cultural values and institutions. It was deployed as a liberating principle promising emancipation from the forces of capitalism, the constraints of social conventions and many other tyrannies. In Prichard's *Intimate Strangers* (1937; North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1990), the communist activist Tony Maretti argues that the "law of life is movement, conflict, progress" and that to "stand still" is "cowardice – a philosophy of impotence."<sup>9</sup> Prichard could uphold such a principle of change because she believed that "the tide of social evolution [was] changing from capitalism to socialism,"<sup>10</sup> and that, just as the life force strives towards perfection,<sup>11</sup> so too humankind was striving towards the socialist state.

The vitalist promise of liberation from tyranny is somewhat compromised by the fact that the vital force, when adapted to social programs, is no longer something shared equally by all who are living. Some lives are judged to be more vital than others and accorded greater value. What is at stake is no longer the scientific question, "What is Life?" but the biopolitical question, "What is a more vital life?" The dangerous possibilities of this new sort of question, when applied to social progressivist goals, are all too readily exemplified in the genocidal consequences of 1930s German National Socialism, which coupled vitalism with a eugenic program (a manoeuvre which found some adherents in Australian literary circles among the nationalists).<sup>12</sup> Vitalism, however, proved a sufficiently malleable doctrine to appeal across the ideological spectrum and to all sides of politics. In the 1920s and 1930s the Australian socialist realists found vitalist ideas particularly conducive to their industrial reform agendas, maintaining as one of the platforms for reform that the more vital life was the working life lived close to the earth.

### **Marxism, Vitalism and the Earth**

In *Black Opal*, Sophie explains the idea of keeping close to the earth as staying "[i]n tune with the fundamentals," and these "fundamentals" are understood to be "all the great things of loving and working." Staying in tune with the fundamentals means staying in tune with nature, not through a passive acceptance of one's place within nature but through an active

engagement – “loving and working.” Moreover, while keeping close to the earth, “our eyes [should be] on the stars.” By “stars,” Sophie means “[t]he objects of our faith and service.” The rhetoric is somewhat oblique but Sophie’s point is that our alignment with nature should always be in the service of the broader social vision. For Prichard, this social vision was fundamentally Marxist. In the same year that *Black Opal* was published, Prichard gave a lecture to the Perth Labor Study Circle in which she describes the precepts of Marxism as the guiding stars by which the workers movement will ultimately navigate towards the haven of community ownership:

Over the chaos and confusion of men’s minds to-day, the cardinal points of Marxism shine like stars ... Understanding the essentials of Marxism ... and interpretation of that understanding in action will enable the working class to steer a straight course to the co-operative commonwealth of the workers. ... [T]he movement of the workers ... may surge ahead by the light of those stars – with clear realisation of what must be done if ever revolutionary reconstruction is to be achieved.<sup>13</sup>

Prichard’s own social vision of the commonwealth of workers, iterated in her novels as well as her political writings, is an industrial utopia founded not only on the material well-being of the people, but on their moral and spiritual well-being. In *Intimate Strangers* “the coming system of social ownership” anticipates a society in which unemployment, prostitution, crime and war will have been eradicated, and “every man and woman working under the system will have sufficient food, clothing, shelter, education and leisure to know how good life can really be.”<sup>14</sup> Prichard speaks of the socialist state giving rise to a “spiritual renaissance” and ushering in “an era of peace and happiness that the doomed generations of capitalism have never known.” She emphasises the importance of “giving people as a whole the fullness of life and a fair share of its beauty and joy.”<sup>15</sup> Something of this social vision is already realised among the community of opal miners in *Black Opal’s* Fallen Star Ridge, if on a less ambitious scale. Prichard makes it absolutely clear that this general sense of well-being arises out of the closeness of the human relationship with nature, and that this relationship with nature is cultivated and upheld by the “Ridge principle,” the social code governing life in the Fallen Star Ridge community.

The Ridge principle mixes liberal notions about the preservation of individual autonomy with the socialistic ideal of mateship as the basis for communal cooperation. The principle of mateship operates as a sort of informal trade unionism to self-regulate working conditions in the Ridge:

Ridge miners ... have agreed between themselves that it is a fair thing to begin work at about six or seven o'clock in the morning and knock off at about four in the afternoon, with a couple of hours above ground at noon for a snack of bread and cheese and a cup of tea.

At four o'clock they come up from the mines, noodle their opal, put on their coats, smoke and yarn, and saunter down to the town and their homes.<sup>16</sup>

The essential element is that the miners themselves control their employment. Every miner in the Ridge works his own hours, enjoys the "full benefit of his labour," and is "the proprietor of his own energies." In stark contrast is the capitalist model operating at Chalk Cliff, where the miners have sold out to a company for the promise of regular work and a steady wage. The implication is that at Chalk Cliff the "conditions of work" have "wrung" the miner "of energy and spirit, deprived him of the capacity to enjoy life."<sup>17</sup>

The contrast between the lifestyles of the two communities is presented in the vitalist-mechanist terms of the debate described by the *Australasian*. The life-enhancing working conditions of the Ridge community are contrasted with a capitalist alternative that operates on mechanistic principles inimical to life:

Ridge miners ... are satisfied in their own minds that it is not good for a man to work all day at any mechanical toil: to use himself or allow anyone else to use him like a working bullock. A man must have time to think, leisure to enjoy being alive, they say. Is he alive only to work? To sleep worn out with toil, and work again? It is not good enough, Ridge men say.<sup>18</sup>

In *Black Opal* it is leisure which is the key to the joy of life. Leisure has allowed the miners to become well-rounded individuals, to reflect on life and the universe:

It is this leisure end of the day which has given life on the Ridge its tone of peace and quiet happiness, and has made the Ridge miners the thoughtful, well-informed men most of them are.<sup>19</sup>

More importantly, sufficient time for leisure allows the Ridge miners access to "the only things of real value in life," which reside in nature:

the beauty of the world, the sky, and the stars, spring, summer, the grass, and the birds ... Any and every man could have infinite happiness by hearing a bird sing, by gazing into the blue-dark depths of the sky on a starry night.<sup>20</sup>

These gifts of nature exist outside the forces of capitalism in that they can-

not be bought or sold, but are still threatened by international capitalism, represented here in the guise of the New York based Armitage company, which proposes to buy up the workers' holdings. Armitage's takeover proposal would turn the small mines into a large scale production, destroying the unity of the labour process and the natural process, and imposing working conditions that would limit workers' access to the joys of nature. In the immediate aftermath of Sophie's remarks about keeping close to the earth, Sophie and Potch reaffirm their intention not to support the takeover bid by Armitage, even if the other opal miners accept the offer to buy out their individual holdings, because of the threat posed to the Ridge way of life. Happily the takeover is defeated by the workers showing a united front and the idyllic relation with nature is maintained.

In *Black Opal* all the *great things of working* arise out of the nexus between work and nature. The nexus between work and nature remains strong because the small community of opal miners working their individual holdings is able to maintain a socialistic approach to community life, based on mateship, mutual cooperation and the rejection of materialist excesses. This nexus becomes the benchmark for Prichard's industrial reform agenda, even when larger scale industrial practices render it ineffective or inappropriate. By 1946 Prichard had added a rider to the novel, acknowledging that the industrial practices represented by the Ridge community had been rendered obsolete by "mass production and mechanization, and ... scientific progress in industrial organisation."<sup>21</sup> In the changed industrial situation the role of nature, and the worker's vital relationship with nature, must either be diminished or reasserted in entirely new ways.

### **Social Norms versus Vital Norms**

In *Black Opal* Prichard is working on the assumption that natural impulses precede or underpin social norms, as if organic values are pure values, and we are more authentically ourselves when we are operating within the "natural" order. Michael Brady, the most well read and ideologically advanced of the Ridge miners, seems to suggest that the laws of nature are both irresistible and inevitable, while at the same time injecting an element of human agency in the act of compliance:

The natural laws just go rolling on – laying us out under them. All we can do is set our lives as far as possible in accordance with them and stand by the consequences as well as we know how.<sup>22</sup>

Nowhere does Prichard admit that this allegiance to nature is itself produced out of a social value given to nature, or that organic values are al-

ready imbued with social values. There are clear undertones of Rousseau here, particularly given that the idea of keeping close to the earth first arises in the context of a discussion of the American “negro problem” in which Western civilisation is blamed for the degeneration of a “primitive people.”<sup>23</sup> But Prichard is less interested in Rousseau’s ahistorical figure of the “noble savage” than in demonstrating the impact of the natural environment on contemporary social conditions.

By “staying in tune with the fundamentals” in loving and working the Ridge miners are acting in compliance with *natural impulses* rather than social norms. On the domestic front (outside the scope of this paper) this means following the sex instinct irrespective of class boundaries or social convention. In terms of labour relations, this equates in part to a work instinct of sorts, where work is viewed as a natural activity of man. In *Black Opal* Sophie suggests that the reason the rich are “degenerate” is that they have no real work in which to take an interest:

After all, what is the good of living without interest? ... when people are bored, they’ve got to get interest or die; and if faculties which ought to be spent in useful or creative work aren’t spent in that work, they find outlet in the vicious ideas a selfish and lazy life breed.<sup>24</sup>

A similar work ethic operates in the novels of Jean Devanny, a New Zealand writer who arrived in Sydney in 1929 and joined the Communist Party the following year. The eponymous timber mill worker in *Bushman Burke* (London: Duckworth, 1930) is exemplary in this regard as he sees work as “an excuse [or reason] for living.”<sup>25</sup> When he inherits a fortune large enough to fund a life of leisure, he nevertheless returns to the bush to work the land, albeit in the rather more congenial capacity as a landowner. This principled return to work the land – in effect a return to the land through work – reflects the importance Devanny accords to a labour process in which man is involved in a vital relationship with nature. Devanny represents this return to the land both as a reflection of the strength of Burke’s vital force – he is observed “out there swinging an axe with the rest of the men, because of the light in his soul”<sup>26</sup> – and as the beneficent influence of the land itself, which also inspires his city girlfriend to drop her cabaret lifestyle and take up work on the land. Prichard’s novels carry similar messages about the therapeutic value of both nature and work. In *Black Opal*, Sophie returns to the Ridge from her unhappy experience of the degenerate New York lifestyle and finds a tranquil pleasure in opal cutting; in *Working Bullocks* (London: Cape, 1926), Red Burke finds solace in a return to nature and a capitulation to natural instincts after Chris Colburn is killed in an accident with Red’s bullock wagon. A swim in the ocean revives Elodie’s

"old joy of living" in *Intimate Strangers*, even if only as a momentary respite before the return to town and the working week. In *Subtle Flame* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1967), the life forces in nature are what "make for peace and beauty on earth."<sup>27</sup>

Amanda Lohrey has questioned in another context whether there can be much to link Devanny's "primitive Vitalism" to her "Marxist dogmas,"<sup>28</sup> a question equally applicable to Prichard and other socialist realist writers. Some of the more obvious of these links arise out of the fact that vitalism was readily adapted by writers to better fit Marxist and socialist platforms. The mutual investment in evolution and human progress is one such link. But more significant is the shared adherence to the overriding principle of creativity and productivity in nature. This is precisely the link that is recognised by Sophie in *Black Opal* in her remarks that people should spend their "faculties" in both "useful or creative work." By including both useful and creative work in the ideal model, Sophie's social vision encompasses both Marxist and vitalist notions of work. Yet this creativity is a flourishing of the life force that functions independently of the Marxist social project. While Sophie does not yet recognise any impediment to their mutual realisation, Lohrey is ultimately correct in identifying a fundamental breach between Marxism and vitalism.

### **The First Schism with Nature: Small-Scale Exploitation**

The picture of man working contentedly and harmoniously close to the earth is not quite as convincing as it first seems. Even on a small-scale the exploitation of nature gives rise to a breach in the relationship between man and nature. The communist critic Jack Beasley makes the interesting comment that the people of Fallen Star Ridge "are not overawed by the natural forces."<sup>29</sup> Although Beasley does not elaborate on what he means exactly by "natural forces," he is clearly referring to the vitalistic forces of nature: the living qualities of the bush, the natural processes and cycles in a temporal continuum of life and growth, but also of death, the destructive power of nature, natural disasters and the elemental forces of storms. It would be easy enough to be "overawed" by such "mighty forces," by mankind's incapacity to fully comprehend, let alone master or replicate, these vital qualities. What Beasley means to suggest by claiming that the workers are not overawed, is that the people are able to work with nature, within the laws of nature, to exploit natural resources in their work without unduly depleting the environment. These workers, while paying homage to nature for its largesse, see the products of their labours as a fitting tribute to the natural world. For Prichard this vitalistic interpretation operates as a coun-

terpoint to the capitalist exploitation of nature for profit, at the same time justifying man's small scale exploitation of nature.

It is not precisely clear at which point working the land shifts from a vital interaction to capitalist exploitation but there is an assumption that capitalism works the land as a machine, without a vital force, unable to generate the vital confluence between the worker and nature. In *Working Bullocks* Prichard contrasts the work of the tree fellers to that of the timber mill workers grappling with the "inhuman" machinery of production:

Whistles piped; their shrill piercing sounds echoed and reechoed all round and then died away. Men hardly spoke. An exclamation, grunt or word called across the clamour was all that came from them. They worked as if they were all well oiled and sprung for their jobs; swiftly moving belts and connections from the engine which rapped the rafters and grey metal roof driving them as well as the saws.<sup>30</sup>

The timber mill workers themselves become part of the machinery of capitalism. The machinery is unnatural in its "speed and shrieking clangour," and in its insatiable appetite for the wood.<sup>31</sup> But even before this capitalist intervention, the worker's relationship with nature was never completely innocent. A certain ambivalence towards nature underlies Old Luke's sense of righteous exploitation in Devanny's *Bushman Burke* when he rhapsodises about the life of a worker on the land:

Land! The land is great stuff. It isn't the wealth we're after, though that follows as a matter of course. It's the – the happiness, the contentment – of seein' yer handiwork around yer; of seein' old Nature bow its noble head.<sup>32</sup>

The worker is not seeking wealth but the satisfactions of *homo faber* – man the maker – in his handiwork. At the same time Luke also approves the fact that Nature is forced to submit to man's purpose. Nature is noble, but that only means that it is a worthy slave to man's will: Nature must "bow its noble head." And it is out of this subjugation of nature to man's will that the schism between man and nature erupts.

Prichard is forced to acknowledge the duality of the worker's relationship with nature; the impulse to master nature and the sense of fellowship with nature.<sup>33</sup> In *Working Bullocks* her solution is to have the tree fellers recognise not just their dependence on nature for its bounty, but also nature's power and the fact that they could be crushed "out of existence" by any one of the trees they felled. The timber workers recognise that nature must be appeased. They make gestures of respect towards nature's majesty, celebrate the stature of the trees in yarns and gossip and "oaths of

admiration," and generally venerate Nature in order to lessen the vengeance for their exploitation. But even Prichard must acknowledge that, with the increasing application of technology speeding up the processes of manufacture and industry, "the simple pattern of men working together close to nature is ruptured"<sup>34</sup> and such rites of appeasement and gratitude are no longer possible. This gives rise to a second more profound schism with nature; which arises out of the increasing complexity and the larger scale of modern production.

### **The Second Schism with Nature: Production-Use**

The socialist-progressives have had a troubled relationship with nature because they must always take into account Marx's principle of labour. In vitalism, the life force or vital impetus is the principle of movement and change and the human subject is joined to this movement through the acceptance of his or her place in the living world. This is the stream of life, to which Sophie in *Black Opal* refers when she declares that she wants to live on the Fallen Star Ridge, "to work with [her] hands: feel [herself] in the swim of the world's life ... going with the great stream."<sup>35</sup>

In the Marxist world view, the basic principle of movement and action is the labour process. In Marx's *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), labour is the means by which the human subject is joined to nature regardless of the particularity of the social system.<sup>36</sup> Marx argues that "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate."<sup>37</sup> What Marx seems to suggest by this remark is that people and nature are conjoined through the labour process in the first instance before any aesthetic, vital or social principles. For vitalism, labour is a secondary process. Creative principles, including the formation of the living body, precede the externalising action of labour. But Marx means something else as well. The labour process not only joins people to nature, it also serves as the basic principle of the division between people and nature. Labour does not align itself with nature, it always seeks to extract use-value, and to submit nature to the exigencies of human need. In other words, nature is valued in terms of its productive capacity. Marx states of man that: "He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces ... in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants."<sup>38</sup> This is the basis of all interaction but it does not take into account a principle of life that must animate the individual from and within nature.

Jack Lindsay once described Prichard's work as a "creative develop-

ment of the Marxist concepts of what humanises and what alienates.”<sup>39</sup> Prichard’s goldfields trilogy, published during the years of the Cold War, records her developing understanding of the alienation Marx describes, with each of the three books – *The Roaring Nineties* (1946; London: Virago Press, 1983), *Golden Miles* (1948; London: Virago Press, 1984) and *Winged Seeds* (1950; London: Virago Press, 1984) – corresponding to a new stage in industrial organisation of the gold mining industry, from the pioneering prospectors to the wage-slaves of large scale capital. Lindsay notes that the industrial escalation depicted in the trilogy means that Prichard is no longer able to show the “triadic movement of people-work-nature” which governed her earlier novels.<sup>40</sup> With her characters increasingly alienated from nature, Prichard is forced to look elsewhere for the manifestation of the vital force in the labour process. Unlike some other socialist realist writers, she was reluctant to recognise the vital force operating through the worker in the interaction with the machine.

Dymphna Cusack, who was never a member of the Communist Party, but who was a devout fellow traveller, takes up this issue in *Southern Steel* (London: Constable, 1953). Cusack’s story of the Southern Steel company is the story of “the endless process of change and the unending fight.” This is a fight, not just with company management for better pay and conditions for the workers, but with nature itself; the fight to forge the steel from the natural resources, and in so doing, forge the character of the workers themselves: “for it’s not only a special kind of steel they’re making here in the south, but a special kind of people.”<sup>41</sup> The individual is forged from the world rather than grown, in line with Marx’s view that man, “[b]y thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.” The consequence of this relationship with nature, according to Marx, is that there is no longer an instinctual and unconscious relationship with the natural world.<sup>42</sup> Labour is the product of a conscious desire to shape the world and to reconfigure it according to a predetermined form.<sup>43</sup> In other words, labour is the exercise of a person’s will upon the natural environment rather than the act of submission to natural laws that Prichard postulates in *Black Opal*.

This point is made with some insistence in the novel by Jummer, who describes the iron ore quarry as looking “like something thrown up by a volcano.” When his mate Hoppy tries to attribute this to God’s works, Jummer corrects him. The iron ore in the quarry is a natural resource, so it is Nature which is to be praised. The volcano in this respect is a potent symbol of the earth as a living entity, but Jummer does not attribute its force entirely to Nature. Ultimately it is “Man’s will to progress. That’s the power in the

world."<sup>44</sup> Although Jummer describes the steelworks as looking like 'something thrown up by a volcano,' it is neither Nature nor God which is responsible for its creation but man. Man supplants both God and Nature as the immanent creative force in the world. Nature is subjugated to the will of man and is no longer the creative volcano, it is only a resource for the instrumental will of man. It is the oppositional character of the will which determines the fundamental separation of men from nature. A person is not one with nature and the natural world, as the human will is exercised in opposition to nature. The power of nature is turned back upon itself as a means of extracting value.

This oppositional relationship to nature is something that Prichard finally concedes in the goldfields trilogy, where the "miracle" of the gold mining operation is attributed to collective human ingenuity and will. She can admire human creativity if not the machine itself. In *Winged Seeds*, the enormous high tech machinery of the mines is described as being "subservient to the will of a few workers operating the controls, and to the will of the men behind the scenes whose wealth and power it serves!"<sup>45</sup> Here Prichard seems to accept Marx's description of nature as adhering to a person as an extension of his or her activity: "Thus Nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, one that he annexes to his own bodily organs."<sup>46</sup> But this is not a theme which Prichard ever explores in any detail in her work, leaving that to Cusack and others.

John Bellamy Foster has argued that Marx was not the champion of a "Promethean" view of the human-nature relationship, where nature is subjugated to man in the quest for his own self-realisation, and that Marx recognised the rift in the relations between people and nature wrought by the industrial practices of capitalism.<sup>47</sup> But the Marxist solution to mend this rift can never approach the vitalistic unity to which Prichard aspires. Marx describes the earth as a "universal instrument" which "furnishes a *locus standi* to the labourer and a field of employment for his activity."<sup>48</sup> What this suggests is that a person's relationship with nature is always mediated by the instrument and instrumental activity. For Marx, the instrument cannot be understood outside of the product that it will form, there must always be the transformation of the natural action into a product<sup>49</sup> – unlike the vitalists for whom the *locus standi* provides the occasion for the experience of their oneness with nature and the expression of the particularity of a vital impulse. For the vitalists, to be close to earth is to be close to the movement of life, to the impulse of life itself, expressed in the natural laws and the forces of nature. For Marxism, the natural laws must always yield to social formations.

Prichard never acknowledges this rift in her novels. She maintains her

dual commitment to a socialist state and to people's vitalist oneness with nature. She shares Marx's view that the collective ownership of the land would ultimately remove the basis of the conflict not only between people and nature, but also between people themselves. She is sensitive to the impact on both people and the environment of the different technologies of production, and has a sense of scale and proportion in the human exploitation of nature, although she is unable to specify in any precise way the boundary between vitalist and capitalist technologies of industry, which she seems to equate with the difference between small-scale and large-scale industry. The human capacity to dominate nature lends a certain ambiguity to the boundary between capitalist exploitation of nature for profit and the vital interaction of workers with nature. It reveals a fundamental difference between the natural collectivity of vitalism and the human collectivity that Prichard wished to bring to fulfilment under her socialist vision. Despite these differences, Prichard never wavers in her allegiance to socialism and vitalism. Her last published novel, *Subtle Flame*, ends with the romance between David Evans and Sharon Leigh consummated in their dual commitment to nature – to “all the trees in the forest, the birds, the bees and wild-flowers – and all the life forces which make for peace and beauty on earth” – and to the guiding star of socialism, “the far star of the hope [they] both serve.”<sup>50</sup>

University of Melbourne  
kareneb@unimelb.edu.au

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 176.
- <sup>2</sup> Katharine Susannah Prichard, “Radical Origins in Australia”, Int. by Ian Turner, *Straight Left: Articles and Addresses on Politics, Literature and Women's Affairs Over Almost 60 Years: from 1910 to 1968*, ed. Ric Throssell (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1982), pp. 82-9 at 84.
- <sup>3</sup> See for example John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Katharine Susannah Prichard, “Our Future Rests with Socialism”, *Straight Left: Articles and Addresses on Politics, Literature and Women's Affairs Over Almost 60 Years: from 1910 to 1968*, ed. Ric Throssell (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1982), pp. 62-5 at pp. 62 and 65.
- <sup>5</sup> See for example Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1991); Cath Ellis, “Socialist

Realism in the Australian Literary Context: With Specific Reference to the Writing of Katharine Susannah Prichard", *Journal of Australian Studies* 54/55 (1997), pp. 38-44.

- <sup>6</sup> Mrs Hugo Throssell [Katharine Susannah Prichard], "The materialist conception of history", *The Communist*, 26 Aug. 1921, p. 2.
- <sup>7</sup> The term "socialist realism" was first used by A.A. Zhdanov in his speech to the first congress of the union of Soviet writers in 1934, but was not well known in Australia until after 1945. It is often used retrospectively to socialist writing in the 1920s and 1930s. Cath Ellis provides a useful commentary on Prichard's role in its introduction into Australia. Examples of male socialist writers who incorporated vitalism ideas into their novels are Vance Palmer and J.M Harcourt.
- <sup>8</sup> "The Mechanism of Life", *Australasian* 28 June 1913: pp. 1515-6 at p. 1515.
- <sup>9</sup> Prichard, *Intimate Strangers*, p. 133.
- <sup>10</sup> Prichard, "Our Future Rests with Socialism", p. 62.
- <sup>11</sup> See Prichard, *Winged Seeds*, p. 379.
- <sup>12</sup> The poet William Baylebridge and literary critic and publisher P.R. Stephensen publicly supported the application of the National Socialist eugenic program to Australian circumstances. The literary vitalists were generally less interested in any general disposition towards change arising out of life's own impetus than in the impact that conscious effort and the exercise of the will could have on the future direction of life.
- <sup>13</sup> Mrs Hugo Throssell [Katharine Susannah Prichard], "Cardinal Points of Marxism", *The Communist*, 1 July 1921, p. 5. Van Ikin finds the repeated references to the stars, which are a dominant metaphor in the novel, to be "portentous" but ultimately "meaningless." See Van Ikin, "The Political Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard: I. The Metaphysical Perspective: *The Black Opal* and *Working Bullocks*", *Southerly* 43.1 (1983), pp. 80-102 at p. 85.
- <sup>14</sup> Prichard, *Intimate Strangers*, p. 237.
- <sup>15</sup> Prichard, "Peace and War", *Straight Left: Articles and Addresses on Politics, Literature and Women's Affairs Over Almost 60 Years: from 1910 to 1968*, ed. Ric Throssell (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1982), pp. 40-61 at p. 61; Prichard, "Our Future Rests with Socialism", p. 65.
- <sup>16</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 46.
- <sup>17</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 47.
- <sup>18</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 46.
- <sup>19</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 46.
- <sup>20</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 47.
- <sup>21</sup> Prichard, "Author's Note", *Black Opal*, n.p.
- <sup>22</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 25.
- <sup>23</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 176
- <sup>24</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 158.

- <sup>25</sup> Devanny, *Bushman Burke*, p. 121.
- <sup>26</sup> Devanny, *Bushman Burke*, p. 242.
- <sup>27</sup> Prichard, *Subtle Flame*, p. 299.
- <sup>28</sup> Amanda Lohrey, "Benign Benediction", *Sugar Heaven*, by Jean Devanny (Carlton North, Vic.: Vulgar Press, 2002), pp. 273-8 at p. 275.
- <sup>29</sup> Jack Beasley, *The Rage for Life: The Work of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1964), p. 22.
- <sup>30</sup> Prichard, *Working Bullocks*, p. 182.
- <sup>31</sup> Prichard, *Working Bullocks*, p. 183.
- <sup>32</sup> Devanny, *Bushman Burke*, p. 242.
- <sup>33</sup> Jack Lindsay notes this dualism in the relationship with nature in "The Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard", *Meanjin* (December 1961), pp. 366-87 at p. 374.
- <sup>34</sup> Beasley, *The Rage for Life*, pp. 55-6.
- <sup>35</sup> Prichard, *Black Opal*, p. 158.
- <sup>36</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 179.
- <sup>37</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 173.
- <sup>38</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 173.
- <sup>39</sup> Lindsay, "The Novels", p. 386.
- <sup>40</sup> Lindsay, "The Novels", p. 383.
- <sup>41</sup> Cusack, *Southern Steel*, pp. 22-3.
- <sup>42</sup> Marx, *Capital*, pp. 173-4.
- <sup>43</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 174.
- <sup>44</sup> Cusack, *Southern Steel*, pp. 22-3.
- <sup>45</sup> Prichard, *Winged Seeds*, p. 145.
- <sup>46</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 175.
- <sup>47</sup> Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, pp. 139 and 164.
- <sup>48</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 176.
- <sup>49</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 176.
- <sup>50</sup> Prichard, *Subtle Flame*, p. 299.