Traversing a poet's terrain

My Blood's Country
By Fiona Capp
Allen & Unwin, $27.99

Fiona Capp is a versatile, award-winning writer of novels, non-fiction and reviews. In earlier days, however, trained as a journalist, she was clearly aware of the importance of emerging news, particularly if it was hitherto locked away. She produced her first book, the aptly named Writers Defiled, after previously classified information detailing the surveillance of Australian authors and intellectuals during the Cold War became available.

More recently, last year's release of the correspondence between poet Judith Wright and economist H. C. "Nugget" Coombs (their relationship "one of the best kept open secrets in Australian literary history") allowed her to add significantly to the final draft of her latest and very different book.

My Blood's Country, as the title suggests, is only remotely sourced from libraries and archives. Given the biographies and critical studies already consecrated to Wright, Capp went out of doors to rediscover the landscapes, both physical and psychological, that had inspired Australia's greatest [and her favourite] poet. To this end she trod and retraced the diverse paths criss-crossing places Wright once loved or lived in, creating word pictures of the gardens she had planted and nurtured. Remaining Wright relatives were visited and interviewed; often, strong bonds were formed.

Capp had first been enraptured by Wright's poetry at the age of 12, and enchanted when she quietly charismatic woman gave a miraculously talk at her school. She sent Wright her schoolgirl outpourings, but although encouraged by the reply, resolved not to emulate her new friend's line of work. Instead she entered into dialogue with, and here presents a story full of personal but illuminating insights.

As she clearly demonstrates, few of the poems can be dissociated from the concept of land, whether private or public. Wright's immense feeling for the historic loss sustained by the Aboriginal population emanates in part from the personal deprivation she sustained when her family had to give up the homestead and property at Wallamumbi, the blissful scene of her childhood years.

Then and later, her poems recalled the "magical" garden where she played and hid, the distant mountains that seemed so close she felt "she could rest her head on

JUDITH WRIGHT with her husband, Jack McKinney, in their garden at Calanthe, near Mount Tamborine.