



Bush tales

My early years in Australia became a time of revelation and wonder. From the start I tried to make the most of the hand that was dealt: ‘Land of Opportunity’ an over-used but markedly apt phrase. Those blue skies, broad plains and golden horizons were a far cry from the dark winters and drizzle left behind in Cornwall. A new and enticing environment had come out to meet and greet me.

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Cocky country

Exasperated and exhausted I slammed the door on the wagon, sweat pouring down my forehead, then walked towards the man sitting in the shade of a broad veranda. His attire reflected the heat of the moment: khaki shorts, brown boots and bushman’s hat, leaving sun-bronzed expanses of skin in between, exposed to the elements. The *weatherboard* house as the backdrop was what they called a homestead in these parts, and standard issue for the hard-working *cockies* (Aussie-speak for farmers) and their families, who owned and managed the land. I knew the guy quite well from previous visits.

“Hey Bruce,” I yelled out. “How’s things? Seems pretty bloody hot ‘round this neck of the woods, and to make it worse my A-C’s on the blink. What’s your gauge showin’?”

“G’day mate,” came the died-in-the-wool reply. *“About one-twenty I think. Too bloody hot for workin’, that’s for sure. Come over and pull up a chair. By the look of it, I reckon you could use a nice cold stubby.”*

With that, the seated man wiped his brow with a handkerchief, then expending the minimum of effort, reached down and flipped the cover on a blue and white *eski*, (the ubiquitous Australian cooler-box) drew a squat brown bottle from its depths, twisted the lid and pinged the top, so it soared through the air, landing directly at my feet. I looked down at the golden bottle top, then back to the man who was smiling broadly.

“Well, don’t mind if I do Bruce. Time to knock off anyway. And you know what they say: ‘a cold one a day keeps the doctor away!’”

Bruce gave a little chuckle. *“Yeah, I think you could be right about that. But maybe two or three is even better.”* Another chortle; then as I sat down by his side: *“Great to see you George: I was beginning to think you’d scarpered back to ‘Pommy-land!’ ”*

It was one of the hottest days of the year in outback Australia. The temperature of 120 Fahrenheit the *cocky* had referred to, was equivalent to a Celcius rating in the mid-40s ... not unknown, but somewhat unusual. I was near the edge of wheat and sheep country; near what we knew as *Goyter’s Line*, beyond which agriculture turns to arid, and a sometimes-green farm-scape changes to the greenish-brown *bush* of the dry interior. I was about half the burly man’s age, there to advise on farming technique.

This was just four years after landing on Australia’s shores as a sixteen-year-old stripling, fashioned in the mold of one of *The Beatles*. But now, at the still tender age of twenty, my job was to oversee, to command, a *territory* something similar to the size of Scotland. Land of opportunity? Well, it was certainly difficult to imagine scaling such dizzy heights in this relatively short time, within the confines of Mother England. Within that period I had changed from boy to man, acquiring all the mannerisms of a died-in-the-wool Australian along the way. I walked, talked and acted as if I’d been a part of the blue-sky country, all the way from the cradle.

Hairy inferno

Another simmering summer's day on the job in Australia's wheat and sheep country: a regular occurrence by that time and something which I was beginning to regard as a given. Earlier in the day I had arranged with Glen - a farmer from the area whom I could genuinely refer to as a friend - for us to meet at the solitary hotel in the local town. It was a typical country pub, representative of many smalltown hostelrys across the nation: wooden floor with chest-high tiled walls, beer on tap and a range of liquors garlanding an ornately decorated mirror behind the bar.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon by the time this characteristically spartan front bar was beginning to come to life. A ceiling fan rotates in languid fashion above, while a grossly overworked barmaid struggles valiantly to keep up with the demand for *schooners* of beer, as two or three dozen leathery-skinned men - some wearing the iconic bushman's hat - talk at each other in small groups, with ever-increasing volume, and evermore frequently injected expletives.

Arriving earlier than most, I had acquired a corner seat at the bar, and now found myself perched on a high stool listening to Glen, who was opposite me, leaning against the bar and discussing the finer points of sheep shearing with a couple of men standing between us. The discussion - fueled by the beer - appeared to be growing rapidly towards argument. I was just listening, not directly involved. One of the men involved (who had been working at Glen's place) boasted a veritable forest of thick black curly hair, which spread out of a low-necked, grubby white vest, up to his neck and across the shoulders. The talk was swiftly escalating to fever-pitch; a spectacle with promise, which others were now turning to watch with a degree of anticipation.

Suddenly, there was a bit of a skirmish, and Glen, whipping a lighter from the bar, lifted the big man's singlet, flicked the switch, and set the hairy growth alight. A small fire took hold on the dark thicket, and within a few seconds flames were sweeping up the man's chest, engulfing his singlet in a serious blaze. The expectant drinkers nearest to the now

flaming man, looked on in amazement, and some – quite wisely – began to fling the beer they were drinking over the guy, in order to help douse the flames.

After a minute or so of smoke and a lingering smell of burnt hair, the smoldering man, with crispy-brown fragments of a once-white singlet hanging from his body, whilst standing in a pool of beer, looked down at his now hairless chest in disbelief, then turned to face his adversary, insulted and belittled by what had just happened, in front of workmates and peers:

“Well fuck you, and your worthless fucking farm Mister Moroney,” he said, red in the face (partly from anger, but also from the hairy-chest inferno which had just occurred). Then continuing in similar vein, added: *“And you can go and fuck your useless fucking sheep too, coz I’m never coming back to your decrepit fucking place, to do it for you!!”*

That said, he whirled around and stormed out of the bar, slamming the door with all his might and leaving the brass doorbell clanging in his wake. There was a stunned silence for half-a-minute or so, people staring at the door where the man had just been. Then Glen turned to face the crowd.

“Bruce the goose they call him ... and his shearing wasn’t much cop either. Let’s hope he pisses off back to Kiwiland, where he belongs.” Then raising his glass to the engaged throng, *“Come on lads, let’s get back to work. Next round’s on me.”*

The impromptu announcement brought a resounding cheer, the men in the bar as one, downing their drinks and turning afresh to torment the already flummoxed barmaid.

A toothy challenge

We had landed in the late afternoon of the previous day, touching down on a grass strip near the outskirts of town. There were five of us, passengers in the six-seater Cessna, with three more arriving by truck from Adelaide. It was a reunion of old comrades from

across the country, so on that first night we partied with gusto into the early hours, even raiding a dark and dusty basement cellar where we were staying - after all the staff had disappeared - to replenish supplies ... and our never-ending thirsts. Many It would have to be said - including yours truly - woke up the next morning decidedly below par.

Our task the next day was to set up a tented display for the company, at the regional agricultural show, which was to take place just out of town. We had done it before, but this was a much bigger affair, where it was planned to build a centrepiece advertising our wares, using the truckload of empty 20-litre cans that had arrived the day before. So somewhat the worse for wear, we deliberated on the easiest way to get our metal drums from ship to shore, or truck to tent in this particular case. By consensus we arrived at the chain gang method, with about five of us in the line. Like the mainstay in a 4X400 relay, I was somewhere towards the middle.

Our plan seemed to be motoring along quite smoothly, with drums looping from hand to hand in picturesque arcs; supplies on the tray of the truck quickly diminishing, and the stack in the tent behind me growing rapidly towards a mini mountain. Out of the blue, something happened to break the engrossing monotony. A voice from the tent called out: "*Hey George?*" I twisted momentarily, towards the questioning sound. A second or two later - already too late - I turned back, only to see the next cylindrical missile, as if simulating a re-run of the Appollo splashdown, hurtling towards me! The trajectory was a little higher than it should have been, and in the mind's eye of my memory (now 40 years later) I can still picture that drum inching towards my head in slow motion. The last I knew was feeling the heavy metal bottom rim of the drum, as it crashed into my top teeth. Then everything faded to black.

A short while later, a doctor at the town hospital (there was no resident dentist) went about deadening the pain, then providing a supply of tablets and a suspicious-looking brown liquid in a tiny bottle, to dull its return. Back at our hotel and after some rest, the advice from my compatriots was to forget the medicine; brandy they said, was the best remedy. And true to form they did not hesitate to assist the cause, by producing a large

bottle of quality cognac, which naturally, they had to help me consume. On reflection perhaps they were right; towards the end of that second evening - and the second (or was it third) bottle - things seemed to follow much the same course as they had on the first night, and before too long I had begun to forget the nagging pain and was lulled towards a few hours of much-needed sleep.

Early the next day I faced the most daunting part of the whole affair. With no dentist in sight, I had decided to make the long drive back to the city on my own. There, I would be able to access appropriate treatment with a dentist I had known for many years, and whom I trusted. So with tablets and the little brown bottle beside me, I bade a toothless farewell to the guy who had hurled the drum into my face, and set off for *the big smoke*.

Seven hours later, as daylight turned to dusk, I pulled into the kerb outside the dentist's surgery. The pain I remember, was quite severe. He was about my age and went by the unlikely name of Boris (the only other Boris I knew of at that time was the king of horror-film, *Boris Karloff*). But dentist Boris, with his usual calm manner, peered into what must have been something of a horror show inside my mouth, and went to work. He was good at his job. Twenty-six visits and six months later, I emerged with a new set of front teeth. And forever since that day, wherever I am in the world, I can never look at a 20-litre metal container, without recalling the catastrophe in the Australian bush that one of their brethren had caused for my teeth.

Country Roads

I had never been to Canberra before, and this was a fleeting visit. Arriving on the early Monday *politician's express*, I taxied from the airport to pick up the truck, as arranged. It was all ready for me, fully loaded with tractor and machinery.

By ten o'clock my six-wheeled friend and I were on our way, following a cross-country trail back to Adelaide. With this job in mind, I had obtained the requisite truck license some months before; but in truth, apart from the driving instruction, I had not driven any truck, large or small, very far at all; so handling this 10-ton monster by myself, on totally

unfamiliar roads, proved - at least in the initial stages - quite a challenge. Later, by the time we pulled up for the day at a mid-way point Motel outside Hay, the monster and I were getting to know each other.

After an hour or so on the road the following morning, I spotted a couple hitch-hiking up ahead. Knowing it was strictly illegal to carry unauthorized passengers in a government vehicle, I kept on trucking, passing them with a wave. Then having second thoughts – their company would relieve the boredom of the bitumen, which normal for the Australian hinterland, stretched out straight and true to the distant horizon – I pulled off the tarmac onto the dirt fringe. I could see the pair running towards me in the side mirror; packs bouncing on their backs, one carrying a guitar with his free hand.

“Hey there,” the guy said, looking up at me. *“We’re heading for The Riverland. Can you take us there?”*

He was slightly out of breath after the 100-metre fully loaded sprint. *“We’d appreciate it so much if you can give us a lift. We can even sing you songs in exchange.”* With this he smiled, and the young, quite small, but very pretty lady at his side, began to laugh.

What the hell I thought; I had been on their end of the bargain many times, just a year or two before, in Europe. *“OK, you’ve got yourself a deal,”* I yelled, over the clatter of the engine. *“Welcome aboard.”*

With that they clambered up into the cabin, the girl perching on top of the central engine housing. It was the start of a friendship that would last two or three glorious weeks, during which I would come to master a number of new guitar chords.

The odd thing about the guy, was that with his long blond wavy locks and round-shaped glasses, he could have been a double for *John Denver*, the very popular American country star of the day. And a little later when he pulled the guitar out of its case and began to sing, I really did begin to think it was not a look-alike, but the real John Denver, on some sort of incognito tour of the Australian bush.

Thus, the four or five hours run down into Adelaide became something which resembled a miniature country music concert. His partner had a wonderfully melodic voice, harmonizing perfectly with *young John*, and together they did a mean interpretation of *The Carpenters*. We bowled on straight through the Riverland towns of Barmera and Berry, after I invited them to come back to stay. With the boot on the other foot, I remembered something similar happening to my wife and I when we had travelled through Germany: an architect taking us off the autobahn and home to ice-cold *Cinzanos* in his spacious house. I was hoping desperately that she would remember back to that time, and now be OK with me returning the favour, albeit to our not-so-spacious abode in a middle-class suburb of Adelaide.

Dead sheep don't tell lies.

A few months later I was out and about, on the job with my now familiar six-wheeled workmate. We were returning from laying down a field experiment in the Mid-North farming lands of South Australia. For this return to base a colleague was at the wheel.

Half-dozing after a busy day, I was suddenly jolted back to life when I noticed a person in a passing vehicle pointing towards the truck. I looked back through the rear window to the tray, with the tractor and its rig on the back, and saw to my horror what I knew to be a very critical plastic pipe that was supposed to be firmly attached at both ends, now detached from one endpoint and waving around merrily in the breeze, spraying a light mist far and wide. I say critical pipe, because I knew the light mist carried a mix of deadly gases, coming from a 50-litre pressurized keg. The two gases were *Methyl Bromide*, odourless and lethal in miniscule doses, along with the added element of *Chloropicrin* tracer, otherwise known as tear gas, but substantially less harmful. We had been using the rig to inject the deadly mix into the ground, thus sterilizing the soil. It was all part of scientific endeavour to produce more wheat from fewer acres.

My workmate, sporting a fine *Wing Commander-style* moustache with bushy sideburns - looking slightly out of place in his white lab coat - stared straight ahead, intent on keeping *the monster* on the straight and narrow.

“Noel.” I yelled across the rattle of the mid-mounted engine, “*I think we have a problem.*” It was just a few years after the famous “*Houston, I think we have a problem.*” soundbite from *Apollo 13*, immortalized after the event by *Tom Hanks*, so Noel caught on fairly quickly to the fact we had a major issue to deal with. He turned to look back.

“*Oh Jesus, you’re right.*” He responded, staring at me, somewhat aghast.

I pointed to a dirt road coming into view, leading off the tarmac. “*Look there’s a side-road up ahead. We have to get off this main drag. Cars are going past with windows wide open. It could be lethal.*”

Noel braked and we edged off the bitumen, then turned into the side road: a straight and sandy surface with occasional water-formed depressions, flanked by the greenery of acacias and eucalypt trees. Away from the track and behind the fences, sheep were busy grazing in abundance. It had been a warm autumn day, now with wispy cotton wool clouds drifting across a cobalt sky: typical for this part of the world at this time of year.

We pulled up in a wider space a couple of hundred metres along the side road and jumped to safety as the truck came to a halt; the gas, already wafting into the cabin was becoming hard to bear. Gas masks were mandatory when we were operating the rig, but I suddenly realized the masks along with protective clothing were stored in an open-topped box right next to the keg. With the pipe from the keg still flapping about and spraying the deadly gas at random in all directions, it was far too dangerous to get anywhere near the box. Noel and I stood back to survey the scene.

“*Somehow, we need to get to that tap which feeds the pipe,*” Noel said, pointing to a red lever on top of the keg. “*With that tap turned on, the liquid in the keg should be released and the pressure will come down.*”

“Right now we could make very good use of a ten-foot bargepole,” I quipped, trying to make light of the situation.

“Great thought,” he responded. Obviously, my attempt at humour had sparked an idea.

Noel then disappeared into a nearby thicket, returning with his improvised bargepole: a branch from a gum tree that must have been at least ten feet long.

“OK, let me have it; I’ll see what I can do.” I was half Noel’s age and decidedly more athletic, so was able to scramble up onto the tray. Then approaching cautiously from the rear, I got near enough to the rig to flip the tap open with the end of the stick. The waving pipe suddenly dropped down and the lethal liquid gushed out onto the dirt next to the truck. The smell of the chloropicrin was overpowering, but I was able to inch near enough to our open kit box, to hoist two gas masks up on the end of the stick, flinging them down to Noel standing on the leeward side of the truck, then almost overcome by the gas, jumping down myself.

We opened the doors of the truck, to get rid of the gas, then went about fashioning crude signs, warning any passer-by from either side: POISONOUS GAS DO NOT ENTER AREA! It was the best we could do before leaving.

“Let’s hope the next passers-by are not our four-legged friends from across the way,” I said to Noel, as he reversed back down the road.

“Dead sheep don’t tell lies,” came the muffled response from behind the mask.

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These brief anecdotes from my early years in the Australian bush, reflect just how much I had become an Australian, living life in my adopted country as if I had been born and bred under the *Southern Cross*. I was certainly a very different person from the gangly teenager who had arrived on the scene not that many years before. Some of these tales occurred before I became aware of my true heritage, some came afterwards, but together they go to show that I was resilient enough to carry on with my life down under, without suffering any untold disruption.