



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 outfit reflected the heat of the moment: khaki shorts, brown boots and bushman's hat, leaving sun-bronzed expanses of flesh in between. The *weatherboard* house, known as a homestead in these parts, was standard issue for the hard-working *cockies* (Aussie-speak for farmers) who populated 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-twelve 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 stubby a day keeps the doctor away!’”

Bruce gave a little chuckle. *“Yeah, I think you could be right about that. But 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 112 Farenheit the ‘cocky’ referred to, was equivalent to mid-40s Celcius: not unknown, but somewhat unusual. I was near the edge of wheat and sheep country; near what we knew as *Goyter’s Line - the 15-inch annual rainfall belt* - 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 my adopted life.

Blue skies, broad plains and golden horizons; a far cry from the dark winters and drizzle I left behind in England five years before. From the start I had tried to make the most of the hand which had been dealt: ‘Land of Opportunity’ an over-used but markedly apt phrase. After arriving on Australia’s shores as a sixteen-year-old stripling, fashioned in the mold of one of ‘The Beatles’, my job now 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 timeframe and within the confines of Mother England. I had changed from boy to man, becoming a dinky-di Aussie along the way. I walked, talked, and functioned as if I’d been an integral part of the blue-sky country, right from the cradle.

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