THE LONG PADDOCK
Contents

Introduction 7

Part 1 On the hoof
From Wilcannia to Booligal 13

Part 2 Hay, Hell & Booligal
From Booligal to Hay 73

Part 3 The Old Man Plain
From Hay to Deniliquin 117

Part 4 To the Border
From Deniliquin to Murrumbidgee 137

Part 5 An Epic Trek
Brinkworth’s Great Cattle Drive 165
Across the Australian continent runs a vast network of corridors largely unseen and unrecognized by most people. This network is officially called the Travelling Stock Route, but popularly known as “The Long Paddock.”

Stock routes are public thoroughfares set aside for the unplanned movement of domestic stock from paddock to market or from one property to another. Many follow the ancient travelling routes of indigenous Australians, often along the most accessible paths that avoided natural obstacles in the landscape. Usually they were a link between water sources.

Often the stock routes became the principal roads. Some evolved over time into major highways. The Sydney Road, better known today as the Hume Highway linking Melbourne and Sydney, began life as a major stock route. From the earliest times, these main stock arteries and their tributaries funneled millions of cattle and sheep from the great plains of the inland. Ultimately the stock mostly ended up on the dinner plates of people. This network is officially called the Travelling Stock Route, but popularly known as “The Long Paddock.”

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, Australia ran from Wilcannia on the Darling River in northwestern New South Wales to the Victorian border towns of Echuca and Moama. From the 1840s the stock routes were vital to the pastoral expansion of the inland. Initially the pathways for freighting stock, the herds and flocks of the squatter herds, rapidly multiplied. Within a few short years, drovers were moving stock more than halfway across the continent, from newly settled regions as far away as Queensland and the Northern Territory to markets in Victoria, where they were then in the draft of the gold rush. Some journeys took more than a year.

Drovers called the route to Wilcannia Stock Route “The Western Road.” In recent years it was designated as “The Long Paddock,” a 610 kilometre route that follows the Old Paddock. Travellers along this route today can readily learn of its rich history from the dozens of interpretive signs that line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer sun. It also removed grazing pressure in the line the way.

Some journeys took more than a year. Drover was known as the “The Long Paddock,” a 610 kilometre route that follows the Old Paddock. Travellers along this route today can readily learn of its rich history from the dozens of interpretive signs that line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer sun. It also removed grazing pressure in the line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer sun. It also removed grazing pressure in the line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer sun. It also removed grazing pressure in the line the way.

From the vast saltbush plains of the Riverina, thousands of stock were also annually moved on foot to the mountains of southern New South Wales. This practice, which began in the earliest days of European settlement and continued until the 1950s, ensured that animals were not exposed to the broiling summer sun. It also removed grazing pressure in the line the way.
The pasture on these pathways has saved many a small farmer from ruin. For some, such as pastoral entrepreneur Sir Sidney Kidman, Australia’s great “Cattle King,” it helped amass vast fortunes. In 2013, an epic cattle trek emulated Kidman’s feat of walking stock vast distances from dry regions to better seasons and markets. In June, 18,000 cows, the largest movement of cattle since colonial times, were moved by drovers from western Queensland to southern New South Wales.

Originating from the drought-parched Gulf of Carpentaria region of northern Australia, the cattle were bought by South Australian pastoral baron Tom Brinkworth. He gambled that winter rains would provide good pastures along the way.

However, as if to test the mettle of modern drovers against those of an earlier age, nature conspired to rob the venture of a crucial element: good pasture. During the seven-month-long journey barely a drop of rain fell in their pathway.

Because the stock route is public land and a public resource, everyone has a democratic right to use it; to journey over, camp on or to graze their stock. So long as they abide by the rules and regulations.

“The stock route system to me is like veins through a body that run through all of Australia,” says Queensland drover Bill Little. “They’re our land. It’s everybody’s land; your land and my land.”

Travelling stock routes are often rich in flora and fauna, remnant vegetation and wildlife. As Crown Land they mostly escaped the axe and the plough that so profoundly changed the Australia landscape. For this reason they are as much valued by conservationists as drovers and livestock producers.

But few people realize that travelling stock routes are still the permanent home of a hardy band of nomads who share a rich heritage and carry on age-old traditions. These are the men of the drovers who live, walk, work along some of the most famous stock routes in Australia. And of some of the people who make their living in farming enterprises alongside those famous outback trails.

It’s a land of epic stories of lives governed by the changing pulse of the seasons in an arid landscape of vast inland plains and open spaces. In summer, the wind is like a dragon’s breath blowing from Australia’s arid centre, whipping dust and debris into a devilish dance, parching all in its path. In winter, night-time frost can whiten the landscape, and the winds, unimpeded by trees or mountains, can whistle over the flat expanses.

They are an independent breed who could never stand the office or the confines of the city. They love the outdoors, the freedom of the road, their livestock, dogs and the horses that still play a vital role. And despite the pace of modern life, the speed of their travel is still governed by the speed of the stock. Their movements are determined by the rhythms of the seasons and the climatic cycles of an ancient land. These are the people of the Long Paddock.
Part 1

ON THE HOOF

FROM WILCANNIA TO BOOLIGAL
Our journey along the Long Paddock begins at Wilcannia, on the Darling River in northwestern New South Wales. The Darling, the most famous river in the Australian outback, begins in northern New South Wales and winds its way southbound, joining the Murray River at Wentworth at the New South Wales–Victorian border. If you include the tributaries, it is the largest river system in Australia.

The Lower Darling region is the traditional home of the Barkindji – “the people of the river.” The Darling’s flow begins in rivulets on the Darling Downs in distant southern Queensland. Like other inland waterways, it slowly gathers volume and momentum as the rainfall from the great inland plains drains through riverside settlements such as Louth and Tilpa, south of the opposite bank. From Bourke and beyond, following the river inland path. The vegetation was richer. There was a longer but far less risky route than the forbidding outback. As the rainfall from the great inland plains drains gradually southwards.

The Darling provided a natural pathway for stock from the far outback, and the water supplies made it a lot safer than the forbidding inland path. The vegetation was richer. There was shade. From Bourke and beyond, following the river through riverside settlements such as Louth and Tilpa, this stock route was known as “The Western Road.”

In colonial days, journeying for drovers and pastoral barons was a hazardous business. Frequently Wilcannia pioneers perished during summer heatwaves, sometimes from thirst, though just as often from drinking too much in local hotels. The town’s historic cemetery is dotted with the graves of young children, mostly infants. They sit in tiny plots behindping iron for decaying wooden fences, poignant proof of the fragility of life in a frontier town. OnOne is known as the “Queen of the West.” Wilcannia’s glory was brief, but her striking beauty has weathered with time and economic decline. Her majestic buildings, in the form of gracious, two-story sandstone buildings, are now faded. Regrettably, other echo-coloured sandstone buildings were condemned by an over-zealous civic official and demolished. Some score of streets here, later partly collapsed, though restoration work is underway on this grand building which was for a long time home to the nuns who taught many of the district’s children.

From Wilcannia, this famous stock route runs all the way to Muckadilla, where the stock crossed the Murray River into Victoria. It was originally gauged at one mile, or 1.6 kilometres, wide, the standard width. Motorists, scuttling along at high speed along these broad thoroughfares, can be completely unaware of the presence of drovers and their travelling stock grazing in the distance. The stock routes heading to the south are mostly no longer usable or discernable and don’t follow the old routes and amalgamated them into their pastoral leases. The watering points and windmills, long fallen into dereliction, have mostly vanished. It’s hard to picture that the Darling River was once a busy arterial waterway. Settlements found it hard to survive this continent ofスタッフ land that had been submerged by flood could sometimes lay glistening and barren by drought. For residents of the island, coping with wild climatic cycles remains the greatest challenge.

Sidney Kidman, later acclaimed as Australia’s “Cattle King,” had strong connections to this Darling River outback. He and his brother, both mail and coach contractors, ran as rivals to Cobb and Co., and for a time had the mail run from Wilcannia to Bourke. In later years, they had as many as 17,000 cattle at one time moving on the great stock routes to market. Using them to shuffle his hands across Australia, travelling stock routes provided the cornerstone to Kidman’s vast fortune. The great pastoral baron’s name is commemorated in The Kidman Way, a former stock route, now highway, that runs 890 kilometres from Jerilderie in southern New South Wales to Bourke in the state’s northeast.

Our journey along the Long Paddock begins at Wilcannia, on the Darling River in northwestern New South Wales. The Darling, the most famous river in the Australian outback, begins in northern New South Wales and winds its way southbound, joining the Murray River at Wentworth at the New South Wales–Victorian border. If you include the tributaries, it is the largest river system in Australia.

The Lower Darling region is the traditional home of the Barkindji – “the people of the river.” The Darling’s flow begins in rivulets on the Darling Downs in distant southern Queensland. Like other inland waterways, it slowly gathers volume and momentum as the rainfall from the great inland plains drains through riverside settlements such as Louth and Tilpa, south of the opposite bank. From Bourke and beyond, following the river inland path. The vegetation was richer. There was a longer but far less risky route than the forbidding outback. As the rainfall from the great inland plains drains gradually southwards.

The Darling provided a natural pathway for stock from the far outback, and the water supplies made it a lot safer than the forbidding inland path. The vegetation was richer. There was shade. From Bourke and beyond, following the river through riverside settlements such as Louth and Tilpa, this stock route was known as “The Western Road.”

In colonial days, journeying for drovers and pastoral barons was a hazardous business. Frequently Wilcannia pioneers perished during summer heatwaves, sometimes from thirst, though just as often from drinking too much in local hotels. The town’s historic cemetery is dotted with the graves of young children, mostly infants. They sit in tiny plots behind ping iron for decaying wooden fences, poignant proof of the fragility of life in a frontier town. OnOne is known as the “Queen of the West.” Wilcannia’s glory was brief, but her striking beauty has weathered with time and economic decline. Her majestic buildings, in the form of gracious, two-story sandstone buildings, are now faded. Regrettably, other echo-coloured sandstone buildings were condemned by an over-zealous civic official and demolished. Some score of streets here, later partly collapsed, though restoration work is underway on this grand building which was for a long time home to the nuns who taught many of the district’s children.

From Wilcannia, this famous stock route runs all the way to Muckadilla, where the stock crossed the Murray River into Victoria. It was originally gauged at one mile, or 1.6 kilometres, wide, the standard width. Motorists, scuttling along at high speed along these broad thoroughfares, can be completely unaware of the presence of drovers and their travelling stock grazing in the distance. The stock routes heading to the south are mostly no longer usable or discernable and don’t follow the old routes and amalgamated them into their pastoral leases. The watering points and windmills, long fallen into dereliction, have mostly vanished. It’s hard to picture that the Darling River was once a busy arterial waterway. Settlements found it hard to survive this continent of staff land that had been submerged by flood could sometimes lay glistening and barren by drought. For residents of the island, coping with wild climatic cycles remains the greatest challenge.

Sidney Kidman, later acclaimed as Australia’s “Cattle King,” had strong connections to this Darling River outback. He and his brother, both mail and coach contractors, ran as rivals to Cobb and Co., and for a time had the mail run from Wilcannia to Bourke. In later years, they had as many as 17,000 cattle at one time moving on the great stock routes to market. Using them to shuffle his hands across Australia, travelling stock routes provided the cornerstone to Kidman’s vast fortune. The great pastoral baron’s name is commemorated in The Kidman Way, a former stock route, now highway, that runs 890 kilometres from Jerilderie in southern New South Wales to Bourke in the state’s northeast.
Above and opposite: Alison and Ed Crossley supervising the loading of cattle at Tom’s Lake, Booligal
His gnarled, arthritic hands are contorted as if clutching a set of reins, and his twisted fingers are near useless, frozen by the countless frosts and bitter winds of the inland plains. Of the handful of drovers still alive today who recall the days of the Wilcannia to Ivanhoe stock route, Jack Hickey is the best known.

"On the range too long," laments the old drover. "I always suffered from cold hands and feet."

In his eightieth year, time is settling other old scores as well. Recently, the nurses in his old folks’ home found a piece of floating bone in his knee the size of a thumbnail. It’s a reminder of when a horse bucked him into a gatepost sixty years ago. He feels his right arm, once smashed after being thrown from a bronco, and announces bluntly, "Them bumps that didn’t hurt us then, start to hurt now. I’m buggered."

Jack’s voice is frail and faltering. Some years back, while feeding his dogs, he trod on a rusty buckle that pierced his sole and turned gangrenous, and he eventually lost his right leg from below the knee. Yet for a man who spent most of his working life in the saddle, there is no bitterness that his final years are confined to a hospital bed.

Above him hang several framed photographs, among the most famous images of Australian droving life. They were taken by Jeff Carter, who specialized in documenting the people of the inland. In 1957, Jack, the boss drover, and his team of Graham Mansell, Barry Skinner and Bob Ballantyne, moved 7,000 sheep from Bourke in northwest New South Wales. A raging drought had gripped the land, and a dealer had bought the mob cheap, gambling that he could walk them into better seasons further south and unload them for a tidy profit. The circuitous 900-kilometre trek through Wilcannia to Bourke and across the Hay plain took nine months, and all the while drought continued to tighten its hold.

Once the drovers had completed their journey to Deniliquin, the dealer, eager to cut his losses, sold the sheep to two local drovers, who gambled on shifting them south and selling them for a profit in Victoria. It proved a very costly venture. "They done their arse," pronounces Jack in the pithy, laconic style common to bushmen.

For the drover, dry stages and watering points could be perilous. Thirsty cattle could rush and smash a trough to pieces. Sheep could become frenzied and smother themselves. "It used to take us half a day to water them. When we’d get a couple of miles back from the water, we’d ride in, one on each side, and they’d wake up and they’d start trotting. They knew we were taking them to water," recalls Jack. Stock, especially cattle, have a keen sense of smell. If thirst-maddened cattle smell water, they are especially prone to escaping the control of the drovers, often to their peril.

Losing a large number of animals in a single mishap is called a ‘smash’, and history is dotted with such calamities. Years ago an old-timer told Jack of one such incident in colonial times. "Barrows Junhouse and Wilcannia there’s a drover with 1,000 bullocks along a dry stage, and they must wind up on the wind out in the station. And they stapled it and the mob couldn’t do nothing. Began the let in a dry lake. Done the let."

Drought is the drovers’ recurring unloved shadow. Jack recalls his boyhood at Moama by the Murray River when the paddle steamers laden with red gum saw logs sounded their whistles as they chugged past the Echuca bridge. In the drought of 1944 and 1945, life in the river district was at a low ebb, she laid a scene of desolation. "I can remember when there was not a vestige of grass. Not a blade," says Jack.

His father Jim Hickey, a drover, was usually away from home and family for long periods. For much of those years he was down south finding grass for flocks of sheep. On returning, he had a job using horse teams to scoop the sand from the wire netting of fences that had been buried by drifting siftings to shifting dunes.

At fourteen, Jack joined him on the road on a wage of £2.10s a week, seven days a week, including his tucker. Jim was a precise man given to dispensing stern advice. "The old man said, ‘If you pay a man and feed him you’ll never have a problem with him. If you owe him a quid, you give him a quid,’” recounts Jack. "And if you don’t feed him, he won’t work, the same
with your horses and your dogs. You had to keep their bellies full."

Droving contracts usually included provision for drovers to pick an animal from the herd to slaughter for weekly rations. A bullock was slaughtered at sundown when the air was cooler; what meat couldn’t be eaten fresh was then dry-salted for preservation, an essential art in the days before refrigeration. The bones were removed, the meat carved with a knife every five or six inches and the incisions rubbed liberally with rock salt. It was then hung and dried for several nights over the frame of a wire bed. Each dawn it was swaddled and stored under the swags and gear to keep it cool during daytime travel. It usually lasted three or four weeks.

"We done it pretty tough. Your salted meat was your mainstay. When you came to eat it you’d soak it and change your water twice when you boiled it. If you didn’t like corn beef then you had to go hungry," says Jack. There were also stews and curries, always with potatoes, sometimes with onions. Green vegetables were often scarce, and the heavy salt diet has taken a heavy toll on many of Jack’s old droving mates.

As time went on, the diet improved, including more vegetables and better bread. "Up till then," he adds, "you were always living on bloody damper. Damper was made every second or third day, a mix of self-raising flour, powdered milk, butter, a bit of salt, that was it."

Three times a day they’d drink mostly black "billy" tea, though some drovers added powdered milk. He and his men seldom drank alcohol while on the road, except when it helped buffer them from the cold of the inland plains. "In the winter we carried rum. You'd have a sailor’s rum every night and every morning. Just cover the bottom of a pandan with it and add a dash of water. As black as a dog’s gut it was. Make a wagtail fight an ass!"

By the late 1950s, stock trucks were putting drovers out of work, but few drovers used a truck. Much of the stock route was inaccessible to vehicles and unsealed roads became an impassable bog after rain. "As trucks and cars came in, women came in," Jack observes. "One time, when I was a kid, it was a disgrace to have a woman on the road; for a bloke to employ his missus. Some men had a bad reputation for having more than a few beers at the end of a drive. The woman would do the work and the husband would collect the pay and drink it."

Jack married Lorraine "Bub" Holschier, the daughter of a drover, and they undertook some large droving jobs. They had two sons who came with them on the road, but droving, admits Jack, was hard on family life. The marriage fell apart. "When their mother rolled her swag and cleared out, they were with me full-time for a while until I got things organized," he says.

Jack has never seen the ocean but he has viewed countless natural wonders and unexplained phenomena, including mysterious light at the 20 Mile Gums on the Gunbar Road northeast of Hay. "It was definitely a Min Min," he asserts. "You’d think that the lights were nearly gonna hit your camp, and next thing they’d be gone. A lot of people won’t believe in them, but it’s fair dinkum and no one knows what it is."

In his poetic, pithy style, Jack sums up the joys of droving: "Another day, another feed, another camp, out on the job, out of bed. Roll your swag and we’re away."
In more than forty years, Alison Palmer can only recall one or two drovers with stock passing her door. She, along with her late husband Mack and their two sons, came to Mount Manara when the family bought the station in 1971. “It became more convenient to truck stock,” observes Alison, an articulate, erudite woman born to the west at Menindie in 1931.

Mount Manara sits halfway between the Darling and Lachlan Rivers, not really a mountain, but more of a rare undulation rising like the spine of some ancient reptile from the vast dead flat plains surrounding it. The stretch of road from Wilcannia is unsealed, one of only two gravelled highways in the nation. There are sections of bone-rattling corrugations. Though mostly gun-barrel straight, at Mount Manara the road curves unexpectedly, a terror for the unwary. Recently a fully loaded double-decker stock transport swayed, rolled and came to grief near the station’s front gate.

“Of the 710 sheep, about 500 were killed,” recalls Alison’s son John. “Wrote the truck off. Got a big recovery rig out from Broken Hill to stand it up, once they got all the sheep out of it.” John used his giant bulldozer to dig large burial pits for the dead stock.

For most of its pastoral history, these inland plains were the domain of Merino sheep, but, confronted by dwindling returns, John sold the last of his Merinos in 2009, changing his enterprise to Dorper sheep. A hardy meat breed developed in the harsh, arid lands of South Africa, the Dorper is gradually replacing wool-growing Merinos in much of Australia’s dry rangelands. “They’re better suited to this country. It’s not good wool-growing country,” says John. “There’s just too much vegetable fault, too much dust, too many negatives.”

Sitting in the cool respite of Mount Manara’s kitchen, an historic stone structure separate from the main homestead, the temperature outside – more than 40 degrees Celsius – is a reminder of the harsh environment. John explains he has no regrets about his change of enterprise; Dorpers have a quicker diet and are far more fertile than Merinos. They also don’t require shearing, a major saving in wages and labour – John and his son Luke run the property with only occasional outside help.

They also run some Shorthorn cattle for beef, while Rangeland goats provide another lucrative and essential sideline. “The goats trim everything up, pretty high, always too high for the sheep. In the dry times the goats will take it higher than the cattle,” says John. “In the last three years we’ve trucked an average of 21,000 goats a year and they’re not getting less. Don’t know why we’re not just running goats. They’ve become a big industry now.”

Mount Manara Station encompasses a little under 100,000 hectares of rangeland, with a light covering of mostly mulga and apple-bush scrub and native grasses. The homestead sits among boulders in a pass through the rocky range, where an early correspondent observed one pioneering family living in a cave under a rocky ledge.

Some of the original buildings are constructed of stone, an abundant local material in a region almost devoid of useful building timber. Originally a wayside stop on the road to Wilcannia, Mount Manara was billed from the 1860s as the “new coach route from Echuca.” For travellers coming from the south, it provided the first drink in twenty miles, courtesy of a deep well that gave lovely pure water – water has always been scarce and precious. An early account tells of a squatter who put up misleading signs reading “main road from the Lachlan to the Darling,” which diverted travellers away from Mount Manara’s well.
onto a waterless track. Several men, victims of this deception, were said to have died of thirst.

The mail contractor who carried the mail between Booligal and Wilcannia had iron tanks installed along the route; the water had to be carted from the Willandra Billabong many miles distant.

Alison’s father, Tom Edson, having survived the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front, met Alison’s mother when she arrived from Scotland after WWII. “Grace was a sister settler’s block, near Menindee,” her father spent his early years digging water tanks. His wife retained the formality of the old world, always wearing a long dress and stockings, even on the hottest of summer days. “I know my mother was terribly isolated. I don’t know how she survived,” says Alison. “The nearest female company was miles away. From the age of six, Alison was sent to boarding school at the Convent in Wilcannia.

She remembers the devastation of the 1940s drought: “I think we ended up at home with about two sheep, and I don’t know how they survived.” Stock numbers were still low when the wool boom came in the early 1950s. By then she had married “Mack” Palmer, a descendant of a pioneer grazing family, and a wartime pilot who drew a land ballot after WWII.

“You’ve got to be optimistic,” says John. “The meat industry’s strong. Commodity prices out here will never break you,” he says, “it’s seasons that’ll make you do it tough. If you diversify a bit you’ll always get by.”
Clive Linnett fondly recalls his boyhood days when he and his brother would ride their ponies to greet drovers moving stock past Kilfera Station, south-west of Ivanhoe. A drover might have a horse that had gone lame, or simply need fresh mounts, and his father would trade horses with him. That was in the 1950s, when stock were still walked from Wilcannia, and drovers used wagonettes.

“There’s a story of two drovers here at the trucking yards and one drover swapped his wife for a wagon wheel,” laughs Clive. Sometimes passing drovers would tell the Linnett family that they were due to kill a bullock for rations in a day or two. “We can’t handle all the meat,” they’d announce. So his family would meet them at their campsite and share in the spoils, taking what beef the drovers couldn’t dry-salt or transport. Clive’s family at least possessed a type of cooler, powered by charcoal.

The Linnetts have been in the district for more than a century. “Our ancestors did it very tough,” observes Clive, relating how it took his parents from dawn to dark to drive their T-model Ford to Balranald. Those days it takes two hours.

But change hasn’t been kind to the district or the nearby town of Ivanhoe, 200 kilometres from any major centre. “There’s no shearing season anymore,” laments Clive, “because the country round here mostly runs Dorpers or Demaras that shed their wool and don’t need shearing. Once there were four or five local shearing contractors.”

He and his wife and son still run Merinos for wool, alongside Poll Hereford cattle. “People do not understand what is happening in the back country,” he wrote in a submission for drought assistance in 2008. “There is a lot of hardship. There are a lot of empty kitchen pantries. Families that have wanted to sell have done so and the properties have got bigger, which has left a lot of empty homesteads. Within five years they are being resold because of the continuing drought and the interest bill.”

With a thorough knowledge of local history and a passion for the past, Clive has played a key role in developing the Long Paddock touring route. He has been a Central Darling Shire councillor for several decades and he and his wife Fay have been tireless workers in civic and community affairs. For their services, both have been recognised with the Order of Australia. “I’m 67, starting to get up a bit in years. But I still pull the boots on each day,” says Clive.
Opposite: Remnants of a wharf that once serviced the port of Wilcannia along the Darling River.

Right: A child’s grave in the cemetery at Wilcannia.
Swirling dust clouds hang over the cattle yards at Tom’s Lake Station, and the shafts of harsh sunlight beaming between the rails give the scene an ethereal air. But the devil is at play today. Amongst the cattle is a rogue grey bull, dangerously crashing and charging into the railings and metal stock crate. After three attempts to run him up into the double-decked transport, he is finally secured in the trailer and the gate locked behind him for his one-way journey south to the meatworks. The other cattle being loaded are prime quality, two-year-old males that have spent nearly a year on the property growing into valuable beef.

Tom’s Lake Station, 50 kilometres south of Mossgiel, comprises about 57,000 hectares of river country and open grassland. “It just helps make a balance so you can run a diversity of livestock,” says Jim Crossley, whose great-grandfather took up the property in 1900 in the midst of a crippling dry spell that became known as the Federation Drought. “I think they probably recognized the saltbush plains and the Hay district would be some of the best Merino woolgrowing country in Australia,” says Jim. “Once you get north of here it’s pretty well Merino sheep, alternative breed sheep or goats. But if you’ve got some flood country, it’s pretty useful cattle feed.”

Jim and Alison, along with their two sons Rob and Ed and their wives, run a family beef enterprise that in good seasons can annually turn off 2,000 head of cattle. The Crossleys don’t run breeding cattle, but buy in yearlings from elsewhere, grow them on and then sell them directly to abattoirs that supply choice quality meat to restaurants.

Like all people of the inland, they mark the years by the run of the seasons, and no natural event is more searing on the memory than drought. Stories of the destructive power of the ‘big dry’ pass down the generations and almost become folkloric. Jim was born during the devastating drought of the early 1940s that gripped most of inland Australia. “There was some hay in yearlings from elsewhere, grow them on and then sell them directly to abattoirs that supply choice quality meat to restaurants.
winter rain in 1941, and then no significant rainfalls for five years. By 1944, the press was calling it the worst drought in Australia’s history. Back then, says Jim, drought was more destructive than today. Plagues of rabbits denuded any living plant, even eating tree roots. “You couldn’t move stock away, so in those big droughts the stock stayed on the country until they died. Because there were no trucks, and the stock route was flogged out, and there was no water. By the end of the drought it was just bare dirt,” he says. “I know places where people put thousands of sheep into a paddock just before the drought started in the 1940s, and after the drought they mustered a handful. The rest of them just died.”

Wartime restrictions compounded the crisis. “There are places north of here where you can see there have been three or four fences put on the same bit of ground because they’ve all gone under the sand. The dust storms have blown and collected on the fence. So that’s how bad things were then,” says Jim. Such wholesale degradation has not happened since. These days during drought farmers sell off their stock, for next to nothing if necessary, avoiding land degradation and animal cruelty. Jim believes better grazing management will see the country continue to improve in coming decades.

The Crossleys have chosen to fence their boundaries that follow the Cobb Highway, though travelling stock haven’t passed their way for two decades. This far north, most of the stock route is not fenced and the watering points are far from reliable. Earlier generations of their family made good use of the travelling stock routes across New South Wales at various times. When drought gripped the district in 1995, Jim and Alison sent cattle south to Victoria in the care of a drover. On the flip side, floods always bring excitement. The retreating waters leave mounds of green vegetation, often up to two metres tall. In 1956, when a giant flood left residents of the region stranded, Jim’s father, a competent pilot, played a gallant role in distributing food. In 1961, while flying a single-engine Austen aircraft on an inspection of grazing country, he and three station hands were killed when the plane crashed in a paddock near Booligal. Undaunted by the tragedy, Jim also got his pilot’s license. In late 1990, a massive flood cut the Cobb Highway, then unsealed, and the Crossleys were cut off for two months. Jim’s light plane proved essential in getting supplies and ferrying his sons to school.

“The outback is always further on. We’re not isolated,” says Alison. “So many city visitors come out here and at night they can’t believe the sky they see. There’s nothing to hide the stars. It’s lovely.”

Stock agent Jason Andrews

36
Opposite: Alison Crossley sits amongst the ruins of an old pub.

Above: Once the domain of the stockman and bullock, today’s transport is both fast and efficient.
Above and following pages: Sheep across western NSW during the 2002-03 drought
Left: Thirteen-year-old working dog Charlie at Abbotsford Station
Opposite: The relentless drudgery of shearing continues under the sure and steady hands of a Kiwi team at Abbotsford Station
Opposite: A road train heads south with a load of sheep on the dirt road from Wilcannia to Ivanhoe.

Above: Charlie Farrar and his dog look out from their Mossgiel woolshed.
Giant stock transports roar along the roads south from Wilcannia, leaving rooster-tails of dust billowing in their wake. As they speed past, their cargo of goats is often identifiable by an odd horn protruding through the metal stock crate.

Domestic goats once accompanied the pioneers to the remotest, driest pockets of the outback, where they provided milk and meat for early settlers. But they soon took to the wild and proliferated, and there are now more than two million feral goats nationwide. They thrive in the harsh, arid inland, but their voracious grazing habits have long seen them maligned for causing soil erosion and land degradation.

At Burndoo Station, Rick Gates begs to differ. He believes that because goats are browsers, they’re not as hard on ground cover as sheep and cattle. But the recently elected national president of the Goat Industry Council of Australia cautions that they must be carefully managed.

Goats have been the savior of Rick and Jo Gates and family. They used to run Merinos on their 25,000 hectares of marginal country 70 kilometres south of Wilcannia. When wool prices crashed in 1991, their long-held promise of giving their two children a good education seemed unattainable.

They began to round up and sell their feral goats, using the money to erect goat-proof fences and employing them in a strategic grazing regime to reduce woody weeds like hopbush scrub. “Our country’s better now than it ever was because goats are browsers, and if they’re stocked correctly we’ve found them much better on country,” says Jo.

Soon after, they sold their sheep and built a goat trading depot. The business gathers goats from a 200-kilometre radius of Burndoo. Annually for the last few years, 180,000 head have been mustered, sorted and trucked out from the yards. Their venture has been vital to struggling graziers.

Goats require much less labour than sheep. They don’t require drenching, they’re highly fertile, usually producing at least two kids a year, don’t need shearing and are hardier than sheep or cattle. Most station owners no longer see goats only as pests and many have a “goat paddock” where they’ll gather mustered animals for market.

Goat is the world’s most widely eaten meat. Half of the animals from Gates Goats are processed for export to the United States. Lately, China has entered the market, joining Vietnam and Malaysia as rapidly growing markets. “We can’t supply enough. The demand is more than we can supply, which is not a bad thing to be in at the moment,” says Jo. “Down our road I think there’s only two Merino breeders left. The next generation has embraced different money-making ventures.”

Their own son Ross, 21, is happily back on the farm after an overseas stint. Both he and Rick are skilled ultra-light pilots. The aircraft is essential for finding stock and mustering; it takes merely an hour to fly across the property, whereas by vehicle it’s the best part of a day. “We were shooting goats in 1992 before we started this,” muses Jo. “It’s been a life saver for us.”
Ross Gates prepares for the day’s roundup on the family property, Burndoo.

For Rick Gates, goats are providing a way forward on increasingly marginal lands.
Goats, once an environmental burden, have now become the economic salvation of dry land farmers in northwestern NSW.
Above and opposite: Ross Gates flies his Foxbat aircraft low and slow as he rounds up stray goats at Burndoo.