



BUSH *life*

A new book contains a series of stunning images of rural Australia ... as seen through the lens of 10 brilliant female photographers

JESSICA HOWARD

The first thing you notice is the sky. It stretches right to the horizon whichever way you turn, and it's bluer than anywhere else you've seen in the world. Except in the light of dawn, or when, at night, it becomes a vast galactic carpet scattered with swirls of copper and pink.

It feels too brilliant to be real. You want to turn to someone and exclaim, can you believe it? As if on this night, the stars can't have shone so vividly for anyone but you. Even those of us who live in the bush are astonished by its beauty.

It is a place of light. Once you're in tune with it, you never stop noticing how the sun dances across silver acacia leaves, or shimmers

on dewy, green paddocks. Most Australians live on the coastal fringe within cooee of a neighbour, and yet there's an enduring sense that the spirit of our country lies beyond the Great Dividing Range. But what's out there beyond the back fence and over the hazy mountains?

When thousands are stepping off urban trains to make their way home, rural people are mixing grain for their tired work-horses and upending scrap buckets for their chooks. During big events like harvesting and seeding, jobs last longer than daylight. Tractors and headers run around the clock. Dinners are consumed in cabins, while working dogs lie at their owner's feet. For days, the only sight kids have of their dads will be



Top: day breaks over a Hay Plains woolshed in NSW. Above: grazier John Howard on his central Queensland property; and a Hills hoist and paddy lamb in Victoria; Left: afternoon beers at the dam on Billenbah near Glenmorgan, Queensland

GEORGIE MANN, JESSICA HOWARD, EMMA LEONARD,

wobbling lights on the horizon as the tractor bounces over loose soil.

The freedom that is a much-touted benefit of country living is true but only if you can schedule events and holidays around harvesting, sowing, branding, feeding, weaning and shearing – and the weather.

You can hit the road whenever you want – so long as you let someone know where you're going, pack a spare tyre, a jack and plenty of water, leave gates as you find them, slow down past houses and don't forget the two-way radio.

Thomas Keneally had a theory that characters in the bush swell like yeast to fill the geographical vastness, much like a nervous person babbles during lulls in conversation. And it's true in a way.

Hats are big, stories even bigger, and utes are so old that you wonder if they're roadworthy (probably not).

While rural life is still largely traditional, eccentricities flourish because no one's keeping them in check.

On the land, living is working. The two activities are wholly interchangeable, mostly because there's always so much to do: pipes split and darken the earth with precious water; graders break down just as you're trying to fix a dam wall; windmills need oiling from a perch 18m high. Even on days setting a less furious pace, so as long as there's light and they're breathing, farmers are working. Sundays are usually reserved for checking waters, making sure tanks are full and troughs are flowing; without water, stock die. Rainy days are for shed work (servicing farm vehicles, greasing saddles, inspecting that persistent rattle in a quad bike) or for tackling the growing pile of paperwork.

Days start early. As the horizon

glows with just the suggestion of a sunrise, people are saddling horses and packing lunches onto motor-bikes, before setting out into wide paddocks of mulga and gidgee. Helicopter pilots are running through flight checklists ahead of a muster. Dairy farmers are already hours into milking, or baling hay still moist with dew.

As the sun creeps up the sky, warming all it touches, the tempo quickens. Work crews descend on farms to pick plump mandarins from trees. Agents draft cattle into auction-ready pens at saleyards. Shearers remove wool in one neat fleece. Rousabouts sweep the floors and keep animals moving through pens. Classers skirt the fleeces, judging the wool's tensile strength before it's compressed into a giant rectangular bale. By smoko time all around Australia, sheep are drenched, cattle inoculated and paddocks ploughed – and

it's still only morning. In family-run operations, mothers and fathers put booster seats in their farm vehicles and fill them with children. They pack enough food, nappies and sunscreen for the day, then head out – often not returning until dark.

With only a little coaching, kids are convinced that climbing trees and spotting calves are a reward for a day away from toys. Very young children bob around in bouncers at the feet of their parents, who are building fences or processing stock.

Once they're old enough, they become little workers. They jump into saddles from tree stumps, and wrestle lambs who have escaped through a fence mid-muster. They coax unwilling abandoned poddies to drink milk, and drive utes while their parents (often roaring "slow the bloody hell down") sling hay to animals trailing behind. By the

LIFE & TIMES

Summer
edition



Clockwise from above left: sheep graze near the Grampians in Victoria; the Dunkeld rodeo in western Victoria; Amber the Jack Russell proves not all working dogs are kelpies or border collies; and a drone captures sheep waiting to be sheared at Warringah in Queensland

GEORGIE MANN, ELLIE MORRIS, LISA ALEXANDER



Clockwise from above: Joe Chalker, 4, watches his dad Brad shearing near Cowra in NSW; property owner Kate Nelder unwraps a bale at Wyworrie Station in the Northern Territory; water tanks and fruit trees are a typical sight on farms; hat designer Jules Holland visits the Victorian farm of her grandmother Isabel, taught her how to sew

ELENA CHALKER,
KATE NELDER,
EMMA LEONARD,



window waiting for their afternoon scraps of meat. We stake out chook pens at night with rifles in hand, hoping to spot the fox that's snatching our girls; we ferry cats into the vet after they've tangled with brown snakes, only for them to emerge bolder than ever.

Our canine friends range from the elite working dogs that astound us with their ability to herd sheep, to the less-skilled (but no less lovable) pooches that seem terrified of almost everything. Our dogs sit at our feet during harvest, lulled to sleep by the rock of the header, and like nothing more than a dip in the trough and a scratch.

All of this – the animals, the work, the country life – are part of me. I was raised on a cattle property near Biloela in Queensland.

In the following years, he and I would have even less to talk about. While my siblings were mustering, I would lock myself in my room reading books about ancient Egypt – dreaming of living anywhere but Biloela, Queensland. Dad accepted my refusal to go near the cattle yards or play any part in the operation that formed our livelihood.

"You can be anything you want to be," he'd lecture. "The bloody prime minister even." And he meant it.

I lived in the UK for the best part of a decade, then came home and settled on the Sunshine Coast, with a new career in photography, and new purpose. I was spending more time on the family cattle property in the aftermath of my grandmother's death and would turn up wherever Dad was working. He'd shake his head and mutter, "If you must." I opted to catch a lift with him to the yards before sunrise, when once I'd have hidden at home.

Zooming in and out on Dad's features to check focus after I'd captured his photograph, I started to see him. Really see him. He was just a person, trying to do the best for his family, but not really understanding how to be around them. Dad's back stiffens when you hug him, then he pats you with one arm, as if to hasten the act. He's never been comfortable with affection, but then, neither was his Dad. My grandfather was a hard man, whose father was even harder, so my Dad never stood a chance.

Now when I'm home, he mentions what he's got planned that day – not quite an invitation – but close enough. Contrary to popular belief, love doesn't need understanding to thrive.

We share a beer now. He asks about my work. And I've had enough time to research my questions to ask really good ones.

Jessica Howard is the editor of *Bush Journal*. This is an edited extract from *Bush Life* (Affirm Press) produced by 10 female photographers: *Beauty in the Bush Collective*.

Make tracks towards a true purpose

MARY RYLLIS CLARK

Looking at my overcrowded bookshelves about three years ago, I reluctantly convinced myself that it was time to cull some books. That's when I came across my copy of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. It took Frankl nine days in 1948 to write his short account of life in the death camps of Nazi Germany. To his astonishment, *Man's Search for Meaning* went on to be translated into 24 languages and sell more than 12 million copies.

His reaction was, "If hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under the fingernails."

Instead of putting it into the box of expendables, I took it over to a chair and started to read it again. I couldn't put it down. I was particularly struck by the turning point that had been thrust upon Frankl, and the idea that the purpose of life is to live a life of purpose.

I reflected on the two most significant turning points in my own life. One led to a huge upheaval, but the other did indeed lead to me finding my purpose, setting me on my path as a writer.

The first was about tragedy. I am originally from the UK and in my early 20s I married an Australian in London. I had one son, Nico, in 1970 and then another, Christian, 18 months later. Christian died unexpectedly at four weeks old.

There was an autopsy, but the medics couldn't find anything wrong with him and wrote "viral pneumonia" on the death certificate. Today they would have written sudden infant death syndrome, or cot death. My third son, Paul, was born in 1973. He lived for three months. Another cot death.

Crushed, we decided to move to Australia. This led, unexpectedly, to a job teaching European history at a private school in Melbourne. Not surprisingly, I was very depressed at the time and struggling to survive emotionally. I wasn't a natural teacher. I found the classroom environment hard going.

Some years later, my husband was made redundant and had trouble finding another job. I felt stuck. But one night I had a dream about making choices and knew it meant taking the risk of following my gut. I resigned. This was my second turning point.

Within days, an extraordinary thing happened. I had a call from the then director of economics at Victoria's Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, Bill Stent. He was a friend of my father-in-law and had seen a book I had written years before when working for a publishing company in London.

It was a history tracing a millennium of British history and a pageant of English kings and queens, called *Crown of a Thousand Years*. I had been on a roll with this kind of writing until I was thrown off-course by the deaths of my sons.

"What are you doing at the moment?" Dr Stent asked me. I was then hired to work with a retired forester to rewrite the text of the plan for managing the state's forests, to be presented to the public as a book-length work.

Victoria's Timber Industry Strategy, as it was called, was the beginning of my career as a freelance writer in Australia. Almost everything I have written since – other books, articles, a newspaper column – has been linked to that conversation with Bill Stent.

Many people have a powerful story to tell about what led to them finding their purpose – their passion. These are people who feel the "burning under their fingernails" that Frankl described. My books clean out led me to embark on collecting interviews with people whose stories I thought others would love to read, people who are remarkable, some household names, some not.



Robyn Davidson reaches the Indian Ocean after her extraordinary trek.

Among the former is Robyn Davidson, who walked almost 3000km across the desert between Alice Springs and Australia's west coast in 1977, with four camels and, for much of the way, her dog, Diggity. "I knew I had to do something large enough to 'grow me up', to integrate myself as a person, because I was a pretty lost sort of kid," she told me.

"It was a turning point in that it took me from one track onto another – not just the trip itself, but also because of what it generated". The journey became a book, *Tracks*, and later a film.

By contrast, among those not well known is South Australian teacher and Rhodes Scholar Gia-Yen Luong, whose parents were boat people from Vietnam. She gave up a career in law to commit herself to raising the standard of education in state schools.

Perhaps my favourite interview was with Anthony Bartl. He was struck by a speeding car when he was six years old. His spine broke at C1 – the highest level. He was not expected to live and his parents were put under enormous pressure to turn off his ventilator.

Now in his 30s, Anthony controls his finely tuned wheelchair, his mobile and his laptop with a mouthstick. He plays sport, dances, has been scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef, flown in a microlight and has made a documentary about a trip to South Africa.

The novelist Philip Pullman wrote, "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world". I agree with him.

Turning Points, 25 remarkable Australians and the moments that changed their lives (Monash University Publishing)