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The Bush Means Work

the Bunurong - Presbyterians and others - the
good farmer's creed - native creatures present and
absent - a world of mud and rubbish - rain never-
ending - the trouble with sheep - the appeal of
horses - the kelpie - the farmer in nature

When I was two we exchanged those hills for others 65 kilometres west, and that still prolific creek for a lifeless river called the Bass. We remained Gippslanders, and we were still in the Strzelecki Ranges, indeed not far from the point at which the explorer scrambled out of the hills to safety. Our new hills were steeper; blue gums, not mountain ash, were the dominant tree, the soil was grey, and there were more Presbyterians.

The dirt road passing the cattle pit at the end of our drive stretched for 5 kilometres from the highway to the valley of the Bass River, about as modest a river as ever went by the name. The first Europeans had seen a crystal stream alive with blackfish slipping through the blue-gum forest, but seventy years later, when we arrived, it was a turbid and eroded ruin. Waste from the butter factory half a kilometre up the hill had killed the river and all the blackfish, eels, galaxia and platypuses that swam in it. In 1943, when a son of an early pioneer returned after several years away, he was shocked to find 'a seething mass of curds' and reckoned those responsible should pay a price for their vandalism. Of course they never did. Across the continent, they never did. When we went to school in the fifties, there were no visible curds, but no life either. By then, instead of pumping the whey into the river, they were spraying it on an adjacent paddock, from where no doubt a lot of the stuff found its way to the water by more subtle means.

The Bass rises in the Strzelecki Ranges and, after a journey of 30 kilometres or so, flows into the mud and mangroves of Westernport Bay. It got Bass from George Bass, the English seafarer who, on his whaleboat voyage of 1798, discovered the bay, and about a kilometre inland from the mouth of the river, repaired his keel amid the ti-tree on the banks. Westernport, he reported, was teeming with swans, ducks and mussels; oysters and oystercatchers. Thousands of seals congregated on the rocks on the shoreline and around the two islands in the bay. A few years after Bass, sealers established semipermanent camps with Aboriginal women they had bought in Van Diemen's Land for lumps of seal meat and kangaroo dogs.

Straddling the Grand Ridge Road on the northern ridge of the Bass Valley sat the little town of Poowong. We sat on the other side. Every morning of our schooldays my brother and I went down the hill from our place, across the valley and up the other side to the town where stood our school, our church and our butter factory - and a hotel for others. Every afternoon we reversed the procedure. If we were on foot, and the river was running, we stopped to float a few sticks under the bridge and watch them drift down between the gums and warbles. When we were not walking we went by car, bus, bicycle or, occasionally, if one should pass our way, by tractor.
‘Poowong’ is said to mean carrion or putrefaction in the language of the Bunurong, on whose lands the settlement arose. The Bunurong were one of the five tribes of the Kulin nation. People had lived in the vicinity for at least 30,000 years, possibly 60,000. The Kulin had been there in a quarrelsome ‘kind of confederacy’ for an unknown proportion of that vast time. In 1802 a Frenchman attached to the Baudin expedition met a group of Bunurong a few kilometres north of the Bass River: ‘They had a white cross upon the middle of the face, their eyes were surrounded with white circles, and several had white and red crosses all over their bodies.’ Smallpox had ravaged them by then. With the loss of their lands, fifty years later there were only a couple of dozen left.

The Bass was their road for seasonal excursions to the forests of blue gum and mountain ash that covered the ranges, and the marsupials, reptiles and birds that lived there. In the five different but related languages of the tribes, Kulin was the generic word for human being. It seems to follow that people who were not Kulin were considered at best human beings of a different order. As the tribes to the east were called Kurnai (or Gunai), which in their languages also meant human beings, or men, it is no surprise that the two groups were mortal enemies.

We were not so categorical about our neighbours, yet it is true our boundary fences separated mental realms as well as properties. There were conscientious farmers like us, some with farms which conscientiousness could not make good, and some who seemed worn out by the effort. On those 5 kilometres of road there were Plymouth Brethren, Presbyterians, nominal Anglicans and non-denominated. All were neighbourly enough, even the ones whose habits were reclusive. Tea and biscuits were on permanent offer in every kitchen, but there was no partying. The best chance of encountering several of them all at once was in the hay-carting season, a rare moment of ecumenism when our souls collided in a shower of sweat, and tea was brought down the paddock by the women. Common tendencies to introversion and voting conservative aside, the grind of dairying, the mud, the drizzle, the weeds and the limits of hope had shaped them in different ways, from affable eccentricity to glum and secretive weirdness. Of course, some were normal like us: in truth, perhaps, more normal. Odd, that so many experts have looked for the typical Australian in the bush – it was the last thing you would find on our road.

But that’s the thing: whether we speak of the bush itself or the bush as a place of people, we need to ask, What sort of bush, what sort of people? Tatty scrub or forest, hill or plain, small holding or large; Catholic, Protestant or sceptic; stoical or not, optimist or pessimist, fit and strong or less so, anxious or easygoing? What kind of climate, crop or animal? Because all these determine the kind of work and how well it is done, and the bush is work.

It was little more than an average lifetime since Europeans had first set foot on the land either side of the road, but it might have been forever. While there was much talk of progress, life could move no faster than steep hills and the patterns laid down by dairy cows allowed. The cows made tracks along the hillsides and farmers followed them at the same pace. We noted neighbours putting up the road and on any day but market day half wondered where they were going, or if they might run into the milk truck on one of the two blind corners, or on the crest. In all the years of watching, they never did. Strange cars excited comment; cars going more than 30 kilometres an hour, displeasure. We had standards and were always on the lookout for breaches of them. Nothing dairy farming might inflict on a soul should compromise a man or woman’s dignity.

In his novel Geoffrey Hamlyn, Henry Kingsley said that free men in the Australian bush never touched their hats to anyone. My father never passed a woman in the street without touching his - narrow
brim, pinched crown, single band, grey, green or brown felt — and he would do the same to any man he didn’t know or believed worthy of respect. With no more formal education than the bushmen of legend, and no less affection for the land, he could not have been less like them. He was a smallholder of industrious, sober and gentle habits, modest ambition, a mortgage and little ready cash.

He split wood under the pine tree out the back. We could hear the blows; hear the blue gum cleave if the grain was even, tear but not surrender if knotted, the next blow just hard enough to force it apart, but not so hard that the axe jammed in the block or sent the pieces flying further than he could retrieve by bending where he stood. Every move was practised; read the grain, use all necessary force but no more, so no energy is wasted or bones and tendons jolted. Leave nature minimally alarmed. Work with the grain of the wood, not against it; always work with the grain. Find the rhythm in it. As nature has rhythms, what is second nature to a man has rhythms. Don’t force it. In getting a cow in bail, or drafting sheep in a pen, taking the harrows off the tractor or the horns off a cow, or saddling a horse, or grubbing a stump, there is a rhythm to be found. As nature finds the easiest way to do things, find the way of nature. He was a Zen sort of farmer.

With even steps across the hillside he sowed grass seed, each fluid arc of the arm the same, each dip of his hand into the hessian bag tied like an apron round his waist, the same. While his limbs kept such perfect time, he seemed to be in time with all around him, with every human being that ever sowed a hillside, as much a part of this scene as any peasant ever was of his. To calm the world, he whistled.

In the parable, the good soil speaks of a good heart. His heart was as good as he could make it: every wound of childhood sutured, every savage instinct denied satisfaction, but not always the indignation that thundered at the uncontained instincts of others, or signs of them in his children. As God and his conscience ruled him, he could not always resist their maledictions. The ungodly folk on whom he visited his judgements were those whose baser natures were not contained: sloth, drunkenness, profanity, foul mouths, lasciviousness, cruelty, troublemaking and bluster, he could not bear. He tried to love his neighbour but, as a righteous man regardeth his beast, who could love the neighbour who mistreated his animals, or the bully who raged at man and beast alike? Or the man who never cut his thistles or pulled his ragwort so the seeds blew across the boundary fence? ‘The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil.’

‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’ he always said, long after we were sick of it. He internalised his disgruntlements, rendered them to the same inner authority that kept everything else in check. And as he ruled himself he would rule this bit of land: with hard work and obedience to the commandments, with irony and without anger, envy or cruelty. He would make it in his own image. He would make it decent. Something fit for the Lord or any man to look upon with approval. A man was permitted pride in his own work, if in little else except his family, and that in moderation. If it took him his whole life he would make this dirty farm clean. It was only 59 hectares, many of them not so far off the vertical, but he was no less a civilised man for that, and one on a civilising mission.

We had dairy cows, but he always preferred crops and sheep. Then he began buying yearling heifers from ‘up north’ where they were cheap as a rule, especially in dry seasons. They would arrive on the train, skinny and half mad, but our good grass reformed them. He’d calve them down, which is to say, get them in calf (‘pregnant’ was an impolite word that we did not use in any context), and once they were delivered of their offspring, he’d break them into the routines of the milking shed and sell them to the local dairy farmers as replacements for their herds. He also bought springers, heifers already in calf. Either
way, the business involved a lot of bovine copulation, a lot of placenta and blood in the paddocks, a lot of bellowing and kicking and sitting in the cowshed, and on the way to the shed through the mud; a lot of dead calves, veterinary bills, ingeniously polite denial of the brutal reality of our enterprise, and a lot of guilt, loathing and confusion in me.

The bellows of cows separated from their bawling calves, the calf corpses hauled with ropes feet first from their exhausted prostrate mothers, the heifers madly following the tractor with their stillborn progeny dragged behind — from this daily puerperal spectacle he would return composed. Soon after the milking machines fell silent he would come walking through the grey drizzly murk of a winter’s evening laced with chimney smoke, up from the cowshed to the back porch, past the doomed calves in the calf shed and the woodheap under the pine, as fixed and unfailing as the hens settling on their fowl-house roosts, the magpies in the cypresses. He washed for tea, put on a clean shirt if necessary and combed his hair; never let his standards slip, or the little rituals that maintained them.

Farming is like playing a piano: it is measured violence. It teaches a man willing to learn that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing everything. The farmer must meet every effort of nature with a calculated countervailing force: the thistle with the hoe or spray, the log with the axe or chainsaw, a disease with a drench, horns with a dehorner. Let things go for a moment and a week’s work will become a month’s, the month’s a year’s, and very soon the thistles are the size of saplings and the farmer is sitting defeated in his ant-eaten weatherboard and numbering his days by the level of the lavatory can. At least that was the impression from some road-gates. Some farmers never moved on to the spray or the chainsaw; they let their fences fall down, their dams silt up and their hedges shut out the light. They left the horns on their cows or took them off crudely with a tenon saw. Perhaps despair or regret, or poetry or nature, had crept into their souls. The difference between that kind of farmer and the other kind — our kind — was nothing more than a quirk of fate or character, but the world was divided on these lines.

The mental images have not faded. The subject cannot be separated from the settings in which he worked: the hills and the trees and the fences and wooden sheds and yards and the cattle and crops and the back porches with their boots and coats, the smell of mud and manure, and the rush of the westerly in the pines. In a dry spell he would tap the tank beside the kitchen window. He tapped the barometer just about every day of his life. In the evening the wind moaned in the Chinese cedars, the calves bawled, the bulls roared their lust. At night the possums rattled their throats in the trees, fighting for territory, discouraging owls and dogs. The dogs barked, howled sometimes. Magpies welcomed the mornings with a warble, the thrush with its thrill of a song.

The images are like photographs, except in most old photographs the subjects are gathered for a special occasion, a wedding or a dance or a picnic in some Arcadian spot, or just outside their poor huts. My subject labours on the unornamented earth: 'That huge and gross body of dust, stones etc. which supports our feet and affords us nourishment', as the family Dictionary of the Bible described it. When photographers followed their subjects to work they made them pose; on a reaper and binder, or beside a bullock team, on a plank with axis poised 10 metres up a mountain ash. We have to read what we can from the setting, from the looks in their eyes, the way they hold themselves. What happened when they moved we can only imagine.

Yet the way he moved is precisely what I remember about him. The images my mind retains are memorials to the force he exerted on the physical world — or at least the small patch of it on which he had made
his home. So long as it was daylight, living and moving were the same things. Living and working were the same.

It stands to reason then that I remember him in the act of working, for in physical work he expressed his life’s purpose and the grace this granted him. That is the puritan’s creed, as well as his fate. Work was what he knew most deeply. With farmers of his generation and before, it was often all they knew, all they had time to know. At the same time as these images speak of abundant self-possession and power over their environments – and over their children – they also resound with what they did not know.

A handful of Methodists have as much claim as anyone to be the founders of Poowong. They were the first to build a church: a simple wooden chapel high on the ridge, facing the cold southerlies. There among the felled and bleaching ringbarked trees they sang of sin and self-delusion, of grace and love, and of their confident belief that when they ‘quit this cumbrous clay/And soar on angels’ wings away,/My soul the second death defies./And reigns eternal in the skies.’ It’s still there, declared a ‘historic’ chapel now, up the hill from the old Bunurong campsite.

Presbyterians and Anglicans followed and built their churches in more sheltered positions. In the 1950s one family commanded both the butter factory and the front pew of the Presbyterian church, and with three or four allies from the better farms, they pretty well ran the church and a good deal of the town itself. Presbyterians seemed to have more than their share of the good farms, and some, like ours, that were not so good. Some selector families had done well enough in the first fifty years to build what were called ‘fine homes’: stately weatherboard houses of generous proportions and verandas on three sides. When the weather was kind and the flowers were in bloom, ladies held garden parties. Our house had been built within a few years of the first packhorses arriving and was a pretty basic affair, but at least it was soon sitting in a garden.

It might be going too far to call it feudal, but hierarchical the community most definitely was. To be on the land – even very steep, bracken- and burr-infested and heavily mortgaged land – was to have an unspoken edge in respectability. To be Presbyterian sharpened the edge a little. In Western Australia, the early-twentieth-century Irish Presbyterian James Twigg had the ‘sense of difference’ even though his faith had lapsed and his land was so benighted he had to hunt possums and rabbits and hire himself out castrating lambs. The land reduced him to a ‘ghoul-like looking creature’. Yet he thought the universal franchise was a curse on the country; to give a tramp a vote equal to that of a landowner was madness, and he cleared out to Africa.

True, a handful of our local business owners were respectable enough, but in general it was suspected that towns inclined naturally to wickedness, and that children of the farms best keep their distance from children of iniquity. ‘God made the country, and man made the town’, as William Cowper said. The thought had come down from the Old Testament: every town was a potential fleshpot, and it was a fact beyond dispute that people living close together and without cows to milk and calves to feed were prone to mischief, particularly in the evenings. There were rumours. ‘Apparently’ they were more than rumours.

So long as the people of the country are the real Australians, other people are less real. This might be only to say less distinctively Australian, or it might mean out of touch with reality and real people, and not knowing which side their bread is buttered on. Then again it might mean effete, parasitic bludgers: sybarites, late risers, people with no conception of what it is to be at the mercy of the elements,
the needs of animals and soils, unreliable markers. E.J. Brady, a friend of Henry Lawson and a would-be Jack London of the bush, thought bank clerks and their like — the ‘idlers’ and ‘dandies’, ‘pigmies’ and ‘vegetables’ in the cities — were akin to a third sex. Bush people led lives of ‘strength and usefulness’; city life was all ‘weakness and futility’. Bush people did not need to think this to know it at some level.

A Gippsland historian and long-time observer of the province, Patrick Morgan, described the Calvinist mentality of a typical South Gippslander as ‘tight, closed, devoted to one single thing with religious fervour to prove himself worthy’. By worthy he means of ‘the elect’, who, he says, paraphrasing the sociologist Max Weber, ‘took the place of the absent aristocracy’. This may not have been true of every community in those hills, but it was true of Poowong. Not that the non-elect took much notice: along with the sturdy Anglicans and a residue of the founding Methodists, there was an equally staunch bloc of sceptics and Epicureans who gathered by the local garage on a Sunday morning to talk about the football of the day before and — I thought bitterly with my head down in the back of the car — to snigger at God’s elect chugging by to worship at the Presbyterian church.

The old women who gathered under the trees after the service were too blackly fearsome for a boy to more than glance at. Viewed through a child’s eyes, the men might have risen from the grave for the occasion; their transparent skin like parchment maps, with brown blotches and deltas of fine blue lines, stretched so tight across their noses and around their mouths it was a wonder they could talk, much less sing hymns. They had been born in Victoria’s heyday, never knew sunscreen or moisturiser, and had long since forgotten their own teeth. But through those taut lips talk they could, doubtless of milk and cattle prices, sheep — there were still some in the district — the coronation, cricket, Suez, and the weather both recent and forecast, including the long-range forecast. The long range forecaster was Inigo Jones, who reckoned the weather in 35-year cycles which he believed were determined by astronomical events. Job had had as much to go on. In the absence of satellites, computers and knowledge of the Southern Oscillation Index, his forecasts were hokum. But, wanting to believe in him much as they wanted to believe in God, the Presbyterians were prepared to grant him the same benefit of the doubt.

Our new farm was a broken-up bit of an old selection — the steeper bit, without river frontage, but most of it lay well enough. There were a couple of springs and a tussocky swamp; watercourses where, for want of protection from the sun, a dozen tree ferns slowly expired among the hawthorn and blackberries; a paddock in which some of the original blackwoods and swamp gums had survived, and a bank where hazels had. The boundary fence was broken down and the farm on the other side of it was a prodigious mass of blackberries, bracken, thistles and ragwort, as were the steepest parts of ours. Rubbish, it was called, and in my youth and childhood it lay at the heart of the meaning of work.

Work meant getting rid of it. A paddock with rubbish in it was ‘dirty’. The provenance of the matter to be destroyed was not important; native bracken and burrs — we had a ‘burr paddock’ — were as much rubbish as Scotch thistles or capeweed. A second cousin who often stayed with us used to say that bracken was pretty. She was right: it looks beautiful under gum trees and on the banks of creeks, the purply older fronds beneath the tender green ones capturing light and stillness according to the breeze. Selectors, surveyors, and others obliged to sleep on the ground made their beds from it. But in a paddock, competing with the grass and clover, it was a pest. We sliced it away with our fern hooks, year after year, until it gave up. Ragwort, an exotic, was even dirtier than bracken. You didn’t cut ragwort, you pulled the flower heads off it and stuffed them in a bag.
The aim in the paddocks was as for the veranda and kitchen — to make a world without blemish. Making enough to live on was the first imperative, but an aesthetic of spotlessness also drove our efforts. Only in what was clean and orderly did the possibility of beauty exist. And if beauty is truth and truth beauty, then truth too could only exist where there was no rubbish. What lived in rubbish if not the iniquitous fox, snake and rabbit? Herein lay the moral imperative of our lives: whatever was dirty was also shameful. To live with a dirty farm was as if to live without changing one’s underwear, it was to let oneself go, to sink into some dark empire of failure and disgrace, halfway to hell itself.

The roadsides, too, contained rubbish: introduced grass species, hawthorn, self-sown plum and apple trees, native wattles, hazels and musk, coprosma, cotton bush, blackwoods, burrs that caught on socks, the riparian clumps we called tussocks, and sword grass which had sliced the hands of the pioneers and the flesh of their packhorses, and sliced our hands too when we were careless enough to trail them through it. Making our way from school, we walked a sort of concourse of natural history. At the bottom of the hill, 200 metres from the road gate, stood a colossal stump, 4 metres high and 2 across. The Methodist patriarch Caleb Burchett reckoned he cut down a blue gum that measured 111 metres and was 600 years old. It might have been this one. The nicks high up in its side had been made by axe men for the planks they stood on when they cut it down. They looked like eye sockets, still staring blindly across the Bass Valley long after all life had gone. Two ceramic insulators were screwed to the stump, and into the 1950s the telephone line that ran through them connected our road to the world.

Of course the land was more productive for being clean, and to most eyes more attractive. It may be taken as another effect of the bush on my character, if not the nation’s, that the same drive to cleanliness also taught the child to forever spot the thistle in the host of golden daffodils; to see the imperfection, or even the potential for it, before he saw the loveliness. This was a consequence as unavoidable as the contrary one, which was to be tempted beneath the blackberries with the fox.

My father’s father, who had come with us to the new farm, quickly planted a Norfolk Island pine and a row of mixed Northern Hemisphere conifers. Rhododendrons and other plants brought from the former property went in down one side of the house, the beginning of what, through the steady exchange of cuttings, roots and bulbs with neighbours and relations, would become our jardin anglais. In the paddocks there were still a few tall blue gums and messmates, and each year another remnant, a koala, would clamber over the fences and run the gauntlet of cows with lethal horns and seat itself in one of the gums. Sometimes it brought a young one on its back. We’d gaze up at them, much as we might have looked at a manatee if one had turned up in the dam. From our beds at night we heard their pig-like grunts, a noise which in the bush is capable of frightening campers a kilometre away.

The Kulin people called koalas Gurrboors, according to Georgiana McCrae, but she called them ‘a sort of sloth’. Koala bears we called them, and at other times they were called monkey bears and marsupial bears. Of course, they’re not bears at all. Phascolarctos cinereus, meaning ash-coloured pouched bear, roughly speaking, evolved from a kind of wombat. When they gave up the wombat’s phenomenal digging ability for life in the eucalypts, they took with them the wombat’s pouch, which in consideration of their young who would otherwise be buried when they burrowed, faces to the rear. In one of those not uncommon flaws in evolution, this meant that the female koala was stuck with a pouch that faced downwards, an obvious inconvenience for a mother that sits in a tree. Evolution solved the problem by coming up with a kind of drawstring.

On the family farm they sat in the blue gums. Where I now live, they seem to prefer the mannas, but I have seen them climb other trees
as well. A neighbour says he has seen them eating pine needles. One New Year's Eve I heard two sulphur-crested cockatoos in a manna gum screeching wildly at a koala as it made its way up a stringybark. Perhaps they were telling it that it was up the wrong tree. As it adapted to the sclerophyll age and the meagre diet of leaves it allowed them, the koala's brain shrank to a fraction of its former size. Koalas are to be found in a dozen different eucalypt species along the east coast as far as Cape York, where they are much smaller, and inland along corridors of river red gums. They sleep or rest for 19-20 hours a day; the remaining hours they give to eating toxic, indigestible and pitifully unnourishing gum leaves. No other creature bigger than an insect could sustain itself on such a diet.

Koalas are a protected species and a 'national icon', which must mean that these endearing if pea-brained creatures represent something we cherish. Time was, when the bush was deciding the native soul, we thought less highly of them. They make poor eating, the flesh being muscular and smelling powerfully of eucalyptus, but this did not save them. As if it wasn't enough to cut down the trees they lived in and depended on for food, they were, along with most other fur-bearing creatures of the forest, hunted for their skins – about fifteen made a reasonable rug or bedspread. Millions were exported in the early part of the twentieth century: in 1919 at least a million from Queensland alone. Economic slumps were bad for native creatures. Across the country vast numbers were shot, poisoned, or by various means hooked out of trees when governments put a bounty on their hides to help necessitous farmers and the unemployed during hard times in the 1920s. Having made them a species of rural subsidy, Queensland established a koala sanctuary in 1927, but in South Australia they were hunted to extinction.

Oscar de Satgé was out driving on the Darling Downs with a fellow sheep man named Mason when they chanced on 'a quaint fight between two eagle-hawks and a native bear; the eagle hawks were getting the best of it, and being too engaged in the fight to observe us, allowed Mason to get within shot, so he first shot one hawk, then the other; but when he got to the bear, that showed fight, and we had to knock it on the head too'. Arthur Henry, son of the first selector on the land at the bottom of our road, and also a bush memoirist, only thought twice before killing koalas because skinning them meant putting up with the stink. As a teenager Arthur set snares to catch wallabies too. He appears to have caught them in numbers, along with 'kangaroo rats, tiger cats, etc.', and on one occasion a young woman, 'but within a year, a disease (worms) killed the wallaby in Gippsland, they died like flies. I have seen them hopping along and drop dead.'

I have never seen a wallaby in the district, nor a kangaroo rat or a tiger cat. Nor, in our part of it, a lyrebird or a Leadbeater's possum (Gymnobelideus leadbeateri), the endangered relict species that inhabited the Bass Valley in the days of the great forest. What sort of wallabies they were Henry did not say, but it's likely they were red-necked wallabies (Macropus rufogriseus), also known as brush wallabies or brushers and in Tasmania as Bennett's wallabies, which continue to thrive in other parts of the eastern seaboard. Who knows how many other wondrous little things vanished? In the Victorian Wimmera in 1846, a settler reported a burrowing canary-yellow mouse that the Aborigines hunted, but there the record ends, and the mouse with it we must presume. If once there had been a canary-yellow mouse in the Wimmera, might there have been an orange or navy-blue one in Gippsland?

Arthur Henry never saw a kangaroo in our part of the world – a blessing because in places where they thrived they were 'a great evil' to the farmer, he said. Now there are kangaroos where there were never kangaroos before. We have seen them through the kitchen window of the family house, grazing in the paddock on the other side of the road.
Birds aside, there was little else in the way of original animal inhabitants. No bandicoots, goannas or wombats had survived the early settlers. They hated wombats almost as much as they hated snakes. Common wombats (\textit{Vombatus ursinus}) are wonderful burrowers, though their distant cousins, the 40-kilogram southern and rare northern hairy-nosed wombats, are more wonderful still. A common wombat’s hole can be a metre wide at the mouth and extend for at least 20 metres, with more than one entrance and more than one sleeping chamber. The southern hairy-nose builds tunnels up to 60 metres long and 4 metres deep. Because their range is so wide and they have no more regard for fences, pipes and the foundations of buildings than they do for crops and gardens, they were a nuisance to just about everyone who lived on the land. In Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and New South Wales they were declared pests for much of the twentieth century and ruthlessly hunted with guns and cyanide. They vanished from our district for half a century (and from some places for good); then, about twenty years ago, they reappeared. Their habits have not changed, and landholders are muttering about declaring them vermin again.

Despite their gormless appearance, wombats are at least as bright as the brightest dog and easily the cleverest marsupial. They can run 100 metres in less than ten seconds and maintain a speed of 40 kmh over 150 metres, which no human could do on rough ground. Dante Gabriel Rossetti adored them and wept upon the death of one of the two he kept in England. George Bass ate one and found it more than acceptable, but the Aborigines seem to have shunned their flesh.

We did have what we called mountain possums, and for once we got the name right. They look like the common brush-tails (\textit{Trichosurus vulpecula}), which do well in the cities and prodigiously in New Zealand, but ours were mountain brush-tails (\textit{Trichosurus cunninghami}). They have shorter ears and tails than the common brush-tail and are steely-grey rather than silvery and have more black on them, though brown and creamy-yellow colourings are common in both species. At night, when excited by rival possums, dogs or the prospect of a mate, our mountain possums made a very loud and startling noise – a ‘grating throat-chuckle’, as Mrs Charles Meredith said in her \textit{Notes and Sketches}.

Textbooks describe them as highly sedentary, and that was certainly true of a very big one that lived in our toolshed, up on a shelf among the old cartons of sheep dip, DDT, and cans of herbicide we used on blackberries – 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, the same stuff the US Army used to defoliate Vietnam.

From the earliest Europeans to the soldier settlers, poor farmers were obliged to eat possums – brush-tails and smaller ringtails alike. Ringtail possums are very pretty and adventurous, especially when going after rose shoots. They use their long prehensile tails as an extra hand, not only for climbing and balance, but for carrying nesting material and food. Powerful owls (\textit{Ninox strenua}) eat one ringtail every night, on average. If not a staple to the same degree, possums were a regular supplement for all kinds of bushmen. There were settlers who reckoned the meat tasted no better than gum leaves, and was fit only for dogs and cats, but on a station on the Upper Yarra in 1861 Penelope Selby declared possums ‘the nicest wild animal I have tasted here’. [T]he sport most in vogue with Australian youth resident in the bush is possum shooting by moonlight’, wrote Sylvester Doig, a Scottish Highlander who lived in the subtropical Queensland bush and planted a lot of fruit trees in the midst of it. He couldn’t stomach the slaughter of ‘these helpless simple animals’. Mrs Meredith was introduced to the ‘barbarous mysteries’ of ‘possumin’ around 1840. She deplored it as ‘mere wanton cruelty, which, to gild its villainy, assumes the name of “sport”’. On the other side of the continent, Roy Kelly of Pemberton, Western Australia recalled the ‘possum moons’ of the...
1930s Depression years when he would go out hunting them for their skins. Millions of possum skins were exported.

'Possumin' was still in vogue with some youths I knew in the 1950s, but they got nothing for the skins and they didn't have to eat them. One year we had flying foxes in the orchard, and my father went with a spotlight and the shotgun. I don't remember seeing any dead ones: I like to think he just fired a few warning shots over their feet. Roy Kelly combined the possums with quokkas (one shilling a skin) and water rats (18 shillings) - until the quokkas, pygmy possums and quolls 'disappeared like a magic wand'.

Possums, Tim Flannery tells us, have 'the most flexible ankles of any living mammal'. It is because they can 'dislocate' them and point them backwards that they are able to scurry down tree trunks head first. Almost as remarkable to European observers was the ability of Aborigines to scale the trees in pursuit of them: for grip they took an axe to cut notches for their free hand and big toes. Possums were a staple in Aboriginal culture; everywhere they existed they were food, and in cooler climates their skins were scraped, decorated with abstract 'scroll' designs, and sown with sinew from the possums' tails into full-length cloaks. Worn 'fur out' and like a Roman toga, they were an 'exceedingly graceful garment' and 'almost impervious to rain', the Murray River settler Peter Beveridge said. The same people wore possum-skin bands around their loins, possum-skin armlets and headbands of possum skin dyed with red ochre. They applied heated possum skins to snakebites, tied skins with sinew into balls and played games of football with them. To ensure the scars of initiation were pronounced and permanent, possum fat mixed with ash was forced into the incisions. Among the tribes who wore possum cloaks it was customary to inter the dead with them: a corpse the explorer John Oxley disinterred by the Lachlan River was wrapped in possum skins, and Georgiana McCrae saw the people near her place on Port Phillip Bay wrap 'a possum-rug about the corpse, which they interred in a sitting position, the elbows on the knees, the chin supported by the left hand, and the opposite one laid, with the fingers open, along the angle of the jaw'.

The only creatures we shot were rabbits and the occasional fox. There were always plenty of rabbits, although with the miracle of myxomatosis we never saw the hillsides move with them as our parents and grandparents had. Introduced in 1950, myxo reduced the nation's rabbit population from an estimated 600 million to 100 million within a couple of years. The stories of the plagues were passed down to us, together with the loathing, and from an early age we were encouraged to trap and shoot, and join in any other anti-rabbit exercises, including ripping, smoking, ferreting and fumigation. Larvicide was the fumigant, the trade name for chloropicrin, which in the First World War had been used with great effect against men. Nothing was considered too cruel and, after all, not even our steel traps were as cruel as myxo. We would see a myxo rabbit from time to time, blind and barely able to move. Once a creature makes vermin of itself it is beyond pity. Foxes fell into the same category. True, they killed rabbits, but hens and newborn lambs were also part of their diet, and they spread blackberries. We shot them for the 10 shillings the shire gave us for each pair of ears we took in.

Birds I spared in obedience to my Gould League of Bird Lovers pledge, except for crows, of which I shot three and remain sorry. I heard of people shooting magpies and I think my brother may have taken out one that swooped him. The Italian newcomers were said to shoot wrens and thrushes, and were reviled for it. I never heard of anyone taking a kookaburra's life. The kookaburras of children's storybooks battled with snakes, and that was a good enough reason to like them. Their charismatic bird form and their weird and spectacular call were other reasons. A kookaburra's laugh sent a signal that something
essential was still right with the world, the vanished bush was still alive but living in another sphere. But in Western Australia the bird is hated as an eastern interloper and a destroyer of local species. Tasmanians, to whose island state the kookaburra was introduced, feel much as West Australians do and are free to shoot them. We could never do such a thing, even though we have photographs of a kookaburra swallowing a duckling. Recently my brother watched as one repeatedly hurled itself against a full-grown goanna that was climbing a dead gum tree, a spectacle that was all the more enthralling, he said, because the kookaburra never stopped laughing.

Many of the bush birds have adapted, and learned to live with imported mynahs, sparrows and blackbirds, but as some have vanished with their habitat, new species have arrived. Thirty years ago we never saw a galah or a sulphur-crested cockatoo on that farm. Galahs are now permanent residents and cockatoos regular visitors. We had only eastern rosellas, like the one on the tomato sauce bottle: they have gone, and today crimson rosellas zoom around the place and utter their little bell-like cry while nipping new stems off roses. In the first four decades of the family’s time there, when a thousand or more millimetres of rain fell most years and water lay in the paddocks and gushed down the gullies, wild ducks were unknown. They came as the years got drier. They bred in dozens on the dams. A first settler on the Bass wrote of birds we never saw: jays, satin bowerbirds, lyrebirds, ground thrushes, whipbirds, leatherheads, black cockatoos, and some he called ‘woodpeckers’ and some ‘whistling jackasses’. There were no magpies; they came with the clearing and the cow pats and drove out the jays. And no ravens; they also followed the settlers in. There were things he called ‘pugney possums’ and chattering ‘flying squirrels’, tiger cats, bandicoots and various ‘creeping things’, but nowhere near as many snakes as there were after the bush was cleared.

One by one the blue gums, messmates and swamp gums on the family farm succumbed. Those that lightning did not pick off, ants invaded. They turned the trees’ insides to powder, until they were too weak to withstand the wind. Not half a dozen remain. The blackwoods died, and the hazels became such a crumbling mess we cleared them. Now it is hard even to see a sign of the original bush. There are still snakes, but not the shy black ones and copperheads that had lived around the watercourses, swamps and springs when we arrived. They are all tiger snakes now, some people say because when we killed all the black snakes we killed the tiger snakes’ natural predator. A bite from a tiger snake can kill you or your dog, your horse or cow, and they are much more likely to turn up at the front door or in the fowl house. Probably they come looking for the wrens and thornbills in the azaleas and roses. If not the birds, then the odd frog living there, or the pretty little bush rats (Rattus fuscipes), which we had never seen or heard of until a decade ago but now make pests of themselves by digging under the camellias and viburnum until they tilt and die. Representatives of the species did the same to the first wheat and corn crops grown in the infant colony of New South Wales and caused the inhabitants to all but starve.

On the next-door property where I shot rabbits after school, I used to watch a platypus in a pool in the watercourse. Platypuses (Ornithorhynchus anatinus) inhabit streams from Tasmania to northern Queensland. They are solitary, but give an unfailing impression of happiness, or at least of enjoying their industriousness. Watch them in the very early morning or late dusk as they appear in one place, disappear and reappear a minute later in another place, and disappear again, all in fluid effortless motion, and you are prone to think that they are playing mind games. In fact they are collecting worms, mussels and yabbies in the bed of the stream or pool and resurfacing to eat them. They have excellent vision and hearing, and it was reported
to the nineteenth-century naturalist Richard Semon that when playing or sending signals to each other in captivity they made ‘grunting, growling, squeaking and piping noises’; and Semon himself, upon shooting them, ‘often heard the wounded animal break into a dull groan’. (What noise was he expecting?) The very few people with scientific curiosity who passed through the settled districts of the east coast were intrigued by the freakish combination of electro-receptor-fitted duckbills and beaver tails, webbed feet, pouches and venomous spurs. And they laid eggs.

Platypuses are monotremes – egg-laying marsupials. ‘Monotreme’ describes the fact that their urinary, defecatory and reproductive tracts all meet in the one opening, the cloaca. Their ancestors lived with the dinosaurs in Gondwanaland. (Kangaroos, possums and koalas are relatively modern.) Nineteenth-century science saw them as a kind of Gothic mole. ‘Biddulph sends Mr Boyce the skin of a duckbill, as a specimen of the natural curiosities of Australia’, Rachel Henning wrote home to her sister in 1855. ‘I have peppered it well, and I hope it is too dry to produce another crop of those gigantic maggots of which the last consignment from Australia seemed chiefly to consist.’ Curiosities or not, for a century they too were hunted for their skins. Semon made hats out of them for his friends. Foxes were added to their natural enemies and much of their habitat was destroyed. They are now extinct in South Australia, and in the Murray-Darling Basin their numbers are greatly diminished. But in the first sunbeams of dawn on any decent stream in the bushland of the Great Divide you can still see them, ‘floating on the river like a plank’.

The weather broke in autumn, sometimes April, sometimes May, and winter lasted well into October. It would rain for days on end, cut down to drizzle for a week and go back to raining again. It would clear up and the barometer would rise, and then it would fall again. He’d come in from the shed and say, ‘I think it’s going to come in rough.’ And often it did. Water flowed down the bare gullies towards the Bass and the river brimmed, swirled and brown. Crabs that had lived deep in the soil of the forest and now lived under the house and rhododendrons pushed up hollow cylinders of clay. In the sodden paddocks, earthworms two metres long (Megascolides australis) gurgled and sucked in the ooze beneath our gumboots, like a gripey movement in the bowels of our earth. Only in our tiny part of the world did these ancient things live. We never saw them unless a landslip tore apart their homes and the air killed them. Water seeping up from the saturated soil became trapped in the sole of grass and formed water-filled balloons 3 metres across. The mud in the cowyard was knee-high. ‘Mud!’ my mother would say. ‘I’m sick of the mud.’

In winter, mud became a prime element. For a decade or so at the beginning of settlement, a horse-drawn mud sledge had been used to transport goods and people. ‘Korumburra Sledge’ was painted on the side, and it must have been a delightful thing to slip and squelch along the ridges on it. Huge mud holes formed in the tracks. One settler said he had more than once seen swans swimming before his cart. Packhorses developed mud fever. In midwinter in the 1950s it was easy to imagine people getting it. When television and film, painting and literature increasingly represented Australia as a land of parched landscapes, we felt a little left out.

Late in winter the black wattles burst into clouds of gold, and our proud little hearts swelled with the honey-scented blooms. Then the road beside the Bass was what we called ‘a picture’. After Eucalyptus, Acacia is the most abundant Australian genus and, as with the eucalypts, many species have been exported to other countries, with good effects and bad. Black wattle (Acacia mearnsii) has been declared one of the world’s worst invasive species. A pioneer plant of the native
forests, its seeds sprout in profusion after fire, and the seedlings bind the soil and fix the nitrogen essential for other plants, including eucalypts. Marsupials need the fungi that attaches to acacia roots and trunks. Grubs like them, and birds like the grubs, as they do the pollen. Wattles break down, split, blow over and die young. They rot and make life good for the rest of nature. Early settlers used wattle saplings and branches to build wattle and daub huts. Wattle bark contains tannin, and countless men made their living collecting it for the tanning industry in Australia and abroad. Demand was so great that in the 1880s wattle plantations were established. Decoctions of wattle bark were used by Aborigines to treat illness and injury, and wattle seeds were a staple of the diet. Stranded and suffering with scurvy in the South Australian desert, Charles Sturt's men noted the Aborigines lived 'almost entirely' on acacia and grass seeds.

In the paddocks newborn calves staggered to their feet and fell and staggered again, as their mothers licked them clean. The next time you looked the calves were sucking, and the next time they were playing, like rocking horses, kicking their back feet in the air, then their front feet, swishing their tails. They came home with their mothers, and there the union ended. Most of the little females had a life to look forward to, but the males had every right to complain. Once the farmer would have knocked them on the head, skinned them, salted their hides and fed their flesh to his dogs. Ours were lined up with rubber teats attached to lines sunk in a trough of milk and were fed this way for four or five days. My mother did most of the feeding. Bull calves went to the local market where men bought them for baby real, pet food and glue. (Around 800 000 five-day-old paddies – each of them as pretty as Bambi – are slaughtered every year in Australia.)

For a time we also had sheep. They did it tough in the frosts and foul weather of our winters, but that's the way it is with sheep. They are needy creatures and vulnerable to passing cold fronts. When it was not their rotting feet that required attention, they had to be churched or shorn, or drenched, dipped, dressed or daubed with some sort of stuff that the CSIRO or ICI had come up with; or mulesed, after the Mr Mules of South Australia who first came up with the method of cutting away the maggoty flesh of their rear ends (blame the blowfly that arrived from South Africa or India around 1890). They had to have their tails and testes removed. They needed to be protected from foxes looking for newborn lambs to kill, and ravens that would peck their eyes out.

Sheep, farmers say, spend their lives looking for a way to die. They get worms, fluke, lice and scab; they get lame, they get ricketts, they get cast on their backs and can't get up. They get Ovine Johne's disease, bent leg, pulpy kidney, twin lamb syndrome, white muscle disease, ergotism, listeriosis, acute and subacute enterotoxaemia, perennial ryegrass stagggers, Cumberland disease (anthrax) and catarrh. Any number of grasses and grains at various times of the year will poison them or cause them to lie down or fall over. Around their mouths they will grow contusions and blisters scarcely less horrible than their flyblown rears. A paddock full of sheep is never much more than a drench away from resembling a field hospital. Their morbid propensity left New South Wales with 40 000 sheep-dip sites contaminated with arsenic. It accounts for the mountains of plastic chemical containers in and about the sheds of modern sheep farms where the use of chemicals has trebled in recent years. In the 1950s they were drums of chlorinated hydrocarbons, such as dieldrin and DDT. Today, we are assured, the cures are less malignant.

It was my father's father who liked sheep. 'Where the sheep lives there lives man', so when he came over the hills with us, so did his sheep. He had spent his childhood on a sheep station near Mt Gambier, South Australia, where his Edinburgh-born father was a
MANAGER OF SOME KIND. HIS MOTHER WAS A HALF-SISTER OF THE PROPRIETOR, AN EDINBURGH SCOT CALLED ROBERT GARDINER WHO HAD MADE HIS FORTUNE FROM WHALING AND SEALING IN BASS STRAIT, FROM GRAZING, AND, BY SOME ACCOUNTS, DIGGING UP ABORIGINAL BONES AND SELLING THEM TO SCIENTIFIC INTERESTS. MT GAMBIER WAS GREAT HORSE COUNTRY AND ABOUNDED WITH HORSEY SCOTS. JUST A SHORT RIDE OVER THE DUNES FROM THE THUNDEROUS BREAKERS AT PORT McDONNELL LIVED THE POET ADAM LINDSAY GORDON, THE HOSIEST OF ALL. MY FAMILY OWNED A COPY OF HIS POEMS, HELD HIS NAME IN SOME REVERENCE, WERE GIVEN TO QUOTING HIS MORE FAMILIAR LINES, AND SHARED A LESS FATAL DOSE OF HIS MELANCHOLY DISPOSITION.

THE SCOTTISH FACTOTUM'S DUAL INSTINCTS OF PRADEFUL INDEPENDENCE AND UNSTINTING FAITHFULNESS – ONE FEEDING OFF THE OTHER IN AN UNWITTING PRESBYTERIAN FRENZY – AND A FAINT BLOOD CONNECTION TO THE LORD OF THE MANOR LENT THE FAMILY BOTH A SPURIOUS GENTILITY AND RELATED PROPENSITIES FOR INDIGNATION AND MARTYRDOM. WHEN, FOR REASONS UNKNOWN, MY GREAT-GREATGRANDFATHER WAS OBLIGED TO MAKE A NEW START WITH HIS FAMILY IN THE FORESTS OF GIPPSLAND, THESE QUIRKS AND AIRS CAME WITH THEM, TOGETHER WITH A FEW ITEMS OF SILVERWARE PRESENTED IN APPRECIATION OF THEIR SERVICE TO THE LOCAL CHURCH, A SMALL JOURNAL IN WHICH WERE WRITTEN OUT SOME USEFUL AIDS TO RAISING ANIMALS AND CROPS, AND AN ENDURING SUSPICION THAT FATE HAD DEALT THEM A CRUEL HAND AND LEFT THEM TO LANGLISH BENEATH THEIR RIGHTFUL STATION. THE BUSH PROVOKES ITS OWN MELANCHOLY, SO IT WAS NOT HELPFUL TO BRING THEIRS WITH THEM. THE HABITS OF LOUD LAUGHTER AND FORLORN IRONY WERE MORE USEFUL.

FIRST ON A BLOCK IN THE LOW FOOTHILLS OF THE GREAT DIVIDE EAST OF MELBOURNE, THEN, AFTER THE GREAT WAR, ON A NEARBY SOLDIER-SETTLEMENT BLOCK, THE PATERNAL LINE LABOURED AWAY WITH LITTLE RETURN. FOR YEARS MY FATHER LIVED WITH HIS PARENTS AND HIS TWO BROTHERS IN ONE HALF OF A COWSHED, AND THEY MILKED THE COWS IN THE OTHER HALF. AS THERE HAD BEEN BEFORE THE WAR, THERE WAS TROUBLE AFTER IT. NO ONE EVER REALLY KNEW WHAT THE 'TROUBLE' WAS, BUT ONE DAY MY GRANDFATHER DROVE HIS WIFE INTO TOWN IN THE JINKER AND PUT HER ON THE TRAIN TO MELBOURNE. AND THERE SHE STAYED WHILE HE RAISED THE BOYS ACCORDING TO HIS OWN SOMETIMES BRUTAL LIGHTS. AS EACH OF THE THREE BOYS TURNED FOURTEEN HE LEFT SCHOOL TO WORK ON THE FARM (AND SOON AFTER HAD HIS TEETH REMOVED). WORK MEANT WORK: MY FATHER RECKONED THAT AS TEENAGERS, IN A TYPICAL DAY'S WORK HE AND HIS BROTHER MIGHT TAKE A DRAUGHT HORSE, A CROSSCUT SAW, AXES, MAUL AND WEDGES INTO THE BUSH, CUT DOWN A MOUNTAIN ASH OR BLUE GUM, SAW THE TRUNK INTO 2- OR 2.5-METRE LENGTHS, SPLIT THE LENGTHS INTO POSTS, LOAD THE POSTS ONTO A SLEDGE BEHIND THE HORSE AND BE HOME IN TIME TO MILK THE COWS – BY HAND.

MY GRANDFATHER LIKED ROMNEY MARSH SHEEP. THEY ARE AMONG THE LARGER BREEDS, GOOD EQUALLY FOR MEAT AND WOOL, HARDY AS SHEEP GO, 'VERY WEIGHTY' AND, COMING FROM THE ESTUARINE MARSHES OF KENT, RESISTANT TO FOOTROT, THOUGH THAT TRAIT SEEMED LESS PERSISTENT IN SOUTH GIPPSLAND. FOOTROT HAD BEEN THE BANE OF THE MT GAMBIER FLOCKS UNTIL THE MANAGER TURNED TO ROBUST, AUSTRALIAN-BRED CORRIEDALES, SO WE HAD THEM AS WELL. MY GRANDFATHER DIED IN THE SHEEP YARD, AMONG SHEEP, IN 1951. HE HAD A BAD HEART AND HAD BEEN GIVEN NO MORE THAN A YEAR TO LIVE, ALTHOUGH MY GRANDMOTHER INSISTED HIS DEATH HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE LILAC MY MOTHER HAD IN A VASE ON THE MANTLEPIECE. WE HAD HAUGHTY BORDER LEICESTERS WITH AQUILINE NOSES AND STARTLING, BANDICOOT-LIKE EARS; SHORT-WOOLED AND SHORT-LEGGED SOUTHDOWNS ('VERY FIRM AND TASTY', ACCORDING TO A 1920 EXPERT); COMEBACKS, ANOTHER AUSTRALIAN VARIETY, PRODUCED BY JOINING MERINO EWE'S TO RAMS OF LARGE-FRAMED BREED, SUCH AS BORDER LEICESTER, AND JOINING THE PROGENY BACK TO A MERINO; AND DORSET HORNS, WITH BEAUTIFUL SHELL-LIKE HORN'S, AND A USEFUL TENDENCY TO BEAR TWINS.

was called marking and all testicles went the way of the tails, traditionally with a knife and a hot iron to sear the wound, or, in legend, strong teeth and a hot iron. I liked their smells and sounds, their silly habits, their nimbleness, the convenient size of them. I remember the rampant healthy Southdown rams banging their heads together in the front paddock; in winter, a lamb or two in shoeboxes on the hob of the stove; the ewes stamping their feet at any threat to their lambs; the wethers’ mad leaping as they raced through a gateway; the pleasure a boy got from catching the half-grown lambs on marking day and delivering them up to the knife or the elastrator.

In 1916 that paternal grandfather of mine had left his young wife and two boys under three years of age and sailed with the First AIF to France. His sisters, by some accounts, may have done their bit with white feathers for shirkers. Rural enthusiasm for the Great War is one of the wonders of Australian history. In some country towns, news of the war was marked by the prolonged ringing of church bells, school bells, fire-brigade bells. There were parades, public meetings and formal pledges of loyalty to the King. Patriotic Leagues were formed, and patriotic funds, patriotic sewing guilds. There were patriotic concerts; patriotic services were held in the Protestant churches and patriotic send-offs were given to those departing. The mood, as John McQuilton says in his study of the subject, was ‘almost festive’. In just three small towns a thousand horses were driven in from the bush for sale to the expeditionary forces. Farmers donated horses and bullocks. Ladies got to work knitting.

German migrants found their way to our district after the Second World War. Not everyone made them welcome, though the same people very likely were not well disposed to any migrants. There was a poor German who lived in the valley and was much feared for his erratic driving of a Ford Custom. He was known as Hiney and I don’t think I ever saw him on his feet or heard him speak: there was just his goitred face behind the steering wheel. He was a veteran of the war and it’s possible his name was Heine. Blighted and lonely as his life seemed then, had he been at large in these parts in 1915 it would have been unlivable. In rural Australia residents of German descent were hounded and vilified, and German place names memorialising German pioneers were replaced with English, French and Belgian ones. Nowhere was imperial sentiment stronger than at the furthest reaches of the empire.

It is easy enough to see why men went to the war. In most minds, there could be no loyalty to Australia without loyalty to the British throne, and duty was a byword of such loyalty. To not go was to forfeit a place among the exalted, to be deemed of a less manly cast, to be a shirker. Men went to answer the call of their king, to protect the honour of the empire and their family, and because their friends did, or to escape their fathers, or as redemption for misdeeds, or for the adventure, or for the money. It is possible that redemption was among my grandfather’s motives. A bout of influenza and a couple of minor wounds aside, he returned physically unscathed from the battles at Pozières, Hamel, Bullecourt, Mouquet Farm, Broodseinde Ridge, and Mont St Quentin-Peronne. But everyone said – as they always have about returned soldiers – that he was a different man afterwards.

My family was patriotic on both sides. The brother of my sweeping grandmother got himself from the bush to an enlistment booth within a week of war being declared in Europe, and fought with the 8th Battalion, the ‘Bush Battalion’, at Gallipoli and in France, where he was gassed. Her two cousins also served in France. Twenty-five years later, one of her two sons served as a gunner in the New Guinea campaign. In 1940 my father was invalided out of the army with rheumatic fever
he caught in camp. His brother was a Rat of Tobruk. All those who went came back alive and sound in body. Their minds were another matter.

My father and his brother both joined the Light Horse in the 1930s, as their father had before them, and my mother's brothers did the same. Their farms were not providing enough income to keep them, and they had taken jobs driving trucks, trapping and poisoning rabbits, droving, rotary-hoeing. They were following the pattern of Australian rural life: in hard times, small farmers put themselves on the labour market. The thirties were the hardest years, but they were inclined to say that the Light Horse made them the best. Horses drew them to the battlefields, but once the war started they were separated from their animals for the first time in their lives. They went into battle on foot.

It was common wisdom that horses were among the noblest and cleverest animals. We were told about horses that could open gates and that sailed across the ground so gently it was like riding a rocking chair. We never met these animals but we knew their names and characteristics, and in some cases, such as that of the fabled Charley (c. 1925–35), the wretched circumstances of their deaths. In my childhood we had draughthorses to pull a sled across the paddocks, or a scoop to clean out dams. But the draughthorses of old were legends of nobility. They worked till they dropped dead in their traces, some of them. For every marvellous horse there was a dog equally exalted: dogs that wore chamois boots and put flocks of sheep in and out of paddocks while the men were having lunch; a brave one on my mother's side died at the hands of a kangaroo. There is scarcely a family photo that does not have a dog in it, and in some of them there are five.

Though the dogs and hacks of my lifetime could not compare to those of old, and led relatively spoiled and uneventful lives, they were essential to both productivity and convenience. But it was not for the likes of cow cockies that Australian working dogs were bred. It was for the pastoral industry. The vast dimensions of paddocks and stock routes of the interior required a dog that was biddable but tough. English black bob-tails and Smithfields had been favoured breeds but they lacked stamina, and their long coats and longer ears found them out in the heat. Like the border collie beloved of sheep people and sheepdog trials, the kelpie came down from the Scotch collie, emerging in the eastern Riverina late in the nineteenth century with the name of the kelp-dwelling, shape-changing Highland water sprite. By the 1890s short-haired descendants of the imported Brutus and Jenny and the locals Kelpie and Moss were scooting around paddocks in searing heat, fully formed with short, pricked ears, bright willing faces and inexhaustible verve. It's not clear when they developed the ability to yard sheep by running across their backs, to travel long distances in the boots of cars with no water and hardly any air, and to stay grinning and enthusiastic in spite of daily being cursed, inhaling prodigious quantities of dust, threatened with death, and pelted with clods and sticks — but these things define them, and their grinning faces define something essential about the bush.

There is no dingo in the kelpie. Around 1870 a Mr Hall of Scone, New South Wales put dingo to blue Northumberland drovers' dogs and got Hall's heelers, which became blue (or red) heelers, also called Queensland heelers, Australian heelers and Australian cattle dogs. These sturdy dogs are as canny, loyal and durable as kelpies, but less balletic and, on the face of things, less imaginative. Henry Lawson declared a dog of his 'a better dog than I'm a man . . . and a better Christian'. For years this dog — and his mother before him — had follarred him on the 'cursed track'. He was a true, straight, honest and faithful mate. In two of Barbara Baynton's brilliant handful of stories, loyal, intelligent and gallant dogs show up perfidious men. But the greatest of all dog-mates might be the two sheepdogs belonging
to a shepherd from Burrangong station in the Riverina: lost in the bush, the shepherd kept himself alive by cutting pieces from the tails of the dogs and drinking their blood. He reached home six days later, the dogs coming along behind him, faithful as ever. Dogs were more than a material help: they helped faith survive in men and women.

In a tent beside the cypress hedge in the far corner of our front paddock, a man called Marky Harrup lived for three or four years. I don’t know what we paid him for cutting rubbish, and weeding and picking the pea crop we grew every year in those days, any more than I know how he survived the winters in that miserable place. He had come from the Aboriginal camp 30 kilometres away on Jackson’s Track with other pea pickers my father had recruited. The camp had been formed in the 1930s, in large part because the lands the local Aborigines had previously used were taken up by soldier settlers, of whom my grandfather was one. Some people said Marky was not Aboriginal at all, but ‘a white man gone black’, like Phillip, a Pole who had fought with the Free Polish Army in the Second World War, and now lived in a one-room hut in Slaughterhouse Lane with Cathy, an Aboriginal woman. The hut belonged to a good friend of my father’s, and they worked at the same sort of jobs as Marky and for the same scant wages.

The local doctor told us about Phillip’s war record. We would never have talked to him long enough to find out, just as we never talked to Marky long enough to find out who he was or where he came from, what he had done in his life or what had been done to him. My mother used to send us down to Marky’s tent with half a dozen buttered scones and he’d eat them on the spot and give us back the plate. He seemed to be scared of women, white women at least, and would go to elaborate lengths to be invisible when my mother was around. Life had taught him to know his place among white people. His face was handsome, lined and leathery, and he smelt to me of earth and tobacco. Especially tobacco: I think that smell on Marky was the root of my later addiction. I can see him cutting rubbish at the bottom of a hill by a watercourse where he got two snakes one day. That watercourse ran into another in the neighbour’s place. The neighbour had found axe-heads, grinding stones and shield trees. We never saw any, but we never looked either.

Eighty years before Marky came to work for us, the Victorian police surveyed the Aboriginal population and found only 489 full- or part-blood Aboriginal men in the state. That was less than half the number counted fourteen years earlier, which was about a sixth of the estimated male population at settlement twenty-five years before that. In 1880 the Victorian government had to send to Queensland for black trackers to hunt the Kelly Gang because there were not enough Victorian Aborigines left. By then it would have been thought unlikely that eighty years on, Marky or anyone like him would exist. That might be why he left such a memory: not only because his skin was different, but because he had the expression of a man in hiding from a society which believed he had only a limited right to exist. I never saw that expression on a farmer, or even on the faces of the kids who went to St Joseph’s convent school and were obliged to sit at the back of the school bus, and to whom we never spoke except to slight them.

The great poet Les Murray grew up as we did on a small farm. He liked cows, and he liked the simplicity of the men and women who raised and milked them. In his poem ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, he pictured his family and the New South Wales community to which they belonged as descendants of ancient Bocotia, noble and virtuous in their rusticity. The Athenians (read the sophisticates of Sydney and Melbourne) scorned them for their backwardness, but in truth these people were the ‘vernacular’ Australians — those possessed of ‘our deepest common values and identifications’.
There is much more charm in the poem than I recall seeing in the kitchens and cowsheds in our neck of Boeotia. Sons crushed by fathers, daughters by mothers; fathers and mothers terrorised by frustrated sons; anger, cruelty, superstition, prejudice, guilt as thick as the mud on their boots; despair closing in like the cypresses around the house. Perhaps they were different in New South Wales, but if the post-Enlightenment Athenians of Melbourne relegated us to an inferior caste of ‘bigoted, conservative, ignorant, despoilers of the environment, a doomed, obsolete group’, as Murray says they did his people, we didn’t notice. Conservative we were and bigoted up to a point, but no more than the national average and the same might be said about our ignorance. The environment scarcely concerned us, and our education, the Church, and government subsidies did more to persuade us that we were indispensable than doomed and obsolete. We did not want for a sense of our own importance. Did farmers ever?

Indolence was unforgivable, along with all forms of ostentation, vanity, inmodesty and observable ambition. All inklings of self-love had to be disguised or internalised, a refreshingly old-fashioned manoeuvre to be sure, but not entirely healthy if taken to extremes. Far from innocent or inferior, we thought ourselves a good bit better than those city bludgers, even as we enjoyed the products of their labour and invention: the cars and hay balers, aspirins, cough balsams, light fittings, fencing wire, and the penicillin in the tubes we poked up the teats of our machine-milked cows. Our guinnessness we owed to no one’s prejudice, but to the weather and our own natures. Our happiness, in the main, we owed to our cows.

Two of the three common breeds of dairy cow in Gippsland came from the Channel Isles and took their names from there, and the third came from Ayrshire. We had Guernseys. Most farmers in the district had Jerseys. Guernseys are golden and white, docile, and produce milk rich in butterfat. Our forty-odd Guernseys were so quiet we could sit on their backs. Jerseys are brown or tan, silvery-tan, silver, or even dark grey approaching black. They have black feet and a black switch at the end of their tails, and a light creamy band around their muzzles. They are a little smaller than Guernseys and prettier – a good Jersey looks a bit like Audrey Hepburn – and their milk is even richer in butterfat and protein. Like Guernseys, they are quiet and good-natured, but the bulls are fierce and should not be approached with anything less compelling than a pitchfork.

Jerseys are not nearly so common now, and Guernseys have gone the way of the horse-drawn plough. Both breeds have been replaced by Friesians (also called Holsteins), big black and white beasts that produce great quantities of relatively low-fat milk. Jerseys and Guernseys used to graze the hillsides in herds of thirty or forty; today’s herds of several hundred Friesians with their great tumid udders, docked tails and loose bowels are to those earlier scenes what a poultry farm is to a few hens scratching in the orchard. While the 650-kilogram Friesians produce about 25 per cent more milk than the 450-kilogram Jerseys, they consume much more water and fodder and produce far more methane in doing it. A North American study of 13,000 dairy herds discovered that it would take 19 per cent less Jersey milk to produce half a million tonnes of cheddar cheese, and the Jerseys’ carbon footprint would be 20 per cent smaller: put another way, replacing all the Friesians in those herds with Jerseys would be equivalent to removing 443,900 cars from North American roads. Now we read in the farming journals that some farmers are going back to Jerseys. City folk are not the only citizens at the mercy of fashion, or whatever passes for commercial or scientific wisdom. Fads come and go among farmers, too. Twenty years ago they all cut off their cows’ tails, but the latest thing is to leave them attached.

One evening early in the 1960s two men arrived at our place with
fingerlings of European carp – 'a delicacy in France', they said, and a great fighting fish. We bought them and, as instructed, put them in a couple of the dams. They grew fat, they churned the dams into soup; when hooked they fought like a football sock might fight and when cooked their soggy flesh tasted of little except mud. And, if not from our dams then from others, they escaped into the streams and became one of Australia's great destructive pests. Tens of millions of them, 80–90 per cent of the total fish population, have infested the waterways of the Murray-Darling Basin, undermining banks, thoroughly outbreeding the native fish, muddying the water and damaging aquatic plant life. Anglers despise them and leave them to rot on the riverbanks.

The history of Australian agricultural enterprise has always been, among other things, a story of mistakes: false understanding, false assumptions and false conclusions. You learn as you go, or you learn from what others have learned, or believe they have learned. In the absence of scientific knowledge, most farmers have made do with intuition or imagination, including, on occasion, faith in an omniscient God and visions of reward both spiritual and temporal. A thousand cases go to show that, along with droughts, floods, pestilence and unspecified misfortune, the Australian cocky has to number himself among his most persistent and destructive enemies.

Necessity has forced the farmers' hands very often. Markets have forced them. But so have phantoms – perceived necessities, bad science and no science, habit, prejudice, fashion. Around the time that great-grandfather of mine arrived in the bush with a few pages of animal remedies to guide him, the first farmers in the Mildura and Renmark irrigation colonies were given, with their 32-hectare (horticultural) or 64-hectare (agricultural) blocks, a copy of Settlers Handbook: eighty pages, leather-bound, 76 x 38 millimetres. Written by George H. Tolley, a licensed surveyor, the handbook contained everything new settlers needed to know: what tools to buy and how much to pay for them; the cost of seeds, wire, staples and labour; what vegetables to plant and when; how to calculate the capacity of tanks and excavations, how much water His Majesty had granted to the licensees, and how to learn the 'art' of using it. Irrigation was, as Tolley said, an essential art, for '[m]any rare plants have been destroyed, and well-meaning persons disappointed by a non-observance of or misapplication of the simplest laws of nature'. He hit on the truth, and with surprising force: 'Do not try to wash all the fertility out of the ground ... by irrigating with a stream sufficient to run a mill.' But in the space of half a century the watering arts he recommended, together with the clearing of the mallee and bluebush, and tilling the soil to a depth of 35 centimetres, created a full-blown crisis of the environment.

It was a rude surprise when twenty years ago city workers, retirees and dropouts harbouring a few goats and donkeys began moving into the old selection districts; the more so when in their dress, habits and general understanding they chose to imitate not the third or fourth generation of farmers, but the first – as if Dad Rudd or Jubilation T. Cornpome knew something that a century of science and experience failed to teach. None of us would have believed that farms made useful and productive by the sweat of our fathers' and mothers' brows would fall into the hands of people for whom farming was no more than a hobby. And that hobby farmers and real farmers alike would come to insist that they lived, not in the country, but in the bush – this was unthinkable.

It might turn out that the great forests of Gippsland were cleared for the benefit of no more than a couple of generations. The labour of the first generation was for the benefit of the second, and the second
laboured just as hard for the third — mine. Mine and the next one enjoyed the benefits. But those 60-hectare farms carved out of a virgin forest and rendered productive by prodigious labour now sell with their houses for about half the price of a renovated worker’s cottage in Melbourne’s inner suburbs, or a fraction of many executive annual salaries, and often that price is only possible if the land is subdivided into ‘lifestyle’ blocks. There are few takers for farmland. There are not enough farmers.

Despite everything, the real farmers retain the posture of their forefathers. They might drink shiraz with their lamb chops, spend the evening in a recliner in front of a television, and make use of a flush toilet, but they are not like other Australians. In farmers there are certain unalterable mental threads. They are primary producers: the very term implies that they are indispensable. They are producers. Their produce is primary. They are first among producers. They are of the line that goes back to Genesis. Coalmining, banking, hairdressing, being a lawyer, plumber or barista — no other line of work has this promise of divine approval.

There has always been more than a material ambition to be satisfied, more than independence: there is something in common with the incorrigible urge of the explorers, men like Stuart and Leichhardt and Giles who persisted, despite everything. If this in part explains their claim on the national imagination and identity, it might also be why, when the banks become their master, or markets fail them, or for whatever reason they are beaten, the defeat drains the meaning from their existence. Behind the laconic lurks the morbid. The bush is a home for martyrs. The room to move, the physicality of the life, the seasonal patterns of existence and the contest with nature attract them as a thornbill is attracted to nectar. It is a primitive, visceral addiction. It satisfies something ancient in their makeup. If suicide is more common among male farmers, it might be at least in part because failure means these needs are no longer satisfied, and that is unbearable.

Television came to the country and tended to confirm the old perspectives with scenes of urban self-indulgence, crime, tomfoolery and sloth, and advertising that assumed a stream of ready cash, leisure and services which most rural folk did not enjoy. Of course, the farmers suburbanised their lives and joined the general addictions to celebrity, game shows, sitcoms and police dramas. The grandmother who sat in the potato paddock while the bushfires raged about her and got around for more than half her years in a horse-drawn vehicle was, in later life, devoted to Graham Kennedy and never missed an episode of Naked City. Her husband may have slept through most of this, but it was in a chair facing the same way as hers, towards the little TV in the corner. All over rural Australia, no less than in the suburbs, the chairs and sofas and pouffes were turned to face the idiot box and they have never been turned back. Country people bought the same cars and the same clothes lines as suburban people, and the same carpets, curtains, kitchenware, laminex and, once the power was on, fluorescent light fittings. The outward distinctions blurred.

But people who went on the land still made themselves the centre of life’s drama, the undisputed subjects. The drama begins with someone alone in nature. In time there will be a couple, family, a community, but the original objective — to be masterless — remains the defining, heroic value of rural life. Farmers might sleep on electric blankets, but when they go out the door they face nature directly — the mud or the dust, the blazing heat or the flying rain, the good season or the bad — and they do whatever has to be done according to their best judgement. In their eyes they still live as men and women are meant to live and, they might say, as Australians are meant to live — hard up against the elements, conquering the continent. More than their hats
and moleskins and lopsided gaits, the interior silence of their days still sets them apart, confirms them in their creed, sets it in stone. They are special and their case is just, and they are doomed to always deserve more than they are given.