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# glimpse

## FOREVER

australia's love affair with the great outdoors

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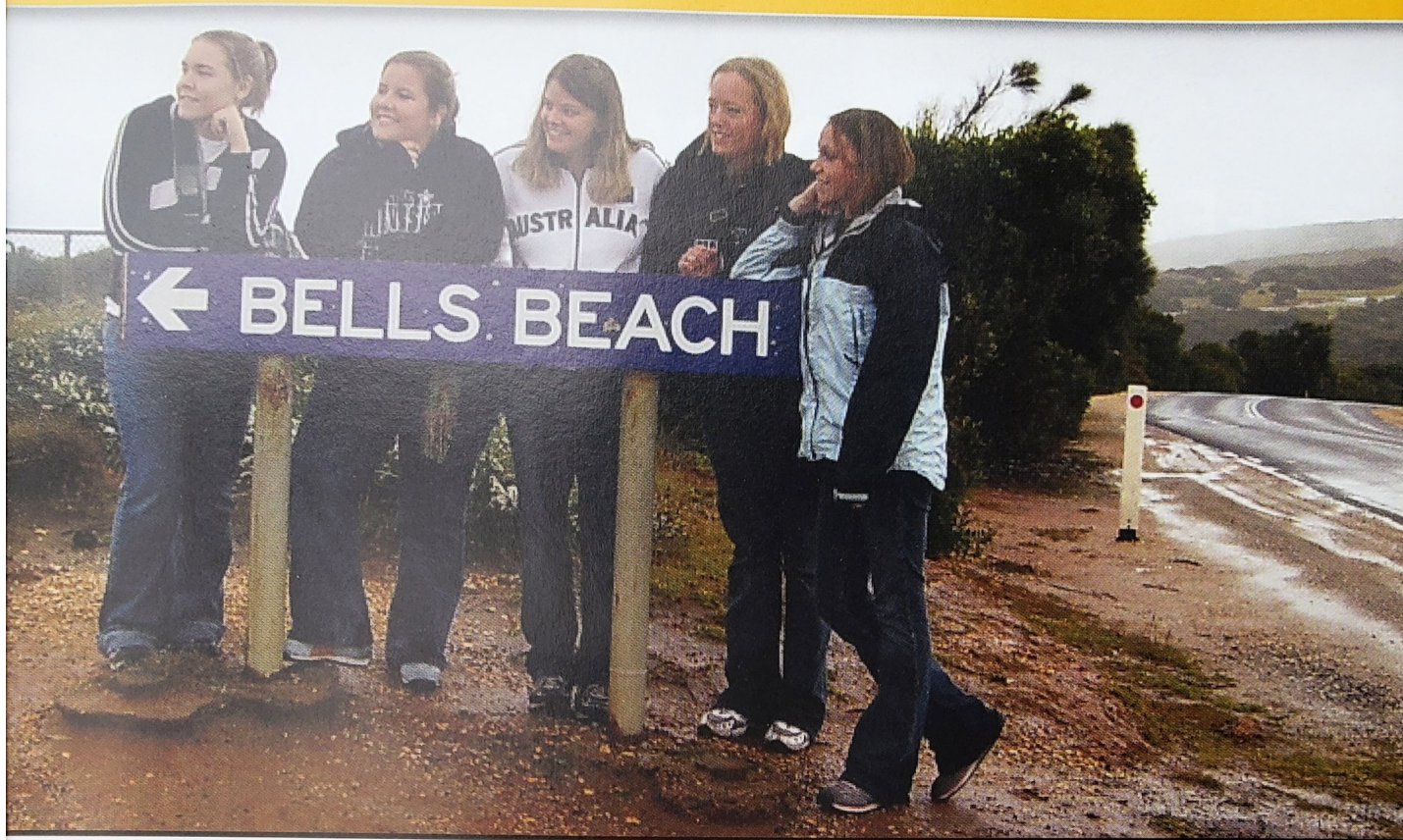
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## SPOTLIGHT AUSTRALIA

[ ABOVE ] Bells Beach runs along the southern coast of Victoria and is famous for its surfing. PHOTO by Carolin Bock.

[ COVER ] Keiran, a tour guide, sits atop a lookout point called Indian Head on Fraser Island, the largest sand island in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Indian Head was named by Captain James Cook, who, while sailing past Fraser Island, saw several Aborigines on these cliffs. PHOTO by Morgan Ashenfelter.



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Hiking barefoot through the Billabong Wildlife Sanctuary, Christopher Quirk understands why people usually wear shoes.

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When Amy Waterman arrives at the sheep station of Boonoke, it looks nothing like the photographs in her coffee table book. Then it dawns on her that she never checked the copyright date.

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Aboriginal teacher David Jungala Kriss is well aware of the slaughter, theft, marginalization and neglect that have plagued his people since the arrival of Europeans to Australia. He wants to make sure that other Australians know about it too.

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An Aboriginal member of the Tiwi Land Council trades expertise with a non-Aboriginal marine biologist. Both want to protect Australia's endangered turtle population. And neither wants to be eaten by a crocodile.

Boonoke shone from the pages of the coffee table book, the crown jewel of Australian sheep stations. The ram shed, brilliantly white. The rambling rose gardens of the restored homestead. The jackeroos (trainee stockmen), leaning confidently on their motorbikes in moleskins and oilskin dusters, golden-shot hair ruffled by the breeze.

I had to go.

I was a sheepman's daughter, on a pilgrimage to the birthplaces of the world's sheep breeds. I'd just come back from lambing season in Britain. Now I was en route to the country that dominated the world wool market, Australia—and to Boonoke, the station that used to dominate them all.

Boonoke! It was the only station that could claim the pure bloodlines of the Peppin Merino, the greatest Australian sheep breed. Bred over a century ago to endure the harsh climate and produce kilos of luxurious wool, the Peppin colonized the bushlands and gave the fledgling country the niche that Spain had abandoned. Even today, every schoolchild knew that modern Australia had been built on the sheep's back.

The secretary picked me up from Deniliquin. We drove along a bare highway with plains stretching endlessly on either side—nothing to break them but sky. Kangaroos bounced off the plains, camped out under trees during the heat of the day. Their heads were hare-like, soft and fuzzy, but their powerful legs could kick a man to death.

As we turned off the main highway onto a dirt track, the secretary slowed to point out some of the native plants: boree trees, corkscrew grass, bluebush, paddymelons.

"It's amazing that all this biodiversity exists," she commented. "Australia's one of the oldest continents. We're a young country, but on old land. Geologically the land has stopped growing; there's no volcanic activity. That's why you don't see any mountains. With nothing to keep it back, over the centuries all our topsoil's blown away into the sea."

"Yet it seems so fertile, with all this agriculture."

"It's an unusual contrast," she agreed. "The continent's dead, but it still supports all this life."

Despite reading each page of my coffee table book on Australian stations with care, I had neglected one crucial part: the copyright page. It had been published 20 years ago. The secretary couldn't tell me what had happened to any of the previous stud managers. The ram shed had been vacant for years. Even the homestead was empty, though a gardener was kept on for the roses.

I felt disappointed, but only for a moment. We pulled into the dirt road to the homestead and entered an oasis of green. White fences sparkled alongside lush paddocks. She dropped me off at the Jackeroos' Quarters, where a sprinkler kept the grass soft beneath the trees. There were roses and orange trees with sweet oranges rotting beneath. Black and tan kelpies lay on their sides, eyes closed, panting.

As I stepped out of the car, I knew that this was why I was here. The civilized heart of a working station: roses alongside gas pumps, muddy boots stacked on the tidy porch,

table manners and beer bottles. Australia's stations have always taken pride in molding their young employees into gentlemen.

I stood on the porch and watched as the jackeroos arrived for lunch, wheeling round on their motorbikes. They pulled off their helmets, arms and shirts dusty and smudged, bright eyes unmarked by squinting.

I envied them. One foot on tradition and the other on the future.

I was assigned to ride with Paul, a 28 year-old with bright orange hair and a bachelor of science in applied agriculture. As we bumped along in the Ute (*utility vehicle*, or pickup), he began to methodically destroy my illusion of civilized greatness.

"If you want to see what Boonoke was at its height, you'll have to go to the Conargo Pub to see their photos. Turn of the century stuff: championship rams, breeders, classers ... the sheep colonized the Riverina. Everybody owed their success to the sheep industry.

"You won't see many places betting their future on sheep now. Boonoke's one of the last. Back then, no one believed that anything but sheep could survive out here. Then they put in all the dams and supply channels for irrigation. Now it's all about rice and wheat."

"Boonoke still puts sheep first," I said.

"Given where the wool market is going, I wouldn't be surprised if they got rid of the sheep entirely. Don't take my word for it. You talk to the stud manager. Then you turn it over in your Yank brain and decide."

So I did. The stud manager, Jim, listened to my question impatiently, then asked, "Do you sleep under a wool blanket or a doona?"

A "doona" was a cotton duvet. "A doona," I admitted.

"That's right. My kids sleep under a doona, I sleep under a doona. What do you think my kids' kids will sleep under? A doona. Think about it. People go from their centrally heated homes to heated cars to centrally heated offices. They don't need a wool jumper. They can get a bloody synthetic coat that's just as warm, twice as light, that you can throw in the washing machine, and it'll last."

"But wool is classy. It's tradition. It just needs to be promoted right."

Jim shrugged, disbelief clear in his smile. "You do that. You go back to America and drum up business for our wool."

Another jackeroo, Dave, added, "I've traveled abroad. People don't wear wool."

That afternoon, we worked in the yards. The "classer" was going through the young rams and classing out any that were too small, were poorly proportioned, or had uneven wool.

The jillaroo, Emma, kept the sheep moving forward by tapping them on their backs

with a length of PVC pipe. "Push up, push up." A third of the rams milled in a separate paddock, where they'd be shipped away that afternoon. Dave waited outside the yards, motorbike humming, ready to take the last ones out to pasture.

From across the yard I could hear Jim. "Fucking bloody bastards, come on."

During the break, or *smoko*, Emma told me that she had worked on stations for 12 years: as a cook, a nanny and a jillaroo. Her parents had property in Western Queensland, but the wool market had bottomed out, so they were looking to goats. Goats could live off anything, didn't need the care that sheep required, and bred like rabbits.

Dave was in a similar situation. His parents had property, but he'd worked up to being overseer here and didn't see himself returning home in the near future. "You can't expect a property to support everyone, not with the market like it is," he said.

Even Paul's parents had sold their sheep and plowed up pastureland to plant chardonnay grapes, converting the sheep shed into a hobby winery. Paul's ambitions were greater: he wanted to buy a header and travel across Australia, driving for the great grain farms.

No one dreamed of sheep anymore.

After *smoko*, Jim sent Paul and me out to dispose of two of the "weaner" rams. One had broken its leg; the other was wheezing sickly and wouldn't survive the trip to the sale.

When we arrived at our destination, a sandbank at a far end of the property, Paul parked the Ute upwind so that the breeze wouldn't blow the smell in through the windows. He checked for the knife in the pouch behind the seat as I got out, rubbing my damp arms in the hot sun. Flies twirled around my nose.

There was a scramble in the back. Paul had the tailgate open and was pulling the first ram out. "Come on. You gotta come now." He grabbed one leg. The weaner was fighting its way back while its mate kneeled on two front legs in frozen fear.

Paul pulled. The weaner came scrambling, leaped out. I slammed the tailgate shut. Paul dragged the sheep over to the pile. He flipped it over, crouched down, and took out his knife. The ram was lying with Paul's knee on its neck. The other one still crouched, cautious, in the back.

I turned my head away.

"Are you sure you want to stand there?"

I realized what Paul was saying. I moved upwind, away from the scene.

In the sandy soil beyond the culvert, there were sheep in various stages of decay. Skulls half-buried with full sets of teeth, decaying wool and hide pulled tight as leather, old leg bones kicked up, bodies decomposing in the sun. No one had made an effort to bury the bodies.

The sound of sawing started. I heard Paul's voice audible over the scraping. The sheep was silent.

He was talking about the shift toward finer wools and how the Peppin Merino-style wool was outdated. His voice seemed as if it were coming from a great distance. At last, he noticed my discomfort.

"We call this Pet Cemetery," he told me, calm and easy. "The least they could do is push the dirt up over them. The smell is horrible on a hot day. You try to kick up some sand to cover them, and you just find more corpses underneath. They're buried for ten feet under here."

"The soil must be rich." We laughed, a hard joke.

I needed something to fill my mind. I looked out over the plains, shading my eyes, feeling the sun beat on my shirt, looking for eucalyptus trees, birds, anything to take my mind away from the here and now.

I added, "This would be illegal in Britain. There, the RSPCA would be on you if you left one dead animal in your field. You used to have to pick up all your dead stock and dump them in a death pit, so people wouldn't see them. Now, after hoof and mouth, you have to send everything to an incinerator."

"Uh huh."

There was a pause. We shared the air. I breathed.

"You're lucky, today is cooler." Paul let the sheep's head go. He stood with his foot on its neck and watched it struggle. It wasn't dead yet. He bent down again.

"Last week we slaughtered 50 young rams that didn't make the cull. All they gave me was a shotgun and two cases of shells. There was a new jackaroo here, just came visiting from one of the other properties. They sent him out with me. I asked the bloke, 'Can you shoot a gun?' 'Oh, yeah, yeah,' he told me. So I gave him the shotgun, and I stood there with my foot on the ram. The sheep was kicking. 'Hurry up,' I told him. The kid had this grin on his face. He must have fired five shots into the thing. 'What are you doing?' I asked. 'I thought you knew how to shoot.' Every one was like that. Fifty rams."

"Why don't they just sell them?"

"Too much work. You can't make any money off them. Not enough to pay for hauling them to the sale and wasting half a day."

Paul stood up. The sheep was dead. He set his knife down, went to pull out the next one. I opened the tailgate for him. He crawled inside, grabbed the sheep, and pulled it out.

This one was a smaller one. It had hid in the corner, hoping it had been forgotten. Of course it hadn't.

Paul set to work again.

The afternoon sun threw shadows on the bodies. Paul finished. He stood for a moment, wiping his knife carefully on the dead sheep's wool. He didn't know, but there was blood on his eyebrows. Blood streaked his jeans, bright on his hands.

He headed back to the Ute. I moved too, obediently. I climbed in and sat while he put the knife back and slid in. The door slammed. He put the Ute into gear, and we moved off.

I left Boonoke five days later, wiser than before. I remembered what the secretary had told me when I first came, that though Australia was geologically “dead,” it still supported an abundance of life. Similarly, even if tradition had become a dead weight for the farmers of the future, at least it wouldn’t hold them back.

I shouldn’t have expected Boonoke to live up to the glossy photographs of its past. It can’t, if it is to survive.

Was the sheep’s history in Australia just a carcass to be buried to make way for rice and cattle? I didn’t think so. There were other stations in Australia still betting on sheep. I just had to find them.

#### Biography:

Amy Waterman is a writer currently living in New Zealand. After graduating from Pacific University, she traveled the world working on sheep farms. Her favorite sheep breed is the Beulah Speckled Face.