

DUNE

is a four-letter word



Griselda Sprigg with Rod Maclean

*I came to realise that Griselda Sprigg
is a great Australian. Now, in the
pages of this book, readers the world
over can make the same discovery.*

Dick Smith



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Rod Maclean was an author, journalist and television producer whose novel *Eric and Ian Get a Life* is also published by Wakefield Press.

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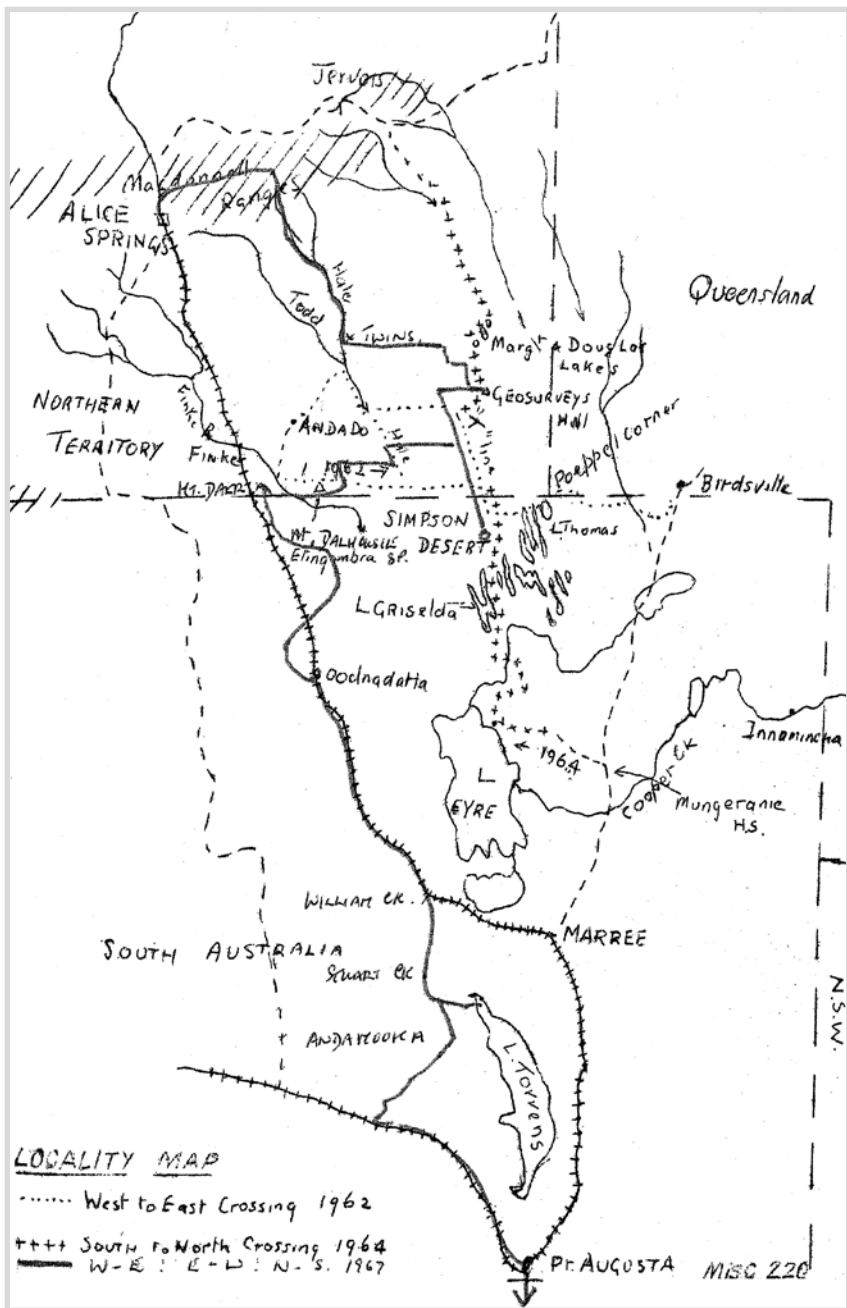
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*The clock of life is wound but once,
And no man has the power,
To tell just when the hands will stop,
At late or early hour.*

*Now is the only time you own,
Live, love, toil with a will.
Place no faith in tomorrow
For the clock may then be still.*

Anonymous



The Sprigg Simpson Desert crossings – Reg's mud map.

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Foreword

by Dick Smith

One of my favourite places anywhere in the world is Arkaroola, the mountain sanctuary in the far northern Flinders Ranges of South Australia. Apart from the beauty of the place – and believe me, you would go a long way to find arid-country scenery as spectacular – Arkaroola is home to an incredibly adventurous Australian family.

The family matriarch is Griselda Sprigg, a genteel Scottish lady who, during the past fifty years, has participated in some hair-raising feats of modern-day pioneering in the vast Australian outback which is now her home. Griselda is the first white woman to cross the Simpson Desert, one of the harshest and most brutal stretches of desert anywhere on the planet, and she did it not once, but thrice! Just for good measure she also crossed our continent from south to north through three vast and often trackless deserts. Having made it through a two-day bogging in the far Tanami and survived flash floods and the threat of being blown sky-high by flaming spinifex, she knows as much as anybody about the dangers of desert crossings. Despite all that, Griselda confesses that she has a love affair with deserts, and in Australia she has known them all.

Griselda's long partnership with her husband, Reg, is famous in Australia's desert country, and for good reason. Anyone who knows about the explorations of Australia's post-war geologists will know of Reg Sprigg. He is one of my heroes.

As I read these pages of Griselda's story, I learn of her role in Reg's decision to set up Australia's first privately owned geological consulting company, Geosurveys of Australia, and how she and her kids were there when Reg discovered what many call the SANTOS basin, and when he helped pioneer its development into the great gas field we know today.

Reg was a student of another Australian hero of mine, Sir Douglas Mawson, who took him on field trips to the Flinders Ranges and instilled in Reg two great attributes – skills to live, work and survive in the bush, and a conservationist's respect for nature. After his career in consulting, Reg started another, and once again Griselda had a lot to do with it. They cleared sheep and feral creatures from the old Arkaroola Station and created the wildlife sanctuary that today attracts enthralled visitors from around Australia and the world.

These days, I'm a regular visitor at Arkaroola, piloting my helicopter westward across Lake Frome towards the thrilling sight of the mountain ramparts where Arkaroola nestles, a genuine oasis in a rugged world. Eleven years ago my wife and I flew in to Arkaroola to help celebrate Reg's seventieth birthday. As they say in the classics, a fantastic time was had by all. Before the time came to leave, Griselda offered me a copy of the diary she kept during the Sprigg family crossings of the Simpson Desert, west to east in 1962, and south to north a couple of years later.

I soon found the diary absorbing. This was the first ever motorised crossing of the desert, and the first of any kind since Dr Cecil Madigan's crossing on camels decades earlier. Griselda wrote of the endless ranks of pitiless sand ridges, the dune corridors choked with spinifex, and how the little team of explorers navigated steadily by astrofix, day after day, getting continually bogged in spinifex or salt-pans, until at last the desert was crossed and a new chapter in Australian history was written.

I remember thinking then that this was a story that more people

should read, but it was not until a few years later, when I piloted my trusty chopper Delta India Kilo over the towering terracotta-red Simpson dunes and landed at the place the Spriggs named Geosurveys Hill, that I realised what an extraordinary feat of adventure and endurance the clan had achieved.

Now, to my delight, I find that Griselda has told the story of the Simpson in the pages of this book. Not only that, she's told us about her whole life. And that, too, is fascinating. It's the tale of how a well-to-do Scottish lass more used to sports cars and sailing boats came to Australia, how her first home was a tiny caravan on a dusty hillside in a uranium mining camp, how she learned to cope with saw beetles while camping in a desert creekbed, how she learned to set fire to petroliferous bores, how she saw a ghost homestead on the Yandama Creek – episodes that today's four-wheel-drive enthusiasts would drool over – all told with humour and an earthy appreciation of the country that has become Griselda's home.

More than that, this book is also the story of how Griselda brought up two wonderful children, Marg and Doug, and involved them in the Sprigg discoveries right from the start. The Spriggs were never mere bush bashers. Their adventures had science and the pursuit of knowledge as a central core. The kids avidly collected artefacts and specimens for universities and museums. Reg taught Doug to navigate by the stars and, these days, visitors to Arkaroola will know all about Doug's passion for astronomy. Marg herself is now a qualified geologist and ecologist. Griselda's diaries chronicle the family's movements precisely, the flora and fauna they encountered, the types of terrain, and the people they encountered – including fellow pioneers like the legendary Len Beadell and Tom Kruse – during their wonderful explorations.

This is also a story of true love. From the moment they met, Griselda and Reg were destined to achieve much together, and their togetherness adds immeasurable richness to this book.

Like Reg, Griselda Sprigg is a great Australian. Reading her diaries all those several years ago I came to realise that. Now, in the pages of this book, readers the wide world over can make the same discovery.

Editor's Note

Because the majority of Griselda Sprigg's desert journeys were undertaken at a time when Australians still measured their distances in miles, I have used imperial measurements throughout. For readers more used to kilometres, a quick conversion is simple. One kilometre is five-eighths of a mile: five miles equals eight kilometres, 50 miles equals 80 kilometres, and so on.

In addition to Griselda's personal collection of notes, maps and photographs, I have relied importantly on the recollections of Darby and Anthony von Sanden, and I thank them both for their help.

I would like to thank Peter MacDonald for getting me involved in this project in the first place, and my family for putting up with me while it came together.

I gratefully acknowledge the geological expertise of Bernie Stockill from the Queensland Department of Minerals and Energy. Warwick V. Woods of the Historical Radio Society of Australia provided useful technical information.

Rod Maclean

Prologue

Mercy Flight

It was still raining.

The night before in the homestead, Mac and Molly Clark had celebrated the rare and bountiful opening of the heavens by breaking out the Scotch. I had been too worried to enjoy the drink. Now my concerns were worsening.

Red dune country stretched to the horizon. The parched Simpson sands were soaking up the deluge. Andado Station's creek was running for the first time in six years. The sky was wall-to-wall grey, with no break in sight.

'The flying doctor's never going to make it in,' said Keith, the Geosurveys charter pilot who had just returned from Melbourne with word that my husband Reg was delayed there for another two days. Our historic desert crossing was starting to look unlikely. 'Maybe I can get you out to the Alice,' Keith continued, 'but you've got about ten minutes to get ready.'

I protested: 'Ten minutes!'

'You've seen the strip, Griselda. It's *already* a bog. Ten minutes, no more.'

We had only been two days at Andado waiting for Reg, but eight-year-old Douglas had scattered his belongings everywhere, and I had emptied my own bag to get at the precious supplies of antibiotics, hoping they would do my daughter some good.

Margaret had started looking poorly on the eighty-five-mile run in to Andado Station from our base camp at East Bore. The camp was supposed to have been our jumping-off point for the first-ever motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert, and we'd reached it after a navigational mishap that warned of the magnitude of our task – hundreds of miles of trackless dune wilderness before we could even *hope* to reach the oasis of Birdsville at the end of our trek. When we finally reached East Bore, Reg remembered a lecture he was committed to make in Melbourne. He collared Keith and flew out on the spot, promising to be back in time for the expedition to go ahead, and leaving the rest of us wondering what to do with ourselves.

Mac Clark had been doing the contract carrying, carting some of the supplies and equipment we needed for our desert expedition. When he offered me and the kids a rest-up at Andado Station, the Clark's cattle property on the desert's western fringe, we left the Geosurveys men in charge of the base camp and headed for the homestead, where we tramped desert dust all over Molly's clean floors. Mac said she was off with her boys in Alice Springs on a shopping trip, but she arrived home a day early and found us ensconced in her house. She took it completely in her stride – mild surprise followed by the unquestioning hospitality you find almost everywhere you travel in the vast Australian bush.

Marg's throat had turned septic during our first day at Andado. Now her fever was dangerously high and she needed hospital treatment. If I quit Andado now, without waiting for Reg, the desert crossing would have to be abandoned.

'Griselda!' insisted Keith, 'it's decision time. Now.'

'Yes. It is. Ask Mac and Molly if we can store some gear in their shed until we can work out what to do with it. They can have the perishables. The mechanic can take Reg's swag back to base camp – anything vital goes back to East Bore. I'll pack the bags and round up the kids. See you on the strip.'

I ran for the house, calling for Doug. He came skidding around a corner, covered with red mud, followed by the two Clark boys, equally filthy, all three of them laughing at the unaccustomed fun to be had when it rained in the desert.

‘Get cleaned up and changed. Pack your belongings. We have to fly to Alice Springs.’

‘Why?’

‘Margie’s sick.’

He was about to protest. Marg was *always* getting sick. But there must have been a don’t-argue-with-me-or-I’ll-send-you-to-Sunday-School look about me.

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Good boy. Hurry!’

I strode into the house and nearly collided with Leo Corbett, our friend and companion. He was on vacation from his Pichi Richi Sanctuary in Alice Springs. He followed me into Margaret’s room. She lay there on a bed with big eyes, suffering in silence. I stuffed family miscellany into my bag and briefed Leo on what was happening. ‘A pity about the crossing,’ he said. ‘But you can’t help bad luck.’

‘Another time, I hope. Somehow we’ll have to get word to Reg.’

‘I’ll take care of that. I’ll sort things out here, too. You’ll be needing a place to stay when you get to the Alice. Use mine.’

‘Leo, you’re a treasure!’

‘I know,’ he said, modest as ever. ‘The key’s behind the cistern.’

Whenever he flew in one of the Geosurveys planes, Douglas always lobbied to sit up next to the pilots so he could impress them with his knowledge of the instruments. Most of the time, it was his father, Reg Sprigg, founder and boss of Geosurveys of Australia, who sat up the front, scanning the horizons and formations below for signs of mineralogical promise.

Today Doug had his chance and he was conversing intently with Keith as the pilot prepared his tail-dragger Cessna for take-off. I was in

the back soothing Marg's forehead with a damp cloth and praying we would get off the sodden strip safely.

When Keith opened the throttle and gunned the little plane, Doug stopped his chattering. The engine protested. Retarded by the slithering drag of wheels in mud, it struggled for take-off velocity. For anxious seconds I thought the runway was not going to be long enough. Then Keith abruptly hauled back on the stick and – suddenly freed from the goo on the ground – we seemed to shoot into the rain-grey sky.

Keith turned in his seat, looking unnecessarily droll. 'Piece of cake,' he muttered.

'Next stop, Alice Springs!' yelled Doug, grinning like a mighty young warrior. Having done their manly best to reassure me that all was well, the pair of them went back to their maps and instruments. This was 1962, and with no headphones for anyone but Keith and the co-pilot, engine noise made conversation near impossible, so I contented myself with trying to keep poor Marg comfortable until we could get her into the hospital. Crammed into the Cessna's tiny back seats this wasn't easy, but eventually she dozed and I was able to relax a little.

Through the perspex cabin windows I could see the enormous desert sand ridges receding behind us. I wondered whether we had been tempting fate by thinking we could make a crossing of the daunting Simpson Desert. I had fantasised that I might be the first white woman – maybe the first woman *ever* – to make the journey. Now that seemed a vain and foolish challenge to one of the harshest landscapes on the planet. The dunes disappeared in the rain haze.

The plane droned north and west, towards the Alice. I too began to doze, and just before I drifted off I found myself marvelling at the extraordinary situation I had found myself in, yet again, and wondering, by no means for the first time, how a city slicker Scottish girl like me could possibly have allowed herself to get mixed up with Reginald Sprigg.

Ancient History

I suppose I could start by telling how I won Reg in a bet, but that would spoil the fun of a little reminiscing.

I am the second daughter of Robert Findlay Paterson and Grace Hope Irvine Fleming. I was born in Paisley, Scotland, on 12 December 1921, a date I disclose only to make it perfectly clear that I am no longer a spring chicken.

On certain Sundays, Grandma Fleming would tour me among various ancestors and antecedents in the Hawkhead cemetery. The visits terrified me: the fallen monuments were like rotting teeth subsiding into the lawns. I felt as if I was about to follow and fall down, down, and be gone.

Apart from this, my childhood was a happy and comfortable one. Mum and Dad and my sister Margaret and I lived in a big house on Glasgow Road. It had a crackling fire and armchairs with lugs so wide you would not fall off if you fell asleep on them. I had a Canadian nanny named Lizzie who took me on top-deck tram rides to Elderslie. On winter nights we would visit Grandpa Paterson, who lived next-door in a big sandstone villa. He sat there in his armchair, twiddling the



A Scot tot in a tub, Paisley, 1922.

knobs on his cat's-whiskers wireless and looking up now and then to dispense gems of advice: 'Never lend money. Whatever you can afford, make a gift of it.' And: 'Never go anywhere unless invited – except to England to invade the Sassenachs.'

I remember riding in a hansom cab to the Gilmour Street railway station for the journey to Gourock on the Firth of Clyde, where we would take a steamer to the Isle of Arran and join other families for our annual summer holiday. Dad was a fine amateur sailor. He kept a boat at Whiting Bay and Margaret and I would help with the mending and making of sails, and scraping and painting the hull. Our reward came on idyllic days when Dad took us out on the water, often with a crew of boys from the other vacationing families. Sadly, the sons of those families were killed in World War II – every one of them. Also doomed was the primary school lad with whom I competed to come bottom of the class. A born warrior, he became a paratrooper and died at Arnhem.

Like my sister Margaret, I was expected to combine brains with charm and good looks. By the time I started at the Glasgow High School for Girls, Margaret had completed her brilliant passage there and

commenced studies in dental surgery, following in our father's footsteps. My early academic performance was not promising. I was only eight years old when, on 24 May 1930, the aviatrix Amy Johnson landed her de Havilland Moth at Darwin, completing an extraordinary solo flight from London, and instantly becoming a heroine throughout the British Isles. Her exploits inspired me and I followed them closely over the years to come, dreaming that one day I too would learn to fly. I actually had two lessons in a Fox Moth before war broke out, but the point here is that during my early high school years I spent little time studying and plenty of time daydreaming about the world to be discovered beyond the 'dark mile' between Paisley and Glasgow. It was so-called because there were no street lights, only green fields. Then war came and they started putting up prefabricated billet houses and army barracks and the mile stayed dark because a black-out was imposed to protect us all from the Nazi air attacks.

Despite my head being in the clouds, there must have been some competitive instinct sparked within me by Margaret's success, because in my senior years I studied harder, and completed my Higher Leaving Certificate at a younger age than she did. I was sixteen going on seventeen. It was late 1938 and our family wintered in Europe. Members of Hitler Youth lined the decks of ships as we entered Hamburg harbour. 'War won't be long now,' said Dad. 'I hope we make it home.'

When we did, I was informed that while the bureaucracy had earlier deemed me too young to sit the university entrance exams, with all available manpower needed to help with the impending war effort there was now no impediment to my starting a career in nursing.

If I had a bob for all the beds I made while I did my training at the Royal Alexandra Infirmary in Paisley, I'd be a millionaire.

The RAI was a castle of turreted red sandstone. The wards were enormous. With every window blacked-out or sandbagged, we worked in wan electric light, uniformed in starched aprons, belts, veils and frills. In winter, combining our on-the-job training with lectures at the

Royal Glasgow Infirmary, there were times I would walk to work in the dark and arrive home again in the same way, wondering how my mother was coping with making dinners from rations without the help of a maid.

Wartime austerity put an end to all sorts of luxuries and frivolities. Fox Moth flying instructors were employed in far more drastic pursuits. Racing a boyfriend's Sunbeam Talbot was out because of petrol rationing. But nothing could stop us from having fun. Atop the RAI's main flagpole perched an enamelled bedpan, and it became a symbol of the hilarity that lurked beneath the rigid hospital routine. When one resident took leave to be married, he was congratulated by being strapped to an operating table and put in plaster from neck to toe along one side of his body. Another time, the head porter was taking a corpse to the mortuary when the body miraculously rose up. The porter fainted, and we all laughed at the absurd sight of one body reviving another.

An ophthalmologist I worked with during a short secondment was a real practical joker. He was a Viennese Jew who had escaped Hitler's *Anschluss*. Experimenting with corneal lenses, he had partially restored the sight of a naval officer, Esmond Knight, who had been badly wounded during the bombing of HMS *Prince of Wales* in Singapore harbour. Now he wanted a guinea pig with more normal eyesight. I said I would try a pair and wore them one night on the Glasgow Underground, riding in one of those carriages where the seats face each other in groups of two. I noticed the passengers opposite were staring at me. I tried to ignore it, but soon I could bear it no longer. I looked at my face in my hand mirror. One of my eyes was purple – the other was pink.

Later in my training, before I started studying radiography and radiotherapy, I did a two-month locum at Glasgow's Royal Women's Hospital where I met and worked with the legendary Sir Hector McLennon. One day I was summoned to help the great man perform an hysterectomy. 'But, lassie,' said the charge nurse as she gave me my orders in a voice dour and serious, 'here we call them Hectoristomies.'

Late in 1940 it was decreed by the Manpower bureaucracy that I should become an assistant radiographer at a 1400-bed civilian and services hospital at Ballochmyle Estate near Mauchline in the heart of Robert Burns country. Much of the property was wooded, but it also boasted manicured gardens and lawns sweeping down to where the River Ayr flowed past rhododendron-flanked pathways on its journey to the sea. The mansion house – now home to the senior medical staff – was famous as the Alexander family seat. The clan crest above the portico incorporated the elephant insignia of the British East India Company. Below the portico, solid mahogany doors opened to polished floors, graceful staircases, ballrooms and billiard rooms with ornate Adam ceilings.

The nurses' quarters were far less salubrious. Like the wards, our rooms were laid out in uniform rows that spoiled the gardens, and the rows of pre-fabricated sheds that housed the rooms were made almost entirely of asbestos. My building was nicknamed 'Siberia'. A single pot-belly stove served fourteen rooms. Normal duties over, we would huddle around it to gossip, read, or write letters home.



With my war-time mates at Ballochmyle.

We did find time to visit the patients, reading the paper or writing letters for those who could not see. The faces of some of the soldiers and airmen were so badly disfigured they were kept in wards with opaque windows and no mirrors. These wards were the domain of Archie McIndoe. He and another leading plastic surgeon, Sir Harold Gilles, had moved their casualties to Ballochmyle from Basingstoke and East Grinstead hospitals to ensure that the wounded lads were not further damaged by the bombing. Many of these men were hideously maimed, but they had to be prepared psychologically for their return to the world outside the hospital. One day Archie said he had a 'wee favour' to ask of me. 'Collect as many of your girlfriends as will fit in the cars I'll arrange, and take a group of these fellows to one of the local pubs for an evening out. See they get thoroughly tanked.'

I scouted the district and chose Poosie Nancie's Houf, once a favourite watering hole of Scotland's favourite bard. In those days though, Rabbie's drinking room was more a museum than a bar, and the publican was hesitant about opening it up to a rabble of wartime servicemen – until I explained the circumstances.

It turned out to be a famous night. The locals did their bit wonderfully, treating the wounded young men exactly as what they were – grand chappies who, through no fault of their own, had suffered tragically but were still, well and truly, alive and kicking.

The wounded were of all nationalities, some even prisoners of war. When a convoy of casualties arrived, we worked until all had been attended, no matter how long it took. My twenty-first birthday celebrations were postponed by several days when truckloads of wounded arrived from the Middle East and I had to x-ray every one of them before they were moved on to further treatment. We often worked twenty-four or thirty-six hours at a stretch. But we'd taken the oath and that was that, no questions asked, and all for the princely pay of six pounds, twelve shillings and eight pence per month.

As for food, we'd given up our ration cards, so we never saw the weekly dole of meat, butter or bacon. Most days we had lentil soup

made in enormous cauldrons, with rice, bread or semolina pudding to fill us up. For variety we had lentil patties made from mashed potatoes and cauldron scrapings, with great hunks of bread and ersatz margarine. I spent the bulk of World War II at Ballochmyle, so it is perhaps not surprising that, while I have nothing in principle against vegetarianism, in my later life I developed a strong preference for a good feed of beef.

There are lulls in all wars, and when they came to the Ballochmyle district they were the cue for occasions of silliness, sentimentality and a sing-along around the piano.

On Hogmanay, at the end of 1940, an RAF radar expert invited me to dine with him in the dungeons of Sundrum Castle, which was centuries old and still had manacle chains in its prison walls. Just before midnight the host called all the guests to the ballroom for 'Auld Lang Syne', ordering the Scots into the centre of a circle formed by people of other nationalities: Poles, French, Americans, Norwegians and Swedes. To my great embarrassment I seemed to be the only Scot. No matter, they circled around and it was as though all the voices of the world were singing just for me.

During the sing-along I was fortunate to meet none other than my childhood hero, Amy Johnson. She had arrived with an American aviatrix, Jacqueline White, who had started an air transport auxiliary. Only a few days later, on 5 January 1941, Amy vanished over the Thames estuary while on assignment for the Air Ministry.

When Ballochmyle hosted a party or a dance, partners were drawn from local officers' billets, the midget submarine base at Irvine, the Canadian 22nd tank regiment camped at Catrine and visiting members of the American Eagle Squadron. The latter smuggled nylons and fresh fruit in the cabins of their massive bombers and soon taught us the jitterbug.

Among the Canadians were three priests, one of whom played the piano whenever he was encouraged to do so by a glass of Scotch whisky. One night the drunken pianist insisted on driving his colleagues



Even in war-time, we sometimes made house calls.

home to Catrine. He crashed into the Ballochmyle gatepost and dislodged a huge sandstone ball, which plummeted to the ground like a thunderbolt. Mercifully, it missed the heads of God's three servants and their military ministry was able to continue without a life-saving visit to one of our wards.

I mention this episode because I do not believe it should be put down to divine intervention. Things happen which cannot be ascribed to a heavenly plan.

Late in 1944 I was released from Ballochmyle at the request of R.G. 'Hutch' Hutchison, who had trained me in x-ray work at the RAI and now wanted me to work with him at London's Saint Thomas Hospital. This was a great honour, and I immediately agreed to go. A fortnight later Hutch was killed in a head-on collision with a Scout car.

2

Bound for South Australia

From Ballochmyle I returned to Paisley and became the RAI's senior radiographer. And until I won Reg in that bet I mentioned, it seemed I was destined to become part of the hospital furniture.

I'd been back in Paisley less than a year when my sister Margaret married her fiance, Douglas Walker. For most of the war Douglas had been a prisoner of the Japanese in Singapore's notorious Changi gaol. Somehow he had escaped being sent to die on the Burma railway. A surgeon, he performed amputations in the Changi 'hospital', easing the prisoners' agony with hypnosis techniques he had learned from two Dutch East Indians there. Douglas was very tall, and on his wedding day he still seemed dangerously thin.

Only a short time after this wedding, on 18 January 1946, my Dad died of coronary thrombosis. I smothered my sadness with work, which is how my chief, Doctor Stirling, came to assume I had become an automatically listed item in his department's inventory.

Then it happened. By August 1947 I had earned some annual leave and was holidaying at Brodick on the Isle of Arran with my mother and some nursing girlfriends. One bitter evening we were

eating at the Ennismore Hotel when an interesting assortment of men and women filed into the dining room. I thought they might be some sort of religious sect. There was an Indian, a Germanic-looking person, two Italians including a beautiful young woman who talked incessantly, some Nordic types, several Americans, a sprinkling of Sassenachs and – judging from their accents and the disdain with which they regarded their non-alcoholic drinks – two Australians.

My friends were as intrigued as I was. ‘Don’t look now,’ said one. ‘But second on the left, with his back to the wall, he seems to have his eye on you.’

He was one of the Aussies, a gorgeous fellow with curly fair hair and bright blue eyes, perhaps in his late twenties. He was dressed in absurdly light clothes and, judging by his sneezing, was suffering from an appalling cold.

Discreet inquiries were made over dinner, and it turned out that the religious sect was in fact a bunch of geologists in Britain for an International Geological Year conference. By now my friends had noticed that my eye kept wandering in the direction of the curly-headed fellow, and the wager was made: ‘I bet you can’t get a date before midnight.’

This left less than three hours for my sex appeal to work. ‘How much?’

‘Five pounds.’

Scottish pounds or Sassenach, that was proper money! ‘You’re on.’

Half an hour was lost as the geologists finished their dinner. When they left the dining room, I made my move.

The weather was still terrible, driving rain and mist. My target was standing at a doorway, staring out at the rain and looking miserable. ‘Hello,’ said I. ‘My name is Griselda. How did you get that dreadful chill?’

‘Climbing Goat Fell. Geological excursion. I tipped in, helping one of the ladies across a creek.’

‘We don’t have “creeks”. You mean you fell into a burn.’

‘Bloody silly name for something so wet.’

I laughed, and had an inspiration. ‘Will you wait for me here, Mister . . . what is your name?’

‘Reg.’ He put out his hand and I shook it. ‘Yeah, I’ll wait. I’m not going out there in a rush.’

I hurried to my room and returned with a flask of brandy. ‘This will prove medicinal. Drink up.’

He needed no further prompting, and the flask had the desired effect. Almost immediately his blue eyes were twinkling and I was invited to join him and his colleagues. We sat and chatted, and just before midnight Reg asked me to have drinks with him the next afternoon at the Douglas Hotel – the only licensed establishment in Brodick. Mission accomplished.

I took Reg to meet my friends and collected my fiver, relieved to find he was flattered and amused to have been the subject of our bet. We were going to get on famously.

Not that we saw much of each other after that. By the time I met him Reg had been away from Australia for nearly six months studying uranium mining techniques in the United States and Canada. After the geological conference he was required in Cornwall to inspect some mineworks there, and then the Hebrides to study glacial moraines. By year’s end he was due aboard the liner *Orcades*, homeward-bound for Adelaide and the resumption of his duties with the South Australian Geological Survey and Department of Mines.

So it might have seemed that our romance was doomed from the start. Not so. Our date at the Douglas went well and we had several more before his duties took him away. He called on me in Paisley, en route to and from the islands. By then my heart was playing tricks on my mind, and the diagnosis was love.

We found ourselves compelled to write to each other. Even with Reg half a world away, we wrote to each other at least once a week, and I found myself paying unusually close attention to those films that promoted migration to Australia. The ones about Adelaide featured

almond blossom, a koala farm and the Torrens River with its tour boats and zoo. And I can remember the shots of King William Street. The city centre looked nothing like Paisley, but at least the architecture suggested civilisation of sorts.

Our courtship by mail continued for nearly two years. One day at the RAI, I was called to the porters' room to receive a long-distance phone call. There was a buzz of gossip as I made for the phone. 'Hello?'

'Griselda, it's Reg. Will you marry me?'

'When?'

'You Scots always answer a question by asking another one! Is that a yes?'

'Yes! When?'

The speculation in Paisley was that Reg was an engineer or perhaps a doctor. When a magnificent solitaire diamond ring arrived shortly after Reg's phone call, he became a wealthy pastoralist.

My mother was saddened by the prospect of my emigration, but when the travel documents and first-class tickets for the P&O liner *Strathmore* arrived, she wished me genuine happiness in my new life across the waves, and promised to visit once I'd settled in.

It's a blessing I'm a sailor, because the *Strathmore* would have rolled on wet blotting paper. I enjoyed shipboard life, but the voyage seemed to take forever, and I was relieved to reach Adelaide's Outer Harbor to be met by Reg – looking as handsome as ever – when the ship docked at eleven on the night of 22 December 1950.

I was armed with two-dozen typed sheets of paper explaining every item in my two cabin trunks, and several suitcases crammed with wedding gifts, clothes, precious photographs and trinketry. But customs had shut up shop for the night! Next morning the arrivals shed was a bedlam of immigrants. As luck had it, the customs man was just married himself. He took one look at my huge list, chalked my trunks and cases and wished me 'a happy hitching'.

'Let's get out of here,' said Reg. 'Before he changes his mind.'

Soon afterwards I wondered whether I'd like to change mine. The

mercury was already well above the old century mark, but Reg was keen to show off the sights of Adelaide. Alas, one of the first was a poor fellow committing suicide from the top storey of a city building.

I doused a cigarette and threw it out of the car window. Reg immediately lectured me on how bushfires were caused. Next day, I heard sirens. There were fires in the city and in the hills. For a guilty moment, I thought it was all my fault.

In January, it got *really* warm. 'No sign of a cool change,' the radio announcers would recite daily. I was a guest in Australia and careful not to complain about the heat until the Adelaideans did so first. But people seemed more concerned with the test cricket scores. Quietly, I longed for some of the snow falling in Scotland, and I think that if it were not for the charms being lavished upon me by the wonderful Reg, and the hospitality of his family, I might have surrendered and gone home.

Just before our wedding I was attacked by a mob of mosquitoes. I had an allergy to the little blighters, and my entire body swelled up. My wedding dress left no room for mozzie-induced expansion. It was a twenty-two-inch waist, strapless Peter Mann model from London, although, judging from all the whalebone used to hold it up, it could have been built at John Brown's shipyard on the Clyde. I was saved by an injection of adrenalin, but my hands remained swollen. The jeweller was kind enough to lend me a larger ring for the ceremony.

We were married in Scots Church on North Terrace on 3 February 1951. At 6.30 pm a cool change obligingly arrived – and the temperature plummeted from 110 degrees Fahrenheit to a frigid 98! As we were walking back up the aisle after the ceremony a Scottish piper began to play, skirling with the guests all the way to the reception at St Helen's Townhouse in North Adelaide.

Of the ninety or so guests, I remember Sir Douglas Mawson the best. Just as Amy Johnson was my hero, Mawson of the Antarctic was Reg's idol. A living legend, he was Reg's professor at the University of Adelaide, a man who seemed to treat Reg as a father treats a son.

'You must be very fond of rocks and minerals,' Sir Douglas said to me, 'to be marrying Reg Sprigg.'



Newlyweds! 1951.

Until that moment I had not considered rocks and minerals, only Reg. 'To tell the truth,' I replied, 'the only rocks I know are Aberdeen granites, and you seem to be a bit light on for those out here.'

Sir Douglas stared at me wordlessly, looked across at Reg and shook his head, then looked at me again. I could imagine him thinking, This marriage will last about a fortnight.

Sir Douglas was a wise man, but if that is what he was thinking, he was wrong by forty-four years.

Radium Hill

Another of the guests at our wedding was Ben Dickinson, Reg's boss at the Mines Department. He interrupted our honeymoon at Lorne on the Victorian coast with instructions that Reg was needed in Melbourne to sort out some aspect of an Otway Basin oil exploration joint venture with the Victorian Geological Survey.

I was able to enjoy some sightseeing alone in Melbourne, but the episode made it clear that during our married life Reg would be off on impromptu assignments at the drop of a hat.

Back in Adelaide, we rented a cottage in suburban Tusmore and Reg made plans to hold our first dinner party. Unfortunately, the previous tenants had not been too fussy. The place was alive with cockroaches, skittering in the cupboards, climbing the walls, lurking behind the cooker. This was hideous, but I soon had them beaten, and Reg thanked his colleague Don Watson for earlier hospitality by asking him and his wife Nita to help us enjoy a roast leg of lamb.

I grew nervous. My mother had always employed maids, even a cook-general, who tolerated no interference in the kitchen. And I had no idea how long it took to cook a leg of lamb! 'Don't worry, dear,'

said Reg, when I confessed. 'I'll keep them drinking till you're ready.'

We dined that night at eleven. When Don and Nita reeled off into the wee small hours, I could almost hear Reg thinking that my culinary ineptitude was going to prove pretty sore on the grog bills.

We had been living in Tusmore a mere two weeks when Reg went bush again. For several years, since before we met and during the war, he had been involved in hush-hush uranium exploration operations at remote and unheard-of outback locations. The South Australian government under Tom Playford was apparently hoping that ore discoveries in places like East Painter in the far northern Flinders Ranges would help the state become an important participant in the development of nuclear power, which was already being talked about as the world's energy of the future. Reg's latest secret explorations were at a place called Radium Hill.

'Where is that, exactly?'

'Out along the road to Broken Hill. There's a turn-off east of Olary. Ten, fifteen miles from there.'

I still had no idea where Radium Hill was, but that was not my main concern. 'How long will you be gone?'

'I'm not sure. It might be a couple of weeks. I'd better get down to the depot and pick up the Chev.'

I couldn't bear to see him go. 'I'll come, too.'

He looked alarmed. 'To Radium Hill?'

'Silly! To the depot.'

When we arrived everyone had their noses in the newspaper choosing horses to back at the Victoria Park races. Reg was not interested in gambling, but one of the mechanics gave him a tip. 'Fleur de Lys, Reg. On the nose. Bonzer odds!'

Reg enquired politely what those odds might be. 'Fifteens, Reg, bloody fifteens. Put your house on it!'

Lacking a house, and having to get on the road to Radium Hill, Reg suggested I place the bet. I had no idea how. 'Well, ring Nita Watson and ask her to whack a fiver on for us.'

He dropped me off at the phone box near our street corner, tooted the Chev's horn, and disappeared. There was a long queue. Successive occupants conducted detailed conversations. When it came my turn, I was embarrassed to discover that I had forgotten not only the name of the horse, but also its number and the time of the race. To the amazement of the people lined up behind me, I didn't even place a call. Naturally, the horse romped home.

Reg was gone a week, back a few days, then gone again. Then he delivered the news that Radium Hill was going into full production and he was needed there 'more or less permanently'.

'I'm coming, too.'

'Griselda,' he protested. 'This is desert country, pretty rough. You've got webbed feet, for heaven's sake.'

'I'm coming.'

He tried again. 'Griselda, this is not women's country. It's camp ovens, portable showers ...'

'I don't care. If I don't come out there I'll never see you.'

'You'll be chief cook and bottle washer.'

'We'll be together.'

It was a dusty three hundred miles and more from Adelaide to Radium Hill. Reg tried to soothe my newly confessed fear of snakes by telling me that most Australians never saw a snake outside a zoo. He killed five that day alone.

Outside Peterborough we picked up a rather smelly swagman – a wanderer with his belongings wrapped in a bundle of bedding. I'd never seen such a person before and to me his solitude seemed as vast as the landscape. He rode in silence all the way to the Radium Hill turn-off and, when it came time to resume his foot-slogging, simply said, 'Thanks mate, missus, good luck.'

Good luck indeed – when I saw Reg's caravan half an hour later, I reckoned I'd be needing it.

The van was tiny, maybe fourteen feet long and half as wide. It stood alone on a low hillside that faced west into glaring late-afternoon

sunlight, protected only by some scrubby low trees and a canvas awning stretched over a framework of hand-hewn poles and guy-ropes. The landscaping consisted of a rock wall, some rolls of fencing wire and a rocky scree that would not have grazed a starving rabbit. I might as well have been on Mars.

‘Home sweet home,’ said Reg encouragingly as the Chev pulled to a dusty halt. ‘What about a cup of tea? I’ll fetch it and you can have a look around.’

I gave him a smile, determined not to appear crestfallen. Satisfied that all was well, he went to the back of the Chev and started lugging boxes of provisions into the caravan, yelling from within. ‘Kitchen’s a bit small for proper cooking, but we’ve got the power on now.’ A single wire trailed away on sticks and poles towards its invisible source. Reg emerged, blinking into the sunset. ‘I brought a kettle from town. Now I just have to find the bloody thing. Won’t be long.’

He resumed his rummaging. I wandered away and, once I was out of range of Reg’s tuneless whistling, it occurred to me how quiet it was, here on this hillside with absolutely no one in sight and a limitless horizon turning purple-red in the sunset. A flock of white cockatoos erupted out of a tree half a mile away, screeching as they wheeled away. The silence fell again, and the burnished blue sky kept deepening. I was looking out for the evening star when Reg appeared at my elbow with a chipped enamel mug steaming with well-steeped Bushells.

He didn’t say a word. Maybe he could tell that I had been filled with a thrilling sense of freedom. ‘Reg,’ I breathed, ‘it’s beautiful!’

If I was going to be a success at camp cooking, it was immediately obvious I needed more versatile implements than the primitive ones Reg had been using. So he took me to meet the mine blacksmiths and place my order.

Both were Scots and one of them looked very familiar. ‘Did you ever,’ I inquired of him, ‘have a compound fracture of the right forearm?’

‘Aye,’ said he, looking suspicious. ‘Fell from a gantry. Clyde Rubber



My palatial new home, Radium Hill, 1951.

Works at Renfrew.' Now he gave me a look of recognition. 'Was it you treated me at the Paisley Infirmary?'

I still have the tools he made me: a poker, a long-handled toasting fork and a set of irons for the barbecue stove Reg was building just outside the caravan. Whenever I see them, they remind me of home.

Our 'kitchen' also needed a large bowl for mixing bread. Reg said I could get one from Harry at the mine store, so I hiked the mile or so into the 'township' proper and made my inquiry.

'Bawl?' said Harry, looking mystified. 'Hang on a minute.' He went to the back of the store and I heard him whispering to his assistant. 'What in buggery is a "bawl"?' He returned empty-handed. 'What was it you wanted?'

'A bowl,' I said, making a circle with my arms. 'Brown on the outside with a lumpy pattern and white inside with what look like hair cracks where the enamel has dried.'

'Jeez!' said Harry, looking like a light bulb had flared in his skull. 'A bison! You mean a bloody bison. Hang on a tick.' He found the object of my desire and handed it over beaming.

Next we needed vegetables, which many Australians seemed to regard with as much fondness as rat bait. Reg used the rolls of wire to fence me a garden and I became a fledgling horticulturist, a venture that would have enjoyed more success if I had not had to contend with O'Reilly's bull.

Out in this sparse country, you could count the number of sheep or cattle per acre on a single hand. Apart from the miners the O'Reillys were our only near neighbours, and their bull preferred *our* acre. I first encountered the creature one night when our house on wheels started rocking violently. Terrified, Reg and I scrambled to the window and looked out to see the huge beast rubbing its backside against a corner of the van. Reg bellowed and the bull took off, but once the vegetable crop was in, fence or no fence, the bull was back for good, bringing his harem with him.

Reg tried first. He set up detonators and mild explosives, intending to put a blast across their bows when the bovine crew came over to forage. One of the milk cows almost ate a detonator, but Reg's fire-works failed. Pfft! Nothing.

So the intrusions continued. Even buckshot over the bull's head failed to stop him wrecking the fence. We reinforced it with rocks and poles so it looked like the perimeter of a prison camp. My vegies sprouted, tender and green, until the bull, sensing my crop was almost ready to eat, crashed through the fence once more.

I was home at the time, supine inside the caravan, resting from the heat. When I heard the twang of wire and the cracking of wood something snapped inside me. I jumped off the bed, grabbed the nearest weapon – which happened to be a carving fork – and charged outside yelling. The poor bull didn't stand a chance. He tried to flee but I caught up with him and buried the fork deep in his backside. He did not bother us again.

The Radium Hill community began to grow. These days it is a ghost town – the mine closed in 1961 after producing nearly sixteen million pounds worth of uranium oxide – but at its production peak the place

was home to hundreds of miners, many of them immigrants like me, living in prefabricated houses erected by the South Australian Housing Trust. Most were single men but some had families, their children going to school and their wives visiting the local library, perhaps even enjoying a dip in the Radium Hill swimming pool.



The metropolis begins to grow.

In those early days – for Reg and me, at least – bathing meant standing under the shower bucket that hung from a tree in our ‘garden’. Every day at lunchtime Reg returned from the mine and we would cart boiling bucket loads from the wood-fired copper and mix them with cold water before standing under the tree for a rinse. We gave no thought to our nakedness until one day Reg doubled the dose of boiling water and scalded me. I danced about in pain until I was astonished to hear laughter – and it was not Reg’s!

Five pre-fab houses were being built some distance from our van. Just close enough to see, even with my eyesight, the heads of the building crew were lined up at the nearest window, chortling like kids

at a slapstick movie. Reg later found out that they had turned our ritual into one of their own. Instead of going down to the mine mess for lunch, they brought sandwiches up to the building site. The sight of steam from the copper was their smoko signal. They had been entertained for weeks.

I tried to keep this episode in perspective. Apart from the few local farming wives and the first of the new township wives, I was a rare female in a man's world. These lads were lonely. I must have looked like Venus.

Besides, I had endured another, more painful public exposure. About twenty yards from our van was the outhouse, colloquially known as a 'long-drop dunny'. Every morning I scoured it with disinfectant and – as scared of spiders as I was of snakes – swept it clear of cobwebs. Despite these precautions, one morning I felt a bite on my backside and sprang up to see a red-back spider – which, as everyone knows, is a potential killer.

I fled like the neighbour's bull. The Royal Flying Doctor Service radio was kept in the van (my nursing skills meant that the Radium Hill sick call was held there), but even before I reached it my right leg and thigh had become huge with swelling. I dragged myself inside and switched on the set. Fortunately there was a doctor on call and he told me which injection to dose myself with. By the time Reg came up from the mine and killed the spider, the swelling had subsided and the chatter on the radio had turned to more mundane matters. But years later, a woman who lived on a station at the fringe of the Northern Territory's Tanami Desert recognised me thus: 'So you're the Scottish lass who got bitten on the bum by the Radium Hill red-back!' There are no secrets in the Australian bush.

Every Friday the mine workers at Radium Hill were issued with beer tickets. Like rations everywhere, they did not go far – not if you had the sort of thirst of those miners. I decided to help them out by selling Reg's ration to the highest bidder, and soon saved myself enough to buy a Hoover vacuum cleaner (would we ever own a house to use it in?).



Thirsty work in tough terrain.

‘You *are* adapting,’ said Reg when he discovered my ploy. ‘When did you do that?’

‘Fridays in the mess, waiting for you to come up from the mine.’

He had the sort of look that suggested I might be adapting a wee bit too quickly. ‘What else did you learn?’

‘Two up.’

‘Two up! No matter that it’s illegal. Next you’ll be wanting to go to the Yunta Races.’

‘Or perhaps the St Patrick’s meeting,’ I ventured. ‘It’s coming up at Broken Hill ...’

‘I suspect that this time you might remember the horse’s name ...’

I fell in love with Broken Hill as soon as we arrived there for the meet. Reg and I were strolling in the sunset when I started enthusing about the architecture, the townscape, the colours, the hills and just about everything else. Reg nodded quietly, only half listening.

‘What is it, Reg? Something wrong?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Well, what?’

My curly-headed man took a deep breath. ‘Not long before you came out to Australia I was offered a job here. One of the companies was looking for a chief geologist, at three times the pay I’m making now.’

‘You turned it down.’

‘I didn’t think you’d like the place.’

Finders Keepers

Crockers Well was west of Plumbago Station, wherever that was. Reg reckoned it might be another Radium Hill. A lot of other people hoped so, too.

Even though he was sworn to secrecy about the reasons why his explorations were regarded as so important, Reg did tell me that Ben Dickinson (his boss at the Mines Department) was not convinced that the Radium Hill uranium reserves were sufficient to serve future demands. The political pressure was on, from Canberra as well as Adelaide, to make a major find.

New technology was brought in to help. A Canadian gadget called an Airborne Scintillometer was attached to an ancient Avro Anson plane, nicknamed 'Duck' because it was low-slung, slow-moving and very low-flying. For days on end Reg and a geophysicist named Ken Seedsman, who had come up from Adelaide to lead the search, scoured the landscape aboard the strange little plane looking for what they called 'anomalies'. They found a big one at Crockers Well.

They came rushing back to Radium Hill to deliver the news one afternoon in June 1951. 'We've got to get out there!' demanded Reg,

excitement raging in his eyes. 'We have to confirm the find on the ground.'

'Reg,' I said, 'it's getting late. You can wait until tomorrow.'

Reg gave Ken a desperate look. Ken took his cue and, looking very official, said, 'This is urgent business, Griselda.'

'Come with us,' urged Reg. 'See for yourself. A new discovery!'

In all the excitement, nobody told me we would be camping out. They certainly did not mention that we would not reach our destination until nine that night. Nor did they say that we would be driving on tracks used, until now, only by mustering horses and light-footed sheep dogs called kelpies. We took the Chev, a billy to boil water for tea, a packet of biscuits and two blankets into one of the coldest nights I have ever experienced.

Once we finally arrived Reg scurried about collecting wood. He built an enormous fire in a dry creek bed. Ken started removing rocks from the surrounding area and making 'hippoles', which I learned are literally holes in the hard ground in which to rest your hip. While I wondered what on earth Ken meant, Reg announced I would be needing a pillow. He scanned the cloudless, starry heavens for inspiration then started stuffing pieces of rotting sheep fleece into a hessian sack. I was underwhelmed. 'Thank you, Reg. I'm sure I shall now sleep so much more soundly.'

Sleep is not what you would call it. The pillow turned out to be infested with insects called 'saw beetles' after the noise they make when they chew the tiny twigs caught in the fleece. When I was not being squashed by one of the men as they tossed and wriggled in hopeless attempts to keep warm beneath our pathetic blankets, I had the sensation that I was being buried by beetles.

Morning could not come soon enough. When at last it did, we breakfasted briefly on tea and biscuits and then the men were off, armed with Geiger counters and geological picks. I was just collecting the mugs and our plate to stow them away when Reg started yelling. 'Over here! Look at this!'

I put the crockery on the Chev's rounded mudguard and hurried off to where Ken was already standing. The two of them were examining a lump of something waxy-green, and the Geiger counter was going berserk. 'It's bloody hot!' breathed Ken.

'There's more down here. Look!' They unearthed more and larger pieces of the strange greenish rock. 'Pseudo hexagonal form,' said Reg. 'We're on to something here.'

'But what is it?' Ken asked. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

'Me neither. Could be hatchettolite. Might be brannerite. I don't think so, though. Let's call it "AbSite", after the scintillometer.'

Ken was more concerned about making sure the discovery was not just a freak outcrop. The two men slaved all morning, gridding an area of two or three hundred square yards, and jabbering excitedly about 'network anomaly patterns' while I carried their samples back to the Chev, my belly rumbling and, as the sun wheeled over the yard-arm, my thoughts consumed by the prospect of another night with the saw beetles.

Reg and Ken quit a few hours before dark, but now there was a new urgency in their eyes. 'All aboard,' ordered Reg. 'We're off to Plumbago.'

'Whatever for?'

'To use their radio to report the find,' said Ken as if he was stating the obvious. 'We must get word to the Chief.'

So we rattled and bumped back along the mustering track. An hour or so later we arrived at Plumbago Station and the men ran off to announce themselves and make their report.

I stood transfixed. The breakfast plate and three enamel mugs were still there on the Chev's mudguard where I had forgotten them.

Adelaide was grateful for the news. It was proposed that a campsite should be established at Crockers Well to 'prove up' the find.

But there was instant bickering about the nature of the mineral Reg and Ken had discovered, and what it should be called. Reg was angry that 'AbSite' was not accepted immediately and without question.

He was, after all, an expert – for years the only South Australian uranium specialist in the field. He bit his tongue and set about organising the camp.

It was a major improvement on the previous one-night stand. In addition to Reg, Ken and me, there was a young driver sent up from Adelaide with a provisioning truck, and twins named Jim and Paddy Cain. When I asked about them, Reg was able to explain some of the history of the projects he was involved in.

‘I met them during the war up at the Mount Painter diggings. It was 1944 and I’d just joined the Mines Department from CSIR [the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research], all because of the Mount Painter project and the need for uranium as a source of wartime munitions. It was a high-priority, secret venture. I was mapping the area and Jim and Paddy were prospecting it. They found more up there, too, not long ago, but by then Ben Dickinson and Premier Tom Playford and Prime Minister Bob Menzies, and apparently the Americans too, had all decided that Radium Hill was the way to go. So Jim and Paddy are coming down here to help.’

The Cain brothers had big appetites, so it was a bonus that we also had a cook, named Paul, who arrived with a truck of his own and a battered but efficient wood stove. My main job at dinner time was to wave a tea towel to shoo the flies while Paul carved the evening roast.

We camped at Crockers Well for six weeks. It was a ‘dry’ camp, not a drop of grog in sight. The men worked tirelessly by day and slept like the dead at night, their faces peaceful with fatigue. I kept alert for centipedes and scorpions until, at last, I too felt trusting enough to fall asleep and be glad I was not dreaming of Scotland.

Then strange events took over. Maybe they had been happening before, but I had not noticed.

One day Reg made a run to Radium Hill from the Crockers camp and returned in a foul temper. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘Nothing, dear.’

I persisted, but he stumped off to where the men were digging.

That night he sat by himself at the fire, brooding into the embers. I went to sit beside him. He anticipated my question. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

He took a breath. 'The Chief's not letting me see the mineralogical reports on the Davidite samples I sent from Radium Hill. I asked him why. All he'd say is that it's top secret. They're getting so paranoid down there that they won't even tell their own geologists what they've found.'

'Politics,' I said, as if that explained everything. After all, there was a Cold War going on. The Russians had detonated their own atomic bomb, and Reg was not prospecting uranium for the fun of it.

'Politics be buggered. I'm a scientist. How am I supposed to do my job if I can't have access to my own bloody data?'

'Surely you don't think Ben regards you as a security risk?'

'I don't know what to think. Maybe not Ben. It's not just the Davidite reports. Now the mine's up and running again, I'm starting to get the feeling they don't want me at Radium Hill at all.'

'Maybe it's just that you're best when you're out exploring. They have plenty of miners, but not too many field geologists. That's why we're camping here, because of what you found.'

'It's what the scintillometer found.'

'Now you're feeling sorry for yourself.'

I soothed my man with wifely ministrations. The stars watched on.

Our driver's mother fell ill and he had to return to Adelaide. Ken's job was done, so he went too. A few days later, just before we were officially due to break camp, Reg also started looking ill. He was coughing and running a fever so we decided we might as well break camp all together and call it a day.

'Me and the Cains are going to Olary,' Paul said to Reg and me. 'Bit of a refreshment run. Wanna come?'

I stepped in straight away. 'The only refreshment Reg needs is an antibiotic.'

‘You blokes go,’ said Reg, although he looked as much in need of a nip to bolster his flagging energies as he did that night on the Isle of Arran. ‘We’ll meet you back at Radium Hill.’

We loaded essentials into the Chev and everything else into Paul’s truck, which was soon piled about ten feet high and topped with the camp beds and mattresses and a layer of swags. The trio set off in high spirits, anticipating a skinful.

Back in our caravan, I dosed Reg with drugs and ordered him to rest. He obeyed without question and slept like a child.

Sometime after midnight there was a rap on the van door. ‘Reg! Griselda! It’s me, Paul. I can’t find Jim and Paddy!’

Reg was barely conscious. ‘Say that again?’

‘I’ve lost ’em. Somewhere on the road. They must have fallen off.’

‘Fallen off! Off what?’

‘The truck, Reg. Jeez they were pissed. Pardon me, Griselda. But they’d had about fifty too many. I got ’em out at closing time. They climbed up on top of the swags and wouldn’t come down even if they could. They passed out, see. So I just left ’em there and started driving home. I took it easy, I swear I did.’

I told Reg to stay in bed, but he insisted on joining the search. We climbed into Paul’s truck and backtracked along the road, zig-zagging, left side and right side, shining the headlights into the roadside gutters, all the way to Olary and all the way back to Radium Hill. There was no sign of bodies.

‘We’re going to have to wait until dawn,’ said Reg, looking like death warmed up but defiantly consulting the luminous dials of his watch. ‘That gives us an hour. We might as well unload the truck in the meantime.’

Paul lent a hand. About half-way through the process – with one of them resting on the wood stove and the other wedged between two camp beds – we found the Cain brothers, fast asleep and completely unharmed.

As Radium Hill grew into a town and the mine's output reached full capacity, so the growing number of bureaucrats and their obsession with security increasingly irritated Reg.

He probably would have done it anyway, but when I told him I thought I was pregnant his face cleared and he smiled for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

'That's wonderful! And that settles it. I've had enough of this place. I'll get Ben to transfer me back to Adelaide. We're going house hunting!'

5

The Great Australian Dream

The house at 5 Baker Street, Somerton Park, was an L-shaped affair built by the Housing Trust. It had bare pine floors and was completely empty of anything built-in – the rooms were shells. But I went around turning on all the taps and marvelling at the water gushing from gleaming tap to gleaming sink. A proper laundry, a real bathroom – the place was heaven. We purchased the house outright using money we had accumulated thanks to wedding gifts, beer rations and savings from Reg's salary, which totalled about 3000 pounds per year.

There was not much cash left over for furnishings and, with building materials so scarce as Australia continued its post-war recovery, we were forced to improvise. Near the mine at Radium Hill was an ever-growing pile of empty tongue-and-groove wooden boxes that were originally used to transport explosives from a factory at Stevenson in south-western Scotland. (When I was nursing at Ballochmyle, I had made a dressing table from the very same boxes.) Reg had negotiated a price with the mine manager. For sixpence apiece, we could have every box we could cart away. Ben Dickinson had not yet completely released Reg from his Radium Hill and Crockers Well duties, so every time he took his trusty

Chev back to the Hill, it returned piled high. We hand-made our cupboards and chairs, and found some second-hand Indian rugs. My mother sent a lovely Persian one. Together, Reg and I fitted a precious piece of Wilton carpet into the main bedroom. Ma Sprigg gave us a good garden table and chairs. I loved it all. I was building a nest for my children.

The nest often turned out to be a lonely one. Margaret arrived on 22 June 1952. Reg was not there to take me to the hospital when my labour began. And he was away so often that he missed much of Marg's infancy. He was beyond Woomera when his mother died. Instead of the music at Ma Sprigg's funeral, he heard the blast of Australia's first atmospheric atomic bomb test. Reg was also in the field when his brother died.

All of these events took place over nearly two years. Reg felt terrible: it seemed that every time something important happened, he was off in the bush collecting samples. Family tragedies intensified his frustrations with the politics of his job. 'I've slaved in the scrub for ten years,' he complained on one rare night at home late in 1953. 'I've found uranium. There's oil out there, and God knows what else! But now we're told that us geologists are there to serve the engineers and the miners and we have to jump when the security boffins tell us to. We found the stuff in the first place! Where's the thanks? I tell you, Griselda, I've had enough.'

Marg had been suffering allergies. The medicine of the day was struggling to do much for her and I was not coping well myself. For an instant I felt like telling Reg that I'd had enough too, and could he not – for once – find a way to stay in town?

Instead, I made the suggestion that changed our lives forever. 'Maybe you should get out.'

There came a light in his eye. 'And do what? Throw away security and start consulting?'

He'd been thinking, out there in the scrub. I nodded. 'Exactly! There must be other customers for your rocks and minerals than the government of South Australia.'

Reg considered this for about half a second. 'They've found a flow of oil in Western Australia just over from where we were surveying last year. There are Americans and French and Brits all over the place.' He hesitated. 'But, Griselda ...'

'Yes?'

'We won't have any money.'

'We don't have any now. And, Reg, I believe I'm pregnant again. But I *still* think you should do it.'

I remember typing his resignation. At first it was not accepted. But on 12 March 1954, with the official company registration of Geosurveys of Australia Pty Ltd, thirty-five-year-old Reginald Sprigg became the master of his own destiny.

Ours was the first geological consulting company in Australia. The nature of the business was risk, real money being invested in the hope of a bonanza. Reg needed clients prepared to put their faith in his skills and – if we were to feed our family – he needed them soon.

We went into overdraft to buy a Land Rover and some basic field equipment. But in those early weeks of his 'freedom', Reg seemed to be spending more time in Adelaide than in the bush, meeting with established local tycoons like *Advertiser* chairman John Bonython and assisting with setting up a new oil and gas exploration company now famous as SANTOS. It was incorporated in 1954 and, on Reg's advice, SANTOS soon acquired exploration leases covering about 200,000 square miles of South Australian and south-western Queensland desert country. Reg would continually enthuse about how 'petroliferous' the region was, how promising, and how there were ancient sedimentary rocks out there that just *had* to be perfect for the formation of folds and pockets full of 'liquid gold' – oil.

But it turned out that the SANTOS explorations would take several years to produce profitable results. At first, there was nothing. I could almost hear the sneers: 'He won't last long. Soon he'll be crying for his old job back.'

Then a uranium prospecting promoter named Frank Drummond came up with a thousand-pound advance retainer and the promise of eight thousand more for a year's consulting with a company called UDP. John Bonython funded a trip for Reg to Perth and the Pilbara region of Western Australia. He picked up consultancies looking for unpronounceables like amblygonite and tantalum. He was soon to be seen seeking gold near Pine Creek and uranium east of Katherine in the Northern Territory. Stock brokers started asking him to help with prospectus preparations for the new breed of companies which were forming to get a piece of the action as Australia's minerals boom began.

In a matter of months Reg was hiring staff, and because field geologists were still such a rare commodity, he was soon offering rates that outstripped salaries commanded by senior people in Canberra's Bureau of Mineral Resources. In its lifetime, Geosurveys of Australia employed more than 400 people. At its peak, we had 130 workers on the payroll.

Having staff did not still the workaholic in Reg. In November 1954, he was away in Western Australia when a double emergency occurred.

The first drama involved one of the Geosurveys exploration parties in the Tomkinson Ranges, corner country where Western Australia meets South Australia and the Northern Territory. They had run out of water, and the weather was getting hot. I was holding the fort at home, bulgingly pregnant, when word came through. By radio, I managed to contact Molly Breaden at Todmorden Station, which lies along a track about fifty miles north-west of Oodnadatta. Molly said she would try to get in touch with Frank Quinn, the water-carrier at Finke, and ask him to make the 300-mile trek to the border.

By the time I received word that Frank was on his way with the water, so was Douglas, my second baby. Reg was due back in Adelaide some time during the next few days, but Douglas was *not* waiting. I pinned a note on the door: 'By the time you read this you will likely be a father again. Food on the table.' I left two-year-old Margaret with my good neighbours, wedged myself into the second of our Land Rovers



Family portrait, 1955.

and drove myself to Calvary Hospital where, on 22 November 1954, Douglas – who we named after Sir Douglas Mawson – arrived in the world five weeks premature.

Five days later Reg bustled into the recovery room to meet his new child and apologise to its mother for being away so long at such a crucial time. He beamed, gave me a kiss of congratulations, then apologised again. ‘There’s work to be done. I’m due at the accountant’s office. Probably I’ll be there till three am. Tomorrow the International Nickel reps are in from Canada. I’m going with them – up to Mount Davies.’

This was where the water drama had taken place. I briefed him on the successful mercy dash from Finke and – even though I was already starting to feel lonely again – gave him my bravest smile. ‘See if you can say hello to Margie before you go.’

6

Camp Followers

Doug was potty trained before he turned one. This was a good thing, because the only way Reg was going to see his children growing up would be for me and the children to abandon Baker Street as often as possible and go bush with him.

The early omens were not promising. We went with Reg to a SANTOS test-drilling site at Wilkatana, a place between Port Augusta and the southern tip of a huge lake called Lake Torrens. Still almost totally ignorant of matters geographical, I expressed my surprise that there was a lake all the way out in such parched country.

‘No dear,’ Reg said patiently. ‘It’s a *salt* lake. Sometimes known as a playa. They fill with run-off from rare flooding rains, then they dry up again and the mudflats get big cracks in them and mineral crusts with stuff like gypsum. There’s a ring of salt lakes in South Australia circling the Flinders Ranges. Lake Torrens is one of the big ones. Lake Eyre is the biggest – its basin is the one the explorer Charles Sturt must have been looking for when he came seeking the fabled Inland Sea. Too bad for him: it was a sea, all right, but it was all laid bare more than 60 million years ago.’

‘Oh,’ I said, as Reg pulled up on a flat, red-brown place fringed by stunted low scrub. ‘Is this a salt lake, too?’

‘No. This is a claypan.’ He gave me an indulgent smile. ‘It’s a similar idea though. Run-off drains in locally, has nowhere to go, can’t get through the clay, so it dries off and the crust bakes hard in the sun. You see these blighters *everywhere*, Griselda. Surely you remember them from Radium Hill?’

‘After Crockers Well, Reg, I believe I preferred the two-up school,’ I said with feeling, placing Doug in his stroller and preparing to push him across the claypan to where the drill rig had been established. It was very hot, and soon I was dripping with sweat. Beyond the claypan the country became rough and stony, and the stroller broke its axle. I carried my toddler through the rest of our visit, guiltily wondering whether home, hearth and kitchen were not, in fact, my proper place. But I persisted, and one day not long afterwards, much further north near Oodnadatta, Marg found a fossilised cuttlefish. She showed the rock to Reg proudly. He examined the find and gave her a huge hug.

I watched in fascination. ‘I do believe, Reg, that I detect a tear in your eye.’

He nodded, blinking. ‘Reminds me of rambling about the cliffs at Stansbury when I was a kid. I found my first fossil when I was five. She’s beaten me by a year!’

‘She has a fine teacher.’

He grinned. ‘We’re going to have to buy the kids some sleeping bags. They seem to enjoy this sleeping-under-the-stars caper.’

The Sprigg children began their bush education, and Doug and Marg and I became regular camp followers.

In 1956 our little clan ventured far out west into the Gibson Desert via Ayers Rock and the Olgas. Today, of course, these places are world famous – you can fly in and ‘camp’ at five-star hotels – and they’re known by their Aboriginal names, Uluru and Katatjuta. We rattled there on an endless strand of dusty track, choking on the fine outback bulldust, skirting wind-blown drifts of red sand, and if I had been

told the beautiful Aboriginal names then, I think I would have found them about as pronounceable as ‘arkose’ and ‘tectonic conglomerate’, which is how Reg romantically described those remarkable rocks of the red centre.

Further west, hundreds more miles beyond the Rock, we came to Warburton Mission, where naked Aboriginal children ran up ahead of the elders to greet us and ask for cigarettes.

The mission house had been flooded a season or two before. There were mud marks staining the walls. Now the place was parched, the sky a vast blue barren bowl, the heat mirage like a siren with its promise of water on the far horizon.

From Warburton we began the return journey, heading first towards Mount Davies in the Tomkinson Ranges to visit the nickel deposit the Canadians were still excited about. Reg paused often en route to scan the terrain. On one of these stops – the desert so silent that the breeze seemed to roar – we heard the distant rumble of a heavy lorry. As it came into view, we could see there was a dingo perched on top of the driver’s cab.

‘That’s young Winston Greenwood!’ said Reg.

It amazed me there was *anybody* out there in that deserted wilderness, let alone somebody Reg actually knew. ‘Who?’

‘Winston! Winston and Bentley Greenwood.’ He started waving like a lunatic at the approaching truck. ‘I must have told you about those lads?’

‘No, Reg, you haven’t.’

‘I met them as little tackers in the Flinders Ranges when Mawson took us on field trips. You know, the Mount Painter uranium field – all that? Their Grandpa, W.B., made the original discovery in 1910. The family runs Arkaroola Station, near the ...’

Reg could not finish his sentence, or if he did, I did not hear it. There was a blast from the lorry’s horn as the driver recognised Reg and braked his truck. It had barely stopped before the dingo jumped down to say hello and Winston Greenwood followed suit, pumping Reg’s hand. Eventually Reg managed to introduce me and the kids and ask Winston if he wanted to join us for lunch.

‘It’s canned stuff, though,’ he apologised. ‘We haven’t been shooting.’

Winston looked almost insulted. He tipped his hat at me to excuse himself, then said: ‘Bugger that! Wait till you see what’s in my tuckerbox.’

He returned to his truck and hefted out a 1950s’ forerunner of the esky, lifting the lid to reveal a colossal chunk of fresh beef. ‘It was hit by a truck near Erldunda. Butchered it myself.’ He produced a lethal skinning knife. ‘Build us a fire, Reg. We’ll have some *proper* tucker.’

The children watched agog as Winston sliced strips of steak. ‘You kids’ll love this! It’s good for the blood!’ They giggled nervously and looked at me for reassurance that we were not dealing with a maniac.

The steak was delicious. While we ate, the two men reminisced about their days in the mountain country of the far northern Flinders Ranges. The kids fed scraps to the dingo. Still the talk continued and I had the uncanny sense that this was not to be the only time I would be meeting Winston Greenwood.

‘What’s that sparkly stuff on the road, Daddy?’

At first, Daddy did not respond. The ‘road’ was in fact nothing more than a two-wheel rutted track and Reg was concentrating on keeping us alive. When Marg repeated her question, it was I who ventured an answer. ‘I think it’s laterite, dear.’

Reg gave me a sideways glance and nearly sent me through the windscreen as he stopped the Land Rover. He climbed out to fossick, collected a sample of the ‘sparkly stuff’ and examined it minutely. He returned to the car.

‘Laterite. Clay enriched in ferric hydroxides. Hardens and rusts, clinker-like, when exposed to the air.’ He addressed the children. ‘For years your mother has shown no interest in geology. Then she goes and makes her first geological observation, and strike me down if she isn’t correct!’

It was getting dark when we reached the Mount Davies turn-off. We saw another Land Rover, heading our way.

‘That’ll be Len Beadell,’ said Reg, squinting into the distance like a dog recognising a familiar scent. ‘Surely you’ve heard of him?’

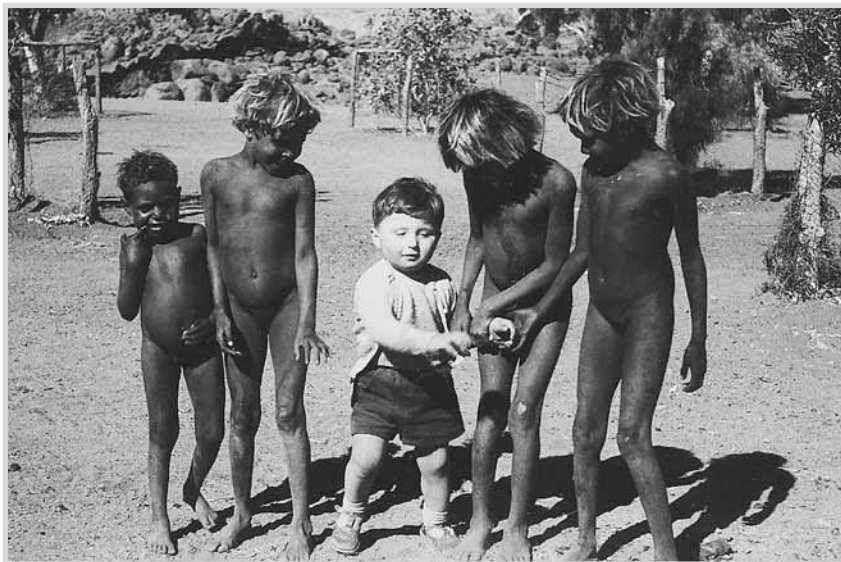
Of course I had. Len Beadell was a celebrity. Officially, he was a reconnaissance officer at the Woomera Rocket Range. He had surveyed the missile firing lines. He selected the ‘Emu’ site for the British atomic bomb testing back in 1953 and now he was building his famous network of outback roads, graded dirt tracks like the Gun Barrell Highway, linking outback South Australian sites like Emu and the Maralinga British nuclear testing site with the faraway weather station at Giles in Western Australia. I remember seeing photos of Len Beadell in the newspaper being presented to the Duke of Edinburgh and receiving honours from the British Commonwealth.

‘I wonder what he’s doing all the way out here,’ said Reg. ‘I hope they’re not going to bomb our bloody nickel.’

Far from it. Len and his crew were bulldozing a road from Mount Davies south-east towards what would become Anne’s Corner (named for his lovely young wife) then east to Emu. Len had left his crew, Scotty Boord and Doug Stoneham, to go for petrol and parts, though he told me he was on an errand for toothpaste! Naturally I offered him some of ours, and after the courtesies and introductions, Len invited us to join the boys for another enormous meal of steak and chips, to which – when I noticed the ulcers on Len’s legs – I insisted be added some of our canned peas and carrots, as well as canned peaches for dessert. Len had been too long in the bush on his limited diet. The boys thought it was a huge joke when I dressed his ulcers and presented him with a clean pair of Reg’s socks.

‘Socks!’ they cheered. Len had never worn them under his green hide boots.

We came back to Adelaide via Ernabella Mission, where two-year-old Douglas was befriended by a quartet of giggling Aboriginal girls. He has fancied himself with the ladies ever since. And by the end of that



Doug discovers girls at Ernabella Mission.

trip, Doug had also become a 'bushie' for life. A soft bed at Baker Street was no place for Doug. He preferred the floor. As for my 6.30 bedtime rule, it was becoming tougher by the day to enforce. 'When are we going again?' he would demand wide-eyed.

When Reg told me there was exploration action near Innamincka, and that some seismic equipment was needed there, I was able to tell him, 'Soon.'

The Talcum Touch

Our next journey proved an epic exploration.

The first leg of our route took us from Adelaide to Wooltana Station on the north-eastern fringe of the Flinders Ranges, then across the top of Lake Frome and all the way to Hawkers Gate in far western New South Wales, following the dry bed of Yandama Creek.

‘Are you sure you want to go that way?’ This was Joe Ford, the station manager at Wooltana. ‘It’s a hundred miles to Hawkers Gate and there’s nothing in between. No one’s gone that way in forty years.’

Actually, it was forty-one years. As usual when his bush skills were challenged, Reg merely shrugged and observed that we were well equipped. ‘But just to be on the safe side,’ he said, ‘we’ll notify you by radio when we get to Hawkers Gate.’

‘Make sure you do.’

‘It’ll take a few days. There are four old bores out there – I think they might be petroliferous. We have to find them and test them.’

‘How’d you do that?’

‘Light a match and see what happens.’

Joe looked at Reg as if this confirmed his lunacy. But he wished us luck and we were on our way.

We followed a track that led north towards Moolawatana Station, but we never intended to go there. Reg was alert for a turn-off that would lead us to the east, across the top end of Lake Frome but south of the region's other big salt lake, Callabonna. We found it easily enough, and navigated the gap between the two vast and glaring salty surfaces. Not far ahead, I saw what looked like a fence. As we steered closer, I could see it was a fence all right – new-ish, tall and very sturdy.

'Ah, the Dingo Fence,' Reg said. 'It's the longest fence in the world. Runs from out near Fowler's Bay on the eastern edge of the Nullarbor Plain and zig-zags all over the place – up past Coober Pedy, below Lake Eyre, back up beyond the top of the Flinders Ranges down to where we are here, round Lake Frome and across to the New South Wales border.'

Reg pulled up at a gate, got out, opened it, drove us through, got out again to close it, and drove on as I looked at the fence that stretched away to the horizon and wondered what it divided.

'We're in dingo country now,' said Reg. 'Not that you'd notice the difference. Here you'll see no sheep. Back on the other side it's supposed to be safe to keep a flock. That's what the fence is for, to protect the sheep from dingo raids. When we get to Hawkers Gate we'll cross it again. It goes all the way through to the coast of Queensland.'

'Does it work?'

'Yes and no. Put it this way, I'm glad I'm not the poor bugger who has to keep it maintained.'

Beyond the fence the ground was pitted like a beach of crab holes. I navigated while Reg negotiated. The kids giggled over their games of 'I spy' or dozed in the back, but they were wide awake when we found the first bore.

Every one of us must have been an arsonist at heart. But before we could indulge our pyromania, we had to listen as Reg explained that, normally, bores do not catch fire. He thumped the rusty, dried-up well-pipe with a fist, and kicked the shaft that disappeared vertically into the ground. 'This shaft would have penetrated an underground

water source – an aquifer – and the water gets forced to the surface by hydrostatic pressure. It's also possible there's natural gas or some other flammable substance trapped down there too, like the water. Let's have a look.'

He set a match to the mouth of the pipe. For a moment nothing happened, then a clean flare of flame appeared. The children cheered as it grew in intensity, but soon the flame began to wane, and Reg doused it with a hessian sack and a plug of sand. 'Let's go and find another one.' Marg and Doug were in the car in seconds.

It was tremendous fun lighting the fires and watching the bore pipes flare. Reg let the kids light the flames and I danced around with them in the westerling sun, a wild tribe of three, while Reg took his notes and smiled on our craziness.

We camped the first night in the Yandama creekbed, stars blazing overhead. Just before dawn I woke to find that Marg's swag was empty. I searched the camp perimeter and inside the Land Rover, but she was nowhere to be seen. In a panic I woke Reg and we widened the search. For a few dreadful minutes I was convinced she had back-tracked to find a bore to torch, but then we saw her, wandering innocently, picking wildflowers.

'For you, Mummy.' It was impossible to be angry, but after that we decided the camp rule would be that Doug and Marg should sleep between Reg and me. We would peg a groundsheet over the top of us, so that if either of the children moved in the night, we would know about it. This proved to be an excellent policy, but for a different reason.

Not far from Quinana Bore the map indicated a ruin. 'I didn't know anyone tried settling this area,' said Reg when I showed him. 'Let's keep an eye out.'

The kids were asleep when we found a hut set on a rise on the northern side of the creekbed, with a row of river gums behind and a pepper tree in front. It looked inviting, and Reg suggested we park under the pepper tree and have lunch. We crossed the creekbed and made our way towards the hut.

Then, as we approached, the pepper tree became a savannah gum, and the hut vanished completely. Reg hit the brakes. We sat for a long time in silence, looking at the empty space.

I glanced at my watch and saw it was noon. I ventured an explanation. 'The old explorers had some odd experiences at this time of day.'

Reg said nothing. Then, sounding baffled, he said, 'Next we'll be seeing Charles Sturt paddling down the creek. Let's each make a sketch of what we saw.'

For the sake of my sanity, I agreed. We separated and started drawing. Reg could have been an artist if he had not gone in for rocks and minerals. His work was far superior to mine, but the resulting lay-outs were identical.

At dusk we found the last of the four bores and fired it. Next morning we made our way to Hawkers Gate, which was uninhabited except for a single station hand who looked like he was living life from the inside of a bottle.

'Where yous from?' he asked. Reg explained our purpose and our route so far.

'Bull!' said the man. 'No one's crossed the Yandama in a hundred years, maybe two.'

'Well, I can assure you that we did,' Reg said politely. 'Could you do us a favour?'

'Course, mate! What?'

'Radio Joe Ford at Wooltana Station and tell him we're safely across.'

'Tell 'im yourself, if you want. Radio's just inside.'

Reg declined, saying we had to get moving. 'Just when you get the chance.'

'No worries. Are you sure you came along the Yandama?'

'We did.'

'Yandama Creek?'

'Dry as a bone, but yes. The very one.'

'Jeez! Rather you than me. Don't you know the place is haunted?'

The station hand forgot to radio Joe Ford. By the time the search party was getting into action, we were camped about ten miles south-

west of Tibooburra – frequently the hottest place in outback New South Wales and not far from the side of the rough road that snaked south towards Milparinka and kept going all the way to Broken Hill.

We finished dinner and, as the fire died down to embers, put the kids between us and laid out our swags to doze off. I was still ruminating on the disappearing ruins, and wished I could see the Milky Way instead of a dark tarpaulin.

In the outback you can hear a vehicle approaching about five miles before it arrives. Marg and Doug usually made a game of it, counting down the seconds. I heard the distant revving, but this night the kids and Reg were dead to the world. I started having anxious fantasies. It was not long since the ‘sundowner murders’, in which roadside parkers like us had been brutally slain. The killings were still unsolved and the suspect, I recalled, was believed by police to be travelling in a cream-coloured Ford Zephyr with a dark burgundy vinyl roof.

The car came closer, slowed, stopped. It was a Zephyr, but it was too dark to see its colour. When the single occupant opened the car door, leaving the engine idling, and the cabin light came on, I saw two rifles propped upright on the front seat. You could have heard my heart beating from Adelaide.

The driver made a circuit of our Land Rover, peering in the windows but touching nothing. Then he started circling us. I dared breathe no sound lest the murderer discover he was dealing with a woman, but I was praying that Reg had woken up, or that the killer was thinking he saw the shapes of four burly men.

Then came a growling ‘G’day’. It was Reg. He sounded alert and threatening.

‘G’day,’ replied the man casually. He squatted down behind us. I could barely see him, but I could tell he was rolling a cigarette. ‘You wouldn’t know how much further to Tibooburra, would you?’

‘Ten miles, maybe twelve.’ I had never heard Reg sound so unfriendly.

There was a pause as the man lit up and exhaled. ‘Glad it’s close. I’m headin’ for the hospital. Busted my ribs when I fell off a horse.’

‘Fair dinkum.’ Reg plainly did not believe a word our visitor was saying. Neither did I. If he had broken ribs, how could he possibly be squatting comfortably and smoking?

‘Yeah,’ said the man. ‘Mount Sturt Station. You heard of it?’

If he worked at Mount Sturt Station, how could he not know the distance to Tibooburra?

‘Yes,’ said Reg, sounding very nasty now. ‘We’re *going* there, in the morning.’

That was enough for our stranger in the night. ‘I guess I better get moving if I’m gonna find a nurse to fix me up.’

‘Guess you’d better.’

The man wandered away. I could see the glow of his cigarette as he stopped at his car and looked back towards us.

Next morning we went to Mount Sturt and made enquiries. They had never heard of the man. We also discovered that half the outback was looking for us.

From Tibooburra we made the 150-mile run across the Strzelecki Desert to Cooper Creek and Innamincka on a rough track that most of the time was buried beneath deep sand drifts. After the nights of camping, Innamincka was luxurious.

Geosurveys had purchased three old double-decker buses to serve as kitchen, offices and sleeping quarters for the staff Reg employed at the exploration base, so we were able to stay for several days in what seemed like wondrous comfort – except that Margaret somehow caught measles and, in addition to overseeing her treatment, I had to keep little Doug isolated from his sister.

Together, Doug and I went exploring. We picnicked at Nappa Merrie waterhole and visited the famous Dig Tree, where I told Doug – as best I knew it myself – the tragic story of the 1860–61 Burke and Wills expedition.

‘Burke and Wills were explorers,’ I started.

‘Like us?’

‘Yes, except long ago. The boss was Mr Burke, and he wanted to be the first explorer to go from the bottom of Australia all the way to the top.’

‘Did he do it?’

‘Yes, but it was quite a mess. He had lots of helpers and camels to carry everyone’s baggage, but he was in such a rush that when he arrived here, at Cooper Creek, he was a long, long way ahead of his friends.’

‘Did he wait for them?’

‘Yes, for a while. But he got tired of waiting, so he took Mr Wills and two other men, Mr King and Mr Gray, and some of the camels, and tried to hurry from here all the way north and back again, as quickly as they could go, and be back here in time to meet up with everyone else. The trouble was, by the time Burke and Wills returned, everyone else had been here and gone again.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, they had been told to wait, and they did. They were told to wait only for three months and they actually waited for four. When Burke and Wills were on their way back Mr Gray died, so they spent a whole day burying him in the hard stony ground. That day made all the difference – the people who were waiting for them left to go home just one day before Burke and Wills arrived back.’

‘What happened next?’

‘Burke and Wills had nothing left to eat, so they died, too.’

Doug looked around at the lush waterhole and was puzzled. ‘How come?’

‘Some people say they should have taken more notice of what the Aboriginal people were eating. Anyway, they died and Mr King was found nearby, living with the local Aborigines.’

Doug still looked puzzled, but he just nodded. ‘Do the Aborigines still live here?’

‘I think so. They come and go.’

‘Like us.’

Back at Innamincka we wandered among the ruins and I wondered what it must have been like to be a nurse with the Australian Inland Mission, staffing the now ruined Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home. I admired the the old hotel and police station, one next to the other. The original hotel was built not long after the police station, which was erected in 1882. Both were closed in 1952 – the hotel first, and then the police station. Apparently with the hotel shut there was no great need for the enforcers of law and order.

The hotel had a huge bottle heap, from which we pulled out antique glass to add to my rapidly expanding collection of outback heritage items. In the cobwebbed, fallen-down police station, I found an ancient record book. Most of its fragile pages had blown away, but some of the hand-written copperplate notes were still legible.

‘Hot and dusty today ...’

‘Hot and dusty today ...’

‘Smith shot himself on the police station verandah this morning.
Hot and dusty today ...’



The children soon learned the basics of bush mechanics.

The next stop on Reg's agenda was a visit to Helmut Wopfner, a geologist who was supervising a Geosurveys exploration near Bedourie in Queensland.

'Where's that?' asked Margaret, who was starting to feel better.

'Not far,' said Reg breezily. 'About four hundred miles.'

I could not help myself. 'Four hundred miles!'

'We get to stop at Birdsville,' my husband said, as if that excused the hours of bouncing torture we were about to endure. But endure it we did, all the way across Sturt's Stony Desert to the Diamantina at Birdsville, then north on the fringes of the Simpson Desert into the western Queensland gibber country.

Helmut and his family lived in a Geosurveys caravan like the one Reg and I had occupied at Radium Hill. It was plonked in the middle of nowhere, but the former Luftwaffe pilot made no complaints, agreeing energetically with Reg that the entire region was rotten with oil and gas. Had I only known it, listening to the pair of them rave on about 'structure form lines' and 'vitrinite reflectance' and 'basal tertiary phantom horizons', with Helmut's contribution in a thick German accent, I was privileged to be witnessing pioneering work that would eventually lead to the creation of one of the country's major energy industries.

From Bedourie we were homeward bound, but it turned out that the thrashing Reg had given the Land Rover had taken its toll on the undercarriage. We limped into Birdsville, where Reg enlisted the help of the publican, Eric Gaffney, and the policeman, Sergeant Sammon. Together they made running repairs with generous amounts of fencing wire, and we were on our way once again.

We made it past Goyder's Lagoon and were getting close to Clifton Hills Station and the Litchfield family when two misfortunes struck: Doug started showing symptoms of Marg's measles and the fencing wire began to give way. The undercarriage was groaning and giving off sharp, cracking noises.

'Bloody hell!' I said, voicing the general opinion of all on board.

'Don't worry,' said Reg. 'We'll ease her into Clifton Hills.'

'We can't! There are children in the Litchfield clan. We're infectious.'

Another groan came from the Land Rover's sagging underbelly. 'We'll make for the homestead anyway. We can camp nearby and keep clear of the kids.' Another cracking. 'We'll have to. That rear axle sounds completely shot.'

Reg nursed the vehicle onwards to Clifton Hills and we found a hot water bore not far from the homestead. 'Stop here,' I suggested. 'I'll boil up some eggs and we'll have them with bread. That'll take the edge off our troubles while you go for help.'

Reg killed the motor and there was a grateful silence. Marg managed a smile but poor Doug was looking terrible. Reg strode off to find the Litchfields. I grabbed a billy and some eggs and made for the bore, the idea being to hold the billy under the stream of hot water for five minutes or so, long enough to cook the eggs. Mission accomplished, I was feeding the kids when Reg returned with the lady of the Litchfield manor.

'Come up to the house,' she commanded.

'We have measles,' I protested.

'And we have chicken pox,' she replied. 'We can swap.'

As it turned out, the trade went only one way. Further makeshift repairs completed and the children treated, we went on our way. The measles stayed.

We had time to make up, so we decided to drive in shifts and keep going through the night. We had travelled seventy-five miles and were about fifteen miles short of Mungeranie Station when, as I was easing the Land Rover through a dry creek bed, there was a loud clunk and the vehicle dropped out of gear. Another bang and something hit the driver's side door. Reg woke up, sounding as frightened as me. 'What the hell was that?'

'I'm not sure. But we appear to be stopped dead.'

Reg peered through the windscreen into the night. The headlights revealed the south-bound Birdsville Track as it climbed out of the creek bed uphill to a blind crest. He clambered out to survey the damage. 'You may find this difficult to believe, Griselda, but one of the back wheels is resting against your door. We're going nowhere, all right. And the Litchfields reckon Tom Kruse is due through here tonight.'

I'd been living in South Australia long enough to know the name of the legendary Tom Kruse. He had provisioned the crossing of the Simpson Desert in 1939, when Cecil Madigan's party made an awesome journey on camels. These days Tom contented himself with bulldozing dams and doing the mail run to Birdsville. He was famous for barrelling along in his big Badger truck and not particularly worrying about what he might hit along the way. 'Oh,' said I. 'Perhaps we should move.'

'We've no hope of moving the car, but at least we can get ourselves out of harm's way.'

While I set up camp on a nearby sandhill and bedded down with my stricken children, Reg dragged dead tree branches to the crest of the track at both ends of the wash-out, festooning them with screwed up pages of newspaper to warn Tom Kruse, and anyone else who might be approaching, that there was a hazard ahead. Exhausted, he flopped into his swag and did not budge until dawn.

If Tom came through that night, he did not stop and we did not hear him. First light gave us the chance to have a close look at the damage. There was a hope we could re-attach the wheel and sagging axle, so we set to work with jacks and old rags soaked in oil, scouring the sand and grit and metal filings from parts that had taken a dreadful pounding. I was helping Reg beneath the differential when I heard a strange voice.

'What's the roadblock for, then?' I sat up with a start, smacking my head on metal. The voice turned out to belong to a swagman, who was pushing a bicycle with two flat tyres. Reg offered him breakfast in return for help.

'No worries,' said the swaggie, who proceeded to do almost nothing except offer verbal support as Reg and I jerry-rigged the axle, and somehow managed to drill a sort of peg arrangement through the wheel to keep it attached to the axle. The swaggie ate six eggs and an entire box of corn flakes, accepted some canned food to keep him going, and pushed off up the track – destination somewhere.

We were mobile again, but only just. The pegging started rubbing against the tyre and within a mile there was a terrible stench of burning rubber.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Reg.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Marg.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Doug.

‘You’ll have to cool it,’ said Reg to me. ‘Walk beside the wheel and cool it.’

‘What with?’

‘Water. Oil. Talcum powder. Bloody anything! We have to get to Mungeranie.’

The talcum worked the best. It was getting late when we limped into Mungeranie, me walking beside the Land Rover, sprinkling the talcum every time I sensed a puff of burning rubber. But at last we arrived and Reg radioed for a Geosurveys mechanic to be flown up with parts. We took the plane home to Adelaide.

I’ve always *loved* flying.

Come Fly with Me

From these and other Geosurveys explorations, Reg was convinced there were major reserves of oil and gas to be found in the Great Artesian Basin – that vast area of the Australian interior in which the early European explorers were convinced they would find the waters of an inland sea.

Late in 1957 Reg flew to America armed with a paper he had written on the subject to be published by the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. But, having purchased exploration rights over a vast selection of the basin on behalf of the SANTOS company, Reg was also pitching for investment dollars, his line being that ‘You can get filthy rich in Australia’.

The Texas and Oklahoma oilmen were *already* filthy rich. Reg soon realised he was being taken for the greenhorn he was.

In Dallas he tried Delhi Petroleum, owned by the multi-millionaire Clint Murchison, whose operators made it clear they wanted complete control over any deal that might be struck. He tried a company in Shreveport, Louisiana, and came up with nothing. He travelled to Chicago and Washington and Pittsburgh, where Gulf Oil declared that

the Australian market was too small to interest it. I received a letter from New York in which Reg complained that officials of a certain British petroleum company with interests in the Broken Hill area were trying to pump him for his knowledge without the slightest intention of committing their money. 'They have oil flowing out of the Middle East at five cents a barrel,' he fumed. 'Why would they pay to search for two-dollar oil in the bloody Australian bush?' No deals were struck.

At the end of 1957, after word had spread that the Australian government was offering a pound-for-pound subsidy for test drilling, Reg tried Delhi again and came away with a much improved but still tentative offer. It added up to a million American dollars over four years in a 'checkerboard' partnership with SANTOS, and – if justified – a 14,000-foot exploration well.

I saw next to nothing of Reg on his return from the United States. The Delhi negotiating team followed right behind him and hired a DC-3 for aerial surveying under Reg's guidance, overflying the enormous Innamincka anticline and the Betoota and Curalle anticlines across the border in Queensland. Then, with the Delhi people wanting to hedge their bets and have a look around the rest of Australia, Reg and his second-in-command, Bruce Wilson, were despatched to investigate whether Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria held any potential. Apparently it did, and Delhi decided on a test drill there as well. I was starting to think that I would never see my husband again, but a friend of Reg's came to the rescue.

Lou Smart had made himself a millionaire by importing ceramics, but now he was fascinated by the promise of oil. Not long after Delhi set up the test drill at Mornington Island, Lou and his wife, Elsie, decided to charter a plane and conduct a wide-ranging survey tour, starting with a look at a Phillips Oil test well he was involved with at Thargomindah in south-western Queensland. They intended to continue then to the Gulf of Carpentaria via Tennant Creek and Darwin, drop in on the Delhi rig, and fly back to Sydney via Lindeman Island in the Whitsunday Passage, where they would pause for a holiday. Reg was dragooned aboard as the expert consultant.

I was unimpressed and said so. He chuckled and gave me one of his devilish grins. 'But Griselda, you're invited too.'

Thinking back on that moment, I believe I made my change of tack quite graciously. 'That's different,' I said. 'When do we leave?'

A girlfriend volunteered to look after the little ones, so I felt like a honeymooner as Reg and I flew to Sydney for the rendezvous with Lou and Elsie at Bankstown airport. Our pilot was Max, an experienced character who had flown with Qantas. His twin-engined Cessna 310 was brand-new, thank heaven.

The run to Quilpie, the closest 'big' town to Thargomindah, was uneventful. We booked into the two-storey pub for an overnight stay. The rooms were hardly the Ritz, unless the Ritz had recently diversified into dog boxes. A railhead for loading cattle and sheep, Quilpie was chock-a-block with truckies and cockies (farmers) waiting for the train. The pub was packed and, as the evening progressed, the din intensified, fuelled by beer and rum. We were caught in the middle of loud debates about cargoes bound for market, local politics, cricket and rugby league. A few of the locals, suffering what was described to me as the infamous 'Barcoo Rot', seemed more intent on talking to God as they sprawled in the dust outside. The local policeman worried not. It was a typical evening, or so he told us as we retired upstairs and tried to sleep through the racket.

In the morning we flew out to Lou's lease at Thargomindah, where he and Reg spent hours jabbering about geological mysteries that made as much sense to me and Elsie as the previous evening's Barcoo banter. At last we rejoined Max, who had plotted his course for Tennant Creek and was keen to get going – justifiably, as our destination was a mere 820 miles away and his plane was not equipped with jet engines.

It was my turn to sit in the navigator's seat. I was thrilled, picking out the cattle station airstrips on our map as Max overflew them and pointing out the eagles soaring around us.

Then suddenly there was a bang and the starboard wing juddered.

‘Shit,’ said Max.

‘We’ve hit an eagle,’ I wailed.

‘I wish you were right,’ he replied grimly. ‘The engine’s blown a spinner.’

This was not the time to ask what a spinner was. I sat in trepidation as Max feathered the engine, yelled at me to watch the starboard engine oil pressure gauge, lit a cigarette and switched the radio to make a mayday broadcast.

In my earphones I could hear Flight Service repeating our call sign like an epitaph. ‘All stations Quilpie vicinity, stay off the air. Papa Charlie X-ray, are you returning to Quilpie?’

‘Papa Charlie X-ray, roger. ETA twenty minutes.’

‘Papa Charlie X-ray. Good luck.’

Max had already turned the plane. A stream of black smoke started spewing from the right-hand engine. I pointed it out, quaking, but Max was calm. There was a burst of static in my earphones, then his reassuring voice. ‘Don’t worry, Griselda, I could fly from here to Broome on the port engine. But I don’t reckon the authorities would approve if I tried.’

I was not soothed. ‘Max! The engine’s on fire.’

‘Details, details! We’ll be back in a jiff.’

By the time we reached Quilpie the entire town had turned out to watch us crash. The hospital staff were there to treat us. The patients were not going to miss out, so they were there too. Even the sheep on the airstrip interrupted their grazing to witness our doom. Only the fire truck was missing.

Fortunately the engine fire had not spread too viciously. Immediately we landed, Max doused it with his on-board extinguisher – a good move, seeing that the local fire volunteers turned up five minutes after we landed. They were wearing black uniforms with red stripes and old-fashioned helmets that would have looked at home on the set of Keystone Kops. They apologised for being late; they had gone to a nearby bore to stock up on water.

The breakdown sentenced us to three more nights in the Quilpie

pub waiting for a new spinner and various other engine parts. When at last they arrived, we set our course for Tennant Creek, close to the centre of the Northern Territory, famous for its gold mining and as a meatworks and mustering centre for the cattle that ranged across the dusty Barkly Tableland and all the way east to Mount Isa in Northern Queensland.

When we arrived the men went off to visit the mines. Elsie and I took a 'taxi' (I think the vehicle actually belonged to the town clerk) and saw the sights, which consisted mainly of an abattoir, some Aboriginal humpies outside of town and a few sun-seared streets with low-slung, dirt-streaked houses. There was a block or two of outback businesses: a general store combining a post office and Commonwealth Bank agency, a garage and several pubs. One of the pubs was conspicuous by the absence of Aborigines, the other doubly so because some of the men were sprawling outside like the lunatics of Quilpie, blind drunk and blind with white-walled eyes, raving at the sun.

We moved on to Darwin, capital city of the Northern Territory, where we settled for the trappings of colonial civilisation – punkahs bravely battling the humidity in the Green Room of the old Hotel Darwin, not far from Government House and Fort Hill above the big blue harbour, sipping gin and tonic and enduring a wheezing jazz band, sleeping beneath mosquito nets and wondering why northern Australia was so infernally hot.

Our next stop was Mornington Island, surely one of the most remote outposts in the entire Commonwealth. By air it is about 850 miles east-south-east of Darwin and more than 400 miles west of Cairns on the Queensland coast. Our map made reference to an obscure mission and an airstrip that was under no circumstances to be attempted during the wet season. We found the place easily enough, because Delhi's test-drill rig turned out to be an easily visible landmark. Marvelling at the perfect white sandy beaches, we landed safely. Reg and Lou went off to barge their way into the drilling camp, where they were made welcome despite their unannounced arrival.

Max took Elsie and me for a walk along the beach. We collected cowries and bailer shells, and were wandering back to the airstrip,

wondering where the mad miners were, when I felt the call of nature. There was a tin-shed loo at the far end of the strip, thank goodness. It lacked a door but seemed discreet enough, so in I went.

I had almost completed my business when an enormous bull came barrelling out of the scrub and heading in my direction. I thought it was going to knock me and the loo into outer space, but it stopped about five yards away from me, snorting furiously. I dared not move. The beast eyed me. I made placating noises and tried to shuffle my pants back on as the bull hoofed plumes of dust. Then, just as I heard the revving of a Jeep hurrying up the strip with its horn blaring, the bull turned tail and sauntered back into the bush.

After this adventure of bulls and blown aircraft engines, I needed a holiday. Lindeman Island was fabulous.

For some reason the legal wheeling and dealing between SANTOS and Delhi was taking ages. Late in 1958 Reg left once more for Dallas – this time with SANTOS chairman John Bonython – where they were kept in five-star luxury, regaled with gifts from the famous Nieman–Marcus store, and even flown to dinner at Clint Murchison’s ranch house at Athens, Texas, in the great man’s private plane. Reg sent me a homesick letter, pining for the bush, but at last the drilling deal was finalised. He came home on Christmas Eve and disappeared again, this time up to Innamincka to supervise construction of the hundred-man drilling camp, including the bulldozing of roads and a decent airstrip.

By late February 1959 everything was ready. It was to be the deepest well ever drilled on mainland Australia. Premier Playford and a mass of dignitaries flew up for the ceremonies, held the day before Reg’s fortieth birthday.

Even though the venturers ignored Reg’s advice about the specific location of the Innamincka drill, he came home a proud man. In the years since he teamed up with SANTOS in 1954, Reg and the Geosurveys team explorations had pinpointed dozens of promising sites where serious attempts might be made to drill for oil and gas. He

genuinely believed that their efforts had helped assure the future of the South Australian and Queensland energy industries.

As it turned out, Innamincka well showed only traces of hydrocarbons, plus proof of sediments from the Permian age – which in geological terms seemed to be an important clue that the well was not a total waste of money. For SANTOS and Delhi, in fact, it was sufficient incentive for further exploration. But without a ‘gusher’ to make headlines, the talk of an Australian oil boom suddenly seemed premature. Public interest waned and the investment money started drying up. It would be another four years before SANTOS and its new ‘farm-in’ partners, the French Petroleum Company, really struck it rich.

Meanwhile Reg had to find new work to occupy his hundred-plus staff. In April he created an awesome overdraft by purchasing two new Toyotas, another Land Rover and four enormous four-wheel-drive wartime surplus vehicles called Blitz Buggies. Then he bought seismic survey equipment and a surplus geophysical drilling rig from the Bureau of Mineral Resources. He formed a new company, Geoseismic Australia Pty Ltd, and started touting for extra business.

‘Griselda,’ he said, on one rare night at home. ‘We’re going to hit the road.’

My reaction was mild. ‘Oh? And what *have* we been doing, these past few years?’

‘That’s nothing! Before we’re done, we’re going to explore every prospective cranny of this country. There’s oil out there. We’re going to find it!’

‘I suppose that means you’ll be wanting to wander into the Simpson Desert like Madigan and his camels.’

‘I don’t know about the camels, my dear, but that’s *exactly* what I mean.’

Raring to Go

Reg picked up oil exploration leases covering a large chunk of the Northern Territory section of the Simpson Desert. In early 1962 the Beach Petroleum company contracted him to carry out an extensive series of gravity surveys there.

I am to this day no geologist, but by then I had at least some idea what this involved. Oil and gas collect in subterranean pockets of sedimentary rocks that have been created by millennia of geological folding – as if by a giant’s hand warping an ages-old deck of cards – so that the various layers buckle up and down, their original sea-bed smoothness lost forever. Aerial surveying and photography can give a basic idea where promising rock shapes might be found, but gravity surveys are needed to detail the sediment contours, to give clues to which pockets might yield petroleum.

Accurate gravity meters were standard equipment for Reg and his men. Gravity surveying remains a mystery to me, except that I understand it has to do with the distance from the centre of the earth and the relative density of various rocks. A reading from a gravity meter is not enough to provide the ‘picture’ of where the prize might be found. The

information has to be related to the latitude, longitude and elevation of the place where the reading is taken, and then all that data has to be 'tied' to all the other readings taken in the region where the survey is being done. So a gadget called a theodolite is also important, to help with the other readings. The readings are taken at designated survey points at evenly spaced intervals – and then they are all tied together in a regular grid pattern, and *then* you get the picture.

It was work that took some of the guessing out of oil exploration. Considering the Simpson Desert was a trackless, almost unknown, wilderness of sand dunes without the so-called 'trig stations' that help provide critical reference points for surveyors the world over, even I knew that this would be an enormous undertaking.

'Unprecedented,' Reg agreed. 'It's going to take a good three months to finish the job, probably more. We're setting up a base camp at East Bore on Andado Station, over on the desert's western edge. I'm going up for a visit in May to see how the work is going. If everything's ready, we'll start the survey and keep going through the cooler season until we're done.'

'Ending up where?'

'Birdsville, sooner or later.'

'How far's that?'

'Maybe 250 miles. As the crow flies.'

'With no tracks to guide you. That would be some feat.'

He nodded. 'The first motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert.'

It was now nearly three years since Reg had said we were hitting the road, and *he* certainly had. Geosurveys' activities were now spread over most of the continent. But I had been housebound, overseeing life at Baker Street and the now serious schooling of the kids – Marg being close to ten and Doug a precocious seven.

'It's school holidays in May. Perhaps we could come, too.'

Reg was hesitant. 'You've roughed it before, but this will be even worse.'

'Reg,' I said, and he gave me a look that recognised I was about to commence the speech of the wife who refuses to be left behind. 'I've seen the Simpson from the air, remember? We saw the dunes in the

distance, on the way from Quilpie to Tennant Creek. It was beautiful! Those massive sand ridges stretching for miles and miles. I don't care how rough it is. I want to cross it too!

'Cross it! I don't know about that. Maybe.'

'Reg!'

Then he gave me a gallant flourish of his hand, like a circus tout inviting customers inside an exotic tent, and suddenly I knew he had not forgotten his promise. 'All right then. But there's planning to do, first. And, as you will discover, I have a surprise for the kids.'

The Simpson Desert occupies about 65,000 square miles of central Australia. From the northern shores of Lake Eyre its borders head north-west towards the MacDonnell Ranges east of Alice Springs, then back to the north-east bordering the Jervois Range. The desert's eastern fringes follow ragged tracks south towards Birdsville and beyond.

Originally called the Arunta Desert, the Simpson has been described as one of the world's most formidable places. I have read that it is the seventh driest place on the planet. Its sandhills extend in parallel rows like railway lines. They trend north-north-westerly, individual dunes stretching unbroken for as many as a hundred miles. They were formed during the Pleistocene ice age, when relentless winds roared across the continent from west to east. Averaging seventy-five feet in height and peaking at 150, the western slopes are gentler than those that face the east – these tend to avalanche. They have survived the millennia since the ice age thanks mainly to massive clumps of anchoring spinifex, also called porcupine grass, that stabilise the slopes and dune corridors in between peaks. It is only along the dune crests that the sand tends to fly, and then high winds create 'smoking dunes'.

Permanent surface water does not exist. Unlike saltbush, which makes good fodder in arid country, spiny, tussocky spinifex is useless for grazing cattle. For humans seeking to bend nature to their civilisation, the Simpson Desert remains a wasteland. People venturing within its borders are wise to show respect. It is no place for mortals who turn up unprepared.

The Wangkangurru people were the first to travel the Simpson. They made little wells, called mikiri, that soaked underground water, and their menu included emu eggs and witchetty grubs as well as the bettongs, hare wallabies and rat kangaroos that were prevalent before Europeans introduced rabbits and other feral animals that ravaged the desert ecology.

In 1845, confronted by interminable waves of desert dunes, Captain Charles Sturt came to the bitter realisation that there was no inland sea. He abandoned his quest to find it and went home. This was probably a sensible decision because in 1848, according to some historians and theorists, it was somewhere unknown in the Simpson Desert that the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and his entire party of men and pack animals vanished without trace. To this day their remains have never been found.

The pressure to find and settle new areas of Australia seems to have been relentless. The challenge was to claim good pasture, so the hopeful explorations continued. In 1866 Major Peter Egerton Warburton rounded the northern tip of Lake Eyre, confronting the southernmost Simpson Desert sand ridges and eventually doing a U-turn where the 'river' that these days bears his name disappears into the multi-channelled confusion of Goyders Lagoon.

Next to try was the surveyor John W. Lewis. He spent a good part of 1874 and 1875 exploring the desert's southern and eastern borders. His opinion may have been clouded by food poisoning, but he came to the conclusion that the countryside was 'anything but cheering' and because there was 'nothing but sandhills' it might be a good idea to head back to the depot for a decent feed.

Despite these setbacks, the semi-desert landscapes surrounding the Simpson still held hope for outback pioneers. The Queensland and South Australian governments foresaw the chance of boundary feuds. In 1878 a surveyor named Henry Vere Barclay set off from Alice Springs along the Simpson's northern fringes to have a go at pinpointing the border. He discovered the Jervois Range and several Simpson-bound 'rivers', but not much else, and the borders remained unpegged.

Next came the man-mountain Augustus Poeppel. Employed by

the South Australian Survey Department, he pegged just under 187 miles of South Australia–Queensland border late in 1880, travelling west into the desert until he reached the 138th meridian of longitude, which marks the north–south divide between Queensland and the Northern Territory. He drove a large coolabah post, carved in triangular fashion to mark the meeting of three territories, into the middle of a dry salt lake. These days it is a famous landmark: Poeppel Corner.

As it turned out, Poeppel's measuring chains were slightly inaccurate. The young surveyor Lawrence Wells completed a ninety-five-mile re-survey in 1883 and moved Poeppel's corner post to its correct position a little way east. Wells and Poeppel then began the long task of pegging the Northern Territory–Queensland border all the way to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Also in 1883, a chap named Charles Winnecke went wandering into the eastern Simpson fringes looking for decent pastoral country. He started roughly where Cowarie Station is today, following the dunes north–north–west towards Poeppel Corner. After that, he followed the north-bound border for a while, then started zig-zagging all over the place, east across Eyre Creek, then back into the Northern Territory, doing figure-eights and loop-the-loops in the vast barren lands where the Hay and Plenty rivers disappear into the dunes. His discoveries were useful, except to pastoralists, who had to look elsewhere for places to run their animals.

In 1886 a South Australian surveyor named David Lindsay managed to reach the Queensland–Northern Territory border after a 200-mile trek east from Dalhousie. He was helped by Aboriginal guides who showed him where to find no less than nine of the life-sustaining mikiri wells. Had he continued on to Birdsville, he would have become the first European to cross the Simpson Desert. However he knew the country to the east had already been surveyed, so he simply retraced his route to Dalhousie. The Simpson remained undisturbed for fifty years.

The first white man to make the full crossing was Ted Colson, an explorer–farmer–roadmaker–miner–camel man who had taken up the abandoned Bloods Creek homestead not far from Dalhousie. With Peter Ains, his Aboriginal friend and guide, he took five camels and

made a beeline to Birdsville and back again in 1936, travelling more than five hundred miles in thirty-six days.

The second white man to make the crossing was Dr Cecil Madigan. Like Sir Douglas Mawson, Madigan was a mentor and hero to Reg. I never met the man – he died in 1947 – but Reg talked about him almost as much as Mawson.

Madigan won a scholarship to the University of Adelaide and had a degree in mine engineering by the age of twenty-one. He won a Rhodes Scholarship and in 1911 was off to study geology at Oxford when Mawson appointed him meteorologist with the Australasian Antarctic Expedition. During World War I he was an officer with the Royal Engineers. After that, he collected his degree with first-class honours and went off to become the assistant government geologist in the Sudan, until Mawson (as chair of the University of Adelaide geology department) intervened once more and, in 1927, offered Madigan a lectureship. It was this appointment that led to much of Reg's geological knowledge. It also led to the official naming of the Simpson Desert.

In 1928 Madigan delivered a lecture describing the sand ridge desert as 'one patch of Australia where white man's foot has never trodden'. This fired the imagination of Alfred Simpson, a former lord mayor of Adelaide and then the president of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia. He offered Madigan the money needed to conduct aerial surveys of the region. Madigan accepted and in 1929, the surveys complete, he gratefully named the desert after his benefactor.

Simpson came up with bountiful quids again. In 1939 Madigan drew up plans for a scientific data-gathering expedition through the least-known zones of the desert. The journey was far more elaborate than Ted Colson's, comprising nine men, eighteen camels and a pedal radio to allow for three nationwide broadcasts on the ABC.

Madigan started by tracking north from Andado Station until he reached a place called the Poodnitera Twin Hills. There he found a cairn, a rough pile of rocks pioneers and travellers use to mark their passing or to conceal a note within. Thinking he would find a note Madigan dismantled it but found nothing. So he left a note of his own

and rebuilt the cairn. After replenishing his water supplies at a soak in the otherwise dry Hale River bed, Madigan led his party due east to the Queensland–Northern Territory border, eventually arriving in Birdsville from the north-west via Kuddaree Waterhole and the ruins of Annandale homestead.

What amazing achievements! I had seen those desert dunes and they seemed so vast and inhospitable that it seemed almost inconceivable that ordinary human beings could *think* about crossing them all, let alone actually do it.

Yet that is what Reg and I were now seriously planning. Our friends declared us mad. I remember one evening in Adelaide when the conversation turned to our outback explorations. I was asked why on earth I should harbour the ambition to ‘do a Madigan’ and cross the Simpson Desert.

‘All these blokes have done it,’ I replied. ‘Why shouldn’t I?’

In May 1962 we flew to Alice Springs and met up with our friend Leo Corbett, owner and proprietor of the famous Pichi Richi Sanctuary. We stayed with Leo, gathered provisions and prepared one of our Geosurveys Toyotas for the journey to the base camp at East Bore on Andado Station.

The idea was to drive from the Alice nearly a hundred miles east following the MacDonnell Ranges towards Numery Station, then plunge straight into the Simpson, following the Hale River as it descends to its dry and dusty doom between the dunes.

‘I was down the Hale some years ago,’ said Leo, after announcing to everyone’s delight that he had invited himself and his Land Rover along for the first part of the trip.

Reg and I already knew this story, but for the benefit of Marg and Doug – yes, they were with us too – we took the cue.

‘Was that when you found that rusty tobacco tin?’

‘I found it under a rough cairn near a place called The Twins. It had a note in it. The writing was badly faded but I could make out Cecil Madigan’s signature and the date.’

‘What did the note say?’ Marg wanted to know.

Leo looked guilty. ‘Well, as I said, it was badly faded. So I took it to a policeman mate of mine and asked if he could help me decipher it. He treated the paper with acid and it charred, ruined for good.’

‘He should have been more careful,’ said Marg.

‘He should,’ Leo admitted. ‘It was a pretty rough way to treat a genuine piece of history but, then, I didn’t know any better.’

‘We’ll have to make it up to Madigan,’ said Reg. He and Leo were looking conspiratorial. I had the sudden, certain insight that Reg was about to reveal his secret plan. ‘Leo,’ he said. ‘Do you think you could find The Twins again?’

‘Oh, I dare say. It’s pretty rough going, though. Last time I was out there it shook the lid off my billy.’ He winked at the children. ‘And I was only walking.’ They giggled. Leo was going to be a fun companion.

Reg waited until he had everyone’s attention. ‘I’ve arranged for a rendezvous at The Twins. Kids, you know my operations manager, Darby?’ They nodded enthusiastically – Darby von Sanden was as much fun as Leo, maybe more. ‘Well, Darby and Mac Clark from Andado Station are coming up from base camp to meet us at The Twins. I’ve had some plaques made, and so has the Geographical Society in Adelaide, to commemorate the start of Dr Madigan’s crossing. Darby and Mac will have the cement all mixed, and you kids can fix up the cairn so it lasts forever.’

Marg and Doug were thrilled. Reg was beaming. I was amazed he had kept the secret so long. He so revered Mawson and Madigan that he usually talked about them in his sleep.

‘When do we go?’ the kids demanded.

‘Monday.’

‘But that’s the day after tomorrow!’

‘I know, but first you have to go to church.’

‘Church!’ I spluttered. Reg had looked uncomfortable enough in church at our wedding. He and religion did *not* mix.

‘I know, I know, but this is a tough country, Griselda. There’s no harm in a blessing before we set off.’

Into the Simpson

I should have known the trip to church would have nothing to do with religion. We did pay our respects at the church built in 1956 by the Australian Inland Mission in honour of Reverend John Flynn – ‘Flynn of the Outback’, the legendary founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. But Reg’s true plan was to scout Flynn’s commemorative grave, which was not far from where his ashes had been scattered after his death in 1951, just a few miles out of town on what is nowadays known as Larapinta Drive.

‘*That’s* how to make a decent cairn!’ he enthused, admiring it from every angle. Until this time I had not known that my favourite geologist loved cairns and wanted to build them. I suppose it was the pioneer inside him, and his desire to recognise the efforts of others. The Madigan affair was to be just the first.

‘I wonder if there’ll be a cairn for Traeger,’ he mused, as we drove back to the Pichi Richi Sanctuary.

‘Who?’

‘Alf Traeger,’ said Reg. ‘He’s still alive and kicking, but he deserves a cairn just as much as good old Flynn. He was a mate of Flynn’s. They

travelled all over the outback together when they were setting up the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Traeger invented a special radio in the late 1920s, so people at all the remote outstations and missions and cattle stations could keep in touch.'

'What sort of radio?' Doug wanted to know.

'Well, it was actually a generator you could power up by pedalling, like a bike. It gave enough power to run a transmitter and receiver. Before that the outback had nothing but the telegraph line and a bloody long hike to make a personal visit. I've got nothing against the missionaries, but *that* was an accomplishment!'

I was only half listening. Memories of Radium Hill came flooding back. It was Alf Traeger and an unknown flying doctor I had to thank for being able to save myself from the red-back bite.

By the time I was paying attention again, Reg was spelling out the itinerary for phase one of our journey. 'First,' he was saying, 'we'll get to The Twins and do the cairn, *then* we'll work our way out into the desert to meet up with one of the advance parties to see how they're coping. If they're okay, we'll muster back at East Bore and decide what to do next.'

'Next we'll cross the desert!' said Doug.

'Maybe,' said Reg, sounding far from certain. 'We'll be taking no unnecessary risks, because I for one don't want to be sending out an SOS on one of Traeger's newer brands of radio.'

Darkness was already descending on Monday evening by the time our convoy crossed the Todd River and headed out of the Alice. There had been endless minor delays. Every time Leo thought he had finished packing his Land Rover with another home-away-from-home comfort, he thought of some other 'necessity'. Then he was persuaded to carry out the mail bags for Ringwood and Numery stations. Then he decided to stock up on meat from his favourite local butcher. Then he added some cold cans of beer from the Riverside Hotel.

We delivered the Ringwood bag and made camp under a pretty clump of gidgee trees at around ten that night. There was plenty of

wood, and Reg set about building one of his huge campfires, a roaring inferno that roasted one side of your body while the other froze. The absence of cloud cover in the desert night sends the temperature plummeting.

Meanwhile Leo was trotting about like a leprechaun as he produced a folding table, camp chairs and a hurricane lamp. 'I brought them for you and the children,' he lied, parking himself and cracking a can of beer. 'Young or old, you need a few comforts.'

'The children being merely ten and seven,' I replied, 'I assume that puts me in the category of being old and infirm.'

'Take it how you like,' Leo retorted. 'But if you have any sense at all, you'll park your backside in one of these chairs and wait for your husband to cook you a steak.'

'That sort of talk can incite mutiny,' said Reg, looking up from the fire and ignoring the fact that he was a perfectly good bush cook. 'One more remark like that, Leo, and you can go back to the Alice.'

This appeared to mean that I was elected cook, so I asserted my authority. 'Reg, stop trying to set fire to the entire outback and let the coals settle or we'll be eating at midnight.'

'Sensible lass,' said Leo. 'No home should be without a Griselda. It should be a brand name, like Hoover.' I was about to toss a piece of camel dung at him, but he handed me a beer and insisted he was only joking. 'Besides, you can put a price on a Hoover.'

Several beers later it seemed to be dawn. Leo was prancing about telling us all what a beautiful day it was. 'Come on, Griselda! Up with the birds.' I stayed where I was. 'Kids, make her get up!' Marg and Doug sprang out of their sleeping bags and jumped all over me. I groaned, but stayed flat. 'Reg!' insisted Leo. 'Make her get up.'

'Coffee!' bellowed Reg from the back of the Toyota, where he was apparently fiddling with something mechanical. 'Half the day is gone.'

'Leave me alone,' I wailed. 'Just because you two have cheap bladders is no reason to wake me up.'

Leo was aghast. 'After all the nice things I've said about you. Come on kids, help me get breakfast.'

Marg and Doug swarmed about obeying his every suggestion.

They had been giggling all night at Leo's daft jokes and entertainments, and now they had adopted him as Uncle Leo. After breakfast – and I had risen at last – they made their announcement. 'We're going to Numery Station with Uncle Leo.'

Reg pretended to look crestfallen. 'Can we come too?'

'You can follow us,' said Doug. 'I'll show you the way.'

'Oh, good,' said Reg, 'I thought Leo was navigating.'

The foothills of the eastern MacDonnell Ranges glowed red and purple in the early sun. It was beautiful scenery but the countryside was bare and harsh after years of drought. Near a conical peak that Reg identified at Chinaman's Hat we came upon Leo's Land Rover, stricken by the expedition's first puncture.

'Have a look at that,' said Reg, as we approached. Doug was clearly in control of the situation, jacking the vehicle and working the wheel nuts free like a veteran.

'Lessons in life,' said Leo casually, as we watched our son complete the tyre change. 'You now have an expert to guide you through your dotage.'

There was nobody home at Numery Station. It looked like the place had been abandoned. Equipment in the yard lay buried in glaring red sand. The sand was piled high along the back verandah and against the door, which stood unlocked and slightly ajar. We dug it open and went inside with the mail bag. The kitchen gave the impression that, at the end of a meal, the occupants had simply said 'Bugger it' and walked away, turning their backs forever on the barren land that surrounded them. Leo left a note with the mail and we went on our way.

From Numery Station's bore tank there was a track heading south-east, the same direction as the far-away Simpson dune corridors. The track was heavy with bulldust that permeated our clothes and caked our sweat-streaked skin. The flesh behind my sunglasses was the only proof that I once had been a lily-white Scottish lady.

We found the Hale River easily enough thanks to the giant gums lining the dry creek bed, and followed it until the going became rocky

and we were forced to confront our first large sand dune. It was a beautiful and frightening sight, a massive red ridge that seemed to stretch to infinity, dominating the skyline. There was nothing but the rich terracotta colour of the dune and the pitiless blue of the desert sky.

Leo had pulled up at the base of the dune. He waved us through. 'You can be the first to die!'

'Don't be bloody stupid, Leo.' To me, Reg sounded like he was trying to reassure the kids. Silently he hauled on the hand brake, clambered out of the Toyota, then climbed the slope to the dune crest. I watched as he was dwarfed. He stood a long time at the crest, and it seemed to take forever for him to return to the Toyota, which was still idling. He gave me a serious look, as if he was savouring a sight he might never enjoy again, and engaged the gears. 'Here goes nothing.'

Reg planted his foot on the accelerator and we took off up the side of the dune. At the top he let out a 'Yeee-haaaa!' and the Toyota sailed over the precipice. I was screaming too. I've never been so terrified.

It seemed we were in the air for an eternity, but it was probably a second, or maybe two, before the wheels bit dirt again and we were braking crazily down the avalanche face of the dune. 'God,' I yelled, 'how many of these dunes *are* there?'

Reg was looking awestruck by the feat he had just accomplished. 'Hundreds,' he muttered. 'Maybe too bloody many.'

Leo and the kids followed carefully in our tracks and, subdued, we made our way towards a barren flat where we pulled up for lunch. There was a well there, and some stock paddocks. The fence posts stood at angles and most of the wire between them was gone. They seemed pathetic symbols of times more prosperous, before the drought.

Leo was looking around, seeking landmarks. 'This was Old Man's camp,' he said. 'It's so badly eaten out I can hardly recognise it.'

Marg was incredulous. 'Somebody lived here?'

'He was a hermit, lived here thirty years.' Leo gave me a mischievous look. 'They say he came here to escape a nagging wife.'

'Ha ha,' said I, trying to sound icy. 'You two would have gotten along famously.'

'Well, not exactly. Old Man used to have supplies sent out from

Numery every three months or so. The first time I was down this way no one had heard of him for a while, so I was asked to check up. He was here, all right. He was sitting on the ground, surrounded by magazines.'

'Ammunition?' asked Doug.

'No, mate, the reading type. I called out, but he didn't look up. So I went closer and called out again, and still he kept his head down, reading. Eventually I was close enough to see that he was reading the *Christian Science Monitor*.'

Reg swore softly. Leo went on. 'All of a sudden, the old fellow rears up and starts waving his arms about and yelling, "Stop where you are! Bloody earth has shrunk three inches and don't argue with me."' Leo shrugged. 'Well, I just left him to his studies.'

I could see the poor soul sitting there in the dust, lost in his lunatic imagination, consumed by Christian Science. I watched Reg, who had wandered off to take photographs, and I shared a thought with Leo. 'Old Man would have been better off if he couldn't read.'

By mid-afternoon we were well into the Simpson Desert and Reg's excitement was starting to get the better of him.

We were supposed to be meeting Darby von Sanden and Mac Clark at The Twins at five in the afternoon, but Reg had become fascinated by the claypans we encountered in the corridors between the sandhills and insisted on 'quartering' the confounded things, scrounging about in search of something called tectites. His explorations took us further east than we had originally planned, and we had to climb the steep avalanche faces of dozens of dunes to get back on course for The Twins. Several times the engines overheated and we were forced to wait while they cooled.

The kids were fretting that we'd be too late to take part in the cairn-building. I tried to reassure them. 'Your father is always late for everything. Darby knows that as well as me. They'll wait for us.'

Alas, we *were* late. When we arrived, the cement- and stone-work had been neatly completed, and a set of fresh tracks wound away in the

direction of Andado. Reg was as disappointed as the children, who – in disgust – set about building their own cairn, complete with a tin containing their names. Reg was humouring the kids, but I could tell he was frustrated and very tired. It was time to set up camp.

‘Bring your bus over here, Leo,’ Reg directed, waving at the good Corbett with hand signals. ‘It’ll make a decent wind-break.’ Leo moved his Land Rover about one scintilla in Reg’s direction. ‘Not there! *Here!*’

Leo waved a mock salute and stayed put. Reg looked like he was about to blow an internal fuse. Leo grinned. He backed his vehicle towards the spot where Reg was standing. He arrived, kept going, and finally stopped. ‘How’s this?’



The first of many! Reg loved building cairns. Poodnitera Twin Hills, May 1962.

‘Leo,’ said Reg, now sounding murderous. ‘Over here.’

‘Oh, there! Certainly, your party leadership, sir.’ Another smart salute and Leo drove precisely past the spot.

‘Bloody hell, Leo. I give up. Just park there and be buggered.’

‘Good! That’s what I like to hear. Now we can relax and have the rest of that beer.’

In the morning we took photos and home movies, then packed up and pushed deeper into the desert, making frequent stops to explore the claypans and search for Aboriginal artefacts. Reg had arranged to meet a Geosurveys advance party that was doing astrofix observations about eighty miles east of the base camp. We searched all day in the trackless wilderness, but could not find them. Considering that the ability to find each other in the desert was critical to our survival as well as the success of the gravity survey, this was a development that augured ill for us when the full-scale crossing attempt began. As dusk settled, Reg decided the four of us could make a fire on top of a dune and prepare dinner while he went off alone to keep searching. He was convinced the party could only be a few dunes away.

‘Watch out for their signal rocket,’ he said. ‘They’re supposed to send it up at eight o’clock if we haven’t found them.’ He revved off into the distance, carrying all the grillers and billies – not to mention most of the food.

There was hardly any wood to be found on top of the dune, so the campfire was miserable. But with the darkness descended, we were determined to keep it going so Reg could find us from the glow.

Marg and Doug descended to the dune corridor and collected all the fuel they could find, then bedded down exhausted. Leo and I sat there by the fire yarning and waiting to see the rocket flare, Reg or, best of all, both.

Eight o’clock came and went with no sign of the rocket. Leo mumbled reassurances and dozed off, leaving me to my thoughts in the silent desert, the Milky Way blazing above. I would have been perfectly at peace, but I was worried about Reg. Wanting to hear the sound of

the Toyota, I was hearing cars, aircraft, trains and tramcars. When they were quiet, I heard another strange noise. *Lub dup, lub dup*. It was my heart, beating in rhythm with the desert. Leo said later that the time to worry is when you hear church bells ringing.

At last, around eleven, I heard the drone of the Toyota in the distance. I stoked up the fire with every twig I could find. Not long afterwards Reg gunned the vehicle into camp, looking exhausted and unhappy.

‘I don’t understand it. I’ve driven bloody near thirty miles looking for those jokers. We’ll have to make for East Bore.’

‘Now? We haven’t even eaten. Maybe we should wait until dawn.’

‘Sorry, Griselda. We’re pressing on.’

‘But we’ll get lost.’

‘We’ll follow our tracks. Navigate by the stars. We’ll be right. Come on Leo, come on kids, shake a leg!’

I insisted on fixing a midnight snack, but soon we were on our way, headlights searching the shadows for the tracks that would lead us back to The Twins, Leo in tow. At one stage I dozed off and Reg must have done, too. Suddenly I woke to the sound of swearing. He was circling back. ‘I’ve lost the tracks,’ he fumed. ‘Where the bloody hell are they?’

I was concerned we might become hopelessly lost, but Reg was a resourceful fellow. He showed no panic as he manoeuvred the Toyota among the dunes. After ten minutes or so – it seemed like hours – he grunted, ‘Got ’em!’ and swung us onto a set of tracks. He even started whistling a song; ‘I Love to Go a-Wandering’.

‘Excuse me, Reg,’ I said quietly, seeing no other way around the issue. ‘But shouldn’t the moon be on the other side of the car?’ Without a word he did a U-turn and we were on our way once more.

We reached The Twins with the first glimmers of dawn. Figuring the Geosurveys crews would be getting worried about us, Reg decided we should keep going back to the base camp at East Bore, following the tracks left by Darby and Mac when they came to The Twins to cement the cairn. We were on our way when we saw a cloud of dust on the horizon, and at the same time we saw the Geosurveys Cessna glinting

in the morning sun. We were getting used to having half the outback searching for Spriggs.

The Cessna escorted us into East Bore. We were almost there when Reg dropped a bombshell. 'I'm due in Melbourne to make a public lecture at the university. I'll be flying out this afternoon.'

'What about the desert crossing?' I demanded, in unison with Marg and Doug. Reg seemed perplexed. 'Didn't I tell you about the lecture?'

'No!'

'Oh. Well, I'll only be gone two days. In and out.'

'What about us?'

'You can wait here at East Bore if you want. But maybe Mac Clark will run you into Andado Station. Leo has to start making his way back to the Alice in any case.'

'The fact that duty calls at Pichi Richi,' replied Leo tartly, 'does not excuse you from being so thoughtless.'

'Leo, it'll only be two days! Griselda! You and the kids can have a wash.'

Leo's anger continued awhile, but I was barely fussed. Most wives would suffer apoplexy at the news that they and their children were about to be abandoned in a desert, but I was used to Reg's sudden disappearances. Nevertheless, I thought it important to give Leo moral support.

'I suppose you want me to stand by the airstrip and wave you off?'

'That would be nice.' Reg gave me a kiss. 'Leo's right. Every home should have a Griselda.'

My Reg. He had the hide of a rhino when he found it convenient.

The rest, as they say, is history. Reg flew out. Mac Clark led the children, me and Leo in convoy to Andado, where Marg fell ill at the same time as the drought broke, and had to be airlifted to hospital in Alice Springs. We wouldn't be crossing the Simpson Desert.

Eastward Ho!

The next opportunity for a Sprigg clan crossing of the Simpson Desert would come in September 1962. School holidays were on again then and the weather – this was critical – would still not be blistering.

This time it would not be a solo family jaunt, simply starting at Andado and battling eastward through the dunes until we reached Birdsville. There were now three Geosurveys teams out in the desert that were running parallel gravity survey lines along selected corridors between the dunes. The lines were considerable distances apart and, Reg told us, a ‘tie-line’ connecting the three – and effectively completing the survey grid – was needed so that the data from each could be correlated. Being the team boss, the task of gathering the tie-line data was going to be Reg’s job – and the family’s history-making desert crossing would be combined with the completion of an historic piece of geological pioneering.

The rest of us would have jobs as well. Doug’s mechanical education would be enhanced, while Marg would collect ants, lizards and other creatures for the South Australian Museum. And, after our advance crews had found a ring of Aboriginal ceremonial stones some

distance into the desert – and Reg had flown in Adelaide University’s professor of anthropology, Norman Tindale, for a closer look – we were *all* under instruction to watch for any further evidence of Aboriginal artefacts. In addition to my traditional roles as chief cook and bottle washer, I was to be the expedition’s navigator, photographer and diarist.

Our route would follow the twenty-sixth parallel of latitude – the South Australia–Northern Territory border. Once we had completed the tie-line work and all the Geosurveys crews were safely accounted for, we would continue on to Birdsville, thus completing the first ever motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert and – maybe this time – fulfilling my ambition to be the first non-Indigenous woman to complete the dangerous feat.

These days, with well-established tracks and road signs and modern, air-conditioned vehicles, a Simpson Desert crossing is a genuine adventure for enthusiasts who like to get into the wilds of Australia’s outback. But even now, experienced travellers know that the Simpson is not a place to take lightly. Back in 1962 the trackless terrain was a virtual wilderness. Maps were so imprecise they were almost useless. Our best navigational guides would be the stars and so-called photomosaics – aerial photographs patched together to give an idea of the topography. We spent hours poring over them, with Reg making advance calculations, working out daily distances, and assessing possible landing spots and water and fuel dumps for the Geosurveys Cessna that would provide aerial support for the survey crews.

I was more nervous than Reg, perhaps because I was terrified something would go wrong again this time. To calm me, Reg made me compile lists of what we would need and he had me marshal the lot. Mechanics’ tools, spare parts, shovels, axes, geological picks, sample bags, perma tags, distress flares and a Traeger radio transceiver that could be hooked up to the vehicle battery. Compasses, binoculars, cameras and films. Cold cream, sunburn lotion, Kaomagma and Gentian violet. Food, clothing, camping gear, ropes and tarps and swags, tea towels and toilet paper. All these were to be crammed into a short-wheel-base Nissan along with my growing family and two five-gallon

jerry cans for water. And did I forget to mention the bronze plaques: Dr Madigan was to be honoured at the Birdsville end of the journey as well as when we finally completed the work at The Twins. This was going to be a squeeze!

Food was a particular challenge. I packed canned and packaged rations to last weeks, plus a case each of oranges and apples. It was not much of a pantry but because we had no refrigeration perishables would be a waste of money and space. I would try to be inventive, but there are only so many ways you can cook Spam.



Of all the clothing in this newspaper photo, the only item we *really* packed was Doug's hat. Baker Street, 1962.

Clothes were not a problem. All we needed were decent outfits for the ceremonies at Birdsville and the rest of our wardrobe could consist of the oldest, most worn-out shirts, shorts, undies, socks and boots the Sprigg clan possessed. The only exception was Doug's prized Roy Rogers cowboy hat.

By the time the list-making was finished, so was the route-planning. Late in August we would return to Andado Station, but this time we would work our way south to Mount Daer near Dalhousie Springs and *then* begin the eastward trek, meeting up with the first of the gravity survey teams three days later. Two more days and, theoretically at least, we would find the second team – plus Colin Semmler, who had taken over piloting the Geosurveys Cessna – at a claypan that the geologists among us had dubbed P.84. There we would fuel up and fill the jerry cans, and continue on to meet the third party.

After the mishaps that had attended our first Simpson Desert venture, this mission was being planned with military precision. Reg, the general, insisted it was crucial that each trooper follow his or her briefing to the letter. What could go wrong?

Yet I still worried. For all our preparation and experience in rugged parts, there was a lot that could go wrong. No family had driven across the desert before. And people died in deserts when things went badly wrong.

The first accomplishment would be getting ourselves and our gear safely to Andado Station, where our Nissan four-wheel-drive was waiting. Reg was to fly there with Colin Semmler to make the last-minute plans and adjustments. The rest of us, including Darby von Sanden's seventeen-year-old son Anthony, would take the famous Ghan railway to Finke.

In 1962 the Ghan did not follow the same route as it does now, and it was not one train. The train drivers of today would never stand having to change once at Port Pirie, again at Port Augusta, then again at Marree.

Our travelling companions in our carriage were a miner bound for the goldfield and grinding mill at Tennant Creek, a banker getting off at Port Augusta, an ex-camel driver returning to Marree for a dose of nostalgia, and a fellow who talked proudly of his box-loads of champion racing pigeons stored in the van. The Ghan ambled along, making stops along the way where we would pile out and find the kiosk for black tea, gulping it down before the guard whistled us back to quarters.

The Marree change came at ten at night. We climbed aboard a train that looked three-quarters of a mile long. Anthony joined Doug

in a second-class sleeper adjacent to the luggage van, while Marg and I shared a sleeper with two charming nursing sisters who were off to work at Alice Springs. The space was so confined that we had to draw straws to see who would change into their night clothes first. Everyone laughed when my bush pyjamas were exposed.

By morning we were in saltbush country, and the landscape was greener. Winter rains had followed the deluge that had almost trapped us at Andado in May. Fat cattle meandered close to the tracks and for the first time I saw the tiny settlement of Oodnadatta without a dust storm blowing.

Anthony, Doug, Marg and I were the only travellers to depart the Ghan at Finke. We counted our dozen-plus items of baggage and freight out of the van and onto the platform while our fellow passengers gathered around taking photos. They had learned of our desert-crossing plans and we had become quite the celebrities. As the Ghan moved off they waved from the windows and wished us good luck in our odyssey.

All our gear was present and correct, except for Anthony's swag. This was the lad's first visit to the bush, and he was upset about the apparent loss. I begged the guard to make a search but he could not have cared less, and the train had pulled out. As well, there was no sign of Fred Stevens, the Geosurveys employee who was supposed to pick us up for the run to Andado Station. This was not a good start. The kids slumped on the luggage while I stamped over to see the station master, demanding he take action to retrieve Anthony's swag.

'Don't worry, missus. I'll wire ahead. We'll get it back on the next train south.'

As I was leaving the station office, I was puzzled to see that Mac Clark had arrived from Andado and was lifting our gear onto his truck. 'Hello, Mac. I thought Fred Stevens was picking us up.'

'He was, I thought. I'm here by coincidence . . . I saw the kids on the platform.'

As Mac finished, we heard a vehicle approaching, and there was Fred Stevens jumping out. 'Had a flat, Griselda, sorry about that.' He wiped his brow, glanced across at the pub, and winked at Mac. 'Bloody thirsty work!'

‘Warm day,’ agreed Mac. ‘Shout you a beer, Griselda?’

In the pub, *everyone* wanted to shout me a beer and soon I was rather in need of relief. I excused myself and looked about for the loo. Instead, I found myself confronted by a drunk pastoralist.

‘I want to see your old man,’ he yelled.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said as politely as possible, thinking it was lucky Reg was nowhere in sight. ‘He’s at Andado.’

The man looked like he was trying to decide whether to drive over to Andado and kill my husband personally, or bide his time and commit the murder later. Then he broke into a crooked grin. ‘Pity. Haven’t sheen him for years! Jush thought I’d shake the old bugger by the hand.’ He peered at me, eyes shining. ‘You’ll do! Any wife of Reg Sprigg’s ish a friend of mine.’ He pumped my hand while I wondered how many previous wives Reg might have had.

My search for a toilet took me outside. ‘Goin’ for a look around, Griselda?’ It was ‘Savage’ Syd, the Finke police sergeant. ‘I’ll show you.’

My insides were bursting. ‘Oh, please! Thank you, Syd, but that’s not necessary. I was just ...’

‘Won’t take long! See, over here, that’s the post office.’

‘Yes ...’

‘And this here is where I do my business.’

‘Very nice.’

‘And this is the local fire truck.’ It was a bright red Jeep with hoses that looked like they would have trouble watering a flowerpot. My gizzards squirmed.

‘We’re proud of the new school here, Griselda.’ It was unremarkable but unquestionably brand new, and it also mercifully ended my tour of fine old Finke. We were back at the pub.

‘Another beer?’

I declined and signalled urgently to Doug, who was sitting at the bar in his cowboy hat drinking a glass of what I hoped was lemonade. ‘Yes, Mum?’

‘The toilet. Find me the toilet.’

Doug rushed off, eager to assist a damsel in distress. He returned an aeon later looking crestfallen.

‘There isn’t one?’

‘There is, but ...’

‘What?’

He shifted in his still shiny boots. ‘You know ...’

‘Oh! Why in heaven’s name were men made to pee standing up? Quick, find Fred Stevens.’

Doug did as he was asked and Fred came hurrying up to the bar.

‘Fred, we have to go.’

‘What’s the rush? Reg is out in the dunes somewhere. He won’t be back until late. Maybe not until tomorrow.’

‘Fred, is everything loaded?’

‘Yes, but ...’

‘Fred, I need to find the nearest, biggest tree on the track. Urgently.’

The penny dropped. ‘Why didn’t you say so? Let’s go!’

It is dry country out there but every now and then you come across a gum tree that seems to flourish just a little better than the rest.

From Finke to Andado is about seventy miles. In drought, the land between is a red dust bowl. Now it was carpeted in grasses and colourful wildflowers a foot high. We arrived at around eight that evening, and I was happy to see Reg there to meet us. Mac and Molly Clark laid on a welcoming meal, and then we had a late-night briefing session, with maps and photomosaics strewn all over the kitchen floor. Again I was reminded that we were making this journey in uncharted territory where our best navigational guide would be the stars and our compasses.

Next morning the homestead was a hive of activity. The workshop was going flat out mending punctures and overhauling the gravity survey vehicles. One of the vehicles, a tough but ancient Toyota nicknamed ‘Yellow Peril’, was already out in the desert, close to the easternmost gravity survey traverse line. It had been put there as an emergency vehicle months before, in case Reg and Professor Tindale needed it as an escape car after Colin Semmler flew them in to take a close-up look



Simpson Desert fringe country after rain. Near Andado, 1962.

at the Aboriginal ceremonial stones. Once the Geosurveys expedition was under way, Colin would fly Geosurveys operations manager Darby von Sanden and Anthony to meet up with Yellow Peril, and the Toyota was then supposed to make its own vital contribution to the completion of the gravity survey.

I went to size up our Nissan and was alarmed to find a 44-gallon petrol drum being wired inside. 'How on earth,' I asked Reg, 'am I

going to fit everything in here with this monstrosity taking up half the back end?’

‘I was going to lash it on the roof up front somehow,’ Reg said reasonably. ‘But yesterday a drum got loose above me and bloody nearly came through the windscreen. With you riding up front, I’m not taking that sort of risk.’

What could I say? My Reg.

Once the drum was wired I had the rest of the day to stow our gear and organise the spaces we would be jammed into during our journey. They became increasingly crammed as I shoved and poked everything inside. It took hours, and by the end of the job I was exhausted. I had reserved for myself the satisfaction of closing the Nissan’s back doors on a well-packed expedition, so you can imagine my absolute annoyance when the doors would not quite close. ‘Bugger it!’ I ranted. ‘Bloody silly design. Why couldn’t they make a tailboard?’

Reg and Molly were watching on. They made a series of not-very-funny remarks about my packing prowess and told me I had forgotten the kitchen sink. I glared at them and gave the doors an almighty kick. They jammed.

‘My hat!’ breathed Reg. ‘Molly, get me some wire and I’ll make it fast. We’d better get going before she does that to me.’

In 1962 there was a ragged network of tracks linking the stations that fringed the western Simpson Desert. We went from Andado south towards Mount Daer and Dalhousie Springs, spending an uneventful first night not far west of Mount Etingambra.

Next day was Fathers’ Day but it certainly was not Reg’s. By ten that morning we had conked out on a claypan. The engine simply sputtered and died. Reg and Doug stuck their heads under the bonnet to investigate.

‘Blocked fuel lead from that back tank we just put in,’ Reg said. ‘Open the back doors will you please, Griselda?’ I was about to protest but Reg went on. ‘There’s a trap door and a screw lid for the fuel lead. You disconnect it and I’ll blow the sand out of the lead.’

‘Reg, I’ll have to pull half our gear out!’

‘Better get started then,’ he chortled. ‘Doug and I have a carburettor to clean.’

Marg helped me pile up some of the gear then went off to hunt for museum specimens. As soon as I could reach the trapdoor, I stopped removing bags and boxes and hung myself upside down from the Nissan’s roof to disconnect the fuel lead. Fortunately there is no photograph to record what happened next.

I had not quite finished when Reg yelled out from the front that he was ready to blow the lead. ‘Wait a sec!’ I called back. I yanked the lead free and brought it up close to my face so I could look for the plug of sand. But Reg – never the type to wait for anything – must not have heard me. Next thing I knew, he had blown the pipe and I had a face washed with petrol.

We were soon on our way once more, but I spent most of the morning burping petrol fumes and listening to Reg crack jokes about how whisky was far more palatable if I really needed a drink.

Beyond Mount Etingambra there were no more tracks. We had reached the desert proper.

A fat brush turkey scudded out of the way and watched from a distance as Reg pulled up to take his first compass reading and we wired a pedometer to the dashboard. This instrument would count the number of sandhills we would now have to cross. A north wind was blowing, the day was getting hotter, and flies were swarming.

To me, despite our practise back in May, the early ridges looked insurmountable. I decided to walk down the first slopes, watching as the Nissan careered ahead swaying like a tug in a big sea. It looked sure to capsize and I could hear squeals of panic from the kids. But Reg made it safely to the bottom of each dune and so, after that, feeling that we might as well all die together, I stayed in the vehicle.

Four-wheel-drive enthusiasts know that it is good to keep tyre pressures low in sandy dune country. This usually prevents you getting bogged, but we soon discovered that the ploy was far from fail-safe.

Sand conspired with clumps of spinifex to have our wheels spinning hopelessly. We were 'jacked up', as the saying goes. Out came the shovels. We dug and pushed and sweated and cursed at the flies, cheering when at last the tyres took grip and we were on our way once more, up another dune, down another slope, progressing at the majestic speed of four miles an hour – until we got bogged again. 'Bloody hell,' came the weary chorus.

The sun was high, the heat stifling, the flies unbearable. There was nothing for it. I stripped to bra and undies and – dignity maintained by my boots and bush hat – started shovelling once more.

'You'll be taken in for indecent exposure,' laughed Reg.

I flung sand at him, but all that did was make me overbalance and land on my rear end in a clump of spinifex. That day, 'spinifex' joined 'dune' as a four-letter word.

One hundred and eight dunes later, we made our first Simpson Desert camp high on a sand ridge. Marg and Doug collected sticks for a cooking fire. After we were fed Reg took them down into the nearby dune corridor where the three of them indulged in acts of arson, getting their revenge on the spinifex by torching great clumps of the stuff.

I did the washing up water-free, digging the plates and cutlery into the sand and polishing them clean. After that I made diary notes in the light of our headlights, then puffed on a cigarette. Looking about me in the deepening desert night, I experienced an all-enveloping happiness.

Next morning, with the wilderness of dunes stretching before us to infinity, Reg gave Marg and Doug a box of matches each. Having been warned off ever playing with matches, they were puzzled.

'In case something happens to me and Mum. You'll have to light a big fire so the searchers can find you.'

Marg looked miserable for hours afterwards. Eventually I asked her what was wrong.

'You're going to leave us behind. Out here all by ourselves!'

A target of twenty miles in a full day of driving might not seem ambitious, but in the trackless Simpson Desert it was almost unachievable.

Our aim on day three was to cut the tracks of Geoff Rowley and Gordon 'Fred' de Rose, who were running the Geosurveys gravity survey lines along what Reg described as 'J Traverse'. Ideally, we would find them in time to camp together that night. This was not to be. We averaged barely three miles per hour. A hot north wind blew and the engine kept boiling as it struggled up the interminable dunes. Sand stuck in lumps to the sunburn cream on our faces. Lizards scuttled like tiny hovercraft to their burrows beneath the spinifex. Budgerigars and finches flitted mockingly ahead of us. Topping another dune and cascading into the corridors below, we chanced upon a gang of dromedaries. The one-humped camels ambled away, munching on the succulent parakeelya that grows so profusely after rain. Even they seemed to be going twice the speed that we were!

We only bogged twice, but the second time we came close to leaving our remains in the desert like the unfortunate Ludwig Leichhardt. We were surfing down an avalanche slope when – for a split second – the Nissan's steering wheel bucked out of Reg's grip. We bounced to the bottom and landed on a bed of spinifex as wide as the vehicle. All four wheels had nothing to grip but air. Suddenly there was the smell of roasting vegetation.

Reg went white. 'The fuel tanks!' he breathed. 'That exhaust pipe is hot as Hades. We'll be blown to bits. Kids, get out and get clear!'

He ripped a shovel from its straps and started digging at the smouldering spinifex. I ran to the other side of the Nissan, pulling at the spines with my bare hands.

By some miracle there was no fire. But even as the car cooled, the malevolent spinifex clump remained undefeated. It defied our efforts as we pushed, pulled and bloody dug, until at last the weight of the car tipped its front end on to the sand and we were away once more.

'I told you it would be rough,' said Reg. Now that we were travelling again he seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. 'Too late to turn back now.'

'Mummy,' Marg said, 'you're filthy!'

I twisted the rear vision mirror to have a look. My face was grimed with red sand and charcoal-grey smears of spinifex ash. My hands, too, were dirty – and bloodied to boot.

‘There must be easier ways of getting to Birdsville,’ I whispered.

The sun was getting low. We had not yet found J Traverse, and with the avalanche slopes now in deep shadow it was hard to tell whether there were vehicle tracks down in the corridors or not.

‘I reckon we’ve missed them,’ Reg said. By his reckoning we should have been within Geoff and Fred’s area by now. His arms and shoulders were aching from wrestling with the wheel, and he looked close to giving up.

‘Keep going,’ I urged him. ‘They’ll not be far now.’

But by 5.30 we were still searching and sunset was close. Reg was exhausted. About to admit defeat myself, I was suffering panicky visions of us endlessly circling and running out of water.

Just as we tipped over another dune face and Reg battled the Nissan once more onto all four of its wheels, I saw the tracks. ‘Eureka! We’re not alone!’ I yelled, and jumped out of the car to kiss the beautiful tyre marks.

The others watched in mild curiosity. Doug said what the others were obviously thinking. ‘Dad, I think Mum’s gone bonkers.’

We followed the tracks until we found a huge sandhill. We made camp on top and indulged in a tinned-stew desert-dinner, then waited for eight o’clock, the pre-arranged time for us and the J Traverse team to send up signal rockets if we had not yet managed to meet.

Reg fiddled with the radio and picked up a signal. It was Sir Harry Lauder singing ‘The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond’. Even though Marg was at the time trying to remove spinifex spines from my *derriere* I was transported back to girlhood days at the Paisley Theatre, where it seemed to me that Sir Harry was singing his song directly to me. As I emerged from my reverie I wondered once again what could possibly have possessed me to trade those cool Scottish climes for a desert dune Down Under.

Desert Rendezvous

On the dot of eight a rocket arched into the velvet sky about six miles south, competing briefly with the stars. We fired off our reply and the kids stoked the fire with spinifex to guide Geoff and Fred into camp. We strained our ears for the sound of an engine, and our eyes for a glimpse of headlights. Nothing.

'I reckon,' Marg said, 'that now they know where we are, they're leaving it till morning to find us.'

'You're probably right,' said Reg. 'Which means it's bed time.'

'But Dad,' the kids protested in unison. 'we're not tired!'

'Well, *I* am.' He found his swag and, fully clothed, climbed inside. 'I'll be snoring in seconds.'

Doug was not easily deterred. 'Dad?'

'Mmm?'

'What constellation is that?'

Reg was never able to refuse a campfire conversation about astronomy. 'Which one?'

'Over there, about thirty degrees,' pointed Doug. 'Near Antares.'

'That's Lupus.'

‘No, the other side.’

‘Oh, Scorpio.’ There was a pause. ‘Your Mum’s a scorpion.’ Reg yawned, and then chuckled. ‘That’s *her* constellation.’ Then, satisfied with his wit, my husband was asleep. I watched his peaceful face in the firelight and marvelled, not for the first time, at the strength and energy of my man, at his ability to guide us through this uncharted desert terrain with nothing but a compass, those primitive photomosaics and his cherished astrofixing skills.

Then I looked across at Doug, who was still staring up at the heavens and making his own discoveries. He was not yet eight years old, but already he had learned so much through his commando-style upbringing. He was even now a better mechanic than most grown men would ever be. It was a foregone conclusion, I knew, that one day he would learn to fly.

As for Marg, I felt sorry she had been concerned about being abandoned. Such a vast desert was bound to provoke fears in anyone with Marg’s imagination. This *was* a dangerous adventure. Reg was a born optimist, and perhaps Marg knew that sometimes her father rode his luck. A devoted ten-year-old, she was proud of him and loved him unconditionally, but maybe she truly feared that one day she would have to light that terrible fire for the searchers who may or may not arrive in time to find survivors.

‘Marg,’ I said. ‘Don’t fuss yourself about those matches. You’ll not be needing them.’

‘I know, Mum,’ she said, looking grateful for the reassurance.

‘You just concentrate on collecting those lizards and ants for the museum.’

Next morning Marg was off exploring, carefully storing her finds in jars she had labelled specially for the job. We breakfasted before dawn to beat the flies, then Reg decided he had better go off to find Geoff and Fred. For the rest of us, it was to be a long wait. The north wind came up with the sun and soon the day was hot and dry. We broke camp in readiness, but still we waited. For what seemed hours, nothing moved in the desert.

Eventually, at around ten that morning, we heard the drone of an aircraft and spied, far away, the dot of what we hoped was Colin Semmler's Cessna. Marg suggested we pile grass on our fire to make big smoke so Colin could see us. We were ready to clasp our hands above our heads in the agreed signal that all was well with us.

If Colin spotted us, he must also have spotted something more urgent. He stayed to the south of our sand ridge and soon he was circling. Not long after that, Doug yelled that he could see sunflashes from windscreens, two of them, heading our way. At last, we had made our first desert rendezvous!

Reg revved into camp with Geoff and Fred bouncing along not far behind in their International Scout. 'Quick kids! Help me dig a trench!' He waved his arm to the east. 'Pointing that way.' Doug wanted to know why. Reg was already digging. 'So Colin knows we're heading that way and all is well.'

The children grabbed sticks and helped with the trenching. The Cessna was starting to circle our ridge.

'Now, everyone! Hands above your heads!'

Marg was amused. 'Simon says?'

'Simon says,' bellowed Reg, and up went all our arms. Everyone giggled. We must have looked daft, standing there in the desert in full view of the lizards and insects and birds, hands held up like kids in a classroom.

Colin circled for a minute, then threw a package from the cabin window. It landed with a soft plop not far away. It was a note, written on a sick bag and wrapped in red survey tape.

'He acknowledges all is well,' read Reg. 'He knows we're continuing east. He's returning to base camp and he'll be back for the scheduled rendezvous.'

Satisfied our plans were still on track, Reg began studying his photomosaics and left it to Geoff and Fred to explain the morning's hold-up. Fred was refuelling the International Scout from my favourite 44-gallon drum. He slapped the side of the small vehicle. 'This blighter is far too light for this sort of country. I had a feeling it might be.'

Considering Fred was a mechanic supplied by the vehicle's manufacturers, who had also supplied the new Scout to prove its bush-bashing capacities, the verdict was condemnation indeed. 'We had a busted axle.'

Yet Fred had obviously fixed it, for here they were, with a working vehicle.

'Fred's too modest,' said Geoff. 'What he's really trying to say is that he's a real clever bugger, pardon my French.'

'Why?'

'He brought spares.'

'Spare axles?'

'Yeah. Heaps of 'em. He was replacing it after brekkie when Reg came looking. Like I said, real clever, Freddy is.'

Freddy was grinning like the village idiot. The fact was that his mechanical prowess had proven vital, and it was to become so again before our journey's end.

The refuelling was complete and Reg had completed his jigsaws. 'We're making for M76. Everyone set?'

It was all of thirty miles to M76 from our intersection with J Traverse, but the dunes were not so close together and we arrived there after only two boggings and half a dozen engine boilings. The replenishments were making serious inroads into our drinking water.

M76 turned out to be a small, open sand-flat decorated by a few trees. We found as sheltered a spot as possible and made camp, feasting yet again from a can and listening to the eerie sounds of the wind, the skittering flight of bats and the calls of hoot owls. Reg, humming away, made his notes and calculations. Geoff was fiddling with his radio, trying to raise a signal. Eventually, through the static, he collected a weather report. It was still early spring, but it had been ninety-four degrees at Cook on the Nullabor Plain and Adelaide had been battered by sixty-mile-per-hour northerlies. A big south-westerly change was due to blow across South Australia some time in the night. The thought of cooler weather was a relief to us all. Our camp descended into silence and we slept.

The change arrived with a bang. Boots, pannikins and clothing went flying across the sand flat. Reg and I ran about the camp,

battening down, zipping the kids into their sleeping bags to keep out the stinging sand, and rejoicing in the delicious southern wind, so cool you could smell the ozone.

The next day's destination was a big claypan Reg had dubbed P84. It was Geosurveys' most easterly fuel dump, the only place west of Birdsville we knew of that Colin could safely land the Cessna.

Before we could get started there were some important, and worrying, details to address. The Nissan's petrol pump was playing up again and its suspension bolts were working loose from the hammering in the dunes. Freddy and Doug took care of the mechanical problems while Reg and Geoff tried their luck with the radio, trying to account for the other Simpson Desert crews. The next team we were due to meet up with was Jack Platt and David Hughes. It was confirmed they had overnighted safely on Q Traverse, in the company of Geosurveys troubleshooter Nick Byrne and his offsider Wal Watkins, whose job it was to range between the survey teams in the depot truck and return to base camp when the survey was complete while the rest of us convoyed on to Birdsville. They reported that all was well and they hoped to meet us at P84, or somewhere along Q Traverse, that evening.

That was the good news. Darby von Sanden and his lad Anthony, however, were in real strife. They were further east, somewhere along T Traverse, in Yellow Peril. Everyone was gathered around the radio as Darby explained their predicament.

'First the good news,' he began. 'Anthony's got his swag back.' This meant little to anyone except me and the kids. 'But I can tell you, old man spinifex is earning his reputation out here. The corridors are so choked we've been getting jacked up every hundred yards or so.' We all understood. Darby continued: 'To make any progress at all, we've been driving along the dune crests. We were climbing the face of one of the bloody hills when we lost first gear. Sheared the rivets joining the gear to the drive shaft. Reverse gear's connected to the same drive, so we've lost that, too.'

This was bad. With anyone less resourceful than Darby, it might have spelled ruin for the survey – and the crossing.

He must have sensed our anxiety. ‘Don’t worry. Whenever the corridors get too choked, we just charge the dune faces flat out in second gear! The rate we’re going, we’ll make the rendezvous point about a week before you get there.’

Our own progress that day was the best so far. Even though Reg was now stopping often to make his own gravity measurements and fix locations so Geoff and Freddy’s survey data could be ‘tied’ with the findings of Jack Platt and David Hughes, we found ourselves crossing more broad sand flats and claypans than we expected, making for fewer of the grinding dune crossings. There were occasional stands of gidgee forest too, the home of hundreds of little birds. At lunchtime the Cessna flew over and Colin dropped a note to tell us we were only twenty dunes west of our target. We pressed on impatiently but, even in the cooler weather, the engine boiled on several dune ascents. Did I complain? Not on your nelly. Like the times Reg paused to make gravity measurements, these unscheduled rest stops gave me the chance to wander away from the Nissan and puff on a cigarette, which I dared not do while we were dune bashing with the vehicle so hot and laden with fuel.



The only shade in the Simpson Desert was man-made. ‘T19’, 1962.

It was soon after three when we topped the final dune and looked down on P84. The Cessna, looking minuscule, was parked there on the claypan with mountainous dunes beyond. Our tiny convoy rattled up to the plane. Colin had been sheltering under a tarp stretched over the fuel and water drums, but he climbed out to meet us, squinting in the sun. We forsook triumphant hand-shakes or congratulations: there was still too much to be done.

The first chore was to refill our jerry cans and every spare container with fresh water and top up the fuel tanks. Then it was time to consider the fact that there was no sign of anybody else arriving to join us. Reg scanned the nearest dunes, as if the others might suddenly appear on top of one and descend gloriously onto the claypan. They did not. 'Might be time to have another fly, Colin.'

'I'll go east and look for Q tracks. I reckon there's another pan I could put down on there. If the light holds, I'll keep going and look for Darby on T.'

'Fair enough, but first – find Jack and David. We'll follow you in the direction of Q and hope to make camp there.'

Reg filmed Colin's perfect short-field take-off. Doug looked on, learning as always, watching as the flaps were raised and the Cessna soared away into the wind. Soon we were making off, heading east with the sun getting low behind us.

Beyond P84 some of the sand flats were half a mile wide, carpeted with green grasses and sprays of wild flowers. We accelerated to the luxurious speed of ten miles per hour. I spotted tracks on Q Traverse at six that evening. Four miles later we saw the Cessna and motored in to where it was parked at Jack Platt's camp.

Again the handshakes were brief. Jack and David Hughes were now united with us, but we knew that Darby and Anthony still faced car trouble alone somewhere further east, and now Nick Byrne and his mate were also unaccounted for. They too had struck car trouble – this time the engine – and stayed behind trying to find the problem and hopefully fix it.

Before the sun sank completely we made camp while David built a ring of fires on nearby dune tops so Nick could see his way in – if

he had succeeded in getting mobile again. And there was also the eight o'clock rocket flare session to help us locate each other.

After sundown the temperature dropped. We ate dinner huddled in our coats and jumpers, then burrowed into our swags as we waited for the appointed hour. Our flare arced into the clouds, but there was no response.

'No point fretting,' said Colin, who had decided to camp with us beside his plane. 'We'll find them tomorrow.'

He walked off into the darkness and rummaged in the Cessna, returning with an accordion. Young David Hughes suddenly looked like he had arrived in heaven. He jumped out of his swag and rushed off to Jack Platt's truck, hurrying back with his guitar. A warming tot of Scotch and we held the first white man corroboree in the Simpson Desert.

Worried that Nick and Wal would be low on water even if they had succeeded in moving again, Reg and Colin took the plane up again at dawn, with David and Jack as observers. Quite soon they were back.

'We'd only gone about eight miles,' explained Colin while Reg stamped about planning what to do next. 'We saw some rough lettering in the sand asking, "Where is P84?" We picked up some tracks and followed them. Some of the sand gouges were deep – I reckon those avalanche slopes were too steep for them as they tried to go west. Anyway, we found the vehicle with its bonnet removed, and Nick and Wal were waving from a sandhill, again with the "Where is P84?" message.'

'What did you do then?' asked Doug.

'Reg scribbled a note with directions to P84 and asked them to give us a thumbs up if they thought they could get there. The idea is to get Fred de Rose, our trusty mechanic, back to P84 to help with repairs.'

'You got the thumbs up?'

'Yep.'

Reg called everyone together to issue instructions.

‘Colin will fly Fred back to P84, where they will wait until Nick and Wal turn up. When repairs are complete, those two can return to camp – their work is done. Jack, David and Geoff will stay here and wait for Colin to return with Fred, then you should follow our tracks. We’ll keep going east to T Traverse and see if we can find Darby and the lad.’

The morning search had not taken long, but I had spent the time wisely, breaking camp and making the Nissan ready for immediate departure. Reg was clearly in a hurry and he drove with urgency. Whenever we boiled or stopped to take survey measurements I was as impatient as Reg to get us moving again. We never said so out loud, for fear of scaring the kids, but we were very worried about Darby. He was not only Reg’s second-in-command, but a friend to us both, and the kids adored him. I adored him too – he had irresistible humour and the good looks of a pirate.

All day we hammered the dunes eastwards, plunging down the avalanche slopes, cursing as we cleared the spinifex bogs, determined to reach T Traverse before sunset. As the sun sank lower Reg began to tire and there was frustration in his voice as he demanded that his navigator tell him how much further we had to go. I squinted over my mosaics and calculations. ‘How much *further*?’ he asked again.

This frustrated me in turn. I wanted to tell him to shut up and watch the road, but there wasn’t one. Instead, I counselled patience. ‘There’s at least a dozen dunes to go.’

‘God! We’ll never find Darby tonight.’

‘Have faith, Reg. Even if we don’t, Darby’s a resourceful fellow.’

‘I know, but with Anthony aboard, his judgment might be affected by worry.’

‘He’ll be even more careful.’

The wheel twisted and the Nissan nearly rolled. ‘My hat!’ mumbled Reg. ‘Maybe I’ll concentrate on keeping *us* alive.’

There were more scares as we battled with some of the roughest dunes we had encountered so far. Just before six, at the bottom of an avalanche slope, I spotted tracks.

‘It has to be T Traverse!’

‘Couldn’t be anything else,’ chortled Reg, looking as relieved as I had ever seen him. He pulled up and jumped out to examine the tracks. ‘They’re pretty fresh. I’m buggered if I know how Darby’s done it, but it even looks like he’s finished his survey – or pretty close to it. We’ll follow him south.’

We bumped along as darkness descended, and again it seemed our rendezvous would have to wait. Then I thought I saw the shape of a vehicle high on an avalanche ridge up to our west. Reg was doubtful, but he flashed the headlights in that direction, and the ridgetop burst into welcoming flames.

Darby came bounding down the hillside, all six-foot-plus of him, waving his arms about and shouting. ‘Jeez, it’s good to see you, Reg, you old bastard! Evening, Griselda.’ He hopped onto the running board as Reg pointed the Nissan up the slope to Darby’s camp. ‘Gun it, Reg! Pardon me, Griselda, but it appears your husband is losing his hair.’

‘From worrying about you,’ yelled Reg, foot to the floor. ‘How the hell did you get up here without first gear?’

‘Roared the tail off her. I would’ve carried her up if I had to. I reckon this is Yellow Peril’s last trip, though. You’ll have to buy me a new car. What about one of those oilman’s Cadillacs? What do you reckon, kids? A fancy new car to take you to school. Maybe a Rolls Royce?’

Naturally the kids agreed with this plan, but Darby was already on to another topic. ‘What did I promise?’

‘Chips!’ chorused Marg and Doug. ‘Chips in the desert!’

By now we had reached the sandhill’s summit. Anthony was dancing about, grinning from ear to ear. But in his enthusiasm to make the welcoming bonfire, he had used most of the available wood, causing Reg to inquire of Darby how he planned to cook his fabled potato chips.

‘No worries.’ With a debonair flourish Darby produced a small pressure stove. ‘Coffee first, to perk you up, then chips and fried onions.’

The billy took forever to boil, almost until it was time for our eight o’clock rocket flare. We expected the others to have sorted out

their mechanical dramas and now be close on our trail. Doug spotted an answering flare far to the west. We were all going to be okay, for now at least. When that coffee eventually came, it tasted absolutely wonderful.

The tiny stove hissed and spat over the chips and onions. Six starving desert explorers can eat a load of chips and onions, so dinner was slow to come, each of us salivating at the cooking smells. We ate at nine, the kids demolishing their serves as soon as Darby handed them their plates.

An hour later we saw two sets of headlights weaving along the dune corridor to our north. This was a good sign, because it meant Nick Byrnes and Wal Watkins had sorted out their problems with the depot truck and would be heading back to base camp from P84 while the first two gravity survey teams caught up with us.

‘Stoke up the fire!’ everyone yelled at once. We raced around finding stray twigs and sticks. The headlights paused in the darkness, then came a roaring of engines as the lights turned uphill towards us.

‘You beauty!’ beamed Reg. ‘Believe it or not, we’re right on time. Where’s that medicinal stuff? Birdsville, here we come!’

Bound for Birdsville

Now the entire Simpson Desert crossing party was together – we Spriggs in the Nissan, Freddy de Rose and Geoff Rowley in the little International Scout, Jack Platt and David Hughes in their stout green Toyota, and Darby and Anthony in Yellow Peril. Morale was high. We had united after days of sometimes exhausting dune crossings. Some of those terracotta ridges, ascending towards a glaring blue sky, had seemed half a mile high. We were filthy from sweat, sand, suncreams, smoke and engine grease, but we had made it this far and, for the moment, that was achievement enough.

Nevertheless, there remained a vast amount of trackless territory to traverse, and the terrain would present a pitiless challenge to our limping vehicles. We also had survey work to complete and a mission to be made in recognition of the Simpson's first surveyor, Augustus Poeppel.

At first light Geoff and David erected a trig station on the summit of our campsite sand ridge, presumably because it seemed the highest point for miles around. As with geology, I find the finer points of mathematics, including trigonometry, incomprehensible. But I can tell

you that the trig station was put there to provide a fixed position from which anyone who followed us – seismic explorers perhaps – would be able to take accurate future bearings. This was not just done for Geosurveys' sake. The Australian government helped subsidise these explorations for the practical reason that accurately measured control points and new maps – including the gravity survey map, when it was completed – added to the national storehouse of geographical knowledge. As far as I know, Geosurveys' Simpson Desert maps are still stored somewhere in Canberra.

Anyway, while this was going on, Fred de Rose serviced all four of the sand- and spinifex-choked vehicles, paying particular attention to poor old Yellow Peril. Try as he might, he could not restore the missing gears. Reg and Darby schemed over their hand-made maps and the photomosaics, working out how best to finish the final section of Darby's gravity survey, which had not quite been completed before we caught up with him.

'We Spriggs will go ahead,' suggested Reg. 'Griselda and the kids can set the tags every half mile. If Jack and David follow us and make the actual readings down to T92, we'll have the job done in half the time.'

We followed the southerly trend of the dune corridor Darby had pioneered and reached T92 without incident, well ahead of the others. Reg started making calculations for a route that would put us on a dune-bashing easterly course for Poeppel Corner. 'We won't make it there for at least two days,' he said. 'And I'm worried about the salt lakes coming up, too. We could end up badly bogged.'

'Worse than we have been?' asked Marg with a been-there, done-that expression.

'I'm hungry,' said Doug, ignoring his sister's sarcasm. I gave him a can of salmon to share with Marg and the bush flies, then sent them off to hunt for wild flowers and museum specimens.

Eventually the others caught up and we were away again, travelling in convoy for the first time. Reg blazed the trail in the Nissan, followed by Yellow Peril, the Scout, and Jack Platt's green Toyota.

The going was rough, with frequent boilings and boggings – but at

least there were many hands to help dig the victims free. We managed just twenty-six miles all day and didn't reach the salt lakes that worried Reg. Close to sundown we topped a dune and looked down on a wide flat fringed by gidgee.

'That'll do for a camp tonight,' said Reg.

Nobody complained. 'It'll do for dune bashing, too,' I agreed. I had just glanced at the pedometer. 'Did you know we have now crossed 708 dunes since Mount Etingambra?'

In wetter seasons, the flat might have been a swamp. As it was, the gidgee were alive with nesting zebra finches, each with three or four eggs. The boys ran among the trees collecting wood, and built a huge fire. Everyone was ravenous – we demolished cans of steak, beans, spaghetti, ravioli and spam. Still nobody was sated until Darby produced a large packet of dried apricots. The culinary diversion was as blissful as chips in the desert!

We chattered by the fire for a while, keeping warm as the temperature fell once again and the stars came out to blaze over us, serene and so indifferent to our pilgrimage across the Simpson sands. Before sleep I looked up at them for a long time, comforted by the astronomical murmurings of Reg and Doug nearby and the sight of Marg, confident now, immersed in her sciences and creatures and artefacts.

In the morning Darby blazed a tree with the date and the initials RCS and GS – his way of marking our progress on what was, after all, an endeavour that would mark a new chapter in the story of the Simpson Desert. These days he would be accused of environmental desecration, but Reg and I felt honoured.

We were on our way early, and soon the country was changing. Corkwood trees grew in the swamp flats. The gidgee forests were enormous and we encountered the first of the gypsum- and salt-surfaced lakes that Reg had been anxious about. If you take a look at modern maps of the region, you can see why. North of Lake Eyre, almost all the way up to Poeppel Corner, is a huge network of elongated salt lakes. Their shapes tend towards the north-north-west, in exactly the same direction as the Simpson Desert dune corridors. In drought, the lake surfaces are crusted and hard, but in a good season,

like the wet winter of 1962, there is water to be found in the scattering of native wells known to the Wangkangurru people, and the surfaces of the lakes are treacherously soft. Our mainly eastward route along the Northern Territory–South Australia border was designed to avoid the worst of these lakes, but now – looking over the first of them – the soft patches were plain to see, dappled all over the surface, and it was clear that the crossing would be a dangerous one. Yet the lakes would have to be crossed if we were to maintain our easterly course. If we did not go straight across them, we would be zig-zagging in the desert for weeks.

Reg worked the Nissan slowly onto the surface of the first lake. Immediately we seemed to be sinking, and in places we were six inches deep, but Reg managed to keep us moving. The others followed our tracks exactly, the going getting easier for each vehicle as the tracks compacted.

The Nissan's radiator boiled, of course. Ever the investigator, Reg announced that while it cooled, he would auger-sample the lake to see how deep it went. While he did so, he delivered one of his off-the-cuff lectures. 'This must have been lush country during the ice age. Twenty thousand years ago, these elongated lakes would have been covered with brackish water, fresh after rains. The gidgee forest sheltered thousands of kangaroos. Long-vanished Aboriginal tribes hunted here.'

There was a pause from the professor. By now he had virtually disappeared inside the lake-bed. 'Look at this! Solid gypsum crystal. I'm told there are still fresh-water soaks in these parts, but buggered if I know where to find 'em. There's nothing down here but mud, salt and gypsum.' He resumed digging. 'Now, as I was saying, in good years these lagoons are teeming with bird life ...'

It was a relentless day of pitting our vehicles against nature's diverse obstacles. The treacherous lakes were, it seemed, innumerable. The dunes were there also, by the dozen. All day, stopping only to water radiators and dig clear of bogs, we struggled eastward, dripping with sweat and harassed by itching sand and maddening bush flies.

At last we spotted what we had been hoping to find – one of the

few of these salty lagoons that was big enough to boast a name: Lake Thomas. Reg consulted his watch. 'Three forty. That gives us twenty minutes to get down there and make an airstrip for Colin.'

The surface looked solid enough from the dune top. 'Why bother, Dad?' Doug asked.

'He might rip his undercarriage off, and we'd have to listen to his accordion playing all the way to Birdsville. Griselda, when we get to the edge of the lake, you and the kids make a smoke fire so Colin can spot us. The rest of us will barrel up and down that bloody lake as many times as we can.'

It would have made a comic sight for anyone there to see it. I was torching toilet paper and a cigarette packet, trying to light the uncommonly green wood while the kids huffed and blew. Four filthy vehicles were screaming up and down a half-mile stretch of Lake Thomas while the Cessna circled above.

Finally Reg gave the all-clear and we cheered as Colin dropped in to a perfect landing. We could have claimed a world record for Fastest Airstrip Construction, but right then I think the men would have been more inclined to *drink* a Guinness than claim one.

The party spirit that joined the expedition that night awoke again in us all the next morning. It was going to be a busy day, and doubtless there would be problems ahead, but now we were within reach of Poeppel Corner we were at last moving into better-known country. Perhaps we would even have a bath again in our lifetimes.

Reg set us two tasks that morning. The first was to find Augustus Poeppel's corner post. The second was for Colin to fly Darby in to Birdsville to make arrangements for our celebration dinner at the Birdsville Pub. They were to introduce themselves to dignitaries including the shire mayor, Francis Brook, invite them all to our planned ceremony for Cecil Madigan and, with luck, dragoon one or two of them into helping with the cairn construction. Doug and Marg went as well with a box of toys for the Inland Mission. The plan was for the rest of us to leave one vehicle at Lake Thomas, so that when they flew back from Birdsville Darby could bring the kids along to catch up, and Colin could return to Birdsville and await us there.

By Reg's calculations it was fourteen miles to Poeppel Corner. As usual, he was correct to within a few tenths of a mile, a feat of navigation which still amazes me. It was another example of how brilliantly he had organised the whole excursion. Apart from one huge dune and some perilously soft lake crossings, the going was good, with clear, sandy saltbush flats and lots of low dunes.

At Lake Poeppel we found one of the waddy-tree survey posts Augustus Poeppel had placed every mile on his epic survey journey from Haddon Corner back in 1880. We were now very close to where the South Australian, Queensland and the Northern Territory borders met, and Poeppel Corner itself was less than a mile away, somewhere on the eastern edge of the salt lake that bears the great surveyor's name.

We could not immediately locate the large coolibah corner post Poeppel had used to mark the junction of the colonial states. Reg paced about, and was still looking puzzled and irritated when we heard the drone of the Cessna returning from Birdsville. He shrugged. 'I might as well go and meet them,' he said, climbed into the Nissan and drove off alone.

It had been Geosurveys' intention to build a fine trig station at the exact location of the border-corner. The boys started preparing the materials: a 44-gallon drum that was to be filled with sand as an anchor-base, a long steel pipe for a mast and a shiny disk-top with a Geosurveys' logo that would be visible for miles. The whole contraption was to be stabilised by guy wires, and it was close to being fully constructed by the time Reg returned with the others.

He said barely a word. He marched off towards the very edge of the lake looking thoroughly annoyed, with Darby in tow. Darby looked like he was trying to placate a madman. The kids and I followed at a distance, until Reg started kicking at the dirt. 'Here! It must be here!'

To everyone's amazement, after a few more kicks Reg connected with something solid. He got down on hands and knees and there it was! The post had been buried by sand and clay, but somehow Reg had found it.

When we asked how he had worked it out, Reg said he had been an idiot and must have been using Poeppel's original calculations.

‘When Poeppel got back from his original 1880 survey he found that his measuring chains had been stretched by the heat. Not much – an inch or so – but it meant that when Wells did the re-survey in 1883, he had to move the post a bit to the east. To this point. Here it is!’

The boys began to erect the Geosurveys trig station. ‘Your husband,’ said Darby to me as we watched Reg join in, ‘is a bloody marvel. I don’t buy that stuff about Poeppel’s chains, I just think Reg has a map in his head. Comprehensive, detailed, all built up from his calculations and the photomosaics. He would have found that post blindfolded.’

After the trig station was fully erect, Reg began examining the Poeppel Corner post. ‘The termites have got to it.’

‘It hasn’t lasted too badly,’ said Darby, ‘considering it’s been in the ground for more than eighty years.’

‘It won’t last much longer, though. Do you reckon you could delouse it and preserve it somehow?’

‘Back in Adelaide, no problem. Should we take it?’

‘The trig station now marks the borders. We’ll give the post to the museum – it’s a piece of history. Otherwise it’ll rot, or some bugger will come along and pinch it.’

The plan was agreed. Reg turned to the next urgent item. ‘How’d you go in Birdsville?’

Darby said the visit had been a great success. ‘The kids had a ball. The mayor is lined up for Madigan’s ceremony. Eric Sammon, the local sergeant, reckons the cairn is a great idea and the pub can’t wait for the extra business. It’s all set.’

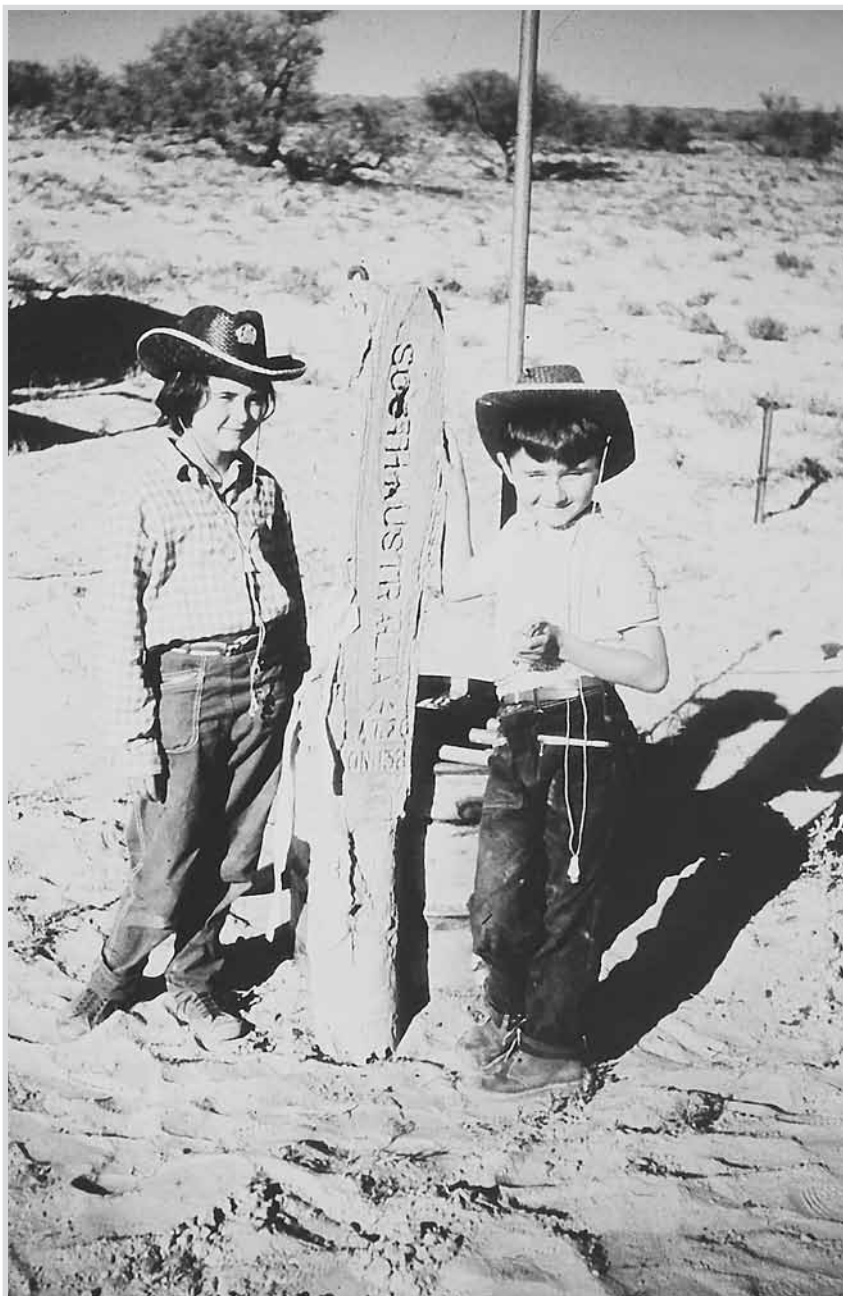
Not quite. We still had to *get* to Birdsville.

Late next afternoon, after another dune-bashing marathon that included the new challenge of not spiking our tyres on gidgee stumps, we experienced a serious mishap.

The convoy was about twelve miles short of the flood-out – where the Mulligan River and Eyre Creek watercourses spill into the dry lands beyond – when the International Scout lost its front differential. We all



Erecting the Geosurveys 'trig' station, Poeppel Corner, 1962.



Poeppel's original corner post, badly eaten by bugs.

heard the bang and pulled up to the sound of furious cursing, especially from Freddy de Rose, who had nursed the Scout with loving care and – even though he had been through several axles – was now genuinely hoping the expedition’s automotive runt would actually make the distance. But losing the ‘diff’, and consequently the Scout’s four-wheel-drive capacity, was a true disaster. There was no choice but to share its load between the three other vehicles and for the daring duo to ease the Scout along gingerly, using front differential only.

This worked for two more dunes. Then the Scout’s front axle broke.

There was a crisis conference. Fred reminded everyone that he had brought along spare axles, but with the Scout’s rear end near terminally crippled, it was eventually decided that repairs to the front end would be a waste of time. We needed to press on for Birdsville. The Scout was abandoned.

Push on we did, cascading down enormous dune faces into the Mulligan River bed, darkness falling before we had put more than a dozen miles between ourselves and the Scout. Camp was dismal. Poor Freddy was practically in tears. There he was, in the middle of nowhere, minus the thousands of pounds worth of Geosurveys’ vehicle he had been entrusted with, a vehicle the company hoped would prove to be of immense promotional value. He walked around with his arms crossed over his chest and under his arms, trying to hold himself together. The rest of us ate in silence, barely tasting the food our bodies somehow did not crave. And for half an hour afterwards, we sat in dejected silence.

‘Doesn’t seem right,’ said Freddy at last. ‘The little bugger giving up just as the hardest part is nearly done.’

We murmured our agreement, then fell silent as we brooded on the thought of a man-made beast of burden failing to accomplish what camels easily could.

I suppose the taste of failure was so sour that it made everyone start planning a night-time rescue mission. But how?

‘What about this?’ Darby said. ‘We take the good Toyota, lash a tyre to the rear bumper and another one to the Scout’s front bumper. That way we can rig a flexible tow line.’

‘And we’d have a six-wheel-drive!’ said Freddy, his face lighting up like a Christmas tree.

Darby told me later that it was almost impossible to get Jack Platt’s Toyota back up the Mulligan River dune front, and they just missed tipping into a windblown pit fifty feet deep when they did make the top. But Darby, Fred and Jack eventually reached the Scout at around ten that night, only to discover that its rear differential was almost shot. Freddy was able to save enough unbroken gear to get the front diff working. Another replacement axle, and they had rigged themselves a functioning six-wheel-drive, desert-duelling road-train.

Back at the Mulligan river camp we had no idea what was going on. Our flares went unanswered. Around midnight, we heard what we thought was the distant roaring of engines, then silence.

‘If I was them,’ Geoff said, ‘I’d be getting some rest for the night and catching up in the morning. They must be bugged by now.’

‘I hope that’s all it is,’ said Reg. ‘What if the Toyota’s blown up as well?’

‘Have faith, boss. Those three galoots are indestructible.’

‘But what if it has?’

‘It’ll just be a squash getting into Birdsville. You’ll have Griselda on your lap.’

This seemed to cheer Reg up. ‘There could be worse fates.’

At sun-up we decided to wait for Darby and the boys before setting off. This would be, we hoped, our last day on the ‘road’ to Birdsville.

I spent an hour or so catching up on diary notes while Reg sorted his samples and the kids collected ants, lizards and plant life. Geoff had ulcers on a leg, so I treated those and called a sick parade to inspect cuts, bruises and burns.

We could hear Darby’s Toyota now, but in the far distance, so Reg decided to have a shave before meeting the dignitaries at Birdsville. His battery-powered shaver couldn’t cope with his days’-old stubble, so he asked to borrow Geoff’s razor.

‘Go easy on it,’ said Geoff. ‘It’s my last decent blade.’

Reg soaped up with a bowl full of hot water from the billy and meticulously shaved exactly one half of his face. Gallantly he handed back Geoff's prized instrument. 'There, you can't go much easier than that.'

Everyone giggled at my half-shaved husband, observing that the dirty side looked far better than the clean. Reg pretended to be offended. Only the youngster, Anthony, was unamused. He sat looking bored on his rolled-up swag, clearly anxious that we should get moving.

Perhaps they took pity on him, or maybe they were thirsty for a beer at Birdsville, but Geoff and David suggested they forge ahead with Anthony in Yellow Peril.

'I don't know,' said Reg. 'It would be smart for all of us to wait here for the others – just in case they need help. They can't be far off now.'

'They'll be right. If the tow's too much for the Toyota, they'll have the sense to cut their losses and leave the Scout behind.'

Knowing Darby's and Freddy's determination, Reg probably doubted that they would, but he agreed to let Geoff and David go ahead with Anthony. 'Keep your eyes skinned. According to the photo-mosaics, there's a station track not too far away, maybe thirty miles east, that will lead you to Alton Downs Station. When you find it, go south-east. Stop at the first well tank and wait for us there.'

Yellow Peril was loaded up and off they went. We watched for a while, alone again as a family, then set about breaking camp. We needn't have hurried. It was nearly midday when the drone of the Toyota came close. We looked up to see it, the Scout in tow, careering down a dune avalanche then revving into our camp.

Darby jumped from the passenger's side door. 'Saved you a few bob there, Reg. You owe me a pay rise.'

'You're late. We'll have to dock you.'

Freddy, meanwhile, was inspecting Reg's face. His eye wandered to a basin of sudsy water left over from the breakfast dishes, then back to Reg. Then he stripped down to his underpants and scrubbed himself exactly half clean, leaving his right side nearly black from two weeks of bush-bashing and mechanical labour. Without bothering to dry

himself, he climbed back into the same filthy clothes he was wearing *before* his wash, and asked what we were all waiting for.

We found the Alton Downs track without any trouble but I thought I saw Yellow Peril's wheel ruts intersecting the track and continuing east.

'It can't be,' said Reg. 'Nobody would be daft enough to miss a track as obvious as this one.' He didn't want to know.

Reg turned the Nissan towards the south-east, then pulled up. 'Hang on a sec while I tell Fred and Darby to separate the Scout from Jack's vehicle. Now we're on a track, the Scout should be okay to limp along on the front diff. Then we'll go ahead and have a wash at the station tank. Anthony and his mates will have had the brains to do the same.'



Never waste the chance for a wash! Alton Downs Bore Tank, 1962.

They had not. They were not there. How they could have missed the landmark was beyond me – the tank stood six feet high. It was corralled by sparse wood fencing and sat next to the biggest windmill I

had seen since we had set out from greener places. Come to that, it was the *only* windmill.

‘Bloody idiots,’ fumed Reg. ‘Maybe they *did* miss the track.’

‘They’ll turn up,’ I offered in hope. ‘They probably decided to go on to Alton Downs.’

‘Blatantly ignoring my instructions. They’ll cop an earful when we catch up with ’em.’

‘Meanwhile Reg, let’s make ourselves presentable. That run-off pipe looks like it will make a shower.’

It was not quite perfect. The water was so saline that no amount of scrubbing would raise a lather, but it was still a luxury. Doug and Marg pranced naked beneath the warm spouting water, and I was enjoying the wetness of it when I spied the dust of an approaching vehicle.

It was Jack’s Toyota. Darby was hanging out the passenger window with camera poised – determined, no doubt, to capture a nude shot of me. I scrambled for clothes and thumbed my nose at him as he and Jack pulled up.

‘Foiled again,’ muttered Darby. He jumped out of the Toyota looking like a silent movie villain, with his mop of black hair brilliantined by weeks of grime, black moustache drooping, white teeth grinning. ‘Give us that soap, Reg. Griselda, turn your back or prepare to be thrilled.’

I did as Darby suggested – the man was capable of outrageous deeds. This time though, he was happy to climb on the edge of the tank and dive in head first, followed by Jack. They were paddling about and splashing water at us when Freddy nursed the Scout up to the tank and hurled himself in as well.

The shower and swim at Alton Downs tank were wonderful moments for each of us. It marked the completion of our crossing. The formalities would be conducted at Birdsville, but this was our time of celebration. We took photographs and only decided to continue on to Alton Downs homestead when the question of the whereabouts of Anthony, Geoff and David once again demanded answers.

Two Aboriginal stockmen were the only folk home at the station. They had seen no sign of Yellow Peril.

When Reg explained to Darby how Anthony and the others had wanted to press on but might have missed the track, Darby's face darkened in fury. 'Bugger it! We're going to have to go back and look for them.'

By now it was early evening and the sun was westering. We decided that Reg and Darby would take the Nissan and back-track in search of Yellow Peril. The rest of us would make for Birdsville.

One of the stockmen drew us a mud map, warning that it was easy to become confused because of the seismic survey tracks that now criss-crossed this area of the desert fringe.

'We'll be careful,' I promised. 'How far is it altogether?'

'About forty miles, missus. Maybe twenty to the seismic tracks. After that you're on the track to Birdsville.'

That stockman might have known the bush, but as a measurer of miles he was hopeless. It was thirty-nine miles to the seismic tracks and nearly seventy to Birdsville. It was ten o'clock when our headlights illuminated the first road sign we had seen for weeks: 'Welcome to the Channel Country.'

In 1962 street lighting was not one of Birdsville's civic features. The place was in darkness. We had located the police station/post office/general store when we noticed the firefly flare of a match lighting a cigarette. 'Sergeant Sammon?' I enquired as we pulled up near the red glow. 'Would that be you?'

'Good evening, Mrs Sprigg. Congratulations on a successful trip, and welcome back to Birdsville.'

The Desert Crossed

‘**W**here’s Reg?’ asked the sergeant.

I explained the day’s dramas as he puffed on his cigarette, and finished by expressing my hope that we would only briefly be half of a Geosurveys and Sprigg family desert crossing party.

‘She’ll be right,’ said the policeman. ‘Come in and have a drink. We’ll let Mrs Gaffney across the way know you’re here.’

We spent a pleasant half-hour with Eric Sammon and his family. Eric was full of questions about the details of our dune-pounding adventure and, dirt-encrusted and weary though we were, we explained our daily dramas dutifully while we sipped frosty tumblers of cordial. Then we went over to the Birdsville Hotel, where Mrs Gaffney matter-of-factly informed me that she had let my room to the Trans-Australia Airlines Channel Country hostess. ‘I didn’t think you’d make it,’ she said.

‘There were times we wondered whether we would.’

‘And there’s still five of you out there,’ she said. ‘Somewhere.’

I could not relax until I was sure everyone was safe, especially Reg. But I didn’t want to voice my concerns. ‘They’re a resourceful bunch. I’m sure they’re all fine.’

Mrs Gaffney interrogated me frankly for evidence that I was correct in my diagnosis and had not gone daft in the desert. Apparently satisfied, she continued. 'I tell you what. There's an enclosed verandah on the north side, quite private. You and the kids can have that, and the blokes can have the south verandah.'

After twelve nights in the desert this sounded luxurious to me. I agreed immediately and Mrs Gaffney explained her arrangements. 'I'm organising some tucker for everyone, just give me fifteen minutes. Why don't you go into the bar and wet the whistle?'

The men needed no prompting. No doubt they hoped to meet the TAA Channel Country hostess. Perhaps she had been there earlier, but the only aviator I could see in the smoky twenty-strong gathering was our very own Colin Semmler.

'Griselda!' he bellowed into the throng. 'Pull up a stool! Breast the bar!'

Colin ordered drinks all round – pint-sized glasses of fizzy for the kids and beers for the blokes. I was evidently one of the blokes. A brimming cold beer was thrust into my hands with a clinking of 'Cheers!' and 'Well done!'.

We toasted the journey and drank as if we were washing away a river of red sand. Yet still we could not truly celebrate. Colin had some news for us.

'I spotted Yellow Peril back along the border, heading roughly east. It was stopped and the boys were out of the car, waving. I wondered where everybody else was and why Peril was travelling solo. So I dropped a note, asking where the bloody hell everybody was. They put out a reply with rocks and dunny paper.'

'What did they say?'

'Don't know.'

'You couldn't read it?' asked a well-dressed stranger who had silently appeared.

'No,' said Colin, addressing the gent casually as though he had known him all his life. 'That's what they said: "Don't know." They had no idea where everyone else had gone. Know what I think?'

I had a suggestion. 'They wanted to be first into Birdsville.'

Colin nodded. 'I reckon they'll be copping a fair old piece of somebody's mind about now.'

'Assuming they've been found,' I agreed. 'Do you think it will be Reg's mind they're copping, or Darby's?'

'Both, I should reckon. Silly buggers could be out of water or petrol, or both. And back-tracking among all those seismic tracks might not be too easy. We'll just have to hope Darby and Reg didn't get lost among them, or I'll be flying a search tomorrow for the bloody lot of them.'

'Well, let's hope that's not going to be necessary,' I said. My attention went to the well-presented chap who was so interested in the progress of our party. He seemed familiar but, tired as I was after the bump and grind of 1386 Simpson Desert sand dunes, I could not place him.

'Mrs Sprigg, I'm Russell Madigan. Congratulations on your crossing.'

Now it clicked. The son of Cecil Madigan was a busy man, an executive with the Hammersley Iron company. He had found the time to fly up from Melbourne to join our commemoration of his father's desert crossing. I thanked him for coming all this distance, and could not help admiring his clothing. 'Clearly the apparel of a gent blown into Birdsville in a *civilised* fashion.'

'I wish I could say the same for you,' he replied, managing to sound perfectly diplomatic. 'I suspect my father's camels may have been rather less bruising. But you've done the job, and almost exactly on schedule.' He raised his glass in salute. 'I'm sure Reginald Sprigg, bushie that he is, will track down the youngsters.'

On this optimistic note we were called to dinner, which turned out to be the best steak and kidney pie I have ever tasted. All hands dived in as if we had not eaten for a week.

It did not take long, though, for the kids' post-dinner chatter to flag. They had soldiered on through our long journey, but now they were wilting. Indeed, as I looked around the table, even the men looked ready to hit the cot – though I knew they had more schooners to consume *this* thirsty evening. Mrs Gaffney surveyed the draggle

of Spriggs before her, noted that all plates had been emptied, and announced that the kids should have a wash, then bed. 'There's a bathroom down the yard.'

This turned out to be a corrugated-iron shed with a tub, a stool and a cabinet. Poking through the iron wall, and looming directly above the tub, was a pipe with a tap on the end of it. Very shortly it was delivering a strong shower of hot artesian water. Even though I had sluiced them down at Alton Downs' bore tank, Doug and Marg still had red dirt running out of their hair. After a brisk towelling they collapsed into the cleanest pyjamas I could find, and were asleep within seconds of their heads hitting the pillows in the pub's sleep-out.

For me, exhausted as I was, it was not so simple. All my clothes were with Reg in the Nissan, somewhere out there in the night. In my birthday suit I was a tasty treat to the dive-bombing mozzies that had managed to infiltrate the netting. Yet the sheets were so clean and cool that I eventually succumbed and, somewhere in the very early hours, was sleeping as deeply as the children.

Not for long, though.

It was probably three o'clock when I was startled awake by muttering male voices. Then came a crash like an exploding land-mine. Two very large figures had just come blundering through the verandah door. 'Is that you, Reg?' I asked in alarm.

'Who else were you expecting? It is I. We've bloody done it!'

'I take it you found the boys ...'

Before Reg could reply the second figure landed with a thump on my bedding. This, of course, was Darby the debonair. 'The bloody idiots were out of everything,' he said. 'Lucky for them we decided to go back for a look. Griselda, I do believe you would look ravishing if I could just see anything.'

'Steady,' Reg said. 'You've already been thrown out of one bedroom this night.'

'That would be the TAA hostie's room?' I suggested.

'The Channel Queen, or so I'm told,' Darby agreed, sounding like his ego had been dented. 'She needn't have been concerned. I'm so exhausted I couldn't mount an exhibition.'

‘Darby,’ I declared. ‘The place for you is the other side of the pub, and be quick about it. There are beds for the boys there as well.’

‘They can sleep on their bloody roof rack, for all I care.’

Darby stumbled off into the night. Reg was dribbling orange juice all over my cool, clean sheets. It was his only sustenance since breakfast. He began to tell me the story of how he and Darby found the errant trio in Yellow Peril, but fell asleep in mid-sentence.

In dawn’s first vague glimmering a pyjama-clad stranger stumbled past the sleeping Reginald and tripped over some gear I’d left on the floor. This person emitted muttered grunts and curses as he recovered his bearings and continued on to the bathroom.

Ten minutes after that a sturdy young woman repeated the feat, this time without any blundering. I decided that this must be the TAA Channel Country hostess, and that the chap preceding her was her pilot, the pair of them no doubt the team who brought Russell Madigan into Birdsville.

It might have been possible to go back to sleep and I was about to do so when a third interloper came barging through our ‘private’ verandah. Then, my senses dulling for a fourth time back to sleep, the hostie made her perfumed return, screen door slapping me awake once more.

I greeted her with an icy ‘Good morning’ and she scuttled through the sleep-out.

At six, Reg exploded into his usual instant-action mode, clearly intent on having me do the same. ‘Had a good sleep, dear?’

‘Sleep?’ I mumbled nastily. ‘I might as well have dosed down in the middle of bloody Rundle Street.’

‘Language! No vile tongues this day, please. This is a day for cairn-making! Where’s the dunny?’

The Reg Sprigg whirlwind soon whipped everybody in to breakfast, and with the taste of real, rich coffee my mood improved. I was further amused by the sight of *all* the boys now precisely half shaved – and by the fact that someone else was doing the cooking. Bliss!

Reg gave us little time to savour it. When Birdsville’s mayor turned

up with his head stockman and wanted to know where to dump the load of gibbers and cement they had collected for the Madigan cairn, Reg took charge. He herded Russell Madigan and me out of the dining room, exited the pub and strode towards the airstrip, the two of us suggesting the best location would be close to the street and the pub. Reg surveyed the area quickly and agreed, picking out a corner of the strip that was adjacent to both.

‘Righto, then!’ he decided. ‘Might as well get started. Feel like getting your strides grubby, Russell?’

‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world,’ replied the son of the great South Australian scientist who had tutored my own Reg and, with Mawson, was such a hero to him. ‘The other advantage of proximity to the pub is that we shan’t be walking too far for a nice cold beer.’

‘Good idea! Incentive for immediate commencement ...’

And so the cairn rose in the stark desert sun. The Birdsville schoolmaster brought his students at recess time, when the plaque commemorating Cecil Madigan’s famous achievement was to be set in place. The children wrote their names on perma tags and, collected inside a tobacco tin, the class of 1962 was remembered too, cemented inside the cairn below the plaque. The youngest and oldest of the Aboriginal kids put their hand prints in the wet cement.

After that the kids trundled back to school, and we admired our handiwork before heading to the pub for a long and rowdy lunch. Then it was back to our quarters to get spruced up for the next of the day’s ceremonies. The word was about, and people were coming from all over the district. Sisters from the Inland Mission hospital sparkled in their starched white uniforms, Sergeant Sammon was decked out in formal police regalia and Mayor Brook wore his Sunday best. Children came trooping back from school to listen in polite silence while Reg and Russell made speeches. Then Darby gave Reg a pair of engraved silver trowels, one to commemorate the completion of the first motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert, the other to recall its commencement, back at the Poodnitera Twin Hills, four long months ago.

The third ceremony was to be a formal dinner and film night, the latter courtesy of Russell Madigan, who would show a documentary

about his father's trek with camels in 1939. But I had business to conduct before dinner.

I had asked Eric Sammon if he knew where I might find the wheel from a bullock wagon.

'What for?'

'I like to collect pioneering memorabilia. I've been looking for a good wheel for years.'

'Feel like sifting through the local rubbish dump?'

I *love* traipsing through rubbish tips, but this day my timing could have been better. It was not long until dinner, and I had to make sure the kids were looking spiffy, not to mention myself. When Eric picked us up at six I was resplendent in a gleaming white Grecian dress trimmed with gold thread that I'd kept safely sealed in a plastic bag all the way across the desert. My feet were clad in high-heeled strappy Italian sandals, and my face had once again felt the touch of make-up. This was not ideal garb for fossicking in a dump, but the dinner was looming fast. Eric drove us straight out to the tip.

At the far end of the heap we found a magnificent buggy. 'Which wheel do you fancy?' asked Eric. 'You can have 'em all if you want. I'll send them down to you next time there's a carrier for Adelaide.' I took off my sandals and stepped out for a closer look. The buggy was almost in working order. 'It's been here seventeen years,' Eric continued. 'A local pioneering family gave it to their gardener, an Aboriginal bloke named Bob Naylor, who must be ninety if he's a day. Bob's got no use for it. Nobody has.'

The buggy's springs and even its leather strapping had survived the elements. 'Eric, it's too beautiful to dismantle.' I had an idea. 'I wonder if Bob Naylor would let us give him ten quid for it and then we could have it moved beside the Madigan cairn as a commemoration of local pioneers.'

Eric regarded me mildly, as if I might have gone dotty in the desert. 'I dare say he would.'

'Do you think we could visit him tomorrow morning?'

'No worries.'

Bob Naylor agreed to the deal. Mayor Brook did us the courtesy

of hauling the buggy to its spot beside the cairn. Years later it collapsed, forlorn and broken beneath the desert sun until Bob Menzies of the Birdsville Museum restored it recently.

We made it back to the pub just as the guests were arriving. One family had driven nearly two hundred miles to be there. There was not a beauty parlour within twice that distance, but all the ladies looked like they had just stepped out of one. The children were in their party best and Darby the dasher looked like he was about to play a set of mixed doubles at a garden party. Reg was decked out in a dark business suit with white collar and a smart silk tie. 'All done up like a sore toe,' grinned Darby.

Dinner was an enormous success. Geosurveys had flown fresh chickens and other delicacies up from Adelaide. An army of local ladies had helped Mrs Gaffney provide salads and delicious desserts. It was champagne for the adults and lemonade for the children as we swam through a series of toasts. Darby led with the Loyal Toast to the Queen. I wish a few city slickers could have been there to hear Reg as he first paid tribute to the folk of the outback who had battled its vastness, isolation and droughts, and then eulogised Cecil Madigan, who had contributed so much fresh, detailed geographic information about the Simpson Desert, until his time essentially 'undiscovered'. Russell Madigan told Reg – and the rest of us – that Reg had been far too modest about his own achievements. Russell had brought two copies of his father's book *Crossing the Dead Heart*, and he gave one each to Marg and Doug. Reg, too, had transported precious copies across the desert, and he presented them to the assembled dignitaries.

Next Russell invited one and all to watch the film of his father's outback odyssey. Naturally, everybody had to see the movie, including all the local Aboriginal elders, who recognised themselves as children. The 1930s black-and-white movie was in comic fast-motion and the children were soon giggling, but the applause at the end was huge.

To finish the famous evening Reg and Darby let off the remainder of our rocket flares. They set the Birdsville dogs yowling with terror and the children cheering with delight. Reg's face shone. He was so happy I think I detected a tear.

Southbound in Strife and Sickness

At eleven next morning, Colin Semmler buzzed his Cessna in a long, low sweep along the main street of Birdsville, nearly blowing our hats off.

‘They’re not supposed to be doing that,’ said Sergeant Sammon.

‘I do believe,’ said I, trying my best Paisley parlance, ‘that I heard you give Colin your constabular permission to do a farewell swoop.’

He slipped me a wink and shrugged. ‘Must’ve.’ He gave a final wave and shook my hand. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Griselda. Well done, and have a safe trip back to town.’

But the journey home almost turned out to be the disaster we had avoided all the way across the Simpson.

Reg and Russell Madigan had flown out with Colin. That left Darby and Fred to do their best to turn Yellow Peril and the Scout into vehicles capable of travelling with the rest of us 700 miles back to Adelaide. We would go via Marree, where we planned to erect a third cairn in honour of the Madigan crossing, this one specially for Jack Bejah, who drove Cecil’s team of camels. Old Jack still lived in Marree, and we hoped he would be our guest of honour.

The infamously rough Birdsville Track had not improved but compared with the bone-crunching Simpson Desert, it was like gliding on an autobahn. We reached Goyders Lagoon by midday and stopped by the spring for lunch. Soon we reached the floodway where, six years earlier, we had broken an axle and worried we would be barrelled over by Tom Kruse in his Leyland Badger on the mail run to Birdsville. We passed safely by, clearing Clifton Hills Station and passing Mungeranie Station in the evening, but we were still more than a hundred miles north of Marree.

We pulled up for dinner on a large claypan. There was talk we could camp overnight and drive to Marree in the morning, but the idea was vetoed once we saw fat rain clouds rolling in from the north-west.

‘If it starts raining,’ said Darby, ‘we could be up the creek. Sand tyres are useless in mud.’

We ate quickly, using up much of the last of the tinned food. The weather held off for another forty miles or so, but just beyond Etadunna we drove into tropical rain that slicked the track. Darby called a halt to see if we could pump the tyres up harder for traction. It was so dark that the raindrops in the headlights were streaking in blinding orange stripes.

It was still sixty miles to Marree, and it would have been wise to call a halt for the night, but now we had a medical problem.

Fred de Rose had fallen ill with vomiting and diarrhoea. I gave him some Kaomagma, but he could not hold it down.

Darby led our convoy carefully through the downpour, and we reached Marree at two in the morning. The nursing sister was off on a distant house call, and there was nobody to be raised at the hotel either. We had little choice but to backtrack and camp in a creekbed. Poor Fred, meanwhile, was getting worse. I could only fill him with fluids, which he would promptly regurgitate. The heavens blustered and wept, and our camp that night offered little comfort.

It was a bleak morning, too. ‘I don’t know about cairn-making today,’ said Darby. ‘We might be better off saying a quick g’day to Jack Bejah and making plans to do the cairn another time.’

I agreed. ‘Fred is not making cairns today, that’s for certain. I say we get in to Marree, send off a few telegrams to give word of our progress,

then buy Fred enough lemonade to last him in to Leigh Creek hospital. Our water's too salty for whatever is upsetting his belly.'

At Leigh Creek, a further seventy miles south, the doctor diagnosed a double dose of food poisoning and sunstroke. Our heroic mechanic was struck down by his own hard-driven chassis. But he would live, and that was a relief. He was dosed with the best of the modern world's latest pharmaceuticals and onward we pressed, with countless miles to negotiate before we found our beds in Adelaide.

It is a flat southbound run from Leigh Creek through Parachilna towards Hawker and, despite the constant flood-outs, we made good time at first. The railway tracks ran parallel with us on our right, and the ridges and ramparts of the Flinders Ranges soared aloft to the east, their ochre and red colours subdued by grey storm clouds. Beyond Hawker the going was steep and hilly, the road switching back and forth in competition with the railway. Much of the road was under repair, and it was still raining – buckets of rain. There were yellow 'detour' signs everywhere, and the sideways sloughs were sometimes terrifying. Yellow Peril lost its brakes and the Scout lost another axle. Despite his illness Fred managed to perform a final axle change, and we were able to coast through the long, languid descent out of the Flinders foothills towards Port Augusta and the arid tops of the Spencer Gulf.

Just outside Port Augusta the Nissan suffered not one, but two flat tyres. 'Damn and hell fire,' hissed Darby. 'This is going to take hours.'

'Send the others on to Adelaide,' I suggested. 'Fred needs his home. Anthony needs his bed. We can fix the tyres and you and I and the children can stay overnight at the Port Augusta Hotel.'

'We did telegram that we'd back for business tomorrow. We'll only manage that if we fix the tyres and keep on going.'

'Well, I'll spell you at the wheel. You've been at it all day.'

'No, you won't,' he insisted. And to make a joke of it, he reminded me of the Tom Kruse 'near miss'.

'I'm not driving with a woman who busts axles on creek crossings. Who knows what might happen?'

'What might happen is that we get to Adelaide.'

'With me at the wheel, no worries.' What a stubborn man! Darby

was as bad as Reg. I could hear the both of them saying, in harmony: 'Don't start something you can't finish.' We fixed the tyres, Doug toiling manfully with Darby in the drizzle, while I fixed us a last meal. We pressed on through the rain shadowing Yellow Peril, which by now had lost its brake lights. Port Pirie, Crystal Brook, Port Wakefield, and on to Adelaide at three in the morning.

By the time we saw the boys to their lodgings, Fred to his sick-bed, Anthony and Darby home to his grateful wife and me and the kids safely home to Baker Street, it was four o'clock. Doug had to be carried inside wrapped in his duffel coat. Marg found her bed without opening her eyes. Unpacking the Poeppel Corner post, I dislodged the now empty 44-gallon fuel drum. It crashed to the ground with an awful racket. I heard a shout from within the house. 'Who's there?'

Reg. How he could not have heard the clamour of our arrival was beyond me. He came striding out of the house. 'Oh, it's you! Well done, you made it. Come inside and tell all.'

'I want to sleep.'

'No, tell me all! You love it!'

'Not any more I don't.'

'You'll be off again tomorrow.'

Tomorrow did not exist.

And Back Again ...

‘Oil is first found in the minds of men.’

Those are the words of William Pratt, a famous American oil geologist, but they might as well have been coined by Reginald Sprigg. Early in 1963, continuing his consultancy with exploration company Beach Petroleum, for whom we had done the Simpson Desert gravity surveys, Reg was poring over his maps and photomosaics again and muttering to himself.

I looked over his shoulder and recognised the pattern of dunes, and the corridors that ran north-north-west. ‘Not again!’ I moaned.

‘Don’t be silly, dear. You love it.’

‘I haven’t recovered from the last trip. My wee Paisley bones can’t stand another pounding.’

‘This will be different. South to north. Lake Eyre to the Plenty River flood-out.’

‘That’s three times further!’

‘Granted. But if Beach and SANTOS and the French Aquitaine types find anything out there, we’re going to have to develop a better road system. Humping dunes east to west will be impossible for heavy equipment.’

‘I thought the French were grading a track.’

‘They are – Mount Dare Station to Birdsville. But there could easily be a better way along the dune corridors. We should give it a go finding a way. And there’s always some useful sampling to be done along the way. We *know* there’s more oil out there. We just have to find it.’

It turned out that 1963 was a very wet year, and for that my bruised derriere was grateful. The May and September school holidays were drenched, so I was able to enjoy a civilised Adelaide recovery and spend lazy days at Baker Street.

But Reg had other plans. ‘We’re going into oceanography.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘If there’s oil above the waters, it’s there below as well.’

Reg commissioned a little ship named MV *Saori*. Darby designed a stern fitting to allow diving cages to be winched below. My husband went off in his boat, and for months the Simpson Desert was forgotten.

The 1964 May holidays came and went. Still Reg seemed immersed in the *Saori*, but some time around July he surfaced long enough to make his announcement. ‘We’ll go in September. A single vehicle this time, just we Spriggs.’

‘One car? Have you got the bends from one of your recent dives?’

‘A family holiday,’ he cooed. ‘You deserve one.’

‘I suppose you want me to start making those infernal lists again?’

‘You always have the most terrific ideas, Griselda.’

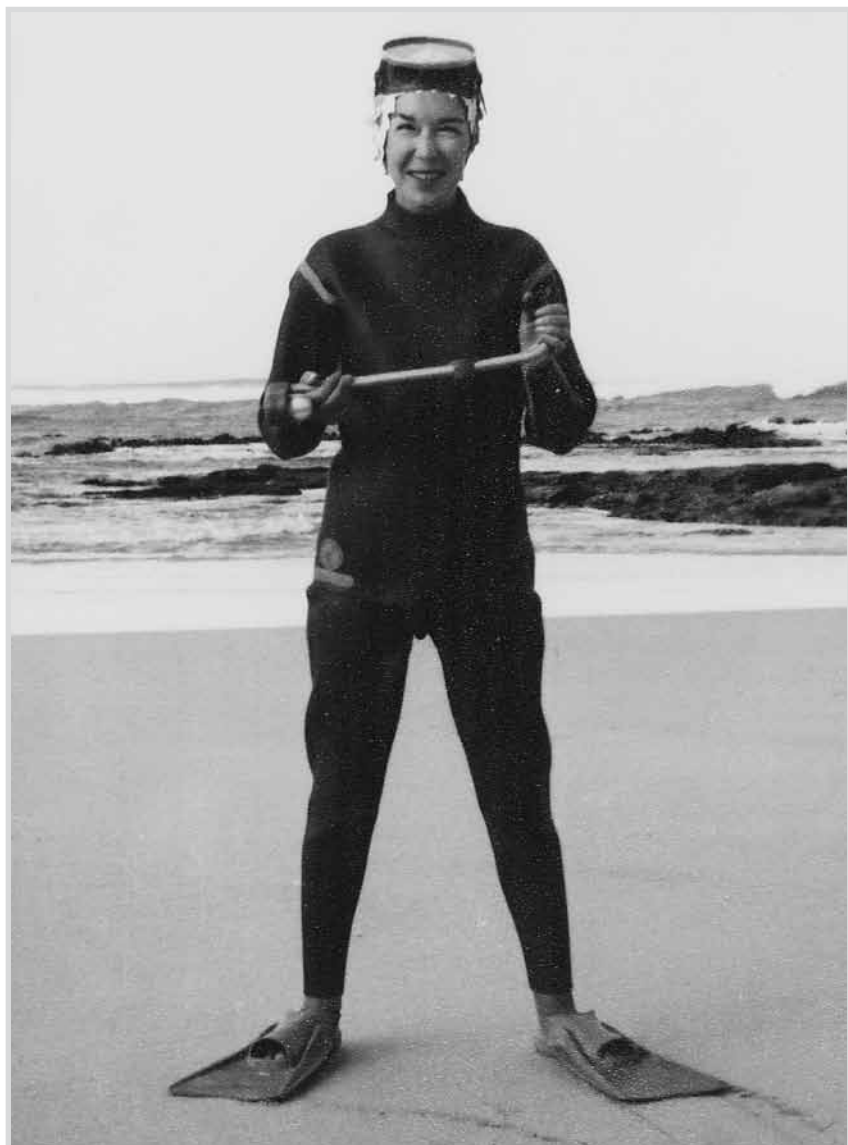
‘And what will you be doing between now and September?’

It was a rhetorical question, and Reg knew it. ‘My dear, I shall be all at sea without you.’

Just before we left Adelaide I dropped the children’s school uniforms in for dry cleaning.

‘Mrs Sprigg,’ asked the assistant, ‘what will I do with them if you don’t come back?’

‘Of course I’ll come back.’



Exploring with Reg meant more than 'doing' deserts.
South-eastern South Australia, 1964.

‘No, you know, from the desert, I mean.’ The child looked like she had seen a ghost.

At the greengrocer, I was bid a tearful farewell. My friend and neighbour Betty Cundy insisted on taking pictures. ‘An epitaph,’ she said, ‘for a beautiful friendship.’

‘What on earth is going on?’ I demanded. ‘You’d think we’ve never been into the bush before.’

It seemed someone had leaked word of our adventure to one of Adelaide’s radio stations, and the Spriggs had become a news item. Our venture had been processed by the journalists’ Mixmaster, and public opinion was that we were embarking on a hare-brained epic that we were unlikely to survive. True, the south–north crossing had never before been attempted, but suddenly we had become the modern-day Burke and Wills with children, the lot of us doomed to perish in the pitiless desert.

At Marree, Troopers Wallace and Reading grilled us about our maps, food, water, petrol and first-aid supplies. They inspected our vehicle, with its axes, picks and shovels strapped to the bulging sides. Grudgingly satisfied, they gave Marg and Doug each an autographed pamphlet about survival in the desert, and wished us good luck. They were tactful enough not to predict aloud that they would be mounting a rescue operation within days.

From Marree our route took us north-east along the Birdsville Track past Lake Harry Station. Long abandoned, its tall date palms swayed in the morning sun. The sky was cloudless blue. We lunched at the Cooper Creek crossing and pressed on, pleased to see that the French petroleum explorers had set up an excellent system of signposts, which proved very useful once we left the Track and made our way into the dune country. By dusk we reached the Aquitaine drill site, Poonarunna 1, and camped in a clearing near their airstrip.

It was not a pleasant evening. A driving northerly wind sprang up, sending waves of stinging sand across the camp. We moved three times in the dark before finding acceptable shelter, and woke in the first

light to the sound of a thousand birds. Somehow we had blundered on to the banks of a beautiful waterhole populated by mobs of pelicans and wild ducks. We breakfasted on steak and chips bought fresh from Marree, had a wash-up, and went to introduce ourselves to the French exploration workers.

It turned out there were only two actual Frenchmen in residence at the camp, and one of them, Michel Allory, was a lively and charming Algerian who made it clear that possession of a Parisian accent would be beneath his dignity. As for the rest, there were Scotsmen, Irishmen, Yugoslavs and a few Australians, one of them turning out to be none other than Tom Kruse, who had pulled in overnight with mail and supplies on his way through to Birdsville.

Michel was wonderful. Seeing we had no sand ladders, he lent us a pair of the metallic mats that would help us gain wheel traction when – inevitably – we got bogged. He plied the children with sweets and tomato juice and insisted they ride with him as he guided us through the maze of seismic tracks his exploration team had bulldozed through the dunes. His ‘au revoir’ was friendly and hearty – he, for one, didn’t think our project was lunacy.

The sandstorms that had bedevilled us during the previous night found us again that afternoon, and the blinding white-outs slowed our progress to a planned camp somewhere along the Kallikoopah Creek, a meandering watercourse that emptied the Simpson Desert’s elongated salt lakes into the northern extremities of Lake Eyre. We found shelter early and hunkered down, aware that we had to be up early the next morning to rendezvous with Colin Semmler and his Cessna at the top end of a large but un-named lake about fifty miles away.

With dune crossings kept to a minimum, we reached the lake’s southern shores just a couple of boggings and many bush flies later. While the surface of the lake looked crusty enough, it turned out to be far too boggy to drive on safely.

‘The legacy of wet seasons,’ muttered Reg. ‘We’ll have to work our way along the edges.’

‘Reg, they’re choked with spinifex.’

‘Spinifex,’ he mused, pulling up and looking at me with one of his

I'm-very-clever smiles. 'Crusty, prickly, soft beneath the surface. Just like you. I think we'll name it Lake Griselda.' (And he did – the official approval came through from the authorities in Canberra a mere sixteen years later.)

'Reg dear, I'm flattered, I really am. But it doesn't solve our problem.'

'I know. We'll have to try to skirt the scrub and look for a drier patch further up.'

No such luck. Every time we ventured back onto the lake bed the surface crust cracked up immediately. On shore, the spinifex clogged our progress. Reg pulled up again. 'This is hopeless. Colin's never going to see us in this stuff.'

'We'll have to bash the top of the dunes,' Doug suggested, and Reg agreed this was our only option.

'Let's get to the top of one now,' I said. 'We'll stop for lunch ...'

'... and hang out some cans for the rendezvous time,' concluded Doug, 'so Colin can see them flashing in the sun.'

'Fair enough,' said Reg, quietly admiring the wisdom of his ten-year-old son. By early afternoon we were in position, the glistening cans festooned on a scrubby little tree. Sharp-eared Doug heard the Cessna first, then spotted the distant speck.

Reg at first looked puzzled. Then he was annoyed. 'He's coming from the wrong bloody direction *and* he's flying too high. He'll never spot us from up there.'

Sure enough, the plane droned above us at about 3000 feet. There was no circling, no note, nothing to suggest that Colin had recognised us or wanted our signal that all was well below. 'Well,' said Reg looking stormy, 'I suppose that means we're on our own for the time being. Not that he could have landed anyway. I hope that Traeger radio still works, because it's all we've got to keep us in touch with bloody anywhere until we get to T19 and I strangle Colin.'

'You'll not strangle such a dear man!'

'I'll buy him a new bloody compass, that's for sure.'

T19 was our next major destination, a claypan with a fuel and water dump about 200 miles away. The fuel and water were left over

from the 1962 gravity survey. It was important that Colin be able to land there, to ensure those vital supplies were still good and to replace them if they were not. Reg now openly wondered if Colin would find it.

‘He’ll find it. Let’s move on.’

We crossed half a dozen dune ridges to align ourselves with the corridor where we figured we would find T19, then pressed northwards until daylight ran out. By the time the kids were demolishing their stew and we were looking up at a billion stars in the black velvet sky, we had travelled eighty miles in a single day. Everyone was exhausted and we turned in early again.

In the morning we discovered a mosaic of marsupial mice tracks around our swags, and hundreds of black beetles beneath the bedding. Doug and Marg sampled some while Reg sampled sand, then they scampered off to look for lizards while Reg made his navigational calculations. ‘It’s going to be rough going today,’ he predicted.

Before long we were bouncing northwards, crossing claypans that were now slightly less treacherous, dodging spinifex, getting bogged, dodging spinifex, getting bogged. It was uncomfortably hot – my feet felt like they were fused into my socks and boots. Aquitaine’s sand ladders gave sterling service that day.

By the time we intersected the French track I was muttering mutinously. The new track looked so smooth, the way it stretched away into the undulating sea of dunes, with the civilisation of Birdsville invitingly invisible far beyond. ‘Let’s go to Birdsville,’ I suggested in forlorn hope that Reg might listen and was immediately howled down by the kids. Instead, we hammered out a little plaque commemorating our intersection with the French track, slaked our thirst, and resumed our bouncing journey.

That afternoon we reached T84, where we had met up with Darby and Anthony and Yellow Peril in 1962. It was like a homecoming. We took photos, hammered out another plaque and moved along. We became badly bogged right on sunset, our total day’s travel a piffling twenty-six miles. We were still fifty-seven miles short of T19, and Colin was due there the following day.

All next day we stopped of our own volition only twice – once for juice and salt tablets, and later for coffee and a cigarette for mother. But despite the urgency of our push onwards, boggings and a late-afternoon blown tyre put paid to our hopes of reaching T19 that evening. We used the Traeger to get word of our delay to Colin. We had confirmation that he had found T19 and that the supplies were fine. He told us he would be back next day with passengers. He had persuaded his wife and children, who were holidaying at New Crown Station on the desert's western fringe, to camp with us overnight at T19. The missed rendezvous had to do with family logistics, but Colin said he believed he saw the glint of our cans and knew that all was well because it was proof we were on schedule. Reg harrumphed a little longer, but we too had missed a rendezvous, and I could tell he was satisfied. As for me, I looked forward to some social company, even if it was on a claypan in the middle of Australia's toughest desert.

In the morning it was Doug who repaired the tyre, blowing up the spare with the engine pump and vulcanising the punctured tube single handed. In blazing heat, we roared through the treacherous sands until at last we reached our destination. We pulled up beside the fuel and water drums, stretched a tarp across them for a makeshift Bedouin tent, collapsed in the shade and slept.

The Cessna arrived just as I was standing – stark naked but for a veil of soap suds – in a large, plastic wash basin. As the plane landed, I scurried into the 'tent' for what I hoped would be half-decent clothes, emerging to greet Colin, his bemused wife Shirley, and their two children, Patricia and Gregory.

'Wonderful to *see* you,' said Colin who, like Darby, was master of the double entendre.

'So this is the fabulous T19,' said Shirley. In her lemon-coloured slacks, floral blouse and glamorous make-up, she looked like she would be far more at home in a Sydney salon and clearly wanted to be in one. 'What a lousy place! Griselda, you *still* look filthy. However do you stand it?'

Her mood did not improve when Reg took everyone dune bashing and managed to get the car bogged. 'Fancy coming out all this way in just one vehicle,' she said. 'You all want your heads read.'

'Now, now, Shirl,' said Colin, doing his best to maintain the general good humour. 'They're experienced lunatics. You'll feel better when we've barbecued some of that lovely New Crown beef.'

Desert barbecues are an art form. Because of the flies, cooking is nigh impossible before sundown. You need to get the fire to the stage of nice hot coals by the moment the sun disappears in a red blaze behind the dunes, and then, knowing that dusk will fall quickly, use the available light to grill the steaks and serve up within minutes.

The juicy beef tasted delicious after days of cans. For a time, as we enjoyed a few drinks and sang songs around the fire (accompanied by Colin on accordion), Shirley looked more relaxed. She admired the pretty brilliance of the stars, and admitted it *might* be nice to sleep beneath them, even though she had never done it before and was terrified of close encounters with the desert wildlife.

But then, at 10.30, not long after we had bedded down and all seemed well, a flash wind squall hit the camp. Tumbleweeds hurtled past while billy cans and blankets ballooned away in the darkness. Stinging sand and debris were flying everywhere. Shirley started wailing in the wind. 'I *hate* this bloody place.'

When the squall subsided she stamped over to the Cessna, which Colin had been frantically tying down. There was the sound of muffled, 'polite' argument. Colin trudged back alone. 'She's not moving from the plane till take-off. She says to make it early.'

Shirley stuck to her guns, refusing breakfast, but obeyed when Reg ordered her out so he and Colin could take the kids on a reconnaissance. Alone together on the claypan called T19, Shirley and I watched the plane ascend. I offered her some coffee. She shook her head, brushing furiously at the flies. 'I could murder your bloody husband,' she said at last. 'Going off like that. What if they crash? What will become of us?'

I wanted to respond snidely that we would use the Traeger to raise the alarm, but I merely offered a classic Australian encouragement –

‘She’ll be right’ – and went humming about the camp, breaking it up and tidying in preparation for travel.

‘God, Griselda! How can you be so happy? How can you enjoy this? What do you do for washing? What if something goes wrong with the car? What if someone gets hurt? What if you get hopelessly bogged?’

I think I was more relieved than Shirley when the Cessna buzzed into view and settled onto the claypan strip. Reg was barely out of his seat before Shirley was in it, demanding immediate take-off for anywhere that was not desert.

The episode reinforced in me the knowledge that, while I enjoyed my creature comforts and hard-earned luxuries at Baker Street, there had grown in me a wildness that loved these empty places we travelled in, places that terrified and mystified so many others. Reg was right. Despite the risks and hardships, I did love my dunes.

Before we resumed our journey we built a cairn nearby on a rare rock protrusion Reg had found on the recce flight. He called it Geosurveys Hill, a tribute to the company’s pioneering work in the Simpson Desert, a place that made us Spriggs the most isolated family in Australia. From here on we would have no more air support and, to make matters more uncomfortable, we discovered that the Traeger was suddenly kaput – temporarily, we hoped. We would attempt to repair it at our evening camp and, meanwhile, hope that we would be safe and not need it.

It turned out that the campsite was selected for us by desert fate. One of the rear tyres suffered a triple stump-staking: there was a sudden lurching of the vehicle, followed by an ominous hiss. The Spriggs took this all in their stride. Doug mended the tyre. Reg looked at the radio (but could not find the problem). Marg collected museum specimens. I caught up on my diary notes. After dinner, father and son practised their beloved astronomy in the silence of the pure night, and I knew absolute happiness.

For two more long days, with Reg stopping often to take sand samples and do some complex mapping, we thrashed our way through huge gidgee stands, over dunes, over more dunes, across claypans, always steering towards the Plenty River flood-out.

We arrived at the flood-out, with its welcoming ribbons of trees and rubble of stones and baby boulders, in the late afternoon. In businesslike fashion we nailed a plaque on the biggest eucalypt we had seen for weeks, toasted our good health with canned orange juice and listened to Reg's simple speech. 'We've made it. Well done. Kids, you are the first white children ever to have crossed the Simpson Desert, not once but twice, west to east and south to north. Griselda, congratulations, you are the *oldest* woman ever to do so.'

The Plenty River certainly had plenty of timber. We built an enormous fire and set up camp as darkness fell on an exhausted family quartet. Marg was rummaging among our gourmet can selection, planning our celebration dinner, when Reg suddenly yelled out a warning.

'Look west! The stars are blotted out. There's a squall coming!'

It struck in moments, and was far more ferocious than the squib at T19. In the first gusts, lighter loose items – including a pile of filthy clothes – flew off in the direction of Queensland. Reg raced about, bent into the building gale, anchoring the most essential gear with jerry cans and ammunition boxes. The wind intensified again. Naked except for my underwear, I flung a tarp across the children and lay flat on top of them, ten thousand bites of pelting sand taken out of my desert-bruised skin.

I reckoned the wind was coming through the flood-out at more than seventy miles per hour. Gum tree branches were crashing down about us, and there was a far more immediate danger. Glowing red coals from the fire were rolling towards the car – which was loaded with forty gallons of fuel. 'Oh God!' I shrieked, and screamed for Reg.

He too had seen the danger, and he acted fast. In moments, he had dumped shovels full of sand on the coals, then on the fire for good measure. Still inspired, he moved the car to make a wind-break for the rest of us. To this day I recall my relief the moment the sand blasting ceased. So do the kids.

'You can get off us, now,' they chorused. 'Mum's a lot heavier than she looks!'



The desert crossed again! Plenty River flood-out, 1964.

‘Give us that tarp,’ ordered Reg. ‘Griselda, let’s have the sleeping bags. Kids, get in and we’ll all get under the tarp.’

The temperature had plummeted from the century mark to perhaps forty degrees Fahrenheit. Shivering almost uncontrollably I found the sleeping bags and delved for the sausage bags that contained our duffel coats. Soon Reg’s battening-down was complete, the swags hauled in to shelter, and I was able at last to get myself dressed in warming, fresh flannel. It was eleven o’clock and the wind still buffeted and rocked the car – at times alarmingly – but the kids were settled in our cocoon and we slowly began to relax. By four the next morning the wind had died to a mere twenty miles per hour and we were able to snatch two blissful hours of sleep.

Later we learned that we had experienced first-hand the worst regional storm for twelve years. Six hours before it hit us, it had blacked out the entire town of Alice Springs. Yet we had made it safely through the night, thanks in large part to the strength and common sense of dear Reginald Sprigg.

Alice Springs was our next target. From dry, sandy creek beds, we moved through swamp grasses that came up to the windows. Then we encountered some outcrops of red sandstone, the first since Geosurveys Hill. A little further north we came upon the first station track, and not long after we turned onto it we spied an oncoming Blitz Buggy that was overloaded with windmill parts and about a dozen Aboriginal passengers.

We pulled up and introduced ourselves to Ken Paige, the owner of Plenty Downs Station. The windmill was bound for a new bore nearby and everyone had come along to help put it up, or to watch the fun. 'Where've you come from?' he asked.

'Marree and northern Lake Eyre,' we replied, knowing this could prove a brain teaser.

Ken was looking dubious. He lifted his hat and scratched his scalp. 'Across the Simpson Desert?'

'Yes.'

'Jeez. That'd be a first. You'll be wanting a cuppa, then.' We laughed at his dry reaction as he continued. 'Mum's up home, visiting from Bushy Downs. Camp's a bit of a mess, but she'll see you right.'

So Ken and his helpers went to build windmills while we headed for 'camp', which turned out to be seventy miles away. It was a house of wood and iron, covered with climbing plants and surrounded by trees and flowering shrubs. To me it looked better than Edinburgh Castle.

Mrs Paige had us in for afternoon tea – but first, a wash. Elsewhere in the world an invitation to get cleaned up first might be misconstrued, but this was different. As for Mrs Paige's cakes and cookies, the kids looked like they were in heaven. Reg, too, looked quite contented.

We thanked Mrs Paige and travelled on, reaching Alice Springs at two in the morning, 1442 miles out of Adelaide. During the next day Colin Semmler and two Geosurveys men flew in. The day after that, Reg flew out to the Stansmore Ranges in Western Australia.

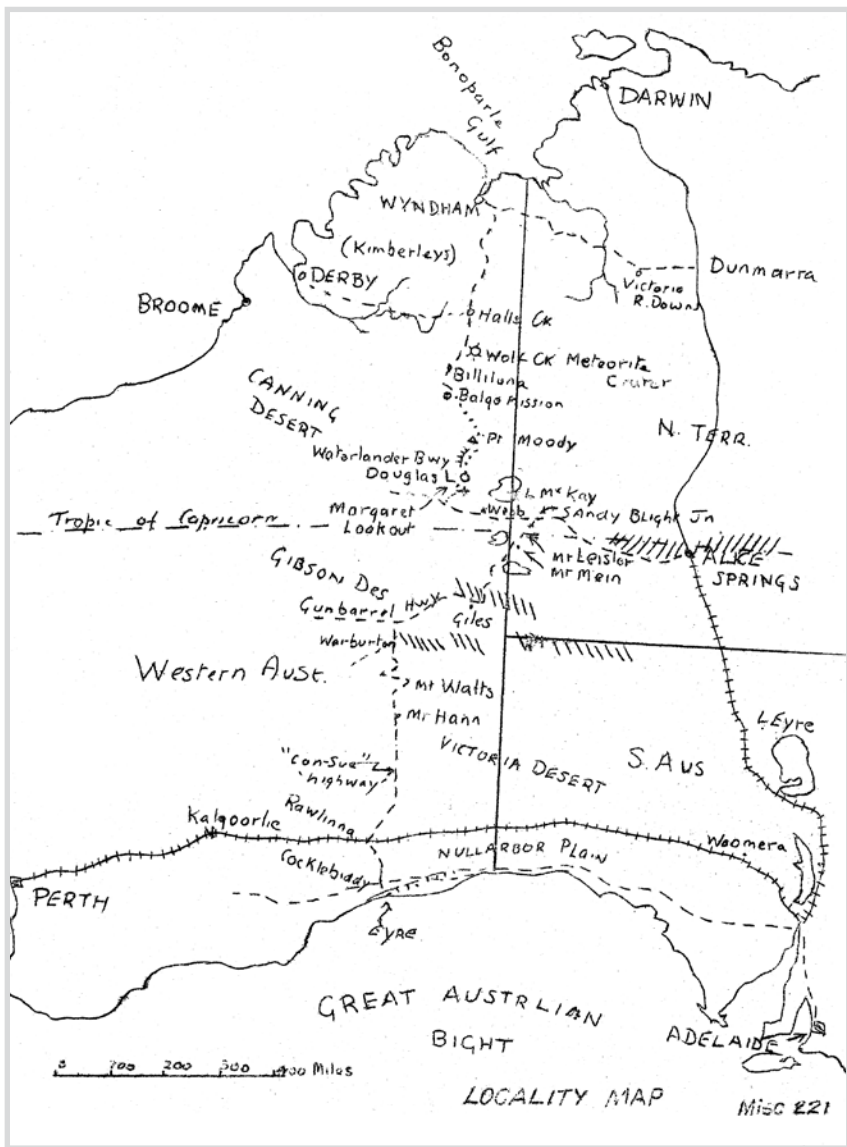
Our old friend Leo Corbett of Pichi Richi Sanctuary took the kids and me to visit Standley Chasm. There were tourists everywhere, and not for the first time I wondered whether our desert pioneering might one day lead tourists in to the Simpson Desert. And would this be a blessing, or a curse?

Deserts, Deserts Everywhere

My affair with the Simpson Desert was far from over, but after the double crossing the Sprigg exploration team looked to deserts elsewhere. In the spring of 1965 we launched what we dubbed ‘Operation Cross the Continent’ – taking on three major deserts, the Great Victoria Desert, the Gibson Desert and the Great Sandy Desert (also known as the Canning Desert), in a single crossing from south to north, roughly paralleling the Western Australia border from Eyre on the Great Australian Bight to Wyndham in the eastern Kimberley country.

For this trip we had a new Toyota packed in Ceduna and delivered to Cocklebidy on the far west of the Nullarbor Plain. Colin flew us west in the Cessna. En route, eleven-year-old Doug took the controls. As I had always known he would, he showed immediate aptitude. The Nullarbor coastline rose sheer out of the foaming blue sea in the afternoon sun, and the vast Australian continent stretched back to a distant curved horizon. Cocklebidy stood out from miles away, even though the place was nothing but an airstrip and a roadhouse.

We collected the Toyota and visited the roadhouse to pay our respects. Above the counter was a sign that read ‘In God we Trust. All



Operation Cross the Continent: Eyre to Wyndham, 1965.

Others Pay Cash'. The proprietor, Graham Campbell, gave us directions for free, and soon we were dipping our toes in the very chilly Southern Ocean, a ritual we planned to repeat when we arrived in Wyndham.

It was good that we had Graham's directions to guide us, because, according to Reg, plenty of strangers before the Spriggs had found gaps in the sheer Nullarbor cliffs few and far between. In 1841, en route for Albany to complete his east–west trek from Fowler's Bay in the remote coastal corner of what is now South Australia, the explorer Edward John Eyre would almost certainly have died of thirst if not for the generosity of Aborigines he met in the Eucla area. They showed him a path down from the cliffs to dunes where native wells offered life-saving fresh water.

No doubt Marg and Doug had heard some of this at school, but it was news to me. 'Eyre and his Aboriginal companion, Wylie, were the only known survivors of that first recorded desert crossing. Eyre's overseer, John Baxter, was killed by the two other members of the exploration team – Aborigines from New South Wales – when Baxter caught them raiding the stores. Wylie and Eyre took off before the same happened to them. Then Eyre had a real bit of good fortune.'

'What was that?' I asked, as we made our way back to the car.

'He and Wylie were just about gone with exhaustion, but they made it west along the coast, about as far as Esperance, where they chanced on a whaling boat called the *Mississippi*. It was French but had an English skipper, and he let them rest on board for a week or more, then set them on their way to Albany with a swag full of wine and brandy. No wonder Eyre called it Lucky Bay.'

I marvelled at the desolate, windy coastline as Reg told this yarn, until we fetched up at an abandoned ruin. 'This is the Eyre Repeater Station,' Reg continued. 'I'm not sure exactly when it was built, but the east–west telegraph line was strung out along Eyre's route. It looks like it's been abandoned a fair while now, though.'

The stone walls were in reasonably good condition, but the little building was up to its roof in drift sand on one side, the floors were gone, and it looked like nobody had paid the place the slightest attention since the 1940s, when the war ensured that even this corner of the globe had to be manned by soldiers. Army lads had festooned the whitewashed walls with salty epithets and signatures but their possessions were long gone. A single camel canteen lay abandoned in the long grass outside.

We stopped again at the Cocklebiddy Roadhouse, this time for lashings of Graham's excellent bacon and eggs, then hit the road again. Time was getting on, and when we completed the sixteen miles to Cocklebiddy Station, Don Wyatt and his three cobblers were just finishing their evening meal. They warned us that the track beyond was shockingly rough, but by Sprigg standards it was fine. Fifty or so miles further on Doug pointed out the lights of Rawlinna far away.

'It's still thirty miles to Rawlinna,' I said. 'It must be something else.'

This caused immediate mirth. I had seen lights before. 'One of your UFOs again, is it?' the kids chuckled. Heathen disbelievers all, my family.

Anyway, we camped within range of whatever lights they were and in the morning checked the load to find that it had not been properly packed. We unloaded and found that of six dozen eggs, only four individual googies had survived. The 'fresh' Ceduna meat was going green and the case of oranges was missing altogether. All the necessary tools were there, however, and soon we were on our way again.

Near Rawlinna, which is on the transcontinental railway line, we passed through the Dingo Fence and stopped in town to tell the postmaster and the Sisters at the Mission that we were heading for Warburton Mission across the Great Victoria Desert, and hoped to be there by Sunday. 'It's a terribly long way on a very rough track,' said one of the sisters. 'I'll tell them to expect you on Monday.' It seemed the Sprigg adventures still invited scepticism.

The fact was, we could take the Connie Sue Highway all the way to Warburton. We started out on the first leg – 145 miles to Neale Junction – watched by some very healthy looking dingoes, as Reg explained the name of our 'highway'.

'It was built by Len Beadell, like the Gunbarrel Highway was, and so many others out beyond Woomera.'

'Dad, we've *met* Len Beadell.'

'So you have. Well, why is it called the Connie Sue?'

Marg supplied the answer. 'It's named after his baby daughter. Connie Sue and Anne and Len were all together while the road was being built.'

Reg looked impressed, and I was thinking how nice it was to know of Anne Beadell's willingness to bring her babe out bush, another member of the IfYou Can't Tame 'em, Join 'em brigade of women.

By luck, we chanced on Roderick McAllister and John Davidson, field explorers doing a gravity survey for Hunt Oil. We camped together near Neale Junction. Before a roaring fire, with a meal in our bellies and aided by warming nips of malt whisky, the yarnning got under way in earnest.

'Had a drama in the Alice a couple of days ago,' John said.

'Yeah,' said Roderick. 'Those boys from Bell's Earthmovers can move more than dirt.'

'They went into the Stuart Arms with a raging thirst. Once they'd had six or ten, one of the Bell's boys accidentally bumped one of the locals and the local bloke got beer all over his beard. He didn't appreciate this, and swung a right hook.'

'A brawl ensues,' said Rod. 'The local wallopers barrel in and chase everybody into the lock-up – including John.'

'But Rod escapes,' says John. 'While the rest of us are getting arrested ...'

'... I'm in the dunny!' Rod continues.

'So next morning, he bails me out for twenty quid. Me! An innocent bystander!'

'You can pay me bloody back,' said Rod. 'I saw you land a couple of useful jabs in there.'

We talked until midnight. Once in a while someone found wood for the fire, and the sparks drifted up to join the stars.

The Connie Sue Highway pushed 200 miles northward, towards Warburton and Jackie Junction. Len Beadell had built a road linking junction to mission back in 1958, and since then Hunt Oil had made some improvements to it. The run from Neale Junction was almost unbelievably fast. With its hard, laterite surface and forty-foot width,

the road really was a highway. We barrelled along at seventy miles an hour. We did not need to hurry, it was just good fun to be flying along. We reached Warburton Mission by early afternoon on Sunday, just in time to miss church.

Dick Hawthorn, the boss missionary, was an ardent soul who made us welcome. We had time to meet some of the 300 Aborigines who lived there. I swapped cigarettes for a photograph of the kids, who were climbing in and out of the Toyota, and pondered the wisdom of Christianising people who could live for months in deserts without any of the paraphernalia we Spriggs needed for a mere two weeks. Out here, our civilisation seemed to offer little more than the passing on of bad habits – cigarettes included. It seemed to me there was something fundamentally wrong with offering inducements – free meals, child endowment money, old-age pensions – in return for embracing the trappings of religion and irrelevant western ways of doing things. No offence to the good people of the missions, who all believed fervently in their work, but to me it seemed there was no way the Aboriginal people needed or wanted the God of the mission folk. They had become trapped into reliance on foreign goods and temptations.

From Warburton we travelled north-east, fringing the southern extremities of the Gibson Desert. This was the signal for another in Reg's series of lectures on Australia's better-known explorers.

'Who was Gibson?' Reg asked us. When silence was the response – because no one dared suggest that Gibson was yet another poor fellow who died in the desert – Professor Sprigg pressed on. 'He died, poor bugger, though no one ever found him. He was some unknown bloke who seemed keen to join up with Ernest Giles on Giles's second attempt to find an overland route from the North–South Telegraph line west to the coast across completely unknown country.'

Even with Len Beadell's road guiding us towards the Giles Weather Station, the country remained alien. Far off to the west, Reg pointed out a range of distant hills. 'That's the Alfred and Marie Range. For

some reason, Giles named them after the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh.’

‘I’m sure they were thrilled,’ said I. ‘So what happened to Gibson?’

‘Well, first off, his horse died under him. Not far from here, I should reckon. He and Giles were off by themselves, hoping against hope that Alfred and Marie would offer some water. The rest of their expedition was a long way back east, waiting for them to turn up and give them the news. Giles and Gibson kept on going west. They hung water kegs in a tree along the way. Anyway, Gibson’s horse just buckled, so Giles and Gibson had to backtrack, riding and walking in turn. They were thirty miles from the water kegs, so Giles sent Gibson on ahead.’

‘Following the tracks to get help,’ Doug said.

‘That’s right. But that left Giles a bloody long walk. He got to the water tree and found Gibson had left him a keg and a bit of meat and ridden on. Gibson lost the plot somehow, and took off in the wrong direction. That’s why he was never found and why the desert was named after him. Giles walked on and on for days. Somehow he found a waterhole and that saved him. It was not just the water, there was also a tiny abandoned baby wallaby ...’

‘No!’ cried Marg.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said Reg. ‘He ate it alive. Bones and all.’

At the Giles Weather Station – since its earliest days a security area thanks to its involvement in the British–Australian atomic bomb testing – we encountered a dour Scottish bureaucrat who refused to sell us fuel. ‘Ye ha nae authorisation,’ he declared. He stopped Doug from taking photographs. ‘There’ll be none of that! This is a security zone, laddie.’

Reg grew impatient with this treatment. ‘Perhaps at least you can tell us whether a Geosurveys depot crew went this way to leave fuel and water for us, further north, in the Sir Frederick Range?’

‘I think not,’ said the man. ‘I have travelled that way within this week past and there are nae fresh tracks.’

‘Surely you’ve been told of the Geosurveys explorations starting up there next month?’

‘Mebbe.’

‘Can we at least buy some batteries?’

‘For what purpose?’

‘For the torches and our transmitter, if you must know. We *would* be grateful.’

The Scotsman drew out a vast bunch of medieval-looking keys and fiddled with padlocked cupboards, his face preparing us for the news that we were about to fill out forms in triplicate.

Under way about half an hour later, Reg still looked annoyed. ‘I always knew Scots were stingy – sorry dear – but that bloke takes the cake.’

‘I take no offence. I’m more worried about his claim that he saw no tracks.’

‘Maybe the boys went through without stopping at Giles since our bonnie Scotsman was there.’

‘I hope so. We’re going to be needing that fuel.’

In the late afternoon we passed a crescent of shimmering red-and-purple quartzite hills, their valleys and flood-outs lined by stands of white creek gums. In the hour before sunset, the sight was something to beat for sheer beauty. We camped on a perfectly still and cloudless night with stars shooting like fireworks. The kids fooled around, burning little clumps of spinifex, Reg making his meticulous notes while I diarised. An owl hooted in a nearby tree, hunting for a meal of spinifex snake. The crickets sang their chorus and – despite the unanswered issue of the fuel – all was right in my world.

Next day though, we had to face up to the fact that the pen-pusher at Giles might have been right.

We had made a side-trip to Sneddon Waters, where the Giles crew had set up a depot and explored the vicinity for months. The excursion had not taken many miles, but now we were watching the fuel gauge with growing anxiety. We spotted fresh tracks on the turn-off towards the Sir Frederick Range, but could not be sure if they were from the Geosurveys depot crew or the Scotsman. We speculated

that he might have lied about making the Sir Frederick Range journey because he did not like the idea of 'unauthorised' people travelling through his back yard.

Anyway, we followed the Range track. It seemed in places that there might be two sets of tracks, or perhaps a vehicle hauling a trailer. It was difficult to tell, but we were hoping it was a trailer – the crew would have needed one to manage the load of fuel, water and cases of canned food for the Geosurveys explorers who were coming through after our own passage. For miles the maddening mystery remained unsolved.

Reg nearly capsized the Toyota when he tried to get us uphill to a trackside trig station, hoping to use binoculars to spot the fuel drums. 'Bloody outwash conglomerates,' he muttered as he wrestled with the steering wheel and gunned the engine, the wheels bouncing and slipping against the rounded rubble, the entire car sideslipping and starting to tip until Reg calmly let off the power and eased us back down the hill, balancing us with brakes and deft angling of the wheels. He climbed the hill on foot and we watched him scanning the country to the north.

'Nothing,' he said when he returned. 'But I say we press on. Geosurveys crews don't miss their targets.'

The fuel gauge dwindled as our pursuit continued. Now it was obvious there *were* two sets of tracks. The trailer? Or the Scotsman?

'We wouldn't be worrying like this if he'd sold us some fuel in the first place,' said Doug, quite reasonably. 'Hey, look! There's a strip of red tape!'

'Eureka!' yelled Reg. We rounded a sandhill and there, on a little flat, was a dump of perhaps forty metal drums. Fuel and water and enough canned rations to last a month-long Geosurveys exploration. 'We've made it!'

By my reckoning we were still less than half-way from having 'made it', but I was as relieved as Reg. Running out of petrol in the middle of the Gibson Desert is not advisable.

Refuelling and replenishing the water took a full two hours.

I organised a grateful lunch, and Reg – ever industrious – cleared an airstrip for future use by Colin and his Cessna. And then we were on our way again.

Two hundred and twenty-two miles out of Giles we encountered a roadside plaque that announced we had arrived at the Tropic of Capricorn. Showing the exact latitude and longitude of the place, the plaque was also inscribed with the words ‘Erected by Len Beadell’.

Further on we found another of Len’s plaques near Mount Leisler in the Kintore Range, then another at a place Len called Sandy Blight Junction because of the eye infections that plagued his construction crew there.

Examining the plaques each time, I could not help but be struck by the similarities between Reg and Len. Both made contributions to the now controversial Anglo–Australian atomic weapons testing, both were among the best bushmen to be found anywhere on the planet, and both were pioneers and trail-blazers. While Reg was still hard at it in the bush, Len was writing books and giving lectures, something Reg was also very keen on doing one day.

Beyond Sandy Blight Junction we clocked up one thousand miles from Eyre. We motored along quite rapidly in baking dry heat with not a cloud in the sky and only a single tree on the horizon. When we reached the tree we celebrated with a can of crab meat for the kids and salmon for myself and Reg. Not far beyond, we crossed back into the Northern Territory about twenty-five miles south of Lake Mackay. We passed the rugged red Dover Hills, and two conical hills – one with a crowned flat top, like a mesa. Following a red sand track through glaring red country splashed with Sturt’s desert pea, we skirted to the east of the lake and Reg told us a tragic story from the district’s past.

‘Two airmen, Hitchcock and Anderson, were sent up this way to search for a fellow aviator – it might have been one of the Smiths – who was missing on a flight to England. They were believed to have come

down somewhere near the lake. Anyway, for some reason they landed in the scrub and couldn't figure out a take-off path. The silly buggers could have burned it off, but instead they drank all their water, and they drank all their fuel, then died of thirst.'

We had sad images of the poor dying pilots for company at our campsite that night. The next day, we would enter the Great Sandy Desert, territory that even Len Beadell had never travelled through.

The day was a stinker – at least century heat. It began with the interesting task of helping Marg collect bull-ants for a professor at the University of Mexico. At the place where we left the track and entered the wilderness, Reg blazed a tree and nailed up a plaque commemorating Operation Cross the Continent, and we buried a bottle containing perma tags with our names and the date. Then it was into the dune country again.

The dune tops were almost as tough and rugged to crest and descend from as the dunes in the Simpson Desert, but the inter-dune corridors were wider and the spinifex not quite as choking. As we progressed we came upon un-mapped stony outcrops and ridges that – apart from Geosurveys Hill – are non-existent in the Simpson Desert. Then we came to a large red escarpment of what Reg declared to be Permian conglomerate. Naturally he was fascinated and called a stop to explore. I'm glad we did.

On the western flat at the base of the scarp was a waterhole and numerous caves peppered the rocks. Inside the caves we found Aboriginal Dreaming paintings, including concentric signs, which we supposed to be symbols of long and interconnected life. But there was absolutely no sign of current habitation. Maybe they had been defeated by earlier centuries of climatic change, but the Aborigines were long gone. I had an eerie sense that we Spriggs might actually be the first white travellers ever to set eyes on this ancient dwelling place.

Reg had the same sensation. 'There can't have been anybody here. Or else it would turn up, surely, on *one* of our maps.' Marg had climbed to the highest part of the escarpment and was coo-eeing down to us. 'Well,' said Reg, looking up at his daughter scrambling about like a mountain goat, 'Seeing we might have the naming rights here, what say

we call the high point Margaret Lookout?’ And so another Sprigg cairn was erected in the far Australian desert country, and another plaque was hammered out for whatever future travellers might discover in this lonely place of dreamings.

Our camp that night was on top of a high, clean sandhill. In the pre-dawn, the sky still velvet black and crowded with the infinite. A satellite wheeled across the sky, spying down on what below? It might have seen the large dry lake we dubbed Douglas Lagoon when we happened upon it during the next day’s travelling. It, too, was unmapped until then, and now it remains another footprint left by Reg’s restless explorations.

Since we left that wonderful escarpment we had endured some very Simpson-like dune country, averaging only four miles an hour. In the dune corridors there, and in the claypans beyond, we found quarries of glassy chalcedony. This was ‘myall’ country, a word used to describe Aborigines who still lived their tribal, traditional ways untouched by European civilisation. We found shiny white sherds – sharp tips for spears or slicing – but could only speculate about how long it had been since any human had visited. We collected some of the chiselled stone for the Museum and camped the night nearby.

I slept uneasily, and had a definite sense that we were not alone, my senses awakened by the sound of a snapping twig. I swivelled my head all about, looking for signs of strangers. There were none, but still I felt a presence. In the morning I searched for footprints. Had I read somewhere that the people hereabouts went naked and wore soft feather boots to leave no tracks? There were none for me to find but our own.

Whitefellas leave tracks, and we were making plenty of them. The day’s journey took us ninety miles into a Geosurveys camp at the so-called Point Moody waterhole on the desert’s northern fringes. Marg and Doug took turns at driving us along the frequent harder patches of sand and clay into camp at the conclusion of the crossing, where we found two of the Geosurveys men who had been taking mud samples for a new Beach Petroleum exploration. They were Axel Andre and Tony Schrekov, a grader driver. Axel soon had the pump going, figuring that after driving 1300 miles from Eyre we would be ready for

a shower beneath the well-head standpipe. It was luxury, even though I had somehow misplaced not one but two bottles of shampoo, and we had to make do with salt-water soap.

Tony and Doug hit it off immediately. In the morning, firm pals, Tony asked Doug to be his offsider on the grader while Reg and Axel went off taking samples and Marg and I attended to the domestic drudgery, washing the family's filthy clothes and sorting out our cluttered gear. By the time everyone returned for a swim in the well tank and a bite of lunch, Doug had graded three miles of fresh track.

Tony didn't want us to go. 'What is the good God almighty rush for?' he wanted to know.

We waved goodbye late in the day to Axel and Tony and made out for Balgo Mission on a track so heavy with bulldust that it made our earlier washing and bathing quite pointless. Maybe Tony was right. The dust was choking and the going infuriatingly slow – so much so that at ten that night, we narrowly missed colliding with an enormous gum tree that suddenly appeared through a clearing cloud of dust. Reg slowed to a crawl, and we inched forward. Then we encountered wheel tracks. Then others.

Reg was puzzled. 'We must be off course.' At eleven we had confirmation: gates and a four-way track. The intersection was not sign-posted, but clearly we had ventured into cattle country. Reg called a camp so we could get our bearings in the morning. Nobody needed any prompting. We collapsed in our swags and slept until dawn, when Reg took a compass reading and made some calculations. Eventually he declared that while we *were* off course – thanks to the bulldust and emphatically *not* due to his navigation. We had simply blundered onto one of the newer cattle roads leading into Hall's Creek, and a bit of back-tracking would soon have us heading straight for Balgo.

Balgo Mission airstrip had a dunny and not much else. And the dunny was full of old tyres. Old Balgo Mission was a deserted ruin, its hand-hewn stone blocks shimmering in the baking sun like the mystery homestead we encountered years before on the run to Hawkers Gate. The roof was gone and in one of the rooms we found a crucifix. Jesus hung there defiant and sad, covered with bird droppings. Birds were the

only parishioners now. In the tiny chapel we found a carved mahogany altar inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It was covered with a pathetic strip of hessian to give protection from the elements. I made a sketch of it in my diary and wondered what history brought it here with the message of the missionaries, and why such a pretty piece had been abandoned to these blank desert skies.

The new Balgo Mission was a different story altogether. It featured a large stone chapel and modern prefabricated buildings with wide verandahs – a school, hospital and quarters. We approached in a cloud of bulldust.

The bottle of whisky we had depleted during the night of yarnning at Neale Junction had been meant for Balgo's Father McGuire, but we still had two more fine bottles and other gifts – clothing parcels and a pecan nut cake, no less. The good fellow promptly offered us lunch and a freshening shower.

We made ourselves presentable and were introduced to the Mission staff, Father Brown, Brother Michael and Kevin Jayes the teacher. They served us a feast of home-made stew, fresh vegetables and a divine lemon meringue pie. Reg was just getting stuck into theological discussion with the believers over a dram or two when there was a commotion at the door.

A gang of dusty ruffians came barging in. We thought for a moment we were about to be bushwhacked by roving thieves, until dimly we recognised that these were in fact Geosurveys men, led by the heavily bearded Clyde Wilkins. Who explained: 'We smelled the whisky, boss!'

As it turned out, we had two brilliant meals in a single day, neither of them prepared by me.

We had been invited to visit Bill and Josie Moyle at Carranya Station, and that is where Reg rolled us next, still waxing on about God, the universe and everything. Bill and Josie showed us a beautiful spot in their lawned garden to lay out our swags. Later we were fed freshly killed, tender beef at a table set with linen and silver, a cut

crystal bowl with ice and a decanter for fine Irish whisky – for which I confess to having developed a mild taste, as it promises more immediate rewards than heaven. I slept well and woke to find the table set once again, this time for a farewell breakfast – once again, not of my making. Joy! Must we leave?

Reg and Marg took a trip to the Wolfe Creek Meteorite crater and came back with a bag of fragments (which would have annoyed the Australian National University types who had searched there recently without success). Our farewells were full of thanks and promises to one day meet again.

‘You wouldn’t reckon they’re battlers,’ said Reg, as we turned onto the track that aimed for Halls Creek and Wyndham.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Bill told me they applied to the state government for a development loan to make improvements on the property. But they were knocked back.’

‘Can they make it through?’

‘He doesn’t know. Someone in the government tipped a Texan land grabber that the Moyles might be hard up, and now the Texan’s trying to buy them out.’

‘Can’t they go to the bank for a loan?’

‘They’ve tried, but were told there are no guarantees for banks in pastoral leases that can be reclaimed by the crown. They’re not a good risk, apparently.’

‘And others in the government won’t intervene?’

‘No votes, no help.’

Now we were in a hurry. Over the past few days Doug had been showing signs of dehydration. I had plied him with water, juice and salt tablets and we thought we had the problem sorted out, but on the run into Halls Creek Doug’s incessant questions about astronomy began to falter, and we could see he was suffering.

There was another difficulty too. At Carranya we had received word that Colin Semmler had parts problems and there would be a

two-day delay before he could bring the Cessna up to Wyndham. Reg had been mulling this over for some time. It clearly had business implications for the timing of his next geological exploration. 'If the nurse at Halls Creek says Doug will be okay, we'll get to Wyndham and then head straight back down to Alice Springs and meet him there.'

I protested. 'But that's another thousand miles or more!'

Reg merely pointed out that we had already covered far more than that. There was no point arguing for a two-day holiday on the southern shores of the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. Not with Reg around. He had so much energy, like one of those spinning devils you see in Disney cartoons.

All depended on the prognosis at Halls Creek, where the pretty young sister declared our treatment effective and Doug basically sound. I resigned myself to the next chapter in our long saga and we made our way to the general store for fuel and drinks.

The store was decked out with dusty racks of bicycle tyres and wheels, ancient corsets, ladies' dresses and Tilley lamps. An Aboriginal stockman with a three-page list was collecting a mountain of station supplies. Eventually a stout middle-aged woman looked up through her glasses. 'Can I help you?'

'We'd like drinks and petrol, please.'

'What kind of petrol?'

'Super, please.'

'No super until Thursday.'

'Regular, then.'

'It'll have to be, won't it? What kind of drinks?'

'Orange and bitter lemon, please.'

'We've only got Coke.'

'Four Cokes, please.'

'It'll have to be, won't it?'

We made our final camp before Wyndham on fly-blown grassland surrounded by enormous ant hills, boab trees and fat cattle that wandered among us in the night and deposited foul-smelling 'balmorals'

(cow-pats) to mark their passage. Flies harassed us and the humidity was stifling. We broke camp and left without breakfast.

At 12.32 pm on 8 September 1965, we rolled into Wyndham. From Adelaide, the Toyota had travelled 2916.5 miles. It was time to commemorate the success of Operation Cross the Continent at Wyndham's jetty.

Apart from a labourer working on new offices at the jetty's base, the place was deserted. The tide was out too. Except at the very end of the jetty, there was no water for we Spriggs to dip our toes into. So we walked to the very end, with Reg ready to record our moment of triumph on the family movie camera. 'In you go!' he ordered.

We all obeyed, and were promptly enveloped to the waist by black, gloppy mud. Reg laughed and filmed merrily as we struggled for the ladders, crabs nipping at our ankles. The labourer's mates had joined him, no doubt from lunch at the pub, and formed a guffawing chorus. As a sign of good fellowship, they let us wash up at their tap.

We had been promising ourselves a beer in the Wyndham pub for a week, but changed our minds when we saw it. The place was crammed with sweating, boozy men who looked ready for a fight. We satisfied ourselves with a visit to the post office, sending a telegram to tell Geosurveys HQ in Adelaide that we had safely arrived, and others to Colin and TAA, booking a comfort flight on Sunday's Flight 577 from Alice Springs. It would be good to be home.

Akurra

In 1966, instead of bashing our bums across endless miles of desert pretending to make a vacation out of his relentless search for rocks and minerals, Reg took us on a couple of very different family holidays. The second one was to change our lives forever.

During the May term break, we satisfied Doug's interest in matters mechanical by touring the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, and his passion for astronomy by visiting the sky-gazing establishments scattered around south-eastern New South Wales: places like the Tidbinbilla tracking station, the radio telescope at Parkes, and Mount Stromlo observatory in the beautiful hills to the south of Canberra. Usually, on our desert explorations, Reg would be constantly stopping to take sand or soil samples, and jotting down notes for meticulous transcription and cross-referencing later on. But this time he relaxed and enjoyed the scenery. I joked he was getting old, but in truth he looked fitter and healthier than any other 47-year-old I'd lately met.

During winter and the September break we went nowhere at all – as a family at least. Reg was spending much time in New Zealand on

a new exploration project with Beach Petroleum. I held the fort in Adelaide, where I too was busy with a major project.

Beloved though our first house at Baker Street was, it had seen better days. Reg wanted to make me the gift of a brand new dream home at Somerton Beach. It was to be a two-storey, cantilevered affair featuring all mod cons, with big windows facing the beach. By the time Reg went zooming off to the Land of the Long White Cloud, we had the plans in hand, the land prepared and the building under way.

Reg called one night from one of those charmingly named but unpronounceable places on the North Island.

‘I fired the builder, Reg.’

‘And why have you done that, dear?’

‘I had a problem about the plumbing upstairs.’

‘Yes?’ said Reg, soliciting more information.

‘He refused to go upstairs on the ladder. He said he was wearing his good clothes.’

There was silence at the end of the line as Reg digested the news. ‘So, who’s going to build the house?’

‘Me and whatever subbies are game to take me on.’

This came out so confidently that I had no choice but to see the plan through. This doomed me to long days of phone calls, site meetings, inspections and haggling at Somerton Beach, while keeping family life on an even keel at Baker Street. The job was done to my satisfaction and the house turned out wonderfully well but, do you know, in my heart it never took the place of Baker Street, the post-war Trust house that Reg and I had made into our first proper Australian home, with its cupboards crafted from Radium Hill explosives boxes all the way from Scotland, and still redolent of the day I first fell in love with the Australian bush. I cried the day I closed the door for the last time at Baker Street.

Cocooned in Adelaide, the Spriggs were ready for a good getaway when the Christmas holidays loomed and Reg made his announcement.

‘What say we go up to Arkaroola? I fancy a little nostalgia.’

The mere mention of Arkaroola had for years been enough to have Reg looking misty eyed. 'It's like the name of the girl who made you a man,' I once observed. 'And stole your heart, as well.'

But the source of Reg's nostalgia originated with a man, not a woman.

As the grip of fascism had strengthened its hold on Europe during the late 1930s, and as the outbreak of World War II was about to turn me into a nurse and radiographer, young Reg Sprigg and his fellow geology students were making regular field trips to remote parts of the northern Flinders Ranges under the tutelage of Sir Douglas Mawson. Many of the field trips had taken Reg to Arkaroola Station, the home-stead base for lessons on the geology of the spectacular range contortions to be found thereabouts.

Yet Reg might just as easily have never met the man who became his hero. In 1912, except for his massive strength, will and ingenuity, Mawson might have perished in the icy wastes of Antarctica along with his fellow team members Ninnis and Mertz. Ninnis was the first to die, down an ice crevasse with a sledge and its dogs. Mertz was worn down by food poisoning from toxic vitamins in the livers of the remaining dogs, which Mawson and Mertz were forced to eat as they trekked the 300 miles back to their base at Commonwealth Bay. After the death of Mertz, Mawson discarded everything but the essentials he needed to survive, plus his geological samples and journals. He hand-crafted a small saw and cut the sled in half, lashing the remains of his belongings to the leading end. Mawson dragged the sled and his own wasted frame across the southern tundra for the next thirty days until he reached the safety of Commonwealth Bay. It was a saga of lone survival unparalleled in the history of Australian exploration.

I had read about Mawson long before I met Reg, but there was something special about hearing the story told over and again by the great man's infatuated student. Reg knew how privileged he was to have gained so much of his own knowledge from Mawson.

Reg also told us lesser known facts about his mentor. It was Mawson who discovered the radioactive davidite – a mineral containing uranium – at Radium Hill, and Mawson who had made a bee-line to

Mount Painter near Arkaroola when W.B. Greenwood found radioactive tobernite there in 1910. Knighted in 1914, Sir Douglas did service with the British Munitions Ministry during the Great War. Loaded down with OBEs and other imperial honours, Mawson was back at the University of Adelaide by 1919, teaching a new generation of adventurers to make its own contribution to Australian and world geology. He insisted that his students get their hands and knees tough and dusty, taking them out in the field to explore the so-called Adelaide System – eruptions of Pre-Cambrian rocks throughout the Flinders Ranges and the easterly spur that culminates around Broken Hill. They almost always camped out and did it rough, and Mawson taught them the bush survival skills that Reg had used to great benefit ever since.

A dozen times I had heard Reg tell how Mawson had threatened to murder him not once, but thrice, in a single day. On a 1939 trip near the Mount Serle camel remount station, Reg smashed Mawson's treasured camera. Then he wrecked the portable radio with which Sir Douglas was trying to keep abreast of the news of the looming war in Europe. Then he crushed Mawson's only pair of spectacles, all in the space of a few hours. What Reg promised in return for his mortal survival, he never disclosed.

Reg must have been forgiven, for Mawson made him his deputy on his next field trip to the Arkaroola–Mount Painter area, the trip which proved to be Mawson's last in the area. War was breaking out, and Mawson was sure that the radioactive minerals they had continued to find and document were going to play an important part in the events. Reg said that this seemed to dismay Mawson, as if he knew nuclear weapons might soon be let loose on the world thanks to scientific discoveries wedded with wartime imperative.

Other changes, too, dismayed the great man. As they camped there in the northern Flinders Ranges, Mawson lamented how introduced camels, donkeys and goats had gone feral and were even then destroying the habitat of native creatures, among them the timid yellow-footed rock wallabies that frequented the Arkaroola waterholes. Men were having their impact, as well. These wallabies often enough were shot for food. Mawson exhorted his students to do what they could

to preserve this high granite country with its intriguing geology and catalogue of irreplaceable plants and animals.

In reflective moments, Reg often recalled Mawson's vision for environmental conservation, and asked himself what his own legacy was likely to be.

Despite all Reg's stories of Arkaroola and the Mount Painter uranium, I had never been closer to this fabled place than our passing visit to Wooltana Station. That was the year we went off to Hawkers Gate, blowing up petroliferous bores and discovering ghost homesteads. 'Well,' I said. 'It's about time.'

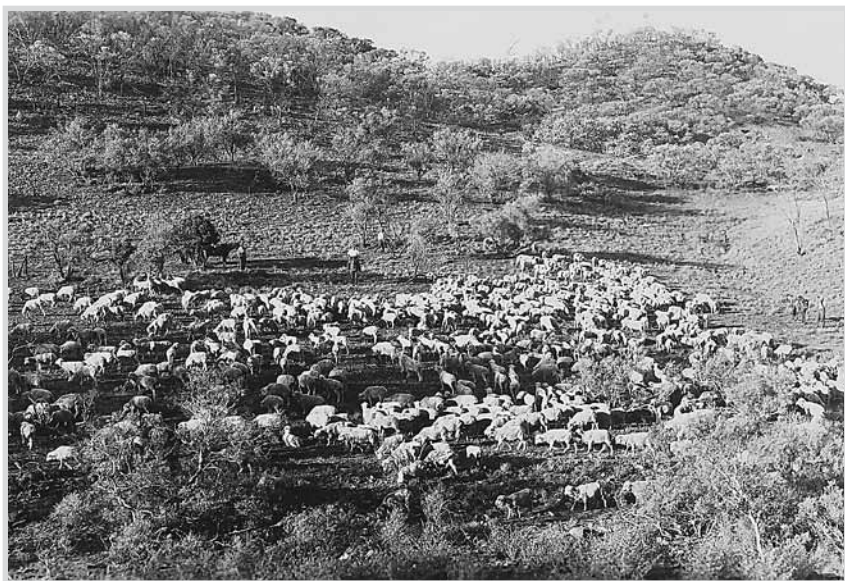
By Sprigg standards, the run up to Arkaroola was a piece of cake, literally a day trip. From Adelaide we made directly for Port Augusta, with the southern Flinders Ranges gathering on our right and Spencer Gulf glittering through the scrub on our left. Just before Port Augusta we took a turn-off that climbs towards the middle ranges via Quorn and Hawker, then flattens out on the long run up to the Leigh Creek coal-field and the desert lands beyond. We could have gone into Arkaroola that way, via Copley and what is now the Aboriginal settlement called Nepabunna. But outside Hawker we took the road to Wilpena and rolled out of the undulating pasture country into a wilder, drier landscape, its horizons always dramatically framed by tilted and bent palisades of rock. There were still plenty of farmsteads, and frequent large pools of water in the wash-outs and creek beds. The river gums were huge, and raucous gangs of corellas were in no rush to forage elsewhere. We could see the ramparts of Wilpena Pound looming high in the west. They seemed so tall they could create their own cloud systems, but this day the sky was baking and clear. 'One day,' promised Reg, 'we'll go for a fly over the Pound. It's the best way to appreciate the size of the place.'

'We're nowhere near Arkaroola, Reg, and already you're waxing lyrical.'

Reg was enjoying the scenery, as he had on our 'astronomy' holiday. I began to wonder whether he was starting to let go of his

workaholic ways and realising that perhaps there *was* more to life than rocks and minerals. It would take another year or so, but I'd find out soon enough.

Just before Blinman there is a right turn to Frome Downs Station, or you can go to the left and head north. We went north and, with the ranges undulating in the west, the further we went the more obvious it became that we had entered drought lands. There were no sheep or cattle to be seen anywhere, the only wildlife a few lonely emus and startled kangaroos. Lake Frome glared and shimmered far away on the eastern horizon. The soil was sere and dusty and our progress was marked by a long, red-brown cloud that hung in the air long after we had motored on. The sparse clumps of vegetation were desiccated and brittle.



The Greenwoods' first mob of sheep at Arkaroola Station, 1937.

Past Wertaloona and Balcanoona, the big dry was just as intense. 'Smiler said it was dry up here,' said Reg at last, 'but he didn't say it was this bad.'

Smiler Greenwood was the son of W.B. Greenwood. He had taken

over the Arkaroola Station lease in 1936, in exchange for little more than a promise to clear out the feral goats and dingoes. We had encountered Smiler's son Winston on one of our earlier outback excursions, when we'd had a roadside barbecue together in the Tomkinson Ranges.

'Do you remember how Winston had that enormous butcher's knife?'

'It was huge!' Reg agreed. 'No wonder the kids were petrified. You said you had a feeling you'd be seeing him again. Let's hope he's up at Arkaroola when we get there. Smiler certainly will be. God knows how he's kept himself afloat in this drought.'

As we reached the Arkaroola Station track late in the afternoon, Reg reverted to lecturer mode. 'Edward John Eyre passed through this way in 1840, and he was the one who named Mount Hopeless, which gives you an idea what he must have thought about the place. Copper was discovered in 1856 and again at Yudnamutana four years later. Rubies and sapphires were found near Mount Pitt early this century. That was Smiler's dad, too, before he found the Mount Painter tobernite in 1910. Did you know that in the 1920s, radium for therapy was worth a million pounds per ounce – until they found huge reserves in the Congo and the bottom fell out of the market.'

Ragged mountain outcrops towered ahead, flaring a brilliant deep red in the sunset. Doug said he thought it would have been too rugged to mine the area, and Reg agreed. 'They took out a fair bit of copper, and I suppose there would have been a bob or two in the gemstones, but the uranium was really hard to get out – it was a job for pack animals. The Mines Department put a road in to Mount Painter during World War II, but most of the uranium is still up here, intact. I tell you, people have always believed this is country of promise. The Aborigines have been here for heaven knows how long, and the first pastoral selection was taken out only about twenty years after proclamation. What year was South Australia proclaimed?'

'28 December 1836,' Marg and Doug replied in unison, sounding bored by such an obvious question.

'Very good. North of Arkaroola, at Paralana, two well-bred Poms named John and William Jacob made a selection and built up 7000

head of cattle over several good seasons. Men named Taylor and Gill brought sheep to Arkaroola. But there was a big drought in the 1860s and properties were abandoned everywhere, the leases reverting to the crown. That's happened here a few times. Smiler Greenwood picked up the lease a year or so after the boundaries were fenced. After that, the sheep came back.'

We had travelled perhaps twelve miles. The sun was well down now, and the range hills were silhouetted black, the sky beyond a deepening blue. We nearly missed the homestead, alerted only by the glint of headlights on the metal frame of a lonely windmill. Reg braked and, half-way up a slope to our left, I saw lamplight glimmering from a window. A figure was waving at us with a torch to guide us in.

It turned out to be Smiler Greenwood himself. Wearing a huge grin to welcome Reg's family for the first time to Arkaroola Station, he herded us inside for bowls of stew ladled from a vast tureen, which we washed down with hot black tea and a tot of highland warmth for the older folk. Reg observed that the drought had done rough work.

'You can say that again,' Smiler agreed. 'I've been lucky enough to get agistment for my breeding stock below the Gawler line. Down in the Adelaide Hills, actually. I haven't got the money to hand-feed a desert devil, let alone sheep. We recently had a big barbecue and the rest went off to the abattoirs at nothing a pound.' There was a weariness in Smiler's demeanour. 'I don't want to whinge, but it's been eleven years since we had a decent season. I'm getting too bloody old for this caper. A bloke has to retire some time, but before I have something to retire on I reckon I'll be joining those bloody sheep down south in the Hills and turning my hand to growing something sensible. Apples, maybe, somewhere near Lenswood. Somewhere green.'

Reg and I went walking in the morning. We climbed a ridge and looked northwards across the most breathtaking outback scenery I had ever seen: contorted regiments of rock, phalanxes of folded hills plunging into chasms, and creekbeds strewn with boulders and populated by giant river gums, their bases still wrapped in the detritus of

the last flash flood, so long ago now the litter was dry fuel for fire. We were in a mountain wilderness that had been forced high above the surrounding plains by continent-shaping forces long before mankind started counting time.

We found ourselves close to a waterhole shaded by sheer rock walls, and Reg remembered the place. 'This is where we camped with Mawson. This was where he told us about the shooting of the wallabies.'

We had not seen a single wallaby. We had seen *plenty* of goat spoor. 'Was there something wrong with goats as food?' I wondered, not really expecting a reply.

Reg kept on reminiscing. 'Mawson was a real one for living quietly on the land. You took your rubbish with you when you broke camp. Some of the blokes thought he was batty for that, but he insisted. He was always talking about the plant life here too. He wasn't just your rocks man. He used to rummage about looking for signs that the native pines might be regenerating, but was always disappointed because they'd been eaten out by vermin – and it looks like they still are. I reckon Mawson would have given back his knighthood for a new native pine shooting through the dirt.'

To me it seemed that even the drought-resistant acacia bushes were ready to crumble and turn to dust.

Next morning Smiler commandeered the kids again, so Reg and I had more time to ourselves. He suggested a picnic at the Paralana Hot Springs.

To get there we had to backtrack to a gap in the hills, then follow a tortured wheel rut that wound along Oppamindah Creek to a place called Lively's Find Mine. Then we followed a narrow tributary through gorge country, passing by a towering outcrop called the Jasper Twins, and climbed up high to another old mine works, the Welcome Mine. Then we descended sharply to another deep creekbed. 'This is Arkaroola Creek itself,' Reg said. 'Up that way is Wheal Hancock, and where we're coming out is close to Stubbs Waterhole.'

It was lucky Reg knew where he was going, because we changed direction so many times that I felt completely lost. When we reached Arkaroola Creek he pointed towards a non-existent path that climbed towards a ragged pass on the far side of the creek. 'That's Claude Pass. From there it's only six miles past Blue Duck Mine to Lady Buxton Mine, and another six or seven up to Paralana.'

That sounded a long way. 'I like it here. Can we stop for a drink?'

We found a shady place beneath an enormous white-flanked river gum and Reg produced a thermos of coffee. For a while we sipped in appreciative silence, Reg looking around.

'See up there? Round the bend, upstream? There are waterholes all the way up the creek. Places like Echo Camp, Nooldanooldana, Arkaroola Spring, Bolla Bollana. The Dreaming story goes that a big snake called Akurra lived up here in the ranges. He got thirsty, so he went down to Lake Frome to get a drink. He drank it dry, and on his way back into the hills he was so heavy he gouged out the gorges and made all the waterholes.' He waved towards the south-west. 'Way over there is Yaki Waterhole. That's where Akurra stopped. He's there today, so the Adnyamathanha people say. It's Akurra's place. Men should stay away.'

We reached Paralana Hot Springs by following a granite-sand creekbed to yet another marvellous waterhole, and then by walking up past some colourful, fractured cliffs. The springs were steaming away, even in the midday sun. Reg was lecturing again. 'The hottest reliable reading here was just below boiling point.' I could believe it. 'When Douglas Mawson brought us up here in 1938, he stuck his hand in a hot spot and brought it out yelling. Another bloke and I thought it would be fun to have a swim, so we skinny-dipped and copped a lecture about using the wallabies' clean water for a bath tub.'

I was on the side of the wallabies. 'You men are brutes. Perhaps Mawson agreed with the Aboriginal people that this place is not meant for men.'

We sat munching our sandwiches, Reg marvelling at the rusty-hued deposits left in the hot springs by mysterious compounds and chemicals, while I listened to bird calls and the rustle of wind in

the river gums. Suddenly, without warning, the breeze blew up in a primordial gust.

‘Akurra is angry,’ said Reg. ‘We’d better go.’

Was he joking? I heard something else in the wind. It was a whispering command to look around me and see for the very first time. To perceive the subterranean magic in a place of mysteries and wonders bigger than my comprehension, and bigger than Mawson’s and Reg’s for all their science. I could not understand what I was feeling. It was as if I was recognising a place I had never seen before, and discovering it was home.

Crossing the Tanami

In September of 1967 we Spriggs crossed the Simpson Desert for the third time, west to east, parallel to what is these days known as the French Track, much of which we found to be ‘blown-in’ by sand drifts and the desert winds. Earlier that year, though, we made another remarkable desert crossing.

In the beginning of 1967, Reg was home for once and we were watching a television feature on Marble Bar in Western Australia, one of the hottest places on earth.

‘Why do you live here?’ the interviewer asked a weather-beaten old fellow in a faded blue singlet.

‘I like the climate.’

‘But it hardly ever gets below a hundred and twenty.’

‘Does at night, mate. I wouldn’t live anywhere else.’

‘Where else *have* you lived?’

‘Nowhere.’

Reg was looking at me with amusement. ‘You want to go there, don’t you?’

I was perched on a comfortable sofa, the scent of freshly percolated coffee wafting from the kitchen. 'No.'

'Of course you do. You have deserts in your blood.'

'Reg, you have rocks in your head.'

'An undisputed fact. What about the May holidays?'

'Can we at least fly up to the Alice?'

'Absolutely! We'll stop for a look at the mines and the Granites goldfield. Cross the Tanami Desert to Hall's Creek. Then to Derby, Broome, Eighty Mile Beach. Then inland to the Hammersley Range and Marble Bar.'

'You've been planning this.'

'Guilty as charged, your gorgeous honour.'

'I'll start making the lists.'

'No rush,' he said, parking himself beside me with an amorous kiss. 'Tomorrow will do.'

It turned out that the preparations and packing happened in a panic – a 'ruddy blush', as my friend and neighbour Betty Cundy described it. We were flying to Alice Springs, so in Adelaide we would have to select a Geosurveys Toyota and book it, fully laden, on to one of the Ghan's flat-top freight wagons. I had thought there would be no need to ruddy blush, but my wish to fly came back and bit me like that Radium Hill red-back.

Late in April I called Alan Wilmet, who ran the service division at Geosurveys' Woodville depot, to ask him which car he recommended. 'I've got just the job for you, Griselda. It's got those side panniers for storage. Bruce Wilson uses it all the time for field trips. I have to come over your way and collect those tide-recording instruments you and Margaret used at Cape Jervis last weekend, so I'll bring it round this arvo and get you to give me a lift back again.'

When he turned up he had the alarming news that if we wanted to be away from the Alice on time, we had until Monday to get the car packed and delivered to the Mile End railway yards. This was a Thursday afternoon. I had one shopping day, and two for packing.

'Come in and have a coffee, Alan.'

He hesitated. 'I should be getting back.'

‘You’ll be back soon enough. I have to find my lists.’

‘Lists?’

‘Yes. Tools – shovels, jacks, fire extinguishers, kitchen bloody sinks. Two of everything. It’s not easy shopping in deserts.’

He chuckled. I was notorious for demanding two of everything. ‘You’d be right there, Griselda.’

‘Sugar?’ I asked.

‘Two, thanks.’

Alan, bless him, saw to it personally that our tools and equipment were delivered next day and neatly stored in the underground garage of our new house at Somerton Beach. The house was finished, but Reg wouldn’t let us move from Baker Street until the two-storey, cantilevered construction had ‘settled’ – to avoid cracking or movement. Why Alan delivered the gear there instead of Baker Street, I don’t know – I was out shopping at the time and too busy to call and ask. Somehow I’d managed to purchase the essentials – canned food mostly, as perishables would be worthless even in the relatively cool climes of May. With the rear compartment loaded with a 44-gallon petrol drum and two built-in 20-gallon water drums, there was – as usual – no room for luxuries.

On Saturday, twelve-year-old Douglas conveniently disappeared with his mate Peter Cundy. I dragooned Marg, now fifteen, into helping me with the packing. She washed pannikins, enamelled plates, mugs and cutlery, packing them neatly into the old ammunition crate we’d turned into a tucker box. Alan had been right about the panniers, which were amazingly roomy. Together we jammed them full of food and other basics, then made for Somerton Park where we worked like galley slaves completing the job – all told it took us six hours. We were tired, filthy and hungry when we got back to Baker Street, where Doug had miraculously reappeared and was demanding food. Next morning Marg volunteered to help again with the finishing touches. We crammed camp clothing into soft sausage bags and jammed the bags into any available space. It was fortunate that the Toyota had side mirrors, because the cabin’s central rear-view mirror was going to be useless.

Early in May, after an absurdly polite and cheerful young man employed by the Postmaster General delivered a 5.45 am wake-up call, Colin Semmler flew us out of Adelaide in his trusty Cessna, the sun rising in a great ball of fire. By eight we were refuelling at Whyalla and demolishing the coffee and sandwiches I'd made for 'emergency' rations. At 9.45 we crossed the Woomera Road, a strip of two-way black bitumen – no bulldust or mud to impede a traveller's progress now that the rocket range had become so important to the waging of Cold War. We had a view of Lake Torrens and the pock-marked opal diggings of Andamooka. There were waterholes along Margaret Creek and we overflowed the Ghan as it ambled along with its cargo of cars. I had only seen the region before in drought, but now beyond Oodnadatta the creeks were flowing. It was a good season.

On arrival at Alice Springs we circled Pichi Richi Sanctuary to herald our arrival. My old friend Elsa Corbett drove out to meet us at the airport and took us back to the sanctuary where husband Leo was lurking in wait with dinner and his repertoire of banter and bad jokes. He also told me a story I'd never heard.

'You're heading for the Tanami, the Granites.'

'Yes?'

'Ever heard of Jim Chapman?' I shook my head. 'He owned this place before I bought it. He retired here to Heavitree Gap after years working the Granites gold. When he bought it he called it the Pearly Gates. After being stuck up in the Tanami since the 1930s, I suppose Heavitree Gap *would* look pretty pearly. But, seeing I'm not so religious as he was, I renamed it for the gap in the range. Anyway, when you get up there, have a look at his house. He built it himself.'

Outside, the men checked fuel levels and attached the mysterious gizmos that prevent low-pressure tyres coming off the wheels in sand country. The stars blazed, welcoming us back to desert country.

When we headed out of Alice Springs – late as usual – on Thursday 11 May 1967 the meter said the Toyota had done 18,211 miles. It was about to do far more than we planned.

The turn-off for Yuendumu and the Granites goldfield was only thirteen miles out of the Alice and we reached it without incident.

Once we were on the Tanami track, the situation started changing fast. The season had been too good – at least for the state of the track. Feed was so lush the ‘road’ was frustratingly overgrown. Just a few miles further on we were forced to camp. Tall, thick bindyei (burrs) scratched our legs and three-corner jacks pierced the soles of our shoes. We fixed that by shovelling a clearing to lay our swags. But one stray jack managed to pierce Doug’s inflatable mattress. It hissed as soon as he lay down. In the morning, flies harassed us by the thousand. We broke camp fast and got under way with the western MacDonnell Ranges glaring violent red in the early sun through waving patches of thick Mitchell Grass and the tall stands of gums and ironbark.

At the Haast Bluff turn-off – another overgrown, barely discernible track in the grass – we saw a fat snake lazily crossing the ‘intersection’. Marg collected a horny lizard for Adelaide University at the Napperby turn-off. A lonely signpost told us the Granites were a ‘mere’ 156 miles away.

The ground cover began to thin out and the going eventually improved. We spent some time exploring the old gold workings near Mt Doreen Station, which looked abandoned: only Nissen huts and rusting car bodies remained. At Chilla Well Reg sampled the sand. A dingo loitered near a stray egret, reminding us it was time for lunch.

Despite these diversions, it wasn’t long before we were crossing dry lakes and dunes in true desert country south of the Granites. When we reached the old mine, the menfolk were anxious to explore the place Jim Chapman had worked.

‘There’s a shaft along the reef,’ Reg enthused.

‘A hundred feet deep!’ added Doug.

They hurried off for a closer look, rummaging among the relics: half a hand-made wheel, a flat iron, a rickety crushed-ore platform, the old gold stamp battery next to it. I watched from near the car, enjoying a cigarette. Then I remembered Leo Corbett’s story and went for a look at the household ruins.

The windmill on the bore was still turning. The house stood on a rise, chunks of cement still filling wind-blasted gaps in the local stone. It had four rooms, each empty of clues as to the type of man

Jim Chapman might have been except for one that boasted a built-in bath. This lonely El Dorado outpost must once in a while have enjoyed a tropical storm that provided fresh bathing water. Today, as usual, the sky was a baked, cloudless blue. On the way back to the car I tapped the sides of the old water tank. It was nearly full. So the rains had been recent here too.

It was nearly dark by the time we reached our next stop, the Tanami gold mine. We'd done 412 miles of rough track driving, so everyone was grateful for a gobble of tinned stew and a pannikin of canned juice before they bedded down. Reg fell instantly asleep despite the fact he'd ended up on Doug's punctured mattress. We woke to a sparse red landscape of shale and laterite, and Marg running up to tell us to come see the miners' huts. They were mud-brick affairs with rough wooden doors, and remained in just the condition they'd been left in thirty years ago. Bottles of aspirin, tins of treacle and other odds and ends were scattered on dusty floors. On the door of one hut was painted a sign: 'PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB. BACK LATER. K. HARRIS'.

I hope K. Harris had better luck than we did that Saturday. The misfortunes were many. First Reg fumed over the fact that his movie camera lenses had been incorrectly serviced and the focus controls were useless. Then, as we broke camp and prepared to leave, we found that we had run over an old miner's boot heel plate, complete with nails, which meant repairs. Next, after we took the Halls Creek turn-off (our brand new Canberra-drafted map showed that Halls Creek was merely 125 miles away) and passed a tattered air sock at the Tanami airstrip to enter another wilderness of tall grass and thick spinifex, Doug observed that the Toyota's temperature gauge was climbing rapidly.

'And I can smell burning,' said Marg. 'The exhaust pipe must be clogged by grass.'

'Where's the extinguisher?' Reg demanded.

'Which one?'

'Any bloody one!'

'Tool kit. Starboard pannier.'

'Great place for it!'

‘Forgive me,’ I said, tartly, ‘for not thinking we might be burned to death by overgrown grass in the middle of a bloody desert! Stop and I’ll get it.’

Reg was wrestling with the wheel and staring grimly ahead. ‘I can’t stop till we get to a clearing or we might get blown sky high.’ Now we could see smoke trailing behind us. Reg issued orders. ‘When I stop, Douglas, you get the fire extinguisher. Margaret, you open up the bonnet. Mum, you tear that bloody spinifex from under the exhaust.’ A clearing suddenly appeared. ‘Now!’

We abandoned the car like the devil was after us. I dived under the Toyota, my hands protected by rubber gloves I had snatched from the tucker box, and ripped away at the smouldering spinifex, terrified it would explode and take me and everyone else with it. Doug, next to me, was aiming the extinguisher into the smoke. I clawed that spinifex free, ignoring my aching muscles, praying we wouldn’t be blown to oblivion – and unaware that I would soon become an expert at this sort of activity.

The last of the grass came clear and the emergency passed. Sweaty and grease-streaked, I joined the others at the front of the car. Reg was cleaning grass heads and husks from the grille with a hairbrush. ‘This radiator needs an alarming amount of water,’ said Reg. ‘If the bloody track doesn’t improve, this could end up being a thirsty trip for us.’

The track got worse, and so did my already frazzled mood. Every few miles I had to slide under the car to remove clumps of grass while another gallon of water went into the radiator. ‘This is no good,’ said Reg as the engine boiled again. ‘We’ll have to take off the bonnet.’

‘And put it where, exactly?’

‘In the back. You’re the expert packer.’

Having just saved us all from an early demise, I was not impressed. I strode to the back of the Toyota in silence. Then, with feeling, I hurled sausage bags at my husband. He, quite calm, started sand sampling. Once half our gear was unpacked, the bonnet could be wedged alongside the petrol drum, just. I shoved, sweated and cursed as I replaced the load.

‘Your blood’s worth bottling,’ said Reg by way of thanks when he returned.

‘It is likely,’ said I, ‘that if this day does not rapidly improve, you’ll have to bottle a considerable portion of it. I might just blow my stack.’

Eight miles on we hit heavy sand and a steep creek bed. We decided to lighten the load and let Reg drive ahead alone, the rest of the Sprigg tribe walking behind to catch up at a level spot. No such luck. We’d only walked a few paces when we watched the Toyota slip from the track and settle at a crazy angle in a deep, watery bog.

This was bad. Reg clambered out and surveyed the scene in silence. Then he took an axe and started hacking branches from a nearby gum tree, ordering the rest of us to unload the car. We obeyed, and obeyed again as Reg wedged the tree boughs beneath the Toyota and told us to heave with all our might. The vehicle moved a few feet then slumped again, immovable. ‘Push!’ Reg bellowed, as we shoved and grunted, fouled by a slimy filth that only the Scottish word ‘gloar’ can adequately describe. The car refused to budge. ‘Bugger it! This is going to take some time,’ said Reg, the understatement of the decade. ‘Kids, make camp. Griselda, we’re going to have to unload the fuel drums.’ I suggested we decant the drum into smaller jerry cans. ‘Good idea, but just don’t fire up one of those bloody cigarettes while you’re doing it.’

‘Manners, Reg. As if I would.’

‘Sorry, dear. This is getting annoying.’

The load further lightened, Reg wedged more boughs beneath the car, but still it wouldn’t move. Then we discovered a flat tyre and Reg had to bog himself beneath the vehicle to dislodge the spare. Towards evening we made another attempt to escape the sludge. The car moved its own length and stopped again, worse than before. It had stopped on a spring. Water flowed into the car.

‘God,’ Reg intoned. ‘We’ll be here for hours.’ This was not the moment to remind him that we already had been. ‘Can someone get a fire going?’

Doug had already thought of that. He’d also set up the Traeger radio transceiver. I tried to raise Carranya Station, home of our friends Bill and Josie Moyle and our day’s destination, now beyond reach. ‘Eight Sierra Alpha Golf,’ I intoned repeatedly, ‘calling Eight Sierra Mike Foxtrot.’ There was no response.

Finally, from somewhere in Queensland, came a crackling reply.
'Eight Uniform Whisky to Eight Sierra Alfa Golf.'

'Eight Sierra Alfa Golf.'

'Flora here. Are you in trouble? Over.'

'Griselda here. We're bogged on the Tanami-to-Halls Creek track bound for Carranya. Over.'

'I'll pass that on to Carranya first call in the morning. You okay for the night? Over.'

'So long as the bloody car doesn't sink. Over.'

The light was fading. Doug had turned his attention to one of our two jacks. 'We should be able to use them both to level the car.'

'On what?' Reg asked. 'It's all mud and water.'

'We'll collect rocks. Make a solid bed and jack up both sides evenly to get a grip.'

Reg looked at his twelve-year-old son in admiration. 'Good idea! Let's get on with it.'

'Dad, this second jack is rusted solid.'

'What! Who bloody checked the gear?'

Another moment not to make wisecracks about my perspicacity for even *thinking* to bring two of everything. 'Have you tried oil?' I asked.

'Yes, Mum.'

'Petrol?'

'Yes.'

'Bugger!' Reg – even he – was starting to look defeated. It was time to act. I asked Marg to make dinner while I searched our gear for anything that resembled a suitable lubricant for the jack, and came up with a jar of expensive French face cream. 'This might work.'

Reg protested. 'That cost eighty dollars!'

'We're hopelessly bogged in the middle of the Tanami desert. Have you a better idea?'

He didn't even bother answering. 'Where's the jack?'

While the others ate I plastered every exposed ratchet of that infernal jack with Parisian elixir of eternal youth. By the tiniest of motions, it started to give. I rubbed and rubbed. Another ratchet was exposed. Everyone but me was fast asleep. More French balm.

Then another ratchet. By the light of our 'trouble lamp' I caressed that bloody jack for hours. Finally I was satisfied it had a chance of functioning. Accompanied by the croak of frogs and the whine of mosquitoes, I sealed Lancome Jack in a plastic bag to keep out any more oxygen and put myself to bed.

I was dreaming of chocolates, coffee and a warming cognac in a Parisian café. And crepes with Grand Marnier from a Latin Quarter sidewalk stall. A walk in the Luxembourg Gardens; perhaps a visit to the Louvre.

'It works!' A shout from Reg. Elation. Admiration. 'It bloody works. Come on everyone, get up! There's work to be done.'

The big red dawn promised hope, but I still felt exhausted. 'Reg,' I mumbled, 'it's Mothers' Day. I want breakfast in bed.' A frog chirruped disapprovingly in the silence as Reg, hauling rocks towards the car, ignored me. Marg went past with a boulder in her arms. Then Doug. I had no choice but to join the slave gang.

For an hour we carted rocks to the bog site and tried to lay a solid foundation in the waist-deep muddy water. Then it was time to join the daily galah session on the SSB radio, to see if our message had gone through to the Moyles. Doug had the radio perfectly tuned and we listened to the cheerful morning banter. Finally I was able to give our call sign and the operator came on the air.

'There's an outpost portable calling and they seem to be in trouble. Maintain silence, please. Come in Sierra Alpha Golf. Is that you, Mrs Sprigg? Over.' Our message from last evening had gone through.

'Yes. We're still bogged but in no immediate danger. Is Carranya listening out? Over.'

There was a pause. Then, as if he was just around the corner, came the clear voice of Bill Moyle. 'Sierra Mike Foxtrot. Carranya here. Griselda? We thought you were flying in. We had the red carpet all rolled out. Over.'

'Roll it back up. Our feet are muddy. Over.'

'Where are you, now? Over.'

'Forty miles north-east of Tanami on track to Gordon Downs. It's a bad bogging, but we should be out today some time. Over.'

‘That’s not a good track. Hasn’t been graded for maybe ten years. I haven’t been that way for six years and then it took us eighteen days to get up from the Alice. You’ll strike even worse trouble if you keep coming. Much as we’d love to see you soon, I reckon you should go back to Tanami once you’re out. Backtrack past the Granites then come through via Mongrel Downs and Balgo mission. Over.’

Reg nodded. I acknowledged the advice and apologised for the no-show.

‘Can’t help bad luck. We’ll listen out at midday and fifteen hundred hours. Sing out if you need help. See you some time soon. Over and out.’

For five more hours we carted rocks into that infernal spring, sustained by salt tablets as the temperature rose far quicker than the car. Agonisingly, we would inch it clear of the water only for a jack to slip, and the car would submerge itself again. We had emptied the entire load, which was steaming in the sun, and while the others toiled I tried to sort the gear and prepare it for repacking once the car was finally clear of the muck. I dared not wash anything given how precious our water had become. Reg had even started saving the bail-water in our wash basin so he could use it to fill the radiator.

Just after midday we had the vehicle on an even keel at last, with many rocks under each wheel and what we prayed was a solid bed of stone for extra traction. The three of us watched as Reg climbed aboard and prepared to reverse out of the bog. The engine coughed and threatened to die, then fired up in a cloud of oily smoke. Reg engaged the gear and, it seemed, barely dared to touch the accelerator for fear of dislodging all the rocks. Slowly, steadily, the car eased onto solid ground. Then it was safe to accelerate. The Toyota roared past us as we cheered, pulling up beside our piles of gear while Reg yelled at us to load up. ‘Hold on a minute!’ I insisted. ‘This is still supposed to be a holiday. Let’s at least have something to eat.’

It was 3.30 pm by the time we started back towards Tanami. Every few miles we had to stop so I could clear that bloody grass and Reg could clear that bloody radiator grille, wielding the hairbrush and cursing mightily.

‘Dad,’ ventured Doug. ‘Why not use the engine pump to blow the husks through?’

‘Douglas, you are a genius! But why, son, didn’t you think of this before?’

Whatever the wisdom of his timing, Doug’s idea worked brilliantly. We were back at Tanami just after six and drove straight to the bore to replenish our water. The tank was green with algae, so we transferred what remained of our drinking water into billies and our collection of water bags and siphoned the tank water into the built-in tanks. While the water flowed and Reg showed off to the kids by hanging himself off the slow-turning blades of the windmill, I spied some crude lettering on the side of the bore tank:

‘WAS HERE BUT GOT OUT IN A HURRY.
RON HOMEK, ROCKHAMPTON, QUEENSLAND.’

We were in a hurry, too. Once Reg decided that there was task to be accomplished, it got accomplished. We raised Carranya Station and told the Moyles we were backtracking safely so far, then enjoyed a meal of canned steak, canned vegetables and canned spaghetti. By then it was after eight, and even though he’d been slaving since first light Reg planned to drive through the night to get us back on schedule, and – with luck – to Marble Bar. ‘You’d better make plenty of coffee, Griselda,’ he said, looking like he was nearly asleep.

‘I’ve thought of that.’ The thermos flasks were full. ‘Let’s get on.’

Out of Tanami Well the track was sandy and rough. The radiator presented fewer problems because the going was cooler in the night air. It wasn’t long, though, before we encountered the soggy fringe of a lake. We had been forced to skirt it in daylight on the way up, so it seemed simple enough to follow our tracks to the other side. But, using nothing but headlights, this proved easier said than done. We lost the track and became bogged again. ‘Not much of a place,’ said Reg as he shut down the motor and slumped against the wheel, ‘but we’re not moving till dawn.’

The mozzies feasted that night. On me.

Some deity smiled on us in the dawn and – despite another unloading and reloading – we pulled clear at the first attempt. Dry biscuits, canned tomatoes and the last of the coffee sufficed for breakfast. We were able to wash at the Granites cattle trough before our Canberra-made map presented us with the choice of turning west for Sangster Bore or backtracking even further and doing what the Moyles had suggested – going via Mongrel Downs. Reg opted for Mongrel Downs and the Balgo track because Geosurveys crews had been along the route just two years earlier.

Again the early going was overgrown with spinifex and grass. As we lunched on salt tablets and canned crab meat we pondered the lack of cattle. They would have loved it, but years of drought had forced pastoralists to muster them up and sell them off. It seemed that now there was a good season, there wasn't the money to bring the cattle back.

A dozen or so miles further on we discovered that a lake had invaded the road. Fearing another bogging, Reg pulled up half a mile short and the others went on for a swim while I made diary notes. Eventually I joined them – the water was icy and for a time relieved the oedemic agony of my mozzie bites, which by now were turning septic. Bliss! I wallowed and watched the kids chasing about among the wild ducks, Marg the scientist collecting little crustaceans.

Our next encounter was with an almost citified Toyota Crown that hurtled towards us along the track as we skirted the lake and headed further west. Out stepped an Aboriginal stockman and Joe Mahood, owner of Mongrel Downs. Joe asked us to come up to the homestead to meet his wife and kids. When we arrived, I felt so filthy I wanted to wait in the car, but Marie Mahood wouldn't hear of it. She made tea and cheerfully suggested we take showers. After that, we were invited for dinner.

'Marie,' I said, 'this is embarrassing. You don't have to look after us so handsomely.'

'We had twenty-five at the table last night,' she said, unruffled. 'Tonight it'll be just fifteen. Make yourselves welcome.'

Real roast beef for dinner! It was delicious. The kids had a ball

gallivanting about with the Mahood youngsters as we adults discussed the weather.

‘Twenty-four inches in twenty-four hours,’ said Joe. ‘No wonder there’s a few new lakes about the place.’

‘The one you passed,’ said Marie, ‘is thirty feet deep at the centre. You’ll see a few more on your way, so be careful as you go.’

We declared that we would be, especially after we heard the story of the travellers who’d recently tried to get to Halls Creek the way we had first gone. They had been promised in Alice Springs that there was petrol and water at Tanami and the Granites. When they found both sites abandoned they ventured dimly onwards, searching for any sign of civilisation. They exhausted their water supply and started on their radiator water. After they had been alone for a week – and were feeling desperate – they burned their spare tyre and prayed someone would see the thin black plume. Joe saw it and their lives were spared.

We could have stayed for days at Mongrel Downs, but the delays were mounting up and we had to push on. We camped that night about twenty miles beyond a neat geographic survey camp where the men were playing canasta and gambling for matchsticks, and pressed on for Carranya at first light. We planned to bypass Balgo Mission, not wishing to embarrass Father McGuire by our unannounced arrival, but we came upon the mission so suddenly we had no choice but to stop, pay our greetings, meet a new colleague of Father McGuire’s and partake of a wee dram of Scotch.

It was four o’clock by the time we reached Carranya. The place looked magnificent. There was feed everywhere, including a profusion of water melons, which I would soon discover go well with a nip of brandy. The homestead was bright with bougainvillea and the wrought-iron table under the shady verandah was decked with cloths and silverware. The Moyles had cultivated a beautiful tropical garden.

Over dinner we discovered the latest on the Texan land-grabs they had told us about during our previous visit. ‘Some of the transactions hereabouts have gone pretty well,’ said Bill. ‘But the mob that got into us were bloody con-artists. When the going got too dry for them they went up in a puff of smoke and left us holding the debts.’

‘We’re looking for another partnership now,’ Josie said. She passed a fruit bowl bursting with home-grown bananas and pawpaws. ‘Or a buy-out.’ She spoke matter-of-factly, but there was no disguising the anxiety born of hard times. Reg produced a bottle of Scotch that had somehow survived the visit to Balgo and we changed the subject.

In the morning I attacked our filthy laundry – a three-hour scrub with hard nailbrush and straight soap powder on clothes that had been soaking overnight. Reg and Doug helped fell trees and in the afternoon they went with Bill to kill and butcher a steer, much of which was eaten that very night. Next day we packed the Toyota, replaced its bonnet, and were on our way once again, wondering for the second time what the future held for Bill and Josie, wonderful and generous people who deserved better than the cards they had been dealt so far.

Not long after, we heard that Bill took ill and had been evacuated to Perth, where he died in hospital. Josie stayed in the city.

We had decided to make for Fitzroy Crossing, so we bypassed Halls Creek, stopping only for a swim in the deep causeway of Mary Creek. The water was wonderful but there were demonic squadrons of mosquitoes dancing about the water’s surface, hunting for *me*. By the time we reached Fitzroy Crossing the bites were causing me agonies. And that night I was so badly chewed by the droning little blighters that next morning I had to visit the sister at the local hospital, who nursed a malnourished Aboriginal baby while she found me some ointment.

It was yet another rugged day’s travelling. The Derby road was in good condition but the radiator boiled again in the fierce heat. Next the ignition unit caught fire. Reg and Doug prised it open and made roadside repairs. Then the steering developed a serious wobble. Eventually we reached Derby, where we had promised ourselves a night of luxury, but the Boab Hotel had no vacancies and the Club only had second-class accommodation, which consisted of a drab share room divided for decency’s sake by a flimsy ‘wall’ of masonite. It would have to do. Starved, we headed for the dining room, only to find the menu had been exhausted by an unexpected influx of visitors. ‘You can have

steak, though,' said the proprietress. 'If you wait a bit.' Steak! After all the beef I'd eaten lately, I would have rather eaten the table. We were too tired to complain. In the end it was worth the wait – washed down by Emu Lager, those tender Texan-sized steaks were among the juiciest I have ever tasted.

We hit the sack at ten, at which time the local two-up school got started next door. Raucous chanting continued until midnight, when it subsided completely, probably thanks to the intervention of the law. Soon after that, a stranger crashed into our room. Dressed all in white – shorts, shirt, shoes and socks – and blind drunk, he was quickly dressed in nothing at all. He hurled himself at his mattress, missed, crashed into the masonite wall, vomited, cleaned it up with a towel, then lay flat on the towel. At 4.30 in the morning he got up, dressed and left. Our night of luxury was not going quite as planned.

Reg took the wounded Toyota to the local mechanic in the morning while I found a chemist who sold me a tube of Paxyl cream, insisting that I was a candidate for tropical ulcers and should spend some time in hospital. Mercifully, the Paxyl worked wonders as we made our way to the shanty town of Broome, which was deserted for the afternoon siesta. We raced tiny blue crabs on idyllic Cable Beach, then went for petrol and cold drinks at Peter's Snack Bar and Petrol Pump. Peter turned out to be Chinese, and his only other customer was an Aboriginal lad.

'You want?'

I thought Peter was talking to the boy, who was there first. The question came again. 'You want?'

The boy was not impressed. 'You be bloody polite to bloody lady. She be customer, you be bugger Chinese. You mind your manners and serve bloody lady.'

He did. Well stocked with cool drinks, we turned for Port Hedland, where we had arranged to meet Colin Semmler and Bruce and Betty Wilson, the idea being for Bruce and Betty to take over the Toyota and Colin to fly the Spriggs back to Adelaide. 'Sorry Griselda,' Reg had said, 'but we've been delayed so often I reckon Marble Bar's going to have to wait for another day.'

On Eighty Mile Beach we did sand sampling and made camp, old clothes soaked in petrol to fuel our cooking fire, the murmur of the sea so peaceful after the clamour of the two-up revellers the night before. In the morning we collected shells – spiders, cowries and balers, all perfect – and swam among huge schools of pilchards. We reached Port Hedland in the steamy mid-afternoon and rendezvoused at the airstrip with Colin and the Wilsons. It was a Sunday; the pubs were shut and so was everything else, so we satisfied ourselves with coffee and juice while we transferred our road-battered belongings into the plane and Bruce loaded his gear among the sand samples and swags. Before long he and Betty were on their way north and we were flying south-west towards Exmouth Gulf, past the huge new iron ore port at Dampier and over the oil flares dotting the rigs of Barrow Island.

Early next day we overflowed the American communications base at North West Cape and landed to visit a Geosurveys gravity team. I had my first helicopter flight there. Up it went, effortlessly, as if I was in an elevator. The pilot followed a deep gorge and then waltzed, with deft movements of the control stick, above a rock pool teeming with fish. Then – so gracefully that I yearned to have the skills to do this wonderful thing myself – he peeled us away sideways and upwards into the beautiful blue sky. ‘Wrap it up,’ I said to the pilot as we landed. ‘I’ll take it.’

‘Time to go,’ Reg said. ‘Griselda’s having another one of her expensive ideas.’

Through thunderstorms to Meekatharra and Kalgoorlie we made our way homewards. At Kalgoorlie, which we reached at last light, we were locked in by bad weather. The kids passed the time by counting the floor tiles at the airport. It was now Tuesday and they were supposed to be back in school. The tiles totalled 1333.

The Christmas Present

Just before Christmas 1967 I bumped into Reg while shopping in Adelaide's Gawler Place.

'I've just bought your present,' he said. 'Let's find a place for coffee. I'll show you.' He took my arm and guided me towards the nearest lounge. I must admit that, with Geosurveys now amalgamated with Beach Petroleum and the family moved into what we now jokingly called the 'dream home' at Somerton Park, I'd been having fantasies. A Jaguar perhaps, or an Aston Martin like Sean Connery's in the James Bond movies. Reg fussed in his briefcase and extracted a big flat envelope with documents and a photograph. Grinning hugely, he passed over the picture. 'Merry Christmas!'

I recognised the beautiful regiments of rugged ranges immediately. 'It's Arkaroola. Such a wonderful place. But Reg, what's it got to do with Christmas?'

'I've bought the pastoral lease! We'll get the deeds in the new year. We'll get rid of the sheep and all the feral pests and set up a sanctuary. Mawson will have his dream!'

This was too much to absorb all at once. 'What about the Greenwoods? Do they want to leave?'

‘That apple orchard is beckoning, and they’ll still have their other place at Mount Serle. Smiler says it’s a great idea. So does the head sherrang of the pastoral board. He always reckoned Arkaroola was too marginal for sheep. There’s just one snag.’

‘Money.’

Reg nodded. ‘We’ll be mortgaged to the hilt.’ He stirred his coffee and said nothing.

I suppose I should have been annoyed with him. After all, he had made a huge decision that would change our lives without the slightest consultation with me. He’d just sprung it on me. But I recalled that feeling I’d had of being *home* when we’d visited Arkaroola not long before, and the idea of owning Arkaroola immediately appealed to me. I put my hand on his. ‘Then we shall have to make your sanctuary a money-making proposition.’

‘How?’

‘Build a village for outback adventurers and city slickers discovering nature.’

This produced a reaction I’d seen before – back in 1954, when Reg struck out on his own as a geological consultant. It had seemed then that our minds were operating on exactly the same wavelength. Reg was beaming. ‘I know exactly where to put it.’

‘We’ll need permanent water.’

‘Copper Creek has plenty of underground water. We’ll pump it. We’ll need power.’

‘We’ll need a decent motel unit.’

‘And a caravan park and camp ground.’

‘Are we really going to do this?’

It was a rhetorical question. Reg nodded and kept on talking. ‘A bulldozer for making tracks and clearing rubble after rain. And we’ll need a manager’s house.’

‘Not to mention a manager.’

‘That’ll be me.’

‘What about your work?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that. I’m almost fifty and I can’t go on bush-bashing forever. Geosurveys is already amalgamated with Beach

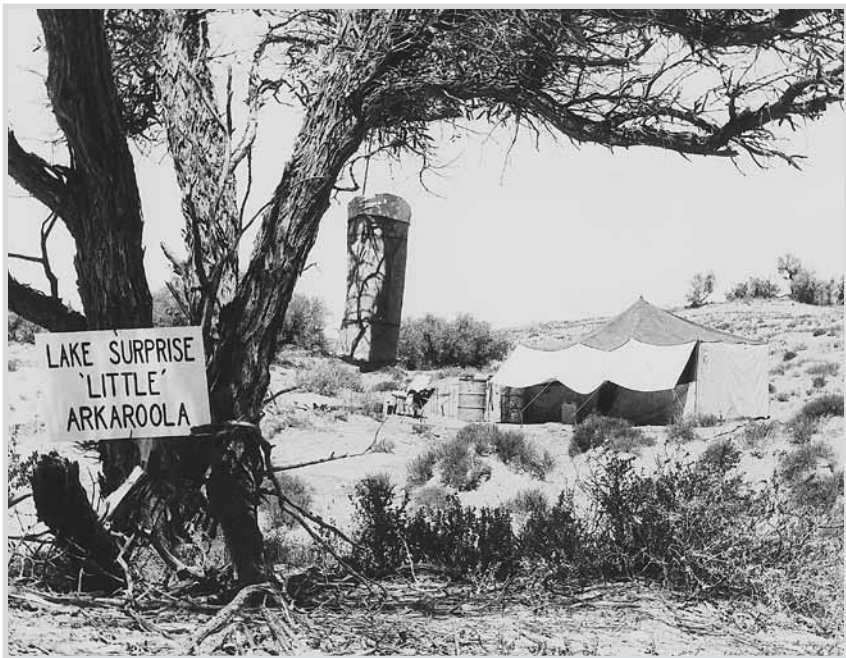
Petroleum, so you know we've got the nest egg we need for Arkaroola. I can still do some consulting with Beach to top up the coffers. I'm sure they'd still have me do some of their donkey work.'

'What about me?'

'You'll be doing a fair bit of commuting.'

'I thought you might say that.' With Marg not quite sixteen and Doug just turned thirteen, their schooling had to be my first priority. Much as I might like the idea, there was no way I could move permanently to Arkaroola. Once again, I would be holding the fort in Adelaide, and heading north to the mountains every chance that came my way. 'Me slaving in the city, and you a gentleman of leisure.'

Reg chuckled at the thought. But Reg and leisure, of course, were complete strangers. For a more timid soul, the sort of life-changing risk we were now calmly discussing over a cup of coffee would be incomprehensible. For Reg, it was typical, a new challenge to seize and devour.



Our luxury camp at Lake Surprise, Simpson Desert, 1968.

We received the Arkaroola titles on 16 January 1968 and started work immediately.

The first task was to leak word of the venture to the press, which meant that we had our first curious visitors long before we had a village to put them in. At the time Arkaroola Station was lit by Tilley lamps and powered by a small diesel generator. Bore water was pumped by wind-mill. There was no sewerage system. The village site, five miles beyond the homestead on a bend of the boulder-strewn and completely dry Wywhyana Creek, was a rugged wilderness of steep slopes, rocks and parched scrub. Further upstream the site for the camp ground was a floodplain of rock and timber debris. Back at the homestead after their tour, we plied the journalists with grog and they swapped noisy after-dinner yarns with an exploration crew from North Flinders Mines. We had a sing-along around the homestead's old piano, with rhythm supplied by one of the miners who'd rigged a bush bass and me on bongos. The scribes promised us a story. We bedded them down in the shearing shed and retired to our swags, feeling lucky.

To provide more formal accommodation, we hired low loaders and transported two prefabricated houses from Adelaide, a journey that took two days. From Adelaide to Yunta our convoy had a police escort but, because Yunta in those days seemed to be the official limit of civilisation, we were on our own after that. Reg and I went ahead in a Chevy truck, looking for trouble spots on the track, which was badly in need of fresh grading. Every now and then we had to oxy-torch the white guide posts to let the low-loaders through. After Waukaringa the country gradually flattened out and there were no posts to concern us, just two hundred miles of dusty track north to Frome Downs and Balcanoona, then the run, another twenty miles or more, into the ranges and Arkaroola.

When it was safe to do so we left the low-loaders behind and went on to meet up with Colin Semmler. He'd come up to help level the site, and we found him noisily negotiating the controls of a second-hand Patrol grader high above the Wywhyana Creek flood line. It was

late afternoon and the site was still too small to take the two houses so Reg and Colin worked frantically to expand the clearing. We heard the low-gear rumbling of the loaders working their way through the foothills past Arkaroola Station. The job was done just as the drivers arrived, and everyone turned their talents to the agonising job of lowering and joining the two houses with the help of hydraulic jacks. Reg was no stranger to hard work, but when the work was done he was slumped and looking stupefied. I gave him some water. He glugged half a gallon and said, 'Thomas Wing.'

'Pardon me?'

'Thomas Wing.'

'What?'

'What we'll call it.'

'Call what?'

'The hotel units. Thomas Wing. After Richard Grenfell Thomas. We came up this way together before the war on field trips, prospecting with Mawson. A poet, he was. He loved this place. Thomas Wing.'

Thomas Wing it was. In retrospect, I realise Reg was describing our hotel as having a wing before there was an actual hotel. There wasn't a lot of logic to it, just an inner certainty that one day there *would* be. With Reg, there was always passion and optimism. That was the way we would be doing things at Arkaroola.

Doug and Marg were ready to help of course. When we heard on the grapevine that some big, slow-revving diesel engines had come on the market when the town of Penola was connected to the South Australian electricity grid, Reg pounced and paid for his booty before he realised he hadn't the time to go and get them.

'I'll go,' said Doug.

'Mate,' said Reg, 'you're only thirteen.'

'So?'

'The police might have something to say about it.'

'I'm a better driver than most blokes on the road.'

'I'll grant you that. Tell you what!'

'What?'

'Why don't you go along and check out the engines and let me

know if they're up to scratch. If they are you can do the run back and forth as the truck driver's mate, and you might get a bit of driving in as well.'

'On one condition,' Doug countered.

'What's that?'

'You let me get my heavy truck licence *and* my pilot's licence the day I turn sixteen.'

'Done!'

It took the entire school holidays – 500 miles as the crow flies, six times up and back – but at the end of Doug's journeying, Arkaroola had a powerhouse.

As for his licences, Doug in the event had to wait a few days. His sixteenth birthday fell on a Sunday, but the licences were approved by the following Wednesday.

Just a few months into our project – it was Easter, 1968 – Smiler Greenwood cut the ribbon to open the motel lodge that bears his family name. Designed by Reg in wide-verandah homestead style, the steel-framed building was hauled from Adelaide in five separate units and arranged on the site in a hollow rectangle, leaving a middle space which we later roofed and dubbed the Germein Lounge in honour of Reg's family forebears, who were pioneer pastoralists and seafarers. We filled the lounge with nautical relics, including memorabilia from Geosurveys' oceanographic exploration vessel MV *Saori*. She had been wrecked after her exploration days were over and we sold her to a fishing business.

Not long after the lodge hosted its first visitors, I came outside one evening to see Reg alone on a flat near the lodge looking thoughtful. 'Found some more uranium?'

'We need a swimming pool.' In these arid ranges, the comment sounded absurd. I said nothing. 'City slickers love a dip after being mountain goats all day. A spot of luxury.'

So we built a pool. Heated in the commonly sub-zero nights of the cooler months by excess heat from the powerhouse, it became a

year-round attraction, adored by everyone except, perhaps, Santa Claus, who was thrown in head-first by a rebellious donkey we'd borrowed from Balcanoona to haul Santa's sleigh. His involuntary dive was met with the uproarious approval of the parents and kids who had come spruced up for Christmas from neighbouring stations all around.

All this construction activity was murderously expensive. One newspaper described Arkaroola as 'the million-dollar resort in the ranges'. On one of the rare occasions Reg was able to get back to Adelaide to see if he still had a family, I told him I thought I'd get a job.

'What for?'

'To help defray expenses, dear.' There was another reason, too. The kids were growing up fast. They were now intelligent and independent teenagers who no longer needed so many motherly ministrations. And the dream home at Somerton Park was becoming a nightmare with all the cleaning it demanded. I felt like Sadie the Cleaning Lady. 'I believe I'm bored.'

'What sort of job did you have in mind?'

'Maybe the rag trade. Fashion sales. To start with, anyway.'

'If you want to do sales, why not sell Arkaroola? We need a city office anyway, somewhere visible to help get the word out. You could run it, and vet prospective staff. It would be perfect.'

So instead of defraying costs, we incurred more. We bought and restored a crumbling mansion on Dequetteville Terrace close to the city – Governor Hindmarsh had lived there in South Australia's colonial days. It was renamed Arkaroola House and we set up shop. Life for me suddenly became very busy. If I wasn't in the office writing press releases and courting media types, I was preparing for parties at Somerton Park, where we entertained as lavishly as we could afford, hoping the businessmen, politicians and journalists would spread the word about our fledgling outback haven, which by early 1969 was officially gazetted as a private wildlife sanctuary, a selling point that made us really proud. I also had to handle the red tape associated with Arkaroola's licensing applications. You could have filled East Painter Gorge with all the paperwork it took for us to get permission to sell alcoholic drinks and open a restaurant.

Once we had the official go-ahead, the next trick was to build a bar and eatery. This job was enthusiastically taken up by Alan Wilkinson, our first paid manager. Almost single-handed, he built the Pick and Shovel Lounge and the Stock Trough Bar, which to this day remains the centrepiece of the village, a magnet for thirsty travellers and the scene – through the years – of some awesome parties.

Whenever I could get up to the village I turned my hand to decorating. I had been scouring abandoned places and rubbish dumps in search of pioneering relics and antiquities. Now many found an Arkaroola resting place, adorning every available beam and overhang. Then I started adding photographs to a wall near the bar – a rogues' gallery of local notables. Along another wall went display cases of geological samples, maps and old tools. The final touch was a massive oak door I transported personally from Adelaide, so heavy it once fell out of the boot and did more damage to the road than the door. While all this was going on, Reg was supervising the construction of our newest motel units. It was in June 1970 that Mawson Lodge was opened by none other than Sir Douglas Mawson's widow, Lady Paquita.

Now we had both superbly comfortable accommodation, and food and drink to offer our visitors. Word was getting around. Bus tours from Adelaide were becoming popular and outdoor types were starting to use the camp ground in decent numbers. It still wouldn't rain but, with cash coming in as well as pouring out, there was reason for optimism. And then we came upon the sight that would inspire Arkaroola's greatest visitor drawcard.

City slickers may not know this, but in the bush one lot of people can hold a pastoral lease while someone else can hold mining rights on the same property. That explains why the North Flinders company boys were based at Arkaroola homestead in 1968. By the next year they had moved on and it was Exoil's turn to see what might be found. While we had been building the village, putting power into the caravan park's fifty newly levelled sites and praying for rain, Exoil employed a bulldozer driver named Bill Keen to create exploration tracks along the ridge tops around Mount Painter. Reg reckoned we could reach one of these tracks by following Wywhyana Creek downstream to its junction

with Arkaroola Creek, so he asked Exoil's boss, Bill Siller, if it was okay for us to use the tracks and become the first non-miners to explore our mountain domain. 'No worries,' said Bill. 'Just be careful you don't fall off. In some places it's a bloody long way down.'

Bill Keen's 'roads' were hair-raising ascents to dizzying peaks so steep Reg never allowed his recently overhauled wartime Jeep to leave first gear. The engine screamed. The wheels skipped and skidded. Every one of us – Marg and Doug were along for the ride – was hanging on for dear life. I could barely restrain myself from letting out a wail of terrified delight when we reached a summit and suddenly there was nothing in front of us but brilliant blue sky.

We arrived at a place where the track plunged towards East Painter Gorge and stopped to stretch our legs. There was a howling wind but the kids didn't care – they went off to explore. I was freezing. Reg ushered me into the lee of the Jeep and produced a hip flask. 'This'll warm you up,' he said, and for a moment I was transported back to the Isle of Arran, a bitter night, a young Aussie geologist battling a dreadful cold and in dire need of brandy. Reg shared the memory. 'One good turn deserves another.'

He put a warming arm around my shoulders and looked about. 'Isn't this the best place on earth?'

It was a question that needed no answer. It seemed my man and I were alone on the roof of the world. And – apart from a nearby peak that seemed too treacherous even for Bill Keen's dozer – we were.

'Why wouldn't Exoil have gone up there?' I wondered aloud, forgetting that this would surely trigger Reg into life-threatening action.

'Kids!' he bellowed. 'We're going mountain climbing.'

'But Reg,' I protested. 'There's no track.'

'Since when has that stopped a Sprigg? Come on!'

Well, we were about three-quarters of the way up the dreadful slope when the Jeep started slipping sideways towards a precipice. 'Bail out!' yelled Reg. For survival's sake we immediately obeyed. 'Get rocks behind the wheel and be ready to shove!' Again we obeyed, and the three of us manhandled Reg and his Jeep to the top of the ridge.

He killed the motor and – huffing and panting – we took in the most awesome view I’ve seen in all my days.

For a long time we were speechless. From the north-west all the way around to the south-east we could see to the horizon: drought-crazed flood-outs meandering across parched plains towards Lake Frome, the glittering white expanse of the lake itself, desiccated red-brown station lands stretching away to pitiless infinity. Behind us were the contorted ramparts of the northern Flinders Ranges, ancient and mysterious and seething with brilliant colours. The mountains pushed jagged into the sky, ripping out of the plains to the east and west. ‘It’s like a giant pushed the land together,’ I said at last, ‘and all the hills burst up from down below.’

‘That’s exactly what did happen,’ said Reg. ‘Imagine the pressures powerful enough to push billion-year-old rocks to the surface. No wonder this place is such a treasure for crazy coots like geologists.’

‘Are we the first people to be here?’ Doug wondered. It felt that way to me.

‘The first white people, maybe. It’s a pity really. People should have the chance to see a sight like this.’

‘Let’s give it to them,’ I suggested. ‘We could extend the track up here.’

Reg was looking enthusiastic. ‘If we helped maintain the tracks, I’m sure Exoil would let us use them. We’ll call it the Ridgetop Tour! It’ll be our star attraction.’

It is.

Praying for Rain

Every time we put up a new building, Reg made sure that there was a way to trap any rooftop run-off when it rained. *If* it rained. By 1970 our three-year tenure had seen virtually none.

He built a farm of rainwater storage tanks, eventually totalling 700 megalitres, but they remained empty. During our first two years at Arkaroola we had a mere two inches of rain. Granted, we had a hard-rock underground reservoir along Copper Creek, but there was no firm evidence that it held enough reserves to sustain the village through more of the long, parching drought. The city folk did not seem to understand why we exhorted them to conserve water. Some visitors even complained, but it would have been a tragic irony if our wildlife sanctuary and conservation project ended up depleting the area of precious ground water. I was genuinely worried. The last of the sheep had been withdrawn from Arkaroola's boundaries and it had now been officially gazetted as an Historical Preserve under South Australia's Aboriginal and Historic Relics Preservation Act. If it did not rain soon, *we* would be the relics and Arkaroola sanctuary would be yet another dream dried up and blown away by the pitiless climate.

‘There’s no point worrying about it,’ Reg said. ‘We need an airstrip.’

What did that have to do with our water problem? Once I had recovered my poise, I pointed out that Arkaroola was not much blessed with flat spots. ‘Which, I believe, are essential for safe aviation.’

Reg had thought of this. ‘We’ll rent part of Wooltana Station. There’s a good stretch about fifteen miles back, just to the right, along the Balcanoona Road.’

‘Why do we need an airstrip?’

‘So Doug can conduct scenic flights.’

‘What!’

‘We promised he could have a pilot’s licence when he turns sixteen. That’s not long away now. Plus he could show people places like Wilpena Pound from the air. What a great sight! And places like Innamincka and the Coongie Lakes. They’d have to be fantastic from the air.’

‘Reg ...’

‘Mmm?’

‘What about a plane?’

‘No problem, there’s a Cessna 206 going for a good price through a bloke I know in Adelaide.’

‘God, Reg, the expense! We’re making ends meet, I know, but how to pay for a plane?’

‘Faith and fortitude, Griselda. We shall overcome.’

So in 1970, just in time for Doug’s sixteenth birthday, we purchased a Cessna and we built the airstrip. Doug and Marg, herself now going on nineteen, both secured pilot’s licences and aerial touring was added to Arkaroola’s list of attractions.

One of our attractions, alas, was short-lived. In his relentless drive to come up with new luxuries and diversions, Reg had built a Finnish-style sauna. The guests loved it, especially on those star-decked, freezing nights when a stroll outside meant violent shivering and dawn promised half an inch of frost on every windscreen.

So the sauna was a great success – until a guest stoked its fire too enthusiastically and the structure was set alight. I was making my way to serve in the bar when I saw the flames. I roused a bucket brigade from the would-be drinkers, and we rushed water from the pool. Our efforts were in vain. The sauna was irreversibly sizzled.

Despite this setback, and the continuing drought, Arkaroola remained a magnet to visitors, and we were able to cover our commitments to the bank. But no thanks for this to the nocturnal visitors who started breaking into our city office after hours – raids that took place just after the arrival of the mail bags from Arkaroola. The bags contained cash for banking. I was back in Adelaide at the time of the break-ins and in order to thwart the thievery I decided to collect the mail bags personally off the coach. Twice a week I would meet the bus, take the bags home and do the banking in the morning. For camouflage I would put the mail bags inside a battered denim hold-all that Reg used for carrying rock samples in about 1950. I must have looked like a bag lady lugging that elegant item about in the city, but it attracted no attention from undesirables, and that was fine by me.

One evening, however, the bus had road trouble near Wilpena and did not arrive at the Franklin Street terminus until nearly midnight. Ill-tempered and hungry, I grabbed the bag, stuffed it into the hold-all and marched out to find myself a taxi. There was none. I had no choice but to walk to the tram stop at Victoria Square, hoping I had time to catch the last run of the night. Nearing the fountain in the square, I was accosted by an enormous, amorous drunk. ‘G’day love. Goin’ my way?’ He reached out and tried to paw me. ‘Garn! Give us a kiss!’

I swung the mail bag and hit him where it hurts. He grunted an oath and toppled backwards into the fountain pool. I ran for the tram and waited an agonising five minutes before it rolled away, terrified the man would come aboard seeking vengeance.

Relentlessly optimistic, Reg surveyed and opened up more than 100 miles of graded roads within the Arkaroola boundaries so visitors could drive their own cars to visit the old mine workings and some

of the waterholes. He also built a geological ‘garden’ featuring the numerous rocks of the northern Flinders Ranges – plus a Jurassic fossil log donated by Frank Kemp from Qinnambye Station. Reg had plans for a windmill farm, too, and he asked me to display some of my larger pioneer antiques in a purpose-built hut in the playground area, not far from the ill-fated sauna. He wanted a sundial park, and cairns commemorating everything that had happened to just about everybody who ever passed through the district – which, despite its grandeur, was now desperately parched.

By the summer of 1970–71 most of the waterholes were dry. Some of the tourists were leaving their soft drink cans scattered about the place as a rude reminder that our shop and bar were the only places they could get a drink. Very soon we would need to impose drastic water rationing, and perhaps even limit the number of visitors – which would have a serious impact on our overdraft.

Christmas came and went. It was dreadfully hot. Far away in the cities, people were consumed by politics, the Vietnam War and the vast social changes that were up-ending the decades of prosperity and stability that many of us had thought the nation was built on. Up at Arkaroola we sometimes felt very small and forgotten. Reg bullocked along, building, building, building. But even he was desperate for rain.

Late that summer a monsoonal depression – the remnant of a rain-gorged cyclonic low that had hit the tropical north – bellied heavily into our territory for a tantalising visit. All afternoon the clouds thickened and the humidity built until the sky turned black; we waited forever, dripping with sweat.

By early evening all we had enjoyed were a few fat raindrops that plopped in the dust and evaporated at our feet. I went inside to take care of the evening chores. Reg stood outside like King Canute, commanding the heavens to open. Like the tide, they defied him. He stayed outside looking lonely. Feeling depressed, I prepared for bed.

And then it happened. At first, a tattoo-drumming on the roof, but within seconds a sustained roar.

All the stories you have ever read about outback people dancing for joy in a deluge are absolutely true. The drought was breaking! Doug

and Marg came running and the four of us hopped about like lunatics, a crazy quartet of Spriggs, the warm, fat, beautiful raindrops mingling with our tears of joy as we turned our faces to the skies and whooped our thanks to whatever deity it was that had at last taken care of us.

Now, I was not wearing very much at the time the drought broke. Indeed, I was wearing see-through shortie pyjamas. These were fine while we were celebrating, but the downpour was unrelenting and soon its intensity became genuinely frightening, the more so because it went on for fifteen minutes, then twenty . . .

‘There’ll be a flood,’ predicted Reg.

‘Dad,’ said Doug, ‘the grader’s down by the creek!’

Doug took off like a jack rabbit, Reg close behind, Marg and I chasing up at the rear. There was a roaring upstream along Wywhyana Creek. The ground was vibrating. There was a flash flood coming! ‘Hurry!’ I screamed.

Doug climbed aboard the grader and frantically worked the starter. The roaring came closer. There was a sudden puff of exhaust smoke and a flurry of elbows as my boy flung the wheel and – with rocks and dirt flying everywhere – revved the bucking creature up the creek bank to safety with less than a minute to spare.

The wall of water hit with terrifying ferocity. Boulders roared, jostled and banged. Entire trees were twisted and smashed. Branches whirled away downstream, crashing together with rocks in the chaos of muddy water. We stood and watched in silent awe.

‘Will it fill Lake Frome?’ Marg asked at last.

‘Some should get there,’ Reg chuckled. ‘But I tell you what. Our rocks are getting a bloody good drink. Arkaroola’s not looking back now.’

Neither was Reg. He was looking at me. Semi-naked. And preparing, I divined, to make an amorous suggestion.

Regeneration

The rains that summer had an incredible effect. The scenery changed overnight. Stunted trees and shrubs showed shoots of green and wildflowers erupted everywhere. Within a few weeks we began to meet lizards and ground birds where before there was nothing but dust and desolation. ‘Now we’ll see if we can get one of Mawson’s native pines to regenerate,’ Reg enthused.

Rather than pines, we became a haven for goats. Smiler Greenwood might have eradicated the wild camels and donkeys, but the goats came back in droves – whole family herds of the bloody animals systematically chewing their way through the regrowth. The rabbits returned along with foxes and feral cats planning to make a meal of the native lizards and birds.

The invasion of pests added to everybody’s workload. Reg interrupted the construction of a Japanese-style rock garden to hunt the goats and set traps and baits. When school holidays arrived, I took the supply run up to Arkaroola with Doug and Marg (when her post-high school social life allowed it). Doug would immediately set to work with the rifle, though he also conspired with Reg to start work on what is

now one of Arkaroola's most wonderful attractions, a hilltop observatory. They also managed to install a new sundial and build a few stray cairns.

My work was enormous. Whenever I arrived up north during the holidays it usually meant that the maids could go on leave, preferably with the good-looking mechanic from the Arkaroola service station. This would have me bouncing from reception to petrol pump to shop and, as often as not, spending my lunch hour making motel beds, just like the nursing days of Paisley.

This domestic slavery was never enough for my Reg. He had further plans for his Griselda. 'Seeing as Siller's Lookout was your idea, I think it's fair that you take our visitors on the Ridgetop Tours.'

Until then I had managed to confine my driving duties to a foray or two in Ruby the Rubbish Truck and the occasional collection of guests from the airstrip. The idea of taking the same trusting souls to their likely doom along the Arkaroola ridges did not appeal to me, and I said so.

'Griselda! You've crossed the Simpson Desert. You've roughed it across every rugged rock and bit of scrub this country has to offer. This is a breeze!'

It was not. It was a good thing there were no visitors aboard during my first ascent. The skills required were *far* different than those required for driving in desert sand. The vehicle hopped, skipped and juddered, wheels slipping sideways and back, the steering wheel threatening rebellion at every yard advanced. I was too busy saving my genteel Scottish neck to be terrified. It was awful.

'You're going well,' Reg said through clenched teeth, his knuckles white on the hand grips. 'Darling, you're doing fine!' He had said this about ninety times by the time we reached the first look-out along the track, where we stopped to let the visitors take photos from on high, back towards the village. 'That's enough for today,' he breathed, as I pulled up, shaking from the exertion. 'We'll do Siller's tomorrow.'

He swept a hand over his sweaty forehead, looking unusually pale. I noticed – not for the first time – that my husband was going bald. 'Oh dear, you've been pulling your hair out over me. Don't worry, I'm getting the hang of this. Let's do Siller's now!'

Reg had his revenge. My driving led to further work – and at an age when the comfortable pursuits of life are far more alluring than rubbish trucks! Not only was I now a qualified tour driver, but I was also tested for and licensed to drive heavy trucks and fifty-seat buses. This meant that I was frequently seen in Yunta loading our Ford 600 with fruit, spuds, fresh meat and crates of grog for the bar, which, of course, I would spend the evening serving behind.

I was tending bar in the Stock Trough one night when a collection of scientists came in. Reg had invited them to visit his sanctuary after one of those endless conferences he would go off to, where geological unintelligibilities were discussed ad nauseam. A massive Texan, complete with ten-gallon hat and a fist full of dollars, bellied up to the bar in conversation with a dapper Dutchman.

‘Say,’ said the Texan to the Dutchman. ‘How well do you know this guy Reg Spragg?’

My hackles rose: Spragg? ‘Until today,’ said the Dutchman, ‘I knew him only through his publications.’

‘I hear he’s married. His wife is up here somewhere.’

By now I had their order ready. I presented the drinks. ‘Excuse me,’ I said, in my sweetest Paisley lilt, ‘I think I can help. Reg *Sprigg* married a Scottish barmaid.’

‘I’ll be darned,’ said the Texan as the pair carried their drinks away. ‘An intellectual marrying a barmaid!’

One of the tracks Reg had recently graded took visitors to the beautiful Echo Camp waterhole, which was to be graced with an official visit from the Premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, and his Adelaide entourage, complete with newspaper reporters and a television crew. A photographer snapped the smiling whippersnapper Dunstan astride a horse with Adnyamathanha elder Clem Coulthard holding the reins and Arkaroola’s Cessna in the background. The TV crew filmed at the waterhole as Clem performed a ceremonial song as a prelude to a slap-up barbecue beside the waterhole.

Clem’s song must have been a wind song. Not long after the



South Australian Premier Don Dunstan pays a visit to Arkaroola in 1971.

premier had eaten and was making his compliments to the chef (me), a wind squall rose up, scattering plates and glasses and camera gear everywhere. Reg ordered the distinguished visitors into the cars and everybody departed for the Stock Trough.

Everyone, that is, except me. 'You'd better stay and tidy up,' said Reg apologetically as rain began to fall. 'Or there'll be a fearful mess in the morning. See you later.'

Foolish me, I thought this might mean Reg would return to pick me up. I enjoyed part of my seven-mile hike that night. The part that allowed me time to concoct the perfect murder.

With so many rocks at Arkaroola, including ones displayed in cases in our shop, visitors thought I might have a clue about them, and they often asked me to identify a stone. I was serving in the shop when a girl of about nine made her inquiry.

‘I think its moss agate, dear.’

‘You’re not sure?’

The question seemed important to the lass. ‘No, I’m not. If you want, go and ask the man at the service station. He has a badge that says his name is Reg.’

The girl said she would go and ask Reg. Could she take the rock and show him? I handed it over and went about my business – served another customer, answered the phone, took a booking. Then the girl was back.

‘Did you find Reg?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he say?’

The girl searched her bright young mind to relate the exact words. ‘He said, “Congratulations. It’s taken fifteen years for you to make your second accurate geological observation.”’

The winter of 1971 was also a wet one. The year’s total was a joyfull eleven inches. The creeks were flowing and this turned out to be a mixed blessing – and a reminder that our village oasis was still a remote, elemental place.

Reg and I were returning to Arkaroola after a supply run to Port Augusta. It was a piece of cake on the good road north past Parachilna to Leigh Creek and Copley, but every few miles on the eighty-mile traverse to Balcanoona and up to Arkaroola we would encounter a running creek that was normally just a rocky, dry wash-out. The first of these were negotiable with care, but past Nepabunna the country was hilly and the creeks were running deeper and harder. The trusty old Chevy was in danger of going too deep.

‘You’re going to have to walk ahead.’

‘Through the water!’ I was as aghast as I sounded.

‘Yes. If it’s safe, you can open the bonnet, throw a rug over the engine, remove the fan belt and I’ll drive us through.’

‘Oh?’ said I, hoping Reg was ridden with guilt by this display of rhino-hide chauvinism. ‘And what happens on the other side?’

‘For an encore, my dear, you get to put the fan belt back on and remove the blanket. If you do it properly, I’ll let you back in the car.’

By the time we reached Balcanoona Creek I was so wet I went the whole hog and took a swim. Reg was not impressed. ‘You could have been swept downstream.’

‘Really? And that possibility did not exist elsewhere?’

He had the grace to appear chastised. He was silent as we drove on towards Arkaroola Village. ‘Cat got your tongue?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I’ve just had a horrible thought.’

‘Goodness. What?’

‘What would happen if it rained so hard the roads got washed out and the buses couldn’t get in?’

We soon found out.

Keeping the Faith

The summer of 1971–72 was the wettest yet. Floodwaters damaged the airstrip, our internal tracks were badly affected and the access road to Arkaroola was washed away in half a dozen places.

Reg's nightmare prediction had come true. The buses could not get in – nor could anything else. Even with our four-wheel-drive vehicles, the creeks were running so hard we were stranded for days. When they finally stopped running we surveyed the carnage along Wywhyana Creek. Ruined vegetation was wrapped around the boles of the big river gums and boulders had completely eradicated the track that led downstream towards Arkaroola Creek and the ridge-top tracks beyond. Heaven knew what had happened to them.

Reg was muttering. 'This is going to be expensive.' I'd been thinking the same. We'd be needing an expert contract driver and a bulldozer with far more power than our little semi-retired Patrol grader. 'And we'll have to get on with it soon. Or our cash flow's not only gone for now – it'll be gone for good.'

'We'll just have to tighten our belts for a while,' I said, trying unsuccessfully to sound cheerful.

‘That’s for sure! We’ll be waiting a while for our new house by the village, I reckon.’

‘We’ll get by. The house can wait.’

‘You know what else is going to have to wait?’

‘No. What?’

‘Coulthard Lookout.’

Ever since Exoil had approved the Ridgetop Tour idea and Bill Keen graded another track and Siller’s Lookout came to be, Reg had been planning a second lookout. Just beyond the junction of Wywhyana and Arkaroola Creeks, where the Exoil tracks started getting serious, were stupendous views. In one high place, where the track ascended towards Sunshine Peak past Dinnertime Hill, you could look south through a gap in the hills and see the village. To the east you could see the gorges created by Arkaroola Creek as it wound its tortuous path past Echo Camp before cutting south for Bararranna Hill and beyond towards Tillite Gorge. The site had the advantage of being considerably closer to the village than Siller’s, and would make an excellent stopping point along the tour, a wet-the-whistle-stop, terrific for a tourist picnic. Reg had decided to build a high platform there and call the place Coulthard Lookout, in honour of the large and highly respected local Aboriginal family whose ancestors had roamed these parts millennia before the advent of whitefellas. We had been planning to do the job together, alone, as a sort of practical and yet symbolic celebration of what we had accomplished so far, a talisman of hope for what was to come.

‘Well, we’ll get it done once we can get back up the track, you’ll see.’

Reg nodded. There was a set look of stubborn determination about him. ‘I’ll do some more consulting. Step it up a bit with Beach Petroleum. There’s a job going at the Dyiarbakir rig in Turkey. I’ll take it.’

The road repairs alone cost us more than fifty thousand dollars. That would not have been too crippling, but it coincided with a new disaster. The first I knew of it was when I paid a visit to Arkaroola House and received an unexpected visit myself. I was looking at two burly debt collectors.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘A delicate matter,’ said the biggest. ‘Have you a few minutes?’

Polite they may have been, but their message was unmistakable. We were badly in arrears with our mortgage repayments. The time had come to pay up.

‘But I signed those cheques myself!’

‘We have no record of receiving them.’

I demanded time to investigate and promised an immediate response once I got to the bottom of the situation. They promised to return next day, by which time the bank expected satisfaction.

Reg was already in Turkey so I made the discovery by myself. A well-meaning employee, perhaps aware of how tight the financial situation had become, had created a little pile of cheques, signed by me, in a desk drawer, unsent. I hit the account books and found that the money I thought was being spent to cover our mortgages had in fact gone on unauthorised expenditure in the village.

My soul sank beneath the floorboards. Arkaroola was doomed – not by lack of rain, not by too much, but by human bloody error! That night I harassed the overseas telephone operator and called Reg in a panic.

‘Stall. Tell ’em I’ll be back in a week and we’ll sort it all out.’

‘Reg, they’re threatening foreclosure.’

‘Foreclosure be buggered. Stall!’

With a personal call to the bank manager I managed to beg a week’s grace. Reg rushed home with a look of dread and we held a crisis conference. Our impending ruin was clear in the impersonal black-and-white of the account books, and Reg began trembling with fury.

‘There’s a way through this,’ I said.

‘We’ll not sell up!’ he thundered. The Somerton Park walls shook like lightning had struck. ‘Not Arkaroola!’

‘Then what?’

‘Everything else. The office. This house. Bloody hell, even the Cessna! I’m not letting Arkaroola die.’

I sat quiet for a moment. This was a crisis that could ruin our lives together, and create difficulties for all the people who worked with

us. If we abandoned our comfortable hidey-hole in Adelaide, we'd have nothing but the village to sustain us. The risk was enormous, but somehow I knew it was a risk worth taking.

'Reg?'

'Mmm?'

'Arkaroola's a dream. You can't kill a dream. We're going to build that lookout.'

'Together?'

'There's no other way.'

Although I had complained about the 'dream home' and all the work involved, it was still a deep sadness to move out. We rented a seafront flat with room for little more than memories, and some modest city offices with none of the historical ambience of Arkaroola House. All but a couple of our staff had to be laid off. Adding insult to injury, the newly formed National Parks and Wildlife Service revoked Arkaroola's official sanctuary status; now the only part of the 250-square-mile lease unfettered by government regulations was the village area itself. This prompted another paper war with bureaucracy, which Reg took up with his usual furious energy. For a while Reg was a saddened man. Letting go of the Cessna was the hardest bit for him. Our business, having taken wings, was grounded.

This proved temporary. Whoever coined the cliché that setback creates opportunity was correct. After it was accomplished, the sell-off actually simplified our lives. Our debt was cleared and we vowed to keep it that way. By 1973, with Doug finished school and Marg off romancing the world, I was able to spend most of my time at Arkaroola instead of commuting back and forth. Reg indulged his passions for history and non-stop physical activity by building cairns all over the place while I honed my skills at bed-making, room-cleaning, bar service, swimming-pool maintenance, front-end-loader operation, rubbish-truck driving, interior decorating, reception diplomacy, taking bookings, tour guiding and driving exhausted at sunset – but with a ready welcoming smile – to the airstrip to collect the fly-ins.

One evening the bar was quiet and there were no incoming bookings to concern myself with. 'Feeling fit?' asked Reg.

'After all the work I've been doing lately, I'm surprised you ask.'

'Good-oh! We'll get cracking on Coulthard's.'

'The lookout!'

'Why not?'

'Reg, it'll be wonderful.'

The work was back-breaking. The site was strewn with enormous boulders. Working alone, we levered them out of the way with grunts and curses, praying they wouldn't roll loose and career downhill, killing some of the wildlife we had, after all, vowed to preserve. Levelling the site took us the rest of the day. In the morning Reg loaded Ruby the Rubbish Truck with huge jarrah posts he'd purchased when the authorities dismantled the old Murray River barrage at Goolwa. Also aboard was a load of expensive Bessa blocks for the foundations, cement bags, sand and a barrel of water. On the final ascent to the lookout site, the barrage posts – longer than railway sleepers – did an impersonation of my oak door en route from Adelaide, and the load started tipping. Reg stood on the brakes while I wrestled the posts back into place.

This was nothing compared to my next task, which was lugging the bricks, cement and buckets of water up to the site, a solo slave, dripping with sweat, clod-hopping up and down the uneven slope in a borrowed pair of pilot's boots while Reg mixed the cement in a wheelbarrow. The foundations and the initial jarrah posts were set in place and, exhausted, we returned to the village to let our handiwork set for a few days.

When we returned it was a relief to see that everything had hardened correctly. We proceeded with stage two – manhandling the barrage posts to create a series of steps leading to the platform base. We drilled holes for bolts with a hand brace and bit – dubbed the 'brazen bitch' by Reg – then fixed the side railings and the platform base about twenty feet above the sloping ground. When the last planks were safely fixed in place, we stood resting and admiring our work. A big wind blew up as we stood there but, unlike some of the chilly ridge top winds that warn strangers not to venture too close, this one was almost a welcome, as if Arkurra was pleased with our work.

We didn't have time to stand about congratulating ourselves. To get the job done we had decided to work late into the afternoon, and now it was getting dark. We loaded Ruby with all the tools and Reg fired up the engine. When he tried to switch on the lights, nothing happened. 'Bugger!' Ruby was only ever used by day. No one had thought to check her lights. 'Bugger!' said Reg again. 'I guess I'll have to sit on the bonnet and guide you down.'

'No, Reg, I'll sit and you drive. I have my pencil torch to show up the edges of the road.'

It was a hairy exercise. The torch was a trusty one, but it threw little light in the gloom, and finding the roadside – while hanging on for dear life as Ruby bounced and jarred my bones in a far rougher way than the Simpson Desert ever had – was not easy. It was made worse by the fact that Reg seemed suddenly incapable of telling his left side from his right, and more than once we came close to tipping down the hillside. Eventually I just waved the appropriate arm and hung on desperately with the other, the torch between my teeth. I can't recall exactly how long that journey took, but the lights of Arkaroola Village have never looked so welcoming.

A word about my torch. It was a relic of my Scottish hospital days, and a faithful possession. I had used it changing tyres by night at Radium Hill. It never failed and I rarely went anywhere without it. After the run downhill aboard Ruby, Reg took time to admire it. I haven't seen it since.

I mentioned fly-ins. As our business commenced its timid recovery, these were Reg's way to satisfy his craving for aviation while grounded himself. The visitors flew him and, while aloft, he conducted intercom lectures about the geological forces that had created the unbelievable scenery below. It proved a popular combination. Our little airstrip might not have been Tullamarine but, once it had safely dried off again, having a spectacular outback oasis at the end of a long flight began to prove a drawcard for light aircraft enthusiasts across the country.

One evening, about 5.30 pm, I was walking from reception to our room in Mawson Lodge for a shower and to freshen up before the evening's barmaid duties. On the way I collected some fresh undies from the clothesline. Suddenly an aircraft buzzed the village, flying drastically low.

In the draft, my skirt finished up above my head. The plane executed a tight turn and zoomed back for another pass, wagging its wings in triumph.

'Bloody impudence!' I ran back to reception and found a set of keys. I had decided to welcome this new visitor personally, and give him a piece of my mind. I reached the strip in minutes. The buzzard barely had time to park his plane. 'You must be a fighter pilot,' I said, icily. 'Or perhaps you were having fantasies.'

'Not until I saw your skirt come up,' came the nonchalant reply from a man who appeared to be in his mid-fifties. The picture of robust good health, he was grinning with pearly white teeth at his companion as she gave him a playful push and giggled.

'Ian, don't be so rude!'

The man gave a chivalrous bow. 'McRitchie is my name. My wife Joyce is here at my side, as she has been loyally this multiplicity of decades. And you must be the famous Griselda.'

'For my temper, I am renowned. You were flying too low.'

'It's true, forgive me. Close encounters with mountain tops make me feel young again.'

'He can't help himself,' said Joyce, in whose company any man would be likely to feel young. 'It was kind of you to come and get us.'

'I should make your husband hoof it, but grab your gear and hop in.'

They cheerily obeyed, and on the way back to the village I learned that Ian was in fact a wartime pilot. He'd stowed away on an England-bound freighter in the war's early days and joined the Royal Air Force. A mate from his squadron introduced him to his sister, Joyce. They instantly fell in love.

Over dinner, with Reg as enthralled by the romance as me, we learned that not long after they married and Joyce became pregnant,

Ian was shot down after a sortie bombing the walls of Amiens prison to release Allied prisoners and French Resistance fighters. Ian was posted missing. For months Joyce wondered if her baby daughter Anne would grow up without a father. 'I was terrified. Eventually word came through that Ian was in a Nazi Stalag and I could breathe again.'

'And while I was sitting out the end of the war,' said Ian, 'all I could think was: Soon, please God, I'm going home!'

They gave each other a look of simple love that melted my heart. Reg put his big warm mits on top of mine and announced it was time for bed. 'Just to prove,' he said, as we made our way to Mawson Lodge, 'that there's more than one charismatic Aussie in the place.'

Nineteen seventy-three was another wet year. Mercifully it caused no massive damage to our roads. Apart from keeping our sanctuary financially afloat, our biggest expense that year was making sure it was still a sanctuary. The population of feral animals had still not declined much and they remained a huge problem, especially the goats.

Reg's father, a spry octogenarian who was recently widowed, installed himself as the resident trapper and baits man. Pop spent days on end ranging about on the mountainsides, delivering a ferocious message to all the non-native intruders: Get scarce, or get shot.

Sadly, Pop's residency at Arkaroola was a brief one. One day, out setting traps, his heart failed him. Reg had a new cairn to build. The cement was mixed with a son's tears.

In the summer of 1973–74 it was the sky that was doing the crying. It was relentless. 'Here we go again,' said Reg. 'We get ourselves back on our feet and we get bloody flooded again.'

It turned out to be a record wet – more than forty inches of rain, which came in two phases. After the first phase, February was harsh and dry, so we re-graded roads and had the old Patrol up and down the airstrip. We had a huge March fly-in, thirty-two planes with their city occupants coming in from Moorabin in Victoria. It would help pay for the road repairs, which topped \$72,000 not counting the cash the government paid to fix the access road.

At first it seemed the weather would hold. There were days of parched northerly winds and dust everywhere. But just before the planes were due Wooltana Station's horses started heading for high ground and a huge monsoonal dump rolled out of the north-west.

Six aircraft made it in. The rest had to be content with Broken Hill. It rained for days. Wywhyana Creek flash flooded again. Our fly-ins were doomed to spend eleven days as captive guests. Over the Royal Flying Doctor Service radio they sent telegrams explaining their circumstances. They looked anxious and angry and in a huge hurry to be somewhere else, as if the last thing any one of them wanted to do was accept the fact that they were safe and suddenly had time on their hands. 'This could get ugly,' I said to Reg. 'They don't look the types to play Scrabble.'

'Don't fret, my dear, I have a plan.'

'And that would be?'

'Get 'em pissed.' He collected every record and cassette in the village and cleared the dance floor, and ordered the cook to spare no frills and the bartender (me) to keep the libations flowing.

The grumpy city slickers trickled into the Stock Trough, the women all dressed up and looking worried that their designer gear would become soiled by their mere presence in this muddy part of Woop-Woop. The men jittered, smoking and studying the photos and geological samples and aerial maps as if their lives depended on the information contained therein. 'Set forth the wine,' bellowed Reg, 'and perish all thought of tomorrow!' Our visitors examined their host as if he was a lunatic. 'Griselda, charge the glasses. To the bloody brim! Never let it be said that the Spriggs host a mean occasion.'

This was better, they were thinking. Reg continued. 'Welcome to you all and let's get it straight. You'll be here for a while so you might as well have fun. Let's iron out those creases and clear the cobwebs. Relax!'

I'd lined up glasses of beer and wine. Reg helped me hand them out. 'In a moment, some fine food and music. But first, a celebration. Follow me!' Again the guests were looking uncomfortable. 'Come along!'

They obeyed as Reg exited the bar, marched across the gravelled courtyard and waved at the majestically sloping hill that towered above the village on the far side of Wywhyana Creek. His timing was immaculate. The grey pall of cloud broke apart and the sun's last rays lit the hillside in magnificent mellow hues of red and gold. He raised his glass. 'A toast!'

Our guests obeyed again, but had no idea what was about to come.

'What you see before you, ladies and gentlemen, is Griselda Hill. As you explore our place here in the mountains you will discover that the Aboriginal people have their sacred sites hereabouts. Special places. Places of history and wonder. Way back in 1969, when we were first setting up here, Griselda single-handedly climbed that hill. As I sat here watching her progress through my binoculars, I knew Arkaroola had become her special place. And because it's hers, it's mine. It combines in one the two beauties in the world that are the most important to me.'

The visitors were silent. I, too, could barely speak.

The fly-ins ended up having the time of their lives. That night the dance floor took a stomping and another night soon afterwards we held a fancy dress party. Everybody had to make do with what they could find in their rooms, so there were many bed-sheet Arabs. I went as Salome, with two O'Cedar mops for a wig, a pair of sheer pyjamas and saucepan lids for breastplates. I seem to recall that a good time was had by all.

For the rest of their stay our new friends contented themselves with little pleasures. We'd see couples wandering in the Wywhyana creekbed, turning over stones, testing the feel of bark on a river gum, speculating about the glint of a mystery mineral, heads up suddenly at the caw of a crow – *ah, ah, aaaahhhh* – as it called forlorn for friendship and the couples looked at each other and remembered why they had become a pair.

One of our visitors happened to have a few clues about botany. Late in the afternoon I was serving, as usual, in the bar, when he wandered up to Reg. ‘You know those native pines you’ve been going on about?’

Reg looked up alert. The pines, threatened even in Mawson’s day, were supposedly near extinct. ‘What about them?’

‘I reckon I might have found one.’

Reg looked like he’d been zapped with a cattle prod. ‘Where?’

‘Up near Sunshine Pound. I was walking there.’

‘Show me!’

‘Reg, I just got back. I’m buggered.’

‘Griselda, quick! Give the man a drink! Where’s the keys?’

‘Reg,’ I reminded my bull-at-a-gate husband, ‘the track is in a fearful mess, in case you’ve forgotten.’

‘We’ll take the grader.’

I remember the look on the botanist’s face as he set off into the rainy sunset on the back of the grader. Reg gunned it into the creekbed, grader blade elevated like a scimitar, heading for Sunshine Pound. The poor man was hanging on desperately as the vehicle bucked among the boulders.

It was well after dark by the time they returned to the bar. There was joy in both their faces. ‘It’s happened!’ Reg yelled at the gathered throng of city folk.

‘What’s happened, Reg?’ they chorused.

‘They’re coming back!’ The visitors were still mystified. ‘Mawson! God in heaven, man, where are you now? Hanging up there in the ether, watching out to see if your daft student’s managed to give something back to the planet – and he’s bloody done it!’

That night there was another party. By the time the airstrip dried and the fly-ins flew out, we’d drunk the Stock Trough dry, and more than a few marriages had been revived.

Ours was never threatened. Ever since the earliest days, when I realised I would have to do my own impersonation of the city-girl-gone-bush if I ever wanted to see my man, we had enjoyed acting in tandem.

So one morning in 1975 when Reg suggested that we climb Mount Painter, the idea of a day alone together was too good to pass up.

We went in Ruby the Rubbish Truck, trailing behind four vehicles doing the day's Ridgetop Tour. In the last of the vehicles was Steve, a former ridge-top driver who was holidaying at Arkaroola with his family. He had volunteered to take Ruby along the old Exoil track that left the ridge top run not far from Siller's Lookout and wound precariously down the eastern slopes below Mount Painter. It was agreed he would leave Ruby at a spot near the top of East Painter Gorge and walk back to rejoin the tour, leaving us to drive home in relative comfort after our strenuous climb.

The ascent took three solid, groaning hours through thick spinifex. Just below the summit Reg surged ahead and I looked up to see him being circled by a lone eagle. It was a wonderful scene, two masters of the same domain sharing the space but keeping a respectful distance, not wanting a clash, not needing one. I joined him at the top and we shared a few moments of companionable silence, the eagle still above us, nearly motionless, carried by the eddying winds. I wondered what it was thinking as it watched us watching it. Did it wonder what fates had brought us there? Could it feel an affinity with Reg?

Our descent was a two-and-a-half mile hike. We had hoped to pick a path among the caves that dotted the mountainside between us and where Steve had left Ruby, but the caves had overhanging roofs that proved impossible to negotiate without ropes. We were forced to follow the line of caves back towards the point where we had started our climb in the first place. The light was going fast. I was getting tired, stumbling on rocks and collapsing into the welcoming arms of the ubiquitous spinifex. So Reg forged ahead again.

'Where are you going?'

'To pick up Ruby. When you get to the track, just wait there and I'll pick you up.' I said something incoherent. 'Are you all right?'

'I can manage. Never did want to climb this bloody hill, anyway.'

'Of course you did, dear. You're in your prime!'

Off he marched as I picked my way down the treacherous slope. He was long out of sight by the time I reached the track. Bruised and

scarred, I lay down on the grassy 'median strip' that had grown up between the wheel ruts courtesy of the recent rains, and promptly fell asleep.

While I was in the Land of Nod, Reg collected Ruby and brought her back. He actually managed to straddle me with the truck. Then he blew the horn. I woke with a start and bashed my head against the rear differential.

'Very bloody funny, Reginald.'

He guffawed at his own cleverness. 'Where else in the world could you lie down in the middle of the road and be perfectly safe?'

Another rhetorical question. Where else? Arkaroola.

Epilogue

A Fine Farewell

These days Arkaroola is run by Doug and Marg with the help of some expert and loyal staff, not to mention the computers, faxes and fancy phones that were not there to help us in the early days. And, believe me, unlike our present staff a few of the characters Reg and I contended with in our founding years were *far* from helpful.

A chef – who I later heard had a fondness for a drug called Mandrax – once threw a plate of scrambled eggs at me in the kitchen. When I politely asked why this was necessary, he screamed, ‘Because you’re not at the ordering counter!’ and threw a dishcloth at me, demanding I clean up the mess. Breakfast was not a good time for him. But as the day wore on his temper would improve and, as he was a good cook, we put up with his tantrums for nearly four years.

Another temperamental chef had a fight with his wife. He bundled up all her clothes, dumped them in the dust outside their quarters, and ran his car backwards and forwards all over the heap. We were not sorry when, soon afterwards, the pair of them disappeared.

Then there was the case of ‘Dinky’ and the kitchen hand. Dinky was a tiny Daihatsu utility, a nickname that stuck because it was so small

it reminded me of the Dinky toy cars Doug had treasured as a boy. I'd purchased Dinky to serve as a laundry truck for the housemaids, but the kitchen hand had other plans. One night Doug was showing some guests through his beloved observatory when he noticed Dinky quietly easing away from the kitchen area, far below Observatory Hill. Doug charged down the hill and intercepted our employee, demanding he hand over the keys and get out of the truck. The kitchen hand obeyed and Doug returned to his guests, but next night the man tried the same trick again and this time he succeeded. Doug gave chase all the way to the Wertaloona turn-off but the thief got away. Three weeks later, back in Adelaide, I recognised Dinky heading along Marion Road towards Anzac Highway. I followed the little fugitive, still wearing its personalised number plates ARK-015, to the home of our not-very-bright former kitchen hand's girlfriend, where soon afterwards the long arm of the law caught up with him.

There were others among our early staff who were also the type to be run out of town by sheriffs in western movies, but we also employed some wonderful people.

During the early 1970s, when Arkaroola was still becoming established, Reg had acted as technical advisor to Beach Petroleum's operation at Dyiabakir in Turkey. During that time he was assigned an interpreter named Sinan Toker who, it turned out, had learned hotel management in Belgium and wanted to come to Australia. Reg was only too eager to help the man migrate. He and his wife, Selda, managed Arkaroola from late in 1972 all the way through 1985, and only left when their children were old enough to go to high school.

Selda was fluent in French and German, but when she arrived she knew no English and refused to attempt to speak it until she could do so properly. She asked us to get her lots of children's comics and paperback love stories with pictures. Six months later, still a virtual mute, she was helping me prepare Greenwood Lodge for re-opening after the dusty summer break. I was struggling with a mattress.

'Careful Griselda,' came a voice from behind me. 'You could strain yourself doing that. Let me help you.' Startled, I turned around to find out who *me* was. It was Selda, and she was looking pleased with herself.

After that, she gained confidence and ended up speaking better than the rest of us.

In more recent times we've also been blessed with long-serving staff, some who might have been expected to blow through again on the next wind of opportunity. Raelene Every and her partner Paul 'Kav' Kavanagh arrived by motorbike during the late 1970s, just about broke and looking for work after a long trip from Darwin, where they had met while Kav was working on a prawn trawler and Rae was cooking for the crew. They ended up marrying and staying for twelve years or so, Rae eventually becoming our resident manager and Kav the manager of Arkaroola's service station, jack of all trades and tours driver. Apart from his great mate Doug, he was the only other mortal I knew who understood the intricacies of Arkaroola's original powerhouse.

Doug has always loved *anything* mechanical. He brags about it. He was devastated when we had had to sell our Cessna 206 in 1972, but thrilled when, in 1979, at the successful end of Reg's long consultants' association with Beach Petroleum, we were able to buy a new Cessna 207. The young pilot was back in business, and the long-cherished dream of providing our visitors with the option of aerial tours became a permanent reality.

I can't recall whether Doug ever had the chance to pilot our Geosurveys Simpson Desert stalwart Colin Semmler over the mountain ramparts of Arkaroola, but I do know Colin himself flew in one year, because I was on board when he landed. We'd flown north from Adelaide in foul weather via Leigh Creek, where we had arranged to pick up another passenger. Well, it was so cold as we approached that the wings were icing up and we had to circle slowly lower for twenty minutes before the roiling clouds cleared and it was safe for Colin to land. I wasn't sure if we should even attempt to take off for Arkaroola, but Colin was confident. He told me it was *never* cloudy on our side of the ranges. As always, he made a three-point landing.

Darby von Sanden, by the way, has also been a visitor to Arkaroola. These days he's 'retired' – if such a thing is possible with Darby – and

living on the Gold Coast. His son Anthony has a family and a professional life of his own in Adelaide.

Arkaroola's new Cessna had other uses, too. In 1980 – with the weather again very hot and dry – a lightning strike set fire to much of our ridgetop zone. The country was so rugged there was little to be done but observe from the air. When the Country Fire Service had been alerted by a volunteer fire officer at Wooltana Station, the response was that the blaze would have to burn itself out: we were too remote and the CFS was too busy. The fire raged for three weeks. Doug took aerial video footage that was shown on the television news in Adelaide. We lost masses of our regenerated trees, and who knows how much wildlife must have perished. A few months later I was solicited to make a CFS fund-raising donation of several hundred dollars. The caller was no doubt mystified when I said, 'Too remote and too busy,' and hung up the phone.

Doug's aerial photography became a sideline that these days sees him flying sorties for geological explorers (including SANTOS), following in his father's – and Colin Semmler's – footsteps. Doug also became a handy ground-based photographer, and then began taking pictures of the far heavens in his observatory. To my knowledge it is the only privately owned and operated astronomical observatory in Australia. It takes advantage of our unpolluted and often cloudless skies, peering into the universe with a computer-aided telescope that allows visitors to observe distant galaxies, globular clusters, emission nebulae, absorption nebulae, binary stars and dozens of other wonders that are totally unfathomable to someone like me, who is only now starting to come to terms with *geology*.

Doug is not the only one to follow in father's footsteps.

After a year of 'doing nothing' after school – as many young adults chose to do at the time – Marg expressed an interest in becoming a marine biologist. But I needed help in the city office and lobbied Marg to study business subjects. She did not much care for it, but did spend some time working with me in town. Later, after an unsuccessful



The Sprigg clan at Arkaroola Village, 1984.

marriage, she decided to study geology and biology part-time at Adelaide University.

When I wondered why she hadn't chosen that path in the first place, she said she had been anxious that her father's outstanding career would be thrown back in her face. 'Now I can enrol in my married name and no-one will know who I am.'

Marg attained her bachelor of science degree in 1991 and she decided to do a masters degree in ecology. In the mid 1990s, though, she moved permanently to Arkaroola to manage the business. I'm not sure she has made as many beds as me but, like her mother before her, she has become perfectly used to being thrown into tasks and challenges she could never have predicted. A fund of information on rocks and minerals and the ecology of Arkaroola, she has become – like Doug – resident expert in an extraordinary place, founded slightly less than a lifetime ago by an unrelenting ball of energy named Sprigg.



Sir Mark Oliphant officially opened the Arkaroola Observatory in 1986.

Back in 1989 we had a weekend of huge fun. It was the occasion of Reg's seventieth birthday. From far and wide we invited 120 guests ranging in age from two to 102.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Reg set most of them to work restoring the old camel yards at the original Arkaroola Homestead.

When the sun set we had a wonderful night of eating and drinking, disco dancing and family speeches in tribute to the now unashamedly bald gentleman who was my husband. I made some remarks about the days when ‘time-sharing’ meant togetherness rather than something to do with computers, and how our marriage pre-dated everyday realities like television, credit cards, frozen foods and the pill, and how in our day cigarette smoking was fashionable, grass was for mowing and pot was something you cooked in.

Naturally Reg had to have the last word. He made a toast to me, using words borrowed from the Field Geology Club newsletter, and winking most of the time at me: ‘Old folk are a geologist’s delight, with silver in their hair, gold in their teeth, stones in their kidneys, lead in their boots – and of course gas in their stomachs!’

Gas or not, we danced until three. And somehow those camel yards were finished next day.

As my yarn draws to its close, I should have a word or two to say about religion. Astute readers will have gathered that I am not exactly a trembler at The Word. I suppose I am an agnostic rather than an atheist, given the way I glory in the splendour of nature and my suspicion that its patterns hint at a design unfathomable by mortal minds. But long-winded theological expositions and dogmatic declamations are *not* my cup of tea.

It may surprise you, therefore, when I admit that I actually recruited people to come to Tony Redden’s Christmas Masses at Arkaroola. A Catholic priest based at Coober Pedy, Tony travelled all over the dusty outback to visit his flock, even if the flock happened to contain fallen Protestants like me and others of my ilk who had a habit of describing the ‘new’ Presbyterian church as the ‘dis-Uniting’ church. With his portable altar, goblets and candelabra carried in a compact case, Tony would hold his masses by the Arkaroola pool. In Coober Pedy it was not unknown for Mass to be celebrated in a pub. ‘If the flock will not come to me,’ he would say, ‘I go to the flock.’

Unlike some zealots I could name, Tony never tried to convert me.

When half of South Australia turned out to farewell Grant Oldfield, tragically killed while laying baits from his aircraft on his property on the Birdsville Track, a minister from another demonination lectured for what seemed like hours. Then Tony took his turn, and in a few short minutes said everything that was needed. As we left the crematorium I said to Reg, 'Darling, when my time has come and you need someone to send me on my way, please make it Tony Redden.'

It was late November 1991. I'd been visiting in Adelaide but Reg called and ordered me back to Arkaroola. 'It's a surprise birthday party for Doug,' he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

'Doug's birthday was days ago.'

'That's why it'll be a surprise! Hurry home!'

By this time we actually did have a home – above the village, close to Observatory Hill. At seven on the designated evening, Reg escorted me from the house and we strolled downhill towards the village. As we passed Observatory Hill I heard the wheeze of bagpipes and looked up to see a lone piper standing there in the gloaming.

'That's a nice touch,' I said. 'But won't Doug get suspicious?'

'Not in the slightest,' said Reg, offering me his arm. 'Come on now, we mustn't be late.'

The piper skirled us into the village. We passed Greenwood Lodge and Marg stepped out of the shadows to join us, resplendent in traditional Scottish finery. Then, in a dress kilt, Doug himself joined us. 'Doug?' What was going on? 'Reginald! What's happening here?'

There was movement by the swimming pool. Suddenly all the lights were switched on and a hundred people started singing 'Happy Birthday'. To me.

Reg's face blazed with joy. Marg and Doug too. They had all managed to keep a secret from me at last! I wasn't quite seventy, but I was planning a visit to Scotland, so Reg had gazumped me by throwing a premature bash. How he managed to get all those people into the village without my knowledge, I'll never know.

This story nears its end. I've done what I can to chronicle my years, asking myself constantly what episodes to add or omit, and how adequately to describe the wonderful years I shared with Reg.

I've asked myself how to interest readers in an image of Reg, sitting at the dining table of our Arkaroola home, maps and files scattered on every surface, classical music playing as he rummages among the documents and works merrily on his memoirs. How to relay my contentment as I work close by, cocooned in my own silent study, tracing the family histories, matching clan tartans and seeking out accidental connections that may have occurred down the centuries, when Spriggs and Patersons might have touched on their travels through history. How, without boasting, to tell of the legacy my lovely man left to his country.

Without further tears, I shall tell you that on 2 December 1994, after a sudden illness in Scotland, my once curly-headed bush-bashing Aussie geologist passed away. Whenever I see the joyous photo of Reg riding the toy truck the staff at Arkaroola gave Reg on the occasion of his own seventieth birthday, I feel again the energy and laughter that hummed relentlessly inside the man. When I look at the dining table that now holds plates instead of maps, I look across at Reg's beloved stereo and leave it silent.

When I take a Ridgetop Tour with Doug and some of the guests, and we pass the place where Reg's ashes are scattered, I ask my boy to let me off while they go on ahead, so I have the chance to spend an hour or so, alone, with the man who made me happy.

Afterword

Women of the Outback

O ver my years living at Arkaroola and travelling the country, I've met and befriended a huge number of men and women. I know that, to some extent, the outback is still a man's world. There have been many male pioneers and modern-day explorers – Reg among them – written up in the histories of this great continent. For the women of the outback, though, there have been few plaudits. Yet in my own way I've made the outback mine and there are plenty of other women who've done the same. I feel it is time that should be recognised. So I'll finish my book with a tribute to some of the outback women I have been privileged to know, and an apology to those I've neglected to mention.

While I was at Radium Hill I met Loris Fotheringham from Bindarra Station. A graduate in science at Melbourne University, she and her husband Tom lived on an outstation near Mannahill before going to Bindarra. Life in those earlier years was very primitive. Loris had no help. She cooked and cleaned for the shearers and roustabouts and supervised School of the Air lessons for her two children until they reached secondary schooling age. No matter when I dropped in for a

visit, Loris always managed to look as if she'd just done a photo-session for *Harper's Bazaar*.

Another of my Radium Hill 'neighbours' was Dora Wilkinson of Cutena Station. Reg had known her since the inception of the Radium Hill project – when he re-opened the mines in 1944. While the rest of us moved on and Radium Hill became almost a ghost town, Dora kept its memories alive. She made a project of fencing the Radium Hill cemetery, and was an organiser for the Radium Hill Reunion Committee in 1992, by which time she was in her late seventies and as energetic as ever. Reg and I went to two of the reunions. At the first the gathering exceeded 450, at the second just 200. So many of the miners had died in the meantime, it was like walking on graves to be there.

Marie Mahood I have mentioned. All the way beyond the Tanami Desert at Mongrel Downs, it was Marie who overheard my complaints about being bitten on the bum by a Radium Hill red-back spider. And it was Marie who fed us after the two-day bogging on our trek across the Tanami and beyond to the West Australian coast. A trained journalist, she had gone to Halls Creek to write about the outback. There she met and later married Joe Mahood, a ringer from Victoria Downs Station. Before they moved to Mongrel Downs they were landed in charge of an Aboriginal settlement where conditions were very rugged. All through, Marie was Joe's 'right-hand man,' and by the time we met her she had adapted totally to the outback life. She had beautiful dogs, so the station name had nothing to do with the canines. Rather it got its name when the Mahoods went to register the property and were asked what they wanted to call it. They debated. 'Mongrel country, that,' said the bloke at the counter. Mongrel Downs it was. She's written her story in a fascinating book, *Icing on the Damper*, which I recommend to all city slickers.

One of the toughest women I ever knew was Molly Breden of Todmorden Station near Oodnadatta. Before I met her Molly had helped organise an emergency water delivery to a stranded Geosurveys crew in the early days of Reg's consulting career. She ran her station as efficiently as any man, and a surprise it was when she shed her jeans and put on evening wear. She could have been another person when

later she arrived for dinner at Somerton Park in a flowing floral gown and the most expensive French perfume.

Once the Sprigg clan's desert adventuring began in earnest, I started to meet others among the isolated women I'd conversed with during 'galah' sessions on the radio. Mrs Joe Ford made us welcome at Wooltana Station in the early 1950s before we embarked on the exploratory journey along the Yandama Creek to Hawkers Gate. Molly Clark of Andado station was another who spent months without setting eyes on another female, helping her husband run the station and bringing up three sons. Her hospitality during our early Simpson Desert dramas can never be repaid. In more recent years Molly has run tours from Alice Springs to the Old Andado Station, and she's established the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame in Alice Springs. June Lowe also resided on the fringes of the Simpson Desert, at Mount Dare Station. At the time I knew her Mount Dare took in the Old Dalhousie Station, which was later taken over by the National Parks mob. June had two charming young daughters and she supervised their education via School of the Air. When Dalhousie was taken over, she and her husband, Rex, moved to a cattle station on the Barkley Tableland, and the last I heard her daughters were married and 'on the land' in Queensland. You have already met Josie Moyle of Carranya Station. She must have been one of the most isolated of all outback women. When we first met her she'd not seen another female for a year. Her only social contact was the weekly galah session.

I've mentioned that we met the legendary Len Beadell during one of his 'gun barrel' highway-building expeditions. Later, at one of Reg's Christmas parties, we also met Anne Beadell. A teacher by profession, she had come out from England and with her family rented Len's house in Adelaide while he was off making roads around Woomera and Maralinga. They married in 1961 and, like me, she decided that adopting the life of the camp follower was the only way to be with her bloke. She and their newborn baby, Connie, were with Len and his gang in 1962 when they built a 'highway' from Warburton Mission through the Great Victoria Desert to Rawlinna on the Nullarbor and christened it the Connie Sue Highway.

Australia's outback pubs are also the stuff of legends, some of it true. Maisie Young for many years ran the Pine Creek Hotel in the Northern Territory. In the early mining days Pine Creek was a wild place. Her husband, 'Bogger', was a dam sinker and inveterate gambler. Eventually she just shut the pub door and walked away. She tells her story in *No Place for a Lady*.

Alice Pierpoint was in charge of the Leigh Creek Hotel in Copley for forty-two years. The Grand Old Lady of the Flinders Ranges was a remarkable woman. When we established Arkaroola, we would often visit on the way back from supply runs to Port Augusta. One time I found Alice wrestling a single-bed inner-spring up a spiral staircase. Alice was winning the wrestle. She was nearly ninety! She was awarded a gong in the Queen's Birthday Honours, but she was more impressed with the letters of congratulations she received afterwards. They came from people she hadn't heard of for decades – potential deadbeats and drifters she'd helped out with a little money, a few clothes and a stern order: 'Let me know when you've done well.' She received more than twenty-five letters. 'They all made good.'

I first knew Nan Nourse about forty years ago, when she was managing the Port Augusta Hotel. Port Augusta is not exactly 'outback', but Nan was a born organiser and for twenty years or more she was a leading force in the local Royal Flying Doctor Service women's committee. And while I mention RFDS stalwarts, I must mention Barbara Fargher, a nurse who married Max Fargher and helped run Wirrealpa Station. Their time so generously volunteered ensured that the Flying Doctor was a mantle of safety for the Australian outback.

Another tireless toiler was a lady we knew as Mrs Pecanec. I don't think I ever knew her first name. A Viennese, she once designed luxury lingerie and had her own boutique – until she married 'Pec' and moved to Oodnadatta and a very different shop, selling everything from food to tyres and axles from the General Store and Post Office there. Some city people cannot adjust to the bush, but Mrs Pec did. She ran the business through the fifties and sixties, and every time I met her she seemed as content as I was with my new homeland.

Closer to home now, and the stations that neighbour Arkaroola. Dawn and Laura Wilson married the brothers Bob and Bill, who for years managed Wertaloona and Frome Downs. The mother of the two men came to Wertaloona as a bride in 1912, a journey by horse and buggy that took nearly a month. At that time Wertaloona took in Frome Downs and was the largest cattle station in South Australia. Mrs Wilson's original home still stands on Wertaloona. Its windows are still empty of glass – there never was any covering other than wet hessian bags. Bob always said that Dawn and her three daughters were better than a dozen men. They could sink bores, tend windmills, muster stock and load cattle, sheep and wool bales onto waiting trucks. Dawn also kept the station's books. Bill's wife Laura had been a nursing sister before coming up to Frome Downs, which is now run by their son Alex and his wife Debbie, a former model from Perth who turned out to be a crack shot where feral pests are concerned.

Speaking of beautiful woman who are also crack shots, I should mention Frieda Hannigan. Of French parentage, Frieda came to the North Mulga outstation on Wooltana Station via the African Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Western Australia and Port Augusta, where she met and married Ron Hannigan, whose parents owned the local ostrich farm. She and Ron are professional kangaroo shooters, with a permit to take 50,000 a year. They shoot all night, then they skin, gut and hang the roos. A dainty girl, she still speaks fluent French and German – and her kangaroo cooked in the French manner has to be tasted to be believed.

Audrey Heinrich also became experienced at handling firearms. Shy and retiring, she worked as a receptionist at Arkaroola in 1969, then fell in love with Mike Sheehan from Moolawatanna Station and became a Jill-of-all-trades there. One night Mike was off visiting a remote part of the run, and Audrey heard noises coming from the woolshed. She went outside and called a challenge. There was no reply, so she fired shots in the air. Two men came out holding their hands aloft. It turned out they were a pair of detectives who had become weary and decided to rest up for a while. They copped a lecture about reporting in to homesteads rather than taking the law into their own hands – even if they *were* the law.

Like Laura Wilson – and myself for that matter – many of the modern-day women of the outback have nursing qualifications. Sharon Oldfield came to her property on the Birdsville Track via Ireland, Glasgow and Sydney as a triple-certificate nurse. Her husband, Grant, was killed when his aircraft plunged into the ground during a flight setting dingo baits. Sharon rushed to treat his passenger, their young station hand, her dead husband only a few yards away. I remember there were perhaps a thousand people at his funeral. They came from all over the outback. These days Sharon still runs the property – in an environmentally friendly way – and she has raised some wonderful children.

Sharon Bell of Dalkaninna Station studied geology part-time. I recall she'd often phone Reg, asking him his opinions on various challenging problems. She collected her degree, and is using her expertise for the good of her station and the region's natural heritage.

Tracy Ellis from Leigh Creek is also one of the new breed. On leaving school she decided to become a diesel engineer, and was encouraged by her parents. She achieved her goal, and these days travels the outback as a trouble-shooter who deals with dramas the road train drivers cannot solve. I'd love to see their faces when she steps down from her truck – a fluffy blonde, she looks more like a beautician than an expert on crippled engines.

I salute Tracy as I do all the women of the outback – including those I've failed to mention after so long. My life has been enriched by their friendship.

The women of the outback are indeed the tallest poppies.

Postscript

Griselda Sprigg died in Adelaide on 20 March 2003 after spending her latter years at Arkaroola. She could be found there most days with a cigarette and a glass of wine in hand, casting a watchful eye over motel staff and chatting with guests.

As she had willed it, and despite her lifetime avoidance of *any* of the world's religions, the celebrant at her funeral was Griselda's friend, the widely loved Roman Catholic Father Tony Redden. Father Tony used to hold Christmas mass at Arkaroola – just one of the many places he visited when ministering for many years to a parish that encompassed most of northern South Australia.

A lone piper in the courtyard at Griselda's funeral, and members of a popular Dixie-style jazz band were assembled in the pews, ready to play *Oh When the Saints Go Marching In* when Tony gave the signal.

In keeping with Griselda's wishes her ashes were scattered over the wild and beautiful Mount Painter, to join with those of Reg, where eagles fly.

As this new edition of *Dune is a four-letter word* was being prepared, the folk at Arkaroola were planning a new cairn: Griselda's

cairn. ‘Somewhere near Dad’s rock,’ said Doug. ‘On the western side of Mount Painter along the Ridgetop Track.’ The place they climbed together in Arkaroola’s pioneering days of Australian eco-tourism.

In latter years her body grew frail but her sarcastic wit, sense of humour, and determination to see out her days at Arkaroola never wavered. Griselda believed in quality of life rather than quantity. For her, a life without Arkaroola was not an option. As with everything else, she made her own decisions and exerted her independence right to the end.

Doug and Marg wrote a eulogy to their Mum. Marg delivered the words to the people gathered to celebrate Griselda’s life: how she let Reg down a Radium Hill mineshaft by rope ladder and was bitten on the bum by a redback there, how she slept with a brown snake on Kangaroo Island, taking to the bush, ‘supporting Dad’s remarkable exploits and also creating a healthy home life for Doug and myself, and – along the way – we had the most extraordinary childhood, and amazing freedoms in the Outback classroom at every opportunity . . .’

‘So Griselda has left us,’ Marg concluded. ‘I’d like to think that she and Reg are together again, perhaps packing their swags and taking off in their four-wheel drive for somewhere new and unexplored.’



Smoking dune sand storm, Simpson Desert, 1962.



Bugged! Simpson Desert, 1962.



Simpson Desert sand dunes from the air.



Arriving at first traverse track, Simpson Desert, 1962.

Griselda kisses the track in thanks.



Geosurvey's Simpson Desert Surveyors' Camp, May 1962.



West-East crossing Simpson Desert, 1962.



Darby von Sanden strikes a pose with the stricken 'Yellow Peril', 1962.



South-North Simpson Desert crossing, 1964.



Dalhousie Springs



Strzelecki Desert dune.



Wurlie at Plenty River, South-North Simpson Desert crossing.



Arkaroola village from the air, with Griselda Hill on the left.



Mungeranie sandhill, 1958.



Me and my hill at Arkaroola.
(photograph by Chris Mangan)



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Griselda Sprigg, her husband, Reg, and children, Marg and Doug, were attempting the first motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert. Steep, slippery sand dunes stretched behind and before them forever. ‘Dune is a four-letter word,’ muttered Griselda, ‘and so is bloody spinifex!’

Dune is a four-letter word describes the Spriggs’ pioneering adventures – not only in the Simpson Desert but across the vast Australian outback, as the family joined Reg in his relentless geological explorations. Griselda Sprigg tells a story of true love, a heart-warming tale of a family working together, and a humorous, earthy yarn about the bush and its characters.

Griselda’s book is also the story of a great Australian outback resort, Arkaroola, and of how the Spriggs turned a drought-stricken sheep station into the magnificent flora and fauna sanctuary it is today.

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