

The Outback Cattle Country of Queensland

I was fortunate enough to spend 40 years in the cattle country of outback Queensland, and fortunate enough also to see it before all of the old ways had been overtaken by modern methods such as helicopter mustering, increasing bureaucracy, and high-pressure marketing of beef. The packhorse camps were almost a thing of the past, as wonderfully documented by Bruce Simpson, and road trains had mainly displaced the packhorse drovers, but the outback in the '70s and '80s still retained much of its original character. And I'm pleased to say that the outback landscapes and rivers are still largely intact, although oil and gas exploration and production now impose a new level of "industrial" infrastructure which sits rather uneasily with the silence and vastness of nature out there.

Thanks to a one-year job with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries in 1984 (as economist with the bovine Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign) I was able to visit every region of the Queensland outback cattle country. There are roughly five major outback regions in Queensland, the Gulf, Cape York, the Mitchell grass downs, the Channel Country and the Simpson and Strzelecki Deserts (most of these regions of course extending across into the Northern Territory and South Australia). As to be expected, there are variations in the type of country within regions. The coastal plains and deltas of the Gulf are markedly different from the spinifex and hills of the Gulf's northwest portion or the open downs of the southern portion. The fabled Channel Country rivers themselves lie within a complex of desert sandhills and stony plains and ranges as the region becomes increasingly arid towards Lake Eyre, with some patches of Mitchell grass downs and mulga and gidgee patches interspersed at intervals, particularly to the east of Cooper's Creek but also between the Cooper and the Diamantina. Even the desert areas are good cattle fattening country after rain.

I realised as I started reminiscing that a lot of the language about the outback cattle country is unique to the country and the old-style pastoral industry out there. In fact, outlining some of the specialist terms and phrases out there might supply another topic of memoir.

Outback

This is a very relative concept, and its meaning is often inferred from its opposite: "inside" country. In general, in Queensland, inside country is characterised by smaller properties, lots of fences, the presence of sheep, and closer proximity to towns. If you're at Boulia, Birdsville, Mt Isa, Normanton or Cloncurry, inside will be anywhere east of the line from Charleville to Winton and south from the line from Winton to Charters Towers. But if you were an old packhorse drover bringing mobs across the Northern Territory to Camooweal, inside was anywhere on the Queensland side of the NT-Qld border. I decided that the most objective criteria were size of holding and the type of pastoral lease tenure. A Grazing Homestead lease was relatively small, usually no more than 50000 acres, and often at the edge of, or actually inside, sheep country. A Pastoral Holding lease was much larger, usually further away from town, and invariably ran cattle - sufficient in my view to be called "outback". The Pastoral Holding leases fell roughly west and north of the imaginary lines mentioned above.

Some modern scientific and conservation thinking has adopted the term "rangelands" (yet another name borrowed from America) which includes all of the outback pastoral areas but also extends to the smaller holdings as long as they are not intensively developed. Farming, land clearing etc. would definitely rule out any rangeland contender and definitely place the block as inside country.

Types of Country

From a cattleman's point of view, the assessment of country is mainly concerned with the quality and availability of feed and water. Of course there are major variations within regions in each of these critical factors, some holdings favoured with an abundance of both essential ingredients; others of a more marginal nature. It is usually the case that the best country is held by large pastoral companies or by a few wealthy private owners, while the average smaller private owner can only afford the more marginal blocks and tends to look longingly over the boundary at the better resources of his/her wealthier neighbour.

A detailed survey of vegetation (trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs) of the Channel Country is available (see reading list) but a few very broad generalisations may offer a starting point. Cape York and the Gulf are generally considered as “breeder” country, with higher rainfall supporting more abundant cattle feed and water and thus higher carrying capacity, although the feed quality deteriorates more rapidly through the dry season and often necessitates the feeding of supplements. The introduction of *Bos indicus* (Brahman) cattle into this environment vastly improved cattle survivability and Brahman cross cattle (often with high *Bos indicus* content) are now widespread across the outback generally although there are still large Hereford herds doing well in the drier, “sweeter” desert and parts of the Channel Country.

In general, it is the practice of the bigger pastoral companies to use their Gulf and Cape York stations for breeding and production of young steers to be fattened on the Channel Country stations (the latter often known as bullock depots). Kidmans however used their vast Channel Country stations for both breeding and fattening, pointing out that steers bred in the Channel Country had a competitive edge over introduced northern store steers which had to adapt to the Channel Country environment. I have lost touch with Kidmans since their sale to Gina Rinehart and her Chinese co-owner.

There are some large areas of open Mitchell grass (*Astrelba spp*) downs country stretching from the southern parts of the Gulf and well down into the Channel Country. The open downs constitute good cattle country especially where the annual Flinders grass *Iseilema membranaceum* also grows (excellent fattening grass after summer rain). A lack of shade in the very open country was the cause of significant calf mortality while British breed (mainly Shorthorn) cattle grazed these areas, but introduction of the more heat resistant Brahman breed, and building of shade shelters near cattle troughs, have overcome this difficulty.

Cattle feed quality becomes better as the landscapes become more arid, and reaches a peak in the fabled lands of the Channel Country - the “vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended” immortalised by Banjo Paterson in *Clancy of the Overflow*. There are many excellent grasses and herbage on the flats between the coolabah-lined channels, but the two outstanding species are wild sorghum (also called channel millet *Echinachloa turnerana*) and Cooper clover *Trigonella sauvisima*. This latter fattening herbage has been shown to rival lucerne hay in protein content. A wonderful area of wild sorghum and Cooper clover on Sandy Kidd’s Ourdel property near Windorah had Sandy on record as saying “you could fatten a crowbar on this country” (Sandy was good at the five second sound grab when talking to journalists).

My mate Bill Scott who managed Tanbar on the Cooper and was Stanbroke’s chief pastoral inspector (travelling manager) told me that bullocks on Tanbar’s Lake Yamma Yamma after flooding of the lake were measured with weight gains of 2 kg live weight per day - better than any feedlot. Note that all the grass and herbage species of the Channel Country are native, and not to be confused with the introduced species “clover” *Medicago spp.* of some inside areas.

One of the greatest misconceptions of many people is that the deserts of the Lake Eyre basin are essentially unproductive apart from oil and gas extraction. There is a marvellous succulent herbage with a pretty pink flower, parakeelya *Calandrinia balonensis* that grows on the sandhills after rain. Inter-dune flats carry floodwater after rain, most spectacularly west of Birdsville and Bedourie when the Georgina-Eyre Creek and Mulligan river systems are in flood, and these flats support the usual rich array of grasses and forbs that characterise the cracking clays of the channel areas. Cattle feeding on parakeelya gain enough water from the plant so they do not need to walk to water, and I saw eight decks of our Braford bullocks go from forward store to top fat quality on parakeelya in just six weeks in the Strzelecki desert on Bollard’s Lagoon station south of Innaminka. A word of warning - parakeelya is just like pigweed - good fattening tucker but toxic to hungry thirsty cattle, which have to be adequately fed and watered before introduction to the plant.

I first saw what the Channel Country can do for cattle while helping a mate tail out Cluny bullocks for spelling at Winton, before they were loaded on a train for the meatworks at Rockhampton, late in 1975. Cluny is on Eyre Creek near Bedourie and has a beautiful mix of floodplains, an ephemeral lake (Lake Machattie) and sweet sandhill country. The bullocks were a superb line of 500 soft Shorthorns carrying the locally famous 4SQ brand, all about three and a half years old and weighing about 650 kg live with very little variation in height or weight. The nicest looking line of bullocks I’ve ever seen. Sadly, most pure Shorthorn lines have gone from that country now.

Yet another mob of British breed bullocks, this lot from Goyder's Lagoon country on Clifton Hills down the Birdsville track in SA, were the biggest bullocks I've ever seen (except for a few "pets" who'd been hand raised as poddies). The Clifton Hills bullocks were only able to be loaded at 14 head to a deck. (Usually, good bullocks (averaging 600 kg live) can load at 20 to the deck). This was somewhere around the year 2000. Clifton Hills had put a helicopter in to muster part of Goyder's Lagoon and find old bullocks that had missed a few years' musters. They were hoping to get 4 decks, but 3 hours' flying yielded 12 decks that averaged 477 kg dressed weight. At a dressing percentage of 56 % you can calculate a live weight of 852 kg. As I mentioned, they were all British breed (mixed Hereford with some black and white dairy breed).

I mentioned these bullocks to my mate Bill from Tanbar, and he promptly showed me the weight sheets for 12 decks of high-grade Brahman bullocks off Lake Yamma Yamma - likewise old bullocks that had missed a few musters - averaging 488 kg dressed (871 kg live).

I once managed to put one older Springfield Braford bullock in with some younger bullocks, and had to drop the number loaded on that deck to 18. He came back at 527 kg dressed (941 kg live) attracting an overweight penalty. He was about 6 years old, quiet and easy to muster, but had jumped out of the holding paddock on all previous occasions. He had become quite a character and we felt quite a few pangs of regret to be sending him on his final journey.

It seems I've waxed rather lyrical about the Channel Country, and it would be remiss of me to fail to mention the downside - raging droughts. From flooding events to extreme drought, it's a boom-and-bust ecology, and the system of cattle operations has to reflect this variation in biological production, fattening when the boom opportunity arrives, and severely reducing cattle numbers in the "bust," sometimes entirely destocking. If you want to maintain a breeding herd, as we did, you have to move cattle to agistment elsewhere during the "bust".

The Department of Primary Industries valiantly attempted to assess "safe carrying capacities" for the western lands, but the concept, laudably intended to reduce overgrazing, is unfortunately irrelevant to a boom-and-bust ecosystem. There is no such thing as a long-term safe carrying capacity where rain and flooding events are so variable and unpredictable. There are few perennial grazed plant species in the region (except Mitchell grass patches) and the annuals, if not grazed, will eventually dry out and blow away in the wind, so there is little opportunity to "save" grass and herbage for longer than a couple of years. Droughts out there can last up to 10 years with little relief.

Patrick Durack, one of the first cattle graziers on Kyabra Creek, recognised this essential point with the prophetic observation that "we are kings in grass castles, that may be blown away upon a puff of wind."

Larger mammal species that survive in arid and desert regions are necessarily nomadic, able to follow storms to capitalise on small and ephemeral localised "booms". In this context, the very Eurocentric practice of restricting operations within tightly held paddock fences seems maladaptive in arid country.

Bob Morrish

Further Reading

Lake Eyre by Paul Lockyer. Book accompanying the excellent 2-part ABC TV documentary on flooding of Lake Eyre and the Channel Country during 2009 - 2010. Tragically the ABC journalist Paul Lockyer, photographer John Bean and pilot Gary Ticehurst were killed in a helicopter crash on Lake Eyre in 2011. The book has excellent photographs and descriptions, including a very informative scientific chapter on the boom-and-bust ecology by my friend Professor Richard Kingsford.

Floods of Lake Eyre by Dr Vincent Kotwicki, a South Australian hydrologist who has made a comprehensive historical and contemporary study of the sources of flooding into Lake Eyre.

Lake Eyre Basin Rivers edited by Richard Kingsford - a collection of papers on the ecological, social, cultural and economic significance of the arid Lake Eyre Basin rivers and their surrounding landscapes.

Plants of the Channel Country by Rhondda Alexander. Rhondda grew up on Herbert Downs, a western outstation of Marion Downs on the Georgina River west of Boulia. Later she assisted her husband Bill Alexander who for many years managed Marion Downs. She is a superb advocate for the natural and pastoral values of the Channel Country, and warmly thanks her many friends and helpers in the production of the book, especially Andrew White and Jenny Milson (pasture agronomist with DPI at Longreach). I regard this book very highly, and not only because I personally knew many of the people involved in its production. For those who have never seen the Channel Country, the book contains an excellent series of small photographs of samples of the major landforms typical of the vast region.

Five excellent accounts of the outback Channel Country, its landscapes and its Aboriginal inhabitants early in the 20th Century, by Alice Duncan-Kemp. Alice Duncan grew up on Mooraberrie station in the heart of the Channel Country, at the junction of the Farrar's Creek and Diamantina channels about 150 km east-north-east of Birdsville. Alice Duncan's father Bill Duncan was an enlightened pastoralist who respected and admired the Aboriginal people, and Alice herself was "adopted" into the local clan as the Leaf Spirit, Pinningarra. I recommend her books very highly: *Our Channel Country*; *Our Sandhill Country*; *Where Strange Paths Go Down*; *Where Strange Gods Call*; *People of the Grey Wind*.

Kings in Grass Castles by Mary Durack, granddaughter of Patrick Durack, one of the first white pastoralists to settle on Kyabra Creek, together with John Costello and Jim Scanlan (the latter took up Springfield, which my wife Narelle, daughter Bronwen and I occupied for 35 years until 2015). Interesting history of the Durack, Costello and Tully dynasties, the Irish diaspora who found their way out there in the latter half of the 19th Century, and one may forgive the slightly hagiographic tone. Mary Durack was proud of her Irish pioneer ancestors.

Frontier Lands & Pioneer Legends : How Pastoralists Gained Kurawali Land by Pamela Lukin Watson. A comparison of the early pastoralists' accounts of the conflict over pastoral vs traditional Aboriginal land use. The mainly white supremacist accounts of the three biggest pastoral land-grabbers in the Channel Country, John Costello, Robert Collins and Oscar De Satge, are contrasted with the more sensitive and perceptive accounts by Mary Durack and Alice Duncan-Kemp. Pamela Lukin Watson is a pharmacist and anthropologist, combining these interests in a minor theme of her book: the social and ceremonial use of pituri by Channel Country Aboriginal groups. Pituri is a psychoactive substance derived from the shrub *Duboisia hopwoodii*, found mainly in the Georgina River area, and traded extensively along routes to the south and southeast (along Eyre Creek, the Diamantina River and Cooper's Creek). The history she has collected of the Colonial dispossession and genocide of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Channel Country is a necessary and sobering reminder of the murderous brutality of some of the early white pastoralists (the Duncan family at Mooraberrie and the Durack family at Thylungra receive due recognition as enlightened exceptions to the general rule).

Plains of Promise by Alexis Wright. The "plains of promise" phrase originates with the Colonial explorer John Stokes (Captain of the Beagle - the same Beagle that had earlier carried Darwin under the command of Captain FitzRoy). Stokes anchored the Beagle off Sweers Island in July 1841 and journeyed by small boat up the river he named the Albert, noting the pastoral and commercial potential of the plains of the Gulf country. Alexis Wright, who grew up in the Cloncurry region, is the daughter of a white cattle station manager and a Waanyi Aboriginal lady, and is thus admirably qualified to address the issues raised in her novel: the complex spirituality of the Aboriginal people of the Gulf, contrasted with the hypocritical persecution and brutality inflicted on her people by white missionaries and Colonial bureaucrats. I would rate *Plains of Promise* almost as highly as Xavier Herbert's famous novel *Capricornia*. Both novels address similar themes of white cruelty and hypocrisy, and dispossession of the first people of Australia.