THEY OF THE NEVER NEVER

By Peter Forrest

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2. The History of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory, by Bishop John Patrick O'Loughlin. (1986)
15. The Queensland Road, by Peter Forrest. (1990)
18. They of the Never Never, by Peter Forrest. (1990)
INTRODUCTION

This talk was delivered on 10 June 1987 by Peter Forrest at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory in the ‘Under the Banyan Tree’ series of lunchtime entertainments.

Peter Forrest is a Territory historian, a consultant on historical and heritage matters, and the author of a number of books and reports dealing with the Territory’s past and its historic sites. He has a strong affinity for the pastoral industry, so his subject is one that is very close to his heart.

In tracing the history of Elsey Station and of the people connected with it, Peter places before us a marvellously condensed history of the Territory’s pastoral industry.
THEY OF THE NEVER NEVER

This lecture is intended to be an exploration into the lives and times of some of the people who helped pioneer the Territory's pastoral industries, as exemplified by the early days of Elsey Station. I hope in the process to be able to establish something of the context in which the book *We of the Never Never* was written.

Some of the people of early Elsey are well known now by virtue of many books and at least one film. Without exception they had interesting and instructive lives, as indeed did all the pastoral pioneers. I have no reason to believe that the Elsey people were atypical in any way, and it seemed to me that by looking at them we might be able to gain some useful insights into the sort of people our outback pioneers were. It is likely too that we will through them learn a little of the processes involved in the settlement and development of an early Top End pastoral station.

I should begin with a passing reference to the man whose name will constantly recur during this lecture. Joseph Ravenscroft Elsey was born in London on 14 March 1834. When just twenty-one years old he had graduated in Medicine, and had been selected as Surgeon-Naturalist for AC Gregory's North Australian Exploring Expedition. Elsey sailed to Sydney in time for the expedition's departure from there in July 1855. He spent most of the next nine months at the Victoria River Depot while Gregory and others explored to the south west. However, the whole party left the Depot in June 1856.

On 14 July 1856 Elsey was with Gregory, assisting him to reconnoitre the way ahead, when a small creek was discovered. Gregory named the Creek after Elsey, and subsequently the same name was used for the station and later for the electorate, thereby securing it on the map of Australia.

It is not generally known that Elsey on this expedition performed some of the most useful and important faunal observations in the North's scientific history. Elsey's work was much appreciated by John Gould and by Ferdinand von Mueller.

Gregory's expedition was a turning point in Territory history. Gregory favourably mentioned the grasslands of the Victoria River at a time when settlement in South Australia was reaching the margins of that colony's useful country. The South Australians began to think of the no-man's-land to their north as a possible venue for pastoral expansion. The problem was how to reach Gregory's country - and that was the problem which John McDouall Stuart was sent to solve.

The result of Stuart's work was immediate and spectacular annexation of 'The Northern Territory of South Australia', but pastoralists were cautious about rushing into the new grasslands. Apart from a short-lived episode of settlement on the Barkly Tablelands, the pastoralists
did not venture into the Territory until the Overland Telegraph Line had been built. Then, from 1873 on, a few stations were established in Central Australia.

Things took a little longer in the Top End, and it was not until 1879 that permanent pastoral settlement began at Glencoe, near Hayes Creek, and at Springvale, near Katherine. Elsey Station was the third Top End station to be established, being stocked in 1881. (Incidentally, I have taken the dates of station establishment as being the date of first stocking - other dates are meaningless.)

Elsey was founded by Abraham Wallace. Many, probably most, of the pastoralists to commission the foundation of the first stations in the Territory were very large-scale men who had done very well in South Australia or the eastern colonies and who wanted room to expand. They could command much capital, and they were prepared to spend it in the Territory. Fisher and Lyons, and Dr Browne were typical.

Abraham Wallace was not typical. Although it is probably not accurate to describe him as a 'battler' before he came to the Territory, he certainly was not in a big way. He was born in Ireland in 1828, and came to Australia aged twenty. There were many temptations for a restless spirit in Australia those days, and Wallace gave in to almost all of them. He settled near Mount Gambier in 1850 but left that good country to go to the Victorian diggings.

In 1861 he married Matilda Hill and the couple again tried to settle down in 'South Australia's south-east for a while. However they lost their first child there, and this seems to have accentuated Abraham Wallace's desire to seek greener pastures. In 1863 the couple set out for Queensland overland in a wagon. Their route was a short cut across unsettled country west of the Darling in New South Wales.

Over the next few years the Wallaces squatted at various locations around what is now the Broken Hill region. It was usually Matilda Wallace's lot to shepherd the sheep near their primitive hut while Abraham searched further afield for grass and water, or went droving with stock for market. In the mid 1870s Matilda went to Menindee for the birth of a child, and she wrote that this was the first time in seven years that she had seen 'civilisation in its entirety'.

Eventually, Wallace was able to establish a good station, Sturt's Meadows. By 1882 the station shore 32,000 sheep, so the Wallaces at last were doing well. However, Abraham Wallace, like all the other pastoralists who ventured into the Territory during the first wave of pastoral settlement, threw it all away in the north.

In 1877 he acquired a number of leases along Elsey and Birdum Creeks. Unlike many leaseholders, Wallace intended to stock his country rather than take advantage of speculative conditions which might have enabled a quick profitable sale. Wallace shared with the Buchanans, the Duracks, and so many others the ambition to take advantage of the opportunity available in the Territory to gain a really large parcel of
supposedly good country. There he would establish a huge pastoral empire - well watered (in contrast with the dry country west of the Darling); well grassed; and close to limitless markets in Asia. It was a seduction which was to ruin Wallace and all the others who yielded to the blandishments of the Top End.

Wallace set out for his new domain in January 1880. He left Sturt's Meadows with six men, 120 horses, a dray, a wagonette, a light buggy, and supplies which included a large stock of rifles and ammunition. The party moved north into Queensland, and then up the Bulloo River and across to Blackall. From Blackall they travelled north to the site of the future town of Barcaldine and then to Aramac before going north-west to Mount Cornish Station. There Wallace purchased 2728 cattle to stock Elsey.

I must digress for a moment to refer to Mount Cornish, the station which was so important in providing cattle for the great migrations from Queensland across to the new lands of the Territory. Probably no less than 40% of the cattle to come to the Top End and Kimberleys between 1878 and 1888 carried the LC5 Mount Cornish brand.

The brand LC was an acronym for Landsborough and Cornish, two of the founding partners in Bowen Downs. Another was Nat Buchanan, who had discovered the beautiful Bowen Downs when exploring with Landsborough in 1859. They claimed the country and Buchanan came back as its first manager when Bowen Downs was stocked from 1861. It was a huge tract of beautiful country, but its development proved beyond the resources of the original partners. Additional capital was sought, and it came from Aberdeen in Scotland. The Scottish Australian Investment Company was formed to develop the station and, before long, Landsborough and Buchanan found themselves unable to continue with the company.

These events were to bring Buchanan into the Territory, first as a drover and then as a pastoralist seeking country that he hoped would make good what he had lost at Bowen Downs. He took up Wave Hill in 1883, but again he found that he had to surrender his dream of a pastoral empire to those who had more capital to meet the costs of development.

There are other connections between Bowen Downs and the Territory. In 1870 Harry Redford stole 1000 head of cattle from the station and drove them downriver to South Australia. Two results of consequence to our narrative flowed from this. One was that Harry Redford, after several more brushes with the law and a gaol term, later also came to the Territory - to establish what became Brunette Downs.

Perhaps more importantly, Bowen Downs was cut in two so that closer management could be achieved. The western section was to be reserved for cattle breeding, and it was called Mount Cornish. It produced splendid cattle which were the foundation herds for so many Territory stations. At the same time, the Mount Cornish manager Edward Rowland Edkins became an influential figure in the Territory.
cattle industry. He was probably the outback's most highly regarded station manager, and those who came from the Territory to buy cattle at Mount Cornish also sought Edkins' advice on all sorts of subjects. Even the knowledgeable and pontifical Alfred Giles asked Edkins to send over a plan for an ideal set of cattle yards with D'Arcy Uhr, who had been engaged by Giles to bring cattle from Mount Cornish to establish Newcastle Waters in 1883.

While the Mount Cornish cattle were being mustered and cross-branded with the Elsey W22 brand in readiness for the trip, Wallace increased his camp to sixteen men.

When Wallace and his overlanders set out the plant and the cattle were split in two, travelling about a mile1 apart. The route was north up the Thomson; then on to the Flinders watershed near Hughenden; then over to the Cloncurry River; and finally, on to the Leichhardt, the Gregory and the Nicholson.

It was by now very late in the 1880 dry season, and there were long dry stages ahead. Wallace decided to hold the cattle up and wait for storms. Only a skeleton staff was kept on.

The mobs waited for two months before worthwhile rain fell. Fresh stores and men were then obtained, presumably from Burketown, and the mobs set out again. They left the Nicholson at Turn Off Lagoon with heavy hearts, knowing that civilisation was being left behind and that the forbidding Northern Territory would soon be entered.

The party actually entered the Northern Territory near what the overlanders called Settlement Creek. This watercourse was taken to mark the border, and it was named because the drovers at the time always demanded to be paid their wages up-to-date before going on into the Territory. They knew from bitter experience that if they were not paid the boss drover might take advantage of the lack of reciprocity of legal process between the Territory and Queensland and, at the journey's end in the Territory, refuse payment of wages for the Queensland part of the trip.

The party was of course on 'The Queensland Road' which followed Leichhardt's track, and had been pioneered for cattle by D'Arcy Uhr in 1872. It was the great artery which brought cattle and men to the stations of the north, and brought many travellers to the Top End mining fields as well. It was, at least until 1888, much more important than the Telegraph Line route for the import of men and stock into the Territory. Traffic up the Telegraph Line was limited by lack of water. The only route for the ambitious men with their large mobs bound for the Top End was the naturally watered Queensland Road. Hence, the predominant influence of Queensland in the pastoral settlement of the northern part of what was really a South Australian domain.

1 1 mile = 1.6 km
The route was north-westerly parallel to the coast until the Roper River was struck at Leichhardt's (Roper) Bar. Then the overlanders turned west for the Elsey. The cattle were let go on Elsey Creek in June 1881, eighteen months and 2000 miles\(^2\) after the first elements of the party had left Sturt's Meadows.

Wallace surveyed his new station, and selected the site of the first homestead, that is the site north of Warlock Ponds adjacent to the old Stuart Highway. Soon after, Wallace returned to Adelaide, leaving his nephew JH Palmer, who had come with him from Sturt's Meadows, in charge. In Adelaide Wallace resumed his much interrupted married life with Matilda.

However, on 27 April 1884 Wallace was found with his throat cut, obviously by his own hand. As he died, he explained to his wife, 'I am tired of the world, and the world is tired of me'. The coroner found that Wallace's mind had been unhinged by a head injury sustained in a buggy accident six weeks before.

Wallace's death was to be merely the first of many tragic and premature ends for people associated with Elsey Station.

In 1881 Duncan Campbell, a Queenslander returning east after an overlanding trip, was engaged to be Elsey's head stockman. In August 1882 he was fatally speared. White settlers were outraged and the reprisals were indiscriminate and disastrous for the Yangman and Mangari Aborigines. Very early in Elsey's history the fundamental lesson was taught to the original owners of the country - come in to the homestead, or stay in the bush and be shot.

Following Wallace's death the station was acquired by the Victorian investors Osmand and Panton, who were also interested in Ord River Station. They took over Elsey just as the last hopes for the Top End cattle industry were being dashed. It was becoming painfully apparent that there was no significant market in Asia for Territory cattle; the goldfields would never amount to much; and it would be only marginally economic to walk cattle down to the markets in the south. Furthermore, even this outlet was about to be closed by embargoes against redwater.

We now know that redwater is caused by the cattle tick, but in the 1890s there was a strong supposition that it was in fact caused by cattle drinking the waters of the Roper River and its tributaries. This created a prejudice against Elsey cattle which did not help matters for the owners.

An important but little documented event in Elsey's history was the arrival in 1891 of a white woman at the station. She was Mrs Oakes, wife of the then manager. In fact, she may not have been the first white

\[^2\] 2000 miles = 3219 km
manager's wife at Elsey, and of course she came into the district more than a decade after the arrival of Mrs Alfred Giles at Springvale. But it was nevertheless a significant event, marking a transition toward a more conventional society.

On 17 January 1895 the Aboriginal Moolooloorun was hanged at Crescent Lagoon on the station. Moolooloorun was a convicted spearer of white men and cattle, and the execution was ordered to be carried out publicly as a salutary lesson to other Aborigines. The execution was supervised by Darwin Telegraph official JAG Little, who also held the office of Sheriff. As a demonstration of white man's justice the spectacle was probably counter productive because even before the execution it became common knowledge that an Aborigine from Queensland who was passing through with overlanders was in fact responsible for the crimes that Moolooloorun had been convicted of.

Osmand became the sole owner of Elsey in 1895, and when he died in 1901 Aeneas Gunn was appointed manager of the station by the executors, with one of whom Gunn had a distant connection.

Gunn was then 39 years old. He had been born in Victoria to Scottish parents who had come to Australia from Caithness, in the far north-east of Scotland. Aeneas Gunn's father, Reverend Peter Gunn, had been brought to Melbourne to minister to the Gaelic-speaking Scottish highlanders of Victoria.

Thus Aeneas Gunn was one of the great number of Scots, or people of very recent Scottish descent, who entered the Australian pastoral industries. These Scottish people had an enormous impact on those industries - in terms of exploration; the organisation of capital; management and the provision of labour; and in respect of the introduction of new skills and technology. It was an influence which dominated the Australian pastoral industries for at least a century, and is certainly still felt.

The Scots did not loom as large in the Territory as they did in other places - they were too canny to commit themselves too deeply to a region which was said to promise much but which actually comprised the worst pastoral land in the continent. However, as we shall see, even at Elsey there was more than a likely proportion of Scots, and they were individuals who were prominent in creating the legend of the Never Never. They were so important to Australia that it is here worth trying to explain the reasons for this Scottish success in the outback.

The explanation usually given is that as the Australian pastoral frontier was expanding, events in Scotland were encouraging the emigration of people and capital to the colonies. This is certainly true. The 'clearances' of crofting and small farming communities to make way for sheep and extensive agriculture were displacing many people from Scottish rural districts, and those people took with them their knowledge and love of the land to the new world.
Scottish capital, built on the tobacco trade with the American colonies and then multiplied by judicious investment in the industrial revolution, was also looking for opportunities in the colonies after the American connection was severed by the revolution.

But I think that there were profound intellectual reasons for the mobility of Scottish money and people, as well as these physical and economic reasons. The Scottish enlightenment of the eighteenth century ingrained a respect for and belief in education in even the most humble Scot. Intellectual achievement was seen as providing the way out of poverty traps. As a result Scotland developed a splendid parochial and secular education system which meant that virtually all Scots achieved at least a primary school education. Such an education was regarded as a birthright, regardless of social class.

Well-established universities provided post-school opportunities, and a university education was not an impossible ambition for even the poorest Scot.

These educational opportunities gave the Scots an awareness of the world outside their cities, villages, and farms which simply did not exist in England or Ireland. The result was that the Scots who came to Australia were by far the best educated of all our early settlers, and thus they were the best equipped to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the new country.

There were associated reasons for the Scottish advantage. One of the products of the educational system was the introduction of new farming and grazing methods in Scotland in the nineteenth century. Scientific and empirical principles were applied to rural production for the first time. The benefits of this new approach were brought to Australia, and in the Territory the outstanding example of the process was the first Commonwealth Administrator, John Anderson Gilruth.

The rigid class system which still obtained in other parts of Britain, and had so constrained social and physical mobility, no longer applied in Scotland with any real force. A result was Scottish aspiration for achievement based on realistic assessment of the possibilities in life, and a willingness to move away from home to the industrialising cities or to the colonies to secure better chances for achievement.

Aeneas Gunn exemplifies the points I have endeavoured to make. He came to the north of Australia in 1890 with no advantages apart from his education. He came with his relative Joseph Bradshaw to help establish a sheep station in the Kimberleys at the Prince Regent River. After about five years Bradshaw and Gunn moved to the Territory to establish Bradshaw's Run on the Victoria River. After a year or so Gunn and Bradshaw parted company and Gunn returned to Melbourne, where he became librarian at Prahran Library and at the same time wrote much about his experiences in and observations of the North. Some of his writing survives as a series of articles 'Pioneering in North Australia' published in the Prahran Telegraph in 1899.
His writing employs the prosy style then popular, although it was restrained in that respect by comparison with other descriptions of the North at the time. However, there are excellent descriptive passages, made uncommonly useful to today's reader by Gunn's acute and disciplined powers of observation. The quality of this work resulted in his election as a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society.

In late 1901 Osmand's executors were looking for a manager at Elsey, and Gunn was apparently looking for a way of getting back to the North. He secured the job, and this enabled him to marry his new-found sweetheart Jeannie Taylor on New Year's Eve 1901.

Jeannie Taylor was also of Scottish descent. Her parents had both come to Victoria when young, and Jeannie's father Thomas had become a Baptist minister in Melbourne. Jeannie was born in 1870, and was educated at home by her mother. Jeannie lost nothing by this as she matriculated aged 17. She did not go on to university but instead joined with her two sisters in opening a private school in Melbourne in 1889. Jeannie taught here until the school closed in 1896, and then she taught at other Melbourne schools until her marriage.

Physically she was quite unlike the Jeannie Gunn portrayed by Angela Punch MacGregor in the film We Of The Never Never. The film heroine was tall, towering over a simpering, effeminate Maluka, and silently introspective. There is enough evidence to show that Jeannie was, in reality, quite the opposite - short, spry and outgoing. Jackie Weaver would have been better cast in the 'Little Missus' role.

The couple had their honeymoon aboard the steamship Guthrie en route to Darwin. It was a gentle transition to the Territory, climatically and socially, and on board she got to know several significant Territory personalities.

This did not help her much when she and Aeneas began their trip from Darwin to Elsey. The telegrams from the Sanguine Scot, Jock MacLennon, warned Aeneas Gunn not to bring a woman to Elsey. Gunn's telegrams in reply warned of Jeannie's determination to come in any case.

One of the most dramatic parts of the film hinted at the true reason for the reluctance of MacLennon and the other white men to have a white woman at Elsey. The vivid scene early in the film showing the castration of a mature bull was dramatic and so shocking that its significance was perhaps lost on urban audiences unused to the blood and brutality of the stock camps. However, I think that the castration, in the context of the men's anxiety about a white woman coming to the station, alluded to the fear that all white male pioneers in the outback at that time had, that the coming of white women would end forever the ways of life which were the reasons for so many men staying in the Territory.
It had been a Territory where white men found sexual gratification with black women on terms entirely dictated by the men. It amounted to sexual enjoyment on demand and without responsibility. It was a social environment entirely dominated by white men. As Matt Savage said, and he was saying it, I think, for all the white men of his time, 'The real pioneers were the lubras, because if it hadn't been for them the white men would not have stayed up here'.

Jeannie Gunn’s arrival threatened to bring all of that to an end, in fact to emasculate the white men. White women on the cattle stations would mean that white men would have to behave as did white men in the civilised districts which the pioneers hoped they had left behind. It was a change which was profoundly resisted, as Jeannie Gunn would have found had she stayed longer in the Territory.

Aeneas Gunn died of dysentery on 16 March 1903, and soon after Jeannie returned to Melbourne. She never returned to the Territory, although she kept in touch with many Territorians until her death in 1961. She had had only one year at Elsey - for her an idyllic year which remained in her memory as a very happy slice of time. She refused to return to the North for fear that her happy illusions of the place would be shattered. It is not surprising that she idealised and romanticised the people and events of that year.

Later in 1903 Elsey was sold to the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company (also called the Arafura Company). This company was floated in England by the irrepressible Joseph Bradshaw, who had gone broke on the Victoria River and now organised something that was really a 'scam' to retrieve his fortunes. The plan was to take stock from Elsey and Hodgson Downs to country which the company acquired in Arnhem Land. It was an impractical scheme, as the experienced Bradshaw must have known.

The scheme took several years to fail, and in the meantime it inflicted disaster on Aboriginal people from south of the Roper to the north coast of Arnhem Land. The Aborigines were blamed for spearing and harassing the cattle and preventing them from settling down and thriving. The company organised several hunting parties of a dozen or so men to range through the country and shoot all wild Aborigines on sight. Only those who were able to take refuge in the Roper swamps or in the recesses of Arnhem Land survived. According to strong oral tradition in the area, one of the ringleaders in these episodes was Jock MacLennon, the Sanguine Scot.

The Arafura Company had failed by about 1908 and the Elsey was abandoned for a time. In 1909 it was taken over by Darwin butcher William Lawrie and partner Tom Sayle. In 1913 part of the station was surrendered to become Mataranka Experimental Station, and in 1914 Elsey was bought by the Thonemann family from Melbourne. The

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3 a dozen = 12
distinctive feature of the Thonemann period was the long rule of manager Harold Giles at the station, but that is another story which reflects the times just as faithfully and in the same fascinating way as does the early period at Elsey.

The Thonemanns held the station until 1959, and there have been several more recent changes of ownership. It would be fair to say that none of the later owners have done significantly better financially than did its earlier owners. The Elsey has always been better country for the production of myths than for the turn-off of good cattle.

Those myths were, of course, enshrined and given national, even international, currency by the publication of *We of the Never Never* in 1908. Today the style and subject of the book is slightly unfashionable, although perhaps these have recently returned to favour.

The lack of enthusiasm for the book today should not obscure its importance. It has sold over a million copies, and it was read and analysed by a generation of Australian school children. It was a significant publishing event in 1908, coming after the decline of *The Bulletin* school of Lawson, Paterson and many others who set their scenes in the bush, and was followed by the revival of Australian subjects in the literature of the 1930s.

Its significance is perhaps best described by Geoffrey Serle in his review of our cultural history, 'From the Deserts the Prophets Come'. He quotes Flora Eldershaw as saying that Gunn's book was the precursor of the 1930s landscape writers, and that Gunn and her successors 'give a romantic version of the world with which many men secretly or openly want to identify themselves, the unique Australian world that is the possession and kingdom of our imagination... They are wonder books, bringing to the reader the marvels and curiosities of a very old country... the riddle of the dark races and their customs that are often vestiges of something forgotten long ago; the skills of the bushman born of sheer necessity...'

What *We of the Never Never* did was play the major role in underwriting an Australian legend of life and achievement in the outback. It was legend rather than reality because even in 1908 Australia was well on the way to becoming one of the world's most urbanised countries.

Perhaps Australians were then rather lost and bewildered by the rapid changes that were taking place. Perhaps Australians were seeking symbols of things that made their country different from anywhere else. Mrs Gunn provided the symbols. They came from the inland - from the forbidding faraway places called 'The Never Never', where men and a few women still lived heroic lives in rhythm with the gallop of a horse.

Eighty years later as we approach our so-called 'bicentenary', we are looking again at those same symbols. I applaud that - they still stand for the things that have been distinctively different about Australia. But we should never, never lose sight of the historical facts that are sometimes obscured by the symbolism.