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SIXTEENTH ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE 2001

Nowhere to somewhere

By Terry Underwood

Thank you Minister John Ah Kit for your generous introduction. Good evening Your Honour the Administrator, Mr John Anictomatis and Mrs Jeanette Anictomatis, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Tonight’s occasion is a tremendous honour for me, for all the obvious reasons and also because I am one of many Territorians privileged to have enjoyed the friendship of Eric Johnston. The first of these series of lectures named after Commodore Eric Johnston, the Territory’s then Administrator, was delivered in 1986 by the man himself. His paper was entitled Operation Navy Help; Disaster Operations by the Royal Australian Navy, Post Cyclone Tracy.

Eric Johnston was in a sense larger than life, a man of enormous enthusiasm and energy, a man of the people. How often on my infrequent trips to town would I cross paths with Eric as I tore up and down the Mall, endeavouring to do my Christmas shopping or complete my list of station stores compiled over many months. With his huge hug and smile, he’d block my way to enquire about my entire family by individual name, ask about the seasons, the markets and life in the bush. Eric Johnston really cared.

As Patron of the Isolated Children’s and Parents’ Association, the Commodore attended Annual General Meeting dinners galore throughout the Territory. He followed with keen interest the challenges of geographically isolated families grappling with distance education and numerous other issues.

Also in 1986, Eric Johnston invited members of the Northern Territory Cattlemen’s Association to a special dinner at Government House. It might have been intended as a warm up to his pledge to visit every pastoral property during his time in office. However, it also alerted the Administor that those of us who work hard “play harder”. It was rumoured that we emptied the hallowed cellar that night and with my memories of a fabulous evening of merriment and meaning needing no enhancement, it is little wonder that we have not been invited back since.

In May 1987, Eric Johnston officially opened the third Annual General Meeting of the Northern Territory Cattlemen’s Association and I quote from his address:

"My involvement with the pastoral industry in any form whatsoever did not commence until I took up my appointment in 1981 as Administrator of the Northern Territory. It became very apparent to me that if over fifty per cent of the Territory I was purported to administer consisted of pastoral land then I had better go and do some visiting.

Thus, in the first half of 1981, some of you were confronted by an apparition wearing the all white of the club, full of ignorance and questions, the majority of which were, no doubt, stupid in the extreme.

The white uniform soon was discarded as I quickly discovered two things – firstly, I would encounter bull dust, in all its forms, on each and every visit; and – RM Williams was not the current Welsh full back but the producer of the most comfortable and sensible clothing and footwear."

Eric Johnston continued: “I believe my major contribution as far as you are concerned has been the uplifting of morale on various stations, particularly in the stock camps I have visited. For those of you who
come from interstate I should mention that my staff is principally female and without exception attractive. The sight of a lovely vice regal aide in a stock camp full of fuzzy faced ringers has a somewhat magical effect and my only surprise is that there have not been more accidents as each ringer endeavours to show-off and impress my travelling companion.” Then in addressing a broad range of issues on a more serious note, Eric referred to his unashamed confidence in the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway being on the immediate horizon with all its implications in the field of transport. I’m sure Eric will be smiling down on us now.

As the organiser of functions too numerous to mention, I commissioned an impressive leather plaque of appreciation to Commodore Eric Johnston on behalf of members of the Northern Territory Cattlemen’s Association. Only after it was duly presented by our president of the day and graciously admired by its recipient, did I discover to my horror of horrors that I had made a spelling error with the Administrator’s surname. I had omitted the "t"! What to do? With the assistance of a certain person in a certain position, the plaque was surreptitiously removed from its place on honour in Government House, and various other hangings rearranged until the original plaque was returned to its craftsman for correction and then whisked through the side door back to its original site. To this day I know not if His Honour knew.

Eric Johnston was a staunch supporter throughout my personal journey, attending my various photographic exhibitions, and with his wife Joan, sharing our family birthday celebrations. His full-bellied laugh and twinkling eyes will never be forgotten. Therefore I do know that upon his passing in 1997, we all mourned the loss of a great statesman, humanitarian and friend whose contribution to the life of the Northern Territory is indelible.

Let the journey from Nowhere to Somewhere begin…

"Speed’s the thing," cries the world, and speeds on, gaining little but speed; and we bush-folk travel our 60 miles and gain all that is worth gaining – except speed."

So wrote Jeannie Gunn in 1908 in her much loved Australian classic We Of The Never Never. One of the first white women to penetrate the inhospitable north, she actually spent less than a year at the Elsey cattle station. In that brief time, Jeannie nevertheless forged passionate partnerships with her man, the land and its people. The new bride from Melbourne wrote of (quote) "that elusive land with an elusive name – a land of dangers and hardships and privations yet loved as few lands are loved – a land that bewitches her people with strange spells and mysteries, until they call sweet bitter and bitter sweet. Called the Never Never, the Maluka used to say, because they who have lived in it and loved it, Never Never voluntarily leave it. Sadly enough, there are too many who Never Never do leave it. Others – the unfitted – will tell you that it is so called because they who succeed in getting out of it swear they will Never Never return to it. But we who have lived in it, and loved it, know that our hearts can Never Never rest away from it.” (end quote)

The same passions governed my autobiography entitled In The Middle Of Nowhere published in 1998. I believe it is vital that in another ninety years, the bush or rural woman records her story the way it is at that time in our beloved Northern Territory.

Today, with the dawn of the new millennium, some things remain unchanged. We are the current bush-folk of the Never Never, the custodians of the land, who chose to live and love and work in the heart of Australia, because that is where we belong. We are committed.

On the other hand, we know that those of us who have not embraced inevitable change have not survived. Rural Territorians and Australians have of necessity forged partnerships with each other, with Mother Earth, the environment and fellow traders. We have the most powerful connections and partnerships with our land, our livestock and our products. We have integrity.
Before I traverse the fascinating pathways of history and progress, it is time for reflection. The tyranny of distance today takes on a new meaning. Several months ago, our helicopter mustering pilots, one of whom was my son Michael, whilst mustering a remote paddock of 556 square kilometres, discovered a body hanging from a tree on our property. An apparent suicide, but the circumstances were most bizarre. A lonely death. We were sad, uneasy, and we slept fitfully.

Exactly one week later, the dreadful Barrow Creek abduction and disappearance of Peter Falconio occurred, and we realised the Outback would never be safe again.

On September 11th the universe changed for everyone. Our Prime Minister and Mrs Howard and son Tim were profoundly affected by the terrorists' attacks, cancer of a hideous dimension, because they were in the United States at the time. But in effect we were all there – unable to comprehend, crying with broken hearts because humankind had been betrayed by its own.

With further corporate collapses occurring and the worldwide war against terrorism underway, tough times multiply for us all, no matter who we are and where we live. In this unforeseen time of tragedy and uncertainty, it is up to each of us not just to function, but also to focus and lead, to uphold our reasons for existence, which are to nurture and care, to help and heal, and to love.

From earliest memories, I was enchanted by the magic of words and the power of the pen. I devoured books with an insatiable appetite and often read in bed at night by torchlight beneath the eiderdown, because how could I possibly go to sleep without knowing what happened to *The Famous Five* or *The Seven Little Australians*?

Even as a young child, I had two dominant dreams: I wanted to marry a farmer and one day when I was a very old lady, I would write my autobiography. How blessed I am to have both fulfilled.

The rest of the world can be forgiven for perceiving all Australians as residents of the land they call "down under", but I come from a land within that land, a country where only the tireless and the fearless survive. The intensifying build up to the Wet Season heats the blood in one’s veins almost to boiling point, until gigantic clouds form to bring life-saving rains, rains that transform desolate landscapes into nutritious grasses.

A land of never ending horizons, never ending until the earth and sky meet; a land where the intimacy between the vibrant innovative inhabitants defies the distance that separates us.

Where is this magical place? It is the Outback, my home, our country.

How then did I earn the privilege to call it home?

My journey commenced in 1963 at St Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney, where as an 18 year old, second year trainee nurse, I commenced night duty in Ward 3. Having read the records and reports, I introduced myself to the patients and asked that they help me with their names. The patient directly before me led the response. His smile was big enough to light the universe. He lay in an extended plaster bed, which engulfed his body but obviously not his spirit, because he chuckled and said: "I'm big bad John."

Over the ensuing three months, I learned much about the strapping young stockman from way up north and was constantly amazed by his commitment to a way of life that was totally foreign to me. He talked about hobbles, Condamine bells and mustering big mobs of cattle across vast tracts of land. The size of his cattle station home, 2400 square miles, was quite incomprehensible and when I suggested he must have a diversity of skills, he winked and replied: "Well, I can ride a bit and fight a bit and skite a bit."

I had never met anyone quite like him. He told me that he was a true blue Aussie as his ancestor had arrived on the third fleet. His family founder, James Underwood, was a convict sentenced to seven years
in the penal colony for stealing goods to the value of thirty-nine shillings. Even more astonishing was his news that the nearby Sydney suburb of Paddington was named after Paddington House, the English home of the same James Underwood. Apparently Underwood Street and Underwood Lane in the same suburb were also named after the Underwood family founder. A few nights later, John explained that following the arrival of Joseph Underwood and the emancipation of James, the brothers went on to invest in wide tracts of farming land. Their businesses included boat building, shipping coal from Newcastle, sealing, the establishment of the Sydney Distillery and even a primitive banking enterprise which issued its own currency. This impressive family history gave "entrepreneurs" a whole new meaning.

John also told me about his mates in the Territory, they were all handy ringers he explained to one who was none the wiser. At annual bush race meetings, they concertinaed friendships into a brief few days. To celebrate the luxury of being together, they socialised in the best way they knew – a few yarns over a few drinks. When John mentioned that he was a top member of a pick up team, I raised both eyebrows. He hastily added: "as in rodeos and camp drafts of course." To me Randwick sounded a lot more civilised, but possibly a lot less fun.

One morning as I was going off duty, Geoff, the young quadriplegic patient in the next bed, called me over and whispered: "He's going to marry you, you know. Told me so on your first night here." I smiled. This was no cause for excessive excitement or loss of sleep. We nurses were always aware of the emotional fragility and gratitude of our patients and the various ways these feelings surfaced.

However I was surprised when five days after big John left Sydney, I received a postcard: "I think you're a bit of a darling. Love John."

And so began our correspondence. As weeks turned into months, intermittent letters became regular and the dears changed to darlings. After two whole years, I felt it was time to reassess our friendship. John reminded me he'd been to Sydney and insisted that I head north.

The reluctance of my parents to endorse a visit to an ex-patient who was also a non-Catholic living in one of the most remote parts of the Northern Territory, Australia, the world, was hardly surprising. After lengthy discussions, an unexpected compromise was reached – my younger brother Johnny, who had just completed his Leaving Certificate, would accompany me as my chaperone. Imagine how he felt!

We had never been far from home and all of a sudden brother and sister were airborne, viewing with reverence a whole new perspective of the incredible vastness of the inland. I remember so vividly that hellishly hot January and when we landed in Alice Springs, I wondered why the tarmac hadn't melted. The incredible fiery hues of the Red Centre pulsed hotly through the haze of heat and when we booked into our overnight accommodation, Sydney seemed grey and far removed.

Next morning I dressed carefully for the flight to Inverway Station. Wearing my newly purchased white crimplene suit, with matching white shoes, white stockings, white hand bag and white lip stick, I was as ready as I ever could be. Prepared? Never!

We were the only passengers aboard the Connellan mail plane. This historic airline was named after its founder, Edward John Connellan AO CBE. A great visionary, pioneer and pastoralist were just some of the attributes of this unique Territorian. A passionate advocate for the Outback and the Northern Territory, Eddie Connellan's mail runs and medical evacuation services had revolutionised the lives of station people and those in remote communities.

We landed at Yuendumu, before bumping through lumpy skies across the Tanami Desert to Hooker Creek, now called Lajamanu. There the Aborigines stared in astonishment at the tourist who looked more like a ghost. Little black fingers clutched and plucked at my stockings. I walked faster, but there was nowhere to go.
Having finally landed at John’s family property airstrip, we were confronted by a welcoming committee consisting of a giant calico motionless windsock. Dear God, I thought, there’s no one home. In the city, everything happens instantly. With a sense of concern, I squinted impatiently in every direction and eventually made out in the distance the shape of a vehicle within a huge cloud of billowing dust. As it slowed on approach, so the red particles of dust gravitated towards me with determination. It was as though someone had upturned a gigantic saltshaker crammed with red dust all over me. John’s huge smile of welcome was the only visible white. Suddenly it was as though I was back in an air pocket, only this time it was my heart that was in free fall.

Impressions did however extend beyond the man, the man who was no longer the patient, but the one who understood and worked his land. How overwhelming was the absolute desolation, impenetrable vastness, blistering heat, ferocious flies, relentless glare and the drought, the drought, the drought. How overpowering was the tenacity of those who carved out their existence in that wilderness, always with indomitable spirit.

On our second morning, John announced a surprise for the two Sydney siders, an outing, he said. Minutes later, the battered sturdy Willy’s jeep lurched across the drought stricken land. It followed a track visible only to the concerned yet somehow contented stockman anchored behind the vibrating steering wheel.

Hours later, we shuddered to a halt and feeling thoroughly shaken stepped down beside a parched creek bed.

Then with a broad grin of excitement, he extended huge arms like the giant blades of a windmill and stated: “See that county in front now? That’s the headwaters of the Victoria River. When I get married, I’m going to build my own place there, my own cattle station.”

I saw only never ending horizons devoid of man-made interruptions.

"Poor bloody woman," I muttered.

We devoured corned beef slabs trapped between thick freshly baked chunks of bread in silent contemplation.

"Cup of tea?" the strapping young stockman asked.

He tossed the tealeaves into the bubbling water, picked up the boiling billy with his well-worn hat, then swung it around vigorously.

I repeated with greater conviction: "Poor bloody woman."

Later that week, our host declared that he planned to visit his relations in the Kimberley to help them shift some cattle. When he promised us an entertaining trip, Johnny and I looked at each other and wondered just what lay ahead.

Despite the crippling drought, we crossed through strangely beautiful country into Western Australia. Onwards we drove through the tortuous hills preceding the former old gold mining town of Halls Creek, then through new Halls Creek and beyond, until many miles later we arrived, covered and almost smothered in red dust, at Springvale Station. It was the home of John’s Auntie Olive and Uncle Tom Quilty, pioneer cattleman and poet of renown. John had already explained that it was Uncle Tom who, in 1950, had offered the Underwoods a new life in northern Australia, far removed from their Queensland beginnings.
Apparently it was Tom’s brother Paddy who first took up Kimberley country in 1917, when he bought Bedford Downs in partnership with his father and brothers Tom and Reg. Having fallen in love with the beautiful horses that Captain Bradshaw had imported from New Zealand, Paddy then purchased Bradshaw and Coolibah Stations in the Northern Territory. Following Paddy’s tragic death from appendicitis, these two properties were left to Tom. When Tom and Olive moved to Coolibah and Bradshaw, it was said to be the largest tract of land ever held by a single operator in Australia.

The Quiltys subsequently sold these two Territory properties to purchase Springvale, three hundred thousand plus acres in size. Tom’s sons Rod, Basil and Mick owned cattle stations called Lansdowne, Bedford Downs and Ruby Plains respectively. Including Inverway Station, the Underwood and Quilty families ran a lot of country, about four and a half million acres in fact. This family history that seemed impressive in Ward 3, was by now completely captivating.

History of a different kind would be created the following year of 1966. To ensure safe delivery of the 1500 bullocks he sold to Australian icon RM Williams, Uncle Tom Quilty personally drove them to their Queensland destination. Upon arrival Tom, over a few snorts of rum, reminded his mate Reg that to ride one hundred miles was simply the order of the day, whether it be to the nearest water or to deliver a message. To enshrine against change and to ensure that the endurance of the stockman be immortalised, they established the Tom Quilty Endurance Ride. Sponsored by Tom to the tune of $20,000 the trophy contains more gold than the Melbourne Cup. Today the Tom Quilty Gold Cup continues to attract the toughest riders and sturdiest mounts in the country.

All too quickly it was time for my brother and me to return to the familiarity of Sydney, where bustling layers of people strained and streamed through the claustrophobic concrete jungle. Family and friends were anxious for our impressions, which varied enormously.

And so it was that hundreds more letters over the following three years were exchanged before the Northern Territory cattleman and his city nurse celebrated their engagement at the Kimberley Hotel, Halls Creek. Six months later, we were married at St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney. Both cultures got a "Guernsey". Then in a red Bedford truck loaded with six tea chests of wedding presents, we drove for days and days and days to our new home – a bough shed on the banks of a dry creek bed.

How could there have been any signposts for the new bride? There wasn’t a coil of wire let alone a fence, no building, no herd of cattle. However, knowing that our love would make all things possible, I was undeterred by the challenges of building and developing from scratch, our own cattle station in the middle of nowhere, as indeed it was.

But how could I, how can any of us see around corners and anticipate heartaches and hardships, victories and joys? There are no words to describe our anguish and grief when we lost our first-born son Martin to leukaemia when he was just nine months old. Yet somehow, somehow as other beautiful babies, school books, fence lines and paddocks merged, I managed to find my place in that new world – ever mindful of the words of pioneer Patrick Durack: "Cattle Kings ye call us? Then we are Kings in Grass Castles that may be blown away upon a puff of wind."

Our new place sprawled the headwaters of the historic Victoria River which meanders five hundred miles to the Timor Sea, the river named by Lieutenant John Stokes in 1839 after her most gracious Majesty, the Queen. Every year the blackfellas in John’s stock camp would ask: “When we bin musta that ribren country next time, Muluga?” Whitefellas also referred to it as the river end of Inverway, even though it was the river beginning. When I understood the origin of the name Riveren, I gave up trying to add a "d", being the stickler for grammar that I am. Riveren was perfect.

The gradual development of "further out" revolved around musters. I never tired of watching the preparations as John organised the packing of everyone’s gear, cooking utensils and food rations into pairs of pack bags. He selected packsaddles for packhorses and mules, with small packsaddles for mules.
and larger ones for the horses. Des Leahy was the horse tailer who took charge of these reliable beasts of burden. With his plant of at least one hundred horses, Des Leahy and another blackfella rode ahead to cross unchartered country they seemed to know like the back of their hands. John followed with twenty Aboriginal stockmen and old Duncan, the ingenious stock camp cook. Their excitement and sense of freedom were evident as they welcomed another opportunity to outwit the mob. I sensed their powerful bond, an invisible cord of respect and instinct and coordination between each other and between man and beast.

They worked long hard days, away from the homestead, or bough shed in our case, for weeks on end, mustering unfathomable distances of unfenced land. At day’s end the Aborigines squatted in the semi darkness and muttered in their own dialect, whilst John’s sole companion was the crackly voice from a portable wireless, whose aerial was optimistically flung over the highest bush. On a good night he’d receive the cricket score or news from radio Australia. Bread, beef and billy tea were the staple stock camp diet. These were the days that all too quickly have become history.

While mustering boundary areas, stockmen from the neighbouring station attended the muster, to give a hand before taking their cattle home. One such friend for life is Tony Clark, seen here in the Wave Hill stock camp at Catfish Waterhole in 1960, typical of the way it was.

John had previously identified the number of holdings owned by the British family, the Vesteys, namely Sir Edmund and Lord Vestey. Since the turn of the century, they had purchased almost an unbroken chain of cattle stations from Flora Valley in Western Australia right across the Northern Territory to the Katherine area. Apparently the original inhabitants of Inverway, the Farquharson brothers, had sold to the Leahy brothers on the understanding that the property never be sold to Vesteys. Hence Inverway became known as "in the way".

In the mid 1960’s, Vincent Lingiari led the walk off from Wave Hill station to nearby Wattie Creek. The strike by the Aborigines for equal pay continued on and off for years. It changed the composition of stock camps on many cattle stations and was the beginning of the Land Rights Movement. Eventually the “sit down” area was surrendered by Vesteys and granted to the Gurindji people. Most of us recall the poignant television image of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam trickling soil through the fingers of a dignified Vincent Lingiari, proudly representing his people.

There seems to be a perception by some that Vesteys were unfair employers. There also seems to be limited understanding about the contentment of the extended Aboriginal families who were completely supported on the stations where the stockmen worked. Walkabout was the ultimate luxury.

However the winds of change were inevitable as our indigenous people sensed the need for self-determination. The strike could have happened anywhere. In their ongoing pursuit of progress, we must support these people to identify their needs and make the necessary decisions for their preferred future.

As overseer of Wave Hill Station way back then, Tony Clark told me the story of how he and another well-known identity of the day, Ralph Hayes, discovered a mob of perishing cattle. Having no men on hand to relocate them, they went to the blackfella walk out mob at Wattie Creek. They greeted Vincent Lingiari, who had been in Ralph’s stock camp, in the usual affectionate manner; "Goodaye Eni Mulloo". When he heard about their troubles, Vincent told his sons Victor, Peter and Harry and ‘nuther fella Algie to go help Ralph and Dorney shift em cattle.’ A deep respect and friendship existed then, and still exists today, between these men and their families who worked cattle and country side by side.

The significant involvement and investments of the Vestey empire, including meatworks and the live cattle trade, in northern Australia were unquestionable. The last of the Vestey properties were sold in 1992. Today there are numerous Aboriginal owned pastoral properties purchased with Federal monies and mining royalties and vested as Inalienable Freehold. The successful management by Aborigines of these properties is vital to the strength of the cattle industry in the Northern Territory.
Inevitable and dramatic changes in cattle management were also being adopted towards the late 60’s and early 70’s. Gary Mextead, a pioneer of aerial mustering with fixed wing aircraft, arrived unexpectedly at Riveren to give John a demonstration flight. John had not long since obtained his private pilot’s licence and was instantly impressed with this new effectiveness of controlling cattle from the sky. Helicopter mustering quickly followed with John Weymouth’s Heli-Muster Operation at Victoria River Downs revolutionising mustering operations far and wide. My husband became one of those original "aerial cowboys", whose flying skills combined with knowledge of cattle and the land justified the additional mustering costs.

However, while John was away mustering, I always worried about my babies. What would happen to them if something happened to me? Consequently they learned to speak on the two way radio and change a tyre almost before they could walk, because it was all about survival, it is still all about survival. From infancy our little ones contributed to the development of our cattle station home situated 1000 kilometres from Darwin, or 600 kilometres south west of Katherine. Chubby little fingers helped plant trees and lawn, and keen eyes followed tracks and weather patterns. Their childhood was in a way an apprenticeship as they reared poddy calves and handled responsibility with a maturity well beyond their years – and always with much love and laughter.

Our children seldom had interaction with any other youngsters in our neighbourhood that extended for hundreds of kilometres. Playmates were cuddly crawling puppies, leaping grasshoppers, assorted moths, beautiful butterflies and all things of the earth. Their calves and other pets often underwent identity crises, as the much-loved animals thought they belonged to the human family.

But even in the bush, or particularly in the bush, formal education is necessary and so it was with a degree of trepidation that I converted a section of our sleep out verandah into a schoolroom. Our correspondence lessons came from the biggest classroom in the world, Katherine School of the Air, four times the size of the United Kingdom. Originally a branch of the South Australian Correspondence School, it was the first School of the Air in Australia to operate independently of the Royal Flying Doctor Service or any other network.

The mother teacher conflict was inevitable during our eighteen years in our home schoolroom. It was up to each of us to make it work. Four hungry impressionable minds, four youngsters leaping out of their skins with energy and intelligence. One morning I felt a little extra discipline was necessary and announced to my two sons and daughters that they should march from the breakfast table out to school. "What's march?" they asked and so I showed them how to march. Despite the need for flexibility, there were rules and more rules, all kinds of rules. There were to be no nouns without preceding adjectives and no sentence should ever ever end with a preposition. One evening, feeling particularly weary, I selected a book that was no-one’s favourite for their bedtime story. One inimitable son asked: "Mum, why did you bring the book I didn’t want to be read to out of up for?" Did you count the number of prepositions?

As the correspondence Social Studies Sets or lesson books concentrated on South Australia, we substituted more relevant lessons. Our children loved learning about home – a treasure trove of history and adventure.Amongst their most admired heroes were the three pioneering Farquharson brothers, Archie, Harry and Hughie, pictured here with an unknown mate. They were nephews of the legendary explorer and Boss Drover, Nat Buchanan, who had founded Wave Hill Station in 1883. It was in 1894 that the Farquharsons took up Inverway Station. How often we read in Tom Cole’s book *Hell West and Crooked* how the Farquharson brothers drove 1000 store bullocks, four days without water, 110 miles across the infamous Muranj Track. It was in the 1930’s when there were no bores along stock routes.

(Quote) “That awful lancewood and bulwaddy, and 1000 thirsty bullocks walking through the night, a hair breadth from disaster. As they rode they talked to the bullocks as only a cattleman can. They talked to their horses, too, and cursed the scrub and the dark and the failing waterholes, and they prayed: perhaps there was a God somewhere."
Daylight came and they were still in that woeful scrub. The cattle were walking determinedly, no longer
snatching at tussocks of grass. Thirst was beginning to show. Neither was there any lowing, the bullock’s
way of talking to each other; they walked silently with nearly a mile between the leaders and the tail.

Now they had to keep the cattle walking. As the sun rose higher they slowed the cattle, but they had to
keep them moving. The day passed all too slowly and dusk crept on them…

It was now two miles from the tail-enders to the leaders; the only sound was the padding of hooves and a
low moaning noise. Cattle sweat through their tongues, but there was no saliva coming from these
beast’s mouths; nothing but a muted moan.

Hour after hour the bullocks plodded on with some kind of indefinable faith in the men who were keeping
them in the direction of water. In the late afternoon of the fifth day the leaders smelt the Newcastle Waters
lagoon. The bullocks broke into a trot…..The poor brutes plunged in and drank and drank and
drank….Four hours later, the last bullock staggered into that waterhole. Each beast had arrived; they
hadn’t lost one.” (end of quote)

A heart stopping story our children still cherish, a story about stockmanship and cattle care at its best.
There can be no adventure story more gripping and no achievement more awesome.

Over the school of the air radio, I organised and produced Jack Hibberd’s wedding satire play “Dimboola”,
with on air rehearsals becoming almost impossible as the Wet Season static increasingly drowned out our
voices. From my location near the West Australian border, I tried to hear Astrid, the flower girl, sing and
tap dance “Rubber Duckie” over her radio 300 kilometres away to my north east. A further 300 kilometres
east, the schoolteacher in town played the piano accompaniment. Spread right across the Top End, my
thespians, some of whom had never met, could not see each other, barely hear each other, continued to
faithfully practice their lines over the radio, even though they were mostly just talking to themselves.
Ultimately at the end of six months, we performed live in Katherine for three consecutive nights. That
remarkable production proved a resounding victory over distance and isolation and restrictive
communications. When the ABC television programme *A Big Country* captured the story, Katherine
School of the Air was truly placed on the national stage and the fund raising account was overflowing.

However thespian fever was unquenchable. The following year I organised a mammoth Territory Talent
Quest, where the most unlikely people were cajoled into performing outrageous roles. John Underwood’s
rendition of Jeanette McDonald miming *Wunderbah* with a Nelson Eddie look alike, proved conclusively
the versatility and generous spirit of toughened battlers who work the land.

In 1990, we were still performing at the Katherine Hotel Motel, or Kirbys, which had become by then the
unofficial Opera House of the Northern Territory. Within the heart of Sherwood Forest, Robin Would If
Robin Could raged for three nights robbing from the rich and the poor for the joint fund raising account of
Katherine School of the Air and the Isolated Children’s and Parents’ Association.

To celebrate the Golden Anniversary of the Brahman breed in Australia, I organised a gala dinner called
The Brahman Bash at the Diamond Beach Hotel Casino in 1994. The highlight was the auction of
Newcastle Waters Buster, a two year old, 750 kilogram grey Brahman bull, donated from Mr Kerry
Packer’s owned Newcastle Waters Station. Mrs Ann Chang was present to receive the auction proceeds
on behalf of The Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute in Sydney. I had known Victor Chang at St
Vincent’s Hospital and this new most worthy cause linked the bush and the big smoke in a powerful way.
We have demonstrated over and over again that isolation is not a deterrent. Everything is possible.

Various diseases have threatened the cattle industry over the years. Red Water and Pleuro- Pneumonia
ravaged large numbers of cattle in the droving days. The impact of those particular diseases influenced
directly the birth of the road train movement. The Murranji track, also known as the Drovers’ Ghost Track,
was still the main stock route until the 1960’s when road transport took over and it became a beef road. My arrival as a new bride in the remote outback coincided with the end of the droving days and the end of an era in the Northern Territory.

The transport industry was developed by one of John’s best mates, Noel Buntine. Noel, a pioneer of great vision and determination, contributed enormously to the development of road trains and beef roads. As a long term member and chairman of the Pastoral Land Board, he batted for us on another level. This body was superseded in 1992 by the Northern Territory Pastoral Land Board, of which Noel became inaugural Chairman. He and John shared another passion – horse racing. They spent years and dollars selecting and breeding the best bloodlines and contributed to our important racing industry in countless ways.

When I first met John, he was President of the Kimberley Goldfields Amateur Jockey Club, the historic name for the Halls Creek Race Club. Noel held executive positions on the Alice Springs and Darwin Turf Clubs and was known as the father of the Katherine Turf Club. It must be remembered that for decades, the social and cultural fabric of the bush revolved around bush race meetings, where station people celebrated their annual outings and get togethers, where youngsters rode ponies in gymkhanas and one and all competed in camp drafts and rodeos.

These race meetings were more than a hobby or sideline. Station people bred their own horses with knowledge and planning. Although the competition was friendly enough, no one raced to come second. I was astounded at the detailed preparation for the race ball, where women without exception wore specially made gowns and three quarter length satin gloves. There was always a flurry and a scramble before the Belle of the Ball dance loomed. It seemed there was little interest in second placings in these stakes as well. When John’s horse Willie Win won, I was presented with a much envied race trophy – a gas iron and collapsible ironing board. In combination with my kerosene fridge and 32-volt mix master, my domestic progress was breathtaking.

Following Noel Buntine’s sudden death in 1994, a section of the Buchanan Highway was renamed the Buntine Highway. A twenty-three tonne granite boulder with an inlaid bronze plaque featuring an inscribed B-model road train now marks the corner of the Victoria Highway and the Old Delamere Road to Top Springs. With the crossing of the Buchanan and Buntine Highways at Top Springs, Boss Drover and Road train Pioneer will be remembered for all time.

From our primitive beginnings at Riveren, we planned our herd for this harsh environment by infusing Bos Indicus into our nucleus herd of Shorthorn cattle. Brahman cattle, Australia’s Number One tropical breed, are tick, parasite and heat resistant. With ideal temperaments, Brahmans are also intelligent, inquisitive and low maintenance creatures. In those early years our turn off cattle, which were four to five year old fat bullocks, went predominantly to the meatworks in Katherine or Wyndham. We were unaware then just how well poised we eventually would be to meet the future demands of the Live Cattle Export Markets. Brahmans on boats to overseas destinations would prove the salvation of the northern cattle families.

Aerial mustering became an imperative factor in the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Programme. Pastoralists were all required to regularly muster and test cattle until eventually the status of the herd and property reached the required level of “confirmed free” for two consecutive tests. Unmusterable cattle were destroyed of necessity and the outcome was ultimately a more manageable herd. However, it was not until 1992 that the Northern Territory was declared Tuberculosis free under the national programme. Australia was already Brucellosis free. It was a great milestone for industry with the erection of new fences and the adoption of a new accountability. The significance of a disease free herd has never been more paramount than right now, with a strong and diverse international demand for our beef.

I love where I live. This ancient land that has claimed us is stunningly beautiful, totally demanding, but also treacherous and unforgiving. The Aboriginal families who lived and worked beside us demonstrated their unique brand of loyalty and friendship. We’ve taught each other many things and we all remain inextricably linked by our empathy with the land. When John was repeatedly and savagely gored by a wild
scrub bull, the pint sized Aboriginal stockmen, with little regard for their own safety, saved his life. Just ten months later, big John, inveterate cattleman and would be invincible all rounder, went for a quick fly in our Cessna 182 to check the bores - and did not return. All night long I searched and prayed, prayed and searched, trying to explain to God that I needed John more than He.

Thus in cheating death numerous times, John’s survival has reinforced the importance of now. Inevitable stumblings, mountainous hurdles, and at times, sheer unadulterated terror have left us counting more thankfully and frequently than ever, all of our blessings.

It is now thirty-three years since John built me my first toilet, three sheets of iron around a hole in the ground. When I asked for a fourth for a door, he laughed: "Who on earth is going to see you out here?" Who indeed!

Our numerous steps and stairs of development are noteworthy. On day one I was not unduly worried about the fact that I didn’t have a house, or homestead as they called it, but anxiously enquired when I could expect my telephone. It was thirteen years before we graduated from the Royal Flying Doctor 2 way radio telegram network to a radiotelephone. Even though that was a cumbersome system, it signalled dramatic progress.

The Royal Flying Doctor network was a lifeline and indeed a way of life for bush people for many years. There was the midday "galah session” when the airwaves were open for general communication. Through the Base Director, emergency calls and telegrams, we kept in touch with the outside world, with news ranging from informative to amusing to heartbreaking. In 1977 we heard with horror how an aircraft stolen in Wyndham was deliberately flown into the Connair (the renamed Connellan airlines) Operations Manager’s office in Alice Springs. This terrible act of revenge from a mentally disturbed and disgruntled former employee resulted in the tragic death of Eddie Connellan’s son Roger, two engineers and a female employee. The EJ Connellan story is captured in his book Failure of Triumph. Today the Connellan Airways Trust provides financial assistance to geographically isolated individuals for appropriate projects.

The Katherine School of the Air also facilitated communication links for those of us who travelled to town infrequently. The roads were basic, air-conditioned vehicles non-existent, and we were totally absorbed with our workload at home. Some famous folk who spoke to our geographically isolated children from the school of the air studio in Katherine include: Malcolm Fraser as Federal Minister for Education, Princess Alexandra, Sir John Kerr and Mother Teresa.

During his flight aboard a RAAF Boeing 707 en route Darwin to Alice Springs, Pope John Paul the second spoke to three Katherine School of the Air pupils, one of whom was our daughter Becky. This unique communication for the Pope was routine for the children, illustrated by the Pope’s omission to say "over". This caused the media coverage crew to call "cut" and start again. That moving segment of the Pontiff’s visit highlighted the remoteness of the Northern Territory to the rest of the world.

I remember so clearly the long years of out station status and our subsequent relief and elation when Riveren eventually became a separate lease. The Riveren brand was struck – JUT – how appropriate I mused, John Underwood and Terry. Wrong! It stood for John Underwood Territory, the latter being a compulsory requirement at the time.

Our day of independence, 1st July 1978, coincided with that of the Northern Territory. On the Esplanade in Darwin the Northern Territory flag, incorporating the three official Territory colours – black, white and ochre, - and the official Territory floral emblem – Sturt’s rose – was flown for the first time at the ceremony marking self -government. It was acknowledged with a 19-gun salute from HMAS Derwent.

The Australian Parliament had passed the Northern Territory self-government act and 35-year-old Paul Everingham rose to prominence as the first Chief Minister of the Northern Territory.
At home we celebrated Independence Day for the Riveren Underwoods and all Territorians. With optimism, commitment and love, we raised our glasses: "Here’s to Riveren and the Northern Territory".

From *Nowhere to Somewhere* was becoming a reality for my homeland and my beloved Riveren.

After what seemed like an eternity, we finally received our own weekly mail plane service. These were some of the pillars of progress that revolutionised the life of one wife, mother and aspiring cattlewoman, intent on conquering the challenges of living a long long way from the rest of the world.

Our developments defy the sentiments that our beginnings really only seem like yesterday. Today our four young adult children reflect their grass roots upbringing; each displaying resilience, integrity, loyalty and an attachment to home that defies definition. Marie, Patrick, Michael and Becky all have bush souls and are never far from home. Riveren boasts a herd of 15,000 Brahmans spread over our 3000 square kilometre property. Despite dramatic changes in communication and management practices, it is still a long way between watering points for cattle and we are still one thousand kilometres from the Darwin wharf.

Through our long term involvement with the buoyant Live Export trade, we have experienced first hand international relationships reaching new heights. Mohamed, a Muslim with many wives, resident of Dublin in Ireland, visited us at Riveren to make the final selection of cattle purchased for live delivery to Egypt. On another occasion, John and I followed our cattle to feed lots in Indonesia. At Lampung we met the extended families who cared for smaller pens of cattle under a local government programme. Grandmothers, grandfathers and grandchildren were fascinated by my photos, which showed the birthplace of the cattle they now called their own. Whether we like it or not globalisation is a reality. However there can be no room for complacency, for there is much hard work to be done. The challenges that lie ahead would probably daunt our ancestors.

Our industry is making new demands even on old hands as to embrace sustainability is to embrace viability. Hobbles have been replaced by portable yards and bronco panels by cradle and crush. Efficiency, the name of the game, must be assessed against the cost. All the changes I have witnessed over the decades are ground breaking and history making, even to the composition of present day stock camps. A multi-skilled workforce is needed to cope with the way it is.

Today escalating complex issues confront us as the wheels of life spin out of control for too many. We must evaluate principles and priorities as we encourage new generations to take up the baton beyond the bitumen. We remain focused on integrity of product as with blood, sweat and tears we continue to contribute to the economy of our mighty nation.

In her classic saga of Australia’s far north aptly entitled *The Territory*, Ernestine Hill writes that (quote): "that the bad and beautiful Territory is not the youngest of the Australian family, as many believe, but the third eldest. It was founded in 1824, following New South Wales and Tasmania. Nameless it is still a Northern Territory, as once it was of South Australia,..." It is, she explained (quote) "...the problem child of empire, land of an ever-shadowed past and an ever shining future, of eternal promise that never comes true...." Her marvellous book, first published in 1951, was suggested as a necessity for the swag of every Australian. I suggest that every swag should now contain a second book, because *In The Middle of Nowhere* documents the gap from then until now, highlighting phenomenal perseverance and progress. My publisher and literary agent are adamant that my autobiography, now in 12th edition, is destined to be an Australian classic and we see this as a triumph for the bush and its people, all those whom we represent.

Despite the fact that Statehood slipped through our fingers, the Northern Territory is coming of age. The last Australian frontier is also the gateway to Asia. Representing about a sixth of the Australian continent, with less than three quarters of one per cent of the total population, the Northern Territory is nonetheless
poised for a challenging, prosperous and exciting future. With the youngest population in Australia, we weave a unique tapestry of riches and opportunities.

In the last decade, the Northern Territory livestock exporters have increased their trade by more than 500 per cent. In the calendar year 2000, the direct value of the Northern Territory cattle industry was $172 million, comprised of $116 million for live export cattle, $50 million for interstate cattle movements and $5 million for abattoir slaughter cattle. Moreover for the year 2000, our industry also generated an estimated additional $124 million indirect value through its linkages to other sectors in the economy. There is also an often overlooked opportunity cost created by responsible land managers. We committed, intelligent pastoralists are in effect permanent caretakers, on site to monitor and administer, adjust stocking rates according to the seasons, and ultimately adopt suitable projects to improve the sustainability of rangeland utilisation.

Through our representative body, the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association, industry and government enjoy active consultation and rapport. These relationships advance industry consolidation and development. Today industry and community events place enormous pressure on our home programmes. There are too many activities beckoning us to town too often.

Ownership of our vast properties is constantly changing as increasing financial pressures are forcing families to sell. With famous names like Durack, Quilty and Vestey becoming legendary all to quickly, one reveres even moreso the history makers and contributors of yesteryear.

Today the commitment of Consolidated Pastoral Company, Heytesbury Holdings Ltd, Stanbroke Pastoral Company, North Australian Pastoral Company, Australian Agricultural Company and the American investors Tejus Land and Cattle Company, amongst others, reflects a vote of confidence in our industry.

Riveren too is coming of age. We have expanded our property and are continually upgrading our cattle herd. In this land of contrasts and contradictions, we continue to give our all. There remains a glorious sense of freedom tempered by accountability. There is the controlling sense of discipline that is vital for survival. There is the majesty of this timeless land.

I look back on our achievements as we have worked, grown and developed; blacks and whites, young and old, in harmony with our land and its products. In this beautiful but unforgiving country, I remain contented and constantly challenged. Our world consists of one stage, Riveren, and we are the sole players. We continue to make our own difficult decisions and must live with them. I have grown in the belief and conviction that one must become of this country in order to survive. Home is everything – our cattle kingdom incorporates schoolroom through to university, workplace, haven, boardroom and ballroom too. At one of my literary functions, a foreigner enquired with frowning concern: "But what do you do for fun?" I tried to explain that the best fun in the world is to enjoy family, friends and animals at home.

In the big scheme of things, 2002 – Australia's Year of the Outback is looming and we are on the countdown for an education, evaluation and celebration of a lifetime. Just as we honour those who lived and died in order that we might follow, so we must uphold their legacy. The Melbourne Cup never fails to bring Australia to a standstill, and we cry unashamedly when our sporting heroes and heroines claim well-deserved victory. But what of yesteryear's legends – our courageous pioneers, overlanders and early settlers?

Sadly no longer the nation that rides on the sheep's back we nevertheless have a growing population dependent on, and perhaps less appreciative of, the vital food chain. Despite the fact that we are the best in the world at what we do, there are school children today who think there is no need for farmers anymore because food can be imported from overseas. By exchanging stories and experiences on a broad scale, we must reduce the country/city divide. It is about different cultures complementing and supplementing, not competing and castigating. God forbid that the heritage of the bush be lost.
As an active Ambassador for Australia’s Year of the Outback, I am driving several projects. The mammoth project, through the cattle industry or more specifically the Northern Territory Cattlemen’s Association, is the erection of a 10 per cent larger than life size bronze icon of stockman on horseback. Representing all that we are and all that we do, the statue will be situated in Katherine, but belong to all Territorians, to all Australians. Sponsors are being eagerly sought, thereby allowing them to express their sense of belonging, to acknowledge our forebears, salute present day Territorians and encourage others to cherish the challenges of tomorrow.

I believe the Outback is inherent in all Australians; it’s as vital to the spirit as the blood pumping through our veins. It is the heartbeat of Australia.

It has been called The Great Australian Loneliness, the Back of Beyond, the Land of Wait–a-While, the Land of the Never Never, the Front Gate of Australia. How privileged we are to call it home. Every day without fail, I take a deep breath and thank God for this beautiful place.

My transition from a city nurse to a bush bird in isolation has been a tumultuous journey, encompassing faith and love, development and dedication, heartaches and joys. I pay tribute to my husband John, my lover, my anchor, my rock, and to our four extraordinary children, Marie, Patrick, Michael and Becky. The love, loyalty, courage and resourcefulness of these five have made for me all things possible.

I remember our friends who have shared this journey and gone on ahead to hand in their spurs to the Supreme Boss. I salute all those who work beside us; all the cogs of the wheel that turn our industry – remote health workers, road train operators, vets and stock inspectors, school of the air staff, mustering pilots, fuel suppliers, remote policemen and numerous others. How fortunate we are in this magnificent country to have the land as our livelihood, family and friends as companions, and faith and love as our tools.

I have experienced an intricate and passionate involvement with the history and culture of the Northern Territory over the past three decades and more. I hope and pray that our children’s children will continue this love affair. Riveren and the Northern Territory have captured our bodies, hearts and spirits.

Throughout all the soul searching, we must pray as never before for world peace.

Against a backdrop of throbbing didgeridoos, pirouetting ballerina-like brolgas and the exhilarating smell of approaching rain, the journey from Somewhere to Everywhere continues.

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Author In The Middle Of Nowhere (Random House 1998)
And Riveren – My Home –Our Country (Random House 2000)
26th November 2001

SLIDES

Ready to Ride
Wondrous Wet
Cover ITMON
Chopper Yarded
Becky foal mares
Build Up
Hospital
Mates in Pub
Pick Up
Cattlemen’s Eyes Gaze
Inverway
Landscape
Budgie Bar
Horses in Pdk
You Look After Me
Wedding
Bough Shed
Michael Cattle Grass
Riding Out
Tony Clark
2 plus1
Calf Branding
Yards Ahead
Cafetaria
Becky Boxing
School
Becky calf Golly
Farquharsons
What a Day
Aerial
John TTQ
RWIRC
Mucca Yards John
On The Move
Kids Gymkhana
Boys HC Races
Best of the Best
John old girls
John Jerome
Mucca xing
Water on the Rocks
Togetherness
Celebrating Life. Love
Kids Windmill
Brahmans
Steady
Dinner Camp
Smoko
Billabong Bliss
Homeward Bound
J T Turkey nest
Marie Jerome
Bush Fillies
Michael cattle
Family