

# An Aussie enlightenment

**Those early years in Australia became a time of revelation and wonder for George. He made the most of them: ‘Land of opportunity’ an over-used, but markedly apt phrase. Blue skies, broad plains, brilliant horizons; a far cry from dark winters and drizzle left behind in Cornwall. We catch up with him, in the outback, on a simmering summer’s day.**

George slammed the door on the *wagon*, sweat pouring down his forehead and blurring his vision, then walked towards the man sitting in the shade of the broad veranda, at the front of an imposing, *weatherboard* farmhouse. It was what they called a homestead in these parts and standard issue for the hard-working *cockies* and their families who owned and worked the land.

*“Hey Bruce,” he called out. “How’s things? Seems pretty bloody hot ‘round here today. What’s the gauge showin’? Any idea?”*

*“G’dday mate,”* came the died-in-the-wool reply. *“About one-twenty, I think. Too bloody hot for workin’, that’s for sure. Come over and pull up a chair. By the look of it, I reckon you could use a nice cold stubbie.”*

With that, the man George had addressed as Bruce, whilst expending the minimum of effort, reached down and drew a small brown bottle from the *eski* beside his seat, then twisted the lid and *pinged* the top, so it soared through the air, landing directly at the feet of the new arrival. George looked down at the bottle top, then with a smile on his face, back to the man.

*“Yeah, don’t mind if I do Bruce. Time to knock off anyway. And you know what they say: ‘a cold one a day keeps the doctor away!’”*

Bruce gave a little chuckle. *“Yep, I think you’re right about that. But maybe two or three is even better.”* Another chortle; then as his visitor sat down. *“Great to see you, George: I was beginning to think you’d scarpered back to pommyland!”*

It was one of the hottest days of the year in outback Australia; the temperature of 120 Fahrenheit that the *cocky* (colloquial name for a farmer in this part of the world) referred to, was equivalent to a Celsius temperature in the mid-40s! It was near the edge of wheat and sheep country; near what was known as *Goyter's Line*, beyond which agriculture turns to arid, and a sometimes-green farm-scape changes to the green and brownish *bush* of the drylands.

This was five years after George had shipped out to Australia as a sixteen-year-old stripling, but now at the still tender age of twenty-one, his job was to oversee, to command, a *territory* something akin to the size of Scotland. Land of opportunity? Well, it was certainly difficult to imagine scaling such dizzy heights in such a short time, within the confines of Mother England.

On arrival at the docks of Port Melbourne five years before, he remembered watching his much older *sister*, her two children and tall blond husband, walking up the gangway to greet him. Did he remember ... or was it the slide photograph he had taken at the time? Probably a bit of both. A bright magenta sky was the order of that early winter's day, which was what he had been led to believe the *land down under* was all about: cloudless skies and endless prospects, in short: *the lucky country! blue*

But it quickly became apparent that it wasn't all sun and surf when he found himself – a week or two later - rugged up in woollen balaklava and gloves, peddling to school through the frosty mornings of a Ballarat winter. The mind-numbing cold came as a rude awakening, which at times seemed to surpass the freezing conditions in faraway Cornwall: the place he had escaped from a couple of months before.

But the frost on his fingers seemed well worth it, as he found himself undergoing a miraculous transformation from wayward schoolboy who had plunged off the rails in the UK, to role-model for the class in Australia. If it had been the UK, he would have joined, and in all probability, led the general misbehavior of his newly acquired classmates. Their sheer daring, on a level he had never witnessed before, startled him. Their exploits included dropping bricks from an upstairs dormitory, into a metal dustbin hidden behind

a cupboard at the back of the classroom, or one particularly fearless lad hiding in a box-like, teacher's desk and swearing loudly, each time the teacher tried to speak. This was insubordination to the extreme!

The place was a Church of England boy's grammar school, designed by the elite, for the elite. Australia prided itself on having such schools for their landed gentry, which mirrored the lofty towers and manicured quadrangles of the *old country*. When George arrived there in the 1960s, the nouveau-riche were beginning to gate-crash the party, such as Jackson (the boy inside the teacher's box-desk) the only son of *Whelan the Wrecker*, the local scrap metal dealer.

When one day the chief pranksters upped the ante and contributed to sending an older, and decidedly English teacher, home on stress leave and out to the greener pastures of retirement, George decided enough was enough, and began to distance himself from the group. He actually felt sorry for the guy, the group's Geography master.

Before their victim entered the class, several of the boys had worked together to document, on the large blackboard, what they titled *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*. When the teacher appeared - a big burly, square-jawed man with a greying crew-cut, but a gentle giant in many ways - he saw what was on the board and flew into an absolute rage: completely out of control and with a pent-up anger, accumulated from all the previous bits of bad behaviour thrown at him by this class in the past. It was a grave insult that they had now denigrated his beloved England (but an unbridled success of course for those boys in the class who had planned the whole operation). The teacher, coincidentally named George, wasn't around much after that.

And then there was *Spense* (when pronounced slowly and with intent, the name even sounded a bit suspect) a forties-something gent, with receding hair, white puffy cheeks and unusually reddish lips, who would cruise around the vicinity of the school in a sleek white car, offering to give lifts and buy sweets. In today's world he would be on some sort of community register, but back in those more innocent days he was passed off as a bit of a *weirdo* whom the most daring of boys liked to torment.

This short stint of school life – it lasted only about six months - was a rapid introduction for George, and something of an eye-opener, to more than thirty years in Australia. It also came as welcome relief from victimization and oppression within the English school system, so that while the errant schoolboy had failed miserably in the UK, he responded with flying colours and top marks in this newly adopted land.

But if he thought the grammar school in Ballarat was something of a no-holds-barred establishment, he was in for an even bigger shock when he moved on to college level, early the next year. There, the staff and students, all males, contrived to launch a *boys-to-men* initiative, which at times exceeded most acceptable norms of what might be termed tertiary education. As example, the induction into the fraternity and inauguration of the toughening-up policy, consisted of a totally out-of-control drinking bash at the house of one of the lecturers. At the end of this beer and vomit-sodden evening, George and many others found themselves unceremoniously loaded onto a pick-up truck – or *ute* as commonly referred to in that part of the world - and driven back, to be dumped outside their rooms at the college. This was like *mana-from-heaven* for the young man from England, who from the age of fourteen, had grown up getting used to drunken nights as a regular part of his insubordinate days, at home in the UK.

On a later occasion, during a two-week booze tour of farms up and down the East Coast of Australia – also part of the *boys-to-men* experiment – he was sitting around the dying embers of a camp fire, with a few others, at about two in the morning, after consuming copious quantities of lager. They were each struggling to find a new even-dirtier ditty to sing, when the principal of the college was presented, spread-eagled in a wheelbarrow, bare chested and with, for some seemingly humorous reason, an enormous Barramundi fish sticking out of his belt. This caused uproarious laughter amongst all the onlookers ... though the principal by that stage had passed out!

This attendance at school and initiation into college - all happening within not much more than six months of landing *down under* - meant that George had managed to gate-crash establishments generally reserved for the privileged few. The tertiary college was

perhaps the best example - a newly established, privately-run, agricultural education institution – which catered for the well-off sons of rich landowners: often prominent people, well connected to the corridors of power. George himself came from a 50-acre dairy farm in the South West of England, but his new mates were heirs to thousands of acres of land that grew beef and sheep and wheat, in the wealthier parts of Australia.

George was indeed something of a stand-out oddity in many ways, with his Beatles-inspired hairdo and broad west-country accent (soon to be replaced by a much more nasal, Aussie twang). His appearance on the role-call of what was only the second year's intake for this college for the wealthy and well-connected, also seemed quite well timed, as if he was the courier of Beatlemania and sixties swinging London, from motherland to the colonies. This culminated in George leading a number of collegemates to attend a Beatles concert in Melbourne - along with 10,000 other screaming teenagers – and driving down the then, super-modern dual carriageway, on the 50-mile trip into Melbourne, as the exalted passenger in aa friend's soft-top MG-TF, at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. Luckily there were no speed cameras back in those heady days, and his silver-spooned mate was a very competent driver.

From the start he was called *Pom* - derived from *Pommy*, the Aussie rhyming slang for *Tommy*: a nickname for British soldiers in the First World War - which was offered up as an affectionate term which bore no malice and George accepted it in the same vein. Indeed, decades later when he attended a re-union of college mates and was introduced by his real name, some of them looked a bit bemused, until one shouted out ... *"Of course, I remember, it's 'Pom'! Great to see you again old cobber."*

On one long summer break between college years, George was given a farm *placement* on a rural block, that whilst only a couple of hundred miles East of a sprawling Melbourne metropolis, was in fact so remote that it might as well have been in the middle of the Simpson Desert! The farm was set in a giant cul-de-sac, carved out of, and - except for the access road – completely surrounded by native bush. Once-a-month shopping expeditions meant a 50-mile journey to the nearest town, way down on the

coast to the South. It turned out to be a fantastic place for a working holiday, with vast expanses of steep, pastured fields (or paddocks as known there) bordering native bushland, and as many koalas, cockatoos, snakes and 'roos, as the numbers of Angus beef and Polwarth sheep, under his charge. Our young intern from college – still only just 18 months out from English schooldays - learnt to ride a horse, drive a car, build a fence and castrate burgeoning fat lambs with his teeth ... along with many other skills.

This secondment also had a couple of very attractive advantages, namely, two teenage daughters, which struck George as another form of *mana-from-heaven*, when he went with their father, his boss, to collect them from the elite girl's boarding school on the outskirts of Melbourne. Then, as a testosterone-filled teenager, he would lay awake in bed each night, dreaming of those same young ladies in the next-door bedroom, but when night turned to day, he never really managed to summon up the courage to turn those night-time thoughts into any sort of reality. As it happened – or did not happen to be more exact - this was probably a very good thing; the guy he was working for, though usually very friendly, could be extraordinarily ruthless at times (which George had experienced on one or two occasions, related simply to everyday farm work).

He graduated from studying with young men who hailed from large country spreads, to actually working on one of those country estates himself: in the wealthy, Western District of Victoria. *Jackeroo* George became his Aussie moniker, which sounded all fine and *Ned Kelly-ish*, but was in fact the lowest form of station hand that one could aspire to. To compensate, the boss, a wonderfully soft-spoken, chain smoking, ex-alcoholic, and his wife - who cooked dreamy mutton chops - looked after George like their own son, though once again there were also a couple of *dreamy* daughters and a particularly alluring housemaid – a sultry 18-year-old of Dutch descent - to complicate matters. The dreamy daughters remained just that, totally out of reach (again probably wisely so); but the tempting housemaid and George did in fact almost come to grips, just before she ran off to become a nun. He was never quite sure, whether their (almost) sexual dalliance had anything to do with her decision to shy away from the demands of the real

world, in favour of the Catholic church and lifelong abstention. Maybe, for our young and conscientious farmhand, it was a sign of times to come.

His main responsibilities as a *jackeroo* were: firstly, to shepherd a flock of 5,000 sheep from paddock to paddock each day (sometimes on horseback, at other times by motorbike); then, to look after the tractor that, at times, he would be told to drive around and around those paddocks, whilst ploughing or planting and such like; and thirdly, to take care of an early model *FJ Holden* car that he would sometimes take out for a spin on the local roads. He didn't do too badly on the first, but failed miserably on the other two, by running the tractor out of oil (the machine suffering a seized engine while he was half asleep at the wheel!), then flying off the road and crashing the old car with no brakes into a track-side ditch.

True to self, Joe, the boss, treated both misdemeanors in his characteristic, laidback style. Running the car off the road, so it had to be pulled back out with a tractor, was one thing - the car was a bit of an old banger anyway - but letting the tractor engine grind to a halt whilst at the wheel, was totally another. The tractor was a valuable asset and any significant down-time would be costly; George really did think he was *up for the chop*, or at the very least a very serious bollocking over this one. But faithful to form Joe looked at the ground for a while, before taking a last drag on his *Camel* - as if searching for inspiration - then throwing the butt down and scratching it out in the dirt, and saying in his usual Aussie drawl:

*“Well, you fucked up there, didn't you George? Let's get the thing fixed, but try not to do it again, or I might be forced to have a word or two with your uncle!”*

George breathed a huge sigh of relief. *“Thanks Joe. Appreciate that. Sorry, I've run out of smokes. Could I 'bott' a Camel?”*

What a cheek: he had just cost the farmer a small fortune in spare parts, not to mention a long delay to work routine, and here he was asking for cigarettes. Joe agreed of course and shook three or four sticks into his hand, before handing them to George, then turning to walk away, already focused on some other pressing matter.

At the time, George thought very little of Joe's reference to his *uncle*, but in hindsight it was quite a telling slip. Joe was in fact talking about John, the man who had become something of a stepfather to George since his arrival in Australia. Joe and John had been best mates for many years, since attending the same Church of England boy's grammar school that George had been sent to, soon after he set foot in Australia. If George had stopped to think why it was that this *uncle* (as Joe had mistakenly called him) – who still had the official designation of brother-in-law attached to his name - had become his benefactor, and such a solid one at that, he might have come up with answers to his own heritage, long before he did eventually find out the truth. It was almost certain that John had confided in Joe, his best friend for thirty years. John had paid for George to travel to Australia, then for the elite grammar fees and his time at the expensive agricultural college. Joe and John were old school friends: hence the job on Joe's farm. He owed this *uncle* a great deal, in terms of his new start to life in the land down under, but he never stopped for a minute to question ... "Why?"

.....