

For Love of My Country

The sun was almost over the horizon on a mid-December morning when I rode through the gate, entry to five thousand acres of Riverina flood-plain, almost completely unscathed from the influence of white-fella interference.

The day before was a complete contrast at my boarding school in Geelong. Finding one's own belongings in a dormitory shared with three others, frenzied stuffing of clothes in bulging suitcases, tying shoes and desert boots onto the handles by their laces, bundling hockey sticks and tennis racquets into a manageable handful, and excited to be seeing my parents again after many weeks of being away from home. The end of year was always a relief.

My school was three and a half hours from home, a 15,000 acre property west of Deniliquin in the Riverina of NSW. Only a couple of years earlier, our family had moved from the ancestral property near Ballarat in Victoria, which had been settled by my ancestors in 1839. They had selected that rich volcanic land under the brow of Mt Buninyong, a reminder of the once ancient fiery landscape this former volcano created. The Scotts were successful farmers with stud Dorset sheep for meat production and dual-purpose Illawarra Shorthorn cattle stud providing milk and meat. Sadly, the latter is now regarded as a heritage breed as fashions in cattle are almost as fickle as those for women.



Bounty from ducks and loganberries

My grandparent's gardens were huge including ornamental areas filled with deciduous varieties which flourished spectacularly in that cold climate. A vast vegetable garden grew an abundance for everyone with excess given to neighbours. Being self sufficient was the norm and, as the eldest, it was my role to collect eggs, carry milk from the dairy, and pick veggies from the garden, the latter under instructions. Late spring held special times when the huge mulberry tree was laden with fruit and we shimmied five metres or more up her branches, wedged ourselves into a fork and crammed our mouths full of these squelchy, messy mouth-marvels. Each November, my family hosted a garden party for the Red Cross and Save the Children, with strawberries and cream fresh from the farm and Mum and Granny Jean baking for days beforehand creating delicacies for the cake stall.

The physical and climatic contrasts between my two homes were stark and, it is true, your physical horizons influence your capacity to think at scale. 'Yuulong', in the volcanic country, was surrounded by undulating hills, often heavily timbered resulting in shortened perspectives as you could not see beyond a certain point. If you can't see beyond a certain point, it is challenging to *think* beyond that point. Imagination is reduced and relationships become strained although, as an eleven-year-old, I didn't take much notice of the tension between the generations.

When we moved to 'Balpool' in the western Riverina, the landscape was the complete opposite to what we left. This was big-sky country, unimpeded by anything but huge *Cameldulensis*, the river red gum trees, hundreds of years old, hugging the banks of the Edward River demarcating the eastern boundary of the property. We were on the riverine plains of NSW which, to new eyes, were endless and filled with possibilities. We had brought our horses and ponies from Victoria and they, too, noticed the differences and enjoyed the very large horse-paddock to the north of the sheds.

Although the gate was heavy, it swung easily in its hinges as I pushed it open from the back of my horse. And so it was, on a mid-December morning when I was 14, I rode into the unscathed river frontage and a huge question confronted me – *‘I know we have to eat, and grow sheep, cattle and crops, but why do we have to sacrifice the natural country in order to do so? Why isn’t there some way where both can exist and every human, plant, animal and fungal species thrive?’*

This question remained unanswered for 30 years and has been the inspiration for why I do what I do - for the love of my country.

A child’s curiosity is a gift and that characteristic has always been dominant in me; exploration of physical realms including termite nests, holes in the ground, the branches of trees, under bark, pools of water, starry nights, clumps of grasses, fingertips into a bird’s nest high up in a tree, under a pony’s hoof, the contents of cow poo, breaking open a duck egg, grooming cattle and horses, caressing just-shorn wool, tasting milk straight from the udder, hand-mixing feeds for my horses, picking sun-warmed fruit from the tree, smelling meat cooking over coals, putting wood into the wood stove, smelling the smoke from different types of timbers, smoking eucalyptus leaves, mowing green grass, finding ingeniously constructed cocoons of moths and butterflies, cuddling newborn piglets and lambs, watching wild ducks land on a dam, wondering at the intricate construction of tiny bird’s nests woven with grasses and spider-webs, watching bees deep in the throats of flowers gathering pollen, watching wriggling maggots. All are textural - kinaesthetically, olfactorally, visually and audially- informing my senses of the natural world and its many realms.

These experiences with the natural world enriched my visceral knowledge inspiring me to know more, more, and more.

Little did I know this was building a vast repertoire of resourcefulness, thought processes, linkages, connections, questions, conundrums, thirst, synapses and relationships that would influence the rest of my life.

The experience when I was 14 resulted in many more questions but I didn’t possess any ability to critically analyse the current farming practices going on around me. Although I’d ask my father and grand- father ‘why are you doing that?’ I simply accepted their answers. This was similar to the sheepdog, Fly in the film ‘Babe’ answering the piglet’s same question with the answer “That’s just the way things are”.

But there was this burning question about the imbalance between production systems where white-skinned humans had forcefully shaped the soils, timber-lines, water-courses and topography to grow grains, seeds, meat and fibres, compared to the river-frontage where there was minimal human-induced disturbance.

From as early as I can remember, I was an avid reader, devouring up to eight books a week, mostly about horses, the Famous Five, then the Billabong series, natural history, Egypt, the Middle East and encyclopaedias both at home then at boarding school. In Year 10, ‘Lord of the Flies’ was compulsory reading and I’m glad our English teacher chose this time in the lives of young, privileged adolescent girls to introduce this profound publication.

To say it had an effect on me was an understatement. I grew up in a comfortable middle-class world where people generally spoke politely to each other and, although there were a few bitchy moments in the boarding house, there wasn’t prolonged animosity. To read about a world without adults and where the innate nature of the boys was unfettered, to even imagine the cruelty shown to Piggy was beyond belief. To my genteel mind and life experiences, I was horrified to learn ‘nice English school boys’ could be such depraved beasts. This shocked my sensibilities to the core and I was told it was simply the survival of the fittest a la Charles Darwin’s theory. ‘This is normal animal behaviour’ I was assured.

From then on, when in the natural world, both domesticated and wild creatures were observed with purpose to see if they naturally displayed similar behaviours to the characters in Lord of The Flies. There were dominant characters in mobs of sheep and cattle but rarely cruelty. There was always a boss mare in the mob, and the same in the chook-house, hence the saying 'the peck-order' but there wasn't ever deliberate cruelty. I learned that human animals are the culprits when it comes to such distasteful traits. I thought it very unfair, and inaccurate, that non-human animals were classified as the cruel creatures. I still haven't ever seen one animal deliberately intimidate or torture another of the same species.

The closest I've seen of torture is a cat playing with its prey, be it a mouse, squirrel, bird, frog or dragonfly. Carnivores kill to eat, not for pleasure yet humans will sadistically torture another person for so-called justifiable reasons to obtain information. Domestic abuse, bullying and violence against women and children reminds me of the thrill Ralph and his cohorts felt when molesting and torturing Piggy – an adrenaline rush of power and control. Non-human animals don't do that.

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At the tender age of six I experienced grief for the first time. For my third birthday, I'd been given a divine little black Labrador pup whom I named Bella, a companion for Dad's golden Labrador, Rover. Bella accompanied us everywhere, even on the annual beach holiday to Point Lonsdale when dogs were still allowed on the beach. The morning ritual consisted of Bella lolloping into the water, frolicking for a few minutes, trotting back to the beach, sniffing out the day's camp site then flopping where she remained for the rest of the day. Dad's beach repertoire was similar to Bella's; he'd saunter into the water, dive in, roll over onto his back, float for a few minutes then lie his towel perpendicular to Bella who became his pillow for the day.

Bella and I explored the farm together, on foot or when I was on my pony Patches and her acute sense of smell identified hiding places of rabbits in logs and dense foliage, and ground-nesting birds in long grasses or reeds. A swim in a dam was de rigour no matter what time of year and I remember Bella as always being happy. She was my constant companion and always ready for an adventure, and something to eat.

One day after walking home from school, excited to tell Mum about what I'd done that day, I was astonished to find her crying. "Bella has died", she spluttered. Dad had found her, and Rover, in the Big Hill paddock, dead. He thought they must have taken a 1080 rabbit bait which had been laid out a few days before.

There was a huge gap on my bed where Bella had slept and the familiar warmth and bulk of her body was missing. Although we'd raised poddy lambs since I was a very little dot and some had lived and some didn't, I was vaguely familiar with death and accepted it as part of life in small-child innocence. But it was the intimacy of my relationship with Bella, spending every day together, trusting each other with mutual loyalty which provided the depth of our relationship. Suddenly, there was an enormous gap, a gaping hole, literally and metaphorically.

Coming home from school, I'd sometimes forget Bella had died and would call her as I came though the garden, anticipating her wriggling black body bursting through the fly-wire door to meet me. Tears would prickle my eyes as I remembered this wasn't going to happen any more and huge sobs would consume me as the physical manifestation of deep grief.

Due to regular Sunday School at the Buninyong Presbyterian Church, I believed she'd gone to heaven, a place always warm and sunny, with dams and beaches to play in and an abundance of her favourite food. It was adjusting to her absence which was so challenging; her joyful spirit was happy but oh, I missed her so much.



Structures of magical trees providing habitats

There's an old saying in farming circles that you prefer either four legs or four wheels, describing your preference for the company and working with animals or machinery. I'm definitely the former and what a gift it is to continuously learn life lessons from horses, cattle, dogs, sheep, pigs, many species of birds, and a variety of two-six-and-eight-and multiple-legged critters including kangaroos, possums, echidna, goannas, snakes, smaller lizard, bees, dragonflies, scorpions and other insects, spiders, millipedes and centipedes.

Ostensibly, the rationale behind the enterprise of farming is to grow foods and fibres to sell, thus deriving an income. Similar to any business which relies on weather conditions to achieve this, the capabilities to achieve two-good-years-out-of-five to be financially viable in broad-scale farming, hinge on so many moving parts.

When I was a child, weather patterns were mainly consistent with hot summers interrupted every two to three weeks with a thunderstorm, long autumns with gloriously cool morning and evening temperatures and languorous days of what I call lizard weather – perfect for basking in the sun and feeling the warmth melt through into my bones.

Winter brought the shorter days and the pleasure of rugging up from head to toe in hand-knitted jumpers, beanies and scarves. Rubber boots were *de rigour* as the ground was usually wet, thanks to the consistent rain which fell rhythmically on the tin roof overnight. Spring was the time of great energy as daylight hours increased, prompting the emergence of new leaves on deciduous plants, the jessant bulbs pushing through the soil with leaves then flowers, the proliferation of insects feasting on the new flowers and the arrival of migratory birds.

These examples are just a snapshot of some of the climatic variations during the year and I always wondered why there were specific dates as to when each (northern hemisphere) season began when there were so many signs of change in plant and animal activities falling outside the prescribed seasonal dates.

Years later I learned the Australian First Peoples recognised nine seasons with indications of change coming from insect and bird activities, lengthening or shortening of daylight hours, emergence and arrival of certain plants, forbs and grasses, the flowering of particular trees, the warming of the earth, the position of the stars and moon, cloud formations and mating times of animals, plus many other observable clues. Young children were trained to intimately observe the changes, smells, sounds, textures, tones, colours and positions of their natural world connections and, when older, would, in turn, repeat how they had been taught with the next generation. This is experiential learning – learning through fingertips, soles of the feet and all ten senses. This is cultural innovation, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge which becomes ingrained into living with country.

Fingertips are magical inclusions in our body with their construction, and ability to tell so much of what they are feeling back to our brain. As a child, my grandmother had a black cloth bag into which she'd put unknown objects. When we visited, one of our favourite games was to plunge our little hand into the depths of the bag, pick up one item then, through our fingertips, try to work out what it was. Spiky, smooth, curved, tessellated, grooved, pinched, flat, square, round, bumpy, adorned, furry, pitted, plump, long, skinny, multiple surfaces, fragile, rigid, flexible, sharp and edged are just some of the messages read by fingertips. These 'impressions' went to our brain as this extraordinary organ received the textural

information and started computing against the known references in my memory to pin a name on the unseen object.

Perhaps this exercise is the reason I've always loved tactility and running my hands over most surfaces to absorb more information than simply visually and audially. Having pets from an early age and my proclivity for tactility provided extensive knowledge of their anatomy, and some physiology of the non-human animals in my care. Patting, caressing, stroking and gently touching them provided pleasure for them, and me, and a textural knowledge of bone placement, differences in skin depths and purposes, the production from mucosal membranes, the temperature of the body and urine, and the construction of feathers, hooves, pads, claws and fins with all the variations between and within species.

Similarly, I always have loved seeds. Initially it was due to the sizes, colours and textures from the many naturally occurring and deliberately planted species in our gardens. The feathery fronds of carrots were overtaken by the flowers of the mature plant which then transformed into tiny seeds. With their external seeds, strawberries, blackberries and loganberries were always fascinating (and delicious). Pine cones protected the seeds between the flakes which started as tight, bright green structures but, through the drying process, gradually loosened and opened so the seeds could fall onto the ground to germinate, most often at the base of the mother-tree.

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Reading *'The Secret Life of Plants'* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird was transformative and my copy has many blue page-tags and notations in the sides of the pages. Peter Tompkins' next book "The Secret Life of Nature" extended my knowledge exponentially with information from Rudolph Steiner and Indian sages describing their relationships and research with Nature. What a complete difference from Western 'science' dictums.

That other kingdom, fungi is fabulous and fascinating. When young, I had no idea of the extensive networks of mycelium beneath our feet providing communication and nutrition channels between plants. The sophistication of mutually beneficial relationships extends for hundreds of square kilometres and, if I had my time over again, I'd study mycology.

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It was quite common for my mother to find handfuls of seeds in the pockets of my little-girl jeans prior to washing them. I had a little collection of seeds in containers even though I didn't know their names which didn't matter; I just knew they were treasures. At primary school one of the first lessons in Nature Study was to place wheat seeds on dampened cotton-wool on a saucer on a window-sill. Without fail, the seeds would swell and then a miraculous small green leaf would emerge from the moistened germplasm, thus releasing a brand-new plant capable of replicating itself by at least 300+ times.

Later in life when a teenager, I was fascinated by a discovery in our jackeroo's bathroom. Post wheat harvest, Justin had soaked his socks in the hand-basin, forgotten about them and lo and behold, there was a verdant thick crop of sprouts! I think those socks, and the sprouts became compost.

The potential of seeds is mind-blowing and one of the sinister reasons Monsanto commenced buying up independent seed companies through the United States in the early 1990's. "Whoever controls the world's food, controls the people" was their company vision and they are right.

For eons, it has been devoted practice to save seeds from one crop to the next to retain access, characteristics, genetics and save money on not having to buy from external sources whether one is a small-scale home gardener, or a broad-acre cropper. However, there is much monetary value in seeds, and the agricultural line-up of ever more hybridised (non-breeding) annual crop seeds to farmers, is lucrative and sometimes cruelly binding. Genetically Engineered seeds come with patents and Technical User Agreements which include that growers are not allowed to retain any seed from that crop as, due to the patent, that germplasm doesn't belong to them.

What affronts me most of all about genetic engineering
Is the arrogant belief that Nature can be 'improved'.

Ever since people started growing foods, there's been keen interest in observing characteristics of the seed-stock and selecting for purpose. This practice isn't genetic engineering, this is selecting traits then selectively breeding them into subsequent generations.

The commodity market (golden-child model of agribusinesses in the free-market economy) is where the vast majority of growers of beef cattle and meat sheep, wool, cereal grains, oil seeds, whole milk and horticulture sell their goods as price-takers; prices are dependent on global markets, the value of the AU\$ at any given moment, levels of supply and demand, weather conditions and the whim of fashions.

The modern 'innovative' farmer and grazier measures units of labour with costs of inputs, absolute focus on productivity with the assumption that the more produced equals a higher income. One of the greatest shortcomings of modern agriculture is the complete disregard of the naturally occurring resources upon which any final commodity relies upon to come into existence.

Ever since the manufacturing and application of synthetic fertilisers on farmlands, the reduction of fungi, flora and fauna has diminished. Frequently referred to as pests, other agri-chemicals have been created to poison plants, insects and fungi which have the temerity to poke their heads and stems out of the ground.

Western masculine competitive language characterises these practices; one only has to read advertisements for agricultural products in popular rural papers. "Start strong and stay on top". "The war on weeds". "Ride over the rest". "Flatten the competition (weeds)".

The results are obvious and include

- increased demands on dwindling soil capital;
- the loss of farming family enterprises;
- desertification;
- soil acidity;
- salinity;
- overgrazing;
- man-made droughts
- loss of habitats and biodiversity; and
- lower equity and incomes for those remaining and attempting to do more of the same and expecting a different result.

What if the hegemonic economic rationalist language had a role to play in creating these outcomes?
Could a change in language instigate paradigm, belief and behavioural changes?

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In 2005 I had a peer-reviewed paper published in the Australian Farm Business Management Journal which was subsequently presented at the International Farm Management Association conference in Cork, Ireland (2007). It was about the journeys of once intensive, agronomist-worshipping farmers and their transition to collaborative pasture-farming and biological systems.

Using Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion "*the limits to my language are the limits to my mind*" (1958) my research was based on interviews with farmers, mainly male, and why they shifted. The common denominator was a severe, emotional experience or, in vernacular terms, an 'oh shit' moment. A fire, machinery accident, drought, death, illness, flood, marriage breakdown and family disaster were reasons people were literally stopped in their tracks. In this forced time for reflection and analysis, hard-hitting truths were confronted as each person realised they were responsible for their actions which had led, directly or indirectly, to the grisly reality of that outcome.

For some, following the advice of agronomists resulted in degraded, dusty, depressing landscapes, exacerbated by the absence of rain. For others, the devastation of a fire destroyed all their operating resources – livestock, infrastructure, outbuildings and even family members; In 24 hours, reality changed from being a financially viable enterprise to suddenly having a million-dollar debt. The illnesses from agricultural chemicals and the ‘normal’ way of doing things had shocking impacts on a family farming enterprise as debilitating and chronic pain changed how, and what, could be achieved.

5th August 2022

To be continued.....

Regenerative agriculture connecting with and loving the land.....

8th April 2020:

I’ve started reading ***Fire Country*** by Victor Steffenson and my heart sings as I read the words - connectivity, respect, care, knowledge and intimacy. The first page inscription reads ‘*This book is dedicated to all of the young and upcoming generations to be the turning point of **reconnecting humanity with land and culture again**.*’
