

SCORCHED EARTH

By Claire Scobie

HE PUTS THE RIFLE ON THE DASHBOARD. 'Yup. That's what the drought is about. There will be some that won't make it.'

We bump along tracks criss-crossing the cattle property to where the day before, Mark Hinman, waist-deep in mud, had hauled out a cow bogged in a dam. With water receding by a foot a day, checking dams becomes a daily job on a farm in western Queensland. Or for that matter anywhere across Australia, as one of the worst droughts on record bleeds the land dry.

Hinman hoped that today we wouldn't find another distraught cow sinking in quicksand. Only yesterday, he had put an electric fence around that particular dam. That would not be enough to deter thirsty kangaroos: every night there have been hundreds pounding through the paddocks. 'They'd already be dead,' he says. 'If it wasn't for the livestock water.' At the dam, a grim scene awaits us. The air is fetid, thick with flies. The kangaroos Mark had pulled out alive the day before are now dead, rotting at the edge of the putrid water, too contaminated for cattle to drink.

But three kangaroos are alive, just. As Mark approaches, they struggle to prise themselves from a slimy grave. 'Hey little fella get up,' says Hinman, a wiry 30-year-old, with greying hair under his broad-brimmed hat. 'Don't bite me now.' The small kangaroo, its eyes panicking, hisses as Mark pulls it out by the ears. It falls flat, the back legs useless. He rescues another, which feebly hops away. The last desperate creature can barely lift its head.

'I'm sorry you're going to have to go. Got to be cruel to be kind,' he says reaching for his rifle. Shots ring out. 'The other one isn't going to make it either,' he says, pointing to the young kangaroo that lies where it fell. 'I'll just put another bullet in that one.'

At this point, I stopped watching.

'It's harder when it is stock,' says Hinman, manager of Dagworth property. 'I shot one of my cattle only a few days ago. It was too far from the water, too weak to move.'

I had met Mark Hinman earlier that day beside the Combo Waterhole on the border of his Dagworth property. Combo Waterhole holds a particularly poignant place in Australian history. It was here, in 1895, that Banjo Paterson wrote the famous lyrics to *Waltzing Matilda*, Australia's most famous song about, 'A jolly swagman camped by a billabong / Under the shade of a coolibah tree,' who jumps into the water to escape arrest for stealing a sheep. Today the Coolibah trees still sway. But where the swagman drowned, there is nothing but a small puddle of brackish water in cracked earth.

Mark and his young family had arrived at Dagworth two weeks ago, victims of the drought that is ravaging the whole of Australia. Like so many families facing rising debts, the Hinmans had been forced to sell up. Their sheep were dying and for months, Mark had to help his malnourished cows give birth. Unable to afford a vet, if there were complications, which there often were, he sewed them up himself. When Mark was offered the position of manager at Dagworth, with a regular wage, he jumped at the chance to recoup their losses.

They travelled 1500 kilometres from their farm in eastern New South Wales to the reaches of far-western Queensland, hoping things would be easier. But they aren't. Skinny cows forage for food in paddocks made barren with drought. The grass that should grow to shoulder-height is bleached stubble with a nutritional content lower than cardboard. Despite an isolated storm on one corner of the vast property of 170,000 acres, most dams are empty. And with summer temperatures soaring to the high forties and never a cloud in the sky, there is no end in sight.

assistance -- basic welfare and 50% interest free loans -- is only available when drought becomes that severe it is considered 'a once in a 20 - 25 year event'.

The drought brings environmental issues -- water management, soil erosion and land clearing - to the fore with politicians, landowners and conservationists battling out their differences. But attitudes in this

THE DROUGHT IS THE MAIN CULPRIT behind the devastating bush fires that have swept through several hundred thousand hectares of south-east Australia and in mid-January destroyed over 500 houses, with four lives lost, in Canberra, the nation's capital. With no rain for months, and undergrowth tinder-dry, fires are ignited in seconds by electric storms and fanned by gale force winds. Canberra's fire services were rendered powerless as fire tornadoes, with temperatures reaching 1000 Celsius, swept down quiet suburban streets. Residents snatched what they could and fled. Brick houses were reduced to ash. For the next week Canberra was in a state of emergency as power, water and sewage supplies broke down.

As thick smoke from bush fires cast a shroud over city skylines, so too did the giant dust storm that swelled in the central Australian desert on 23rd October last year. What began, as a common whirlwind became an erosion catastrophe as fine topsoil, stripped of protective grass and vegetation after months without rain, was picked up by high winds. As the storm moved eastwards, stretching over 1500-km from south to north, over 10 million tonnes of red dirt was carried before being dumped in the ocean.

The storm was seen as an omen. After months spreading through the rural regions where 20% of Australia's population live, the 'big dry' had reached the 80% living on the coast.

While this one-in-a-hundred year drought turns farmer's dreams to dust and tears apart the social fabric of rural communities, leaving bankruptcies, broken marriages and in the most severe cases, suicide, in its wake, there are fears this is only the beginning. Towns have run out of water. Millions of cows and sheep are suffering, starving slowly. Even the native wildlife - rare kangaroos, emus and possums -- that have evolved to survive the harshest of conditions are dying in droves.

Two weeks before the giant dust storm, a group of eminent scientists had gathered to examine the impossible issue of how to drought-proof Australia, and suggested turning back rivers. Farmhand, a national appeal and concert, was launched with INXS, Jimmi Barnes and other leading rock stars, championing the plight of farmers. Widespread water restrictions began in cities; the state of New South Wales was 98% drought-declared. With farm production down by 80%, grain prices are sky-rocketing. The nation's sheep flock is at the lowest since 1920s. The economic cost of the drought was announced as Aus \$5.4 billion (close to £2 billion), equivalent to 0.7% of the GDP.

The drought in Australia and Ethiopia - where a catastrophic humanitarian crisis looms -- cyclones in America and floods in Europe are all caused by a powerful climactic phenomenon called El Nino that is linked to the Pacific Ocean. During an El Nino event, areas in the Pacific Ocean heat up causing warmer water to flow towards the Americas and rain-bearing clouds to move away from Australia. 'While Europe is exceedingly wet, Australia is exceedingly dry,' says Dr Roger Stone, Director of the Queensland Government Climate Centre, whose research indicates a disturbing new trend of more frequent El Nino events, 'because of global warming'.

For Australia, this means more droughts, more often. While Dr Stone forecasts that the El Nino - and the drought -- will break between March to May 2003, he warns there is a 20 - 30% chance that the it will immediately 'regenerate' and last another year, with devastating consequences.

The scale and remoteness of the farms are unlike anything in Britain. Some of the 'stations' in western Queensland, the heart of Australian cattle-county, are bigger than Wales. Australia is a giant land of beef and sheep production where one 'beast' may not be handled for years roaming wild until mustering season, that is done not on horseback but with helicopters. In Australia it is farmers who grow crops, and graziers who produce sheep and cattle. Both accept that droughts, floods and bush fires are some of the hazards of running a business on the land. Neither receive government subsidies. Their livelihood is dictated by world markets and the vagaries of the weather.

Most shun government handouts - 'bleeding heart bullshit' -- that supports bad management. 'Half the problem is trying to compete with subsidies of the UK and US,' says one cattle owner, 'Take the subsidies away and leave the industry to evolutionary forces.' Government

been a marked rise in fatal farm accidents attributed to farmers trying to do everything themselves. Karen's learnt to 'drive the tractor, throwing around big bales of hay. Learning to drive the tractor was easy,' she laughs. 'It was tying those knots around the hay bales that was hard. We just about divorced over these bloody knots.'

conservative industry are slow to change. One cattle owner now introducing sustainable practices sums it up, 'Under traditional practises, there is one cow on 10 acres all year round. Over-stocking has depleted the grass growth. When the Europeans came 200 years ago, this land was an oasis.' Today some areas are desolate, and more resemble a wasteland.

'DROUGHT HAS A BIG IMPACT RIGHT ACROSS THE REGION, when we lose the people, we lose the services,' says MP Vaughan Johnson, shaking his head sadly. 'A lot of people are selling their land, they feel enough is enough.' The constituency of Vaughan Johnson, a broad-shouldered, thickset man with a handshake like an iron-grip, is around 370,000 square kilometres - roughly one and a half times the size of England -- and covers much of western Queensland. When too far from a hotel this easygoing politician will roll out his swag and camp by the roadside. Based in Longreach, known as the gateway to the outback, Johnson epitomises the 'resilient people, resilient country' he represents.

My trip begins in the bustling supply town of Longreach, deep in cowboy country, and a three-hour flight from Brisbane. I notice how the men swagger in faded jeans with classic Australian broad-brimmed hats, and the women's roughened hands speak of a lifetime of physical labour. Hand-cream I am told, is one of the first luxuries they forego when times are hard. Longreach has a population of 5000 and enough water in its river to last until May. Every Sunday, congregations pray for rain. When clouds formed in Winton, 300 kilometres west, it brought people on to the streets says Reverend Denise Quinn. 'It raised the hopes of the whole area, boosting their morale.' Not a drop fell.

The first station in the Longreach shire to be 'drought declared', Noonbah, lies 150 kilometres south. The nearest hamlet is Stonehenge. Every day 60,000 litres of water is carted into to keep the residents alive. It is surrounded by flat plains with grass bleached so white it hurts the eyes. Rain last fell here in December 2000.

Before Angus Emmott's grandmother staked her claim and divided the land at Noonbah, it was virgin country. Angus was born there and like so many children in the outback, was educated at home through 'School of the Air.' He has never left. 13 years ago he married Karen, a nurse from Brisbane. They lived in the worker's cottage next door, only moving to the rambling main house last year when his parents retired. A passionate natural historian, Emmott -- with a boyish laugh and penetrating gaze - has identified 185 bird species and several insects new to science on his property that covers 130,000 acres.

Angus insists 'drought is what to expect in this part of the world'; Karen says, 'others are doing it much tougher than we are... But it's pretty bloody awful. Everyone is being pessimistic now. I am sick of dust and death.' Karen, 39, is an open hearted, earthy woman whose day starts at 5 am when she bottle-feeds over 70 orphaned calves, whose mothers have died in the drought; creams the milk and snatches her only free half-hour responding to emails. As her two children, 11-year-old Amelia and Fergus, 9, are educated through School of the Air, Karen is also home-tutor as well as farm-help, book-keeper and mum. School of the Air sends out a comprehensive education pack every term to each pupil in far-flung farms across the district. Children work on this with the home tutor and also have interactive 'on air' lessons, starting with 'assembly' at 8 am. Provided the radio signals are clear - the old-fashioned two-way radio is still used - the children listen to their teachers and can ask questions and receive feedback.

Last year School of the Air lost 30 students and several staff. 'Families are selling up because of the drought', says Scott Edmunds, the Director at Longreach. Older children who would normally be sent to boarding school are staying at home as farm-hands. As paid workers are laid off and animals are hand-reared, drought means tough work for all the family. 'It makes them grow up pretty fast,' says Karen. 'The kids won't go on water runs anymore because they're sick of seeing bogged cattle with their eyes pecked out by the birds.

'We are losing five or six cows a day... Angus is having to shoot those that are too weak or are bogged,' says Karen who worries about her husband working such long days alone. There's

Farm-workers, musterers and fence-contractors are other unsung victims of the drought. There is Leon Schwager, a contract musterer, who wears a pressed pin-stripe shirt and sits astride a sleek stallion, on 'a never ending trip' to find grass for the 1800 cattle he droves. When his wife had their second child last

How do the men cope? 'We just cope,' says Angus. 'We don't talk about it, just get worked up. I'm fortunate I have a whole host of other interests.' For many farmers the farm is their entire world, their identity rests upon its success. 'The drought doesn't only threaten them personally,' says Karen, 'It threatens where and how their family live. These men can't move to the cities, they've no trade, nothing to fall back on.... Men out here are so masculine, they're not into sharing feelings with mates. They do with their partners, but it's very understated,' she says sighing. 'It falls back on the wives to tap dance, tell jokes and keep buoyant. It's hard to know how to get them to handle the stress.'

'Farmers are getting to the stage where they may spend all their money hand-feeding their livestock and they still die,' says Angus simply. 'They're unable to put the animals on a truck to market: they're too weak to move.... In some cases managerial decisions should have been made earlier to de-stock. Now the only option could be to shoot them.'

A blistering wind blows, heat shimmers above red, dusty earth. In the nearby paddock the Emmott's prize breeders gather around vats of 'lick-block' -- a nutritional supplement -- that helps them digest the coarse leaves of mulga trees they are forced to eat. It costs \$1000 (around £300) every eight days to keep 600 alive. 'We are trying to hold onto them until the end of February. If there's no rain by then, we will sell whatever we can,' says Angus. As the house dam level drops dangerously low, the Emmotts are faced with the prospect of carting water at prohibitive cost. 'But these days it's getting a challenge to even find water sources,' he says glumly. 'Such a valuable commodity is fast disappearing.'

SANDIE KIDD BEGAN 'DOING A MAN'S WORK' AGED NINE when he started mustering. This legendary outback figure, with a life-saving medal from the Queen and yarns he spins from the first 'days of white settlement,' invites us for his daily breakfast -- bacon and sausage boiled in onion gravy. Now 62 with a gruff voice that outdoes Tom Waits, his clothes are shabby, the house ramshackle and half-lived in. Sandie feeds his leftovers to Kenny, the pet dingo, rummages for a fresh packet of B&H cigarettes and we jump into the small plane parked outside his front gate.

Close to the town of Windorah and 300-km south-west from Longreach, Kidd's property is on the edge of the biggest irrigation system in the world, the Channel Country. When it floods, the water rich in nutrients, turns the land verdant almost overnight making 'this the best natural fattening country in the world.' Usually cattle are trucked thousands of kilometres in road-trains - giant juggernauts -- from the Northern Territory to be fattened here. Now for the first time in living memory, the cattle are being transported hungry, back to the Northern Territory. Sandie Kidd flies low over red sand dunes where animals take refuge when the floods do come. I see a lone cow wandering in a desolate expanse of parched earth.

We meet his neighbour, John Rickett, whose house, supplied by bore water, is hemmed in by a green lawn, with bougainvillea bushes and a peach tree. It is an oasis; inside is spotless. John works for the Australia Agricultural company managing a huge property of 2000 square miles or 1.25 million acres - the size of Cornwall. Usually he will have 20,000 steers, now there are 7,000. Both men are philosophical about their situation. 'It takes two years to get in and two to get out of a drought,' Kidd says bluntly. 'It's boom and bust here,' agrees John, who as an employee of a huge company, knows that when rain comes, there will be funds to re-stock.

'People in small businesses are left to fall through the cracks. There's no government assistance,' says Sharon Hutchings who with her husband, Chad, run a bush pub in the town of Isisford. The collapse in the local wool trade is turning Isisford into a ghost town; the pub that once hummed with sheep shearers, is empty. 'We're heading for bankruptcy,' says Sharon, reaching for another cigarette, 'Waiting any day for the receivers to walk in, take back the hotel-pub and our car. Then we'll move with our three little girls into a caravan.' The only new residents moving into Isisford are scrawny emus and kangaroos, desperate for something to eat. After dark, kangaroos notoriously shy animals, can be seen hopping down the main street to graze on the playground lawn.

year, he was home for barely two days. In a pub in the township of Yaraka, I meet a group of fence contractors with no land to fence, slurping beers in the mid-afternoon and oggling over a soft porn magazine. Yaraka, on the edge of dust-bowl country, is at the end of the railway line. And at the end of its water. Chris Williams, the local policeman, keeps the peace among neighbours. 'There's no other topic of conversation,' says Williams, 'I'm the mediator.' While they wait for a bore to be sunk, residents are allowed only one hour of water every morning and afternoon.

Chris Williams tells me about the hopelessness and depression he sees in outlying properties, where 'people are finding it hard to put food on the table.' In such remote areas, mental health services are slim. The Flying Doctor swoops in for a clinic once a month. Organisations like Bush Church Aid offer support and donate bales of hay. 'But a lot of the women, even though they mightn't tell you,' I was told, 'are on anti-depressants.' Calls from female farmers are increasing, says Derek Tuffield, director of the charity Lifeline. 'Financial stress and everything dying around them means relationship pressures. This can lead domestic violence and suicide.'

'Western Queensland has one of the highest suicide rates in the developed world,' says Neville Radecker of the Salvation Army. When I arrive at the 'Salvo's' Longreach bungalow, Neville and his graceful wife, Lorraine, are preparing for a trip 'out bush'. Since mid-December they say, people 'are getting critically low.' When not visiting farms, Neville and Lorraine keep in phone contact with as many farmers as they can. 'People are trying not to cry on the phone,' he says. 'They are that desperate to reveal their pain and openly talk to a stranger.'

He tells me of one teenage girl whose mother died suddenly last year and whose father is away trying to find grass for the cattle. She is left alone to manage the isolated farm several hours from Longreach. 'She dresses and works like a man,' says Neville who brought her donated gifts before Christmas. 'With no mains power and not enough funds to repair the generator, the house gets to the mid-forties. They have no fridge, so no perishable foods.'

Another man who Neville is deeply concerned for, is a farm manager in his early fifties, 'a deep-thinker with a lot of burdens. He doesn't have a gun licence so when his sheep are too weak to live, he puts them out of their suffering with a hammer. Each time he's close to vomiting.' When the Radeckers went to visit him there was a note saying he was at the water bore. It had broken. A breakdown in such circumstances can quickly become a catastrophe. 'But between us we were able to get the machine running.'

Back at the Combo Waterhole, I remember looking out over the crusty dry riverbed where once was the famous billabong and trying to imagine it with flowing water. I couldn't. I had asked Mark Hinman what the future held. Brushing the flies from his face, he says: 'There has never been a drought that hasn't broke [sic]. But if there's no rain before April records show there will be no rain before the following wet season.' He pauses. 'That means November or December. Then we'll have to buckle down for the worst.'

Ends.

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