

The Spirit of the Outback

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'The Spirit of the Outback' is a term we often use, to conjure up an image for our poets and their muse, to focus on Cloncurry and a million Aussie cents, in honour of Dame Mary and the traits she represents. But those who live there understand the Outback is profound, that having just one Spirit's not enough to go around.

They span the generations from the Dreamtime until now, across a sprawling spectrum which we cannot disavow, and even though we find some that give reason for regret, we need to recognise them all as pieces of a set. So where are all those 'Spirits' which define that special place, where endless curved horizons meet the stars in outer space.

We find them in the books we read, of fiction or of fact, like Mary Durack's stories or where Davidson had tracked, with camels and a dog to give some meaning to her life, as fortunate as Facey with his struggles and his strife. We also read the gripping tales of Burke and Wills and Eyre, of Stuart, King and Cunningham, whose courage we can share.

We find them in those paintings on a wall or in a frame, on Joel Fergie's water tank, or signed with Chaplain's name, depicting Outback images and characters we know, like 'Barrack' and 'Brianna' from the Deadly Dancers Show. We see them in those landscapes from the Namatjira art, or in a dotted masterpiece and colours from Pro Hart.

We find them where the Kalkadoon are recognised at last, in ways that understand the hate and horrors of the past, ensuring that equality is more than poli-speak, and those who have the where-with-all, provide the things we seek. There are no simple answers to the challenges we face, but we can be reminded that there's just one human race.

We find them in our Outback pubs we know are so unique, where people from all walks of life mix seven days a week, from miners, stockmen, truckies to the nomads with their vans, and kids from all around the world who backpack with no plans. Referred to as a 'waterhole' for those who like a drink, our Outback pubs are so much more important than you think.

We find them in those shearing sheds that Lawson wrote about,
of ringers, pressers, roustabouts, in times of flood and drought,
and drovers who spent months away from loved ones we all know,
from verses by 'The Banjo' – 'Clancy of the Overflow'.

In recent times we can revere those shearers we applaud,
like 'Daffy', Howe and Elkins who were masters of the board.

We find them in so many places easy to forget,
like rodeos and racetracks where the punters have a bet,
and not just on the horses but on camels from the scrub,
where city folk are entertained with beer and country grub.
We can't forget the Schools and Clubs and places where to stay,
or Festivals, Museums and the local Market Day.

We find them in the wildlife we all treasure as our own,
like things that hop and have a pouch and birds that have not flown,
that stand upon our coat of arms and make it so distinct,
reminding us of how we'd look if they became extinct.

We need to value habitats which have a major role,
maintaining our identity, the Outback's heart and soul.

We find them on a doctor's mind or on a nurse's sleeve,
where patients are remote in places you would not believe,
without the Flying Doctor as those angels in the air,
the Outback would not be the same without their loving care.
The distances are vast and even though they breed 'em tough,
the people of the Outback know, that's sometimes not enough.

We find them in those musos who can play or sing a tune,
with songs that make your feet tap or that see young lovers swoon,
or maybe you're an oldie who remembers days gone by,
and sang aloud with Slim along the road to Gundagai.
Whatever Country Music does, it makes you feel so great,
to be connected to the bush, just like another mate.

And lastly but not in the least, we read poetic verse,
to understand those 'Spirits', which for better or for worse,
are numerous and varied in the ways they symbolise,
those wonders of the Outback which may come as a surprise.

And if the urge to travel bites you on that bit we know,
remember all those 'Spirits' of the Outback when you go.