

Heroes of Yesterday

Tom McIlveen

They came when the colours of season were turning
from green to magenta and burgundy red.

They came when the sun was a demon and burning
the souls of the living and bones of the dead.

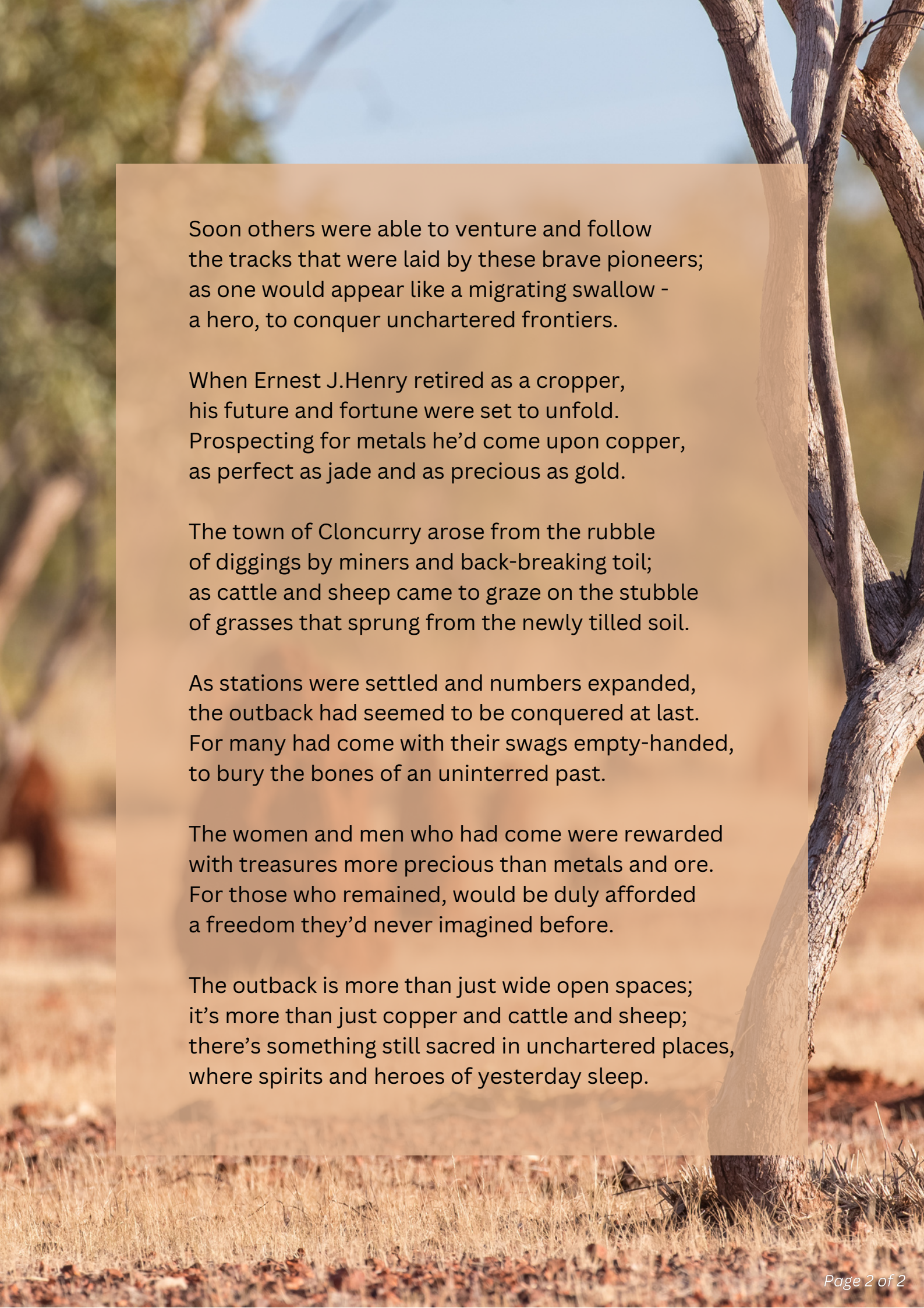
On camels and horses, they rode information,
abreast of each other, together as one...
in silence they shuffled, without conversation,
immersed in the haze of a merciless sun.

T'was Robert O.Burke who elected to lead them
through desert and scrub where the skies never rained,
and William J .Wills who neglected to heed them,
when camels and horses and men had complained.

“If only we’d come when The Cooper was flowing,
we might have been able to follow its course,
instead of just wandering north without knowing
its true destination or primary source.”

If only they’ d come at the start of September,
they may have been welcome and given respite
from summer’s inferno and hell of December,
that bleaches the Spinifex grasses to white.

Perhaps they were destined for fortune and glory,
these heroes who’d ventured to places unknown.
But history tells of a different story -
of men who had died in the outback alone.

The background is a photograph of a dry, open landscape. On the right side, there is a tree trunk with rough, textured bark. The ground is covered with dry, yellowish-brown grass and some small plants. The sky is a clear, light blue. A semi-transparent, light brown rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing several paragraphs of text.

Soon others were able to venture and follow the tracks that were laid by these brave pioneers; as one would appear like a migrating swallow - a hero, to conquer unchartered frontiers.

When Ernest J. Henry retired as a cropper, his future and fortune were set to unfold. Prospecting for metals he'd come upon copper, as perfect as jade and as precious as gold.

The town of Cloncurry arose from the rubble of diggings by miners and back-breaking toil; as cattle and sheep came to graze on the stubble of grasses that sprung from the newly tilled soil.

As stations were settled and numbers expanded, the outback had seemed to be conquered at last. For many had come with their swags empty-handed, to bury the bones of an uninterred past.

The women and men who had come were rewarded with treasures more precious than metals and ore. For those who remained, would be duly afforded a freedom they'd never imagined before.

The outback is more than just wide open spaces; it's more than just copper and cattle and sheep; there's something still sacred in unchartered places, where spirits and heroes of yesterday sleep.