

The Women of the Outback

Bronwyn Blake

The First Generation, Maude.

The Irish Hunger drove them out, forced them to emigrate.
Poverty driven; hunger driven. Hard to separate
from those you love, but when hope is gone, when nothing else remains,
they left the green of Ireland's heart, for the Western Queensland plains.
Took up a free selection when they opened up the land,
and named it for the old country; Maude called it 'Ballyran'.
Apprehensive settlers in a strange and alien land,
courageous, scared, determined, they grew to understand
the bullock train, the sheep... to wild dogs they lost that battle...
facing defeat, were given ten calves, and began again with cattle.
In time, Maude bore six children; four of them survived,
they buried two, but in that tough new world, the other children thrived.

Maude's daughter, Ellen.

A snatch of time on a sepia card, I hold you in my hand,
I glimpse you child, currency lass, first-born in this new land.
One grainy photo, a laughing face, a bare-foot, tousled child,
on half-tamed colts, the Mitakoodi kids and you ride wild
across the hills, or mustering with your brothers and your friends.
From the Elders, she learned their tongue, learned, and comprehends
that a way of life is passing by. Ellen mourns with them.
She grows to be a teacher, and with time she understands
the people's deep connection with their ancient tribal lands.
In that time of frontier wars against first people of this nation,
despite the taunts and prejudice, she protests their desecration.
Records their gifts of language, legends, beliefs, and sacred ways.
A trusting and trusted teacher, in her core she knows she'll stay.

Ellen's daughter, Alice.

A physician in the frontline of women's emancipation, respected for her work, and for her selfless dedication. A woman well beyond her time, Doctor Alice became back home in her beloved land, a valued outback name. I picture you, a shadow shimmering through green daisy glass, beyond the wooden surgery door fleetingly you pass. In hard worn clothes, with sun-bleached hair, you curse the cranky car, drive endless miles on treacherous roads, go where your patients are. How frightening it must have been, so often on your own, emergencies way out bush, burns, and broken bones, killing fevers, childbirth scares, no Flying Doctor then, above and beyond, pushed to the limit... the next day back again to lonely homes, communities, to widespread cattle stations, a lifeline for the families who cope with isolation.

Alice's daughters, Nell, and Isabelle.

Started with such high hopes, generation four. The paddocks in great shape, the house as lovely as before, its sprawling, wide verandahs, its canopy of vines, with three good seasons in a row the future's looking fine. But good times crashed... World War Two, peace is overturned. Nell's husband, Kelly, sailed to France, never to return. Intrepid Nell, and a fearless Bell determined they'd remain, through grief and tears, endured the years, the hard times as they came. Through towering dust storms of the plains, they kept the place alive. Throughout the drought they hauled the feed. The breeders would survive. Prices up, markets down, grassfires and deprivation, 'Ballyran' survived with their hard slog and desperation. They rode the brutal hardship out, those legendary two, until the good times came again and the stricken lands renew.

Outback women, we are awed by all that you can do.
Outback women, listen and hear how proud we are of you.
You're a govie, you're a station cook, a pilot, or a ringer,
a mother, nurse, a bore-runner, an artist, or a singer.
Without fanfare, without awards, you go about your lives,
"It's just what we do," you say when asked... but courageous in our eyes.
You care, you share, you grow as strong as the river redgum trees,
for heroes of the outback, these are my nominees.