

Clancy Lives

Driving up the Lachlan Valley in central New South Wales, I come across a drover running about four or five hundred head of the fattest cattle I've seen all trip, so I stop for a yarn.

He's a big bloke with a ruddy face and a beaming smile, but he's a bit rattled at present because he's just run over one of his dogs, which is not looking too good lying in the back of the ute.

'I think I might've busted him inside, bugger it,' he says. 'He's a good little pup, too, that one. Just came runnin' out of the mob not lookin' and straight under the wheels.'

He tells me he'd normally be working from horseback, only the equine flu virus has meant he's had to send his horses back home for a spell.

'Wouldn'ta happened if I'd had me horses. Bugger.'

The pup's on his side and trying hard to raise his head when he hears his master's voice. He's not whimpering and doesn't yelp when the drover lifts the pup's back leg to feel the break in it. The pup puts his head back down with a little sigh as if resigned to his lot.

The drover invites me to share some dinner with him and his wife and tells me to head back to his camp while he puts the mob in the reserve for the night.

He's camped under a stand of trees just off the road, and his setup consists of a big, old caravan he pulls behind a sturdy-looking truck, a couple of trailers and a sulky strapped to the back of the last of them.

I'm greeted by half a dozen dogs tied up and going crook, and the drover's wife, who in contrast accepts the arrival of a complete stranger driving a loudly decorated campervan as if it were the most usual of bush happenings.

We talk a bit and she tells me they're from the Riverina country and she's only up for a visit for a couple of days. She used to be on the road full time with her husband – in fact they raised five kids on the road – but she reckons she's retired these days and prefers life back home.

I imagine their daughters would make hardy wives with a rearing like that.

The drover returns directly and puts the pup in a trailer on his own.

‘I don’t like his chances,’ he says to me, and you can tell he’s about as cut up as a drover ever gets about one of his dogs. There’s no place for sentiment when it comes to working dogs; they don’t even pat them, as a rule. And if you do they’ll likely tell you not to go spoiling their dog.

Over dinner and a few red wines he tells me he’s been droving pretty much all his life, right through New South Wales and a good chunk of Queensland too.

‘Things have changed a lot,’ he says. ‘Bit too much bureaucracy now.’

He explains how the Rural Lands Protection Board controls the licensing for the Travelling Stock Routes, and about the penalty fees for going too slow.

‘But sometimes you don’t worry about that if there’s good feed about. The stock’s gotta come first, second and third. My job’s to hand these cattle back to their owners in better condition than when I got ’em.’

He’s obviously proud of his work and his reputation as a good drover, but he speaks with a lot of humility, and most times when he makes a point he’ll refer to his wife for her view. He’s not a highly educated man, but it’s clear he’s done a lot of thinking about things.

‘Met a lot of good people on the road,’ he says. ‘My word, yes. And a few not so good.’

‘In fact they nearly did me in a few years back. Yeah. Got accused of cattle rustlin’, just because the stock was in good shape.’

‘Opened the door of the caravan one mornin’ and there was the Stock Squad cops with guns pointed at me; they had helicopters, and men everywhere ... the whole show.’

‘All because I look after me cattle. They reckoned I must have pinched ’em. How they figure a bloke could steal fifteen hundred head of cattle while he’s drovin’ down the long paddock, in full view of everybody, I got no idea.’

‘You can’t do nothin’ out here without everybody knowin’. They’d know where you camped last night, where you are now. It’s not like the city.’

‘Sure, we’re always lookin’ for a killer, a stray that’s bolted when it’s come off the truck. But I’d no more pinch a man’s cattle than ...’

He turns his hands upward. Then he turns his palms down and puts them on the table.

‘Almost got too much for me at one point. Just about ready to shoot meself.’

His wife’s been busying herself cooking dinner while we’ve been talking, often chiming in with a comment or two. At this last statement she makes no contribution, no sign she even heard it. But it’s surely a subject she knows well and with prompting she joins in, and together they tell me the full story. Not for a proud drover and his wife to avoid the truth of it, whatever it is.

In short, he got himself wrapped up so tight trying to defend his innocence against the rustling charges that he lost the plot. He doesn’t remember the final stages – didn’t even remember where he was and had to describe the landmarks in the countryside over the phone so his wife could work out where to send a daughter to collect him – he only remembers that his family rallied. Then they spelled him for a bit and now he’s back, good as new. Maybe a little more circumspect, but I’m guessing that bit.

I ask him how the people are coping with the drought.

‘These towns are sufferin’, no doubt about it. But I was only talkin’ to a bloke yesterday, who was tellin’ me that what you see in the towns now, the people still hangin’ in, they’ll be there at the end.’

‘Is this the worst one you’ve ever seen?’ I ask him.

‘Yeah this is the worst I’ve seen. I was only thinkin’ today I wonder how tough it can really get. We reckon it’s bad now, but how’d the old fellas go back when they had to cart their own water?’

‘Wouldn’t be twenty kilometres from here they drowned about two hundred and fifty head of bullocks rushing the water because they hadn’t had a drink for days. Well that don’t happen no more, because we’ve got tankers to cart water for a thousand head.

‘And they had the rabbits to compete with. We don’t have rabbits like them days.

‘We got plenty of feed. We’ve got this stuff you can put in the water to feed the bug in the cows’ guts so they can go for a long time without much to eat, so we can keep ’em alive in the heat.

‘Yeah, it’s a bit rough at the moment. But once we get over it, this country’ll produce.

‘We just want rain.’

And I'm humbled by the thinking of the man, who, in the middle of the worst drought he'd ever seen, preferred to think himself lucky he had it so much better than his predecessors.

In the morning his pup is up on three legs, wagging his tail and looking like he's going to tough it out as well.

I had written him a letter, which I had for want of better

Knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan years ago

He was shearing when I knew him so I sent the letter to him

Just on spec, addressed as follows, Clancy of the Overflow

Banjo Patterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow'