A Far-flung Life

M. L. Stedman



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Also by M. L. Stedman

The Light Between Oceans

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Western Australia

Friday, 10th January 1958

OUT HERE, IT'S red earth for as far as the eye can see. Overhead, the sun ploughs an unending blue sky. Under dust-green mulga, a lizard seeks shade and shadow; ants engineer heat-defying nests; kangaroos suck moisture from tender leaves, ears swivelling to locate a distant rumble: on the straight vermilion line that cleaves the sparse trees, a lone truck is approaching.

Strung along the seat of the Bedford, the three MacBride men sit, like unpacked Russian dolls. Phil's straight, dark hair and oval face is repeated in Warren, his eldest son, and echoed in Matt, his youngest. Like peas in a pod – same story for generations. Everyone reckons even Rosie, the daughter back at the homestead, born between the brothers, is the spitting image, too. The mother, Lorna, doesn't get a look-in. You can tell a MacBride a mile off.

Warren punched his little brother's arm. 'God, you come out with some bulldust!'

'No! Sailing around the world. Discovering uninhabited islands . . .' Matt said. 'It'd be great!'

'Well, unless you put in the elbow grease, the damned boat'll be eaten by white ants, so you'd sink as soon as you hit the water.' Their father gave the gearstick a shove, coaxing the truck over the coming rise. From the back, the few dozen sheep *baa*'d.

The fact that the MacBrides had a boat on their sheep station might have been unremarkable if their property bordered the state's six-thousand-mile coast. But Meredith Downs, nearly a million arid acres, is far inland, fringing into desert country in places.

'What was the bet about again?' Matt asked.

The discussion had begun when they passed a towering, solitary shape in the distance: 'Monty's shed'. Named for Phil's uncle, Montgomery MacBride, it was the most outlandish structure for hundreds of miles. The legend of how Meredith Downs – a property with twenty thousand sheep and an average annual rainfall of eight inches – came to be home to a fully rigged pearling lugger had been much embellished over time, but the essentials remained: a debt from an old mate of Monty's, settled in kind; towed behind a camel team by some Afghans; a dream that one day Monty would sail it himself, perhaps off the continent's south coast, despite the absence of pearls in the freezing Southern Ocean. It had come with the name *Alpha Crucis*, the brightest star in the Southern Cross. When Monty marched off to the Somme in 1915 to do his duty, his father promised to keep it in good order. He built the shed around it with money from the wool clip, and kept the vessel's timber oiled, and the spiders and termites at bay.

But when Monty came back gassed, all he was good for was to hunker in the boat in the blinding heat of the shed, and sail away to some safer shore in his imagination. When he died not long afterwards, his boat bone-dry and his dreams unlived, they stowed his ashes in the bow along with a compass and a bottle of beer, and a promise that one day they'd get the lugger in the water, to scatter his ashes in the Indian Ocean. Phil MacBride still kept up the ritual: varnishing the timber; replacing frayed lines; bringing Monty a beer every birthday. A man not given to whimsy, Phil made this exception: 'It's tradition,' was all he'd say, placing the bottle reverently in the bow.

Now, he answered his youngest son's question: 'Monty reckoned

he could find water on his friend's property up north using just a divining rod: if he did, he'd get the boat. Sure enough, he turned up fresh water at thirty feet, and they never looked back. So the mate made good on the promise. Took the better part of a year to tow it here.'

The truck grumbled along, the sun stalking it more greedily with every hour. The orange gravel road was riven with parched gulleys from recent unseasonal rain. 'Better get the grader out here, Warren, see if we can iron out this stretch,' Phil said as they shuddered over a badly corrugated patch which sent the sheep stumbling. 'Get Miles to give you a hand,' and they went on to discuss how the Pommy trainee overseer, Miles Beaumont, had done, now that his stint with them was nearly over.

Saltbush began to give way to spinifex in places, and six black swans glided onto the massive salt lake, its border crystalled white. The lofty metal windmills in the paddocks turned gently in the breeze, pumping up the precious underground water. Now and then a few sheep scattered at the sight of the truck.

Wedged between his father and brother, Matt watched as a pair of emus darted out at the side of the road and for a moment kept pace with the truck before bolting back into cover. Daft buggers. But fast. Faster than the bungarras that would be there somewhere too? Countless animals, disguised by the scrubby bush: the Brown snakes and the redbacks; the little skinks; the ants in their millions. Camels, too, roaming wild after the era of cameleers: right now, somewhere on the property, there'd be one kneeling on a fence to break it and get to water. But they weren't nearly as bad as the dingoes, wary of traps and waiting for night to get at some poor sheep. And the roos. Bloody thousands of them, despite the best efforts of Pete Peachey, their roo shooter.

His eyes began to close, weighed down with the early start, and yesterday's excitement of the telegram from Perth announcing his outstanding Leaving and Matric results: the end of school forever.

He'd lain awake most of the night, thinking about what he would do next. Warren, more like forty-two than his actual twenty-two years, would take over Meredith Downs when their father retired – that was set in stone. Matt would have to do something else. And right this minute, two days short of his eighteenth birthday, it felt like he could do anything at all: go to university, become an engineer or a scientist – or a cartographer – he loved a good map . . . Or, with his parents' help, buy a station of his own. Get married even? One day. He conjured the pale green eyes of Pattie Gosden who, his sister Rose had promised him, would be at his Young Pastoralists' meeting in town today . . .

After hours rattling along flat dirt roads, stopping to swing open and close the broad gate of each paddock, they reached the boundary of Meredith Downs. The truck, with three men and the load of sheep, was no more than a grain of living sand in the landscape.



The MacBrides took up country in Western Australia a few decades after the Swan River Colony was settled in 1829. Lyle MacBride and his brother Lachlan left behind their father's modest sheep farm, braving the gruelling voyage from England with wives in tow, and over a couple of generations, their families fanned out across the west, as land opened up for grazing. As years went on, the Crown Lands maps showed block after block leased to 'MacBride' in red cursive ink.

The MacBride name also began to turn up in all the other records you'd expect: Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and the minutes of meetings of Vermin Boards and Roads Boards. In Bureau of Meteorology logs, which sent weather observations back to Perth and Melbourne, you'd also find mention of a MacBride or two. They were there in the Pastoralists' and Graziers' Association

minutes and the Royal Agricultural Society ledgers and much else besides.

The MacBrides had the touch, it was said: sensible but shrewd, careful but not mean. When fortunes allowed, they were ready donors to good causes both religious and secular. They made ideal neighbours: fair in disputes, practical in disasters; good husbanders of land who followed the best practice of the day. Whilst Lachlan's lot drifted up north, descendants of Lyle stayed put on Meredith Downs and eventually increased its boundaries to just shy of a million acres, the maximum extent then allowed by law. But a million acres barely registers as a dot on the map of Western Australia, the million square miles that makes up a third of the continent.

The MacBride men were handsome fellows, and had the knack of attracting debutantes to join them in their bush life. These wives sometimes came with dowries bestowed by stockbroker fathers or gold-mining grandfathers, which meant there was usually the wherewithal to tide the station over the tough times that came often enough.

It's hard country, out this way. Back in England, a farm might support two or three sheep per acre. Here, with the lack of rainfall, you need more like forty acres per sheep. There is heat. There is sun. But on winter nights the water in the tanks will freeze over. The searing light that coaxes life into being here will bleach it out of existence with the same indifferent shrug, leaving blanched trees, and rusted corrugated iron on the roofs of abandoned homesteads. The wind that brings the rain can bring floods and flatten shearing sheds. Everything that can do you good can also do you harm here – that's just the way of it.

This land has seen improbable things: the evolution of marsupials and monotremes; of flightless birds and animals that fly. It's seen continents split and islands arise. It's seen oceans turn to desert and desert turn to glaciers. And it's watched people drag their little lives across its surface, flat and unforgiving.

As for drought . . . Well, that's like the bad relation you know will turn up sooner or later – it's not a question of whether but when. That's another reason properties have to be big out here: to spread the weather. At least on some part of the million acres you might get a bit of a shower and be able to move your stock to the green feed that springs up in the paddocks or around the clay pans that fill with water. If it looks like you're heading into a perish, you destock as quickly as you can, cut the staff numbers, and wait out the eerie silence that comes when no sheep bleats, no bird flies, and no leaf rustles in the wind because there are no leaves.

On the day of that drive to Wanderrie Creek in January 1958, as Phil and Warren chatted about fence repairs, and Matt daydreamed about his future, about seeing Pattie Gosden, the MacBrides' luck changed, and they headed into an altogether different kind of perish.

Phil MacBride had been able to drive since he was seven years old – as soon as he could reach the pedals. He'd taught his sons at about that age, too. And one of the main rules he'd impressed on them was this: never swerve to avoid hitting a roo. There was no telling which way it'd jump, so you were better off taking your chances of a busted radiator than to risk skidding out of control and rolling.

Perhaps it was the heat mirage, then, that made Matt's father, for less than a second, register the six-foot upright figure on the road in front of him as a man instead of a red kangaroo buck. By the time Phil's feet had moved to slam on the brakes, his head had told him his mistake, but by then the truck had ploughed into the treacherous soft gravel shoulder, and twisted onto its side in a snarl of metal and force, flinging one of his sons through the windscreen, and impaling the other on the gearstick.

Phil had just enough strength to pull Warren from the cab, and drag him clear. He could make out Matt, further from the truck, head bleeding, limbs sprawled. Then he saw nothing more.

Petrol fumes doused the tang of the saltbush, and the thrum of the nearby windmill died under the frantic bleating of the sheep as the truck's wheels spun in mid-air, flicking fuel like a Catherine wheel. Within minutes, the vapour had ignited in the heat and drowned the vehicle in an orange roar of flames, black smoke from the melting tyres sketching a ladder to the boundless, empty sky.

Peas in a pod, the MacBride men were, strung along the dusty road in blood that welled and eddied and banded into a single scarlet pool.