

# Prologue

When I began my youthful passage, my expectations were simple: to learn to be a sheep station manager and to enjoy a life in which horses would play a major part. I had no idea what would unfold or where my inclinations would lead me. I learned and I enjoyed, but somewhere along the way, the country crept inside me and took root.

In South Australia, I began to know it and to feel it. But when I went to Western Australia's Upper Gascoyne and Upper Murchison, the country's power increased – and I began to love it. Love? Such a hackneyed word, but I can't think of a better one. What else can it possibly be? When my gaze passed over and through the landscape, I felt a frisson of excitement, of exquisite pleasure. How can mere red dirt and stones and scrubby trees and shrubs and rises and falls in the land and haze and a vast blue sky be so potent? Such was its power, even in intense heat, even at night – sometimes, especially at night – the landscape seized you. And what held together and enclosed all the elements was the enveloping silence, a soothing emptiness of noise. Yes, there were sounds, but they were the life-affirming murmurs of the movement of air, of the calls of birds, of the shuffle of leaves. Human sound is noise – and noisome. How sweet to be away from it.

When I listened to the silence and the stillness of the country, there was communication. Writing this now, seeing in my mind's eye the country that I learned to love, the old frisson stirs afresh. People who truly live in the outback listen to it. What they hear, I do not know. What I hear, I will not try to tell you. What the country says is beyond words. You feel it – or you don't.

So I discovered something I was not looking for, something profoundly important and beautiful. How grateful I am that I listened. And when people ask me why I wasted my youth working on sheep stations in the vast Australian outback, all I can say is that my youth was not wasted. It was not – wasted.

In 2009, I went back, yet again, into the country where I was forged. I camped alone on the bank of the dry bed of the Upper Gascoyne River. The place is called Teamarra Pool. I had camped there back when the pool had water for half a mile. I settled at my usual spot, at the base of an ancestor river gum. The night was pleasantly warm. Clothes seemed superfluous, irrelevant. I lay naked on my swag, which was unrolled on the ground beneath my tree's vast, spreading branches. I removed my watch. I disengaged from everything in my life but the country. I was back. The connection was back. There was no moon; the night was intensely dark. Stars flickered on and off as the leaves wafted. Soft, cool breaths of air came and went across my body, with intermittent, long-drawn-out periods of stillness.

I lay lightly on my back, looking up, feeling the earth's weight beneath me, observing the infinite firmament above through the thin veil of foliage. As I listened to the creak of the ancient tree's branches and the flicker of its leaves and the soft tumbles of the campfire coals, I asked myself if this is where I would like to die. Could I close my eyes and pass on here? Fade away, as the campfire faded out? Could I? Well, yes, I could. I felt at ease here. What greater feeling can a country give you than to set you free to pass on in its embrace. Alone, tracks dispersed by the wind, mind emptied, scattered traces, a final passage, no more rites. Knowing I could

accept my death, my appetite for life surged and flooded me with urgency. The country is alive! I am alive! I am not ready to end the partnership. If we do not take a firm grip on life, it will slip through our fingers.

When I was there in my youth, Death did reach out to me and seek to take me. I was sustained by the strength the country had given me. Through long dark days and nights, I heard the whispers and the reminders, and I listened.

Two hours into that night alone at Teamarra Pool, the full moon emerged and lit the floodplain with pale light. Eventually I slept; and in the morning, I brought the fire back to life to boil my billy, and I packed up and drove slowly away from the river to the road. I skimmed down that soft dirt track through miles and miles of flat wanderrie country, trying, as always, to imprint in my memory the landscape I was watching. But the details of memories fade. All that remain are impressions and feelings – and a sadness at the loss. There is only one solution – to return.