

Excerpt – Outback Women’s Stories



Introduction

Amazon / 'æməzɒn/ n. A member of a mythical race of female warriors...

(*amazon*) a very tall, strong, or athletic woman

Oxford Concise Dictionary

True to this definition, the word ‘amazon’ generally conjures up images of wild and powerful warrior women, fighting off foes in some primitive matriarchal society where they rule over men who have been subverted to more menial roles.

More generally, however, it talks of simple but important character traits.

Strength.

Fortitude.

Courage.

And, maybe most importantly, grace under pressure.

All undeniable qualities of our ‘Australian Amazons’.

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When Captain James Cook first landed in *Terra Australis* aboard *The Endeavour* in 1770, he could have had little idea, at least initially, that he was about to lay claim to the world’s largest island and smallest continent—a landmass of over 7.6 million square kilometres.

Over the decades to follow, this ‘island’ would be explored and navigated, with a picture of its true geographical nature slowly drawn by those who dared traverse its great expanse. In just about every corner of this ‘Great Southern Land’ there existed an indigenous population located in of over 40,000 years inhabitancy; there was a wide range of flora and fauna never see before or imagined; and from initial forays into the interior, the continent appeared most liveable along its coastlines, for, as explorers very quickly discovered, the vast inner heart of this massive continent was primarily desert, rocky mountainous ranges and scorched scrubland, with temperatures that soared higher than anything many of those who traversed its arid internal regions had experienced. Water was scarce, there were but two seasons—wet and dry—and the indigenous peoples were protective of their lands.

These discoveries no doubt prompted the obvious question: was this ‘outback’ actually uninhabitable?

Yet even with such doubts in mind, it is in man’s very nature to take up the challenges an alien environment of the sort posed, and rather than be outdone to instead tame, claim and bend it to his will.

And so he did.

Edward John Eyre would be the first man, together with his indigenous guide, Wylie, to cross Southern Australia from east to west, travelling across the Nullarbor Plain from Adelaide to Albany in 1840.

Burke and Wills would similarly set out to traverse from one side of the continent to the other, although in their case from bottom to top, as they travelled from the south to the north. Sadly, their journey would infamously end under tragic circumstances, with the pair dying of starvation at Coopers Creek in 1861.

There were also the great early pastoralists—men who saw untapped potential in this new land, even in its most arid locations, where they might grow crops or raise livestock.

James Ainslie was one of the first.

In the 1820's this Scotsman, taking up some land in Duntroon in the Northern Territory, turned a herd of 700 sheep into a massive 20,000 head, before returning to Scotland in 1835.

William Buchanan came not long after.

Arriving in Australia with his family in 1837, after leasing a run with his father in New England, and following some failed attempts at gold prospecting, he began to build a pastoral empire in both NSW and the Territory, going on to become one of Australia's most renowned pioneer pastoralists.

Most famous of all, however, was John MacArthur, ex-naval officer.

By 1801 MacArthur was the largest sheep owner in the colony and would go on to help establish our wool and sheep industry with his imported merino stock, leaving a lasting legacy.

So, you might ask, while these men were exploring the outback, creating both the backbone of our agricultural industry while at the same time helping to more generally establish the nation, where were the women and what were they doing?

Simple.

They were working alongside these pioneering men, travelling with them to the far reaches of the continent; helping manage the stations and farms; running households and performing the multitude of 'duties' that had been expected of them for millennia; supporting

families who needed every ounce of energy they could offer under harsh conditions; and dealing with, yet also connecting to, the indigenous peoples and, in their more intuitive feminine ways, forging positive relationships with them.

They were right there, fulfilling an extensive range of role and tasks while keeping the home fires burning, building the nation right along with their men.

And still are.

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Some of the earliest female pioneers included Georgiana McCrae and Emma Withnell.

The former was a promising artist from a privileged, if slightly scandal-tainted, life in London, the ‘bastard’ daughter of a Duke. McCrae would uproot herself for love, travel half a world away, raise a large brood of children and help husband Andrew to establish a sheep run in Arthur’s seat on what later became known as the Mornington Peninsular just out of Melbourne. The same woman would be versatile enough to mix with the local Melbourne ‘aristocracy’ when called upon, and yet act as something of a medicine woman and friend to the local tribes of indigenous Australians residing in the region.

Emma Withnell, who would be dubbed ‘the mother of the northwest’, was born to a pastoralist and his wife in the far reaches of the newly forming state of Western Australia. She and husband John would travel to the north of the state in search of new opportunities, facing innumerable challenges, and yet always, like true pioneers, seeing them through and surviving the worst to go on and face whatever next might be thrown at them.

Later, there were women like Daisy Bates and Mayse Young.

Bates, a feisty liberated woman of her time, came to Australia to start a new life, and promptly did so, although initially it was unsettled and not necessarily the life of her choosing. However, in time she would commence an anthropological study of Indigenous Australians that would traverse several decades and, while being labelled as somewhat controversial in part, would end up being considered an instrumental service to the indigenous community in terms of bringing some aspects of their plight to the attention of government.

Mayse Young, on the other hand, would become renowned for quite a different ‘service’ to Australian society more generally—pulling beers from behind the bar! This popular outback publican owned numerous pubs in the Northern Territory at a time women business owners, particularly in the hotel industry, were a rarity, and would become renowned for her good nature and solid business head.

Moving into a more contemporary landscape, women continue to play important roles in the outback and have wonderful tales to tell.

There are the adventurers, like Robyn Davidson, famous for undertaking a solo trek through the centre of Australia, from Alice Springs to the far west coast of Australia, with just her dog and four camels for company.

The pastoralists, such as Sara Henderson, who, with ex-American-naval hero husband Charlie, would establish the massive ‘Bullo Station’ in the Top End of Australia and go on to become something of a local celebrity after documenting a colourful and sometimes extraordinary life in her autobiography, *From Strength to Strength*.

And there are those who survive against all the odds: who look fate in the eye and dare it to stop them.

Women like Gayle Shann who, after a horrific farming accident that ripped her arm from its socket and nearly killed her, refused to lie down and accept that her life had changed forever.

Rather, she embraced this challenge and carried on regardless.

The Australian outback is filled with the stories of such extraordinary women, and there can be little doubt that many more tales will emerge in times to come as such resilient and brave women continue to do remarkable things in so many different ways under all manner of circumstance.

