Waterless Wonderland

Australia's Wyperfeld, 1988

by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at **www.billsbrownstone.com.**

Reviews for The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

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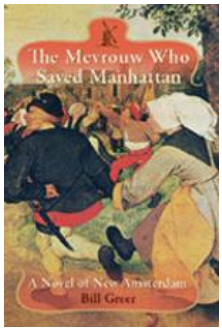

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"COLD FRONT COMING," declared the radio announcer. We were wrapping up a few days hiking in the Grampian Mountains, where we had sought a brief respite from the heat of an Australian summer. "Let's head for the Outback," I suggested to my wife Diane. "We're not likely to catch another cool spell."

Cool spell - Australian summer - Outback? That combination, we were soon to learn, gives new definition to oxymoron. Nonetheless, our vehicular cocoon seemed comfortable enough and the string of green dots on our map marked out an enticing set of national parks in northern Victoria. We pulled onto the Henty Highway and cruised due north. Our destination: Wyperfeld National Park, 280 miles northwest of Melbourne.

On any map of Australia, a thin green band circling the coast fades into a tan expanse covering the continent. Don't be fooled into expecting a gradual change. The Grampians, comparatively a lush oasis world-renowned for spring wildflowers, abruptly yield to the mallee scrub. Shades of brown undulate across the landscape. Clumps of tangled eucalytus branches sprout directly from the ground, forming impenetrable thickets with nary a touch of green. Grains of sand blow constantly off the tops of dunes. The light breeze that swirls them up brings as little relief as another blast from the furnace.

The features on our map of Wyperfeld could have fooled us into thinking we were heading toward another oasis within this sea of brown. Outlet Creek bisected the park. Its bed ran by several lakes, Brimin, Brambruk, Wonga, and a slew of tiny ponds. "Subject to flooding," warned the legend.

We knew better. Any blue on our map represented the ghost of waters past, for we were entering a waterless world, literally. All right, so that's not quite true. Some water had flowed in about 15 years before, and that was hardly unprecedented. Back in 1918, the lakebeds had filled up, and then again in 1956. A typical drought only lasts

three or four decades. And if your mouth grows parched between floods, you can always capture a little dew at dawn, like the park rangers do.

What better way to introduce ourselves to this barren wasteland than with a stop at the Little Desert? After a couple of hours on the road, we detoured into Little Desert National Park, about 80,000 acres of sand and scrub. Aside from a small sanctuary at the park entrance, the scrub is interminable. A few sandy mounds may rise several meters to break the vista, but no living creature, plant or animal, rears more than a couple off the ground. We hiked a few kilometers toward the salt lake at the center of the preserve, then decided, unseasonably pleasant temperatures or not, we had endured enough.

In reality, the Little Desert is no desert at all. With 400 millimeters of rain annually, it hardly qualifies as arid! With that bit of irony fresh in our minds, we eagerly pushed on toward Wyperfeld. There we expected to find a real desert.

We arrived in midafternoon. The sun beat down relentlessly on a baked plain. The place looked desolate. Another irony: we set up camp on the "lake shore." That meant the edge of a dry, cracked hollow. Yellow grasses and the scattered Eucalyptus offered the only signs that some primitive life might survive.

THE GRASSES WAVED slowly throughout the afternoon, catching just enough air to keep them in perpetual motion. The only other movement was an illusory one, the lengthening shadows thrown by the Eucalyptus as the sun sank lower on the horizon.

As the glaring rays receded from directly overhead, the shadows began dancing. Bobbing mirages appeared through the waves of heat, one or two at first, then more and more popping up behind the tufts of grass. Gradually, the shadowy figures took more substantial form. These were not tricks of the eyes and the heat, they were the first signs of a slumbering world emerging to enjoy the dusk, which would bring an almost imperceptible respite from the burning sun.

First to awaken from the afternoon siesta were the Kangaroos. They had been invisible bedded down beneath the brush. The cooling air and the promise of a meal of Cooba grasses now enticed them out. A few here or there soon soared into a mob of

hundreds. Their rumps spread across the ground like small hillocks. Occasionally a black face would raise up to peer around, the jaws working to grind the brown grasses hanging from the sides of the mouth.

Soon more creatures began arriving in waves. Galahs nested in the Eucalyptus, hanging like ornaments from a Christmas tree. A brown world that had slowly taken on a golden hue with the setting sun was now transformed into a collage of pastels, the birds pink feathers and faded blue tufts set against a sky deepening to royal blue. Sulphur-crested cockatoos vied for space among the branches. A small flock of Mallee ring-neck parrots winged in to liven the mixture. Their turquoise bodies were adorned garishly with vibrant yellow circles and crimson foreheads.

In the dry Lake Brimin, more shadows began moving as the stars began to glow in the dim light. Like the roos, these shadows had bulky lower bodies but their small heads set atop elongated necks. They ran with a smooth stride rather than a bobbing gait. The creatures were a hundred yards away, and we began stalking them across the lake bottom. We gained enough ground to recognize these flightless birds as emus. But while many of their brethren have grown tame, even cheeky, in other areas, the Wyperfeld residents remain timid. Never did they let us draw near.

By dusk, we had learned we were not visiting an uninhabited wasteland. The richness of the ecology might be hidden from ignorant human eyes, but its abundance could clearly support tremendous populations. The shrill cacophony ringing from the Eucalyptus branches attested to the masses that call Wyperfeld home.

WE ROSE WITH the dawn. "Cold front," we now knew, meant that the temperature could be measured without a third Fahrenheit digit. Wyperfeld is criss-crossed with tracks, providing both trails for hikers and access for firefighters. We had marked out a several kilometer loop to Lake Brambruk, dry of course. Six to nine a.m. was our allotted hiking time in anticipation that by mid-morning the furnace would have revved to full blast, pushing the mercury well above 90 degrees.

On foot, one has the opportunity to observe at a relaxed pace, to study the nuances of the land rather than to be captivated by sheer numbers or noises or stimulating colors. While the evening's impression was of abundance, the morning's would be one of subtlety.

Our camp lay in the flood plain of Outlet Creek, which of course had seen neither deluge nor trickle in well over ten years. River Red Gums stood tall along the streambed. Like many trees which early settlers viewed as topsy-turvy in this land Down Under, this Eucalypt species was peeling its bark rather than dropping its leaves. The mottled red trunks branched in all directions as they reached for the sky. Beware we were warned - those handsome limbs can come crashing down at any moment! A stand of Black Box trees marked the flood line, where an eternity before a rare flow had reached just far enough to unlock their seeds.

The creekbed is the low point of the park. Ridges of sand rise away, typically reaching 15 meters. Viewed as a panorama, the landscape is a drab monotone. Yet over those few meters of altitude, an enormously complex environment illuminates itself in its details.

Eucalypts are everywhere. The tall examples, the Red Gum and Black Box trees, never stretch beyond where the waters might some day return. But their brethren seek a toehold where never a drop of moisture will reach. The scubby mallee eucalypts look like poor relations. Tangles of sticks rise directly from the soil, slender leaves clinging in clumps. Slowly distinct personalities unveil themselves, revealing a fascinating diversity within this arid zone. The yellow mallee sprouts its broad leaves and large fruit on the higher dunes where sandy loam helps it grow. The slender leaf mallee contests this favored soil, its stems and buds casting a reddish aura. The leaves of the Dumosa mallee mix in gray-green tones.

The mallee eucalypts may look scraggly compared to their cousins of the floodplain, but that view is only skin deep. Beneath the surface, a tough tuber is the centerpiece of an elaborate root system. Insulated from the unforgiving heat above the

ground, each mallee's core is also safe from the fires that race through its canopy of oily leaves. New shoots sprout quickly on the heels of the common infernos.

In the lower reaches beneath the dunes, hundreds of other plants carve out their niches. The tiny pink flowers of the Heath-myrtle bloom where the soil is a fine clay. Green Tea-trees create dense thickets. Cypress Pines build scattered forests. Within this community, a patchwork of newcomers is encroaching. Wild turnip, thistles, and horehound spread beneath the Box trees. Early settlers carried these weeds with them, and as their sheep and cattle cut down the native plants, they moved into the void. Heat, fire, drought could not threaten the native species, but the specialization that permitted survival in such harsh conditions led to a fragile structure that can withstand little change.

A movement along the edge of a stand of Cypress Pines interrupts our observations. The animal's reddish fur seems out of place as it trots casually along. The fox is indeed a relatively recent migrant to the area, brought by man to fight another import. Rabbits, not weeds, are the greatest threat to the ecosystem. Posing no danger to mature vegetation, they will denude the next generation, nibbling any fresh shoots as they emerge from the soil. Suddenly stopping, the fox appears to have caught sign of its prey. We hold our breaths, hoping to witness another drama play out. But the animal bolts into the piney woods, perhaps reacting more to our own scent than in pursuit of its next meal.

COMPLEXITY AND FRAGILITY, these themes of the landscape manifest themselves best in the unofficial mascot of Wyperfeld, the Mallee bird. These pheasant-shaped fowl reach the size of a small turkey. Their gray coloring, patterned with blacks, whites, and browns along the wings and back, blends with the spotted sunlight beneath the mallee scrub. In this arid climate, the birds subsist on seeds and insects, able to derive all the moisture they need from this food.

The Mallee birds spend a lifetime in a sophisticated ritual of breeding and incubating. In a land of harsh extremes, they have become master builders of climate-controlled environments, the mounds in which they hatch their young.

Hoping to observe this extraordinary dance of nature, we crept slowly toward one mound, shielding ourselves behind a pile of brush. The nest covered an opening in the scrub about 5 meters across. It rose a meter above the ground, with steeply slanted sides and flattened top. As the breeding season was well underway, this mound's owner had already spent months preparing it. The prior autumn and early winter, the male had begun, raking into the egg chamber leaves, bark, twigs, and any other organic material he could find. Onto the chamber, he piled a meter of sand.

During September and October, this craftsmen must have continued his feverish work, opening the chamber each day. Into it, he would have popped his head testing the temperature. By then the organic material was rotting, throwing off heat to warm the chamber. Depending on the temperature, the male may have left the chamber oper during mid-day, letting the sun contribute its own warmth. At other times, he would have ventilated the chamber during the cooler hours, anxious to push the temperature downward.

Through this constant attention, the Mallee would have brought his mound to a steady 33 degrees Celsius. Satisfied with his efforts, he would call his mate. If the hen approved the work, she laid an egg, leaving it to him to maintain the incubator's 33 degrees for several weeks until the chick fought its way through the sand to reach daylight.

Our hope was that an egg lay buried already. With luck, the cock would come by and open the mound, testing the temperature. Or perhaps, he would excavate another section and beckon his hen to drop another egg. But the blazing sun soon exhausted our patience.

Though we were unable to observe the bird in action, his handiwork had opened another window into the remarkable adaptations of Wyperfeld's life. Living amidst harsh extremes, the Mallee has developed a complex behavior to ensure its young will gestate in a virtual constancy. Its survival is precarious, however. Despite its unceasing efforts to create an artificial environment for its unborn young, it cannot endure a change in the harsh ecosystem from which it protects them. Fortunately, the threat of extermination

from the clearing of the mallee scrub has abated with the set-aside of preserves like Wyperfeld.

AFTER A COUPLE of days at Wyperfeld, we were only half-baked, thanks to mercury which refused to break through 99 degrees at the sun's zenith. We had viewed a panorama in shades of brown that could suddenly come alive with hundreds of creatures. And we knew that the panorama did not reveal the land's true character. One had to look closer to see the tiny variations adapted by each organism, to witness the ingenuity that permitted survival.

The cold front we luckily encountered had about run its course. The temperature would soon begin creeping toward 110, and while the life of the mallee might thrive in such heat, we would not. So we moved on, satisfied with our experience but knowing that Wyperfeld had unveiled only half its personality.

Someday years into the future, the rains will begin far to the south in the Grampians where our journey had begun. The downpour may continue for days, and as the waters roll down the northern slopes, the rivers will begin to rise, the Wimmera catching the runoff in the east, the McKenzie in the west. Eventually the streams will merge and flow into Lake Albacutya. If the rains continue, drifting northward, the lake will rise and the waters will spill over its upper barrier into Outlet Creek. The flow will tumble northward, further into the outback, until it floods the lowlands of Wyperfeld.

Millions of microorganisms will ride the waves northward. Water fleas will find a new home. Snails will infest Lake Brambruk. Somehow the winds will carry the message hundreds of miles. Thousands of black swans will hear or smell the call and descend on the newly-formed ponds. Huge white pelicans, with their gangly webbed feet and long wrinkled muzzles, will splash into the waters.

And we will wing our way back to a Water-filled Wonderland.

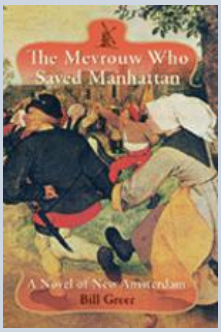
The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

by Bill Greer

"A very authentic ring … like etchings by Van Ostade and Steen."

– Charles Wendell, Ph.D., President of the New Netherland Institute

A Novel of New Amsterdam



When Mevrouw Jackie Lambert opens her New Amsterdam tavern in 1626, she jumps aboard a madcap ride through New York history. With a razor-sharp tongue and the tastiest beer on either side of the Atlantic, Jackie spurs the tiny Manhattan settlement toward a head-on collision with the tyrannical Dutchmen who rule it. Poison, blackmail, murder, all are fair game as she fends off threats to the family she yearned for growing up as an orphan. And when pegleg Peter Stuyvesant would rather destroy the town than surrender his honor, Jackie must take history into her own hands or lose everything she has spent a lifetime building.

A Real Portrait

While a work of fiction, The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan paints a real portrait of life in New Amsterdam with all its humor, bawdiness, and conflict. It presents a window into how Dutch culture during the Golden Age of the Netherlands transplanted to the wilderness of the Hudson Valley. The thread of Jackie's life reflects the central theme of the Dutch period, the rebellion of the common people against their rulers, the Dutch West India Company and its Directors, a conflict that historians argue laid the foundation for the pluralistic, freedom-loving society that America became.

About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan.

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Reviews

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