

# YOUNG GUNS

PROUD, PASSIONATE AND DETERMINED, AND WITH ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGIES THEIR FOREBEARS COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED, A NEW GENERATION OF YOUNG AUSSIES IS TACKLING HEAD-ON THE CHALLENGES IN THE BUSH.

BY NATHAN DYER

Tim McClelland, of Birchip, Vic, is part of the new generation driving technological change on the family farm.



SHE MAY NOT BE FLASH, but out here on the dusty tracks of Queensland’s Channel Country, where temperatures hover around 40 degrees Celsius for weeks on end and a well-maintained bore can be the difference between life and death, Charlie Roberts’ 75 Series LandCruiser is a sight for sore eyes. “I’ve been driving LandCruisers and breaking them ever since I was 16, so I know how to fix them,” says the Boulia boreman, while taking a break in the shade from another scorcher.

Since moving from Bundaberg a decade ago, Charlie has made the Channel Country his home, workplace and playground. Establishing his own bore and windmill maintenance business back in 2008 after six years working for wages on nearby Glenormiston Station, Charlie has built a name for himself with expertise in remote-controlled bores and old-fashioned windmill maintenance. “I’ve got a foot on either side of the fence; I’m up with all the new technology, all the latest and greatest, and I still service the old stuff,” he says.

Adding to Charlie’s growing business success, sales from his online store are steadily growing. “I’ve even sold to America when the dollar was high; they could buy their windmill buckets cheaper from me,” he says. Last year, Charlie and the Cruiser rattled over 40,000 kilometres to service bores and windmills across the local shire. He’s also president of the Boulia Turf Club. Not bad for a 30-year-old who stopped home schooling at 16. Charlie’s explanation is matter-of-fact. “I don’t have a school education, I’m not a brilliant man, but out here I can be somebody,” he says.

The young Boulia businessman epitomises a new generation of Aussies who call the bush home. Like their forebears, this new breed of young rural and regional leaders are proud,

determined and steadfastly community-minded. They also have unparalleled access to education and information and are adopting new technologies to change almost every aspect of life in the bush for the better. Recent research shows many young people are returning to the bush after travelling and building careers in the cities, bringing with them new skills, experience and ways of tackling adversity.

Like generations before them, a passion for the rural way of life is a common thread woven into the minds and ambitions of the half-a-million young Australians aged between 18 and 35 living in the bush. Human resources manager for Kidman & Co Terry Omond is responsible for recruiting the workforce for the company’s dozen properties spread across the country. He says that although it’s getting tougher to keep young people in the cattle industry, those who choose to make a career in the bush have one key thing in common: “They’re staying because of that passion”.

FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

It’s the middle of harvest up in the flat sandy country of Victoria’s Mallee region and sleep is in short supply for 31-year-old Tim McClelland. Working four days a week as a farming systems analyst with research cooperative Birchip Cropping Group, Tim spends the rest of his time on his family’s farm, between Birchip and Berriwollock. So, with harvest in full swing, Tim is spending his days in the lab and his nights in the cab of the header. “I sleep between midnight and 6.30am, and when you have some rain you catch up on sleep then,” he laughs.

University educated and passionate about agriculture, Tim is part of a new rural generation driving technological change on the family farm. In the past 30 years, the proportion of ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE TOP: Jarred Tilley, with wife Alice and son Edward, brings a new level of professionalism to the family farm in Kapunda, SA; businessman Charlie Roberts, of Boulia, Qld, with partner Jane Vaschina; human resources manager for Kidman & Co, Terry Omond. BELOW: Bringing in a bumper harvest in the Mallee.



JOHN KRUGER



NATHAN DYER



FAIRFAXPHOTOS





Farm manager Tom Murphy says he and his wife Fiona believe the bush is the best place to raise their children Grace, 6, Maggie, 4, and Sam, 1.

Australian farmers with tertiary and other qualifications has grown from 15 to 38 percent. That growth has been led by younger generations, with half of farmers aged 25–44 holding tertiary and other qualifications, compared to 30% of those aged 45 and over. Often, as was the case for Tim, it is the older generations who have encouraged their children to get an education away from the farm.

Tim works with his father and uncle to run the family’s 7000-hectare cropping and livestock operation, and says adopting new technologies is about making the most of what you’ve already got. Since returning to the farm two years ago, Tim has overseen the introduction of National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) ear tags. “We’re using those on our Merinos to track their performance from season to season,” he says. Individual sheep can be profiled with information from wool samples, weight measurements and impregnation history. “If it’s not performing then we can sell it, or if it is performing we can try to breed more from that particular ewe or ram,” he says.

New South Wales Farmers’ chief executive officer Matt Brand says access to information is helping young farmers adopt new technology at unprecedented rates. “Because of the digital age, they’re able to access information very quickly,” Matt says. “They may hear of something through word of mouth and from there they’re able to research it themselves and they can then get evidence fairly quickly because things are posted on official sites and blogs.”

Tim says the technology is helping him to continue a proud family tradition. “It’s about making use of technologies that I’m a little bit more aware of than my dad or my uncle, who are 55 and 70,” he says.

GROWING PROFESSIONALISM

At home on the family farm at Kapunda, on the edge of South Australia’s Barossa Valley, Jarred Tilley says his generation is bringing unparalleled professionalism to the family farm. With the average Australian broadacre property growing 30% in size from 5000ha in 1978 to 6500ha in 2007, young farmers increasingly see themselves less as traditional farmers and more as business managers.

After studying agricultural science at Adelaide University, Jarred worked for a corporate-farming operation in New South Wales, before spending two years in Europe working and travelling. The 32 year old says that world experience coupled with his time in corporate farming has allowed him to look at the family farm in a new light. Since returning home in 2009, Jarred has established an open-book benchmarking group with other young farmers in the district. The group shares details of input costs, overheads, debt levels and yields, and benchmarks their performance against each other. “Our aim was to have better control over our numbers as our business was growing,” he says.

The Tilleys have also implemented a board-style governance structure with independent advisors. Jarred says that level of professionalism is key to young farmers making the most of growing world food demand. “I think there is going to be a golden era for farming over the next generation,” Jarred says.

According to Matt Brand, deregulation of key industries has also driven many young farmers to focus on better governance and increased professionalism both on-farm and beyond the farm gate. “In the grains industry, for example, we’ve got a lot of young guys who are doing their own trading,” Matt says. ►



**Young Territorian Donal Sullivan, who grew up on Cave Creek Station, reckons her generation is well placed to build stronger ties with customers in traditional and new export markets.**

“They’re marketing and shipping their own grain in containers directly to overseas customers, and they can talk with those customers very quickly through the internet.”

As a farm manager with the Sustainable Agriculture Fund (SAF), based in the central New South Wales locality of Tullooona, halfway between Moree and Goondiwindi, Tom Murphy understands the importance of this professionalism. When his father sold the family’s dairy farm at Numurkah, Vic, during his final year of school, Tom realised he’d have to look elsewhere to follow his dream of farming. After spending two years jackarooing in south-western New South Wales and another two years on a wheat-and-sheep property in Western Australia, Tom enrolled at Marcus Oldham College and completed an advanced diploma of farm management.

When he returned from the west, Tom brought back both a girlfriend, Fiona, who would become his wife, and the experience to back up his education. He landed a job with one of Australia’s leading agricultural investment groups. In 2012, Tom re-enrolled at Marcus Oldham to complete a bachelor of business in farm management. He and Fiona, a chartered accountant, are now employed by SAF as a management team in charge of five properties known as the North Star Aggregation, cropping about 8500ha of wheat, barley, chickpeas, sorghum, canola and cotton. “If you’re going to survive in farming, whether it’s on a family farm or in corporate, like I do, if you’re not professional about your operation you’re starting behind the pack,” Tom says.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Sweltering on a building site in the middle of another of Darwin’s torrid wet seasons, Donal Sullivan is well aware of the need for traditional industries to go about things differently. Having grown up on Cave Creek Station, 10km east of Mataranka, NT, Donal attended boarding school in Alice Springs, where she was shocked by the attitudes of town-based students. “Growing up in an urban setting, they were very much streetwise, but they had no clue about any of the beef industry that is right under their noses,” she says. “It made me realise there’s a whole world of people who don’t realise what we do.”

Although now working for a Darwin surveying company, Donal maintains close ties with the family business, which recently hosted Indonesian university students as part of an exchange program between the Australian and Indonesian beef industries. Last year Donal travelled there for 10 days to see the students in their own country. “And I still talk with the students on Facebook,” she says. With greater ability to engage directly with customers, Donal says her generation is well placed to build closer relationships with trading partners. “We have so much access to information about what’s going on around the world, and being so open to utilising technological developments I think our generation is probably the best equipped so far to really engage with the industry through all levels of production.”

Many young people in the bush are also taking to social media to tell their stories in an effort to educate their urban brethren on the ►





PHOTOS: JESSICA WYLD

West Australian sheep farmer Emily Stretch, pictured with parents Digby and Nikki, uses social media and a blog to bridge the rural-city divide. OPPOSITE: Emily works the yards on their 2800ha property in Kojonup, WA.

realities of life on the land. Three hour's drive south-east of Perth, third-generation farmer Emily Stretch is in the middle of harvest on the family's 2800ha Kojonup property. "The canola is yielding evenly and well, which is surprising given all the sandy stuff we've got," she says, taking a break from the header. After attending boarding school, Emily returned to the farm for a year then tried her hand at various other pursuits, including mustering in the Murchison and working in administration for Wellard Group at Fremantle Port. "But it doesn't matter what I do, I always end up back here," she laughs.

Frustrated with negative coverage of rural issues in the media, the 21 year old last year turned to the internet to share the trials and tribulations of life on the land. "I decided we obviously needed to bridge the gap with urban people who are disconnected with what we do out here," she says. "I thought if I put a blog out there, people who want information can find it, and that's got to be positive for the industry."

A post from her *Life on the Land* blog titled 'Picking up the pieces of your heart', about shooting flyblown lambs, prompted a particularly large response. "It's probably because it was raw emotion," Emily says. "It was me just saying, 'Look, this is what we do. It's absolutely heart-wrenching sometimes, but we still do it because we believe in it'." Emily hopes her blog will help counter some of the negativity in the mass media. "People are obviously seeing confronting images from animal activists, so if they can get it out there on a widespread basis then I'm sure we can, as well," she says. "But I'm firmly of the opinion you shouldn't be shoving it in people's faces. If they want to find it they'll go looking, but you've got to have the information there to start with."

#### SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Having grown up at Quantong, 15km west of Horsham in Victoria's rich Wimmera region, De-Anne Ferrier knows how important young people are to the survival of small towns. Now living at Birchip, De-Anne is among a group of young scientists from Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) passionate about getting involved in community life. Outside her role as extensions and communications officer with BCG, De-Anne juggles life on the land with farming husband David and her key roles in various community groups.

As president of Birchip Next Gen – part of an initiative run by the Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program – De-Anne is working to ensure community voices are heard by local government. Through initiatives such as the Birchip Forum, which provides council with community feedback, the 34 year old is helping local residents take part in decisions that affect their town. New town signage, a Christmas-trading promotion and a bike track to nearby Lake Tychum are all ideas to come from the forum.

Although the Birchip Forum uses traditional means such as noticeboards and the local newspaper to spread information and invite feedback, it is social media that has really helped build a following. "The trouble is, meetings are hard to get to for many people, and people are already time poor," De-Anne says. "Facebook is a great medium for people to share information, so people are all on the same page and know what's happening." For example, a farmer might get back from the paddock and post a quick comment after dinner. Although they haven't made it to a meeting, they're still part of the discussion. "And you



"This is what we do. It's absolutely heart-wrenching sometimes, but we still do it because we believe in it."





get more ideas out of different opinions,” De-Anne says. “Having young people involved in community groups is vital for small towns because that’s where you develop your leadership skills and your community skills; skills that help you in life,” she says.

Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) research director Jeanette Pope says although young people in the bush face unique challenges compared to their city counterparts, they have a clear advantage when it comes to community. Recent FYA research shows they are more likely to volunteer and more likely to feel they have trusted adults in their lives. “So they have clear social capital strengths,” Jeannette says.

### COMING HOME

That ability to be directly involved with local communities, coupled with housing affordability and growing career opportunities, is slowly attracting more young people like De-Anne Ferrier back to the bush. Research by the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) shows unprecedented numbers of people returning to rural and regional Australia after a stint in the cities. The RAI’s paper *Talking point: Returning to Regional Australia* released earlier this year, shows that in 2010–11 more Australians aged 25–44 moved from cities to regional areas than vice versa.

Born-and-bred Birdsville girl Jenna Brook is a good example of the trend. After going away for boarding school and university, Jenna worked in Sydney and Rockhampton and travelled through Africa before returning to her home town. “I had planned on coming home for a month or so while I looked for a job, and I’m still here, a couple of years later,” she says. ►

“Having young people involved in community groups is vital for small towns”



PHOTOS: NATHAN DYER

**Recently renovated, the Birchip Hotel is a meeting point for the growing number of young people in the small Mallee town. OPPOSITE: Birchip Cropping Group scientist De-Anne Ferrier is passionate about driving positive change in her rural community.**





Jenna says the outback's community spirit is what drew her back. "It's a place where you can make a bit of a difference because you're part of a community and you do things to help others," she says. "Out here, everyone is dealing with a lot of the same issues ... you share lows and you share all the highs as well." Not long after returning, Jenna came up with an idea to walk 430km across the Simpson Desert. The 15-day walk raised \$37,000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. "It was a very humbling experience, with all the support," she says.

Jenna soon found herself looking for other ways to help her community. She's now the local swimming instructor and lifeguard at the public pool, and more recently started a community garden. "There are a lot of opportunities to better yourself out here," Jenna says. "You find a little niche and that's what you aim for – it's one of those places that if you really want to make a difference you can."

For rural doctor Shannon Nott, getting young people to stay in or return to the bush has become a burning passion. Leaning on a fence post across from the rural block he rents outside Orange, NSW, the 25 year old explains why he headed for the bush after completing his medical degree at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). It's mid-summer and the surrounding countryside is bone dry. Shannon has just finished a 12-hour shift in the intensive care unit at the local hospital and despite his obvious exhaustion and the heat, he is full of passion as he talks about improving health outcomes in rural and remote Australia. ►



**Orange doctor Shannon Nott wants more young health professionals to realise that spending time in the bush can be good for their careers. OPPOSITE: Born-and-bred Birdsville girl Jenna Brook says young people willing to have a go can have a big impact in small communities.**





**CLOCKWISE:** Birdsville author Kelly Theobald with her VW Beetle ‘Onslo’; health students are shown life on the land during the annual Rural Appreciation Weekend; former television journalist Bessie Thomas has discovered a new world since re-locating from Townsville to Burragan Station, NSW, three years ago; general manager of research and policy with the Rural Australia Institute, Jack Archer.

“The further you go from metropolitan areas, the fewer health professionals there are,” Shannon says. “Although there are enough doctors to go around, getting those health professionals to the regions where they’re needed most is difficult. And those shortages actually translate into poorer health outcomes for rural and remote Australians.”

Shannon wanted to do something about the situation. So, in 2007, while still a student at university, he established the Rural Appreciation Weekend. “I wanted people to see rural and remote health as a big opportunity and break down some of the stereotypes, especially for those people who have never been out bush before,” he says. Now in its eighth year, the four-day weekend has seen more than 1000 medical and health students get a taste of country life. Initially held at Shannon’s family property at Dunedoo, NSW, the weekend is now held at a property in Wagga Wagga. Shannon remains in close contact with the Rural and Allied Health and Medical Society at UNSW that manages the student-run initiative.

Although he is soon to embark on a Churchill Fellowship researching telemedicine in indigenous communities across Brazil, Alaska and Canada, Shannon says he will always return to the Australian bush. And he’s confident many more young Aussies will do the same. “There’ll always be people who say, ‘That’s never going to be for me’, but if we can influence a few people to think, ‘I might give that a go’, well that’s the first step.”

He says starting his career in a smaller regional hospital has had big advantages. “The people who are helping you through those very nerve-racking early days in your career are people who are genuinely great mentors who realise most of the people who come to a place like Orange are really keen about rural and remote settings,” Shannon says. “In terms of the depth and breadth of medicine I’ve been able to experience, I’ve never felt like I’ve been disadvantaged by being out here.”

It’s a message Shannon wants heard in classrooms and lecture halls around the country. “We just need to get people changing their mindset about rural and remote Australia. It’s not a dead-end part of your career, it’s actually a way of enhancing your career and your career prospects in the future,” he says.

On the dry rangelands of New South Wales, Bessie Thomas has discovered a whole new world since re-locating from Townsville, Qld, to Burragan Station with husband Shannan three years ago. Having previously lived in Darwin and Brisbane, 25-year-old Bessie is finding that 28,000ha Burragan – 110 kilometres south-east of Wilcannia – is quite different to her former city life as a television news journalist. “To see Shannon’s passion – he was born out here and has lived it everyday – you get sucked in; nothing is the same when you go back to the city,” she says. “It’s exciting and it’s fun, and no day is ever the same as another; and I love the idea that I’m growing the wool people are wearing in Milan and Paris.”







**High-end tourism business Kimberley Quest operates cruises through the Kimberley. OPPOSITE: Alice Ralston, 27, is the manager of the tourism business.**

## CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

More and more young people are discovering smaller communities provide a chance to change career paths and move into areas that would be closed to them in the city.

The RAI's general manager of research and policy, Jack Archer, says that 20 or 30 years ago there was a real limitation to what careers people could pursue in rural and regional Australia. "But I think that is really breaking down," Jack says. "I think what you get out of regional communities is really good networks with people doing all different kinds of things, whereas when you live and work in a metropolitan area networks are likely to be in your industry ... I think regions are always keen to give people a go and back people who are trying to do something different."

In Birdsville, Qld, journalist Kelly Theobald is a case in point. Kelly moved from Melbourne three years ago to save money before starting a planned masters of human rights in Paris and following her dream of becoming a war correspondent. "I was only going to stay for four or five months, save up money, and then move to France," the 26 year old says. Instead, she stayed.

Inspired by her new community, and having fallen in love with charmingly laconic local boilermaker Sam Barnes, Kelly set about writing a book to tell city children about outback life. *Onslo*, the story of a little blue Volkswagen Beetle that crosses the desert with the help of a bunch of animal friends, is now in its second print run. The book was inspired by the 1963 Beetle she and Sam restored and then drove across the Simpson Desert, which edges Birdsville. "I think there is a lack of literature teaching children about the outback, and I wanted to do something about that, to show kids in the city what life out here is like," she says. Kelly says the



PHOTOS: KIMBERLEY QUEST





bush offers amazing opportunities to those willing to have a go. “If I was still in the city there’s no way I would have published my own children’s book, but out here those things happen,” she says.

In the shadow of the rugged red cliffs of the Kimberley coast, Alice Ralston is taking on responsibilities that would daunt many people twice her age. As manager of her family’s Kimberley Quest tourism business, Alice oversees accounting, human resources, logistics, marketing and the resupply of the company’s 24-metre vessel *Kimberley Quest II*, which completes up to 28 voyages each year. “I don’t have a degree in anything, I’m self-taught and my mum’s taught me a lot, so I’m quite lucky to have the role that I’ve got at my age,” says the 27 year old who grew up being home-schooled in a remote West Australian cray-fishing village. “If you’ve got experience in the industry and you’re capable of doing the job, sometimes in smaller towns you don’t need as many qualifications.”

Alice’s brother Ben Bonnet and partner Josh Bairstow both work as captains of the *Quest*, and alternate time on and off the ship. For her parents Lynne and Jeff Ralston, who established the business almost 20 year ago, the opportunity to have the next generation take on more and more responsibility and continue their work is rewarding. “It’s good to see something you’ve given so much to continue to evolve for the family,” Lynne says. It’s not an easy business, and you have to be able to keep a lot of balls in the air at once while staying calm and keeping focused. “To know that there’s a future for them and the business, and that they want to work hard together and build that future is great,” Lynne says.

**Businesswoman Benita Bensch, of Goondiwindi, Qld, is using new technology to service an expanding client base.**

**OPPOSITE: Pilbara businessman Clinton Walker says the mining boom has provided amazing opportunities for young people.**

## GOING OUT ON THEIR OWN

Young people are increasingly using technology to break down the barrier of isolation and establish thriving regional businesses. Jack Archer says regional economies are now more sophisticated, offering a greater diversity of jobs. “There are also many more opportunities for people to start their own businesses and do their own things and be successful,” he says. “In some ways, the regions are a better place to do that because you have lower costs of living, so it’s potentially easier to take those risks of starting a business without the big overheads.”

Goondiwindi businesswoman Benita Bensch agrees. After graduating from rural science at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW, Benita worked with the Agricultural Business Research Institute helping beef producers apply genetic technologies on-farm for herd improvement and identified a niche to assist seedstock producers with their marketing and bull sales.

In 2008, Benita established Sunburnt Country Consulting in Gunnedah, NSW, with a focus on producing sale catalogues and coordinating bull-sale campaigns. The scope soon broadened, with media, marketing, event and project-management services introduced to the mix. Now based in Goondiwindi, Qld, Benita is doing business coaching – another niche service she identified







NEWSPIX

Loving living in the bush ... horses are fed at sunset in the hot, dry weather at Boulia, Qld.

as lacking in the bush. The 32-year-old expectant mother says the bush continues to offer opportunities to young people. “For businesses like mine, technology is making it possible to do business from any location,” she says. “In a given day I could sit in on a webinar being hosted from Sydney, I might dial into a teleconference being hosted from America, and I can have clients all over the country.”

On the other side of the continent, Clinton Walker is busy preparing for a tourist season that won’t start for another three months. It’s wet season in the Pilbara and locals in the coastal town of Karratha are enjoying the rain. Rivers are flowing between the spinifex and scrub-covered hills and waterholes are full. In town, miners and their white four-wheel-drives with orange flags fill the streets.

After a decade of being employed in various roles in the mining industry, Clinton, an automotive mechanic by trade, and sister Cherylea had the idea to start delivering cultural-awareness training to mining companies, something he had done in a previous position with Rio Tinto. The siblings went into partnership with an old school friend, Jolleen Hicks, gathered support from local organisations, and worked with elders to develop a cultural-awareness package specific to their own language group, the Ngarluma people from the Roebourne, Karratha and Wickham areas.

Their business, Gurrigura, delivered its first cultural-awareness training in March 2011. This year Gurrigura will

expand into tourism. “Prior to the mining boom, a lot of Aboriginal people missed out on opportunities,” he says. “Now a lot have started their own businesses as recruitment agencies, mobile-plant operators, trades, all sorts of stuff.”

**A WAY OF LIFE**

Back at Tulloona, Tom Murphy and wife Fiona have their hands full. It’s daughter Grace’s sixth birthday and the young couple has invited the whole school over for a pool party. All four students from Tulloona Public School – all girls – are having a ball. “We call it the elite Tulloona girls’ school,” Tom shouts over their laughter and splashing.

Jokes aside, Tom says the little country school is wanting for nothing. “You should see this little school – it’s got every little gadget,” he says. “They do their video conferences with other schools, they’ve got interactive whiteboards, and every kid’s got an iPad, so they definitely don’t miss out.” He and Fiona see the bush as the only place to raise Grace and her siblings, four-year-old Maggie and one-year-old Sam.

Tom says although there will always be unique challenges to raising a family in the bush – for example, funding for the local school bus run has just been cut and parents are now looking to buy the bus and drive it themselves – the benefits far outweigh the challenges.

“To get the lifestyle, you make compromises,” Tom says. “But we do it because we love it.”