

“The Longest Drive” by Tom Guthrie

“The Longest drive” is a book of magnificent scope and meticulous scholarship; it is also an adventure story in the time of the early European occupation of Australia.

In the Introduction, Tom Guthrie says, “This is the story of my great-grandfather Thomas (Tom) Guthrie and his pioneering adventures in early Australia; the story covers the period from his birth in 1833 to his death in 1928 at the ripe old age of ninety-five.”

The book is long, but never tiresome, as there are constant inserts from Thomas Guthrie’s memoirs, other remembrances, historical date and even quotations from Australian poets of the pioneering days, such as “Banjo” Paterson.

Thomas Guthrie came by sailing ship at the age of 14 to join his brothers in their import-export business in Hobart. After a spell of jackerooing on a Tasmanian sheep station, and five years in Hobart, he was to join his brothers George and David in a new plan to take stock to New Zealand and commence farming there. However, their vessel was wrecked in Poverty Bay, New Zealand, and the focus of their plan changed to Melbourne, where a shop was established in the new colony.

There, observing the hysteria of the gold rush, which created a need for materials, Tom and George set up shop in Forest Creek (Castlemaine) – but disaster struck again, as the shop and stock were lost in a fire.

So it was time to regroup and go back to Scotland for a visit – and this proved fortunate, as on this trip Thomas met George Synnot, and on their return to Victoria in 1855, became Synnot’s partner in a stock/station enterprise which became very profitable.

At first the partners shared in a leasehold of Quambatook Station, but Thomas had met and wished to marry the young South Australian widow, Mary Rutherford, so it was time for his own property – and in 1864 he bought the lease of Rich Avon East. This has been the family’s home ever since, and having celebrated its sequicentenary, it is now on the way to the next milestone with the fourth generation, Chris and Jenny Guthrie.

The Drive

The book’s title refers to Thomas Guthrie’s greatest venture, when in 1882 he bought 1.5 million acres on the Barkly tableland, then part of South Australia, now the Northern Territory, and calling it Avon Downs, drove his sheep there, all the way from Rich Avon, about 4,000 km.

As Tom said in the book, “It was certainly an epic journey, the longest trip with sheep ever done in Australia.”

The family held Avon Downs for forty years, adding cattle later, enduring drought and floods, and there were more droving trips as stock were taken for sale down the Birdsville Track to catch a train at Farina for Adelaide.

Inserted in the narrative are chapters on related subjects, such as the story of the Rutherford family, a history of Donald, the aborigines, the establishment of Corriedales – and even the 2002 cattle drive undertaken for the Commonwealth centenary, which the author and his wife joined to gain an idea of the early long droving trails.

This is a book that every-one who is interested in the pastoral history of Australia and its redoubtable pioneers should have, savour and pass on to future generations.

It is available from the cellar door at Grampians Estate Great Western Wine Centre, 1477 Western Highway, Great Western, on-line at www.grampiansestate.com.au or contacting Grampians Estate, phone 53546245, fax 53546257, email info@grampiansestate.com.au. The price is \$75 plus postage.