



Mervyn Owen Wynne: A Life on the Land

4th August 1925 (Kensington, Sydney) - 18th May 2008 (*Torvale*, Gum Flat, Inverell)

There were mountains in Mervyn's life. The first was Mount Wilson with a cherished childhood at *Wynstay*, a property established by his great-grandfather in 1875 and held in trust until Mervyn's father came of age whilst being educated at Marlborough College and Cambridge University, UK. World War I delayed Richard Owen's return to Australia as he fought for England, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, decorated with the D.S.O, a bar to the D.S.O. and mentioned four times in *Dispatches*. Following his discharge from the Bedfordshire Regiment, the Colonel sailed to Australia to claim his inheritance and on board met, and successfully courted, Mariamne Ronald who was on her way to visit Australian relatives after driving an ambulance in France during the war. They married in London on the 22nd January 1921.



Math Davies, the Colonel's batman, married his childhood sweetheart Flo and the Yorkshire couple sailed to Australia to live with and assist the Wynnes to settle on the mountain where the Wynne children, Jane Mariamne, Mervyn Owen (named Muff by his sister) and Ronald Michael, were raised in a traditional English manner with large loving doses of Yorkshire humour and kitchen fare. Math taught the boys how to ride their pushbikes and encouraged them to enjoy boyish bad humour. Flo joined in their antics willingly too, coerced one morning to bring a branding iron, red hot from the kitchen range, skirt flapping, apron flying, racing across the lawn to where Mervyn and Ron had the milker's calf caught under the cherry tree.

A remarkable governess, Miss Dorothy Moore, rounded their early childhood education with a rather advanced curriculum for the time, adding music, pottery, poetry and historical dramatization in costumes made in the classroom, such as the story of King Alfred with fireside cooking and Mervyn brandishing a colourful cardboard sword. Dolly accompanied the Wynne family on Christmas holidays at Jervis Bay and on one of the Wynne's periodic visits to England Dolly went too.

Aside from his father and Math, mountain men, with whom Mervyn spent a great deal of time listening, watching, learning and off-siding, shaped his life and attitudes. All hardworking men

like the Kirks, Norman Cummings, Joe Webb and Jack Woodgate, skilled in timber, carpentry, scrub clearing, fencing, farming, gardening, bee keeping and construction.

Mervyn grew up with a busy mother dedicated to community involvement through fundraising (her fetes are legendary) in order to generate further developments in the village (a community hall for example), a love of her garden and entertaining at home – English teas and dances on the veranda. ‘She was a great entrepreneur’ Merv told me one day, ‘Mimi and I were always good mates, we used to do a lot together, she always had little excursions and activities on the go’.



Mervyn & Jane

Excursions were often in her ‘Forget-me-not’, a little blue Austin that had a dickie seat all children fought over to sit in en route to picnics, tennis parties or some adventure. The Austin, in which Mervyn learnt to drive along the hairy mountain roads, carted children, fake antlers at Christmas time, rocks, pets, flowers and cakes with his mother often heard saying ‘She’s a little bit light in the mouth, isn’t she?’ as she herself careered around a corner.

Mervyn’s father was always busy too, working the farm and working for the community. He made his own implements in the blacksmithy shed he had built. He was a crack shot and captained teams to shoot at Bisley. He had annual trout fishing excursions and chaired many meetings. He was a fine handsome man, a community man, a good citizen and a supportive father laying down solid foundations and examples for his children. Of his father Merv commented ‘Dad was a practical man,

determined to make *Wynstay* a viable farm. He was a strict father having been an army officer. He was a very serious looking man, a humble man with a good sense of humour, never blew his own trumpet and was very respected from all sides of the community, giving generously of his time, land and resources for Mount Wilson village causes’.

One day when Mervyn had to leave the mountain to return to boarding school at *Tudor House*, Bowral, he ran away, hiding in the rain forest. However, the nine year-old was found and sent packing, though soon came to love *Tudor House*, the billy-carts, canoe races on the dam, the pack and drill and camping-out of Scouts and the many friends. He was dux of the school in his final year, a feat his sons only came to know about when they found his name on the Honour Roll Board.

Between the war years of 1939–1942 Merv boarded at Geelong Grammar, Victoria. He rowed in the First Eight, winning Head of the River in his final year of secondary education and was awarded a gold medallion and silver oar. Merv's godparents, Sir Allan and Lady Newton, lived in Melbourne and as Lady Newton and Merv's mother were great friends Mimi came to visit whenever she could, once taking Merv on a joy flight across the city - a highlight for a lonely young man. The Newton's son Richard attended Grammar as did the sons of Lord and Lady Wakehurst, Governor of NSW, to whom Merv's father was appointed aide-de-comp during WWII and whose sons had also boarded at *Tudor House*.

Merv worked at Nap Nap near Hay for six months until he was finally old enough to join up. He had wanted to be a foot soldier but was allocated to the 2/5 Armoured Regiment (Tank Corp) training at Puckapunyal and then at Canungra, Queensland for jungle warfare. He never saw action as the war ended virtually on the eve of his departure for the islands. The year following his discharge from the AIF Merv worked on *Cullin-la-ringo*, Emerald, Queensland as Ganger of the burr cutting camp, as jackeroo, then as bore runner in charge of the 29 bores on the property. He became a jackeroo at *Byerwen*, Collinsville before joining his brother Ron at *Bogara*, Walgett where they worked as station hands. Merv and Ron then went opal gouging at *Grawin*, Lightning Ridge and shortly after took work as builders' labourers at Coonabarabran before returning to Mount Wilson. The handsome young men were warmly welcomed back and joined the other young people on the mountain playing tennis, having bush picnics and horse riding. They lived at *Wynstay*, helped their father and worked plastering a house that came to be called *Donna Buang*. Sound education in the basics in all aspects of rural life was gained during these years of hard work and parties.

Another mountain in Merv's life - that of hard work on the land - took on an adult perspective when in 1949 he and Ron bought *Woodlands* at Coolibah, NSW: a 33,000 acre property of red country carrying 5,000 sheep and 50 cattle. A major influence in the decision and financial assistance was Merv's mother wanting to give her sons a direction influenced by her Ronald family connections to the AML&F Company (read *Wool before the Wind* by Heather Ronald).

Two years later two pretty girls were driving through Coolibah when they were forced to pull over with a flat tyre. Drinking at the pub were the Wynne brothers, hardworking, hard drinking handsome young men who gallantly changed the tyre and their future. Lesley Fisher from *Glenelg*, Brewarrina and friend Joan Day had met their life partners by asking at the pub if anyone had a match in order to vulcanize the patch for their flat tyre! Ron and Joan married in July 1951 and Merv and Lesley married in Sydney on 2nd February 1952. From then on it was always Merv and Lesley or Lesley and Merv, never one independent of the other; a truly amazing team.

Merv and Lesley sold their interest in *Woodlands* after drawing a 10,000 acres ballot block at Walgett. They established a camp and began developing *Minnamurra*. Merv and Lesley's background had prepared them for the challenges they faced in clearing and preparing this country for farming, sheep grazing and for building infrastructure. In particular, cattle yards made from timber often cut on the property and with most gateways made from Mount Wilson timber cut at Peter Kirks sawmill in the Mill Paddock of *Wynstay*. Two sons were born before a house was built: Robert Owen on 27th June 1953 and Michael Ross on the 30th July 1954. Lesley continued to help Merv while the boys spent a great deal of time in a sulky, bumping around the

paddocks mustering or sleeping in a fly screen cot carted to the job site. Understanding different soil types and developing the health of the soil for productivity and prosperity evolved and developed into a lifetime interest for Merv.

Merv's third mountain, alcoholism, had to be dealt with at this stage and he became a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, changing his and his family's lives forever, forging new friends and community involvement, helping other alcoholics deal with their addiction and associated problems while being helped to deal with his own. He adopted and lived by the Serenity Prayer: 'God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change... Courage to change the things I can and Wisdom to know the difference'. He also lived by the AA maxim for coping: '24 hours at a time – one day at a time'.

While at Minnamurra, Merv pioneered flood irrigation from the Barwon and was an original member of the North West Wool Marketing Committee that was instrumental in the establishment of the wool floor price scheme. Their efforts were recognised and each member was awarded with a medal during Australia's 1778-1998 celebrations. As a member of the Walgett RatePayers Association he and the committee were successful in having unrealistic rate levels lowered by a massive 25 percent.

Another 15,000 acres were bought at Dirranbandi to run wether sheep. *Wombil* was a property also in need of development. More scrub pulling, pasture establishment and another set of cattle yards.

Following the birth of their daughter, Jennifer Ann, in Collarenebri on 5th August 1968 Merv sold both these properties and purchased 1,500 acres of coastal country near Port Macquarie. Again all infrastructure needed building including another set of cattle yards, though with interesting and different challenges. Soil types at *Minnamurra*, Telegraph Point needed boosting to carry the quality Herefords bred and brought across from the Western Division and Merv turned to bio-dynamics for a sustainable solution that was highly successful. A collapse in the cattle market saw both Merv and Lesley working off-farm for a period of time though both kept up with community work and AA meetings. Local rate payers benefited again from Merv's Chairmanship of the Rate Payers Association and a 25 percent reduction during very hard times. Merv supported many rural industry associations during his lifetime including Prime Hereford, The Cattlemen's Union, ABA and various Landcare organisations.

Merv and Lesley leased areas of country around Minnamurra allowing for herd increase and the spelling of their own country - in the forest, along the Maria River and at the Hatch. *Glenvale* at Rollands Plains was purchased in 1972 and another set of cattle yards were built. Merv and Lesley were frequently seen moving their Herefords around the various blocks and were often sidelined by locals to yarn in order to seek their opinion on local, personal or rural industry issues or to share a good laugh.

By 1990 Merv's health dictated a move back to the dry west and *Woodlands* at Tamworth was purchased. The over-farmed wheat property posed yet another set of challenges and was, as usual, in need of development. Merv had faith in his ability to recognise good soil and while waiting for

the sale of the coastal country to finalise, camped in a caravan and built his seventh set of cattle yards.

He and Lesley supervised the building of the house, renovated the soil with bio-dynamics and were rewarded for the hard years of 'gaining knowledge' as they watched their Herefords regain colour and vigour, their improved pastures thrive and the native tree lines they'd planted grow tall



Nov 1993 - Lesley & Mervyn at 125th anniversary of the survey of Mt Wilson

and support re-colonisation of bird life. There was time for family: Jennie's garden wedding on 13th April 1996 to Scott Lindsay, family gatherings and milestone celebrations, Landcare, birdwatching and time for Lesley to pursue her artistic talents. An art studio was built in the magnificent garden (as Merv built yards, Lesley built gardens). He was extremely proud of the works she produced and of her attaining her Bachelor of Arts, with Honours.

Merv was the best 'head of the family'. He loved each member and always knew where and what each one was doing at any point in time. He thoroughly enjoyed the company of his family and he loved his

children's spouses. Both sons were 'on the land'. Eldest son Bob, who married Margaret Macdonald on the 29th September 1979 and had two daughters, Jacqueline Margaret on 21st February 1983 and Katrina Robyn on 11th May 1986, lived in western NSW near Condobolin. Mike, who married Irene Hurford on 17th March 1979 and had two children, Jodie Lesley on 15th September 1981 and Thomas Owen on 23rd March 1985, lived near Cloncurry, North West Queensland. Mike's family bought a property near Bingara, north of Tamworth, in July 1994 and were fortunate to spend quality time at *Woodlands* and enjoyed many return visits to their property. All members of the family were always welcomed at Merv and Lesley's and for any length of time.

Christmas was always wonderful as Merv's traditional English upbringing and Lesley's traditional outback hospitality ensured a grand occasion. Lesley made plum pudding, Christmas cake, trifle, meringues and cooked chicken, turkey and pork. She glazed the ham, made bread sauce, apple sauce and always the same particular salads. Merv found and cut the Christmas tree, bought the finest chocolates, glacé fruits, liquorice allsorts, Christmas lollies, plenty of alcohol (apple juice and Clayton's tonic for himself) and crackers that contained miniature gifts. He also found time to do his own Christmas shopping, wrap and tag the presents too. Merv was Santa on Christmas day

handing out the presents. He only gave out one at a time so that we could all enjoy watching each present be opened as we sipped champagne.

Merv and Lesley visited every property and place of residence where their children lived and their grandchildren schooled and gave generously of their time, advice, knowledge and finance. Not only were family members welcomed at any time in their home, so too were old friends, new friends, employees, AA acquaintances and pals, old and new neighbours, stock and station agents, friends of their children and friends of their grandchildren. Tea was brewed, food prepared and the yarning began around the table. Sometimes one would glance at Merv thinking he was not listening and just as you would be about to change the subject he would respond with a chuckle or a pertinent question that showed he had taken in every word and nuance.

Over the years Merv had two hip operations, was diagnosed with emphysema and bladder cancer and it was eventually a time for slowing down. *Woodlands* sold in November 2006 and a clearing sale ensured that only a select herd of Herefords, a tractor, some tools and household items moved with them to their new 'retirement' property - a 240 acre property 25km from Inverell called *Torvale* in the locality of Gum Flat.

Torvale did not need the full development treatment of previous properties. It had a solid home, sound fencing and excellent soil in good health except that the cattle yards were incomplete! Merv was not interested as hard cold steel cattle yards were not his thing. He did, however, organise people to finish the yards, tidy up paddock gateways, renew a stretch of fencing, plant oats, harvest hay, fatten steers - still topping the market with quality cattle - build a shed and a little studio for Lesley and of course shore up the water supply on the property as 'cattle need good clean fresh water to do well you know' Merv was frequently heard to say. The old developer never gave up and he continued to do the books and his GST commitments right to the knocker.

Merv now had type 2 diabetes as well, and his long slow days were made enjoyable when Jennie, her husband Scott Lindsay and their three boys, Campbell Alexander (b. 22nd March 1999), Angus Blair (b. 8th October 2001) and William Scott (b. 21st December 2004) moved in while they searched for their own dream farm within the district. The two eldest boys went to school and Will kept Merv company. Chattering away, smiling and laughing, drawing Merv's attention, as he cat-napped, to some insect or antic of the dog's was a treasured time for them both and it was a pleasure to watch them together.

Jennie and Scott's timing was perfect as they were in residence at the critical time of Merv's decline and could support both Merv and Lesley. Merv wished to stay at home in control of his ailments until the last and sitting in the sun together, drinking tea and chatting, Lesley had asked Merv how he was coping. He responded with a smile and the words '24 hours at a time'. He chose to go to hospital one Saturday morning and simply went to sleep twenty-four hours later on Sunday, 18th May 2008. He died as he lived after finding sobriety - quietly, privately and with dignity.

Merv and Lesley's three children continue the strong connection with the land, living on properties that reflect their geographical features. Bob on *Black Range*, Condobolin, Mike at *The Valley*, Bingara and Jennie at *Mt Pleasant*, Gum Flat.

Eddy Irvine, one of the many people that Merv and Lesley assisted and cared for, wrote in condolence and remembrance: 'I know that Merv would have left this world feeling loved and I am certain he left the world a better place'. He was and he did.

The Mount Wilson Historical Society wrote in part: 'Mervyn represented for the Society and its members, generations of the Wynnes' close links, not only to *Wynstay* but to Mount Wilson. He was a good friend to the Society, courteous, kindly and always very helpful. We are very grateful for his knowledge and historical contributions. There is so much to remember and value from the Society's relationship with Mervyn over the years. We grieve his loss but celebrate too his long life stamped with a genuine and deep sincerity, gentleness of spirit, honesty and an innate sense of what is right and what is good'. Everyone who ever met Merv would agree wholeheartedly. Vale dear Merv - you will rest in peace.

Merv's ashes will return to his first mountain in October, 2008.

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