

Agriculture and Resilience in Australia's North

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Agriculture and Resilience in Australia's North

A Lived Experience

 Springer

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Introduction

Fly away little bluebird, I guess you'll have to find another farm. (Mark Knopfler¹)

For the reader to understand the orientation and motivation, and because the present is so heavily influenced by and cannot be separated from the past,² the following is some primary author context:

Early in my third year of school, we young students had to tell the class about ourselves. I told my classmates I wouldn't be around for long, as my dad was going to buy a farm and we would be moving. Nine years later, I completed high school just up the road from that primary school – still in Brisbane. My father had never actually said we were moving, but he did talk a lot about buying a farm, we did look at a few, and we ran cattle on agisted land outside Brisbane, so my young mind had just joined the dots. The concept obviously had appeal and stuck.

November 2000: 4 days drive from the Gibson Desert of Western Australia to Far North Queensland in a truck containing our worldly possessions and three red dogs sharing the cab, from one of Australia's driest regions to Tully, a *Pretty Wet Place*³ in the Queensland Wet Tropics, where they measure rainfall in fathoms,⁴ we were moving to our farm – a 31-ha established tropical fruit and taro property rising up the wet tropical slopes of the northeast of Tully – and the wet season had arrived early.

Thirty-six years after first talking about it, I moved to a farm – our farm. Though I won't pretend this had been an unwavering course through life, when there was a choice to be made, generally, the path that headed towards a farming future was the

¹From the song *Bluebird*. On *Privateering* [LP]. Mercury Records Ltd.

²Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; and Berry, T. (2015). *The Dream of the Earth*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press.

³The slogan on the Tully 'Gumboot', a 7.9 m rubber boot replica at the entrance to Tully that indicates the height of Tully's record annual rainfall, recorded in 1950.

⁴A unit of length in the old imperial and the U.S. customary systems equal to 6 feet or 1.8288 metres, used for measuring the depth of water. Used in a humorous sense by Tully residents when describing their rainfall.

one chosen: agricultural science at the university, first job at an agricultural service town and then steadily working west. I enjoyed a range of jobs in agriculture and natural resource management for the state and federal governments and discovered the joy of being part of small regional communities where the butcher sold raffle tickets at the RSL Club on Friday nights and ran pony club on Sunday, where everyone knew everything about everyone and what they didn't know they made up; but generally, with a care and consideration for other people that once experienced, I valued.

From Gatton to Longreach to Broken Hill (where I met my wife), to Charters Towers to Townsville (where I married her), then Alice Springs and the Warburton Ranges (a Ngaanyatjarra Aboriginal community in Western Australia) and all the small places in between, it was the same: people looked out for people and respected and appreciated the contributions made by others. The pinnacle, in my mind, was always those people who worked directly with the land – they had a pride and confidence that I admired and aspired to be part of.

So, in the early hours of Monday, 20 March 2006, when Cyclone Larry blew out the 600 new fruit trees we'd planted, it was only natural our first thought was to rebuild our farm and the emerging tropical fruit industry we had become part of. We'd had our one-in-a-hundred-year storm, so we'd be right now!

Third of February 2011: Severe Tropical Cyclone Yasi, category five, crossed the Far North Queensland coast near Mission Beach, between Cairns and Townsville, bringing peak wind gusts estimated at 285 kilometres per hour. The eye went over the top of our farm, giving 40 minutes of deceptive calm before the winds snapped back from the opposite direction – demolishing everything that the first onslaught had weakened. Not only were the 800 trees we'd replanted after Larry (and picked our first fruit from the previous year) gone, along with our new machinery shed and a good part of our roof, that night, the tropical fruit industry ceased to exist as an industry, with survivors slipping back 20 years to a state of disconnected individual growers.

Those trees weren't getting planted a third time, but I didn't know what to do next – the farming picture in my head seemed a permanent fixture. Certainly, the next slide wasn't queued and ready to view. This book is a direct outcome of that shattered dream. It is in part me, making sense of what happened – moving beyond feeling a victim of circumstances and understanding and accepting *life is what happens to you when you're busy making plans*.⁵ It is also, in part, an attempt to understand why I wanted to 'go farming' in the first place when my work experience had shown it was 'a hard game'. But more importantly, this book aspires to provide an understanding of the operational context of Northern Australian farmers at a time when substantial industry expansion is being actively promoted.

⁵ John Lennon (1980). *Beautiful Boy*. On Double Fantasy [LP]. The Hit Factory, New York.

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About the Authors

Keith Noble trained as an Agricultural Extension Officer and worked in agriculture and natural resource management throughout Australia before farming in his own right in Queensland's Wet Tropics. With cross-cultural communication skills and expertise, particularly with regional Australians and their communities, Keith is able to solve problems, identify opportunities, and provide solutions that build on the inherent strengths of people and their place. Keith chairs Terrain NRM, the Regional Natural Resource Management body for Queensland's Wet Tropics bioregion.

Tania Dennis is an architect from the top end of Australia, who has designed an impressive series of places and buildings that allow people access to healthy living. Winner of numerous architecture awards, including the National Award for Small Project Architecture and Commendation for Sustainable Architecture, Tania's projects respond to and offer positive built spaces that influence how communities function and are perceived. By working with local people, makers and artists, and using skills applied through local culture to architecture, interior and urban design, Tania's work offers intricate and insightful interpretations of place.

Sarah Larkins is an academic general practitioner and Associate Dean of Research at the College of Medicine and Dentistry, James Cook University. Sarah has particular skills and experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research and health services as well as workforce research, and is an internationally recognised expert on social accountability in health professional education. Sarah is also Co-Director of the Anton Breinl Research Centre for Health Systems Strengthening, a centre of the Australian Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine. Sarah's particular focus is on collaborating to improve equity in health care services for underserved populations, particularly rural, remote, Indigenous and tropical populations, and on training a health workforce with appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills for this purpose.

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