'I would like to spread before you a world of rhythm and light; a world of beauty and fear; of rushing water and slow-burning dry-season fires: it is a realm where lightning strikes for nights on end, where clouds form ranks and phalanxes that stretch for hundreds of kilometres across flat plains, where rivers rush down bare savannah watercourses and enliven the dead earth.'


In the midst of a wintry Hunter Valley dawn, I drove my Land Cruiser past the still-sleeping cottage I called home, the leafless vineyard on one side and the hulking forms of cattle on the other, turned out of the driveway, and began the first of several journeys into the outback of Australia. I drove past the manicured estates that allowed moneyed Sydneysiders to feel like lords of all they surveyed, then on past horse studs that were a household name around the country. On through towns like Merriwa and Dungog, where pretence gives way to practicality, and the Great Dividing Range gives way to country that lifts and falls in gentle undulations like breathing.

By the time I reached Queensland, the skies were larger, the treeless plains more common, and red sandhills started to appear. When
the fences disappeared and wandering stock lifted their heads to watch me pass, I felt the heart of the outback was growing near. When at last my wheels touched unsealed road, and the sense of freedom that permeates wide open spaces was inescapable, I was finally there.

My objective was to explore a phenomenon that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the world. While many Australian stations are large, covering thousands of square kilometres, some are truly enormous. Nowhere else will you find not one but many places that cover more than a million hectares (or 2.5 million acres). By comparison, the biggest property in any other country is King Ranch, in Texas, which in 2012 covered just 334 000 hectares (slightly less than 1 million acres). In Australia, dozens of properties are bigger.

Originally, I planned to cover every million-hectare property in the country. However, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, between the idea and the reality falls the research. I uncovered more and more of them, and more and more about them. I’d been hoping to discover rich histories while finding out what life is really like on those properties today, and I was far from disappointed. But it wasn’t long before I realised I’d have to be selective and focus on those stations that had a special claim for inclusion. They ranged from Bowen Downs, the first giant station, and those stations that owed their genesis to the great outback pioneer Nat Buchanan-Brunette Downs, Alexandria, Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill (Bowen Downs falls under this category too). Nat wasn’t just one of the best bushmen ever to mount a horse, he was also one of those intriguing individuals who treated the original inhabitants of the country he helped settle as people rather than ignorant savages. His respect for their ancient knowledge of the land was a key element of his success in the outback.

Then there were stations that were less well known but just as fascinating: the powerhouse Lake Nash Station; the family-owned and second-largest station in the world, Crown Point; and a personal favourite, the desert-challenging Adria Downs. I was particularly
fortunate to be given access to the biggest sheep station in the world, Commonwealth Hill, which had only welcomed one writer in the last 80 years.

Unfortunately, I was refused access to the biggest cattle station in the world, Anna Creek. In the end, I went anyway, as explained in the final chapter.

One of the delights of a project like this was the occasional moment when what I thought I knew turned out to be totally different to the way things really were. For example, I’d assumed that stations in the same region would have a lot in common. What I soon discovered was that even stations that sit side by side can be surprisingly different. In the case of Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill, for example, the fact that one is closer to the Top End, even by only 50 kilometres or so, means that the climate and vegetation is noticeably different. While VRD is quite tropical, on the southern boundary of Wave Hill there is desert. Their histories also diverge. Aboriginal workers at Wave Hill were involved in the famous walk-off, while their colleagues at VRD were thwarted when a telegram stating their intentions was torn up instead of being sent.

Both these stations contrasted with those further south, such as Crown Point and Adria Downs. These two stations are in the arid ‘dead heart’ of Central Australia, one on the eastern side of the Simpson Desert, the other on the western side. While one enjoys the benefits of the regular floods of the Channel Country, the other has the advantages of being on the Ghan railway line. While one was carved out of the desert by one family over two generations, the other is a recent amalgamation by another family driven by the demands of the modern economics of cattle operations.

Not only were the stories of these stations markedly different, my responses to those stories, and experiences of them was also varied. As time went on, and my understanding grew, I recognised emerging patterns and examined them in more detail. Most often, I was exhilarated and inspired by the things I did and saw. At other times,
however, there was also disappointment or disillusionment, which I guess is all part of life’s rich tapestry. There were occasions when I was simply tired and homesick, driving alone and wishing my wife could share my adventures (and take the photos), gazing across an immense herd but wondering how our little ‘herd’ (Cassie and Barbie) were doing back home. Exactly which emotion described the moment when a wheel came off my vehicle and I couldn’t wedge the jack underneath the axle, I’m not sure. What I can say is that at that point life’s rich tapestry was looking pretty bloody frayed. Although, I was helped by a bit of advice once given to me a Birdsville cop, Neale McShane. ‘When there’s a problem, don’t rush in to fix it,’ he said. ‘You could make things worse. Take a few minutes to assess the situation. Usually, you’ll work out what to do.’ I ended up digging under the axle with a spoon until the jack fitted.

Speaking of frayed, there are times when I tackled some massive drives that in the narrative might appear to push the boundaries of safety. In fact, these trips included regular rest breaks. The Truckasaurus, as my Toyota LandCruiser 100 Series Wagon is nicknamed, was well equipped with coffee-making and nap-taking facilities. Indeed with a portable stove, 20 litres of water, two spare tyres, puncture-repair kit, compressor and power inverter, plus tools and a spare parts, there were few situations I couldn’t handle, or at least survive.

In fact, the only time I really got caught was trying to reach Crown Point late at night. I have to admit I was too tired to keep going but I was expected. I was further delayed when a driving light blew and I didn’t have a spare (I do now), which meant I had to slow down even more. Without radio or phone contact, I couldn’t let anyone know that I was okay and not to come looking for me.

There was a lesson that came out of that: allow more time, and at the last available contact point make an honest assessment of how long a drive down an unknown track to an unknown destination will really take. I’m certainly not the most experienced outback driver there is, but it was easy, in hindsight.
While visiting these extraordinary places, I was conscious that I was entering an intensely busy work environment and my presence wasn’t helping to get things done. Nevertheless, many stations put themselves to some inconvenience showing me their operations and giving me access that was well beyond anything I could have hoped for. Some did so even as a major exposé threatened their industry.

Finally, if you really want to experience the big country, please remember that these are all working properties. It’s best to keep to public roads, and to check first before entering private land. Of course, if you’re really inspired, most of the stations are on the lookout for good workers. They advertise in all prominent rural publications. And as I found while visiting these stations, a life in the big country is one lived large.

Ultimately, while I jumped at the chance to explore these stations, I also got to return to the places in Australia that had long fascinated me. Visiting these stations to find out what goes on beyond the farm gate was certainly my main objective, but I have to confess I had other motives and sought other rewards as well.

It’s no accident that this introduction includes words like ‘breathing’, ‘heartbeat’ and ‘inspiring’. For me, the outback is a living thing. While making camp in the middle of nowhere might seem a lonely way to spend a night, when the stars begin to shine and all is silent, you can sometimes sense just how timeless this country really is. It’s hard to feel lonesome when you’re filled with awe.

Words may not be able to describe this feeling, but it’s always worth a try. There are plenty of outback people who understand this, and you’re about to meet some of them. Many of them share a bond, not just with each other, but with something much larger: the land itself. Once forged, it can never be broken.