

**HONOUR**

**WILL SPOKES**

# CHAPTER ONE

Fully matured, the Eastern Taipan, one of the world's deadliest venomous reptiles, had been hunting along the dry creek bed and was making her way back to her home among a tangle of tree roots, where the creek bank had collapsed. Perfectly adapted to her harsh environment, the snake was still hungry, having only taken a tiny sandy inland mouse. Despite that expenditure of venom, she still carried enough to kill a dozen grown men and hoped to use it to secure more prey.

She had been exploring her territory, seeking game in the drought-affected country. The lack of water had driven much of her usual target species away. The landscape had changed and she needed to relearn its subtleties and dangers. She was moving quickly, but cautiously, through the leaf and bark trash, mulga grass and dead shrubs. Her 3-metre-long slender body moved silently; her large head highlighted by a pale face and snout, still seeking left and right optimistically for the heat flare that would indicate prey.

She suddenly became aware of a series of strange vibrations ahead of her and was instantly on high alert. She was driven to keep moving, in fear of being caught by the rising sun exposing her to the ever-present wedge tailed eagle. She moved over and around a fallen tree and stopped in her tracks. Lying across her path was a huge creature of a type she had never encountered. Her curiosity drew her forward, her long, bluish tongue flickering in and out, sampling the air, trying to identify the creature's risk potential.

She was now only several feet from it, well within her striking range, when it suddenly stirred and rose up. She immediately went into self-

defence mode. The deadly pose was unmistakable, rearing up, her head now two feet from the ground, her body drawn up like a coiled spring, ready to strike whatever that threat was.

Known as *Dandarabilla* to the indigenous people, they knew the chance of surviving a bite from this viper was exactly nil.

Harold Eldon Cuthbertson had slept well after a tiring day exploring his territory; a huge parcel of land in south western Queensland, recently purchased by him near Longreach and named Courtland Downs. He too needed to learn its limits, its dangers and subtleties.

This was no country for soft white men accustomed to the green plenty of the land they had migrated from. A harsh climate, plague levels of the ubiquitous maddening flies, infrequent rainfall leading into long crushing droughts and blinding dust storms, broken only by destructive floods. Stock succumbing to thirst, hunger and disease. Cattle losses to local tribes were frequent and annoying, leading to friction between the races and legal intervention should any settler be unwise enough to seek retribution.

Harold Cuthbertson was no soft European. He had been brought up to believe you had to earn what you got and fight to keep it. But within these precepts, there was an instinctive wisdom that allowed him to separate losses from vengeance. He intuitively understood the natives' attitude to possessions. Cattle wandering about on their land were fair game. In fact, they were wonderful game that just stood about waiting to be speared. Very little tracking and chasing involved and the reward was enough meat to sustain the mob for a week or more.

They resisted the white man coming into their camp with their guns, whips and clubs. To the natives, it seemed odd they should hold these animals so precious and yet strangely let them roam free in the bush.

Harold could see the futility in this conflict and sought to befriend and educate the tribesmen hunters to white men's ways while learning all he could about the Aboriginal culture and beliefs. In doing so, he found ways to grow trust between the two and offer some valuable assistance to the natives.

Over time they nurtured a reciprocity where Harold was trusted with vital information about water sources for which he traded beef or cloth. An axe was held in awe by the primitive people whose dependence fell upon stone instruments. They had carried them forward for millennia, however, the sharpened steel of a modern axe could not be bested for

butchery of kangaroos or cutting firewood supplies. Not to mention putting fear into their enemies. These tools enabled the people to survive over millennia.

Harold had been mapping out surviving water holes and assessing the parched country's capacity for bearing stock. He was being guided by an elder of the local Bulawai tribe who had been invaluable in locating springs and water holes. Harold had a great deal of respect for the man and his bush skills, using his tribal name Jirrah, instead of some anglicised version for his own convenience. They had camped together by the creek bed where the soft sand provided a comfortable base for their bedrolls.

Sitting up, he yawned, stretched and looked up at the stars still filling the pre-dawn sky. They were so bright and the air so clear, he swore he could reach out and touch them. His legs were sore and stiff after a day in the saddle and he needed to get up and stretch them, working the blood back into his lower limbs. Harold never complained about the legacy of pain from hard work. He considered it a small price to pay for what his God had granted him in this new land.

He noticed Jirrah was already out gathering wood for the dying fire. He would brew a pot of tea and they would breakfast on salted beef and the remains of a damper left from the previous night before the two set off again.

Some primitive sixth sense, a tingling sensation on the back of his neck, alerted him to a danger he was yet to see. A slight noise, a kind of sibilant whispering behind his left shoulder drew his attention. Turning slowly, he was terrified to see the large snake rearing up in a strike pose three feet from where he now sat.

Warily, he scanned the camp site for a weapon or a way to escape the inevitable painful death, but his shotgun was out of reach. His feet were tangled in the blanket that had covered him as he slept and any attempt to dive away would be far too slow.

Harold was frozen in fear, while almost resigned to his fate, when Jirrah shouted and with all the skill of an experienced hunter, hurled a length of wood like a boomerang in a flat, whirling flight that caught the snake one foot below its deadly jaws and carried her away down the dry embankment, her spine broken by the blow.

Jirrah was on it in an instant, his pure white teeth flashing in a huge grin as he stood proudly holding the now dead Taipan for Harold's

inspection; its nervous system still thrashing. He would make a meal of it later and offer to share it with his fussy white man friend.

Harold remained frozen to the spot and, for the first time in what seemed like an age, he released a huge sigh of relief. Turning to his still grinning and laughing guide, he realised how close he had come to an agonising death but for Jirrah's intervention. He would always owe his life to his new friend, to whom it was just another little slice of life in the bush.

Harold never forgot the experience and was forever grateful to his wonderful guide who became a great and very wise friend, helping him understand the limits and dangers of the land they shared.

The vast grazing property just outside Longreach in Queensland, *Courtland Downs*, was settled by Harold Eldon Cuthbertson in 1876, just a few years before one of Australia's earliest recorded nationwide droughts. It would not be the last drought old Harold would experience, but he was smart enough to learn from it and prepared well for the next one. This circumstance of climate may have been why he was able to purchase such a large parcel of land. This highly developed foresight of his, enabled Harold to maintain stock numbers above the average of similar properties around the country and secured his future wealth and the security of his legacy for generations of his descendants.

The property was bordered by the Thomson River and consisted originally of 30,000 hectares carrying several hundred sheep for wool and meat. The Thomson River, as with all the rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin, never reached the sea, and instead, either evaporated or, in an exceptional flood, emptied into Lake Eyre many miles south west. Floods were relatively common because of the summer monsoon rains. Due to the flat nature of the country the river could then become many kilometres wide, causing major difficulties for Harold and his neighbours. For much of the time, however, the river did not flow, and became a line of billabongs.

Relying on the sparse native grasses for cattle feed, Harold had few concerns about water as his property sat above the Great Artesian Basin, an aquifer system, from which he and many other settlers drew an unlimited supply of cool, fresh water for their cattle and their own use.

Cattle was another matter. With the arrival of cattle ticks into North Queensland in 1896, it became apparent that maintaining

British bred herds in the harsh tropical environment was virtually impossible. Consequently, graziers, like Harold, began experimenting with crossbreeding to overcome the perennial problems of drought, cattle ticks, heat, eye cancer and many other problems that reduced production and profitability.

Courtland Downs was well watered, but still suffered in the frequent droughts which killed off the grasses Harold had to rely on to feed his stock. Still, he managed to farm the sheep and some beef cattle in fluctuating numbers according to conditions. Future generations of Cuthbertson's would run cross breed cattle reasonably successfully but that was a long way in the future of Courtland Downs.

Harold married Henrietta Constance Croft, who became a very important contributor to the success of the endeavour. Without her support, life out there would have been intolerable. At the end of the day, when Harold returned to the homestead he had built to replace the old shack he had constructed in the early days, he would find that Hettie, as he called her, had added some homely touches to the newer building and put a decent meal on the table, instead of the fly struck boiled mutton and potatoes that had been his fare as a bachelor.

These were the very early days in the Cuthbertson dynasty but things would improve with a whole lot of hard labour and good luck. The hard labour began with the design and construction of the new homestead.

The construction of the new accommodation began with the arrival of a load of massive logs, ordered by Harold to serve as the stumps, raising the floor above the potential flood levels and providing an airway to cool the main building during the summer months. The logs were sawn in half and set into the ground, protected against white ants, each with a metal cap to keep rats and mice at bay. The end result was a secure comfortable farmhouse that became known as a "Queenslander", large, spacious and airy with a huge useful area beneath it for a workshop and storage.

After a period of time, Hettie was able to run a scruffy bunch of chickens and ducks that gave them some meat and eggs when the native dogs and hawks left them alone. Kangaroo meat graced the pot now and then, along with a bit of chewy emu from time to time. Fresh vegetables were a problem for a while, until Hettie was able to establish a garden, but then it had to be guarded very closely because there were plenty of hungry mouths that would devour a crop in a night.

Hettie was far more than a housekeeper-wife. She became a very competent horsewoman, keeping pace with Harold and even some of the crack stockmen. Her lightweight frame, stretched out along the neck of 500 kilos of half broken stock horse at full gallop, in pursuit of a stray, was something that made the breath catch in Harold's throat.

Hettie could take the eye out of any dingo, that threatened their precious stock, at 100 yards with her handy well-kept Winchester 30.30 rifle. Despite these masculine talents, Hettie never became coarse and scolded any bad language; she read the Bible and the classics and built up an impressive collection of poetry. She also had a deft touch with a paint brush and palette, producing some beautiful portraits of family members and some stunning landscapes, which often included their loved indigenous stockmen recruited from the local Ininga mob, and especially their beautiful doe-eyed children. Hettie was, in all things, a true product of her English heritage and education.

The soil of western Queensland around Longreach existed in one of two states: cloying mud that could trap and drown stock when on the odd occasion it chose to rain; or more consistently, as choking dust when it didn't. The predominant soil type was known as a *vertosols* which cracks open when dry. A large belt of grey and brown vertosols ran from the New South Wales border to Charters Towers. Harold's station sat right across this belt.

All the essentials of life that could not be produced on the land, like flour and salt, dry goods such as cloth and building materials, would be hauled in by bullock wagons. These heavy plodding wagons hauled along by a team of up to 18 oxen, generally driven by a tough character who skilfully plied a long whip, cracking it just above the heads of the slothful beasts, peppering the air with a nonstop salvo of ear blistering obscenities. They were the heavy transport of their day hauling massive loads of produce out and essentials in.

Harold and Hettie, as cattle producers, said the good thing about cattle was they walked themselves to market and, until Harold had built up their sheep numbers and had a reasonable clip, there was no wool going out in the first few years anyway. So he rarely had outgoing cargo for the bullocky. But almost like a kid at Christmas, he always anticipated the arrival of the next team that might be carrying fencing wire, milled timber, feed for the poultry, seed for Hettie's garden or other provisions that would improve their comfort levels.

Harold had employed a manager-foreman, Bartholomew (Barney) Jones. Barney was built like the proverbial brick outhouse and possessed a power to weight ratio that would almost rival a bull ant. Harold had witnessed Barney effortlessly dragging a yearling heifer from a bog and then heave the exhausted creature onto his shoulders and place it on to the wagon. They put on a number of local blacks who worked for supplies and a small allowance and who thought Barney was some sort of yowie. Harold found it hard to argue, as he wasn't too sure about Barney himself. Thus the large man became the butt of a few jokes among the indigenous cattlemen who began to warn their children that the yowie man would come for them if they misbehaved.

He was a huge man by comparison with the average male, towering over Harold at six foot, three inches. His large head was a mass of curly hair that covered the back of his neck. His face was almost obscured behind a wild bushy beard. The first time Harold saw him with his shirt off, cooling down in a billabong, he was amazed at the thick hair that covered his entire body. Poor old Barney couldn't understand why the children screamed and ran for the bush when he visited their camp. The men would be rocking back on their heels, chuckling and exchanging knowing looks.

Harold learned early that if he paid the blacks a cash wage, they wouldn't know how to handle it, so he paid them with supplies like flour, salt, tobacco and some second-hand clothing and boots. This way, he gave them fair value for their input and was able to keep a reasonably consistent workforce, enabling him to plan a day or twos work in advance.

But after a while, he managed to sort out a decent bunch of hands and, under the guidance of Barney, the workers started to make some significant gains. The truth was the blacks were slightly terrified of the big man and jumped every time he barked out an order.

Harold, on the other hand, was good to the native workers and respected them and their strange ways. He endeavoured to understand their culture which he found fascinating. He began to understand how their wanderings were not just random but related to the seasonal appearance of game and fruits in the bush. They were the product of centuries of experience and wisdom and they had much to teach him.

He was an educated man and, like many of his kind, he was interested in the sciences. The branch of science of special interest



to him was anthropology and here he was in a living laboratory. At every opportunity, he would sit with the locals and interview them, attempting to learn their language, superstitions and customs, taking copious notes and making accurate sketches of the men and on visits to their camp, he was permitted to sketch the women and children. They demonstrated some of their arts to him and he was delighted when they brought him some of their native bark paintings as a gift. They taught him how to track and find water and food in the bush. Skills that proved invaluable in the way he treated the land. They would drink tea, smoke their pipes and share genuine affection for each other.

Hettie would sometimes have to break up these talk fests by shooing the natives away with a gift of damper or cold roast meat. There were two prominent tribes in the south west of Queensland, the Ininga and Kuungkari, from which the stockmen came. There didn't appear to be any friction between them and Harold and Hettie treated them equally.

Clearly, being a pastoral property, meat for the house would come from their stock. A beast would be cut from the herd and led into the house paddock and allowed to settle down before slaughter. It was eerie the way the animals seem to sense their fate, trembling and snorting with fear. Harold, or Barney, would try to spare them unnecessary trauma and dispatch them with the minimum of fuss. Traditionally, an animal would be slaughtered and hung under the water tank stand, hauled up by a pulley system constructed for the purpose to bleed out. The beast would then be eviscerated with the lights and offal being put aside.

The hide would be taken off and put aside for later tanning, to provide material for repairing harnesses and footwear etc. Then the carcase would be broken down and prepared for storage in the cool room. There was little room for waste.

During the summer, the meat could spoil on the same day, so preserving it quickly was important. If it was to be eaten within a few days it would be par-boiled or par-roasted as soon as possible and then the cooking was completed just before consumption. For longer periods of time, meat would be pickled by stacking it in layers in barrels, separated by salt, saltpetre (potassium nitrate) and brown sugar and then soaked in brine. Harold often made sure to provide a gift of meat to one of his stockmen who had performed particularly well.

Harold had access to plenty of chopped wood and had constructed

a smokehouse. Choice cuts of beef and pork were treated in it, which involved hanging the product above a fire of mulga wood. When smoked like this, the meat would last for weeks or months at a time and would have a beautiful smoky flavour as a bonus. Bacon produced this way from a small parcel of hogs was sensational. Most of these skills exercised by Harold were transplanted from the old country where it was, admittedly, a cooler climate but still presented the same problems with preserving and storing produce.

After time, his descendants would take this further, producing many varieties of smoked meats, including sausages, that were turned out in the “surgery” as they jokingly called the butchery.

Fruits, when they could get supplies of them, could be dried by covering them with cheesecloth in direct sunlight, on the roof of the homestead. Once shrivelled and hard, they were hung in the cool store until needed. When consumed, the fruit was stewed in water and sugar, however it wasn't very palatable, being tough and lacking flavour.

It took time for Hettie's orchards to start bearing good crops and when they did, she would preserve the stone fruits or convert them to wonderful jams from recipes she had brought out to Australia with her. These would be put up in the cool store and enjoyed in the winter months. A much preferred result to the old, dried fruits.

The native hands were good with the animals and had a hand in locating aquifers and digging the wells that would keep up a supply of precious water forever and a day. Cattle troughs were continuously fed by the wells at strategic spots, such that stock would not need to walk miles to quench their thirst

This was real pioneering work vital to the viability of the station and Harold knew it would be to the benefit of those that came after him. He was building an empire, an opportunity that was denied him in his homeland, where all the farmland was held in an iron grip by the privileged classes. The best he would have been able to hope for was to take a lease on someone else's land and be forever in their debt.

Australia represented a chance for men of Harold's ilk to forge a future for themselves and their descendants, free from the ancient mores and restrictions of Europe. Not only did his labours profit Harold, but would eventually be passed down to their eldest surviving son Hugh, and thence to William Luther (Big Bill) and his younger brother George Clement (Books), by which time it was a secure

debt free and profitable agricultural concern; droughts, floods and bushfires allowing.

Life on these remote cattle stations was extreme. The pastoralists and families had to endure punishing heat and dust that made its way into every nook and cranny, frustrating the housewife's vain attempts to fight it.

Flies!

The Australian outback had cornered the market on flies. These irritating, little, black bush flies would crawl into eyes, ears and nose of man and beast alike. Without some sort of net protection over the face, they were capable of literally driving a person insane. It's claimed that flies have influenced the Aussie accent by forcing people to talk with a closed mouth to keep the pests out and introduced the great Aussie salute, the constant waving to move the flies on.

It would be a few years yet before civilising facilities such as a post office and the railway arrived at the town of Longreach. In fact, it would be 1892 for the rail. In the meantime, supplies would continue to arrive by bullock dray. An early settler had to be made of sterner stuff to imagine a life out there and have the stamina to see it through. Old Harold was such a man.

As mentioned, the homestead was built by hand with materials brought in for the purpose by bullock dray. Old Harold Cuthbertson had money behind him and a comfortable timber structure was designed and built by a party of labourers and tradesmen led by himself and Barney over a period of a couple of months. Deep verandahs with fly screens provided a sanctuary around the core of the house and kept the heat at bay by opening or closing the shuttered sections that were placed where they could capture the cooling evening breezes. They also provided a safe environment for the children, when they came along later, to play out of the weather and away from snakes.

Old Harold, as he was always referred to by his descendants, brought his young English bride, Henrietta Constance, to this home on the hot and dusty Queensland plains where it was expected that the delicate English flower would wilt and die. But she would have none of that and from day one, showed the mettle of a seasoned pioneer, swinging an axe, pumping and carrying water and even after time, wielding a castration knife like an expert.

No one sat idle in those days, least of all Grandma Ettie, as she

became known. There were sheep to shear and drench, meals to cook for the shearers and station hands, laundry and the dusting. The never ending dusting. Harold looked on proudly as his little flower became a self-sufficient tough-as-old-boots settler's wife.

Not that she lost her femininity, as when they went to town for supplies or to partake in some social activity in later years, she would spruce up and become the unmistakable ladylike Henrietta Constance Cuthbertson once again; even sporting a little powder and perfume. Her work hardened hands were covered by delicate, cotton gloves.

These were hard days, but days of accomplishment; small wins were great triumphs. The first wind-powered well, the completion of functioning stockyards, the first sale of steers where, for a magic moment, income beat outgoings, if only for a moment or two.

When it came time to bring the cattle in, Harold was presented with a uniquely Australian cattleman's problem. Find the blasted cattle. On 30,000 hectares there were a thousand places they could be and risk and reason would not find them. They would always be in the last place they looked. Once they got the mob together, moving them wasn't too bad; just head the strays in and keep an eye open for any small mobs in pockets of bush as they went.

The sound of a large mob of cattle was unmistakeable and would often draw the small clusters out of their hidey-holes.

Once back at the stockyards, a count would be taken and any sick or lame beasts would be culled out. A mob would be put together for the sale yards and, after giving the beasts time to rest and take on water, they would head off under the encouragement of the stockmen who made up the droving team.

Horses, dogs, cattle and men, in a moving cloud of dust just over walking pace and generally making more noise than a circus. Whips cracking, dogs barking, men shouting and the support wagon providing a musical background of rattling pots and pans, accompanied by the creaks and squeals of harnesses and snorting of horses.

The cattle would feed from the crown land on the roadside when cattlemen owners were forced to take their herds on the road in time of severe drought and feed was scarce. In time this came to be known as "the long paddock".