Chapter Eight

'Dad's peas'

Well I remember those days,
Fond memories linger still,
Of the picnics, parties, tennis and dancing,
And climbing the old Bynya hill.
…
Bynya will live on forever
They cannot take the old name away
Those old walls may crumble and fall
But the name on the hilltop will stay.
Bynya my Bynya forever.

Emily Clarke (nee Laurence).

One of the many workers who sought to live out the myth being constructed by Henry Lawson and his fellow democratic nationalists, was William Joseph Laurence. William was born at Creswick in Victoria in around 1855. His Irish parents, Alexander and Catherine, had either moved to or met there following the discovery of gold in 1852. With news of the find, prospectors flooded into the area and by the time of William's birth, more than 25,000 people lived and worked on the diggings. Creswick had become, as Norman Lindsay wrote in his 1930 novel *Redheap*, 'one of those eruptions of human lunacy called a mining centre'.

We know nothing of William's life before his marriage in Melbourne in 1884 although some in the family believe that he lived for a time with two younger sisters and a brother before walking out on them after the girls neglected to iron his collar for mass. While possibly apocryphal, such a story underlines his headstrong and passionate nature. Like many among his kind, William was a man who liked to express his opinion on Catholicism and the English especially. In his later days he was a vehement critic of the country's participation in the First World War, declaring to anyone who would listen that 'he would not let his sons fight for England'. Photos of him at the time reveal a defiant chin, steadfast gaze and a full and bristling moustache. His granddaughter, Winnie Stafford, remembers him as being tall for his time ('five feet eleven inches'), thick set, with 'a mop of curly sandy coloured hair and a very likeable personality, which made him popular, especially with his work mates'. William was also 'a

bit too fond of alcohol to suit [his wife] Marn' who, when he imbibed, would 'tell her children "your father is a good man" which seemed to fix everything'.

Marn was Mary Jane Kersley who was born in 1861 in Inglewood in Victoria, the same year and in the same place where Susan Hickmott was buried. Her father, Thomas Kersley, was an agricultural labourer who emigrated to Australia from the small Hampshire village of Mapledurwell during the gold rushes. Her mother, Bridget Buckley, came from Mitchelstown in County Clare in Ireland. She met and married Thomas in Ballarat in 1856, converted him to Catholicism, and followed him from one diggings to the next, giving birth in the process to ten children. By the mid-1870s Bridget had lost patience with moving and the family rented a house at St Arnaud where they lived for the remainder of their lives. Thomas died and was buried there in 1896. Bridget died seven years later in Balmain in Sydney while visiting her youngest daughter, Ellen Smith. Her wish had been to be laid to rest alongside her husband but because the family had little money she was buried in Sydney. At the time of her death, Bridget, like many of her class and generation, owned no property or substantial assets. Her estate was worth a mere £24 of which £15 had to be paid to Ellen to cover her mother's medical, undertaking and funeral expenses.

After their marriage, William and Mary Jane travelled north from Melbourne to Kiama in New South Wales with their first daughter, Florence May, being born *en route* in Queanbeyan. The couple settled in the village of Bombo which is a few kilometres out of Kiama. Bombo was then the centre of a basalt-quarrying industry. Cut from the black, rock cliffs that faced out to sea, the basalt was transported to the Kiama Harbour and then shipped to Sydney for that city's expanding tram and rail networks. Life in the pretty seaside village for the young family was close to idyllic. But William became gradually disillusioned with his lot, started drinking heavily and yearned for a fresh start. He and a workmate became convinced they could make their fortune farming. The local newspaper had advertised blocks of land with 'good prospects' in the Riverina district north of the New South Wales township of Narrandera. The blocks were said to have been partially cleared and each contained a house and a dam. The men decided this was too good an opportunity to miss and they should buy adjoining blocks to increase their chances of success. Their wives were reluctant to leave their friends and the security of coastal life for the uncertainties of the bush. But the men and their

dreams prevailed. A deposit for the land was raised from the small amount of money they had managed to save and by selling most of their household possessions. And William and Mary Jane and their, by this time, six children aged from one to ten years, began a three hundred mile trek into the unknown.

The journey and the family's early experiences were later recounted by one of William and Marn's daughters, Alice Maud, to her eldest daughter, Winnie Stafford, who towards the end of her own life wrote them down as part of her memoirs. According to these the families travelled overland by horse and cart. In addition to their personal belongings and supplies for the journey, they each took a tent, a camp oven and a water container which was hung from the back of the wagons. At first an adventure, the journey before long became tiring and tiresome:

> Some of the roads were not much better than bush tracks, and the trees that looked so good at the beginning soon became monotonous, the mothers and children would get out and walk for miles to stretch their legs and spell the horses. They saw a few black fellow's camps, kangaroos and rabbits and once there was this terrible creature, sitting on top of a post with its tail almost touching the ground. William said it was a goanna and told the children they might often see one at their new place (they hoped not).

After a three week trek, the families finally arrived at their destination. Needless to say the reality was far removed from the newspaper description that had lured William and his friend. The blocks were extremely isolated and covered in cypress pine and mallee scrub. The houses were nothing like those they had lived in in Kiama. They were makeshift huts, made of stripped saplings held together with mud and wire, with shingle roofs, beaten earth floors, and roughly constructed bluestone fireplaces and chimneys. The dams were very small and only half full (of muddy water). Jim's wife, Nell, claimed that the huts 'looked as though they had been abandoned by blacks' and refused to stay (the family left for Sydney the following day). Knowing William would not be so easily deterred, Mary Jane declared the place could be made more liveable if they could only find some hessian, wallpaper and whitewash to line the inside walls. These, together with two milking cows and some hens, were duly purchased from Narrandera and adjoining farms, and the family settled in to their new life.

William and Mary Jane's bush block was at South Yalgogrin, in the northern reaches of the old Barellan sheep run. Yalgogrin, a derivation of the Aboriginal word *yalgogering* meaning 'dead box trees' or 'dry ground', was first leased in 1861, forty-four years after the English naval officer, explorer and colonial surveyor, John Oxley, and his party, detoured through there during a journey down the Lachlan River from Bathurst. The party's experience of the district was a far from memorable one. As Oxley recorded in his journal, the country was found to be 'extremely impractical' and 'utterly destitute of the means of affording subsistence to either man or beast'. They saw no trace of other inhabitants, 'no game of any kind, nor grass to support any', and little prospect of finding water since 'the country being perfectly level…and the soil a deep loose red sand, the rain which falls must be immediately absorbed'.

The exhausted men spent most of their time looking for water, or for horses that kept wandering off into the scrub. What water they did find had usually to be strained, 'its taste, from the decayed vegetable matter it contained, was sour and unpleasant'. Fearful that they could perish and unaware he was but two day's ride from the Murrumbidgee River, Oxley decided to cease his exploration of the area. They turned back towards the Lachlan but not before performing a small and touching ceremony on the afternoon of 4 June 1817.

> Yesterday, being the King's birthday, Mr Cunningham planted under Mount Brogden acorns, peach and apricot stones, and quince seeds, with the hope rather than the expectation that they would grow and serve to commemorate the day and situation, should these desolate plains be ever visited again by civilized man, of which, however, I think there is very little probability.

Oxley was wrong of course. As Bill Gammage describes in his splendid history, the *Narrandera Shire* (1986), there were members of the Narrungdera and other clans of the Wiradjuri Aboriginal tribe all around them. These had lived in the district for at least 40,000 years and viewed the land in a much more positive (and sophisticated) manner than the early white explorers. Within two decades Europeans also appeared in the area with their sheep and cattle. In the beginning they were largely Airds Irish—'moderate sized, wiry men, all married and young'—who overlanded with their flocks and families from the Monaro Plains. At first they kept close to the watercourses and were resisted by the Wiradjuri and other tribes who had earlier clashed with another explorer, Charles Sturt. The Wiradjuri's defence of their homelands was, at first,

very successful, driving the interlopers from all but a small number of outstations located along the Murrumbidgee. They were eventually overwhelmed, however, by a combination of European numbers, guile and disease. The victors, who included increasing numbers of squatters and their men and flocks from the south, established such early frontage runs as Berembed, Buckingbong, Yarrabee, Uroly and Gogeldrie.

These initially carried mainly cattle which, in the 1850s, were driven in vast numbers along stock runs to Deniliquin or Swan Hill and then on to the Victorian goldfields. To meet the ever-increasing demand for meat, the squatters bought up land in the drier regions to the north of the Murrumbidgee—establishing in the process such backblock runs as Barellan, Yalgogrin, Bygoo, Moombooldool, Warri and Murrel Creek. Most of these were used only in the winter months to feed stock brought from other places. They were occupied largely by stockmen, discharged soldiers, ticket-of-leave men, and the sons of former convicts. As George Foy related in the Barellan *Quarterly Gazette* in 1924,

> These early pioneers were men of great courage, nothing daunted them. Here in the winter they camped on the best natural holes they could find, tending their stock by day and camping in bark huts at night. They had few luxuries in the way of food. The fare principally was salt meat, damper, brown treacley sugar, currants and raisins in very limited quantities, but they had plenty [of] hard work and fresh air and seemed to thrive on it. If they met with an accident it meant perhaps 150 miles to the nearest doctor.

The slow-down in immigration following the end of the initial gold rushes, and the arrival in Australia of such cattle diseases as pleuro-pneumonia, saw the squatters turn increasingly to sheep. As G. L. Buxton (1967) relates, from 1861 the numbers of cattle in the district began to dwindle and the Riverina became increasingly sheep country. This trend was maintained by the steady increase in the price of wool, and the gold rushes at Forbes and other places in New South Wales which provided new markets for mutton and any surplus wheat the squatters had grown and threshed either by hand or by using horses to tramp out the grain.

Life for the squatters and their employees was not without its problems and difficulties. Those on the outer runs in particular could be confronted by Robert Cotterall (alias Blue Cap), Dick the Devil, John Williams and other bushrangers who roamed across the region during the 1860s. Their wool clip had to be carted on creaking bullock drays either south to Corowa or east to Goulburn,

a journey that could take weeks or months depending on the state of the roads. From the early 1870s the pastoralists had also to deal with an initial wave of settlers. As had occurred in Victoria, many of these ended in the employ of the squatters who used them to protect their own holdings. But many others had genuine aspirations to be Riverina farmers. They included, in the area where William and Mary Jane would settle, John, James and Christopher Foy, and the Comyn, Stivens and Ridout families.

Over this period, wells were sunk, dams dug and swaths of the existing box, ironbark, red gum, cypress pine and mallee forests cut down or ringbarked by gangs of Chinese workers. Grasses and the number of stock to eat them soon proliferated. But so did such pests as wild horses, which had to be caught in mile-long trap yards, wild cattle and the howling dogs that had earlier made John Oxley and his party uneasy at night. In the ringbarked country, the seeds that had fallen and remained dormant for hundreds of years now took root with the first rains and millions of young gum and mallee saplings appeared. 'Thus in a few years the last state was worse than the first: for instead of open forests through which you could in many places ride at a gallop, dense scrub, mostly of pine, appeared; and as it grew it became difficult to ride through' (Gow, 1924: 8).

Many of the original pioneers were broken by the effort to clear their land a further time and sold out to a second wave of settlers who came mainly from Victoria in the 1880s. Although they were able to purchase much larger areas of land they, too, were affected by bush fires, droughts, diseases such as scab and anthrax, and a new pest that afflicted squatters and farmers alike, the rabbit. These caught the landowners unawares and caused extensive damage not only to the districts' fodder and foliage but its wildlife as well. As Bill Gammage recounts:

> Only one district squatter prepared for their coming: in 1883 Duncan Robertson of Goree netted his 84 kilometre boundary. His neighbours thought this eccentric, but he kept the rabbits out, and within a few years boundary netting was standard. The runs were made forts, but sometimes the mesh was too large, or someone cut holes in the fence, and at once the rabbits were away. Traps were set but at first no-one knew where to set them, and they caught everything but rabbits—goannas were common victims. Rabbiting gangs were hired, pit traps dug along fences, yard traps built, rabbit dogs bred up, scalp bounties offered, water poisoned. Phosphorised grain was laid, decimating the native birds and animals and even killing stock. (Gammage, 1984: 87).

Those who gave up and were not bought out by their neighbours were replaced by people, like William and Mary Jane, who came into the area in the 1890s as part of a third wave of new settlers. As Winnie's memoirs reveal, even then life for most of the district's inhabitants remained isolated and hard. There was no township close to where they were—Narrandera was some fifty kilometres to the south—no schools, no churches, no stores and very few dwellings. At the time of their arrival there were less than 20 school-age children in the district overall, insufficient to warrant the despatch of a trained school teacher to the area (no school was established at Barellan until 1911). As a result, the older children received little formal education beyond the rudimentary reading and other skills their mother or older siblings were able to impart to them. This was done in the few hours set aside each week for lessons and when William brought home the latest issue of the *Bulletin* which he would make them read from cover to cover. They were also made learn the poems, by Henry Lawson and others, that were published in the *Bulletin* or the *Narrandera Argus* including, possibly, a lament penned by an anonymous writer for the 'broken-down squatters' whose land was being gradually occupied by the settlers:

> No more shall we muster the river for fats
> Or speed o'er the Fifteen-mile Plain,
> Or rip through the scrub by the light of the moon
> Or see the old stockyards again.
> Leave the slip panels down, it don't matter so much now
> There's nought but the crows left to see,
> Perching gaunt on yon pine as though longing to dine
> On a broken-down squatter like me (cited in Webster, 1956: 18).

The only light for reading at night was a kerosene lantern with a rag wick. Water for washing and bathing had to be carried up from the dam, cleared overnight with alum, and then heated in tins that were hung over an open fire. As the iron stove in the house didn't work properly, Mary Jane had to use the little camp oven they had brought with them from Kiama to cook their daily meals and make the sweet white bread and raisin scones they all loved so much. Alice and her sisters were made responsible for looking after the cows and other farm animals. This involved herding them through the bush in search of the grassed areas that had been cleared by earlier settlers, or the Wiradjuri, or climbing the small kurrajong trees and picking their newly grown leaves for the cows to eat. On these excursions 'they met plenty of lizards, a

few goannas, plenty of rabbits and occasionally a snake, and soon became real bush girls'.

At the end of their first year in the district, the family was invited to the Ridout's farm to celebrate Christmas. The Ridouts had settled in the district in the 1870s and, by 1895, were well established—a report in the *Narrandera Argus* at the time enthused over the family's two-acre vineyard and orchard, informing its readers that 'the vines laden with their beautiful fruit just proves what can be done by energy and cultivation'. The visit was particularly exciting for Mary Jane and the children who, unlike William, very rarely travelled far beyond their property. On the day of the visit the girls:

> … were up very early bathed, dressed with their white starched pinnies over their dresses and all in the wagonette bound for Mrs Ridout's house. It was a long journey and at last the house was in sight. The girls gasped in amazement, fruit trees covered with fruit on each side of the drive and grape vines all over the porch at the back door. Mr and Mrs Ridout met them at the gate, the Ridout family were much older than them. Inside they had never seen such a long table, filled with such beautiful things. After dinner the older Ridout children played games with them and showed them their pets; they had a Christmas they would never forget.

Like many others before and since, William was unable to make a living solely from the land and was forced to seek work as a labourer and road contractor. This meant they were able to survive the drought that began in 1895, lasted until 1902 and saw much of the land turned to the powdery dust that levelled dams, buried fences, and swirled 'up into gigantic red clouds which blotted out the sun and reached into every hiding place, chocking, driving beasts mad, and reducing women to tears' (Gammage, 1984: 87). It also meant that from the very beginning of their time at Yalgogrin, Mary Jane and the children were left to survive in the bush on their own for days and sometimes weeks on end.

Confronted with the emerging reality of his choice and craving good company, William would also spend more and more of his spare time—and the family's hard earned money—drinking and socialising at the Narrandera Star where, after October 1899, he and his mates are likely to have argued about the rights and wrongs of war in the Transvaal. Some, like the editor of the local newspaper, would have wondered whether the war was not a case of the 'Briton, having found a rich territory inhabited by an unprogressive but unoffending people', then 'swarms over it and

claims it for his own' (*Narrandera Argus*, 17 October 1899). But most seemed to take the view of the local Anglican and Presbyterian ministers who prayed that all Australians would 'be ready to sacrifice themselves for the maintenance of right and the principles…and privileges upon which the Empire stands'. It was certainly the position adopted by 'Cornstalk' whose 'Patriotic Poem', published in the *Narrandera Argus* on 17 October 1899, ended with the refrain:

> No jingoistic spirit ours.
> Nor seek we war for sake of war;
> But we would warn all hostile powers
> That England is where Britons are;
> That everywhere the bulldog breed
> Will rally round the flag at need.

While William and his mates argued over the affairs of state, Marn had the responsibility of maintaining the family home and rearing, virtually alone and unaided, her and William's growing brood. This meant, in addition to cleaning the house and cooking the family's meals, milking the cows, churning milk into butter, feeding the hens and collecting their eggs, tending to the spreading vegetable garden, and, after the children had been settled at night, making and mending clothes by the flickering light of the kerosene lamp. For like many among her class, Marn was determined that her girls at least were clean and, when the situation demanded it, well-dressed. She sought also to educate them in the manners and skills that were seen to be both necessary and appropriate for either domestic service or future marriage. This was likely not just a matter of personal pride but also of gaining self-respect, of differentiating herself and her growing family from others in the district who had 'let go' either physically or morally, and, perhaps even, to compensate for the embarrassment and perceived social stigma of William's public drinking and garrulous behaviour. She may, too, have taken to heart an editorial in the *Narrandera Argus* which decried the fact that the district's children were being 'allowed, if not taught by example, to lie and swear; they evade home and school discipline, quarrel and thieve among their playmates, and so grow up without any honour or notions of integrity. Left thus ungoverned', the editorial warned, 'who can wonder that in the natural course of events…they become a menace to society' (*Narrandera Argus*, 20 January 1899).

Like most settlers' wives, Marn had no access to contraception and so had to deal with the added anxiety, and burden, of giving birth in the bush. In the time they were at South Yalgogrin, she had a further four children where all were delivered at home with only the aid of a neighbour's wife or, in the latter years, a local mid-wife. These would be collected by William in his wagonette as the pains of labour commenced, and returned once his newest child was safely delivered. More often than not William then proceeded on to the Narrandera Star where he would toast his latest arrival with whomever were present. During these times the older girls were expected to look after their mother and younger siblings. On one occasion they occupied themselves by playing cards and ignored their mother's request for a bowl of gruel. Arriving home, an inebriated William asked Marn how she was. Feeling low she replied 'I have asked the girls to make some gruel but I am still waiting'. Winnie's memoirs relate what then happened:

> William removed his belt and without waiting for an explanation, those girls were to get the biggest hiding they had ever had, he was swinging the belt and hitting them wherever it connected, while shouting, 'I'll teach you not to make your mother some gruel'. Alice hid under the table and did not fare quite so badly as the others. For days they were finding new big black marks on one another that the belt made. From that day on Alice lost all love for her father and vowed never to marry a man who was fond of alcohol.

Although she had neither their opportunities nor theoretical insights, Marn thus shared the experiences of the likes of Louisa Lawson and Bessie Lee Harrison, and, according to family folklore, their slow-burning anger over both the abuses perpetrated with relative impunity by hard-drinking men and the frustration of being powerless to do much about it. Although, like most women in her position in those times, she sat at the centre of the family, indeed represented its very life-force, Marn and her like were still, as Patricia Grimshaw describes, 'denied access to a secure share of the family's resources, to control of their sexuality and childbearing, and to social power, by men who appropriated [in parliament, church and the pub] those aspects of women's lives for their own empowerment' (Grimshaw *et al*, 1994: 155). Her physical isolation also meant that Mary Jane was, in the early years especially, separated from the love and support of her own parents and siblings, denied access to the comradeship and counsel of other women, and generally without the ways and means of developing her own interests and sense of self.

Having had ten children, Mary Jane could not at least be admonished by members of the Royal Commission into New South Wales' declining birth rate, who lamented in 1903 that too many women were placing such selfish needs as 'a love of luxury and social pleasure' above the duty of populating the young nation with white, Anglo-Celtic stock. But she had her children too early to receive the maternity allowance introduced by the Fisher Labor Government in 1912 and so remained all her life financially dependent on her husband. Any real sense of personal freedom was only really experienced when, later in life, she was able to travel from the family farm and visit her sisters and married daughters. Perhaps because it reminded her of her time in Kiama, she particularly loved Sydney and wrote numerous letters to her daughters about her times there. In one of these she declared she was 'greatly in love with this place and would love to leave out there and try our luck down this way'. In another she reported that

> I am enjoying myself alright but not able to see much as nobody is able to go out with me. I was out to a bazaar at Miss Walker's on Saturday and seen the lady herself. The bazaar was nice but her place and gardens were just lovely. I enjoyed myself well then we was pulled home in a little boat across the bay. I have had a few boat trips back and to Sydney and was out to Manly beach but the sea was a bit rough and made me sick but it was a lovely place. Nell [Mary Jane's younger sister] is going to take me out to Coogee one day this week to see a girl I used to know in St Arnaud. We are going to drive so that will be nice. I can see the place. I like being down here and wish we were living somewhere about here instead of that hole of a place Narrandera.

In a further letter to her daughter Kit, Mary Jane wished 'to goodness that we were settled down in a place like this…only 6 pence to Sydney in the boat and a boat every half hour and a tram to Burwood every twenty minutes and the fare 2 pence, it would just suit me nicely'. But while she loved Sydney and the freedom it gave her, she also missed home and seeing her other children. A lifetime of hard work, enforced frugality and self-sacrifice probably also made her feel guilty about being away. Thus towards the end of one of her stays she confided to Kit that she now wanted to come home where she could be useful. 'I expect the busy time is near at hand now and I hope we will have a good crop this year and how about Dad's peas, I expect they are all going to waste for the want of someone to pick them'. Mary Jane's enjoyment of Sydney was also tempered by her limited finances. This was clear from a letter in which she said 'I don't mind telling you that I have been short enough that I wrote to Will [Kit's

brother] to see if he would send me a couple of pounds but have not had a answer as yet. Dad and Lucy sent me three pounds today but it will take all that for mine and Tommy's fare home of course. It cost me a good bit for the doctor and medicine since I have been here so if you can help me out of the difficulty do so'.

Such admissions were not, however, shared with William (whom she addressed as 'Dear Husband'). After talking about returning home, she went on to add that 'by the tone of this letter you might think that I am in a hurry home but I am not, only I don't want to stay away when I might be wanted at home as I would like to make what we could in the harvest time for we will want it later on'. The matter was quickly settled when Mary Jane received news that her daughter Lucy was ill in hospital. Back in Narrandera she wrote to Alice that she found 'plenty to do but no pay attached to it' and continued, as she had always done, to help others in need, visit her daughters and their families and make and mend her youngest and dearly beloved son's clothes.

As with most poor rural families in the late nineteenth century, once the children reached an age where they were able to work, they were despatched to neighbours or employers in order to earn additional income for, or reduce the financial load on, the family unit. Thus as the first contingents of colonial troops destined for the Boer War were being farewelled by Lord Beauchamp and Sir George Dibbs in the rain in a goods shed at Circular Quay, William and Mary Jane's two eldest girls, May and Jane, had already left home, May to work on a farm near Narrandera and Jane as a domestic servant in Sydney. Since Emily was helping her mother, William arranged for Alice (who was then eleven years old) to go to the farm of one of his drinking mates to help the man's wife look after her children. As Winnies' memoirs reveal, it was a far from pleasant experience for the young Alice:

> The woman used to rant and rave all day at the children and at six o'clock they were fed and put to bed. She would then say to Alice, 'dig deep down into the dripping jar and get some nice gravy and spread it on some bread', that was Alice's tea, then she would be sent to sit with the grizzly, naughty children until they went to sleep. The lady would then change her dress, spruce herself up, and the master (her husband) and her would have the evening in peace.

Alice was also made do the housework and look after the farm animals. On one occasion she was sent out to bring in the family's cows and became lost in the bush. Alice wandered around and around but could find neither the cows nor the farm house. She

eventually came across a fence and, remembering her mother's advice, followed it and thankfully found her way back to the homestead, close on sunset and well after the cows had returned of their own volition. Instead of being concerned, the woman scolded Alice, 'gave her a good belting' with a small whip she used to herd the cows, and sent her home crying. Marn was horrified at what had happened and refused to allow Alice to be used in that way again.

Although unhappy about having again to support his daughter, William acceded to his wife's entreaties and allowed Alice to remain at home until she turned fourteen. She was then sent to work at the Narrandera Hotel as a house-maid and waitress for which she received six shillings a week plus board. She had to work each day from six in the morning until everything was finished at night. A big girl for her age, she was harassed by the Chinese cook but managed to keep both her dignity and her chastity although not without some private tears and, needless to say, no treats from the kitchen. There was little for Alice to do for entertainment. She went occasionally to the Saturday night dances with her workmates but found that the few young men there she took a liking to either drank or, in one case, turned out to be bullock driver which she saw as a 'last straw'. She kept her distance from the hotel's patrons especially after being warned by the older women on the staff never to speak to the commercial travellers as 'they were nearly all married and no good'. There was though one young man who stayed occasionally at the hotel who stood out from the rest. According to Winnie's memoirs, he 'was tall, dark and handsome and…drove two beautiful horses in a buggy that always glistened. Alice liked to serve him at the table, he was very well dressed and very nice, quite different from the ordinary run of customers'. One day he asked Alice her name and whether she would like to come and work for him. 'The job was in a small household on a station, they needed someone, and the wages would be fifteen shillings a week and keep'.

The questioner was Leslie Thompson who was then managing the Bynya run for its latest owner, A. S. Austin. According to George Gow, who later succeeded him as Bynya's manager, Thompson was 'a young and energetic man', who 'had gained his first station experience at Murril [sic] Creek, beyond Ardlethan, and later, at Manfred Downs in the Queensland Gulf country' (Gow 1924: 210). Bynya (meaning 'big hill' or 'mountain') was first occupied in the 1860s well after the runs along the Murrumbidgee had been won from the Wiradjuri. This was because most Europeans took the

view, first expressed by John Oxley in 1817, that the area was too remote and too desolate to be much use for either grazing or farming purposes. Even as late as 1847 Europeans were still struggling to pass through the area. As Bill Gammage relates in his *Narrandera Shire*, in January of that year three Europeans and an Aboriginal rode into the 'desert scrubby country' to the west of Ardlethan looking for suitable land.

> In intense heat they advanced over 100 kilometres, but found no land, and not a drop of water. They turned back exhausted, but one by one their horses died beneath them, and under the terrible sun they weakened rapidly. When the last horse died they drank its blood before staggering on, battered and bleeding from the prickly scrubs of the desert. About midnight on the 22 January, near the site of the Bygoo head station, one of the party, Stewart, collapsed and died. The other white men sank down, refusing to continue, but the Aborigine pleaded with them…telling them they were only 25 kilometres from water…At last the white men went on, reaching Mirrool Creek on the morning of 24 January. Stewart's remains were never found (Gammage 1984: 50).

Bynya was first leased in around 1865 by John (Four-Eyed) Patterson so-named because he wore glasses while riding, something that apparently was quite unusual in those days. Patterson stocked the property with sheep brought up from the Yarrabee run on the Murrumbidgee. The sheep were scattered into the forest by wild dogs, Four-Eyed was ruined, and his lease sold by his creditors in 1871 to a John Hunter Patterson. This was the second son of the John Hunter Patterson for whom William Free probably worked after arriving in Melbourne from England in 1853. John Hunter the younger was born in Collingwood in 1841 and, after completing his schooling in Scotland, attended lectures in medicine at Melbourne University before abandoning his studies and turning to the land. He and his younger brother, Harvey, bought a number of pastoral properties in New South Wales as well as shares in the newly established Broken Hill mine. By 1886 they held leases to over four million acres of outback land (ADB, Volume II: 165).

Patterson and his employees had not only wild dogs and horses to contend with but cattle thieves as well who hailed from the 'Weddin Mountains' made famous in Rolfe Boldrewood's novel, *Robbery Under Arms*. Expert bushmen who rode horses that had also been stolen, they would round up cattle grazing in the scrubby outreaches of the Barellan, Bynya and other backblock runs, congregate them in stock yards hidden in the dense bushland surrounding the Cocoparra ranges, and then sell them

'at very reasonable prices on the goldfields out Grenfell way' (Gow, 1924: 172). Despite these and other predations, Patterson made considerable improvements to Bynya which enabled it, in a good season, to carry over 50,000 sheep. He also built the original, logged section of the Bynya homestead in which Alice would later work and, today, serves as the ticket office and souvenir shop for the Pioneer Park on the outskirts of Griffith.

As Bill Gammage (1984: 97-100) relates, the backblock squatters in particular were never completely inured from the cumulating effect of debt, drought, shearers' strikes and rabbit and grasshopper plagues. The most serious threat to their livelihoods came not from the bush, however, but from 'the men in Sydney' who, from 1895, had begun enacting legislation that would see more and more of the countryside made available for agricultural settlement. This 'sea of troubles' arising around them saw an increasing number of 'broken-down squatters' ruined and foreclosed on by their creditors, a steady turnover of leases and managers, and a continued reduction in the size of the original runs as their leasehold (and later even freehold) components were either resumed or sub-divided. The, for some at least, golden era of the pastoralists, with its long and proud history, was drawing rapidly to an end. 'All over the agricultural lands of New South Wales after 1905, giant runs which so much sweat and scheming had won and held were demolished, and the squattocracy they supported crippled. It was one of the greatest and quietest revolutions in Australian land history' (Gammage, 1984: 100).

The experience of the run at Bynya provides an illustration of the overall process that took place, as well as some sense of the various stakes and losses that were endured by the squatters and their employees. The run was sold by John Hunter Patterson to William Leonard of Melbourne in 1876. The new owner installed as the run's manager Neil McCallum, a gruff Scot who as manager of the Tubbo run would later take on the Amalgamated Shearers' Union during the 1890 strike. McCallum put a stud merino flock on Bynya, built a second woolshed there, and added to the station's water supply by having dug a number of new dams and wells. In around 1884 Leonard sold out to the Young family who first employed a man called Nicholson and, following his death, another Scot, Charles Wood, as the station's manager. According to George Gow (1924: 196-7) Wood initially 'ran close to 100,000 sheep on Bynya, which at that time was…about 160 to 170 thousand acres' in size. A succession of dry seasons, the rabbit invasion and scrub regeneration, however, 'reduced her to a very

low ebb, and her improvements fell into disrepair until the tide of her misfortunes was turned during Mr Austin's ownership'. As Gow relates, part of the property's misfortunes included Wood himself, who met with the 'dreadful fate' that riders in the bush forever risked. The manager had left the homestead

> …on horseback one morning…and his horse fell in a rabbit warren and rolled on him…Charley Bailey, who lived out on the run with his family, came into the homestead that evening and found Wood's horse had returned riderless so he at once organised a search party, and found the unfortunate manager badly crushed by the fall. He had lain out in the sun all day, tortured by flies and ants, and had tried in vain to shelter his head by fixing his coat on the small sticks which he was able to reach. He was taken into Narrandera on a stretcher, but died four hours later (Gow, 1924: 196).

Wood had only shortly been married in a happy ceremony that had taken place at the Bynya homestead. His family had already good reason to rue their connections with the station. In 1892 a nephew of Wood's, George Chancellor Collyer, who had come out to Australia from Scotland to gain some colonial experience, perished after becoming lost in the rugged bushland near the Cocoparra ranges. He was eventually found by two men who were looking for stray cattle and was buried in the Bynya cemetery, far away as George Gow notes, 'from his own home and people'. When the run was bought by A. S. Austin in 1906, it covered only some 100,000 acres with 40,000 of these freehold and the balance crown land. The new owner and his manager, Leslie Thompson, immediately set about returning the property to its former glory. Land was cleared, dams sunk and cleaned out, and a new boundary fence erected which George Gow considered 'to be the best in the district'. The existing woolshed was enlarged to provide shelter for some 3500 sheep and Woolsley shearing machines were installed.

These was driven by a 'gigantic stationery oil engine, a Phoenix…[which] stood in a specially prepared spot in the centre of the shed, some nine feet below the level of the shearing floor'. The only one of its kind in the district, the new engine represented a mixed blessing especially for the shearers and rouseabouts who had to use it. Once started—a difficult and dangerous task in its own right which, prior to the installation of a subsidiary starter motor, required no less than fifteen men—the Phoenix drove the shears nicely but with a roar that was deafening and seemed to shake the shed's very foundations. On one occasion when Arthur Brooks, the only person able to control the beast, was away, the

monster gave a hoarse splutter and 'playfully tossed her huge flywheel into about a dozen pieces, hurtling the fragments among the 25 shearers and nearly killing the ringer.' A replacement flywheel was obtained 'but the shearers' nerves were quite gone…and when someone accidentally dropped an empty petrol tin one day all hands dived to earth, the shearers letting the partly shorn sheep go…causing much confusion'. It was as George Gow noted drolly, 'the old engine's swan song. The shearers and rouseabouts were fed up and a local steam engine finished the job' (Gow 1924: 210).

In spite of the impressive efforts of its owner and manager, the carrying capacity of Bynya could not be returned to its earlier levels in part because the prevailing seasonal conditions had become much drier, but also as a result of the continuing rabbit problem. The 'men in Sydney' also played their part by pushing the state's railway lines further and further into the country's interior and, from 1904 onwards, passing various settlement and land tax assessment acts which aimed, once and for all, to break up the runs and replace them with agricultural settlements that could be populated with yeoman farmers. By 1910 the earlier, virtually pristine scrublands lying to the northwest of Narrandera were now dotted with farmers' cottages and fields of wheat and other grain. The runs to the south and east of Bynya were beginning to be sub-divided and sold off, and the pressure to create further wheat farms was increasing. The writing was on the wall and, in April 1912, Austin sold his run to a syndicate of businessmen that had just completed the subdivision of the Barellan run.

The dispersal of Bynya's land began well, aided perhaps by advertisements—prepared by George Gow who was tasked with overseeing the property's sub-division and sale—that reflected the democratic nationalist ideals that had earlier attracted the likes of William Laurence. The land at Bynya, it was claimed, provided an opportunity for men and women who are 'tired of the impoverished surroundings…of many of the populous centres of our Australian civilisation…to secure for themselves and their families, a share in the prosperity which our boundless agricultural lands hold in store for those who seek them' (cited in Gammage, 1984: 102). Sales slowed down with the advent of the First World War but quickened again following the extension of the Barellan railway line to Griffith. By March 1917 sufficient land had been sold for there to occur 'the clearing sale which usually follows the wind-up of a station'. This raised some £9000 and saw the bulk of Bynya's stock, machinery, tools and even parts of its

outhouses and shearing sheds—but not the great oil-fired engine that had terrorised the station's shearers—sold to bidders who had come to the auction from across the district. As George Gow concluded in his story of the run: 'Thus ended Bynya. As a sheep run she had not altogether been a success'…[although as] a wheat field she has been much more prolific'. Beyond that, Gow added somewhat wistfully

> She has always had a sort of historical interest for many people, and though not, generally speaking, so good for grazing as Barellan and Moombooldool, she was in a way more likeable, possibly from the fact that her outlook is more interesting owing to the low ranges which give her a picturesque appearance (Gow 1924: 215).

The sight of the lovely old homestead set among the rolling grasslands that lay in the lee of the bush-covered Mount Bynya certainly pleased Alice at the end of her long buggy ride from Narrandera. She was employed to help the station's Irish housekeeper, a Mrs Flood, whose husband may have been related to Edward Flood—'a man', according to one contemporary, 'of little mind, but of lengthy lungs'—and who, in the late 1840s, used his connections in Sydney to gain control of some of the best land around Narrandera (Gammage, 1984: 47-8). The only other people living there at the time were the manager Leslie Thompson, a Mr Botterall the station overseer, and a seventeen year old labourer and rouseabout. The station's owner, A. S. Austin, would often visit as would Thompson's sister Winifred who Alice thought 'the most beautiful lady she had ever seen', and after whom she would later name her eldest daughter. Although the homestead was very isolated and quiet compared with the Narrandera Hotel, Alice loved it. The work was easy, she was practically her own boss, and was respectfully treated by all but Mrs Flood who, coincidently or otherwise, began drinking quite heavily a few months after Alice's arrival.

In her spare time Alice would sit in the sun, darning holes in the mens' socks and mending their shirts. Winnie's memoirs record '[t]hey were very grateful for these extras. Mr Thompson got his sister to get a machine for Alice and when they went away they would also bring her a little gift when they returned'. She was by this time seventeen years old, fully grown and, in her own way, striking to look at. Tall and slim, with a longish face and nose, frank, grey-blue eyes, and an enigmatic smile, she looked more like her mother than her father. But she had William's strength of character, quick-fire temper and shy yet roguish charm which might enchant some in her presence but could well be

misconstrued by others as being too knowing or too forward, especially for a girl of her age and class. This certainly became the view of Mrs Flood who in the mornings after her night-time binges 'would start on Alice' insinuating that she was trying to 'win one of the bachelors for a husband'. Alice's response to these taunts was not to answer which served only to infuriate the old woman more.

> …one morning when she was extra bad and Alice was not answering she grabbed Alice by the hair and swung her around. This [like the bullocky] was the last straw and Alice picked up a bowl of cold soup and flung it over Mrs Flood, who ran yelling to the boss that Alice had scalded her. He sent Mrs flood back to tell Alice to come to his office…[where he said to her] 'You will have to go Alice if what Mrs Flood tells me is true'. Alice said 'Yes, I will have to go I can no longer work with Mrs Flood'.

Alice went back to work at the Narrandera Hotel. Three months later a contrite Thompson invited her back saying 'I've got rid of Mrs Flood. I did not know about her drinking and am so sorry if she gave you a bad time.' Alice accepted and, working now for a Mrs Barnes, 'a very nice lady', began two of her most treasured years. During this time she met her future husband, Alfred Cheeseman. After returning home from service in South Africa, Alfred had found it hard to get steady work around his home town of Beaufort in Victoria. He and his brother travelled north into the Riverina district where they were contracted by Thompson to sink wells for bore water. Alfred and Alice became friends and continued to write to each other after Alfred returned to Beaufort. Some time later Alfred proposed and, to the disappointment of her employers, Alice accepted. She was given a farewell party at Bynya where she was presented with an inscribed silver tea and coffee service, a silver and oak biscuit barrel, a silver butter dish, and a framed photo of the famous Melbourne Cup winner Carbine. Her place at the homestead was taken by her sister Emily who, in her youth was even better looking than Alice, and who worked at Bynya until the station's demise. As evidenced by the poem at the beginning of the chapter, which she composed many years later, Emily also loved her time there, giving support to George Gow's contention that although the run no longer existed, it would remain in peoples' minds and memories for another generation at least.