

# RED IN THE CENTRE: THROUGH URBAN EYES

*Sample Chapter*  
GREENHORN FARMING

One fine morning when the world was smiling I watched a man mustering cattle with a four-wheel-drive ute. At first it wasn't clear what he was up to and I thought he was simply driving across the paddock to reach them. But when he flanked the perimeter of the mob and started tooting his horn I realised I was witnessing something special.

The cattle responded by moving around a bit in no particular direction, so his next manoeuvre was to drive through the middle of the herd, still beeping away on the Land Rover's tinny little horn. The beasts calmly stepped aside to allow him passage, before resuming whatever bovine things they were doing before he arrived.

Then he turned and rounded them again, this time managing to get them started in a direction he was happy with. Unfortunately, once he'd driven past each beast it stopped moving and his utility looked like being the only thing in the paddock likely to go through the open gate. The cattle were spread out far and wide behind him, grazing unconcernedly.

The exercise was all performed at about five kilometres an hour, and from my vantage point on the hill overlooking his paddock it made for an amusing spectacle. Later I meet the man and ask him about his iron horse mustering. He just laughs and tells me I should have seen him trying to do it with his two-wheel-drive vehicle, which he couldn't even steer in the wet grass.

'Have you never heard of a dog?' I ask him.

'Well, I read somewhere that the best cattle dog is one you can take fishing with you,' he explained, 'and since I always take the ute ...'

He's a man in his mid-forties with a lean build and a cheeky face that always looks balanced on the verge between grinning and laughing. For over twenty years he was a chef on the Gold Coast, before deciding to change tack and become a cattle farmer.

'Just like that,' he says, with a click of his thumb and forefinger. 'At the blink of an eye, I thought,

"Yeah I'll go to the country and buy a little bit of land and run some cattle."

'Why did you pick here?'

'I like the area. And I like the township: it's just the right size. Oh, and the parking,' he remembers.

'That's the main thing. You can always find a park in town where you can open your door and not hit the car next to you. And there's no parking meters.'

We both laugh at the absurdity.

‘How many head of cattle have you got?’

‘I bought thirty head.’

‘Has it been a steep learning curve?’

‘Very,’ he says. ‘For the first six months I was over at the neighbour’s every week saying, “What’s wrong with my cattle this time? Why are yours so healthy and mine are always getting sick?”’

And he tells me a story about dehorning, and how the holes left after the horns are sculpted from the beast’s skull are left for the flies to blow so the maggots can clean up the wound; a fact he didn’t know until one of his previously dehorned heifers started thrashing her head around in the yard and sprayed him with maggots.

And I can only imagine the delight his neighbour would have felt hearing that one.

‘What breed are you running?’ I ask

‘Charolais–Santa Gerudis cross,’ he tells me.

‘You mean Santa Gertrudis,’ I correct him.

‘Is it?’ he asks, genuinely unsure, but not surprised he got it wrong.

At this point in the interview we’re both laughing hard, and for the next hour or so he entertains me with his city-turned-country- bumpkin tales.

‘Well, whatever they’re called, you just don’t know what you’re getting,’ he says, about the breed of the cattle. ‘So you’ve just got to take the word of the farmer.’

‘And they can see me coming a mile off.’ And he laughs again.

‘Like that cattle yard down there. Did you see that thing? All I did was casually mention to one of the cockies that I probably needed to have a yard built at some stage, and the next thing I’ve got myself the Taj Mahal of cattle yards and I owe him a fortune. All I’d have to do is line and clad the thing and I could live in it!’

‘And those Herefords there in my bottom paddock? They’re not mine: they’re another neighbour’s. As soon as he knew I had a good bull he moved his cattle into the paddock next door because he knew they’d climb through the fence to get to my bull, or the other way round.’

‘In the end I thought it better to let them in because I didn’t want my bull getting himself caught up trying to get to them. I’ve heard of bulls ending up with bent dicks trying to get at cows through fences, and then they’re no good for anything but mince. But now I’ve not only got them all pregnant for him, but I’m feeding them as well.’

‘What’s your bull?’

‘He’s a Murray Grey. We call him Muzza.’

‘Have you got names for all your cows?’

‘Of course. We’ve got Cowabunga, Hugh Heifer, Billy Idol with the cute fringe, and we’ve got one really small one we call Minogue.’

‘Are you making enough out of the cattle to survive?’

‘No, definitely not.’

‘Are you having to pick up other work?’

‘Terrible, yes,’ he says, with a self-derisive laugh. ‘Terrible work. Terrible hours. Terrible pay. Brickies’ labouring. My hands’ll never be the same.’

‘But you’re enjoying yourself otherwise?’

‘Yeah, it’s great. I’m enjoying being in the country without the stress of The Coast. And learning about cattle.’

‘I’ll tell you one thing I learned about cattle, myself, recently,’ I say. ‘A bloke told me they fill themselves with air so they can negotiate floodwaters.’

‘Yeah, they do,’ my greenhorn farmer assures me. ‘Air and water. Because if they have too much air they’ll be forever tipping over, so they take on water to stabilise.’

‘So you’re trying to tell me they take on ballast?’

‘They take on ballast and air so they can ride the rapids,’ he tells me, straight-faced for the first time since we started talking. ‘It’s only when they get hooked up in fences or logs that they drown.’

‘I swear if I stay in this area any longer,’ I say, ‘you’ll all have me believing pigs fly!’

‘It’s true,’ he says, laughing his head off again. ‘I’ve seen them do it.’