THE NASONS: KEEPING UP WEST OF THE DIVIDE

In this article, the final one in The Bulletin's *series on remarkable families, ROBERT MACKLIN tells of the hard struggles and rich diversity of the Nason family.*

IN QUEENSLAND there is a game we play. Those of us who have some connection west of the Divide do it compulsively, endlessly, but any true Queenslander can join in. Perhaps it helps to have been to a public school and you have to realise that the true aficionados are ladies of a certain age. But modified versions are available to all of us.

It's called Keeping Up. Not as in "with the Joneses" but with developments in the great extended family which is Queensland beyond the mountains. It has its own exotic points system and its own patter pattern which, between a couple of experts, usually goes this way:

"Did you hear that Bill Carpenter got married?"

"No! Really? Old Bill. Who'd have him?"

"Well, that's the thing. (Pause) Dinki Fraser!"

"Good Lord. Dinki Fraser. You mean Pelham Fraser's girl? Pelham and Marie from Scatterwood?"

"That's right."

"Goodness. How did old Pelham feel about that?"

"Well (knowingly), he kicked up a bit at first. You know what he was like . . ."

"Sure."

". . . but he's okay now. Bill's changed a lot, you know. (Serious frown) He's a pretty solid citizen these days; and old man Carpenter died of course . . ."

"Yes, I'd heard that (sober concern)."

". . . and Bill's working the two places together: Curlew and Ramsgate, so he really has his hands full."

Murilla homestead, circa 1886. In the buggy are John Nason, his wife and younger daughters

"Sure. And anyway (unctiously) Marie Fraser is a terribly nice person."

"Oh yes. Well, she was a MacDonald, you know." (What else!)

And so it goes.

While it might have its funny (not to say faintly ridiculous) side I have no interest whatever in deriding it. I confess I enjoy to play it – much to the amused exasperation of my southern wife – just as much as the next man. In a curious way it provides Queenslanders with a sense of belonging and of security unavailable in the urban conglomerates of the south.

But the point of the story is that whenever one plays Keeping Up it's only a short time before one touches upon the Nason family of Surat. In fact, at times you get the feeling that without them it would hardly be worth playing at all. Their connections seem to cover the entire State.

In that sense they are the essential Queensland country family, their tree firmly planted in 100,000 acres of rich

Bob Nason on the verandah of Newington, with his wife Chesne and their children

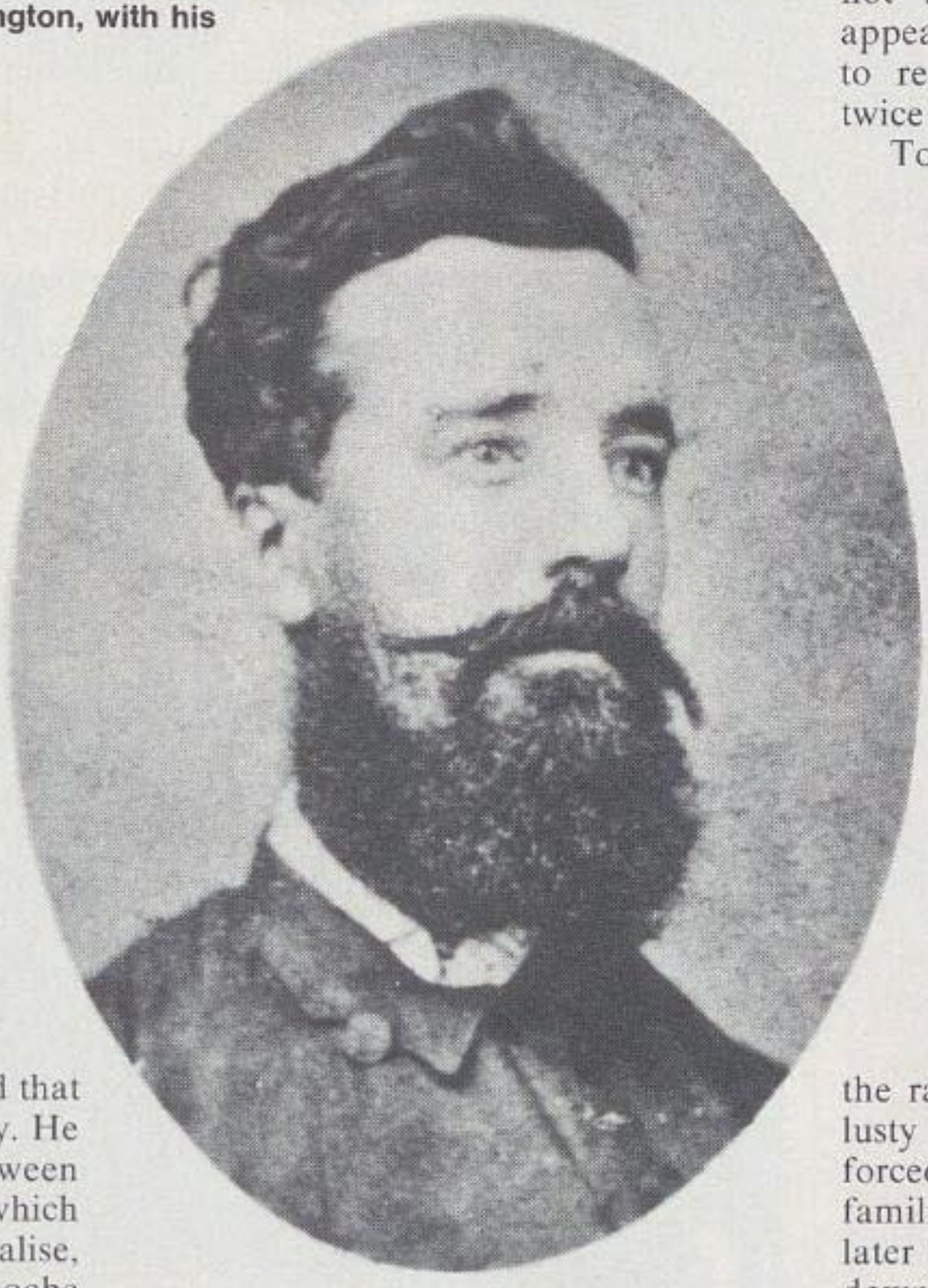
south-eastern soil. But the Nasons are very much more than that, for within their branches are perched a cabinet minister in the Federal Government, a brilliant stage director, an artist/grazier, a brace of local government stalwarts, an actress . . .

The first Australian patriarch, John Nason, was born in Tooting, Surrey, in 1827. His father's name was George but little else is known of his early days. There is a story that he worked for the Bank of England, and there is no doubt that he received a reasonable education, but the rest is clouded. Most of the early family records were lost in a Surat fire 100 years ago.

It is known that he arrived in the colony between 1854 and 1856 – in the wake of the goldrush – and that he made his way north immediately. He paused in Drayton, a small town between Toowoomba and Warwick and which Steele Rudd would later immortalise, long enough to marry diminutive Phoebe Grubbe, a local girl.

It was, it seems, a whirlwind courtship, the young lovers deciding to forego the lengthy posting of banns in favor of a special licence which allowed them to tie the knot in the shortest possible time.

The marriage took place in 1858. Shortly afterward the newlyweds broke away from the cramped Dad-and-Dave selections and headed for the open country west of the Divide. It was a courageous decision to take. At the time marauding bands of Aborigines,



John Nason, patriarch of the family in Australia

dispossessed by the settlers, harassed the intruders and often held up the Cobb & Co coach on its way from Dalby to Condamine and Yuleba.

For John Nason, his wife with child, no capital and no job in prospect, it was a leap into the unknown and it took him as far as a pub, a general store and a scatter of shanties known as Surat, named inexplicably after the Indian town famed for its brocades and silverware.

There he began job hunting and after a stint at droving (and almost anything else that was going) he was drawn inevitably to the great slab homestead at Murilla owned by the Daisey family. There he drew on his English education and was soon appointed bookkeeper on Michael Daisey's vast cattle property. He moved Phoebe from Surat and they settled down to raise a family.

It was quite a business. Over the next 20 years they would have no fewer than 12 children, 10 of whom survived to adulthood to begin the infinitely complex web of connections throughout Queensland.

John Nason himself never took up land. Keeping track of the huge receipts and even huger expenditures of the Daiseys and their properties involved him totally. And given the Daiseys' propensities with a cheque book, particularly Michael's son John, this is not surprising. From the records it appears that John Nason went so far as to resign at least once and probably twice at John Daisey's profligacy.

To no avail. When the younger Daisey died the property had to be broken up and sold to pay the debts and Nason in his middle years found himself out of a job.

Perhaps it's being a little unfair to attribute the downfall of the house of Daisey solely to their propensities. Apparently it was the custom in those days for the new settlers to stock their properties with cattle they were able to pick up on the way. It was a custom they took to with great enthusiasm. So much so that between 1870 and 1872 Murilla "lost" no fewer than 2000 head of cattle. Michael Daisey offered a 500 pounds reward for information leading to the conviction of the duffers, but a sudden silence settled on the land.

To John Nason, charged with the raising of nine daughters and three lusty sons, the Daiseys' problems were forced into the background. The two families retained their connection (in a later generation a Nason would give a down-and-out Daisey a stockman's job because of it) and John Nason called on his education once more to keep his own family solvent. He took a position as secretary/manager of the Waroo Divisional Board, equivalent of today's Shire Clerk, headquartered in Surat.

Soon afterward his eldest girl, Emma, married a former ship's carpenter, Hans Bager, who selected a small property, Sydenham, 20 miles from Surat and on it built what was to become the first Nason homestead.

It was a curious little place, its doors

the size of ship's hatchways, its interior more like a windjammer's stateroom than a bush homestead. The property was only 4000 acres at first, but by then sheep were replacing cattle as the staple money-spinner in the district, and with wool came a measure of prosperity.

The home was progressively enlarged and after the Surat house burned down with all the family records, and John Nason retired from the Divisional Board, he and Phoebe settled in their own small wing. She died in 1912 and he followed her the next year. He was 86.

The daughters – apart from Emma – either drifted into spinsterhood or set out with young husbands to spread the bloodline to distant fields. The three boys, William, Alfred and Charles, found their futures on the land.

Around the turn of the century William decided, like so many eldest sons before and since, to make his own way far from home and he set out for the channel country. Perhaps there was a letter or two, but then nothing. It is one of those mysteries tucked away even in Queensland families. For once the Keeping Up game failed to work its magic and an entire branch drifted into limbo.

But Charles and Alfred stayed put and dug their roots deeply into the Myall and Wilga plains around the headwaters of the Condamine, known locally as the Balonne. Both took up small properties – around 5000 acres – and both into families which were themselves stretching their tentacles across the western districts.

Charles bought Rockdale and married Eleanor Gilmour. Their sons, Alec and Donald, would continue the process of opening new land and over the next 60 years would become pillars of Surat's grazing, sporting and local government fraternity.

Alfred's marriage was slightly more exotic and its ramifications were much more far-reaching. His bride was Lilian Sheridan, whose lineage went back to the Irish playwright/politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan. It must have been a powerful genetic line, for suddenly the Nason family began to take on a new dimension, one which continues to flower in both fields today.

The first hint of this development came not from a Nason but from a parallel branch. Lilian's sister, Mabel, married a Dalby dentist, Dennis Killen, and their son, Dennis James Killen, would grow up to be one of the more distinguished (and theatrical) ministers in the Federal Government.

But the Jim Killen story deserves a place of its own, and I will return to it later. Meantime, I must finish the chronology before it becomes too confused.

Alfred Nason and Lilian Sheridan had two sons, John and Robert, and a daughter, Nancy. Robert would die as a young man among the horrors of the Burma Railway; Nancy would marry a CSR chemist and spend most of her adult life in Fiji, where her husband ran the company's five sugar mills.

John Nason married a Brisbane girl, the beautiful and gracious Sheelagh O'Reilly, whose family operated the State's largest customs and forwarding company, and between them they produced five children, four of whom

John and Phoebe Nason: whirlwind courtship, then marauding Aborigine bands

have made a significant contribution to the theatre and the arts in Queensland.

Rosemary, the eldest, cut short an acting career in favor of nursing, though her younger sister Victoria remained in the theatre and is one of Queensland's better-known actresses. (She understudied Diane Cilento in *The Taming of the Shrew*; Diane busted her ankle and the reception accorded Victoria's performance was so favorable that the ankle healed overnight.) Robby is a leading costumier and Bryan masterminded one of the most exciting theatrical innovations in Queensland for decades. The other child, Robert (Bob), runs 34,000-acre Newington, the family property four miles from Surat, with only Chesne, his wife, to assist. In his spare time he paints, and in 1976 held his first one-man exhibition in Brisbane. It was a success and he is now in the process of preparing for another.

All the children are in their 30s and most are producing youngsters hand-over-fist. But for the moment these require no special mention.

Their grandfather, John, himself grandson of the first John Nason, is ideally placed to tell the family's story. At 75 he lives in retirement in the quintessential Brisbane home at Clayfield. It is rambling and gracious with a lookout tower which might have been designed specifically for the delight of grandchildren.

Like so many of his kind, he is boundless in his hospitality, gruff in his delivery, intensely proud of his family and, when the mood is upon him (and a sip or two of the good stuff), an almost limitless fund of bush stories: a Queensland patriarch.

That he can barely walk following an horrific accident two years ago on Newington, when he crushed a thigh and hip and lay untended for five hours, is dismissed as a damned annoyance. Not part of life's rich tapestry exactly, but the sort of silly bloody thing that happens to a man.

The same attitude permeates his memories of the early times on Newington when his father (Alfred) was struggling to support a young family on an appallingly overstocked 6000 acres and in a hut no bigger than a kitchen. In fact, it *is* the kitchen of the present homestead.

"People tell me it was tough," he says, "but I don't think of it that way. We always had plenty to eat; we were as strong as young bulls and we even went away to school (the Southport School).

This was a period that determined which of the Queensland families would survive on the land and which would be swept aside like the Daiseys: pear time.

The original 6000 acres at Newington along Bungil Creek, a tributary of the Balonne, were relatively free of prickly

John Nason, grandson of the original John, with his wife Sheelagh and their daughters Victoria (left) and Robyn

pear but as grazing land it was simply not a living area.

Alfred Nason had tried to diversify, but with decidedly mixed results. He started his own sawmilling operation, which went quite well until the good timber cut out. He became involved in a mini-goldrush, but it turned out that the blacksmith's assistant had hoaxed the district with filings from a brass mug and that had to be hushed up. He bred horses, remounts for the Indian Army, but after the war that market went kaput.

Then he took on farming, bringing in a share cropper and starting small.

"The first year they cleared and planted 20 acres," John says. "They didn't do too bad. They got seed for the next year. They had a plan that every year they'd double their acreage of wheat till they'd made their fortunes.

"Well, the second year went all right. They harvested 40 acres and they made a few bob. So the third year they cleared 80 acres. They bought a brand-new, 12-furrow stump-jump plough and away they went. It was a huge thing. They needed an entire team of horses to get the bloody thing moving. But they did it. They got the crop in.

"Beautiful crop too. Acres and acres of it. Trouble was, every wheat farmer in Australia had the same result. They could hardly give the bloody stuff away."

It was the last crop ever sown on Newington.

During the Depression John Nason thought of selling the old plough for scrap metal, but it wasn't worth the haulage.

So without the option of intensive farming it was necessary to expand the acreage to run more sheep and cattle. In this the pear was both a blessing and a curse. It meant that during the 1920s pear country was selling cheaply, so expansion was possible on fairly limited capital.

"One of our neighbors had 2000 acres of pear and he wanted to get out. Dad heard about it and rode over, and for 250 pounds he bought the lease. He was so anxious to get it settled he scratched out the bill of sale on the flap of his saddle. It was honored too.

"There were a couple of bachelor brothers who had Dooral, another block adjoining Newington, about 22,500 acres, mostly pear country. My father wanted to buy it and the brothers wanted to sell, but if they did they'd have no place to go.

"Well, one day these blokes – Davidson their name was – heard that an auntie of theirs had died in New South Wales and left them 20,000 pounds each. They were off like a shot and that's the last anyone ever heard of them. My father applied for the lease and they granted it."

But the new land was useless unless it could be cleared of pear, and it was to be nearly a decade before the cactoblastis moth made its welcome appearance. Meanwhile, men, women and children alike fought an unending battle to stop its spread and, if possible, cut back the area it covered already.

Every day, week after week, year after year, they went back into the paddocks armed with the hated Roberts' Pear Poison – a lethal mixture of sulphuric acid and arsenic – which the Prickly Pear Commission delivered free to the nearest railhead 30 miles away.

It came in five-gallon drums and it had to be sprayed at high pressure into the tangled pear clumps.

"It was awful stuff. You had to be so careful. It could eat into you and poison you. You had to be sure to wash every part of you. Terrible stuff."

But even pear time had its lighter side.

"The Prickly Pear Commission got it into their heads that the poor old emu was responsible for spreading it. I don't know how they thought he did it: on his big feet, I suppose.

"Anyway, they put a bounty on emus – 2/6 for every head and 1/-each for eggs. At the time there were emus

everywhere in this country. My mother would use the eggs in her cooking. One emu egg was worth a dozen hen eggs. Anyway, my brother and I got busy after work and at the weekends and in two seasons we earned 800 pounds. I had my 21st birthday in New Zealand on the proceeds.

"The first year we collected a lot of eggs. But one time when we took them into Surat they started hatching and we only got a shilling for the eggs. So next year we waited until they hatched."

Eight hundred pounds. Not a story for the squeamish, I know, but pear time was never that.

Shortly afterward John's brother Robert drew a block near Barcaldine, a couple of hundred miles west, in one of Queensland's regular land-ballots. It was just in time for the Depression.

Starting a new block was a struggle any time, but particularly then, so John went out to give him a hand. But almost as soon as he arrived he was called home. His father was ill and he was needed back at Newington to run the place. It was 1931.

In a few months his father was back on his feet again and starting to get about. As soon as he was fully recovered John would head back to the adventure of a new place, new people, new land.

Then on a Saturday morning the old man decided he was well enough to go for a ride round the near paddocks. He would check the stock and the fences, but that was only an excuse. All he really wanted was to get back in the saddle and ride over his land and let the feel of it seep back into him.

John waved him off and went to work on his car, a Vauxhall which needed to be stripped down and thoroughly overhauled. He had the sump off when he noticed his father's horse riderless in the distance. Suddenly chilled in premonition, he ran into the paddock looking about for the old man. He saw a figure walking toward him and ran toward it. It was his father, bleeding from the hand.

"It was a snake. He'd seen it, a brown, and got off his horse to kill it. It turned and struck him on the hand. It must have really taken hold. You could see where he'd torn it away and the blood was running down the back of his hand. He killed it and then started to walk home."

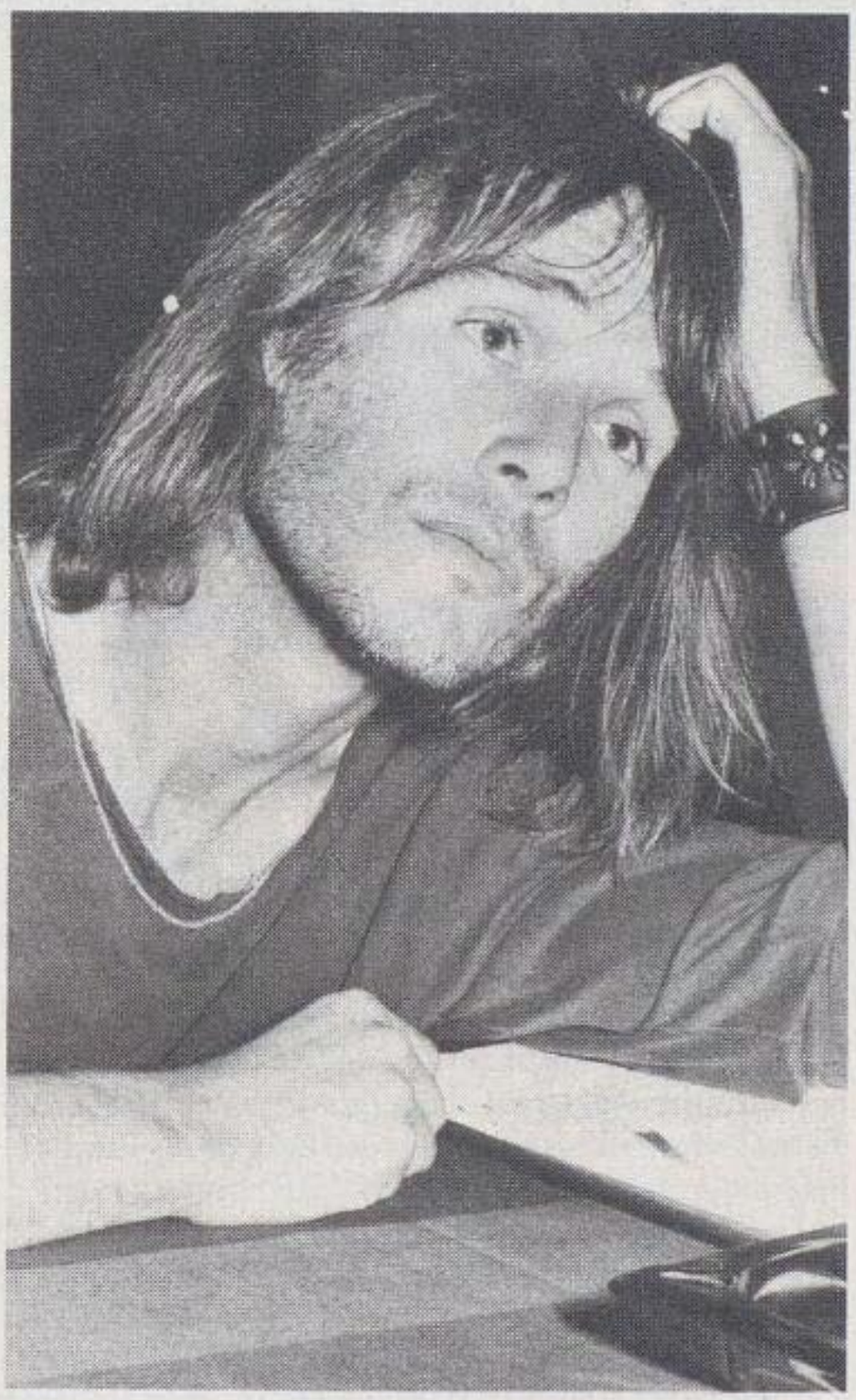
He took his father into the house, wrapped a rough tourniquet around his arm and called the doctor in Surat. The doctor was out. He'd taken the day off to go duck shooting with friends and was uncontactable. Roma was the next nearest town but to get there he'd need the car, and the bloody car was in pieces.

It took hours to replace the Vauxhall's parts and get it going. It seemed like days. When it was done he drove the old man to Roma hospital.

"He was in a pretty bad way. But we got him there."

He lingered for three days before he died.

"I remember he'd said to me a few days before . . . we were talking about the cactoblastis moth and he said, 'My word, Jack, this might be good.' "



Bryan Nason: from a hermit's hut on the edge of a waterfall to dramatic fantasies

It was. The magic moth laid 100 eggs six times a year and the larvae killed the pear, which rotted on the ground and fertilised the soil. In a couple of years Newington was a picture.

John Nason never did get back to help his brother establish Saltern Creek, the Barcaldine block. Robert married and did it himself. Jack stayed on the old property and turned it into a showplace.

It was at this time – the mid-1930s – that a young cousin came to jackeroo on the Sheridan place, Newstead, next door.

He is remembered as a young "doer," a bit of a rebel who'd cleared out from Dalby after his father died and was determined to find his own way in the world. And for the record, Jim Killen really did swim bare-arsed in the Condamine with the Aboriginal kids of the district.

In Nason country little Jimmy Killen has never really grown up. He's still seen as belting a rough horse over the Coolibah flats to round a mob of recalcitrant wethers or breasting the bar of the New Royal and dipping his lid to no man.

"He was a really likeable kid," John Nason says. "Full of spirit and energy, into everything. Once he'd set his mind to something you just couldn't stop him. Wild horses couldn't stop him."

It is also remembered that when the war came Jim Killen realised something had to be done about his education – which was almost non-existent – and Alec Nason gave him a hand with his correspondence course in mathematics so he could qualify for aircrew.

He made it; and that was probably the beginning.

Most of the Nason boys went off to the war and it fell to John as the eldest to stay behind and look after the land. He learned, second hand, of his brother's capture in Singapore and subsequent death on the Burma railway. He learned of other relatives, his cousin Alec chief among them, who also suffered at the hands of the Japanese and who distinguished themselves in war service. But it is an episode like his father's death or his own accident which is waved away. There are other more positive things to dwell on at 75.

Such as his own family and his eldest son, Bryan, who would break utterly with tradition and devote himself to a world as far removed from wool growing as could be imagined.

Bryan Nason, in his own words, "lives in the rainforest. He has a hermit's hut on the edge of a waterfall in far north Queensland and comes out of hiding on certain rare moments of the moon to direct dramatic fantasies in the real world.

"A Queensland University graduate, he founded the College Players and toured eastern Australia by train with musicals and Shakespeare.

"He directed *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* at the Festival Hall and *Royal Hunt of the Sun* to begin the Queensland Theatre Company. Together with Ralph Tyrrell he wrote and directed *Bacchoi,* which opened the Schenell Theatre at Queensland University and the Nimrod in Sydney."

The words are true as far as they go. What they fail to convey is the impact Nason's work has had on theatre in Queensland.

His founding of the College Players, for example, while still at Queensland University enticed a number of talented youngsters, Shane Porteous among them, to pursue a career on the stage.

Jim Killen: still seen as belting a rough horse over the Coolibah flats

More importantly, the eight tours his travelling troupe undertook to Queensland country towns – entirely at their own expense – brought to the provincial areas a standard of theatre previously unknown there and spurred the government to consider the establishment of an official State theatre company.

"When we started," says his sister, Robby, "it was very much on an amateur basis." Though he disclaims credit for it, the actual financing came from John Nason, whose only theatrical experience had been in the romantic farces of Surat's amateur productions. "If there were any profits," says Robby, "we just divided them up between us at the end."

No one got rich.

"Later we became a more professional troupe and during the last couple of trips when we were taking *The Merchant of Venice* from Cairns to Canberra it was as a professional company."

By then – 1968-69 – word had filtered through that the Queensland Government was definitely going to establish a theatre company. Not unnaturally the Nason group believed they would become the nucleus of the permanent company and the Cairns to Canberra tour was designed, in part at least, as a demonstration of their professional quality.

But the government, being the government it is, opted to engage individuals with a more conventional theatrical background, despite the fact that they called on Nason to direct their first production.

"It would be silly to pretend that there wasn't some bitterness," Robby says now. "We were terribly disappointed at the time. But Alan Edwards (artistic director of the QTC) is really first rate and we get along very well."

Looking back, the tours were an end in themselves.

"They were tremendous fun. We'd hire a railway sleeper and a baggage car in Brisbane and travel from town to town hooked on to whatever train was going our way.

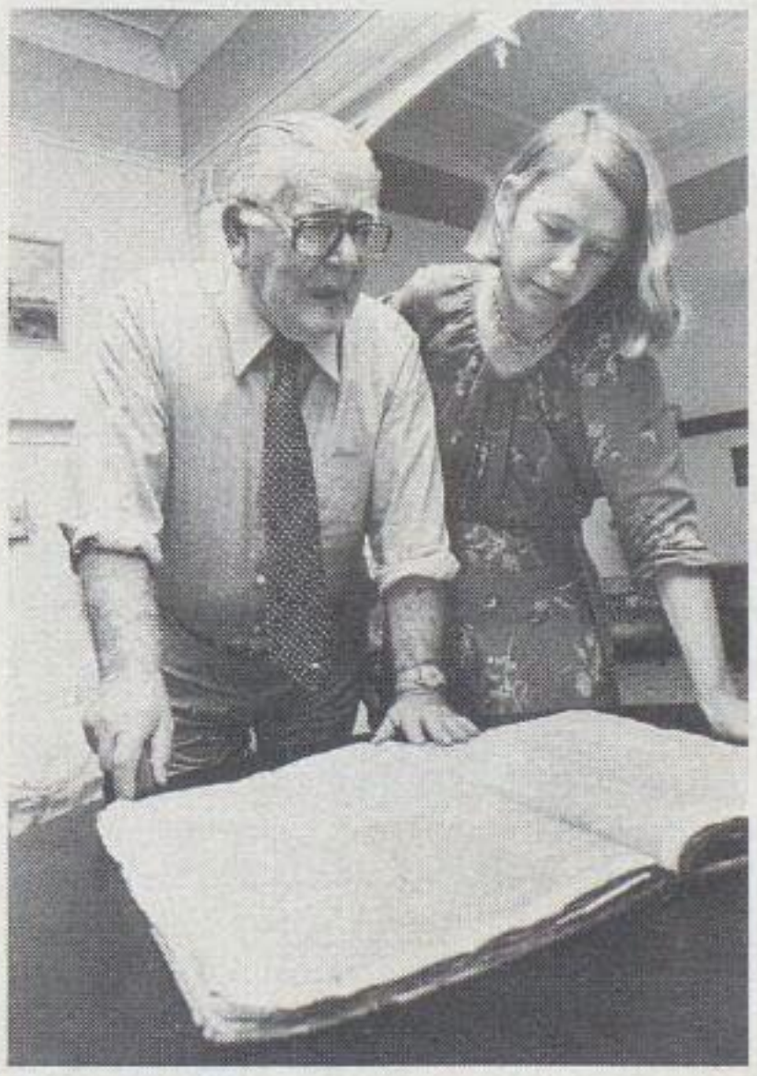
"When we got to a town on the itinerary we would be shunted off to a siding and we'd live in the carriages until it was time to move on. It was great experience for everyone – actors, people behind the scenes, everyone."

It was probably this experience as a vagabond player which made Bryan Nason decide, after a stint as a tutor at NIDA, to turn it into a way of life. These days he lives on a small farm near Innisfail and spends much of his time travelling to northern schools talking about the theatre and giving one-man performances. From time to time, as funds run low or an interesting challenge is offered, he comes south to direct some new production in Brisbane, Sydney, or Darwin.

A return to his roots at Newington is probably the furthest thing from his mind.

Fortunately, the same can't be said for his brother Bob, who now runs the property on his own. It is an impossible job, as anyone with any bush experience would know. Six thousand sheep and 1300 head of cattle on 34,000 acres, much of it uncleared, is work for three men at least. And as well as the work load there is the physical danger involved. His father's accident and his grandfather's death are never very far from his mind.

"I try to be as careful as I can," he says, "and I always make sure Chesne knows where I'm going."



John and Robyn pore over an old scrapbook: fund of bush stories

Another personal consequence for Bob Nason is that the long exhausting days in the paddocks or at the yards keep him from what has become a secondary obsession – painting.

"If there was more time I could get more done," he says as we sit on the broad veranda overlooking the "new" shearing shed. "Sometimes I wish . . ."

Chesne finishes the thought. "He'd like to go to Brisbane and paint full-time."

"Only sometimes."

The problem is that he is the star graduate of Mervyn Moriarty's Flying Art School, which brings regular instruction to aspiring artists across the whole of the Queensland outback. Instead of fulfilling a need, "it's opened up new horizons," Nason says.

Moriarty encouraged him to produce his one-man exhibition in Brisbane and it was well reviewed with 80 percent of the work being sold in a week. As a result he was featured in an ABC *A Big Country* documentary as a grazier/artist, and that did nothing to harm his reputation.

This is not to say that running the property is not fulfilling in its own way. At the moment, for example, he is deeply involved in a plan to improve his Herefords by introducing a couple of Simmental bulls. But compared with the tug of new artistic horizons, well . . .

There are other factors in the equation too. If the property doesn't demand his full attention it will begin to slip back.

"That is happening all around this country," says his cousin Alec Nason, on nearby Rockdalle. "It's a vicious circle. You can't afford to put men on so the country doesn't get developed as much as it should, so you don't improve your return."

Alec and his brother Donald on neighboring Banoona run about 70,000 acres between them, and in their case the younger generations retain their interest in the land. It is one solution to the manpower problem and, as Donald Nason says (jestingly) of his recently married offspring, "We're hoping for a 100 percent lambing."

On the family's record such a result is very much on the cards and the Nason net will become even more intricate.

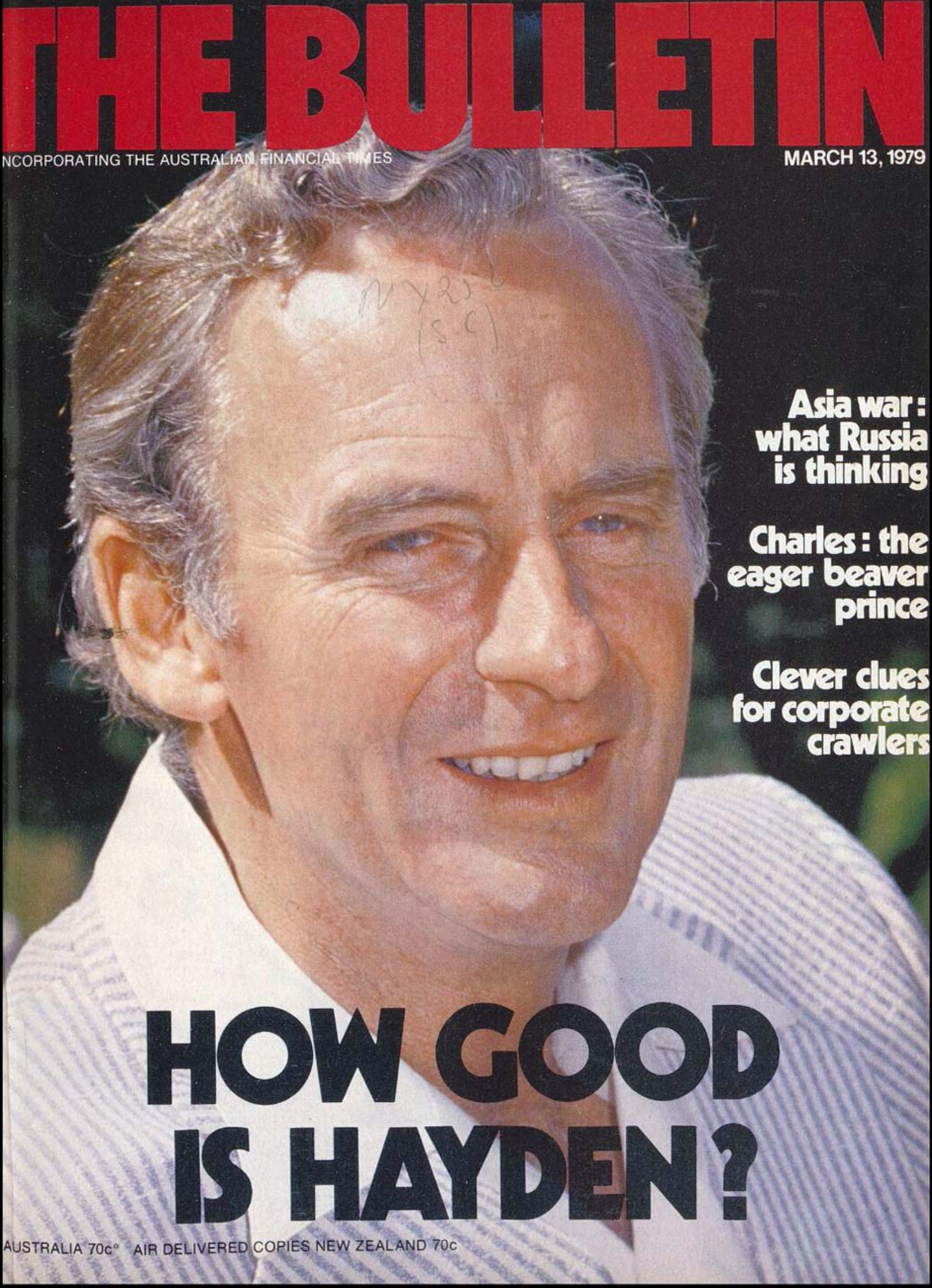
But to continue the analogy, a major effect of the drift away from the rural areas is the lack of new bloodlines venturing west of the Divide to maintain the standard of the stock. And while that might have its serious side – as of course it has – the way things are going the day seems not far distant when the Queensland game of Keeping Up will be no longer worth the candle.

That would never do.

THE BULLETIN

INCORPORATING THE AUSTRALIAN FINANCIAL TIMES

MARCH 13, 1979



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Charles: the eager beaver prince

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HOW GOOD IS HAYDEN?

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