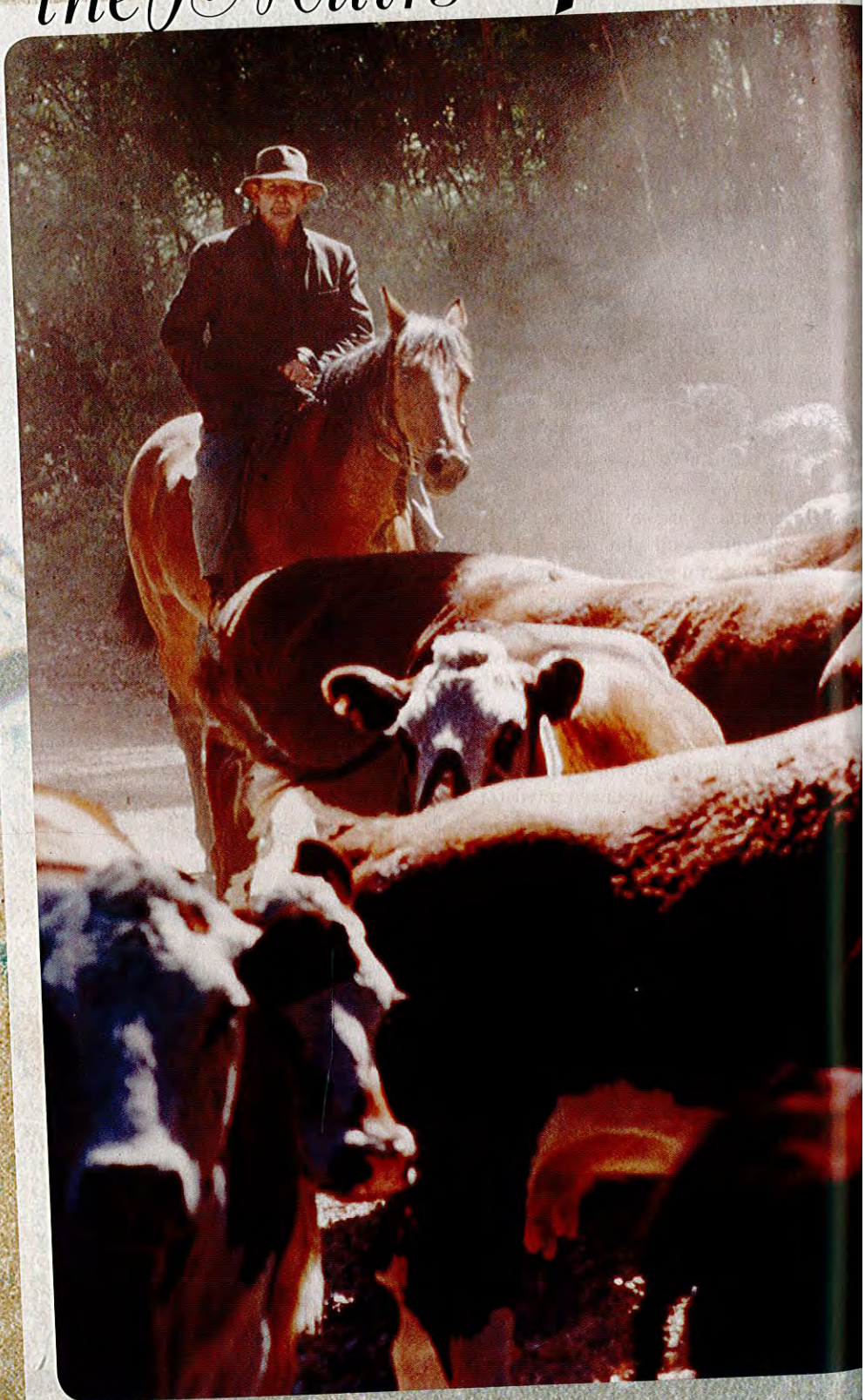
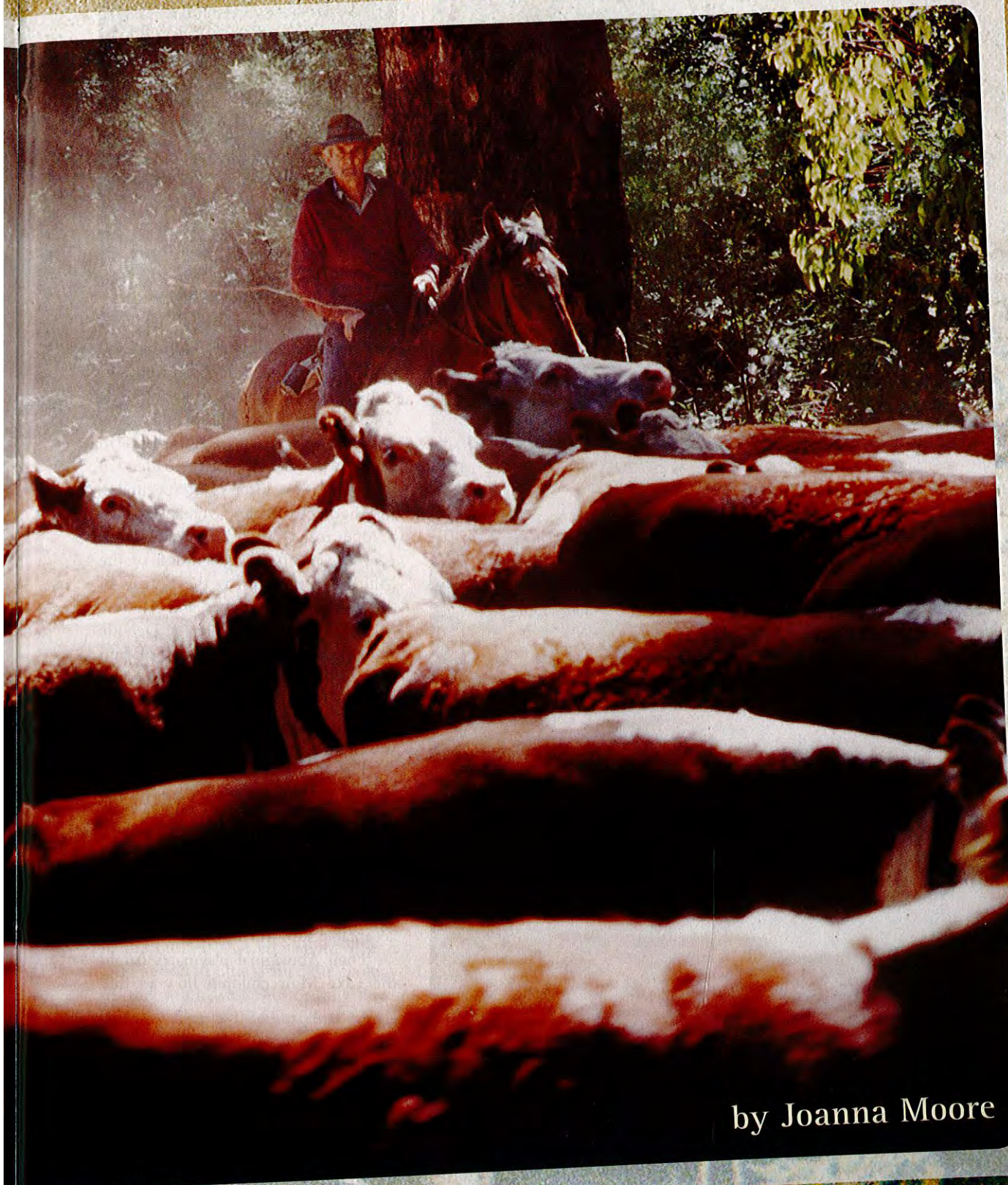


Manjimup and the Muirs



The Muir family name is intertwined with the history of Manjimup. From being the region's first European pioneers to the shaping roles their descendants have played in this farming and forestry town in the south-west of our State, they are the keepers of a wealth of knowledge. Held in the hearts and minds of people who have been living and working on the land for decades, this great store of wisdom goes beyond the limits of conventional science.



by Joanna Moore

For long-time Western Australians, especially those of us from the south-west, the name 'Muir' is synonymous with knowledge and love of the natural environment. The members of this pioneering farming family were the first Europeans to settle in the Manjimup district. Today, their descendants continue to live in the area and their connection to the environment endures in both farming and conservation traditions.

Andrew and Elizabeth Muir and their four sons and two daughters arrived in Fremantle on 18 January 1844. The family eventually settled at 'Forest Hill', 30 kilometres west of Mount Barker in 1851. From Forest Hill, the Muir sons and their partners ventured north and west from Mount Barker in search of good sheep grazing and new challenges. Their properties—mostly located along the route they established which is now known as the Muir Highway—included Marbalup, Moolicup, Lake Muir and Deeside. Three sons even ventured as far away as Eucla—Moopina to try their luck at opening up this area in the 1870s (see



'Eucla pioneers: sand and salt water', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1998.)

The Muir pioneers received invaluable help from local Aboriginal people in their explorations of the land. Lake Muir, for example, was 'discovered' by Andrew and Elizabeth's sons Thomas and John and named after the family, following the Aboriginal people's talk of the 'big water' to the west, towards what is now known as Manjimup. In 1856, members of the family established holdings and built a two-roomed paperbark hut on the edge of Lake Muir at Nabagup (an Aboriginal name that means 'place of the cobbler'). Thomas, the first European to settle in the Manjimup area, established a farm at Deeside in 1856, further down the Perup River.



Botany and bush tucker

The Muirs were keen explorers and observers of natural history and made some worthwhile contributions to botanical collections. In about 1872, Thomas Muir started corresponding with Government Botanist in Melbourne Baron von Mueller, to whom he sent local plant specimens. In August 1873, von Mueller named a rope rush found near Lake Muir *Lepyrodia muirii*, in recognition of the Muir's contribution to the botany of the area. When Thomas and Andrew Muir hosted von Mueller at Deeside and Lake Muir in 1877, they took him to the Nornalup coast where he could see the beautiful red-flowering gum (*Eucalyptus ficifolia*) in the location it was first collected.

The Muirs made good use of local plants. Marri gum was used to tan kangaroo skins for rugs, dingo and sheep skins for floor mats and cattle hides for leather from which to make boots and harnesses. Tea was often in short supply but a native tree made an acceptable substitute.

Their Aboriginal playmates taught the Lake Muir children how to find

Previous page

Main Andrew and Jim Muir drove cattle through what is now the Shannon and D'Entrecasteaux national parks.

Above Cattle near Squirts River.

Left Old hut.

Photos - Muir family collection



Right Balga (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*).
Photo - Brett Dennis/Lochman
Transparencies

Bottom right Bardi grubs were eaten by
the local Aboriginal and Muir children.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

honey. They would insert a down feather into the back end of a bee and then track the feathered bee back to its home. Balga rushes were used to make a fire to smoke out the bees so the honey could be retrieved. Native bees are harmless but they found that the introduced ones carried a painful sting.

According to Jim Muir, great grandson of the original settlers Andrew and Elizabeth Muir, who has farmed and lived in the Manjimup area for his entire 89 years:

“They say that in the early settlement of the Swan River, people used to chop the green reeds out of a balga and the bottom of these reeds or the white part was used as a vegetable. They ate it raw. It was pretty tasteless really but that’s what they did. There’s a fat white grub that can be found in the balga called a bardi grub; and these taste good. My kids would eat them as fast as I could cook them—on burning balga rushes. They taste something like the fatty end of a chop and it is real good tucker! The Aborigines and the hunters ate them.”
(Battlers, Bushmen and Drovers)

Changing ways of being in the bush

Jim has some interesting recollections of how life in the bush, and the bush itself, has changed over the decades. He has seen the forest structure change dramatically since the 1930s. His understanding, developed over decades of living and working in the bush, is that regular fire over a long period of time shaped the ecology of the south-west. Historically, low-intensity fires lit by Aboriginal people or caused by lightning occurred as frequently as every three to four years, or as often as the bush would burn.

Regular burning developed a mosaic of burnt and unburnt country which stopped wildfires from developing. From what he observed, the small, low-intensity fires were beneficial to the





Left Horse riders greet the Southern Ocean.

Centre left Rustic accommodation on a horse riding tour through Shannon National Park.

Photos - Muir family collection

Below left Foxes were first seen near Lake Muir around 1932.

Photo - Jay Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

forest's ecology as they encouraged new growth and stimulated plants to flower and fruit. For example, Jim noticed that the balga (*Xanthorrhoea* sp.) would flower regularly when burnt, usually every three years, but not for 10 years without a burn. He also noted that:

"... we don't get karri honey much these days. It is because of very little fire in the forest. It was regular fire that promoted the flowering of the karris... The emu bushes are the same. If they are burnt they will generally flower and have fruit the next year, but with no fire they will grow tall but you'll find no flowers or fruit."

(Battlers, Bushmen and Drivers)

In Jim's view, Aboriginal people were near perfect ecologists. Fire was their primary form of land management, a technique that would shift dramatically with the arrival of European settlers and foresters, particularly after 1929 when a decision was made by foresters to ban burning of the bush. Decisions such as these were often based upon Eurocentric understandings of forest structure and function, not knowledge of the very different south-west forests. This understanding has improved significantly since those days and forest and fire management now reflect it.

Each summer between the 1860s and early 1980s, the Muir family drove cattle down to their holding on the coast, through land now in the Shannon and D'Entrecasteaux national parks. When this tradition ended with the declaration of the parks, two of old Thomas Muir's great grandsons, Thomas junior and Jeff Muir, started offering horse riding tours through the Shannon National Park—a business which still operates today, though no longer run by Muir descendants.





Above Brush-tailed phascogale—a threatened species which may benefit from the control of feral animals in the south-west.

Right Red-tailed black cockatoo—another threatened species in the State's south-west.
Photos – Jiri Lochman



Store of oral knowledge

Over the decades, Thomas has built up an understanding of environmental issues in the area and a rich knowledge of how things have changed.

It is important that the knowledge of local naturalists and 'bushmen' whose forebears have lived on the land for many decades is not lost. Conventional science rarely taps into these environmental credentials, but they can make an important contribution to conservation and also to the attitudes of future generations to the land and its careful management.

Farmers such as Thomas can also provide a historical perspective about the arrival and spread of new weed species, observed changes to salinity and water levels and changing populations of rare animals and birds. For example, a large population of the red-tailed black cockatoo lives on Thomas's property and in the surrounding forest and comes down to the water trough near the house in the evening to drink. The threatened Carnaby's black cockatoo also visits sometimes.

The recent decline of the woylie (*Bettongia penicillata*) is one conservation issue which is raising significant concern among scientists and conservationists (see 'Down but not out: solving the mystery of the woylie population crash', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2008). Thomas recalls stories of previous population crashes in the species, such as in the 1940s, which suggest there may be a cyclical nature to the phenomenon.

Meanwhile, 89-year-old Jim has some interesting recollections about feral animals in the Manjimup area. He describes how rabbits first came to Deeside in the early 1930s, increasing to plague proportions in just a few years. They caused massive damage—eating out both farming pastures and bushland grass—and farmers tried a range of methods to kill them including poisoning, fumigating, trapping, ripping burrows and fencing. He remembers the introduction of the myxomatosis

disease in 1952, which dramatically reduced rabbit populations until they began to develop immunity. Jim also recalls that his brother Andy noted in his diary in 1932 that a fox had been caught at Nabagup near Lake Muir.

Jim's anecdotal evidence about animal populations also includes recollections of native species, such as bilbies and marron. Jim remembers that marron were plentiful in the 1920s and 1930s before their numbers declined through increased fishing and the introduction of perch and trout. Jim also remembers when kookaburras were introduced into WA from Victoria in about 1917 with the hope that they would reduce the number of snakes. Unfortunately, they had no natural enemies and he describes how populations of small birds, lizards, frogs and small mammals dropped, preyed upon by the introduced kookaburras.



Above The numbat is one of several species which DEC's *Western Shield* program aims to help recover through feral animal control.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Raised in the south-west forestry settlements, Ethel (nee Muir) and John Thomson's son Andrew Thomson also contributed significantly to environmental causes. Following a career in teaching, he spent his retirement caring for the bush environment.

Ross and Gary Muir from the Lake Muir family take tourists on interpretive cruises in the Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park, surrounded by the magnificent Walpole-Nornalup National Park. Janine Liddelow, daughter of Prudence Liddelow (nee Muir) is a district flora officer at DEC's Walpole Office. Bill Muir is a senior technical officer at DEC's Woodvale Research Centre.

Remembering to get amongst it

How we value our bushland is tied up with how we experience it. While the way people live and work on the land has changed dramatically since the pioneering days, there's still much we can take from the old stories. Most of all, we can learn about the importance of getting amongst the bush to really appreciate and understand it. Turn off the engine, get out of the car, perhaps try to imagine you are one of the first pioneers arriving in our south-west. What an amazing place you've just arrived in.

In Jane Muir's book *Battlers, Bushmen and Drovers*, Andy Muir commented that in his youth you could catch 70 or 80 marron in an hour with a snare on a stick. He also notes that:

"Over the last few years there have been kangaroos going blind—this was unknown in my younger years. I can remember snakes in their hundreds, mostly dugites. Tiger snakes were very rare in my younger days. There are plenty now especially around swamps and rivers."

Western Shield

Thomas describes the Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) *Western Shield* program as highly successful. The *Western Shield* wildlife recovery program aims to bring native animals back from the brink of extinction through the control of pest species such as foxes and cats and, in some locations, the reintroduction of native animal populations. In the Manjimup area, poison baits for foxes and cats are regularly laid and Thomas can testify to their effect.

Before *Western Shield*, Thomas said foxes were catching dozens of small

bird, reptile and mammal species in the Manjimup area. After the program started, Thomas increasingly saw animals and birds in the bush, including the numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*), chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroi*), white-breasted robin, brush-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*), goannas and possums. During his lifetime, about 50 years, Thomas has gone from seeing these animals very rarely, to observing them frequently in the bush surrounding his farm, Wattle Glen, which is about 40 kilometres east of Manjimup.

A continuing tradition

The Muir forebears' concern for the environment has continued with a number of Muir descendants sharing their interest in nature with others through their careers and eco-tourism businesses. John Thomson, who married Ethel Muir from Deeside, was selected in 1917 as one of just two successful applicants for the first forestry apprenticeship ever offered by the WA Forests Department (one of DEC's predecessor departments). He devoted his life to the care of the south-west forests and, in his retirement, became an outspoken conservationist.

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Photos from the Muir family collection.

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