



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***Dry Grass Whispering* by Norah Kersh. Private publication (Boolarong Press, Moorooka, Qld), 2010. Soft cover, 202 pages plus xiv, illustrated (some colour), map. ISBN 978 0 9579285 1 0. Recommended retail price \$24.95.**

With more than one third of its content devoted to an account of life at Balgo, this book represents a significant departure from Norah Kersh's usual output. A one-time Creative Time Residential Fellow with the May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust, she is best known for her Outback series of educational books for children. That series, characterised by colourful covers and appealing illustrations, began with *Outback Alphabet* (1999 & 2009) and includes *Outback Countout*, *Grandma's Precious Chest*, *Outback Songs*, *Outback Doctor* (with Russell Ousley), and, most recently, *Outback School* (with Coreena Lucas & Nicky Cooper).

Dry Grass Whispering, which has a foreword by Frank Brennan S.J.A.O., gives a brief overview of the author's childhood (in western NSW), education, social life and marriage to John Kersh at Warren, NSW, in 1964. The couple moved from one grazing property to another as John gained experience working with livestock. Then came Balgo, which they envisaged in 1967 as an opportunity to do volunteer work for a couple of years but found to be 'seven years of challenge, fun and hardship'.

Driving through the outback in a station wagon for eight or nine days with two-year-old Sean and six-month-old Matt was no picnic but Norah's diary entries reveal a strong spirit and a keen interest in the people and places they saw *en route* to Balgo. The mission is introduced with quotes from a letter written by Phillip Cox about the early days. When Norah and John arrived, Father McGuire was the administrator. The St John of God nuns were Sisters Francis, Veronica, Anthony and old Andrew whose 'brown-skinned little angels of the desert sang nursery rhymes with a Scottish accent!'

John had been engaged to oversee the establishment of a cattle station for the mission. While he set about that job, Norah taught kindergarten with the help of 16-year-old Nancy, a local girl. After their prefabricated house was built at the mission, Norah and John welcomed the assistance provided by Muntja and her husband Mosquito. Many other people, including John Shoobridge, Jack Carroll, and Norah's nephew Peter Waterford, pop up as the story continues. These cameos provide glimpses of how things were done in this remote locality. Extracts from letters written by John tell of the progress with the cattle, and a short chapter is devoted to the construction of the homestead on the cattle station. Located about 80 miles (128 km) from the mission, it was 75 miles from its nearest neighbour, Mongrel Downs.

Dry Grass Whispering is both a family chronicle and an account of life in parts of Australia that include the outback. Its coverage of Balgo is welcome because too little has been written about that place and about this 'period when the old ways for both tribal people and Kimberley station people in general, were changing'. The detail throughout is seldom extensive but the coverage is broad, interesting and informative. Some is amusing and some is terribly sad. The final third of the book tells of the family's return to NSW and a subsequent move to Queensland.

Copies of the book are available from outlets that include [Kimberley Bookshop](#) (Broome) and [Halls Creek Visitor Centre](#).

Cathie Clement