



## OUR LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

STEPHEN & ANNABEL TULLY, BUNGINDERRY STATION, QUILPIE QUEENSLAND

**WHEN PAT TULLY** married Sarah Durack in 1882, they began their own dynasty in south-west Queensland. Now their great-great-grandson, Stephen, his artist wife Annabel and their five children — Lachlan, 7, Sophia, 6, Harriet, 3, Hugo, 2 and Eve, 1 — continue the saga on their 74,000-hectare property. Bunginderry Station is 11 hours drive west of Brisbane, and 45 minutes from Quilpie, their nearest town, so it's certainly isolated — but the Tullys wouldn't dream of living anywhere else.

While Stephen was born with the outback in his heart, Annabel is a more recent convert. Growing up in the leafy Brisbane suburb of Brookfield, she had no notion of rural life out west, let alone thoughts of living there. This all changed in 1996 when she met Stephen while teaching in Charleville. She didn't take much notice at first of the tall, quiet fellow from Quilpie, but he just kept hanging around until she did! The tactic worked and they married in 1999.

This couple forge ahead at a time when many are leaving the bush. Facing seven years of drought has been tough enough; add Annabel's serious brush with cancer and even the most determined souls might waver. But the Tullys remain committed to living life to the full, staying on the land and sticking together as a family. "We have a rule... adults can't go anywhere without at least one child," Annabel says.

INTERVIEW: WENDY AGAR PHOTOGRAPHY: YASHA MILNE

**annabel** I grew up in Brisbane and, after finishing school, I came out west, governing. I was inspired and wondered how I could travel in Australia and do the bush thing — so logically it had to be nursing or teaching. I chose teaching, more as a vehicle for going where I wanted to be rather than as a career choice.

When I first moved out here, I saw the beauty not the harshness, and I think that's because I have an artistic eye. I have always done some art but didn't decide to go professional until 2003.

My art has my heart in it. I use found ochres and pigments to get the colours of the land, and sometimes found objects, as another subtle way of saying there is a human imprint on this landscape.

Stephen is my best critic because he knows the land so well. I try to portray our connection to it. I don't



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ABOVE LEFT The Tullys (from left) Annabel, Eve, Hugo, Lachlan, Harriet, Stephen and Sophia.

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proclaim to be indigenous to this country — you know, born and bred — but I'm developing the same sense of values and feelings as Stephen.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2002. I had treatment for nine months and that's when I decided to focus on my art. While I saw my cancer as a diagnosis and not a death sentence, I really needed something to keep me positive. I learnt to only have positive people around — and first and foremost, it strengthened my relationship with Stephen. We often say that if we hadn't gone through that, we would find the drought very difficult; but after cancer, everything seems a walk in the park.

Our children are growing up in the most wonderful environment. Because we have five, we have a rule that, within reason, adults can't go anywhere without at least one child. They love helping around the paddocks and generally being involved with the property. We regularly camp out, go for picnics and explore Bunginderry.

What's unique about living on the land — and particularly your own land that you feel passionate about — is that you can't segregate work, family and where you live. It's all interconnected and if one falls away, then it's like a pack of cards.

Our whole married life has been drought and hard times... every couple of months we discuss the options and we still don't want to be anywhere else. We really want to be here.

**stephen** I really love the independence of living on the land. It's what you make it. You obviously have competition with the weather, but that aside, if you stuff up, you have to suffer the consequences and there's no point blaming anyone else. That's why the people in the bush fight so strongly for what they

believe — they have that fierce independence bred into them.

Bunginderry Station is surrounded by properties still owned by other Tully families. I feel a real connection here. This is the place where I grew up and it just gels. It's partly the size — you can be many kilometres from people — and then we have this enormous variety of country. We have just about every type of land system that there is — there's nothing boring about any part of it!

We run sheep and cattle here. Bunginderry has traditionally carried both. In a normal year we would shear 18,000 sheep and run 300 to 400 cattle. Because of the drought, we hope to shear 9000 sheep this year and have 150 cattle.

I've always lived here except for the years away at school in Brisbane and a short time overseas with Annabel. I'm fortunate to be living here now with my own family. We're able to spend a lot of time as a family unit and that's my first priority. We work and play together.

My grandfather always said, "If you don't think you can do something, look at the people who do it, and you will find there is nothing out of the ordinary about those people." This gives you the confidence to have a go yourself.

Our latest project is that I'm going to build an art studio. The commercial ones are too ugly, apparently! We looked around at the different types and got the quotes, and I thought, "This is ridiculous, we can do better than this."

I've been heavily involved in Agforce, Queensland's agri-political organisation. My feeling is there's no point telling the sheep how to fix the problem: you may as well go and put your ideas up. If your ideas aren't good enough, well, so be it — but at least you've had a go. \*