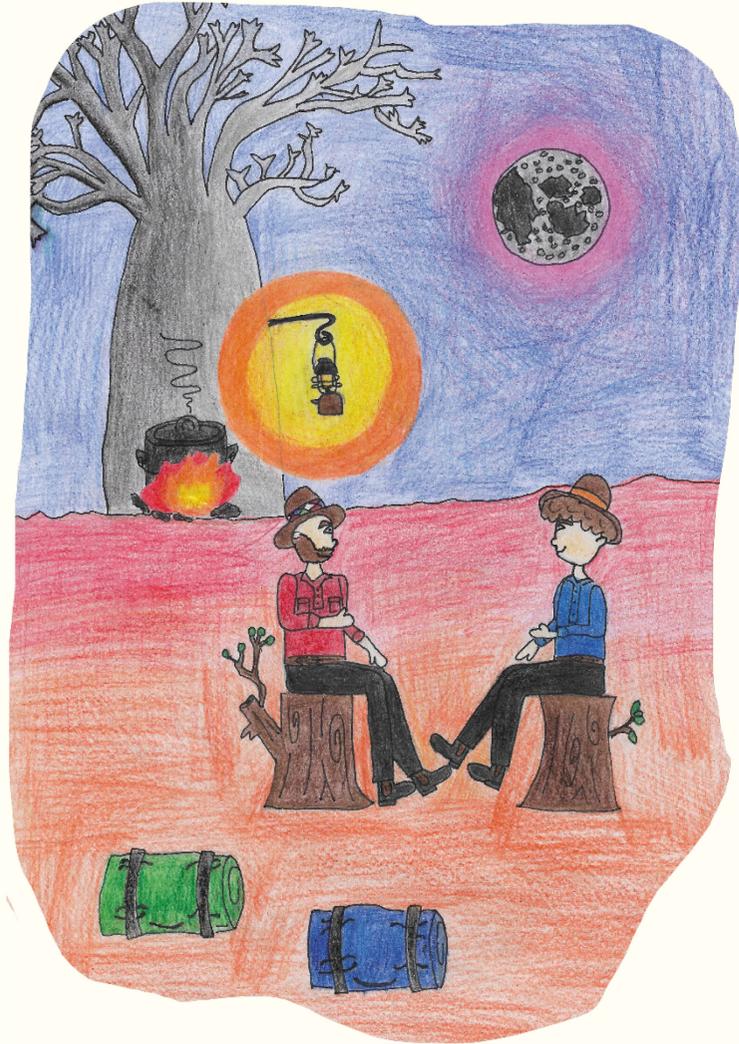


NO REGRETS

Cobber's Favourite Bush Poems & Yarns



Keith 'Cobber' Lethbridge

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Gallipoli & Other Bush Verse

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*This book is dedicated to Colin Maggs:
masterful guitar player, singer and good friend for well over fifty years.*

Thanks, Colin.

FOREWORD

While travelling through life, there are occasions when one meets a person who stands out from the crowd. Keith Lethbridge is one such person. A talented yet modest, humble man, quietly spoken, Cobber is a keen observer of nature and of people.

Comfortable with his own company, Cobber has been known to head out on a walk of several hundred kilometres, be it alone on the Bibbulmun track, through the Kimberley bush or with a mate on back roads through the WA Wheatbelt. This is where his mind is free to develop ideas and construct his poems. This book is a collection of Cobber's favourite poems penned over a lifetime. In it, you will find so many aspects of Australian life, the country, the characters found in the bush. Many of his stories are based on people Cobber has lived and worked with in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of WA.

Cobber is a man of many parts. He is a gifted musician who claims he cannot read music. But he feels it as a natural part of his psyche. I have seen him play the guitar, button accordion, clarinet, Jew's harp, keyboard, bones, gum leaf, didgeridoo, harmonica and lagerphone. He is ranked among the best square dance callers in the country.

This feel for music flows through into the rhyme and rhythm that is integral to his poems. Cobber has won many awards for his poetry and yarnspinning. Several times WA Champion Poet, in 2017 he won the Australian Championship and has been awarded the coveted Bronze Swagman for written poetry.

On top of all this, Cobber is a devoted family man, a loving husband and proud father. He finds contentment spending time at his bush retreat,

Cobber's Corner, in the village of Dinninup in the southwest of WA. Whenever he is there, the billy is always on for any who care to drop in and share a yarn, a song or a poem.

I commend this book not only to lovers of Bush Poetry but to anyone who enjoys a good story crafted by one of Australia's modern-day masters.

Bill Gordon

INTRODUCTION

G'day folks, fellas and females.

I hope you're all keeping well.

Australia is blessed with characters, situations and scenery, just begging to be put into verse; investigated, described, and perhaps exaggerated. There are stories out there to make people laugh, to think, or to cry. Very often, all three emotions can be found in just one poem. No villains, no heroes; just ordinary people with the strengths and weaknesses we all have. Humans! You can't help loving them!

This book is a compilation of my favourite poems written between 1963 and 2024. Some have been updated or amended in minor ways. The book also includes yarns from the East Kimberley between early 1963 and mid-1967. During that time, I had the pleasure of working as a farm hand at the Kimberley Research Station. They were interesting times, filled with amazing characters. These yarns, and the verses, give a little snap-shot history of Western Australia through the eyes of a very ordinary bloke who just happened to be there at the time.

You can pick up the complete works of Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and many other famous writers at second-hand book shops for a few shekels. So why do today's bush poets bother to get their poems into a book? Perhaps we hope to pass on some of the great pleasures we've enjoyed, yarning around campfires, tin sheds, stages, verandas, and the homes of family and mates.

Many of us have now grown old together, meeting from time to time in a variety of circumstances, enjoying new and old yarns, music, songs and poems along the way. It's been such a joy and privilege to have known

these old mates. Many have now passed on. They lived well and have left fond memories. That's why I call this book "No Regrets".

I thank those who have been so very helpful in getting this book organised:

- My beautiful granddaughter, Willow, for her colourful drawings presented in a youthful, talented, exuberant style.
- The "Dragonfly ladies", Lisa and Bek, who have been so helpful and understanding throughout.
- Bill Gordon, for agreeing to write the Introduction to this book and for his ongoing support.
- Dear Peg Vickers, for the use of the "naked Cobber" cartoon at the base of each page, and also the soldier sketch next to the poem "Gallipoli". Sadly, Peggy passed away, aged 92, just before this book went to print.
- And, of course, my beautiful, loving, caring wife, Maricor, who continues to endure the eccentricities of an aging bush poet.

Thank you all, most sincerely!



Cobber

YARN - TO THE KIMBERLEY

February 7th, 1963: The Kununurra airstrip was still under construction, so the Fokker Friendship landed at Ivanhoe Station. This landing strip was also flooded due to a big wet season. The Ord River was running a banker. There was no Lake Argyle and no Diversion Dam, so the water rushed freely out to sea, carrying logs, cattle carcasses and huge amounts of topsoil. Mud splattered up over the widows of the aircraft as we shuddered to a halt.

I climbed out, along with half a dozen other passengers and took my first look at the East Kimberley. The muggy heat swallowed us up, but to me, it seemed balmy and wonderful. Right from the beginning, I felt that this was home. I knew I was going to love this place, free from the restrictions of school and family dependence. Young, healthy, with a job lined up and a million square miles to explore, I was ready to tackle the world.

A bloke of about twenty-eight years wandered over from a shady tree, chatted to a few passengers and seemed to be looking for someone. I guessed this bloke was the farm manager of the Kimberley Research Station (KRS), looking for me, his new farm hand. He walked straight past me, and I was too shy to say anything. Obviously, he was looking for someone with a bit of strength and maturity, not a scrawny schoolboy type. I was only about five-foot-three inches tall at the time and weighed about nine stone (“wringing wet”, as they say) with no need to pack a razor in my swag and with very little knowledge or experience. No wonder I was too shy to step forward.

When I did introduce myself, the manager, James, was a bit cranky. He was very cranky, muttering about all the work they had to do, the shortage of farm hands and now they send him a rat-bag kid to babysit. How was he expected to cope? But I could tell he was a decent sort of a



bloke. “Can you row?” he asked. Well, I didn’t expect it would be too difficult, so I said “Yes”, although I’d never actually been anywhere near a rowboat.

The problem was that we had to row across the Ord River to get to the KRS. The manager took one oar, and I had to handle the other. I learnt very quickly since the alternative was sailing away downstream and eventually out to sea. As it was, we started two hundred yards upstream and rowed like billy-oh. Our destination was marked by a handful of rowdy farmhands. They were perched high up on the bank, yelling ribald encouragement as we struggled across the river. The main theme of their humour was that I was obviously undersized and should be thrown back. So, I wasn’t disappointed that we drifted two hundred yards downstream from this motley mob before reaching the bank.

Bedraggled and soaked in mud, we dragged the rowboat and ourselves to safety, then sat down for a while to recover our breath. A very official-looking bloke strode up. “My name’s Fredricks,” he said. “I’m the OIC. Present yourself at seven o’clock tomorrow morning, at the garage. And don’t be late!” He then turned and strode away.

James looked at me and grinned. Then we both started chuckling and before long we roared with laughter. “Welcome to KRS, young fella,” he said. I was as happy as a pig in swill (and that’s pretty much how we both looked). KRS! I just knew I was going to love the place and the people. This was my new family. This was my home!



A DECENT HAT

You just can't find a decent hat
Like old time bushmen wore.
Not in the fancy catalogues
Or the R M Williams store,
You scrounge around the mustering camp
To pick up what you can,
Then sneak inside the saddle shed
To try 'em out, but strike me dead,
They just don't suit a man!

You need a hat that looks the part
No matter where you go,
At stockyards in the Kimberley
Or at the Perth Royal Show.
You need to have it soft and light
And gentle to the touch.
A plaited band would suit me nice
But not at some fantastic price;
The head's not worth that much!

A hat should be a man's best friend
To wear at work or play,
To warm his skull on chilly nights
Then shade him through the day,
To mark him as a worker,
But a gentleman at that.
Australians are a stoic breed,
They only have one special need:
To wear a decent hat!



A DOG

“If I had a dog”, the old man said,
“I’d be good as a pig in swill.
It ought to happen, but strike me dead,
I suppose it never will.
He’d be happy enough if a bloke lived rough
Or occasionally hit the grog.
He’d follow his master everywhere,
Sober or drunk, he wouldn’t care.
Yes, a man should have a dog!”

“You can say what you like about fleas and such,
And whatever they cost to feed,
But a working mutt wouldn’t eat that much;
It depends on the size and breed.”
The old man sighed and swallowed his pride
As he sat on a fallen log.
“I wouldn’t go in for a Pekinese
Or some pampered poodle that’s hard to please,
But a man should have a dog!”

“A woman’s okay if you’re settled down
Or you’re holding a steady job,
But they don’t care much for wandering round
With a happy-go-lucky slob.
There could be a few that’re loyal and true,
Like the damsel that kissed a frog,
But a good little mongrel trots along
Wherever you’re heading, right or wrong.
Yes, a man should have a dog!”

[cont...]



“He’ll cheer you up when you fall apart;
He’ll treat you like a brother.
Those big, brown eyes could melt your heart
Much better than any lover.
He’ll warm you right through the coldest night
If you happen to catch the wog.”
The old man shook his whiskery head;
“There isn’t the slightest doubt”, he said,
“A man should have a dog!”

A DOG WITHOUT FLEAS

I wake in the morning to Nature’s sweet chorus,
With nothing important to baffle or bore us,
No urgent appointment, no schedule to keep,
It’s time to turn over and drift back to sleep.
Some people are burdened with drive and ambition
To rise to the top and achieve recognition,
But I’ve got a fortune that nobody sees:
A track without burr and a dog without fleas.

Out here in the bush it’s so peaceful and quiet,
There’s nothing to lose if you’re willing to try it,
Just follow your nose and remember this rule:
A man in a hurry is only a fool.
I once had a farm with a mortgage to bless it.
For over a decade I strove to possess it,
By digging up prickles and chopping down trees,
But now all I ask is a dog without fleas.



Soon after the drought and the loss of my cattle,
The fire and the flood and the taxation battle,
I vowed to get rid of such trouble and strife
By taking a break for the rest of my life,
To lean on a log with a bungarra baking,
A handful of black-berries ripe for the taking,
The croaking of frogs and the buzzing of bees,
A sweet serenade to a dog without fleas.

It didn't take long to develop the habit
Of tracking a lizard or snaring a rabbit,
But being too idle to roll out of bed,
I stir up the dog to go hunting instead,
And when it's a hundred degrees in the valley,
I rest in the shade of the she-oak and mallee,
Contented to wait on a westerly breeze,
To ruffle the fur of a dog without fleas.

This ancient Akubra, so shapeless and battered,
Had three former owners departed and scattered,
But none of them bothered to fashion it right,
Then stuff it with grass for a pillow at night.
And now that I'm leaving the warmth of your fire,
I won't take offence if you call me a liar,
For I've got a fortune to spend as I please:
A track without burr and a dog without fleas.

This poem was "Runner-up" in one of the Bronze Swagman competitions (Winton, Queensland).





EPILOGUE

June 20, 1967. The evening before my 21st birthday. I was about 8-foot under water, near the west bank of the South Alligator River, in the jaws of an 18-foot crocodile. Luckily for me, the croc had a bullet right through his skull. With his final burst of energy, he grabbed and rolled... twice. Then we both drifted up to the surface. (Read the poem “Crocodile”.)

I was in shock, covered with mud and blood, gasping for breath, coughing up river water, but otherwise safe, well and alive! Every day since has been a bonus.

Today, quite fit and well in 2024, how could I possibly have regrets?

I hope you’ve enjoyed the poems and yarns in this book. My final blessing to each reader

is that you enjoy life as much as I have and have absolutely “*No Regrets*”!

Yours truly,

Keith “Cobber” Lethbridge

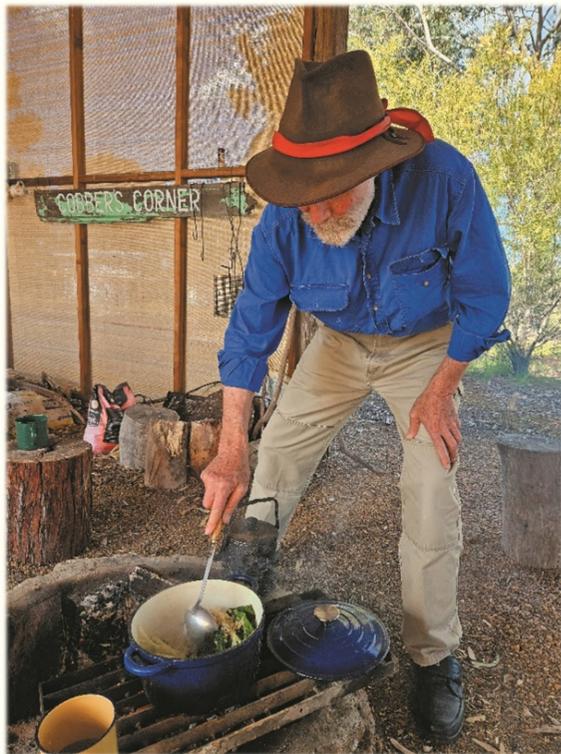


ABOUT COBBER

Keith “Cobber” Lethbridge was born in England on 21st June 1946. He remembers playing in the bombed-out buildings of Penge, a London suburb, with older brother Richard. In February 1950, the family travelled to Australia on the Otranto. Their first home was on Rottnest Island, where Cobber’s father Robert “Slicer” Lethbridge worked as a maintenance carpenter / joiner.

Within a year, the family moved to Balingup in the South West. This was (and still is) a beautiful town, with plenty of bush, hills and creeks for youngsters to explore, rabbits to trap, mushrooms and blackberries to collect for Mum (Sophie) to prepare for meals. Cobber’s first school was at Balingup.

At age sixteen, after two years at the Harvey Agricultural School, Cobber found work as a farm hand at the Kimberley Research Station, out from Kununurra. The year was 1963. At that time, the East Kimberley was another wonderful place to explore. Cobber began recording adventures, incidents and characters in verse. Over the years, he found a variety of employment right throughout Western Australia, enjoying the most remote, unspoiled parts of the State and the characters he met along the way. Yarns and poems followed.



Now very happily married and with many descendants, Cobber lives in Armadale (Western Australia). Still writing, reciting, playing music and walking, Cobber enjoys good health and peace of mind. His camp at Dinninup in the Shire of Boyup Brook, gives him a place to “chill out”, boil the billy, rest up and contemplate a very pleasant, simple life with absolutely “No Regrets”.

Cobber Celebrant: www.cobbercelebrant.com

WA Bush Poets and Yarnspinners: www.wabushpoets.asn.au/cobber

ABOUT WILLOW

Willow Warr is the illustrator of this anthology. She is Cobber’s talented thirteen-year-old granddaughter.

Willow began creating the illustrations for this book while in Year 7, often working full days on the project.

Willow has always enjoyed drawing, and her favourite colour is pink. She loves animals and wants to become a vet when she is older to help save animals’ lives.





Cobber and his family in 2012