

Palya

Stewart Roper¹

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I met this bloke by chance at dinner last night, because I bumped into his partner who I've known for many years. And I didn't know that he knew her and, you know, whatever. But great story to tell. His name is Stewart Roper. He has spent the last 20 years living in some of the remotest parts of our country. In that time he's taught himself to become, I think, quite an extraordinary photographer. I had a sneak peek of some of his photos in a brand new book about to be released. And that's what he's going to tell us about this afternoon. I'm sure you'll be impressed as well. Please welcome Stewart Roper.

Hello. This is just a short ten-minute session. So I went up to the Pitjantjatjara Lands in 1990. I'd never been further north than Port Augusta, which is about 300 kilometres. Ended up in the Pitjantjatjara Lands and ended up staying there. I remember my first arrival there, everybody seemed far more—not really much interested in the new nurse and far more interested in what I wanted to sell the yurt for.

So from staying there though, the spirit of the people and the beauty of the country has really kept me there. I was very fortunate. I went—I had an interest in photography. But because I had the chance to stay there and work with the people and get to know parts of the countryside. It gave me a real chance to see the country in times of drought and floods and everything like that. So I'd just like to run through a few of the photographs with you. It was supposed to be a launch today, but the books haven't actually arrived from Sydney, so ... In the exhibition hall there's a table set up there with a couple of books that you can have a look at. And some prints that I've put up as well. And also you can take business cards or postcards. I've got contacts for a website where you can order if you're interested.

So this is one of the first photographs. It's the cover of the book. This is a boy who is drinking up in a—from some fresh rain water, sorry, up near Pitjanjatjara where I was. This is Amata itself. There's a few photographs of Amata. It's only a community of 300, 400, 450 people. But a visitor who came there from Milan in Italy said to me that it was actually much noisier than Italy at night. Because you had these screaming children, the dogs, people yelling, cars driving around all night. And she hadn't got any sleep at all. So this was a trip when they went—when the children went to Kangaroo Island for an exchange at Kingscote School down there. That was in the early days when I'd been working for the health organisation up there, which is Nganampa Health Organisation, for a while. And I managed to get a job travelling down to Kangaroo Island as the nurse. I've never had a chance to do it again since. I don't think they'd fall for it again the second time.

This was Ruby. The sheep, it was actually given to her by one of the stations to keep for a while and then have it for a meal. But she couldn't do it. So the sheep grew up to think it was part of the dog pack. And followed Ruby all around the community. The main drive is in the desert of fire and rain basically. After a few years of plenty, the whole area can be covered in great swathes of native grasses. And after a few more years with drought and fires and things, that's really all that's left. It looks as if it's completely gone. But as soon as you get some rain, it pops back again. That's a creek that would normally be dry. That is fully flooded after we've had some rains—not even in that area—about 30 kilometres away. And it flowed down through the mountains, and suddenly there was a creek flowing there. And we hadn't had any rain. And, as I said, fire is the other driving force. And a combination of fires from lightning and lit by Aboriginals themselves who use them—the fires to manage the landscape over thousands of years. To get rid of heavy grassland to make it easier to walk through the area and everything, without the poisonous snakes. And also to bring in, after there's more rain, all these patchwork areas bring in game for hunting and things like that. So by managing it at different levels all the way through where the fires have burnt, you can have the game coming at different times as the new growth appears.

It's very difficult to predict exactly what's going to happen where. This group of flowers, it actually only happened once the whole time I was up there. I went back the following year to try and get better photographs. And it just never ever happened again for the whole 20 years. And that's the Spinifex country with the great heaps of Spinifex, which look very inviting but are incredibly sharp. And you've got the two areas really; there's the rocky mountain ranges and the sand hill areas. The sand hill areas, there's not really much that is bare like that. Most of it is covered in some form of vegetation most of the time except in extreme droughts. There's a coverage of the animals, and the book covers the animals and the people there. And uses Pitjantjatjara words for all the species as well as the scientific words and the common words.

This is a Woma python. Again, just the chance of being there for that whole period and that whole period, 20 years, I only ever saw one of these snakes. And it happened to be in a particularly picturesque area. There's actually a lot of vegetation around there too. By getting down a little bit lower, you can sort of cut it out to get the kind of photo I was after. And this is a perentie or goanna, which can grow up to two metres long. They're the second largest lizard in the world after the Komodo dragon and actually quite scary. When he turned around and looked at me and started walking, I hightailed it very quickly.

These are Major Mitchell's Cockatoos. The fellow I was travelling with told me a story of these. I told him how beautiful I thought they were. It was a Pitjantjatjara fellow from over the border in Western Australia and he said, yes the Wedge-tailed eagle thought they were beautiful too. So he took two of them for his wives. And then he said in Pitjantjatjara, [Foreign language spoken]. Which means, two women, big trouble. And he said, so one of the cockatoos got jealous that the wedge-tailed eagle was always talking to the other one. So she picked that one up and threw her in the fire. And she got burnt black, and that's how we got the crow.

And this is a traditional good-bye you get quite often from young school boys up in the communities there. Behave yourself at the football.

Cars are vital for going out to the country all the time. But, because the cars are usually bought cheaply, and the countryside is so devastatingly cruel on them, there are cars all over the countryside. This is actually a car in Pitjantjatjara or near the community. This is collecting some bush tucker, which is bush tomatoes, near Amata. That's mincupa [phonetic], which is a chewing tobacco. This is out on another bush trip. I actually quickly learned to like travelling with the women rather than the men. Because the men tend to hunt kangaroos. And if it was my car, it meant we drove across country at record speeds, being bounced all over the place, and usually ended up with several punctures and headaches. So I actually enjoyed much more making the cups of tea for the ladies while they did the digging for the macoo [phonetic], which is witchetty grubs and honey ants.

This is a swimming hole in the Everard ranges. And this was an Inma, which is a native dance at one of the homelands that I was at a long time ago. And this was—I actually happened to be driving down to Adelaide, and some people had asked me to take their kangaroo with them. And I was looking after a dog. It was a friend's dog. So there wasn't much to take a photograph of. But the lighting was beautiful. So I popped them both out in the road. And they sat—they sat there while I took this photograph.

So that's all the photographs. The reason I've enjoyed putting it together so much is that most of the time in the media all you get are the negative images. And that's not what it's like in the communities. When you're going in there, it's very confronting. But the people don't spend all their lives just being stuck in this negative image that we see all the time. And for that reason I'm very happy to have the chance to show the people and the country what I see is a much more positive aspect.

But at the same time too, if you look closely at these photographs, you can see in the environment itself the hardships of life that are still endured by the people there. And I'm certainly not meaning to trivialise that in any way. Because we've all become very well-off and very rich by taking over a country

that was originally their country. So that's it. And if you get a chance, you want to come have a look, please feel free. And we're in the exhibition hall down—near the end of it.

Thank you.