

# DUNE

is a four-letter word



## Griselda Sprigg with Rod Maclean

*I came to realise that Griselda Sprigg is a great Australian. Now, in the pages of this book, readers the world over can make the same discovery.*

Dick Smith



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Rod Maclean was an author, journalist and television producer whose novel *Eric and Ian Get a Life* is also published by Wakefield Press.

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Griselda Sprigg  
with Rod Maclean



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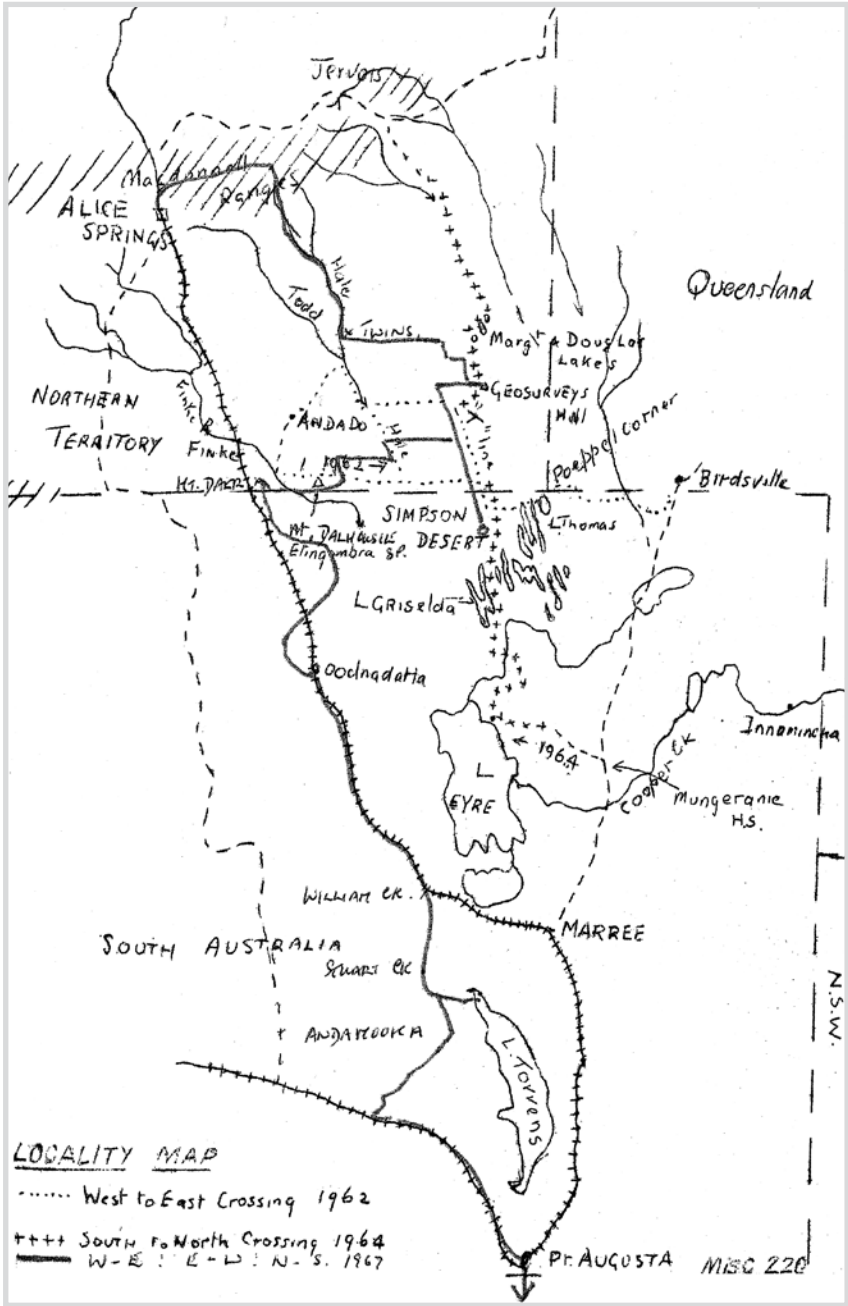
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*The clock of life is wound but once,  
And no man has the power,  
To tell just when the hands will stop,  
At late or early hour.*

*Now is the only time you own,  
Live, love, toil with a will.  
Place no faith in tomorrow  
For the clock may then be still.*

Anonymous



The Sprigg Simpson Desert crossings – Reg's mud map.

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# Foreword

by Dick Smith

One of my favourite places anywhere in the world is Arkaroola, the mountain sanctuary in the far northern Flinders Ranges of South Australia. Apart from the beauty of the place – and believe me, you would go a long way to find arid-country scenery as spectacular – Arkaroola is home to an incredibly adventurous Australian family.

The family matriarch is Griselda Sprigg, a genteel Scottish lady who, during the past fifty years, has participated in some hair-raising feats of modern-day pioneering in the vast Australian outback which is now her home. Griselda is the first white woman to cross the Simpson Desert, one of the harshest and most brutal stretches of desert anywhere on the planet, and she did it not once, but thrice! Just for good measure she also crossed our continent from south to north through three vast and often trackless deserts. Having made it through a two-day bogging in the far Tanami and survived flash floods and the threat of being blown sky-high by flaming spinifex, she knows as much as anybody about the dangers of desert crossings. Despite all that, Griselda confesses that she has a love affair with deserts, and in Australia she has known them all.

Griselda's long partnership with her husband, Reg, is famous in Australia's desert country, and for good reason. Anyone who knows about the explorations of Australia's post-war geologists will know of Reg Sprigg. He is one of my heroes.

As I read these pages of Griselda's story, I learn of her role in Reg's decision to set up Australia's first privately owned geological consulting company, Geosurveys of Australia, and how she and her kids were there when Reg discovered what many call the SANTOS basin, and when he helped pioneer its development into the great gas field we know today.

Reg was a student of another Australian hero of mine, Sir Douglas Mawson, who took him on field trips to the Flinders Ranges and instilled in Reg two great attributes – skills to live, work and survive in the bush, and a conservationist's respect for nature. After his career in consulting, Reg started another, and once again Griselda had a lot to do with it. They cleared sheep and feral creatures from the old Arkaroola Station and created the wildlife sanctuary that today attracts enthralled visitors from around Australia and the world.

These days, I'm a regular visitor at Arkaroola, piloting my helicopter westward across Lake Frome towards the thrilling sight of the mountain ramparts where Arkaroola nestles, a genuine oasis in a rugged world. Eleven years ago my wife and I flew in to Arkaroola to help celebrate Reg's seventieth birthday. As they say in the classics, a fantastic time was had by all. Before the time came to leave, Griselda offered me a copy of the diary she kept during the Sprigg family crossings of the Simpson Desert, west to east in 1962, and south to north a couple of years later.

I soon found the diary absorbing. This was the first ever motorised crossing of the desert, and the first of any kind since Dr Cecil Madigan's crossing on camels decades earlier. Griselda wrote of the endless ranks of pitiless sand ridges, the dune corridors choked with spinifex, and how the little team of explorers navigated steadily by astrofix, day after day, getting continually bogged in spinifex or salt-pans, until at last the desert was crossed and a new chapter in Australian history was written.

I remember thinking then that this was a story that more people

should read, but it was not until a few years later, when I piloted my trusty chopper Delta India Kilo over the towering terracotta-red Simpson dunes and landed at the place the Spriggs named Geosurveys Hill, that I realised what an extraordinary feat of adventure and endurance the clan had achieved.

Now, to my delight, I find that Griselda has told the story of the Simpson in the pages of this book. Not only that, she's told us about her whole life. And that, too, is fascinating. It's the tale of how a well-to-do Scottish lass more used to sports cars and sailing boats came to Australia, how her first home was a tiny caravan on a dusty hillside in a uranium mining camp, how she learned to cope with saw beetles while camping in a desert creekbed, how she learned to set fire to petroliferous bores, how she saw a ghost homestead on the Yandama Creek – episodes that today's four-wheel-drive enthusiasts would drool over – all told with humour and an earthy appreciation of the country that has become Griselda's home.

More than that, this book is also the story of how Griselda brought up two wonderful children, Marg and Doug, and involved them in the Sprigg discoveries right from the start. The Spriggs were never mere bush bashers. Their adventures had science and the pursuit of knowledge as a central core. The kids avidly collected artefacts and specimens for universities and museums. Reg taught Doug to navigate by the stars and, these days, visitors to Arkaroola will know all about Doug's passion for astronomy. Marg herself is now a qualified geologist and ecologist. Griselda's diaries chronicle the family's movements precisely, the flora and fauna they encountered, the types of terrain, and the people they encountered – including fellow pioneers like the legendary Len Beadell and Tom Kruse – during their wonderful explorations.

This is also a story of true love. From the moment they met, Griselda and Reg were destined to achieve much together, and their togetherness adds immeasurable richness to this book.

Like Reg, Griselda Sprigg is a great Australian. Reading her diaries all those several years ago I came to realise that. Now, in the pages of this book, readers the wide world over can make the same discovery.

# Editor's Note

**B**ecause the majority of Griselda Sprigg's desert journeys were undertaken at a time when Australians still measured their distances in miles, I have used imperial measurements throughout. For readers more used to kilometres, a quick conversion is simple. One kilometre is five-eighths of a mile: five miles equals eight kilometres, 50 miles equals 80 kilometres, and so on.

In addition to Griselda's personal collection of notes, maps and photographs, I have relied importantly on the recollections of Darby and Anthony von Sanden, and I thank them both for their help.

I would like to thank Peter MacDonald for getting me involved in this project in the first place, and my family for putting up with me while it came together.

I gratefully acknowledge the geological expertise of Bernie Stockill from the Queensland Department of Minerals and Energy. Warwick V. Woods of the Historical Radio Society of Australia provided useful technical information.

Rod Maclean

# Prologue

## Mercy Flight

**I**t was still raining.

The night before in the homestead, Mac and Molly Clark had celebrated the rare and bountiful opening of the heavens by breaking out the Scotch. I had been too worried to enjoy the drink. Now my concerns were worsening.

Red dune country stretched to the horizon. The parched Simpson sands were soaking up the deluge. Andado Station's creek was running for the first time in six years. The sky was wall-to-wall grey, with no break in sight.

'The flying doctor's never going to make it in,' said Keith, the Geosurveys charter pilot who had just returned from Melbourne with word that my husband Reg was delayed there for another two days. Our historic desert crossing was starting to look unlikely. 'Maybe I can get you out to the Alice,' Keith continued, 'but you've got about ten minutes to get ready.'

I protested: 'Ten minutes!'

'You've seen the strip, Griselda. It's *already* a bog. Ten minutes, no more.'

We had only been two days at Andado waiting for Reg, but eight-year-old Douglas had scattered his belongings everywhere, and I had emptied my own bag to get at the precious supplies of antibiotics, hoping they would do my daughter some good.

Margaret had started looking poorly on the eighty-five-mile run in to Andado Station from our base camp at East Bore. The camp was supposed to have been our jumping-off point for the first-ever motorised crossing of the Simpson Desert, and we'd reached it after a navigational mishap that warned of the magnitude of our task – hundreds of miles of trackless dune wilderness before we could even *hope* to reach the oasis of Birdsville at the end of our trek. When we finally reached East Bore, Reg remembered a lecture he was committed to make in Melbourne. He collared Keith and flew out on the spot, promising to be back in time for the expedition to go ahead, and leaving the rest of us wondering what to do with ourselves.

Mac Clark had been doing the contract carrying, carting some of the supplies and equipment we needed for our desert expedition. When he offered me and the kids a rest-up at Andado Station, the Clark's cattle property on the desert's western fringe, we left the Geosurveys men in charge of the base camp and headed for the homestead, where we tramped desert dust all over Molly's clean floors. Mac said she was off with her boys in Alice Springs on a shopping trip, but she arrived home a day early and found us ensconced in her house. She took it completely in her stride – mild surprise followed by the unquestioning hospitality you find almost everywhere you travel in the vast Australian bush.

Marg's throat had turned septic during our first day at Andado. Now her fever was dangerously high and she needed hospital treatment. If I quit Andado now, without waiting for Reg, the desert crossing would have to be abandoned.

'Griselda!' insisted Keith, 'it's decision time. Now.'

'Yes. It is. Ask Mac and Molly if we can store some gear in their shed until we can work out what to do with it. They can have the perishables. The mechanic can take Reg's swag back to base camp – anything vital goes back to East Bore. I'll pack the bags and round up the kids. See you on the strip.'

I ran for the house, calling for Doug. He came skidding around a corner, covered with red mud, followed by the two Clark boys, equally filthy, all three of them laughing at the unaccustomed fun to be had when it rained in the desert.

‘Get cleaned up and changed. Pack your belongings. We have to fly to Alice Springs.’

‘Why?’

‘Margie’s sick.’

He was about to protest. Marg was *always* getting sick. But there must have been a don’t-argue-with-me-or-I’ll-send-you-to-Sunday-School look about me.

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Good boy. Hurry!’

I strode into the house and nearly collided with Leo Corbett, our friend and companion. He was on vacation from his Pichi Richi Sanctuary in Alice Springs. He followed me into Margaret’s room. She lay there on a bed with big eyes, suffering in silence. I stuffed family miscellany into my bag and briefed Leo on what was happening. ‘A pity about the crossing,’ he said. ‘But you can’t help bad luck.’

‘Another time, I hope. Somehow we’ll have to get word to Reg.’

‘I’ll take care of that. I’ll sort things out here, too. You’ll be needing a place to stay when you get to the Alice. Use mine.’

‘Leo, you’re a treasure!’

‘I know,’ he said, modest as ever. ‘The key’s behind the cistern.’

Whenever he flew in one of the Geosurveys planes, Douglas always lobbied to sit up next to the pilots so he could impress them with his knowledge of the instruments. Most of the time, it was his father, Reg Sprigg, founder and boss of Geosurveys of Australia, who sat up the front, scanning the horizons and formations below for signs of mineralogical promise.

Today Doug had his chance and he was conversing intently with Keith as the pilot prepared his tail-dragger Cessna for take-off. I was in

the back soothing Marg's forehead with a damp cloth and praying we would get off the sodden strip safely.

When Keith opened the throttle and gunned the little plane, Doug stopped his chattering. The engine protested. Retarded by the slithering drag of wheels in mud, it struggled for take-off velocity. For anxious seconds I thought the runway was not going to be long enough. Then Keith abruptly hauled back on the stick and – suddenly freed from the goo on the ground – we seemed to shoot into the rain-grey sky.

Keith turned in his seat, looking unnecessarily droll. 'Piece of cake,' he muttered.

'Next stop, Alice Springs!' yelled Doug, grinning like a mighty young warrior. Having done their manly best to reassure me that all was well, the pair of them went back to their maps and instruments. This was 1962, and with no headphones for anyone but Keith and the co-pilot, engine noise made conversation near impossible, so I contented myself with trying to keep poor Marg comfortable until we could get her into the hospital. Crammed into the Cessna's tiny back seats this wasn't easy, but eventually she dozed and I was able to relax a little.

Through the perspex cabin windows I could see the enormous desert sand ridges receding behind us. I wondered whether we had been tempting fate by thinking we could make a crossing of the daunting Simpson Desert. I had fantasised that I might be the first white woman – maybe the first woman *ever* – to make the journey. Now that seemed a vain and foolish challenge to one of the harshest landscapes on the planet. The dunes disappeared in the rain haze.

The plane droned north and west, towards the Alice. I too began to doze, and just before I drifted off I found myself marvelling at the extraordinary situation I had found myself in, yet again, and wondering, by no means for the first time, how a city slicker Scottish girl like me could possibly have allowed herself to get mixed up with Reginald Sprigg.



# Ancient History

I suppose I could start by telling how I won Reg in a bet, but that would spoil the fun of a little reminiscing.

I am the second daughter of Robert Findlay Paterson and Grace Hope Irvine Fleming. I was born in Paisley, Scotland, on 12 December 1921, a date I disclose only to make it perfectly clear that I am no longer a spring chicken.

On certain Sundays, Grandma Fleming would tour me among various ancestors and antecedents in the Hawkhead cemetery. The visits terrified me: the fallen monuments were like rotting teeth subsiding into the lawns. I felt as if I was about to follow and fall down, down, and be gone.

Apart from this, my childhood was a happy and comfortable one. Mum and Dad and my sister Margaret and I lived in a big house on Glasgow Road. It had a crackling fire and armchairs with lugs so wide you would not fall off if you fell asleep on them. I had a Canadian nanny named Lizzie who took me on top-deck tram rides to Elderslie. On winter nights we would visit Grandpa Paterson, who lived next-door in a big sandstone villa. He sat there in his armchair, twiddling the



A Scot tot in a tub, Paisley, 1922.

knobs on his cat's-whiskers wireless and looking up now and then to dispense gems of advice: 'Never lend money. Whatever you can afford, make a gift of it.' And: 'Never go anywhere unless invited – except to England to invade the Sassenachs.'

I remember riding in a hansom cab to the Gilmour Street railway station for the journey to Gourock on the Firth of Clyde, where we would take a steamer to the Isle of Arran and join other families for our annual summer holiday. Dad was a fine amateur sailor. He kept a boat at Whiting Bay and Margaret and I would help with the mending and making of sails, and scraping and painting the hull. Our reward came on idyllic days when Dad took us out on the water, often with a crew of boys from the other vacationing families. Sadly, the sons of those families were killed in World War II – every one of them. Also doomed was the primary school lad with whom I competed to come bottom of the class. A born warrior, he became a paratrooper and died at Arnhem.

Like my sister Margaret, I was expected to combine brains with charm and good looks. By the time I started at the Glasgow High School for Girls, Margaret had completed her brilliant passage there and

commenced studies in dental surgery, following in our father's footsteps. My early academic performance was not promising. I was only eight years old when, on 24 May 1930, the aviatrix Amy Johnson landed her de Havilland Moth at Darwin, completing an extraordinary solo flight from London, and instantly becoming a heroine throughout the British Isles. Her exploits inspired me and I followed them closely over the years to come, dreaming that one day I too would learn to fly. I actually had two lessons in a Fox Moth before war broke out, but the point here is that during my early high school years I spent little time studying and plenty of time daydreaming about the world to be discovered beyond the 'dark mile' between Paisley and Glasgow. It was so-called because there were no street lights, only green fields. Then war came and they started putting up prefabricated billet houses and army barracks and the mile stayed dark because a black-out was imposed to protect us all from the Nazi air attacks.

Despite my head being in the clouds, there must have been some competitive instinct sparked within me by Margaret's success, because in my senior years I studied harder, and completed my Higher Leaving Certificate at a younger age than she did. I was sixteen going on seventeen. It was late 1938 and our family wintered in Europe. Members of Hitler Youth lined the decks of ships as we entered Hamburg harbour. 'War won't be long now,' said Dad. 'I hope we make it home.'

When we did, I was informed that while the bureaucracy had earlier deemed me too young to sit the university entrance exams, with all available manpower needed to help with the impending war effort there was now no impediment to my starting a career in nursing.

If I had a bob for all the beds I made while I did my training at the Royal Alexandra Infirmary in Paisley, I'd be a millionaire.

The RAI was a castle of turreted red sandstone. The wards were enormous. With every window blacked-out or sandbagged, we worked in wan electric light, uniformed in starched aprons, belts, veils and frills. In winter, combining our on-the-job training with lectures at the

Royal Glasgow Infirmary, there were times I would walk to work in the dark and arrive home again in the same way, wondering how my mother was coping with making dinners from rations without the help of a maid.

Wartime austerity put an end to all sorts of luxuries and frivolities. Fox Moth flying instructors were employed in far more drastic pursuits. Racing a boyfriend's Sunbeam Talbot was out because of petrol rationing. But nothing could stop us from having fun. Atop the RAI's main flagpole perched an enamelled bedpan, and it became a symbol of the hilarity that lurked beneath the rigid hospital routine. When one resident took leave to be married, he was congratulated by being strapped to an operating table and put in plaster from neck to toe along one side of his body. Another time, the head porter was taking a corpse to the mortuary when the body miraculously rose up. The porter fainted, and we all laughed at the absurd sight of one body reviving another.

An ophthalmologist I worked with during a short secondment was a real practical joker. He was a Viennese Jew who had escaped Hitler's *Anschluss*. Experimenting with corneal lenses, he had partially restored the sight of a naval officer, Esmond Knight, who had been badly wounded during the bombing of HMS *Prince of Wales* in Singapore harbour. Now he wanted a guinea pig with more normal eyesight. I said I would try a pair and wore them one night on the Glasgow Underground, riding in one of those carriages where the seats face each other in groups of two. I noticed the passengers opposite were staring at me. I tried to ignore it, but soon I could bear it no longer. I looked at my face in my hand mirror. One of my eyes was purple – the other was pink.

Later in my training, before I started studying radiography and radiotherapy, I did a two-month locum at Glasgow's Royal Women's Hospital where I met and worked with the legendary Sir Hector McLennon. One day I was summoned to help the great man perform an hysterectomy. 'But, lassie,' said the charge nurse as she gave me my orders in a voice dour and serious, 'here we call them Hectoristomies.'

Late in 1940 it was decreed by the Manpower bureaucracy that I should become an assistant radiographer at a 1400-bed civilian and services hospital at Ballochmyle Estate near Mauchline in the heart of Robert Burns country. Much of the property was wooded, but it also boasted manicured gardens and lawns sweeping down to where the River Ayr flowed past rhododendron-flanked pathways on its journey to the sea. The mansion house – now home to the senior medical staff – was famous as the Alexander family seat. The clan crest above the portico incorporated the elephant insignia of the British East India Company. Below the portico, solid mahogany doors opened to polished floors, graceful staircases, ballrooms and billiard rooms with ornate Adam ceilings.

The nurses' quarters were far less salubrious. Like the wards, our rooms were laid out in uniform rows that spoiled the gardens, and the rows of pre-fabricated sheds that housed the rooms were made almost entirely of asbestos. My building was nicknamed 'Siberia'. A single pot-belly stove served fourteen rooms. Normal duties over, we would huddle around it to gossip, read, or write letters home.



With my war-time mates at Ballochmyle.