



Mighty Munros

Like all great family traditions of pastoral Australia, the Munro story is an ever-changing tale.

Booroomooka Angus hit the headlines for all the right reasons after last year's colossal \$4 million on-property bull sale, which saw 232 bulls knocked under the hammer for a staggering \$17,262 average.

Stud principal Sinclair Munro is humbled by the impressive result and still can't quite believe it. Running over 1200 stud and 800 commercial breeders over "Keera", "Glenroy" and "Glen Park" leaves little time for self adulation.

To Sinclair, the record average was a clear signal from grass-roots breeders that Booroomooka, one of the oldest Angus studs in the country, is heading in the right direction.

The stud has never been out of the news, whether it be selling Booroomooka Frankel F510 for \$65,000 in 2012, achieving a 100 per cent clearance of 211 bulls in the midst of the 2019 drought or their first ever \$1 million sale in 2005. They were all big moments leading up to their 2021 blockbuster, billed as the highest-grossing, single-vendor, on-property sale in Australia.

In recent years, Sinclair's parents, Hugh and Juliet Munro, have run their own cattle enterprise on "Glenroy", about 60km from the historic "Keera" homestead, built in 1856, where Hugh grew up and spent most of his life.

On the day of our interview, Hugh, now a sprightly 81, has returned to his ancestral home to discuss family history, starting with Donald Munro, the plucky Scotsman who survived a long cruise to the colonies in 1848. He bought "Keera" a decade later but his rein was short-lived, succumbing to food poisoning at age 46.

His son, Hugh, better known as "HR", was next in line. He managed the property, initially for the family and then for noted local grazier Thomas Cook. In 1887, Cook bought the land with the proviso HR had first option to buy it back at a later stage.

That chance came after Thomas died in 1912, and HR bought several properties of his choice from the estate, including "Keera". In a book written by historian Jillian Oppenheimer, jackaroo Don Wittington recalled one of his roles was driving HR around in his car. Even at 70, the farmer worked around the clock, inspecting mobs of cattle.

"We drove from daylight to dusk; the roads were all unsealed and mainly black soil. Sometimes we slept under the stars, with the old man tending cow dung fires to keep mosquitoes away, but more often at station homesteads where he was always welcome.

"HR Munro was one of the finest men I've ever met. He never lost his temper about the idiotic things I occasionally did with horses, cattle and motor vehicles. The nearest he ever came to a tantrum was to call me a damned fool when I ruined his favourite car by trying to cross a creek that was too deep. I tied the car to a tree, but it was submerged in the raging waters and was never any good afterwards."

HR's wife, Grace, was a forthright and colourful matriarch. Her broad-ranging talents encompassed everything from needlework to riding horses. Her legendary strength of character was initially put to the test on the way home from her wedding. With 15 gates to contend with, the foot went down at gate number one.

HR had pulled up his horse and buggy and looked expectantly across at his beautiful new bride. Silence. After a while he nodded at the gate. His indignant wife looked him up and down before declaring: "Hugh Munro, I most certainly do NOT open gates!"

Foremost in her thoughts was finding a way to connect the countless country women living on remote farms and stations. In 1922, Grace formed the Country Women's Association (CWA), providing a strong and unified voice for future generations of country women.

After four years as inaugural president, she was thrilled to see the group grow to 4500 members in 100 branches. Part of the centenary celebrations held earlier this year involved a get-together at Grace's old homestead.



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NEW BLOOD

Gordon "HG" Munro was the next to take control, switching the cattle herd from Shorthorns to Angus, believing the breed was better suited to his country.

The Booroomooka Angus stud was established in 1926 with five stud heifers purchased from NL Forster, Abington stud, Armidale. Within two years, further heifers were introduced from studs in New Zealand. Over the years, many bulls were imported from Scotland, the USA and New Zealand.

To promote their cattle, the family exhibited their show teams at the Sydney and Brisbane Royal Easter Shows for nearly 60 years, finishing in the late 1990s. There were many great years under the guidance of legendary stud groom the late Bobby Gregory, his father Abbie and grandfather Abe.

In the days before performance recording and on-property auctions, the Royal shows provided an excellent opportunity for cattlemen and women to travel to the Big Smoke to see what was on offer. After the war, Hugh remembers their prized cattle being loaded onto carts at the Barraba train station ready for the long haul to the showgrounds.

Jackaroo John Noble worked under Gordon's supervision and recalls in Jillian's book that he was a man constantly on the move.

"He was one step ahead of himself in all his doings. Tireless in his energy, he took a poor view of those who did not share his enthusiasm or support a particular cause he was pursuing. You either admired him or you couldn't tolerate him. I had never any doubt; to me, he was an admirable man . . . and the world needs many more like him!" >

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Booroomooka stud co-principals Sinclair and Hugh Munro; Grace Munro established the Country Women's Association (CWA) from "Keera", Bingara, 100 years ago; Gordon Munro, Colin Ross and HR Munro in deep thought at the 1953 Brisbane Royal Show.

FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: Jo and Sinclair Munro with their children Arabella, Digby and Barnaby and the top-priced \$48,000 bull at the 2021 sale; the "Keera" homestead and outbuildings.



“They wanted cattle with good growth and high carcase quality, including good marbling. We responded accordingly and changed the type of Angus we produced.”

Hugh, the next in line, was a teenager in the 1950s during the mighty wool boom. “Keera” resembled a small village, with five families of stockmen and station hands assigned to stock duties, along with a further four jackaroos.

The property had its own one-class school, catering for about a dozen children. Hugh was one of the last to attend before the introduction of school buses. He went on to board at the Sydney Grammar School, Randwick, during which time he acquired shares in the property, courtesy of probate and death duties.

After meeting at the Sydney Matrons’ Ball, Hugh and Juliet tied the knot in 1968. Apart from Sinclair, they also have a daughter, Sarah, married to Rick Kennedy and raising a young family on their farm near Inverell.

Out at “Keera”, the family have a long and proud history. Their employees have been the “unsung heroes”, working tirelessly behind the scenes. For most of the 1900s, members of the Gregory, Turner, Rampling, Apthorpe, Rollings and Cracknell families worked at “Keera” for most or all their lives, often with their children and even grandchildren.

Hugh says this loyalty is apparent today. One employee, Stephen Baker, is still with him after 40 years.

THE JACKAROO LIFE

And then there were the jackaroos.

“Some rather wayward boys were sent here to get straightened out under my father’s stern thumb,” Hugh laughs.

“The jackarooing days were an important educational arm of the property. Up until they were phased out in the late 1970s, they were

taught various skills, including horsemanship, stock work and whip cracking. Mostly they were very useful and went on to do quite well.”

With a tennis court and cricket ground at “Keera”, aspiring jackaroos were often selected for their sporting prowess, and a healthy rivalry existed among the bigger properties.

Hugh enjoyed his early days with the stockmen and cherishes the memories of his early droving trips with packhorses. His life revolved around the sheep and cattle.

A typical day involved a 7.30am start but if it was a big day branding or lamb marking, the men would be up at dawn. Everything was done on horseback and the horses were bred tough.

“We may have a cattle boom now, but the wool boom, when wool was getting a pound per pound, was equally as good, if not better,” he says with a grin.

“These days, there are more cattle and less people. In some ways it’s a shame but we have become more efficient at doing things.”

Sinclair has seen a huge expansion since his days at The King’s School, Parramatta. Securing a job as a jackaroo was a natural part of the training.

After 12 months gaining valuable experience, he spent four years at St Andrew’s College, studying Agricultural Economics at Sydney University. Later he spent a few years at the Whyalla feedlot in Texas, Queensland.

Meanwhile, Hugh was overseeing the stud’s expansion in the 1990s, following the wool price crash and the Japanese investment in Australian feedlots.

“Our aim was to develop an Australian premium grain-fed beef supply based on Japanese expertise,” Hugh says.

“They wanted cattle with good growth and high carcase quality, including good marbling. We responded accordingly and changed the type of Angus we produced.”

Nowadays, more emphasis is placed on extensive performance recording, genetic evaluation using the TransTasman Angus Cattle Evaluation (TACE), visual assessment, genomics and progeny testing.

The family continues to breed cattle renowned for their meat quality and fertility. And those years of hard work are reaping rewards.

COMMUNITY MINDED

Hugh and his father are past members and presidents of the board of directors of Angus Australia. Sinclair is a former NSW president and now serves as a director of Angus Australia.

Gordon was the founding president of the Bingara Show Society in the 1930s. Both Hugh and Sinclair have held long terms as presidents of Bingara Jockey Club, and Sinclair has been president of Bingara Pony Club.

Like all Munro men, Sinclair shares a deep love of thoroughbreds. It’s been in his blood since his grandfather and great-grandfather travelled down for the Inglis sales at Randwick in the 1950s, coming home with the top-priced filly at 3700 guineas.

At the moment, he is feeling on top of the world after *Jo Jo Was A Man* stormed home for his third win at Randwick. Sinclair’s love of good cattle and fast thoroughbreds is shared by his wife Jo, who has given up teaching to work with aged residents in Bingara.

Already the farming life is filtering down to their children with a love of horses and cattle. Arabella is now in New Zealand for her gap year, while the boys, Barnaby and Digby, are boarders at King’s.

As we drive through big paddocks and endless gates, it soon becomes evident this cattleman enjoys checking his bovine beauties.

“It’s important to get out in the paddock and into the stockyard, to look at and assess each individual heifer and cow. Our cows are the building block of our herd. For 96 years, we’ve been building a highly resilient, fertile cow herd.”

With such dedication, it’s not surprising that Sinclair and his team have continued the pattern of success set by his father and grandfather.

The achievements of the present mesh with the victories of the past and hopes for the future. It’s often a life of toil and sacrifice but with the memories of past generations comes the obligation to a tradition.

Then there are those rare moments when the work finds its value, when another Booroomooka bull enters the sale ring, when the auctioneer brings down the final hammer.

It’s taken five generations of the family to reach this pivotal point, with another generation, the sixth, being groomed to one day leave their own mark.

The daring Scotsman who started the Munro dynasty in Australia would be smiling broadly from his grave, seeing his humble patch of dirt transform into one of the biggest and most successful Angus studs in the nation. **RLM**

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Booroomooka cows are known for their great doing ability; Sinclair Munro likes to keep a close eye on his cattle; Hugh Munro looks back at generations of family photos in the homestead; the Munro family have held many important gatherings in the formal dining room; a young Booroomooka heifer; a mob in typical “Keera” country; Sinclair and his father Hugh next to the monument dedicated to former generations of the family who lived on the property.

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