

TO PROTECT AND DEFEND

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Standing out there in the paddock, lucerne up to her knees, the land she loves spilling in green folds all around, Wendy Bowman is lost in thought.

It is a poignant image: a solitary woman, set against the Hunter landscape, ruminating on fortitude, loss and survival.

What you see here is a final snapshot of a passage in time, that parting glimpse before the page of history turns forever.

Two hundred years ago, a colonial government granted vast tracts of the new colony's richest valley to pioneer families whose farming credentials indicated they had what it took to turn it into a food bowl for hungry settlers.

Flood, fire, failed crops, bushrangers, sickness and desolation guaranteed only the resolute survived. Those who did, prospered, creating pastoral dynasties, building historic homes and producing generations of community leaders. The Bowmans were among that first generation of Hunter grant holders.

Today, Wendy Bowman, one of the last of the pastoral matriarchs, is hanging on hard to the fading threads of that history. It all but ends with her.

Not that she intends going any time soon, and certainly not without a fight. As a founder of Minewatch NSW, she has worked inexhaustibly to help the valley cope with mining and safeguard the landscape and communities of the Hunter. A recent Herald cartoon, reprinted opposite, depicted her unyielding before a bulldozer blade, bent where it had attempted to budge the Bowman woman.

In a written tribute Glenn Albrecht, former Hunter resident and now a professor of sustainability at Murdoch University in WA, says of Bowman: "She is one of the true patriots, a battler for genuine productivity and sustainability in opposition to some of the largest and most powerful mining companies in the world. She has also had to fight state governments and their bureaucracies as they have systematically avoided their duty to protect the health of people and the environment."

But it has been a lopsided battle. This is not a young Boadicea leading an Iceni uprising against the Romans but rather a 75-year-old widow and grandmother rallying what small resources she has against the world's largest mining companies and a state government hooked on coal taxes. Today, there are about 30 open-cut mines and three coal-fired power stations in the Upper Hunter. The conquest is complete. The era of the pastoral pioneer is all but gone.

Yet, Wendy Bowman battles on. Along the way she has twice beaten bowel cancer. Her resistance is both legendary and genetic. She was born Wendy Peters in Chatswood, lived at Lindfield and was educated at Wahroonga where she attended Abbotsleigh.

"My father's sisters went there," she says. "My daughters went there and I have a grandchild just started this year."

Wendy's father, Oscar John Peters, was an accountant and the son of Thomas Peters who, aged 18, had arrived from Sweden as Hans Oscar Holmqvist and anglicised his name in the time leading up to World War I. The Swedish immigrant became a leader in concrete construction

and, as a partner in Lane and Peters, completed major projects including Burrinjuck Dam (but not before taking on and beating the state government in a long legal battle).

Thomas built a holiday house at Palm Beach, which the family would throw open to boarding school children unable to travel home to New Guinea or other offshore destinations during the school holidays.

"There would be as many as 30 of us sitting down to Christmas dinner," Wendy Bowman recalls. "We had a lovely time."

The home later became the Palm Beach Surf Club.

As well as Palm Beach, Wendy and her sister holidayed at Dungog and on a Badja River property near Cooma where she learned to shoot and fish for trout.

"My father loved the country and he was a great walker," she recalls. "He would go up and down hills like a diesel, never stopping. I'd be tagging along."

Oscar Peters, who had jackeroo-ed in his youth, managed stations and had wanted to go on the land only to be denied by the Great Depression, taught her to love the wide, open spaces.

But that appreciation could have just as easily come down the maternal branch of the family tree. Her mother was Alice Doreathea Mackay. Nicknamed "Woodgee" by her father, C.M. (Charles McKenzie) Mackay, Alice came from pioneering graziers. The Mackays can be traced to Duncan Forbes Mackay, Superintendent of Prisons and Public Works in Newcastle in 1826, who was farming near Dungog in the 1830s and received his first land grant in January 1838. The family built the historic Melbee and Cangon homesteads near Dungog. Once famous for thoroughbreds, Cangon is today occupied by Jaime Mackay and is still breeding horses for the international polo market.

In the 1870s, the family bought Anambah (near West Maitland) and Minimbah (near Singleton) from the Cobb family and built substantial houses on both estates. House guests would include Dame Nellie Melba and at least two NSW governors. Cattle drives from the Mackays' Queensland grazing holdings terminated at the Anambah property before going to the Sydney markets.

The Bowmans had arrived in NSW in 1798 and taken up a grant on the Hawkesbury River near Richmond. George Bowman (1795-1878) settled on his father John's 1824 grant at Jerrys Plains before moving to a larger grant near Singleton "on the south bank of Hunter's River at the junction of Fal Brook".

The Bowmans honoured an archer ancestor in naming their holdings Arrowfield, Archerfield and Bowfield.

George added extensively to the properties, breeding sheep, cattle and horses, including the thoroughbred stallion Pegasus which stood for a fee of "5 guineas payable in cash or good clean wheat".

As his fortune prospered he found time to represent Northumberland and the Hunter in the NSW legislative council. He and Eliza Sophia (nee Pearce) had two daughters and nine sons. The first-born, George Pearce Bowman, added extensively to the family's pastoral holdings while siring nine children, five of whom were graduates of the University of Sydney, two taking higher degrees in medicine at Edinburgh. The fifth, Robert, became one of Australia's leading physicians and president of the Parisian Medical Society. The seventh, Alexander, was a breeder of champion racehorses and popular parliamentarian regarded as the unofficial representative of the Upper Hunter landowners. The third son, William, the first mayor of Muswellbrook, was succeeded as mayor by the youngest son Edward (twin of Andrew), who served six terms.

The present Skellatar homestead was built for the twins in 1883-84. The stately Victorian two-storey brick and wrought-iron building with slate roof was sited at the top of the hill with a view

of Muswellbrook on the slopes opposite. Along with Archerfield, Arrowfield and Skellatar, Bowman stations in the Hunter included Balmoral, Gyarran and Grampian Hills. Beyond the Liverpool Ranges were Maidenhead in New England and Terry-Hie-Hie in the north-west.

Like two great rivers of the Hunter, the families the Bowmans and the Peters-Mackays found a junction during the mid-1950s when Wendy Peters was introduced to Mick Bowman in Sydney.

"It was at a party at the Pickwick Club, one of those underground places we used to go to in those days," Wendy says. "I knew all about him. In fact, I think I may have met him earlier at Muswellbrook picnic races when a whole group of us had come up to stay with Gus Bowman's family."

Like many of the Bowman boys, Mick had been educated at the King's School at Parramatta.

They married in 1957 and moved to the Hunter as custodians of part of the Bowman estate.

Ashton had come into the family hold in 1893 when the Archerfield Bowmans had bought the bottom end of the vast Ravensworth station and renamed it. Mick and Wendy would enjoy 25 years of rural bliss, raising three girls of their own and contributing to local life in the manner of their forebears until her husband's untimely death in 1984 left Wendy a widow at the age of 50.

By then she was already at odds with the coal companies over compensation.

"We had our first meeting about coal compensation in 1981. When Governor Bourke gave those original land grants they had included the mineral rights. As [then Premier] Neville Wran said: 'It has come to my hearing that there are people of NSW who own their own coal rights. Those rights belong to the people and by the stroke of a pen I'll take them,' which, of course, he did."

Wendy Bowman and other landholders approached the new premier, Nick Greiner.

"We said: 'These people have had this land since Governor Bourke's time. You just can't take it without compensation.' So he set up the Coal Compensation Board."

Used to running their own affairs, the landowners were struggling to comprehend the power of access afforded to the mining companies. Says Wendy Bowman: "The Department of Mineral Resources put ads in the paper saying that a certain company has been given mineral exploration rights. If you're lucky enough to spot the ad you look at it with a magnifying glass and see that your property is included. They don't notify people.

"We didn't know how to deal with it, we didn't know our rights. Mineral Resources' job was to find the coal and get somebody to dig it out not to help the landowners.

"The mining companies would say 'Here's an environmental impact study, you put in a submission'. A farmer who may have left school at 14 was handed an EIS several phone books thick. That's why we started Minewatch, because people didn't know what was happening to them."

Like dominoes, holdings large and small began to fall.

"Archerfield went early," the campaigner recalls.

At first, the mining company didn't wish to acquire Ashton: "They said that dairying and mining could coexist."

But Ashton had been under siege for some time and, according to its owner, was losing money. When a lucerne crop failed the cause was traced to sky-high salinity levels in a nearby creek. Underground mine workings had created subsidence causing subterranean water to pollute creek water used for irrigation.

As open-cut activity increased, Ashton was blanketed in dust, its peace disturbed by the sound of blasting and the shudder of the dragline. Cattle refused to eat barley covered in mine dust.

Wendy Bowman says she wept every night for weeks at the prospect of selling. But sell she did.

"After Mick had died I felt like I was the curator of that land. I had to look after it."

Bounded by Bowmans Creek, the Hunter and Glennies Creek, Ashton had been one of the best-watered properties in the region.

"When the girls were little, I'd take them up late on a summer's afternoon to the creek, throw a line in, catch eels and watch the platypus," Bowman says.

The dealings over Ashton came as a tipping point for Wendy Bowman, her anger mounting with her frustration. By 1988, the lines had been drawn. The rejection of Bowman milk by the dairy company because it contained dust was the last straw. In 1991 she and others, including founding president Geoff Marshall, formed Minewatch.

She stayed on at Granbalang, which had been her marital home since 1958. The building itself, built in 1861, had been the Auckland Arms Hotel at Rixs Creek. In 1893, when the Bowmans purchased Granbalang, the structure was relocated brick by brick to a nearby hill where it housed the manager.

Perusing the Rixs Creek mine plan and noting that work was not scheduled to reach Granbalang for another 40 years, Wendy Bowman had reckoned she would see out her days there. But the world was hungry for coal and the NSW government desperate for revenue. Under the impetus of the resources boom and record prices, Hunter coal production soared. In 2005, she packed up her life and left Granbalang to the company bulldozers. The grand old residence joined Ravensworth homestead, Plashett at Jerrys Plains, Archerfield at Lemington, and Clifford, Wambo and Stafford (all at Warkworth) on the list of historic homes assumed by the miners. Kayuga, the prize property near Aberdeen granted to the Macintyre family in 1823, went a couple of years before Granbalang.

The original landholders were in retreat.

"David Macintyre had hoped to stay on at Kayuga because it was one of the original grants," she laments. "But, in the end, he had to move."

Wendy Bowman might have put the family heirlooms, heritage furniture and other keepsakes in storage when she moved down to Rosedale at Camberwell. Instead, she had builders add a lounge-dining room which she filled with bureaux, tables, bookcases and various treasures, the creature comforts of a country life.

It is here, on a table strewn with Minewatch documents, that she serves a lunch of home-made pie and salad. Beyond the french doors, 30 Droughmaster cattle graze.

These days the occupant of Rosedale reads reports on respiratory illnesses, climate change, cancers and critiques of the clean-coal concept. She fears for a community that may have traded its health for hefty pay packets. If the State Government was fair dinkum, she says, it would accede to her wish to mount a comprehensive study into the cumulative effects of the Hunter's mines on the health of residents. She knows the government isn't listening. Defiant as ever, she has vowed not to sell her Camberwell land to the mining companies unless the authorities relent.

Driving up through the valley for the first time in years poses quite a shock, even for somebody with an appreciation of the mining sector's economic contribution to the region's wellbeing. In material terms, much of the quality of life we enjoy in this neck of the woods is predicated on mining profits.

Coal remains the Hunter's economic lifeblood. Once, there appeared to be some sort of order to the advance and scale of the open cuts. Not any more. Today, vast tracts of the post-boom Upper Hunter resemble a stricken animal, disembowelled by an overwhelming alien force.

Between the coal companies and a state government armed with Part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act that takes the local community out of the process, there has been a

feeding frenzy here. Rehabilitation, once a byword, seems too inconceivable to contemplate. It would take the hand of God to put the valley back together.

Wendy Bowman is talking about the clash of cultures miners versus pastoralists.

"The mining executives don't love the land. They just move from one job to the next. They don't stay. The pastoralists and the Aborigines had something in common a love of the land."

The irony of the comparison is not lost. Such is the story of conquest and dispossession. Two centuries ago, the settlers pushed the original occupants out of the valley. Now, the miners are having their turn. But what happens next?

Wendy Bowman knows she won't be around long enough to answer that question.

"Sometimes I think I'm too old and too angry. Then you wake up the next day and say 'Bugger it they're not going to win!' "

For now, time is precious and small victories cheer the soul. She needs to talk to the coal company about flocculent sludge from the washery polluting the creek. The matter is quite pressing. A new guest has arrived.

"A platypus has turned up in our creek," she declares. "I think it must have found its way down from upstream."

She stops and listens. Beyond the far ridgeline to the north, a mine is in full production, but the wind from the south carries the noise away from us. Here, the only sound is the soft rhythm of cattle picking steadily at the grass.

Wendy Bowman is hanging on hard to the fading threads of that history. It all but ends with her.