

AKUBRA IS  
AUSTRALIAN  
FOR HAT

GRENVILLE TURNER

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Cover: Darwin carpenter Stephen Talbot wears an Akubra Rough Rider.

Half title page: Kimberely Lane, a jillaroo on Anna Creek Station, South Australia, wears her hat to shade her from the sun.

Title page: Father and son, Ashley and Peter Severin, stand in front of *Curtin Springs Station's* finest feature: Mt. Conner, a 700-million-year-old mesa that lies about 100 kilometres east of Uluru in the southwest of the Northern Territory. The dust storm that swirls behind the two cattlemen and the stark red dirt with not a hint of green demonstrate the hardships endured by the pastoralists of the Red Centre.

For Luke Fay-Turner

# CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

THE STORY OF THE AKUBRA

THE JOURNEY

TRAVELLING NORTH

ACROSS THE TOP

THROUGH THE CENTRE

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## FOREWORD

We must continue the fight against cancer because it is a First World disease about which we still have a lot to learn.

I rather value the fact that if I temporarily take off my hat of thinking about antibodies, immunological tolerance and the immune system in relation to cancer, I can put on another hat and say, 'Put on your hat and protect yourself from skin damage from the sun'.

A broad-brimmed hat provides excellent sun protection for the face, head, neck and ears. By encouraging family members, friends and work colleagues to wear a hat, we can all work together to ensure the welfare of our community.

Professor Emeritus Sir Gustav Nossal, AC CBE,  
Australian of the Year 2000,  
Patron of the Cancer Council of Australia



Grenville Turner, on location during the shoot for *Akubra Is Australian for Hat*.  
(Photographed by Grant Hunt)

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n 1984 I started seriously photographing people who wore the Akubra hat. After I had spent three years on the road and some more time in Sydney working on the project, the first edition of *Akubra Is Australian for Hat* was published in 1988.

For many years I considered remaking my hat book, and in 2008 I set forth around Australia looking for new hats and new stories. Over the years I've travelled many thousands of kilometres throughout Australia, and I have a network of friends and acquaintances, which in some ways made this new journey somewhat easier.

I followed a very similar route to the first journey, starting off at the Akubra hat factory in New South Wales and heading through western and northern New South Wales, up into Queensland, across the top to Darwin and down through the Northern Territory to the Red Centre into South Australia and Victoria.

I met some of the local legends of the outback—people like Bill King, who was the first tour guide to take tourists into the outback; R. M. Williams, who started off as Sidney Kidman's saddler; Peter Severin, who built the first landing strip at Ayers Rock by hand in addition to developing his remote cattle station; and Ian Conway, a modern pioneer who created a thriving tourism operation alongside his cattle station.

I visited the biggest cattle properties, not just in Australia but worldwide. I met very special people who not only wore a hat but also had fascinating stories to tell. It was an honour to meet these people and share a slice of their life.

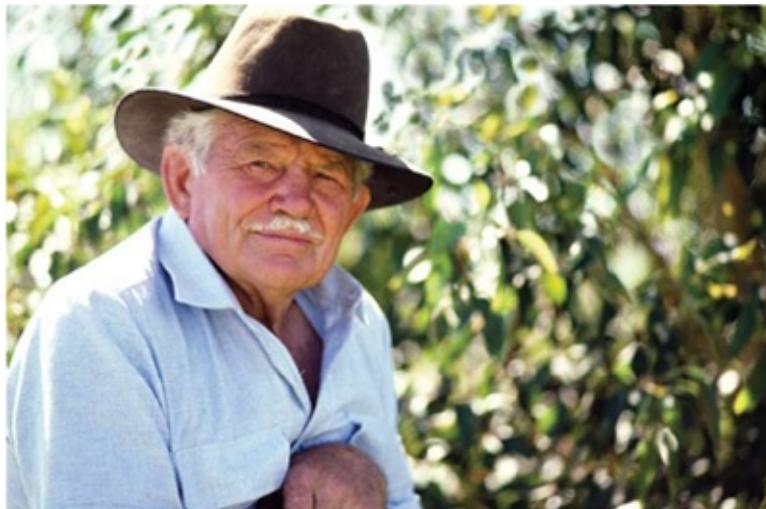
I currently wear an Akubra Cattleman hat that protects me from the sun and hard knocks when I'm walking through the bush. It also regularly acts as a lens shade for my camera and is often used to shelter it when it's raining.

Grenville Turner

HATS FOR THE MAN OF THE LAND

Advertisement in R. M. Williams catalogue, 1972

A bushman expects a lot from a hat. It must stand up under the punishment of sun, rain, wind and rugged use. It must be a 'water your dog, fan the fire' model. Akubras have been Australia's leading hat makers for over half a century, and their hats are made to take this kind of treatment and still retain that authentic stockman look right through their long life. You can be sure that whichever style of Akubra you buy, either for bush work or town wear, it will serve you well.



R. M. WILLIAMS

A true son of the bush, R. M. Williams was still competing in the Winton to Longreach endurance ride in Queensland well into his 70s. He began his business empire in 1932 when he sold a handmade pack saddle to legendary cattle king Sir Sidney Kidman for five pounds. He is seen here wearing his Stetson, made under licence by Akubra. R. M. never went without his hat.



STEPHEN KEIR

## Akubra Hat Factory

The fifth generation of the Keir family to take the helm of Akubra at the headquarters in Kempsey, New South Wales, Stephen Keir is the managing director and wears a Traveller. 'It's hard to know which one to wear when you have so many, but I usually wear the Traveller. You have to protect yourself from the sun—that's what I'd say for hats in general'.

## THE STORY OF THE AKUBRA

**T**his book is about hats—Akubras—and the people who wear them. Behind every face under each hat is a representation of the landscape of Australia—the age, the mystery, the new, the old and most of all the colour and diversity of the people who together make Australia special.

The Akubra has nothing to do with class. For almost 100 years it has been worn by station hands, property owners, rouseabouts, railway fettleers, trappers and shooters, soldiers and, in the twenty-first century, by a legion of everyday Australians as a national insignia.

It was in August 1912 that the trade name ‘Akubra’, believed to be an Aboriginal word for ‘head covering’, came into use. However, the company’s beginnings started earlier than that, in the 1870s, when a young engineer from Britain, Benjamin Dunkerley, established a small fur-cutting business in Tasmania. Ten years later, he moved his business to Sydney, where he opened a modest hat manufacturing plant in Surry Hills. There he met youthful hat maker Stephen Keir, who came from Manchester and whose expert workmanship impressed Benjamin. Stephen was soon manager of the hat-making business and became a son-in-law by marrying Benjamin’s daughter, Ada. Since that time, the hat-making firm has been in the hands of succeeding generations of the Keir family. Today Stephen Keir IV is the managing director.



MICHAEL TERLICH

Akubra Hat Factory

Michael Terlich is forming the hat body. 'I am right at the start of the making of the hat. I wear an Akubra when I go fishing, when I mow the lawn, when I do most things. I have been here 20 years. It is like working with family.'



DARREN PEITSCH AND STANLEY DUCKETT

Akubra Hat Factory

Stanley Duckett (front) is 'taking the excess fur off the hat'. His colleague Darren Peitsch has his 'old army Akubra slouch hat as well as a couple of others at home'. Both men have clocked up two decades with Akubra.

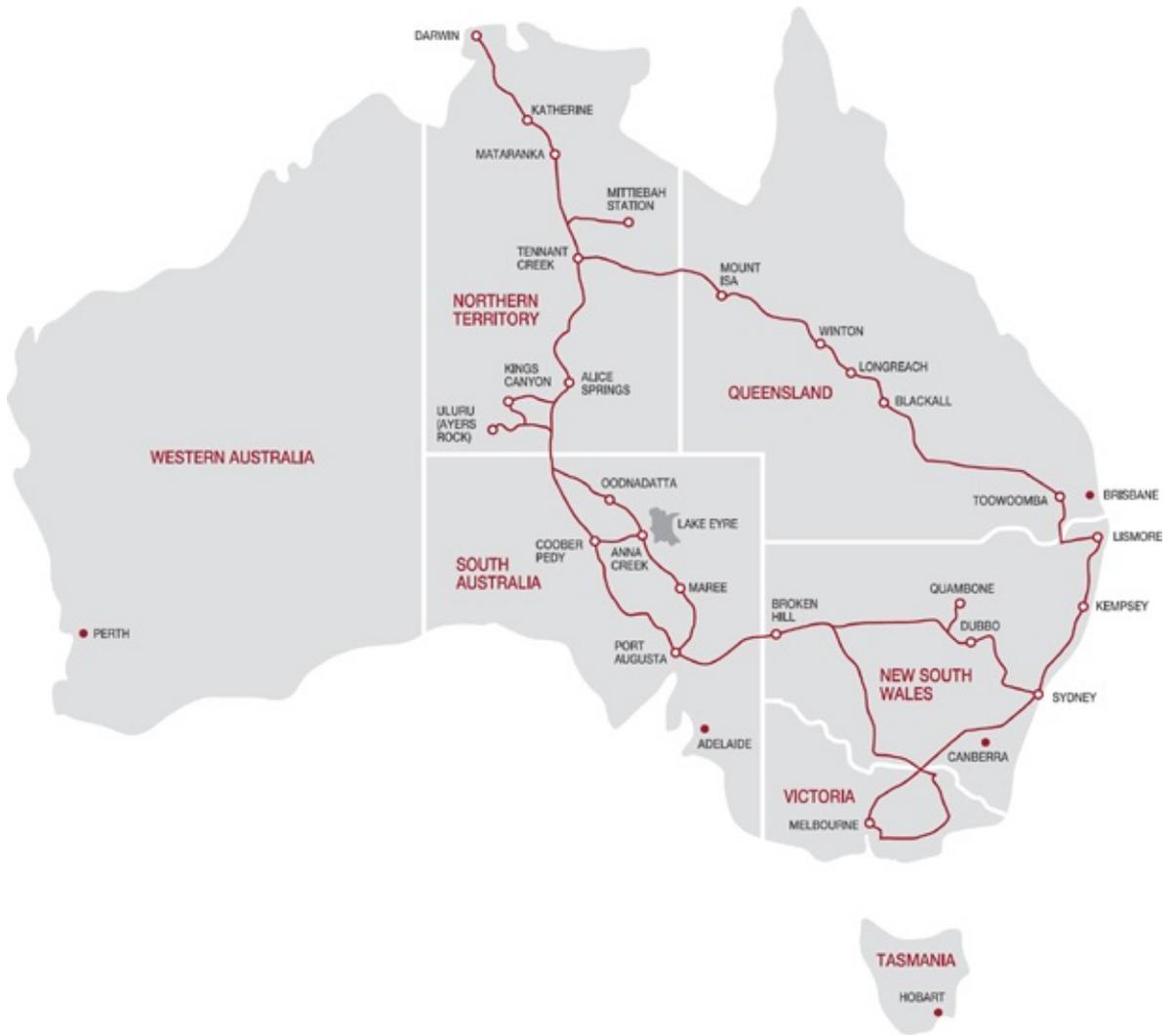
The Akubra has become Australia's national hat, with tens of millions of hats sold. Akubras have been worn by our slouch-hatted diggers in two world wars, presidents and prime ministers around the world have donned the famed hat, sportsmen and sportswomen wear Akubras, and 2008 Australian of the Year Lee Kernaghan never goes without the iconic Akubra. Once used by country people as a work hat, the Akubra is the hat of choice for Australians everywhere, whether you are in a suburban coffee shop, in a city boardroom, on a surf beach or chasing cattle in the Northern Territory.

The Akubra is made from the downy under-fur of the rabbit. The fur is put through a shearing machine to eliminate any long hair, and the under-fur is chemically treated to give it a shrinking capacity. Then the fur is blown to remove clots, hair and dirt, and when finished it looks like a piece of absorbent grey cotton.

Now the hat is coned in a forming machine. The fur for one hat is weighed out, deposited at the top of the cylinder and shucked down to settle on the revolving cone. Hot water is then sprayed to consolidate the fibres.

The felt is stripped from the cone; it is delicate and several times the height of the finished hat. The ensuing process is called shrinking and felting. Before the shrinkage is completed, the hats are dyed, and when the body-making process is completed, the hats are stretched and blocked. The finish comes by cutting down the fluffy appearance with fine sandpaper. Then the hat is steamed, pressed and ironed. After that, the finished product is trimmed with leather banding and lining.

At the end of it all, it is no ordinary piece of felt; it is an Akubra.



## THE JOURNEY

**T**wenty years ago, I scoured Australia to photograph quintessential Aussie characters and their hats. In 2008 I ventured forth from Sydney to see if ‘Akubra’ was still Australian for ‘hat’, and it is. From the vast landscapes of the Top End through the iconic Red Centre to the cattle stations of South Australia and Queensland and beyond, we Aussies love our hats. And we wear them.

This new journey took me more than 10,000 kilometres across the country through extraordinary high temperatures, dust storms, electrical storms and floods. Not only did I see some of the best landscapes that Australia has to offer, but more important, I met some of our finest citizens.

It was a great opportunity to catch up with friends and acquaintances, new and old, and witness firsthand the lifestyles that reflect Australians and who we are. Whether you are a townie in northern New South Wales or a bushie in the sheep country of Victoria, your hat becomes synonymous with your story, and this is what I wanted to capture.



### THE GREAT ESCARPMENT

The heritage-listed Lansdowne-Comboyne Escarpment is part of the Great Escarpment that runs east of the Great Divide almost the entire length of eastern Australia. The escarpment makes a significant contribution to the regional water catchment. Prominent volcanic plugs and exposed bedrock are characteristic of it. Once a busy farming community, the landscape now supports farmers, retirees and sea-changers.

## TRAVELLING NORTH

**I**t has often been said that the outback begins on the western side of the Great Divide. Most Australians live on the eastern side of this haphazard mountain range that starts in the tropical forests of Cape York and ends in the bluestone fortresses of the Grampians in southwestern Victoria.

The rich coastal fringe gives way to the rolling hills of the western plains, where the farm activities are as diverse as the character-driven locals who call this region home.

After I left Sydney, my journey took me along Highway One in a northward direction, sometimes tracking westward across the range but mostly toward north Queensland.



MIKE RICHARDSON

Lansdowne Escarpment, New South Wales

A reclusive natural historian eking out a peripheral existence under the Great Escarpment, Mike Richardson is often benighted on his own property. He works part time as a psychiatrist to the disadvantaged and would feel naked west of the Great Divide without his hat, and ‘with a nose like mine you would do too’.



ANITA COOPER

Hookes Creek Forest Retreat, Barrington Tops, New South Wales

Hookes Creek Forest Retreat rouseabout Anita Cooper wears her Akubra every time she goes riding.



**JASON GIZZI**

Hookes Creek Forest Retreat, Barrington Tops, New South Wales

‘I like a well-worn hat, and well fitting so it doesn’t fly off my head when I am galloping after cattle’. Jason Gizzi is a horseman and rouseabout at Hookes Creek Forest Retreat. ‘You shape a hat to the way you like it, and you get attached to it’.