

Alice Mabin: Riding the long paddock

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Drovers move cattle down the "long paddock."

It's quite the journey ... from high country shepherd to winner of a national business award.

But it's a journey Alice Mabin completed this year when she won the 2015 Asia Pacific Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the self-publishing of her book, *The Drover*.

Mabin's book tells the historic story of the Great Brinkworth Cattle Drive of 2013, when 18,000 head of cattle were moved 2500km down the "long paddock;" the stock routes of inland Queensland and New South Wales.



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Alice Mabin, from high country shepherd to entrepreneur of the year.

When the wet season across Northern Australia failed, multi-million dollar cattle baron Tom Brinkworth, who owns over 100 farms throughout Australia, bought up as many fit northern weaner cattle as he could from Australia's largest cattle business, the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo).

AACo was carrying too many cattle in the drought stricken Northern Territory, and couldn't sell or feed them through to the wet season. Brinkworth purchased them for \$400 each, at a total of \$8 million, making it the biggest livestock sale conducted in Australia's history between a single buyer and a single seller.

The drive began in Winton, Queensland, where the cattle were divided into nine herds of two thousand and staggered- strung out along the route a week apart to enable pasture and waterholes to replenish.



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Cattle crowd around a water trough on the Great Brinkworth Cattle Drive.

However Brinkworth's grand vision to drive his massive new cattle herd down the travelling stock routes of Queensland and NSW did not quite go to plan. The drive was stalked by drought, and thousands of the weaker and pregnant cattle were leapfrogged ahead by truck.

When the main herd finally reached the end point of Uardry Station, near Hay in NSW, eight months later, they found no respite from the drought and Brinkworth was forced to move the cattle again, spreading them across his properties along the Darling River and into South Australia.

Livestock manager of stock brokers Elders, Ron Rutledge, says, "It's the magnitude of what he has done: 18,000 cattle, nine mobs, 70 drovers, eight months, two states and 2500km. A staggering feat of logistics, of courage and a vision on the scale of a military exercise...it's an achievement of national significance..."

So how did Mabin get mixed up in this?

Originally from the Hawkes Bay, Mabin completed a science degree at Otago University, before securing a job as a shepherd and musterer on Glenmore Station in the Mackenzie Country. After two years she moved herself and her dogs on to Caberfeidh in the Hakatamea, to get experience on a "more intensive" property. From here she moved to Omarama Station, near the Lindis Pass, and on to Australia, where ironically, she worked as a jillaroo on Uardry, the same station made famous for being the end of the drive.

Eventually returning to New Zealand, she began a career with international pharmaceuticals company Pfizer, working as a rep in animal medicine. This paid her a six figure salary, took her around New Zealand, to Australia and finally to Canada. It was here she had another change of heart.

"Most of my clients were studs," Mabin says, "and I noticed their marketing and photography to promote their livestock was terrible. They didn't know how to sell themselves."

Identifying a possible niche, she went back to part time study, winning a degree in photography and a diploma in journalism. Deciding to set up her own business, she employed a business mentor.

"I had friends with businesses who were always struggling, and I didn't want to be like them," she says.

The day she resigned from Pfizer was the day she approached the cattle drive, asking if she could spend a few hours taking photographs. A few hours turned into a few days, then five months, during which she rode out daily with the herd and the drovers, and took 10,000 photographs. At the end her mentor suggested she document the journey in a book, saying she had "captured a piece of history" worth preserving. While droving was woven into the fabric of Australian history, it was a rare event today, he said.

The rest of Mabin's story has a history of its own. Self-publishing, she could only afford to print 1000 copies before her bank account was cleaned out. Bookshops don't support self-publishers; something she hadn't realised. Worried she'd made the biggest mistake of her life, she returned to the towns the cattle had passed through to sell her books... and within a week had sold the lot.

She has now sold 16,000 copies of *The Drover* and it is a four-time Australian best seller. It sells in a wealth of country shops, cafes, saddleries and grocery stores across rural Australia. She is currently doing a promotional tour of New Zealand, distributing the book where she can.

What's more, she has a sequel planned: *The Driver: Australia on the Back of a Truck*.

"The Australia I get to see compared to what the tourists see is so amazing," she says. "I think that's what's made *The Drover* such a hit."

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