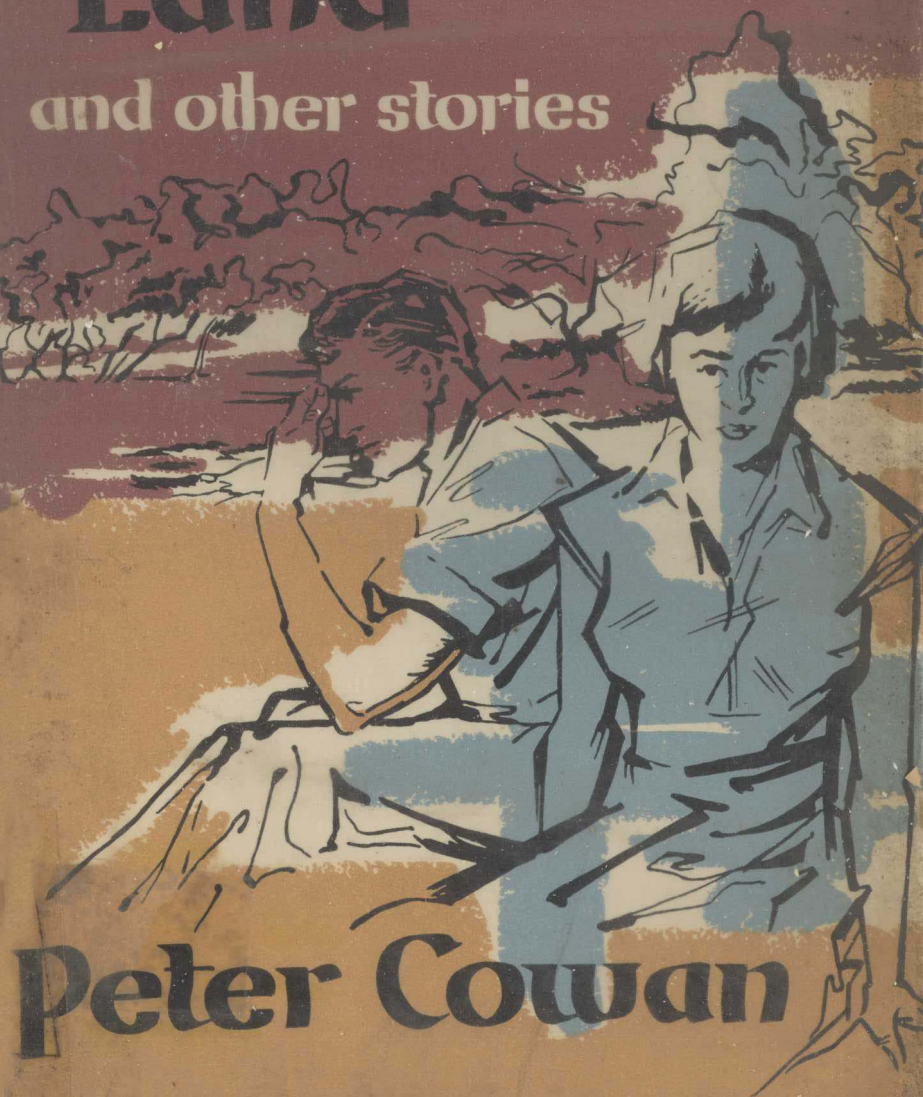


The Unploughed Land

and other stories



Peter Cowan

THE UNPLOUGHED LAND

STORIES
by
~~PETER GOWAN~~



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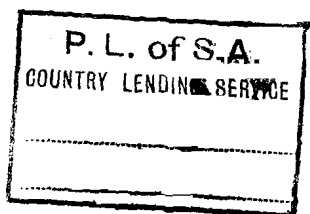
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Isolation

To the eagle swinging well up the two clearings were as one, and only a dot of lighter colour in the spread of undulating forest. But in the great bird holding the air with its stretched, taut wings there was an awareness that this light patch of colour was a new thing in its timber-covered domain, and something not in the natural, unchanged order of things which it knew. More sharply, the dot below held significance because occasionally it yielded food. Also it held danger.

For the two men who had carved them from the forest the clearings meant life, and the wedge they had driven to form a split in the forest did not appear to them, as it might have done had they been able to view it from where the eagle hung, a minute chink which might have closed in on them at the will of that forest.

The wedge-tail planed lower. The clearings took on distinctness, individuality; the small buildings showed as dark blots, the iron roofs gleamed with a brightness not yet dulled by sun and rain, the dead ringbarked trees twisted strangely above the cleared land, contrasting with the living wall of forest pressing in on the cleared space.

From the ground a rooster strutting among a group of hens appeared the first living thing to observe the eagle. It raised its head and gave a sudden high warning call to its flock.

Then abruptly the purpose and grace of the eagle's slow descent was lost. The bird veered, swung, one wing towards the hard pale sky, the other dipping at the trees, and with a clumsy undulating flight swept away over the greyish carpet of trees as though caught by a sudden gusty wind. It had veered before the sound of the shot spread across the valley.

A few yards from the hut where the shot had been fired a horse was tied to the fence and, startled by the rifle, was shifting restlessly, pulling against the halter rope. The horse

was between the shafts of a light sulky and the sweat was still wet on him.

From the back of the hut a man with the gun still in his hands walked over to quieten the horse. But on reaching the sulky he seemed in a mind to complete what had evidently been neglected before and, loosening the halter, led the horse across to a shed, backed the sulky in, and unharnessed. He turned the horse loose, watched it make for the soak half-way down the hill, and then walked back to the hut, looking round above the trees as he went, though he knew there would be no sign of the eagle.

He went inside and stood the gun in the corner near the door.

"One we won't get," he said. "Saw the gun. He's wise now."

The man he spoke to was sitting on a box pulled up to a table in the centre of the room.

"Might lay a bait for him," he suggested.

A number of papers lay on the table, most still in their postal wrappers, and a few letters, some open.

As though the eagle he had shot at had been dismissed from his own mind and that of his companion, Jim moved across to the table and, picking up one of the rolled newspapers, began tapping the end of it on the table.

The hut was small and square. The table took up the centre. There were two beds along the walls, one under the double window to the right of the door. Farther along there was a rough corner wardrobe with faded green curtains. On the opposite wall to the windows was a bench and shelves and a black wood-stove with no hearth. On the shelves were dishes, blackened pots, a frying-pan. From the window the edge of a new, slightly larger building on the adjoining block could be seen, barely a hundred yards away.

Neither of the men spoke. Jim looked down at the table, the other, as though in avoidance, staring out of the window. In the small hut the monotonous tapping of the paper on the table made a regular, almost authoritative noise as though it must cease before either man might speak.

"No," Jim said abruptly. "If you're set on it you might as well do it as hang about."

Morris shifted his gaze from the paddocks beyond the window to the man standing above the table. His own voice

as he spoke was deeper, more reflective than Jim's, which had been rather high and holding a querulous note. He was bigger than Jim, with long features, long nose and chin, thin cheeks, a wide forehead enhanced by the receding line of his thin dark hair. His eyes were not the brown to be expected in one of his dark complexion, but a light grey. They were not as hard as Jim's dark quick eyes, and were more tolerant, showing more of a recognition of things beyond the immediate, something of the remoteness of the dreamer.

"And you're set on making things hard. It won't make all that much difference."

"Looks to me," Jim said, "like it makes all the difference. We'll go different ways. When you get a wife and later kids you're working for different things."

"Yes." Morris jerked his hand at the hut. "I'd hate to work for nothing but this."

"All right. There's a time for it, isn't there? We got to work for this now. Later, when we get ahead of it, well, you can look for something else then."

Morris shook his head. "Too long. And there's too many chances. But we can go on just the same."

"We can't. We didn't look for this. Or I didn't. Most of the stock are yours."

"We can work on the same basis."

"It wouldn't work. Not for me, anyhow. I don't want someone else making my way for me. And you'll want all you've got. See, we haven't got enough, the time's not right for that. It's been tough enough going for us, but if you bring somebody else on—"

"All right," Morris said. "I'm sorry you won't look at it any other way. I know what it'll be like. And Jean knows. But she's willing to come. A man can't go on by himself like this all the time, Jim."

"It's more or less a new start for me," Jim said. "It's knocked a bit of a hole in things for me. Still, I can look after that. It doesn't have to worry you. You go ahead."

"It doesn't have to be like that. You know that."

"I'm not going to come on you when you're trying to start

off married life. I'm not coming on anyone. I can make my own way."

Morris moved his hand slowly, then brought it suddenly down on the table and pushed the box back.

"All right, Jim. Only thing we can do, see how it works."

Jim nodded. "And you're going up Saturday?"

"Yes. Have a week in town, then back here."

He had been ten miles in the sulky towards the siding that morning for the mail they received once a week. On the way to the meeting place for the mailman he had, as had become his habit, gone out to the farm where Jean worked for friends. The farm was one of the few of those pushed beyond the fringe of the timber. Jean had left her family's property in the older established wheat-belt to the north to come to the timber country for a holiday rather than with any idea of staying. At first she missed the distances of the wheat-belt, the wide acres broken only by the small ridges and rises and the scattered, irregular belts of scrub. The forest depressed her, there was no horizon, vision ended at the clearing's limits, at the dark wall the timber made about each cleared space. She had felt shut in, bound to the routine of existence almost visibly by the ever-present line of trees. But the forest began to lay its hold on her, and she began to catch something of the feeling of those who were opening up the country. It was the wheat-belt that lost reality, and faded in her memory.

And Morris's visit that morning had been to Jim in a sense a climax to months of waiting. Knowing that it would end like this, he had yet kept, in the absence of finality, a faint half-hope, born of his desire, that it might not be so. But he had known even that was vain, and now in the certainty of it he felt himself in a way cheated. Underneath his sense that in the reorganization to come he suffered the greater disability, and that sense was strong, there lay something deeper, akin to superstition. For him the land was something vital, something into which he projected his own hopes and fears, and whose indifference or hostility had to be met not only by unremitting labour but also by a kind of inner resolution, a dedication of oneself wholly to its service. By such an attitude hostility or indifference might, if they could not be turned to benevolence,

at least be allayed, kept, as it were, unaroused. And he felt that with their work and plans at a critical point and with such a slender hold on their new soil it might easily enough mean failure to allow some new factor to deflect them from their purpose, to come between them and this application of themselves to the land and the work they had to do. This feeling, which never found its way into words or clear thought, contributed to his decision to go his own way; with it was the sense of injustice that he had to make what was virtually a new start, and a pride that would not allow him to accept what seemed to him charity, and was reluctant to admit how much of the actual money put into the enterprise had been Morris's own. And the cause of his divergence with Morris, and the consequent readjustment, was the woman. She stood for that which he had lost and what he had to make up, and she stood for that which he might lose and for what Morris might lose in the future, so that already she seemed a symbol of failure.

Morris left on the Saturday. For Jim, with the two farms to tend, the week went quickly for a start, then the two days in the middle seemed to drag, and then it was gone altogether.

On the next Saturday towards evening he drove in to the town, the cluster of buildings about the siding. The trees threw long shadows that spread until they covered the narrow brown road, and the sun going behind the rim of timber sent the last of the light slanting through the dark bars of the trees. Driving into the dusk, he did not seem long on the way. As he swung over the crossing at the town he heard the train whistle round the curve up the line. He had no wish to meet them now, he felt awkward and embarrassed. He saw Jean as though for the first time. She had left youth by more than her years. She was not good-looking, but her face held character. There were lines on her forehead and about her eyes, and a straight deep crease between her brows, legacy of responsibility from youth and etched more firmly by sun and wind. Her skin was brown and healthy and her firm body suggestive of strength.

As they greeted each other it seemed to Jim that Morris had told her of his dislike of the marriage and that she was trying to be good to him, and he thought she must feel sorry for him, so that he became more awkward and mortified, and,

driving home in the sulky, only answered questions, offering nothing himself. He had left the fire ready to light in the stove of his own hut and he made them tea. He would not go with them to the new place Morris had put up. But after they had left him he was restless and could not settle down. He went outside and walked out through the back paddocks. He climbed the timbered rise to the back of the farms and, sitting on a log, he smoked and watched the moon come up over the trees to throw queer twisted shadows from the dead trunks in the clearing. Then among the patches of light and shadow below him he saw a figure pass between the two buildings and blend with the darkness that was his own hut. It might have been what he had climbed the hill and watched for. After a while he saw Morris go back over the distance between the two buildings, passing through the gap in the dividing fence they had built, where there was no gate hung. He got up and started back down the rise.

They took up the threads of their isolated lives and went on as though in harmony. But the division was there. Jim worked as though with no thought but for his land. Obscurely there was the determination to show that, thrown on himself, he could do better than if he had not been alone. And there was the desire to prove himself right in what he had said about their farms not being developed to the point where they could afford anything but necessity. He saw Morris trying to compromise, to bring comfort into their way of living. He would himself make no compromise. His hut remained unchanged while Morris's living quarters became a homestead; everything he gained he put back into the land. And slowly his land began to give a better return. There became visible for the first time the division of the two blocks, the fact that they were separate pieces of land shaped by different men. This brought a certain satisfaction in that he was able to justify himself, but he felt that Morris could have made the same use of his own land, that he should have made such use of it, and he felt contemptuous for what he regarded as the obstacle in Morris's path. It seemed to him that Morris missed much in opportunity in these vital years, and he resented what he felt sometimes in Morris, a certain pity for his own solitary way. They worked

together when the work demanded it and he found some satisfaction in a criticism of the methods Morris used, sometimes outright, sometimes implied. But something in the way Morris accepted this without comment, not defending himself, unsettled him and seemed in some way to turn the criticism back on himself.

During these years the district was changing. Men were coming in increasing numbers seeking land. The number of cleared spaces in the forest grew. Long winding roads pushed out from the town the railway had built. Timber mills appeared, branch lines belonging to the mills were laid, the fallers, the bullock-teams, the log landings and saw benches entered the forest. Far in where there had once been stillness there was now the ring of axe and wedge as the sleeper-cutters discovered the district. War began against the trees, the jarrah and karri that were valuable commercially, and against those that were given no value but covered the soil the farms took; war against the trees that brought men there and kept them there. There was no consideration of what might happen when the trees were gone, the trunks passed out unrecognizable from the mills or standing stripped and dead over the cleared land, and such a day seemed remote, even impossible.

The changes that came with development affected more particularly those settlers who had been among the first to enter the district. They affected Jim and Morris, as the others. Mails were more frequent and they did not have to go so far for them. Stores were better and more varied; implements more easily procured and better in quality. There were neighbours.

Perhaps the most significant of these changes to Morris and Jean were the new settlers, their neighbours. The new-comers made possible social activity, the limited social activity of a new, still sparsely populated district, but sociality none the less; they meant visits paid and exchanged, new faces, gossip, dances, parties, picnics, friends, a fuller way of living, a break in the monotony and narrowness of solitude.

Into this Jim would not allow Morris to draw him. In his solitary way it affected him scarcely at all. Of necessity it did set him and Morris even further apart, but he took this as

inevitable, it had in any case come by now to be a thing accepted. The solitude that had become habit had marked Jim. He was now sufficient unto himself. In a queer way he did not seem to live in the present at all. His farm had every modern improvement, but he himself was apart. What he felt of the life he had come to live he never revealed, but if his mind, narrowed by solitude and being little lifted above a constant round of work, admitted that in this aspect he had failed then the symbol of it was still the woman, he could forget the rest; perhaps he had never properly lived in it, had made of the past an everlasting present. But he was beyond the neighbours, they gave him up, regarded him as queer, one of the earlier settlers affected by loneliness and probably not a little hardship, and some felt sorry for him. He was aware of this without caring. He had very little to do with them, they barely touched his life. That they might ever touch him directly he had probably not considered until the fact was forced on him one winter more than twelve years after he and Morris had begun to go their separate ways.

In the night there had been one of the July storms. The wind had torn up trees where the roothold was shaky, flung high branches down in splinters, and driven the rain against the farmhouses. It was still blowing in the morning. Then in the afternoon the wind eased and the sky seemed swept clear of cloud till it was a pale scoured blue. The storms were no uncommon thing and Jean, seeing the weather lighten, took the sulky and drove five miles to a neighbour's place early in the afternoon.

But towards evening the clouds came up over the timber and the wind came again. It came through the trees and onto the clearings as though conscious of its own power, something of purpose about it, a lust to destroy as though it were a force alien and inimical to the earth.

Near five o'clock Jim saw Morris riding his horse out of the yard. He supposed he was taking the horse to bring the cows in for milking, on such a night they were reluctant to leave shelter and be driven. His own cattle were in a paddock near the house, otherwise he would have used a horse him-

self. It was almost dark at five o'clock, the night coming early with the storm, and he hurried through his milking.

In the morning he was making a late breakfast when he heard Jean call from the fence. He went outside.

"Is Morris there?" she asked.

"No," Jim said. Then, "Why?"

She did not say anything, looking at him strangely.

"When did you come home?" Jim said.

"This morning," she said in a queerly subdued voice. "I stayed at Henderson's last night because of the storm. Jim, have you—?"

He looked past her to the milking yards where the cows were grouped, some standing, some lying, waiting with a patience that later would evaporate. They had not been milked. He did not say anything, but as he turned away there was something in his eyes that frightened her, it was as though he had been waiting.

He caught his horse and rode through to Morris's place. He went down the steep slope towards the road, dragging the horse up before the gate. As he reached to unlatch the gate he heard a horse coming down the slope. He saw Jean on Morris's big black mare.

He kicked the gate open.

"You go back," he said quickly.

She took no notice. He was about to follow her when he saw some distance down the fence in the timber the horse Morris had ridden the night before. It was still saddled but the bridle was gone. He thought Jean had not seen it. He set his horse after hers along the road.

The path of the storm was plain. Boughs and limbs were flung on the road and through the timber to each side. Twisted trees leant against others still standing, or were hurled full length on the earth, a huge mushroom-like spread of newly torn red soil about their roots. There were trees on the road and they had to go through the timber to get by. In places through the timber the smashed tree-tops and splintered arms and trunks made swathes where the wind had cut through the forest like a binder in a field of wheat. In contrast the morning itself was clear and fresh after the storm, the sky a pale clean

blue, bright and hard, and the unbroken trees and undergrowth washed by the rain and taking on a depth of green in the early light.

Along the road a couple of miles Jim branched off to a track that served as a short cut to Henderson's. It was wide enough only for a horse and was blocked now by limbs and boughs. Jean had brought the sulky home round by the road. She followed Jim as he worked through the timber. They found Morris a short distance along the track. Jim could not tell whether he had been struck by a falling limb or killed by a fall when the horse took fright. He took Jean on to Henderson's. Frank Henderson and his two sons came back with him.

Jim looked after the other farm until, some days later, Jean returned. She came with Frank Henderson and his wife in Henderson's sulky. Jim saw them coming up the rise from the road, and he went over to the homestead. In the time he had been alone on the farm Morris had owned he had made his plans. When the Hendersons had gone he and Jean were left standing on the veranda together. It was late afternoon. The shadows from the trees in the gully by the road were lengthening and spreading up the slope towards the house.

Jim said, looking down at the road, "I suppose you will be going now?"

She turned towards him. She looked worn out, her eyes were dark and heavy, and the lines deepened on her face. She did not attempt to avoid his gaze. He was staring at her queerly as though something in the weariness of her pleased him.

"Not now," she said, accenting the first word.

"Not? Why?" He looked startled. "Do you mean—?"

"I'm going to keep the farm. I'm going to work it."

For a minute he didn't say anything, and it was she who regarded him. He did not look at her.

He said, "You couldn't. That's a thing you couldn't do."

"I've thought about it and I think I can."

"It's no job for a woman. And you couldn't do it. It'd be better if you were to go."

"Where would I go?" she asked with a hint of mockery.

"Eh? I don't know. Back to your people, I suppose."

"My mother and father are dead. And I'm not sure I know where my two brothers are. They sold the property, you know."

She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone and Jim felt she was laughing at him.

"I'd buy this property," he said slowly. "I'd make you an offer."

"I don't want to sell. But why do you want it, Jim, anyhow?"

He looked away. "I'll offer for it."

"No," she said.

He swung on her suddenly. "If it'd been you—"

She nodded, undisturbed. "I know. You think—think I killed him, don't you?"

"Yes," he said. "And now you're going to keep his land. You'll kill that."

"You're ridiculous—"

"You look at my land and tell me it's not better than yours," he said excitedly. "His would have been like that but for you. Now you've killed him and you're going to keep the land—land you can't work—"

"Oh," she cried, "oh, you're crazy! You're a man crazy from living by himself. You're not sane. You've no right to say that. For God's sake go—leave me alone—"

"I will," he said. "I'll go. But I'll offer you for this farm—it's the last time I'll make it—"

"No."

He moved towards the steps. Abruptly he turned, and his face was agonized as he spoke.

"I—I'll make you any—any offer."

"No," she said, and she saw now something of why he wanted the land. And because of what she had suffered those past few days and because of his attitude and the hate that had risen between them in these present moments stronger than ever in all their past passive dislike she was glad she held now that which he set such store upon.

He stumbled down the steps and as he went he heard the door bang behind her as she turned quickly and went inside. At the end of the week he had hung a gate on the gate-posts on the dividing fence. He brought his dog back if he saw it go

through the fence to the house on the other side as it had been used to doing. He kept it with him for some days and it soon learnt not to go.

One service he performed for her alone broke what would have seemed to an outsider a ridiculous isolation, but which had to them in the small orbit of their lives become paramount. Twice a week the mailman came to within two miles of their farms. Jim rode out to collect the mail and stores ordered from the town. This he performed and she accepted largely because it would have been too awkward for them both to have ridden the two miles to be at the one place at the same time. The mail was frequently late and they had no wish to embarrass themselves by waiting together on the lonely road. And any other arrangement would have made obvious their private feeling to the entire community.

Jean worked her farm, milked the cows, tended the pigs and the small orchard, ploughed before and with the early rains, cut the meadow grass and oats in late spring for hay. She reduced the number of cattle and the acreage of the farm to be worked to a size she could handle.

Occasionally the pigs or stock of one would wander onto the other's block. Mostly it was the ever foraging pigs. They would drive them off and in silent protest were to be seen repairing the fence where the marauders had broken through. No words were exchanged about it.

Then after the first winter, when the grass was high in the paddocks and there was a breath of heat in the days after the sharp, clear early mornings, Jim, waiting for the hay-cutting, one morning saw Jean harnessing the horses to the mower. As she moved off to the paddocks he ducked through the fence and followed her.

She saw him approach and halted the horses. She sat on the mower waiting for him. She said nothing as he came up.

"See you're mowing," he said, waving his hand at the pasture. "When you finish and want to get the hay in I'll come over. You can't handle it on your own, and labour's hard to get—and costs money."

"It really doesn't matter—" she began.