

A
SOLDIER
SETTLER

SHIRLEY BURKE

PREFACE

Soldier Settlers in the Mallee

The area of the Victorian Mallee in which this story is set had been issued to graziers on long-term leases. In the late 1800s the government of the day established a Closer Settlement Board and as these leases expired, the land was surveyed and subdivided. A square mile, six hundred and forty acres,¹ was the regular size of these lots. The government's aim was to extend the land area under cultivation to produce more wheat, both for home consumption and for export. In July of 1914 Robert Poole surveyed Victorian Mallee land from the Patchewollock area, and further south to the old lease of Yallum. By early 1915, successful applicants had been allocated their land at Yallum.

However the government had not attended to the details of this settlement and there were many problems to be addressed. There were rough bush tracks, but no roads. There was no railway line close enough to allow practical transport of goods and grain. Water was scarce. A household had to manage with rainwater tanks but, as the power to clear and work farms was supplied by teams of horses, much more than tank water was required. With a relatively low rainfall and often light sandy soil, catchment dams were not a reliable source of water. In some places there was underground

¹ 640 acres = approx. 259 hectares

water, but it was difficult to access, its reliability uncertain, and the settlers could not afford to have deep bores installed. Further south in the Grampians, water storages were improved to service the Wimmera, but no channel system had yet been planned for this new northern area. Hence very little settlement progress was possible.

After World War 1, attractive financial terms and conditions convinced many returned servicemen to try their luck on the land. Many war veterans who took up the challenge had wives who had come from comfortable backgrounds with no prior knowledge of making do in remote Mallee areas. Through this story of fictional characters, Will Shepherd and his family, the author pays tribute to the men and women who, with grit and determination, faced similar challenges.

CHAPTER ONE

The shot shattered the quiet of the early morning. Jolted from sleep, Will Shepherd rose and dressed quietly so as not to disturb his mother. He left the house and walked toward the stable. He spotted the battered work cap that his father had worn and stooped to pick it up. Hugging it to his chest and blinded by tears he'd tried to suppress, he passed through the stable and blundered into the dark shape of the colt, Jet. He put his arms around the horse's neck and sobbed into the soft warmth of his coat. That was where Michael O'Malley found him when he returned from the freshly turned earth in the gully behind the stable.

'I know there are no words that can take away the sadness, Will,' he said. 'I was going to tell you on your birthday, but now's the right time. I want you to have Jet. He's yours.'

For weeks, as he slept, Will Shepherd relived the nightmare of his father's death. It haunted him. His father standing in the stable yard, oats on his outstretched hand and the black stallion reaching towards him. The long splinter of wood, from the destroyed loosebox door, dangling from where it was skewered close beneath the horse's eye. Then, in a flash, as his father pulled the splinter free, the huge black shape reared and crashed him to the ground. Will always woke in a sweat, his heart pounding. Then his memory took him on the desperate drive to the hospital at Horsham.

That had been in December, a week before his fourteenth birthday.

With the nightmare week behind him, Will had persuaded Michael O'Malley to let him try his hand at taking over his father's work, training the year's crop of foals till they were ready for sale as two-year-olds. He had managed well, for like his father, Bill, he had a gift for handling horses.

Will gazed across the gentle slope of pasture and along the creek. Land! Will's dream was to one day own a stretch of land. He admired what Michael O'Malley had achieved. An astute man, Michael had established his land and set about breeding horses to fill the needs of local farmers for horses to pull their buggies and carts, to ride on their properties or into town. His venture was profitable, and this enabled him to build a new and bigger house for his wife, Molly, and the family they would have.

He hired Bill Shepherd who had established a reputation in the district as an expert horse trainer. Newlywed Bill and his wife, Ellen, moved into the former O'Malley cottage. Their son, Will, grew up with the O'Malley children – Kate, the same age as Will, and Connor, two years younger. Will had loved the horses that surrounded his home and spent most of his free time with his father around the stables.

Ever since the children had been of school age, Bill Shepherd had delivered Kate and Connor to St John's Catholic School, and Will to Horsham Central Primary, every day. But when Michael O'Malley arranged to replace his old stallion with one purchased from Ben Lang near Warracknabeal, life at O'Malley's changed forever.

The stallion had been led to O'Malley's property by brothers Curly and Joe, who had been working for Ben Lang. That evening Joe had slid from his saddle, obviously relieved.

'Phew, he was a right bugger to lead,' he had exclaimed.

The papers accompanying the stallion listed his registered name and pedigree details, but he had been renamed Satan by Lang's wife, who mistrusted him and had declared he was black as sin, and that the name Satan suited him. She had urged her husband to be rid of him.

Devastated by Bill Shepherd's death, Michael O'Malley had Satan destroyed to ensure there would be no more progeny with his mean streak. The present crop of foals would be the last; from now on, he would concentrate on stocking beef cattle.

The tragedy which had widowed Ellen Shepherd and made Will fatherless, left them with an uncertain future. Will began work on the understanding that there would be two more years' training the recent crop of foals; after that, ongoing employment with cattle if Will wished.

Ellen Shepherd was offered work with Ivy Collins, a long-time friend who had established a dressmaking business in Horsham. A widow for many years, Ivy had recently remarried and wanted to spend part of her time in her husband's jeweller's shop. Ellen, although nervous at the prospect of new work, accepted her offer and moved to Horsham to live in the premises behind the shop.

Will stayed on in the cottage at O'Malley's. There were few daily school trips to Horsham after he began work, as it was near the year's end. Kate too, near the end of her school year had left to assist her mother with the many tasks Ellen Shepherd had hitherto performed.

One of these school trips was to bring about a major change in Connor's future. Inspired by his cousin's report of the recent Melbourne Cup, he had constructed a crude whip to test Jet's speed as he pulled the buggy to town. Out on the open road, Connor produced his whip and swung it across Jet's rump. Stung and startled, Jet bolted. Before Will could regain control, the buggy, lurching dangerously, slewed into a guidepost by a culvert. When Michael O'Malley rode out to inspect the damaged buggy, he found Connor's whip and could see what had caused the horse to bolt. Connor had caused many problems, but this was the last straw. In the New Year, Michael arranged for him to board at St Patrick's College in Ballarat. Michael demanded that Connor apologise to Will. Already jealous of Will who had earned his father's approval

and respect, Connor vowed revenge.

Joe, after having helped deliver Satan, had ridden back to Lang's and picked up his kit and pay, for O'Malley had offered him permanent work to improve his fencing and to assist with the greater number of cattle he planned to stock. Joe returned with his belongings tied in bundles suspended from his saddle. Will was pleased to see the man who had accompanied him in the desperate dash to Horsham hospital with his injured father. To work with Joe cheered Will and boosted his confidence. With Ellen now settled in Horsham, Joe shared the cottage and was company for Will.

Will worked on with the last yearlings. He loved the horses and every day brought satisfaction, but the brood mares had been sold and the rest of the horses would soon be gone. Will was concerned for his future.

From a neighbour, Ken Scott, who had been at work scooping and building retaining walls for Lake Fyans as part of the Grampians water storage system, Will learned of other work options.

'Up north they're surveyin' miles o' channels, right up past Warrack.' said Ken. 'I hear they're subdividin' land in the Mallee.'

Will considered this; maybe here was the answer for him for future work. When Will was next in town he called at the State River's office.

But Will's hopes were dashed by the answer to his enquiry.

'Sorry, son,' said the clerk, 'that work's been allocated to contractors who have their experienced men and teams already lined up.'

'Oh, I see,' said Will.

'I'd like to say you could get the channel work, but I doubt any of the contractors would take you on. It's heavy work; you've got to be able to handle your team and at the same time guide the scoop. You'd need to carry a lot more weight to handle the work.'

Will left the office. It had not occurred to him that he would not be strong enough for this type of work. He thought of Ken Scott, a big powerful man, almost made two of Will. He climbed into the

buggy and drove away disappointed.

Will was restless. He had carefully banked almost all that he had earned for the past two years. He knew he was a long way short of his goal to have his own property, so he must find a way to earn and save more money. He talked to Michael O'Malley.

'I'm thinking about going north for a bit,' said Will. 'I've heard about land being subdivided and I'd like to see it. That's if you don't need me here at the moment.'

'You know, son, you're welcome to stay on here – plenty of work with cattle and fencing. But I can understand you wanting to size up other opportunities. You're free to head off.'

Will paid two pounds for a disused cart and, with Joe's help, made it roadworthy. He repaired a set of discarded harness from the stable store and gathered a bedroll, some supplies for his horse and himself, and was soon ready to go north to see for himself what opportunities may be there.

Lastly, Will rode into Horsham to see his mother. To his relief, Ellen was not surprised; she had been expecting Will would seek other work possibilities.

'You will write and let me know where you are,' she said. 'Wait a minute Will.' Ellen turned back to the shop. She returned with a calico bag in which Will found writing paper and some envelopes, a few stamps, and pencils.

'Thanks, Mother,' he said. 'Now I have no excuse for not keeping in touch. I don't know how long I'll be away. Depends on what I find out, but if there's some work that pays well along the way, I may be gone for some time. Don't worry about me, I'll look after myself, I promise.' With a quick hug, a happy grin and a wave, Will was off.

The land was dry, browned, flat and depressing as Will drove north towards Warracknabeal, the first township along the roughly

limestoned road. On the outskirts of the town, he left his cart, and hobbled his horse beside the Yarriambiack Creek, where there was a sparse picking of grass; it would make a rough camp site for the night. Will wandered past a variety of shops along Scott Street and paused as he came to Cooper's Palace Hotel, where a group of locals lingered. Clearly a stranger in town, they glanced at him curiously.

'G'day. Just got into town?' one of the locals greeted him as he walked by.

'Yes, drove up from Horsham today. I'm headed up north; hope to find some work.' Will spoke quickly, unsure of himself and acutely aware of being on his own and knowing no-one.

'You'd have to be lucky, there's not much about. A poor harvest, and money's pretty tight.'

'Bob Piper,' said a toil-worn man. Will extended his hand, grateful to feel a degree of acceptance.

A second man, hearing Will's comment about looking for work, stepped forward.

'Ron Webster. I won't offer you my hand, too bloody sore. Got it jammed in a cow bail yesterday; one of the old girls got edgy. Reckon I've broken something, the way it feels. The missus has had to do the milking since, and she's not happy. Could you handle a milking job till I can manage it again?'

'I'm no expert, but I'll have a go.' Will grinned, recalling his milking debut at O'Malley's with old Silver, the family's milk supply.

'Only ten cows left from my herd of seventy since the local butter factory closed,' explained Ron. 'Supply the regular customers in town. Could you start in the morning?'

'I'll be there,' answered Will.

After a quick introduction to the missus, who was already milking, and who favoured him with a curt nod, Will set to work. Ron's wife finished milking the first cow and quietly disappeared. She did not grace the milking yard again. It took Will longer than he had expected, but finally the milking was done. But the

Warracknabeal job was short term, as after the third week Ron's hand had healed enough for him to resume milking.

'Thanks, Will, great having you help out. I'd like to keep you on but can't afford to. You understand?'

Will nodded. It had been a good break and now he felt more confident about meeting strangers. He left the Websters with his pay in cash and armed with half a home-baked loaf, a pat of fresh-churned butter, and a billy of tomatoes from the missus' garden. He'd also gathered information from local estate agents that, at six pounds an acre, land here was almost as dear as that around Horsham.

The further north he travelled, the drier it became. The sun beat down, delivering a scorching burst of summer, and the only change in the land was that the flatness gave way to low rolling hills. He paused at Beulah, a small cluster of houses and a general store. The creek behind the town was dammed with a rough weir. A few lads splashed and swam. Will tried the water too. It was cool, clear and refreshing. He camped there overnight.

Travelling north still, he crossed the Yarriambiack Creek, now dwindled to a dry bed. He approached Hopetoun, a small town crouched on a low hill that sloped gently up from the surrounding farmland. Following the road into the town's centre, he reached a wide intersection where stood a large iron tank. It was a water store, he presumed. Down the slope to his right, Will discovered a small lake, which he later learned was Lake Lascelles. Although low, it appeared to be the town water supply. Beyond was a larger, dry lakebed into which the dry creek course had disappeared. Will found a small flat patch of grass by the lake's edge where he could hobble his horse to graze. Though not yet noon, the heat seemed to press down as he toiled back up the slope to the main street. There were several shops, two well established stores, some churches, and two hotels to serve this community. Near the post office stood a building with *Karkaroor Shire* painted on the front.

Will entered the building and inquired of the clerk about the land

that was to be subdivided north of Hopetoun.

‘Do you mean the Yallum plain, or further north up Patchewollock way?’ asked the clerk.

‘About twenty miles north of here, I was told. Would that be the Yallum lot?’ asked Will.

‘It would. It’s been leasehold for years, sheep grazing.’

‘What’s the land like? Is it similar to around here?’ persisted Will.

“‘Dry” is the best word,’ replied the clerk. ‘Mind you, I haven’t seen it, but there’s been no rain so it’s going to be much the same as you see around here. Some grassed flat plain area, I believe, and a lot of mallee scrub on light sandy soil. Only eight or nine blocks have been surveyed there. The Closer Settlement board interviewed applicants a few months back and I think the blocks have all been allocated.’

Will’s face fell. He had assumed that no-one would want to settle this land until the channels came through. ‘I’d like to ride there and see for myself.’

‘Wouldn’t advise it right now,’ the clerk went on. ‘For a start, the track is rough, and I believe hardly exists once you get past Mill’s corner. No water for your horse; the few farmers north of Hopetoun are carting water for their horses so have none to spare. Same goes for the land around Patchewollock; it’s been surveyed, too, but only a few applications are trickling in for it.’

‘Then there’s no way I can see any of this land?’ Will’s voice betrayed his disappointment at having come all this way for nothing.

‘Rain will come, even though there’s talk of another dry year. Have you worked on cropping land?’

‘No, on grazing country, cattle, and I worked training horses. Mr O’Malley, the boss, grew oats for the horses on some of his land, but he had another farmer do that. Land’s very pricey back in the Wimmera, that’s why I’ve come north to look at the new subdivisions.’

‘Don’t give up on it. Some of these blocks will come up again.’

There'll be the odd farmer who can't make a go of it. But you need to get some experience working with someone who's been growing wheat. To put in an application, you have to be able to convince the board you know a bit about farming.' The shire clerk thought for a moment. 'Tell you what: I can't help you right now, but if you leave me your name and an address where I can reach you, I'll let you know if there's an opening on any of the blocks around here for work.'

Will hastily addressed one of his mother's envelopes and handed it over. He thanked the man for his help. His only option now was to retrace his tracks. *The long drive was a waste of time*, he thought ruefully.

He called to see Ron Webster as he passed by Warracknabeal. Sensing his disappointment, Ron tried to cheer him. 'As soon as the weather breaks, all the cockies'll be flat out. You might get someone to take you on then.'

As he continued south, Will turned in at several properties to ask about work when rain came. The answers were all the same: not enough cash to pay anyone, sorry. He passed Lang's gate and momentarily thought of asking there, but the memory of the stallion that had caused his father's death was still raw. He rode on to O'Malley's, disheartened.