

BY CLAIRE SCOBIE

She would come to love the tough cattle country of the Kimberley. But Sheryl McCorry paid a heavy personal price for an extraordinary life.

Hard reign of the cattle queen

THE FIRST TIME Sheryl McCorry went on a wild cattle muster, she knew she was being tested. Her backside had barely touched the seat of the buggy before the head stockman put his foot to the floor. “The feeling was, women don’t do this,” says McCorry, now 58. “This is a man’s job.” Determined to prove them wrong, when the beast was on the ground, McCorry jumped out with a strap and tied its legs together. At 22, she had triumphed on her first rogue bull run. Some 10 years later, she would be the only woman to run two million-acre (809,371 hectare) cattle stations in the Kimberley, with the tag, “No bull, she’s boss.”

With her flyaway golden hair, navy jeans and Akubra, McCorry looks like she just stepped off the set of *McLeod’s Daughters*. Except her life is all the more remarkable because it’s true – and scarred by tragedy. Little fazes this grazer, who now lives south of Mount Barker in Western Australia. She’s dug maggots out of her mechanic’s fly-blown sores, had two close calls with king browns and, in 1987, evaded the “Kimberley Killer”, the serial murderer who stalked and shot five tourists.

A breast cancer scare eight years ago precipitated her decision to write her story, *Diamonds and Dust*. “My life seemed quite normal. It’s only since putting it on paper that I’ve realised it was different,” she says in her honeyed outback drawl.

After growing up around Darwin, McCorry spent her teenage years on the Gove Peninsula. Weekends were expeditions with “four fishing-crazy brothers” or buffalo hunting with their father, who worked for the mining company Gominco. After a brief disastrous marriage to an American called Chuck, the 21-year-old eagerly quit her telephonist job in Broome to take up an offer to learn mustering on a remote station outside Derby. The invitation was from Bob McCorry, a silent brooding man whom she’d first noticed at her “farical wedding”. Even though he was 20 years her senior, they were married in 1973.

FROM THE OUTSET life was tough. Their homestead on Oobagooma station was made from corrugated iron; her first bed was a war-era camp stretcher. The couple managed a succession of cash-strapped properties in the remote Kimberley. There were no fences between stations and range wars – over unbranded cattle – were frequent. Bob McCorry had no fear in taking on his neighbours or the “Stock Squad” detectives.

Bob could be cruel – he once shot two of his dogs found chasing his beloved horses – but, says Sheryl, “he loved his children so much that they could do nearly whatever they wanted”. Such devotion was to have an unimaginable cost. In 1981, with their two children, five-year-old Kelly and three-year-old Leisha,

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SHERYL MCCORRY ON HER SON’S DEATH

the McCorrys took over Louisa and Bohemia Downs, owned by the Australian Land & Cattle Co. Despite Sheryl’s insistence that her son Kelly was not to ride on the bull bar on the buggy, one day, while in Bob’s care, Kelly did just that. The little boy lost his footing and fell underneath the vehicle, breaking his neck. Sheryl McCorry’s world turned black.

That death, in April 1981, also dismantled their marriage. It was too painful to speak about and, she says, “the biggest mistake that we both made ... I know Bob blamed himself so terribly”, Bob’s quiet demeanour

PURE GOLD

End of a day’s muster
in the Kimberley



BOSS COCKY
Sheryl McCorry, true blue mistress of the million acres

that had filled their earlier days now lengthened into chronic depression. Even the birth of a son, Robby, five years later, could not shift Bob’s increasingly erratic mood swings or all-night drinking binges.

Sheryl stuck it out for the sake of the children – an adopted daughter Kristy had joined Leisha and Robby – and in the hope that the man she still loved would “come back”. Throughout, it was the Aborigines – there were some 60 living and working in the camps on Louisa station – who were there for her: “I had more faith and trust in the Aborigines than in a lot of white people.” That trust was reciprocated – she was the only woman in the Kimberley who would dig graves to bury Aboriginal dead. “A lot of the other white managers wouldn’t have dirtied their hands.” For McCorry, it was an honour, if a harrowing one. After digging a resting place for one old man, Joe Nipperappi, she stood among his relatives who were wailing and singing hymns and other songs in their tribal language. “It was the most moving ceremony. They kept bringing up my boy Kelly and touching on my loss as well.”

As her career took off, McCorry’s marriage continued to unravel. In 1984, as a way to boost their finances, she encouraged Bob to become a contract musterer while she applied to be sole manager of Louisa and Bohemia



HARD YAKKA
Wrestling the livestock,
above, and with
brooding husband Bob at
Oobagooma station in 1971

Downs. By 1986, following her success in the job, she was offered the position of general manager of Kimberley and Napier Downs, both million-acre properties close to the Gibb River Road. "Bob backed me all the way," says McCorry. But when newspaper stories appeared lauding Sheryl as "the cattle queen of the Kimberley", "he ignored me".

In 1992, McCorry's world would again be rocked. Bob, plagued by ill-health and taking a mixture of medications, includ-

ing morphine, was accused of indecently assaulting a 16-year-old friend of Leisha. He pleaded guilty and was fined \$5000. Weeks later, the teenager contacted Sheryl and Leisha, telling them it had "been blown out of proportion". They have since reconciled but, says Sheryl, it took a long time to forgive.

Although they divorced three years later, Sheryl and Bob McCorry's lives were braided until the end. By 1996, each owned farms just 18km apart near Albany in WA. Two

years later, Sheryl found her former husband unconscious on the bathroom floor. He had terminal cancer.

In all those years, he'd never uttered to her those three simple words, "I love you". "I'd waited 20 years for that and ..." her voice cracks, "barely on his death knock, he waited until then to tell me. The old bugger." ●

Diamonds and Dust: The Story of a Million-Acre Cattle Queen, by Sheryl McCorry, is published this month by Macmillan, \$35