

Where the River Ends - Background ...

I was born and grew up in the northern New South Wales town of Bourke. During these days Bourke was well known for its sheep (wool) industry. Now cotton is its number 1 export.

I decided to set my second novel, *Where the River Ends*, here, in this outback town. Looking back through the general history of the area, I thought that the late 1890s, and on, were interesting times. It was, in a sense, the beginning of the end of the paddle steamer era, as well as the days of the Great Shearers' Strikes, depression years, and the birth of the Labor Party. In 1902 the worst drought on record decimated the land. All these events would, I knew, provide a fascinating historical background for my characters.

Following the success of my first novel, *When Hope is Strong*, my publisher, Pan Macmillan offered me a contract for the book, on the basis of a 2-page synopsis. Secure in the knowledge that I had a guaranteed publication contract, I madly began researching my story.

Research plays such an important part of historical novels and, to be able to place my characters in *Where the River Ends* in the period about which I was writing, I read copiously. I studied every book on paddle steamers I could lay my hands on – their general history, names, the routes they ran, even the scenery the crew saw as they traversed the great Australian waterways. Then I brushed up on the history of Bourke, the shearing industry in general and the shearers strikes of the 1890s in particular. I visited Adelaide and spent several days in the Mortlock (State) Library. I went on a paddle steamer cruise at Goolwa – what a lovely historic town – and saw where the Murray empties into the sea.

My own family history (yes, I guess you'd call me a genealogy buff) always manages to find an outlet in my novels. For my main character in

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Where the River Ends, Roxy, I drew on one of my own forebears – Roxy Claudia May Barton – who was a well respected Shakespearean actress, both in Australia and England, around the turn of the century. I discovered after I had finished writing the book that coincidentally the 'real' Roxy had also played Titania, Queen of the Fairies – at the Royal Adelphi Theatre, London, in 1905. *The Globe* newspaper at the time reported that Roxy played "an attractive Titania".

Other family names have managed to 'get a look in' into *Where the River Ends*; Bellue, Dumas and Barton are all family surnames. And my own ancestors undoubtedly travelled the Darling River on one of the numerous paddle steamers, in the 1870s, when they relocated from Adelaide to Bourke. So, in a sense, in *Where the River Ends*, I was reliving their own story, one I hope that you will find as fascinating as I did.

Cheers ...

Robyn Lee Burrows

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