

Land of opportunity

Reinvented city gal Patrice Newell has been living and breathing her love of the land for the past 20 years. She also paints a detailed picture of it in her new book, writes JIM KELLAR.

Country life is full of bumps and bruises, emotionally and physically. A run of bad luck, or a run of bad weather, can wear a person down, cut through the skin down to the bone, to the soul.

Those who last the distance, a lifetime on the land, are resilient to say the least.

For Patrice Newell, a 49-year-old city slicker who moved 20 years ago to Elmswood, a 10,000-acre (3345-hectare) property near Gundy outside of Scone, with her husband, media personality Phillip Adams, it has never been anything but a labour of love.

They have more than 200 beef cattle, an olive grove with more than 1000 trees and a substantial business in honey, olive oil and natural soap. The property, which includes a good portion of Black Mountain, soars from an elevation of 200 feet (61 metres) to 1100 feet (335 metres). It has a huge variation in landscapes and soil types, from red clay to black basalt.

Somehow, Newell has also found time for her passion of writing. Her third book about life on the land, *Ten Thousand Acres – A Love Story* was published by Penguin last month.

"This is a book for everybody, not a technical book," she says.

"If I was writing it for people on the land, I would have used my journals much more thoroughly. When I talk to fellow primary producers, what is interesting is the detail; it's all the little ins and outs that grab your attention.

"My challenge was that I wanted to reveal the fascination, the interest in the joy of discovery rather than the detail of it."

Cameron Archer, principal of Tocal Agriculture College and a keen land historian, rates it an important book.

"It's positive, it's got depth," he says. "It's not shallow or simplistic, whereas much of our modern debate is fairly simplistic."

Mind you, there is plenty of detail in the book. Newell has carved out a reputation as a modern-day conservationist and biodynamic farmer. The book is full of observations and anecdotes about specific plants, birds and animals at Elmswood, which she shares with her husband and 14-year-old daughter, Aurora.

"I suppose when you put your hand up to talk about a subject, one asks to be listened to," she says.

"Environmentalism is dominated by activism, not literature. We don't have a strong tradition of nature writing – we don't have a lot of bestsellers."

Newell's first two books – *The Olive Grove*, about leaving the city life for the land, and *The River*, an examination of water management issues in rural communities – have introduced her to thousands of readers. For those fans, this will be a more reflective book that still states the case for sound land management.

"No one actually said to me when I came here that I have to understand the nature of the land and make sure I don't go beyond the capacity," Newell says on a mild autumn day.

"People used to say to me – and this has changed – 'You can get 200 more cows if you irrigate, sow seeds'. It's this push, push, push mentality. It's the start of where things get unstuck with land management; too much pushing.

"We all want to maximise the asset and the production. It's learning to do it without damaging. It's not all about 'buy this bull, buy this grass'."

The book is beautifully illustrated with photos by Travis Peake, a consultant ecologist now living in Lake Macquarie. Lists of all the flora and birds identified on the Elmswood property are included as appendices.

Newell writes with fascination and curiosity about the function of flora such as hairy panic, bluebells, oyster plant, turnip weed and variegated thistle. She tells true tales of bats in the attic, white-faced masked owls on the veranda,

stinging nettle added to spinach and fetta pies. They are personal notes from a property she has spent much time learning about over the years.

For Archer, the blend is right.

"It's fascinating in that she's brought the factual science together with the reflective issues of working on the land," he says.

"It's an interesting and unique combination that works well. There's a lot of Patrice in there and a lot of Elmswood in there. That's what farming is all about, a matrix of personality and the farm."

"I have no idea how I find the time to write, it just about kills me every time," Newell says. "I've always wanted to be a writer. As you get older, you realise time is running out and you just find time.

numbers. Benchmarks, gross profits, fixed costs. It's a different language. And it was always a risk for me that the book wouldn't work if it didn't have it in. I can talk about sustainability until the cows come home and it won't work if the numbers don't add up. But that's another book."

The farm has been successful, she says, although it has had its share of ups and downs.

It's too early to say if the property will remain in the family for generations to come.

"I can see value in inheritance, but unless that person is interested, it's probably better not to. I grew up without pressure to be anything other than what I wanted to be."

Newell has no problems with city people buying country land, like she did once upon a time. But she hates the thought of land being chopped into housing blocks.



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"I find it very, very difficult. I've got slight dyslexia. It's very stressful."

She is helped by habits. She keeps a journal and writes daily entries in the farm diary, an invaluable tool for managing a property. Commitment to craft is essential in a home where two writers live.

"I feel there is a lot of ritual on our farm," Newell says.

"Friday night is a family night for the three of us; cooking, talking and catching up. Saturday night we all write; Phillip writes, I write, we have dinner together."

Adams is a national icon who anchors *Late Night Live* on ABC Radio National. He's written more than 20 books and made several films. The couple have been the subject of an episode of *Australian Story* on ABC Television.

"Living with a writer is a great asset," Newell says.

"He's a walking dictionary and always tells me when I'm off the mark. As for management, he is engaged with every aspect of the farm. It's a joint venture."

The original version of the book included a section on business, but it was taken out.

"Once you start talking business, you've got to talk

"The land is a living organism," Newell notes. "It is being deeply stressed. We need to bring back its vitality and not in any way diminish it further. We really have to learn as much as we can about our little patch."

Right now, the outlook is grim in the Upper Hunter, she confirms.

"We've been in drought since the end of 2001. Our capacity has never gone back to the late 1980s or mid 1990s. The [Pages] river has never been as bad. Our dams, most of them are empty."

But there is an innocent, naked optimism about country life for Newell.

"Actually, going down and turning the pump on is interesting to me, for what I learn and feel when I do it. It's interesting and fun . . . it's what people do. It's the whole amazing experience every time you go out."

Patrice Newell appears at the Sydney Writers' Festival on today in a conversation with husband Phillip Adams and later in a discussion about water use with Tim Flannery and John Archer. For details call (02) 9252 7729.