



Eric Charles Rolls
(1923–2007)

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Eric Rolls was a farmer, poet, cook, fisherman and a supreme writer about the history and nature of his own country. He lived with vigour and manifest joy and leaves Australians a remarkable legacy of words and insights. His voice has become part of this land and has forever changed the way we live here.

Eric Charles Rolls, who has died at 84, was born into a western New South Wales farming family and educated at home by correspondence. His promise as a storyteller emerged early. Every Friday afternoon at his kindergarten in Grenfell, his teacher Miss Postlethwaite used to tell the class stories. But she was rather dull. So one day, five-year-old Eric put up his hand and said, 'Miss Postlethwaite I'd like to tell a story.' She said 'Alright, come out here.' Eric was prepared and knew what he would do. It was sowing time on the farm, so he told the story of a grain of wheat from sowing to harvesting, miming the process as he talked. He started telling stories every Friday afternoon, and adults came to hear him. 'I realised that telling stories was a good thing to do if you did it properly.'

Rolls found a way of telling stories that made you feel as if you were sitting on his knee. He carried a rare combination of authority and intimacy. With short sentences, vivid verbs, sensual imagery and a necessary swagger, this poet-turned-prose-writer wove a kind of magic.

From Grenfell, Eric won selection to Fort Street High in Sydney, before serving in Papua New Guinea in World War II. For 45 years from 1946 he farmed his own land in the northwest of New South Wales on the edges of the 'Pilliga Scrub', a forest he made famous in his book, *A Million Wild Acres*.

Of more than twenty books, this was his masterpiece. Its central story is the growing of a forest. 'Australia was not a timbered land that has been cleared', Rolls argued. In much of Australia, Aboriginal people kept the forests open with their light and

regular burning. The prolific germination that always follows fire in Australia was kept in check by the plentiful wallabies, possums, bandicoots and rat kangaroos, which ate the seedlings. Without Aboriginal fire management, occasional and intense wildfires erupted, a product of European occupation. Many of today's forests are different and new; they are exaggerated communities of plants and animals; they are volatile and vulnerable. Eric the farmer found 'wild' nature to be feral, mongrel and hybrid, nature stirred up, nature enlivened by human presence and intervention.

As well as a pioneering environmental history – and still the best written in this country – *A Million Wild Acres* is a regional history like no other, where birds, animals and plants share the stage with humans. One of its heroes is Eric's beloved tree, the white cypress pine. Through his democratic recognition of all life, Rolls enchants the forest, presenting a speaking land, a sentient country raucous with sound and nervous with creative energy. Reviewers compared it to a campfire yarn, the Book of Genesis and the Icelandic Sagas. Les Murray declared that he read and reread it 'with all the delight of one who knows he has at last got hold of a book that is in no way alien to him'. Readers wrote to Eric from all over the country, including one who explained: 'This is the first book I have ever read. Thank you for writing it. I enjoyed it so much I am now going to try reading other books.'

Rolls challenged our assumption that disturbed nature is somehow always lesser nature. Such views sometimes brought this ardent environmentalist into conflict with the green movement. He had strong, original opinions and was fearless. He was just as ready to run the gauntlet of the conservationists as the developers or the bureaucrats. He was especially critical if they were 'short on history'.

His first non-fiction book, based on tenacious research in newspapers, was *They All Ran Wild* (1969), a history of 'pests' in Australia, especially the rabbit. 'Wildness' fascinated him. This relish for the fecundity of life and an irrepressible optimism also underpinned Eric's attitude to human immigration to Australia. At first glance, it seems surprising that this writer of the land should also be an outstanding historian of the Chinese in Australia, as represented by his two-volume *Flowers and the Wide Sea* (Sojourners, 1992; Citizens, 1996). But both scholarly endeavours arose from his determination to see the creativity of encounter, human and natural.

Alongside his extraordinary literary productivity, Eric worked the soil. Sometimes his two lives pulled in different directions: 'It is cruel changing over from writing to farming unexpectedly', he wrote to his publisher while writing *A Million Wild Acres*. 'And I'd been concentrating so hard I was not even living in this century'. But he added, 'Without the farm there would have been no book, even if it delayed publication.'

As a farmer-poet, his struggle between 'acres and words' was a source of creativity, but eventually the words won. On his sixtieth birthday, he did a stocktake of all the books he still

wanted to write and decided from then on 'to work words a day every day instead of acres'. He and his second wife, Elaine van Kempen, moved to the Camden Haven on the New South Wales mid-north coast where fishing became Eric's reward for a good day's writing.

His books included poetry (*Sheaf Tossers*, *The Green Mosaic*, *Selected Poems*), books for children (*Running Wild*, *Miss Strawberry Verses*), memoirs (*The River*, *Celebration of the Senses*, *Doorways: A Year of the Cumberland Diaries*), a three-volume compendium of stories, practical hints and wisdom about food and wine (*A Celebration of Food and Wine*), and other remarkably original histories (*From Forest to Sea*, *Visions of Australia*, and *Australia: A Biography*). Two more books will be published posthumously.

His honours include a Member of the Order of Australia, Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, an honorary Doctorate from the University of Canberra, and a remarkably broad array of literary awards that included the David Myer Trust Award for Poetry, the Captain Cook Bicentenary Award for Non-Fiction, the C J Dennis Prize, the Age Book of the Year, the John Franklin Award for a children's book, the Greening Australia Journalism Award, the Landcare Media Award, the Braille Book of the Year and the Talking Book of the Year. He was particularly proud of the two Blind Society awards. He said: 'I write to make people see.'

Rolls deserves to be remembered not only for the originality of his scholarship and the quality of his writing, but also for the vigour of his living. He had a great capacity for wonder, and for expressing and sharing it. He had a rare combination of courage, earthiness, delicacy and sweetness. In 1984, he published *Celebration of the Senses*, a frank, funny and moving memoir of his zest for life which some readers found confronting.

Once, he gave a talk while wearing a pair of socks he had been given with leaping dolphins on them. The speech went so well that he always tried to wear his 'talking socks' for public occasions. This bold man took such care with his presentations that his scripts were marked for pauses and rhythm.

Eric had two long and happy marriages, each celebrated in his writing, first with Joan (Stephenson) who died in January 1985, and then with Elaine van Kempen. He is survived by Elaine, his children Kim, Kerry and Mitchell, Elaine's children Nick, Sue, Simon and Adam, and his sister Dellas. His status as the doyen of Australian nature writers made him a fitting patron of the Watermark Literary Society Inc., which organises a biennial 'muster' of environmental and natural history writers in the Camden Haven, New South Wales. In the week after his death, Eric's life and work were celebrated in the village hall at Kendall. His simple rectangular coffin was made of white cypress pine from the Pilliga and he was wearing his 'talking socks'.

Tom Griffiths