

LIFE ON THE LAND

Gruelling physical work, long hours, an income subject to the vagaries of the weather, international markets and foreign currencies – the modern farmer's life is anything but easy.

So is making a living from the land a man's world? Absolutely, according to a new study that shows the majority of Australians persist in thinking that farming is a career path rarely trodden by the fairer sex.

The research, commissioned as part of the Australian Year of the Farmer 2012 campaign – a year dedicated to communicating the importance of farming and rural communities to Australia's economy and social fabric – found 92 per cent of Australians think men are more likely to work in agriculture, farming and related businesses.

Then it's a job only for the boys?

Not likely, say eight remarkable rural women successfully running their own farms, whose personal stories have been captured in a new book by SA author Liz Harfull.

Reality also tells a different tale. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' most recent labour force data shows of the 250,000 agribusiness jobs in Australia, more than 50,000 belong to women.

It wasn't a lack of women to choose from that presented Harfull with her biggest challenge in writing *Women of the Land*, it was selecting which stories to tell.

HEATHER KENNETT

SUNDAY WRITER



After scouring the nation, the award-winning author – who grew up on a small farm near Mt Gambier which has been in the family since the early 1860s and whose first book was the best-selling *Blue Ribbon Cookbook* – whittled a list of 40 potential candidates down to eight.

From Nan Bray, a US-born oceanographer who walked away from a life as a leading marine scientist to produce superfine Merino wool, to Keelen Mailman, the first Aboriginal woman to manage a cattle station – all are examples of women who have prospered in an industry that has been the domain traditionally associated with men.



A desire to share the women's inspirational stories and detail how the eight came to make their living on the land – rather than paint them as poster girls for female farmers in an effort to break down the enduring stereotypes – shaped Harfull's choices.

"Each of the eight women are quite different in terms of how they became farmers, their personal stories and personalities, the types of farms they run and how they manage them," she says.

"In selecting them I was, in fact, trying to reflect the diversity of farmers and farming in Australia, and the complexity of issues affecting regional communities and agriculture in this country."

Harfull believes it is the women's individual characteristics, rather than their gender, that is an important contributor to their achievements.

"In the case of these women, I think their particular strengths are their willingness to seek information and advice, and to use their networks to find a way to get things done," she says.

"They have also had to be clever when it comes to the physically demanding side of farming."

Harfull highlights the ingenuity shown by Cecily

Cornish, in her 80s and still farming sheep and cattle amid the majestic red gum trees of Victoria's western district, to illustrate her point.

"Cecily had a special hoist fitted to her ute so she could lift heavy sheep," she says. "Women cannot rely on brute strength so they have had to find ingenious solutions instead."

She says most of the women shared a deep sense of connection to the land where they live and farm; and their commitment to a style of farming that is sustainable. "These women have each led fascinating lives and had to overcome significant challenges at various stages to stay on the land," Harfull says.



A family tragedy influenced Mary Naisbitt's decision to take sole responsibility of a sheep and wheat farm at Lake Grace, in Western Australia's isolated salt lake country.

When her husband died from a heart attack, aged 46, she became the custodian of their farm and carer of four children under the age of seven.

She knew that no one would have thought less of her if she had sold the farm after her husband's



sunday WHAT'S ON

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