



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## Book Review

**Donnelley, S. (2020) *Big Things Grow. A memoir of teaching on Country in Wilcannia.* Allen & Unwin**

**John Halsey**

Flinders University

[john.halsey@flinders.edu.au](mailto:john.halsey@flinders.edu.au)

## Big Things Grow

*Big Things Grow* is Sarah Donnelley's detailed and very personal account of her journey as an Eastern Sydney suburbs teacher to Wilcannia in New South Wales for a two term 'outback adventure' contract. It is very readable, engaging and highly relevant in terms of the opportunities and challenges of being a teacher in the country and on Country.

Donnelley's preface to her memoir frames and signals the values and fundamentals that motivate her and shape how she unfolds her journey as a teacher, as a member of a community, as a friend and mentor to young and old, and most importantly, as a listener and a learner... 'what I do want to share are the extraordinary learning opportunities I have had in this environment... The connection to people, to Country and to place... so I am a guest in Wilcannia... those of us who come and go... have to respect how lucky we are to be here... we have a duty to speak up for and give a platform to people who often feel unseen and unheard'.

It is well known and widely documented that attracting and retaining teachers to schools in rural, regional and remote locations continues to be one of the main issues, if not the main issue, for education systems in Australia and many other countries around the world. At the heart of this challenge is an overriding mindset which basically likens teaching and living in these kinds of locations as something less than what it is in cities and very large population centres. And like all global type assertions, there are of course exceptions that need to be acknowledged.

*Big Things Grow* commences with confirmation of the Wilcannia posting and the task of closing down a comfortable and familiar inner city life and lifestyle. This is followed by getting together all that will be needed to make the journey out to Wilcannia and what the author thinks she will need for her time there. Very fortunately for Donnelley, she has the support of her parents and wider family as well as a circle of friends including one who had worked in Wilcannia and was 'honest and upfront about the fact that I was a city kid who had grown up by the ocean and I was going to feel a long way from home'.

Donnelley shares her transition from inner city Sydney replete with favourite cafes to outback Wilcannia, with candour and humour. Included are very practical details such as where to pick up the keys for her new house and setting up your new home. Her experiences resonated with mine of more than 50 years ago when I arrived in a country town on a blistering hot day. Some things apparently never change!

Transitioning from a location where you are basically just a face among thousands- perhaps millions- of others, to a place where you quickly become known by most if not all as the new teacher in town, is a major formative experience. One of the very real strengths of Donnelley's

memoir is revealing how she comes to terms with this new high visibility/low anonymity situation. She turns what for some is quite burdensome into a source of strength and reward for herself, her students and others. At least three things seem to be central to achieving this.

First, prior to moving to Wilcannia Donnelley 'did her homework'. She prepared herself as best she could and yes, she had strong and reliable support doing this. As well, she made the decision to give Wilcannia a go so personal agency and choice were in the mix from the start of her journey.

Second, she entered into the community with a sense of expectation that things would likely be very different from home- put another way, she was open (though at times apprehensive) to change. Linked with this was a determination not to be drawn into a deficit headset about education in rural and remote areas. New sights, sounds, experiences- including an encounter with a very big kangaroo in her back yard- helped her to begin to make sense of where she was and why she had come- to try something very different; to discover what it might mean to be a teacher on Country far from the supports of the familiar and the taken for granted.

Third, the primacy and importance of relationships- with students, parents, families, colleagues, the community as well as the natural world beauty of Wilcannia and surrounds- are key to making a success of the transition. And so too is the preparedness, indeed embrace by Donnelley of the culture and heritage of the many traditional owners of the land and the places and practices they cherish and nurture. 'Wilcannia is full of opportunities to learn if your heart is open to listening... The remoteness and context of our school open(s) the doorway... *This is why I moved here*, I thought to myself... *You can't have this experience in the city*'. 'Time is currency in relationships... We learn through stories. If you don't stop to listen to people, you'll miss out on the most amazing opportunities'.

Donnelley relates that critical to her becoming and then being a teacher in Wilcannia was understanding in a visceral way some of the seminal events and experiences that make a place the place it is. A visit to the local cemetery advised and encouraged by a highly respected and much loved Elder proved to be an important milestone for her. It provided insights that otherwise would have remained hidden. For all teachers and especially country teachers, what has happened outside the school gate prior to their arrival as well as what continues to happen are powerful resources to shape teaching and learning, to locate one in place while also maintaining sufficient distancing to bring a professional perspective to bear on issues and relationships.

While the overall message and voice of Donnelley's memoir is optimistic and *hope-full*, the message is also firmly grounded in the day to pragmatics and realities of teaching and being a teacher in a context where the boundary between being on duty and off duty is often blurred. As she writes, 'I have no doubt my endless positivity must be frustrating for some people... I don't ignore the dark parts, but I refuse to allow them to take over'.

The memoir is an important first hand account of one teacher's transition from an inner city comfortable life and career to an outback town where challenges abounded (still do) and because of them, opened genuinely new, exciting and hugely rewarding personal and professional experiences.

The memoir needs to be on all undergraduate teaching degree reading lists.