

R.M. Williams

MOTHER'S DAY BELT OFFER INSIDE

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Rural Leader of the
Year Rob Egerton-
Warburton with
daughters Lucinda
and Zara at his sheep
and cropping property
in Kojonup, WA.



RISK TAKER

ROB EGERTON-WARBURTON HAS NEVER LET NAY-SAYERS OR TRADITIONALISTS HOLD HIM BACK. THE RURAL LEADER OF THE YEAR HAS A CLEAR-CUT VISION FOR AGRICULTURE, AND IT DOESN'T INVOLVE FOLLOWING THE RULES.

STORY + PHOTOS FLEUR BAINGER

HIS NEIGHBOURS often shake their heads and say he's crazy. He never intended to work the land. He doesn't eat meat, he survived cancer at 29 and he helps his wife grow hectares of hot pink flowers. Meet Rob Egerton-Warburton, the current Rural Leader of the Year.

It's fair to say this sixth-generation farmer is anything but ordinary. At 40 years old, the West Australian chairs the state's Sheep Industry Leadership Council, he's the youngest member of the country's Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Sheep Industry Innovation and he regularly tweets to an international following. A self-described introvert, his mantra is for greater diversification, communication and youthful leadership in agriculture, and if his latest award is anything to go by, the Nuffield scholar's message is being heard.

Rob and his wife Jennifer run 3000 hectares in Kojonup in Western Australia's Great Southern region, carving the land into zones dedicated to Merino sheep, canola, wheat, barley and native wildflowers called everlastings. The couple and their two daughters, Lucinda and Zara, live almost four hours' drive from Perth and half an hour from the nearest town.

"Korellup" is the same property where Rob spent his childhood, but it's not where he thought he'd end up. After being sent to boarding school, farming felt like more of a chore than a future vocation. "Every school holidays was work," he says. "I've been crutching sheep since I was 13. I just couldn't see the attraction."

Adventure sports held more appeal than university so he took a job in Sydney as a trainee outdoor-education instructor. After a year of taking 14-year-old students hiking, kayaking and scuba diving, he joined a former SAS officer in Western Australia and assisted with hard yakka leadership-development trips for executives. Staff would be dropped in the bush with limited supplies and a map, and the then-19 year old would track them to ensure they were okay. "These 40-year-old guys would be crying on your shoulder, telling you how awful their life is and I thought, 'I don't want to be you'," he says. "They'd have no life and no family. I couldn't see a future in that."

The experience left him puzzled about his future and when his father suggested he come home to figure out what he wanted to do, he agreed. It was a significant turning point. "Because I had the farm to myself I saw the challenge and the business of farming, not the drenching part," he says. "I decided I wanted to give farming a go."

It's perhaps no surprise: agriculture courses through Rob's veins. Generations before him, British soldier George Edward Egerton-Warburton pioneered the pastoral industry near Albany in Western Australia's Mount Barker region. According to the history books, he made good use of the 1850 introduction of convict labour and by 1856 he held 12,150 hectares of land, stocked with 1500 sheep. He was equally industrious on the home front, marrying twice and fathering 12 sons.

Over time Egerton-Warburton men spread across the region. Rob's grandparents continued the sheep-farming tradition through the 1950s, as did Rob's father Kent, though he took it to another level, developing a farm-accounting computer program in the 1980s. He'd bought the state's first personal computer at a cost of \$7500. "One thing we've always had in the family is innovation," says Rob, the youngest of Kent and Mary's three children. "We're science-based innovative farmers. We're always looking for new and better ways for doing things."

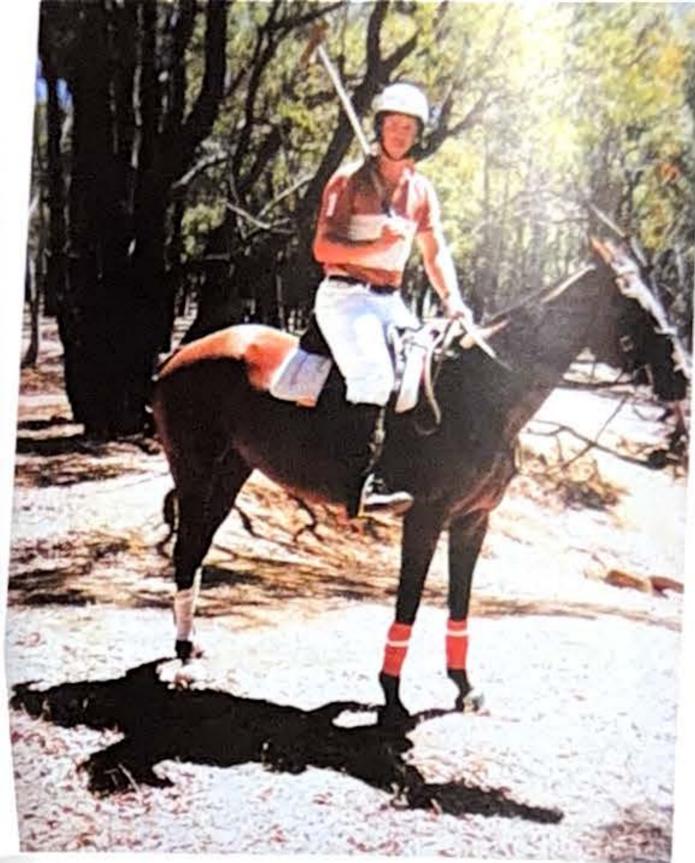
Which perhaps explains Kent's non-negotiable condition that his son complete a business degree before settling into farming. Three years of Marcus Oldham education and Rob was back, joining his brother Dave in taking full control of the property so their father could focus on his popular Agrimaster computer program. At 23, Rob was gung-ho. "I plunged straight into it," he says. "Our neighbour had died so my brother and I decided to buy his place. I'd only been home three weeks, but we went out and borrowed \$1 million and bought the farm."

When the price of wool plummeted that same year, in 1995, the pair wondered if they were perhaps a little hasty. "Our first wool clip was \$2.50 per kilogram, in the bank," Rob says. "These days it's close to \$6/kg. We had all this debt and all these sheep."

In order to stay afloat, the brothers diversified into cropping and began farming more intensively, putting their entire sheep flock onto only half of the farm, devoting the rest to grain production. The strip-grazing experiment worked. "We still generated the same amount of income but we slashed the costs," Rob says. "Those years were really good. We got ourselves out of a hole and made a go of it."

The lesson in thinking outside the box has informed Rob's decisions ever since and is, according to Kent, the driver of his success. "Farming is a conservative occupation, change happens gradually," Kent says. "The CSIRO and Ag Department used to say they'd try to get new ideas across to just three percent of

PROFILE



An Egerton-Warburton family catch-up in 1999: (l-r) Rob's sister Megan McCracken, parents Kent and Mary, and Megan's son Alex with Rob. ABOVE RIGHT: Rob playing polo in 2001. OPPOSITE: Rob with wife Jen and daughters Lucinda, 10, and Zara, 6.

farmers who'd be willing to pick them up and spread the word. I'd put Rob in that three percent."

But there were more hurdles in store. In 2001, a year after Rob married his soil-scientist sweetheart, Jen, and took over the family farm from his brother, he was diagnosed with cancer. He'd noticed a lump in his throat and an offhand question about it saw him off to Perth for a CAT scan. Having started seeding, Rob was in no mood to be told he'd have to hang about for further scans. "When the doctor came out with the results he said, 'I think you'd better sit down'. All I was thinking about was getting home and going seeding. Then he said, 'You have a massive thing in your chest, which goes from your neck down to your stomach. You need to be admitted to hospital right now'. The rest is a blur. "I just about blacked out," he says. "The next night I was opened up so they could take a biopsy. It was Hodgkin's lymphoma."

His bride of 12 months was told the cancer was inoperable and to prepare for "a year of hell", with chemotherapy and radiotherapy his best option. The prediction of a tough time was more prescient than the hospital could have known. Jen had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis just before the pair was married.

Hers is the relapsing remitting kind – the better of the two types – and for now treatment has kept her out of a wheelchair. For health reasons, she and Rob have stopped eating meat. For a time, Rob says he started to wonder if he should simplify his life, buy a beach house, get rid of debt and take things easy. "But that's not us," he says. "We're very driven people."

Enter Lucinda's Everlastings, the wildflower business the couple named after their first daughter, who's now 10. A work contact of Jen's at Landcare asked if they could try growing the hard-to-source plant. They devoted half a hectare to it and within a year produced 70kg of seed, harvested by a header fashioned for the job. The niche market has proved to be lucrative: they're the only farmers in Australia to produce commercial quantities for retail trade, now yielding 400kg over a five-hectare patch. Rob says it's taught him the value of end-user feedback. "This is a business where we own the entire chain, so we talk to the customers," he says.

Jen is proud of her husband's approach to farming. "When people diversify, they plant their crops a bit earlier or they hold lambing at a different time of the year," she says. "I don't know anyone who's

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taken the bull by the horns and tried a whole new crop."

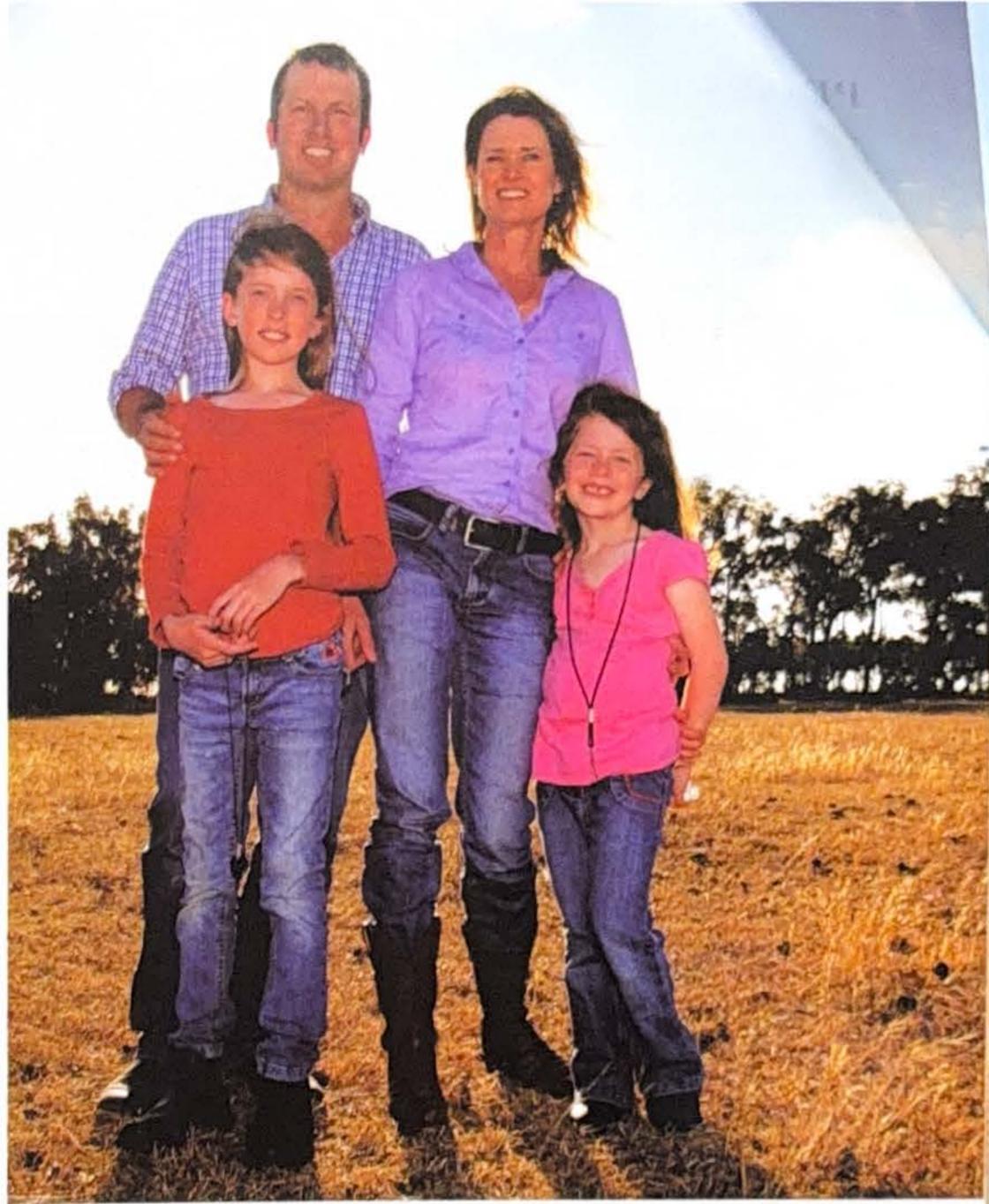
Rob's readiness to try new things also saw him trial a revolutionary style of crop grazing that has gone on to influence farmers across Western Australia. Inspired by a New South Wales grain farmer who, in 2005, was putting sheep out to graze on 40% of his crop and seeing no impact on yield, Rob planted four tonnes of an early germinating winter wheat variety. "Everyone around here was amazed he was planting wheat in March," Jen says. "Then he put sheep on the crop and people were even more in shock."

Neighbours thought the wheat would die and more than a few told him his ideas were verging on insane. But it worked. "I don't listen when people tell me I'm crazy with what I'm doing," Rob says. "Now we graze everything and so does everyone else. It's this amazing feed base we've suddenly got, and it's invaluable at that time of year." However, the discovery could have come at a better time: that same year the Egerton-Warburtons lost 2500 newly shorn sheep in a freak weather event and suffered a bout of black frost that decimated their wheat crop. "That was right after we'd bought another farm," Rob says. "It took us five years to get over that."

By the time the business recovered, Rob's derring-do had led to a Nuffield Scholarship, where he further investigated the crop-grazing concept. While travelling through South America, his belief in using what's at hand and pushing diversity on farm was cemented. "It's looking for opportunities," he says. "You don't have to invest a lot of money, it's just reallocating resources within the business to make things work."

Rob is now a member of the Nuffield Australia board and his scholarship report has led to a ministerial appointment. In 2011, the pro-live export, pro-genetically modified and politically shy farmer became chair of Western Australia's Sheep Industry Leadership Council, where he's just driven the creation of a blueprint for the sector's next two decades. Surprised that no such forward planning existed, he hopes it will inform future research, development and growth decisions, boost sheep numbers and double the financial value of Western Australia's sheep industry.

Fellow CRC member Peter Trefort, who collaborates with Rob and other board members to assign \$145 million of research funding, says Rob has the sort of get-go that's needed to reinvigorate the sheep industry. "I see Rob as a visionary," Peter says. "His ideas are well thought out and they're possible to achieve. If people are



prepared to listen and work with him, he'll go a long way."

Two of Rob's ongoing bugbears are the lack of younger farmers in leadership positions and the inability of many farmers to express themselves positively to the public. He aspires to have the sheep industry valued by the West Australian community in the same way mining is and, through his stewardship of the Leadership Council, he hopes to create a generation of leaders and advocates no older than 35 to 40, who'll drive the industry they're invested in. "They're the people we want speaking for agriculture, not the guys in tweed jackets with grey hair," he says. "We shouldn't be asking people who've retired from agriculture to make decisions for the future of agriculture."



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