

Jack Earth 1948

Jack Earth was Tom Bass' first commission while he was in his final year at art school.

"The clients were a family of graziers, real country people, from Queensland. They came to the school inquiring for a young sculptor. They were extending an old stone house on their property, Comfort Hill, at Sutton Forest in New South Wales, and they wanted someone to carve the end wall of a fireplace in their entrance hall.... .. They wanted the theme of the sculpture to be something related to their life. They wanted it to express what they were, and their relation to the land.

I was very excited about the commission and spent many weeks trying to find a theme. I tried all sorts of things but none of them rang true. I tried Australian legends, but nothing seemed right. Then, one evening an idea came—an unusual time for me to get ideas, it's usually the morning—and I sat down and did the drawing. It was of a drover sitting on his horse and he had a sheep across his knees which had gone lame and he had picked it up to give it a spell. There was a dog curled up under the horse's belly and a tree in the background and it all added up to a nice compact composition.



Now the drawing wasn't based on any particular moment or event I could remember. I must have seen such a thing in my travels but I certainly couldn't recall any specific incident. The next morning Lenore was doing something at the back of the house and she called to me, 'Quick, come and look at this.'

There was our neighbour, a retired drover named Jack Earth, riding down the road with a calf over his knees exactly the way the sheep was in my drawing.

Jack Earth was a remarkable man. He was in his seventies at that time and he'd been a drover all his life. He told me that there'd been one period in his life when he hadn't slept under a roof for twenty-five years. He had clear blue eyes, a white moustache and a big booming voice from calling to his

dogs. He was totally without pretensions, a simple man, but he had the dignity of knowing exactly who he was. He was a man of great integrity and purity.

I used Jack as my model for the carving, but while I was working on it, he became very ill and went into hospital. He wasn't expected to live, but he did come out for a short while, and during that time he came to see the carving.

As we went out to look at it, I wondered what he would say, this humble, simple man who would never



have imagined that anyone might 'immortalise' him in stone.

He looked at the carving for a long time and finally he turned to me and said, 'Many's the time I've had a beast over my knees like that, Tom.'

That was all. And he went away and very shortly after that he died." Tom Bass

Tom Bass Totem Maker (ed 2006) by Harris Smart and Tom Bass – \$15

Other publication: Tom Bass: Retrospective ed Genevieve Carson 2006 - \$10

For more stories about Tom's life and work contact the School to acquire these books