

'My Country' poet honoured

WHO but the gentle folk of Gunnedah, northern NSW, could have erected a statue, an information mushroom and a waterfall — and timed their unveiling to coincide with Australia Day, 1983?

In the town's Anzac Park, at 12.30pm on Wednesday, by the hand of poet Rosemary Dobson, the curtain will rise on a lady who once told us that she loved our "sunburnt country", our "land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains".

The late Dorothea MacKellar, 1885-1968, has at last been commemorated, and by the very town in which she penned 'My Country' — or that, at least, is what the townspeople will tell you.

For some reason *The Australian Encyclopaedia* lists Dorothea as having been "staying on a family property in the Allyn River Valley, north of Maitland", when she "experienced the breaking of a drought" and wrote the now-famous poem. Well, what's a few hundred kilometres, anyway?

A life-sized bronze work, showing Dorothea as a young woman sitting side-saddle on a horse, has been lowered into its "running creek-cum-billabong setting" and, before you leap in with comments about women riding side-saddle at the turn of the century, let me explain.

Sculptor Dennis Adams was well aware that Dorothea had been an accomplished horse-woman, and that women of her day would sit astride when riding through the bush. But Dorothea preferred to ride side-saddle in *public*, and as her statue would be truly a *public* spectacle . . .

The waterfall is for the billabong, naturally, but what of the enigmatic "information mushroom"? This apparently houses a recorded recital of 'My Country', read by Dorothea in person, and at a cost of 40c the full five-minute performance can be yours.

News of the memorial has spread as far as Australia Post. A "pictorial postmarker" — with details of the memorial — has been installed in Gunnedah's temporary post office, from whence

Gunnedah's temporary post office, from whence it will proudly be superimposed on the special commemorative envelopes with Australia Day 1983 stamps.

To complete this fulsome tribute to the writer of arguably our best-known lyric poem, Gunnedah has been lent that vintage 1919 film, 'The Man from Kangaroo'.

Shot partly within the shire (on location at 'Kurrumbede', one of the MacKellar properties), there is some teasing suggestion that the memorable Dorothea might even have played a small part in it herself.

Seldom can so few lines of poetry have been better rewarded.

— TIM NORFOLK