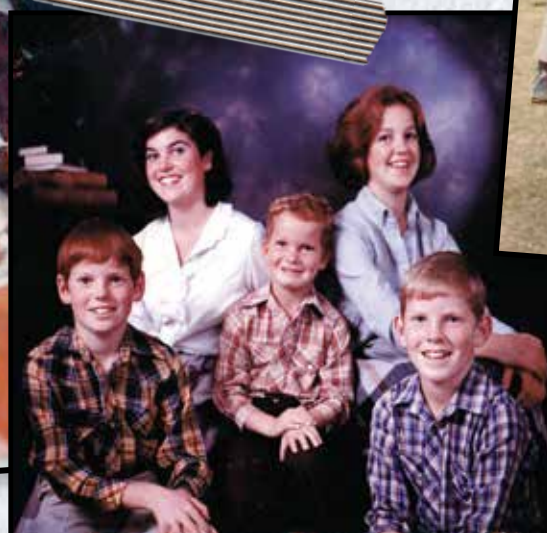


CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT Second birthday; nine-year-old Tom far left, with siblings Cathy, Nick, Mary and Phil; again on the far left at Pony Club in Gunnedah; a penchant for motorbikes began early.



## TOM GLEESON

THE COMEDIAN TELLS CERI DAVID ABOUT LETHAL FLYING FOXES AND WHY COUNTRY KIDS HAVE A COMIC VIEW OF CITY LIFE.

According to Tom Gleeson, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more fertile ground for humour than the Australian countryside. "A common trait with comedians is that they have a kind of outsider quality — and there are quite a few of us from rural areas," he says. "Coming from the country, I've always been a bit bemused by the city. I think maybe that gives one a tangential view on things."

Tom, who most recently has been a regular on the ABC's satirical news television program *The Weekly With Charlie Pickering*, grew up near Tambar Springs in NSW's North West Slopes, where his father worked the family cattle and wheat farm.

"It was such a small place that I knew everyone I came into contact with, or else they knew my dad," he says. "So there was never any concept of ill will, and I think that helped me form the world view that people tend to be good. You could call it a failing, but I still take people at face value."

Boarding school in Sydney beckoned from age 11, and Tom remained in the city to study science at university — which was where he first tried his hand at stand-up.

"I saw a poster for *Five Minute Noodles*, which was a student comedy competition," he says. Tom was in a band at the time, having inherited a love of music from his mother, who gave

organ lessons at the farm. "Often on stage, in between songs, I'd be a bit of a smart-arse and tell silly stories. So I thought I'd have a go without using music as a crutch." Tom loved it and although he completed his degree, stand-up put paid to any further scientific ambitions.

For the past five years, 41-year-old Tom has lived with his wife Ellie Parker, a food writer, and their two young children in Romsey, in Victoria's Macedon Ranges. "House prices meant we couldn't afford the city, so we were looking a little bit further out, and then I thought, 'This little bit further out feels like we're constantly compromising. Let's just do it properly and live all the way out.' I spend a lot of time flying around to do shows, and the airport's only half an hour away, so it's a bonus that I get to drive past cows on the way."

Tom enjoys bringing his family on tour whenever possible, and hopes to do so with this year's show, *GREAT*. This, it turns out, is one of the key differences between his children's rural upbringing and his own.

"We travel a lot, and their life is far more cosmopolitan, meeting a far wider variety of people than I ever did. Life is less of a monoculture than it was for me — but that might also be a reflection of Australia when I was young." *GREAT will be at the Brisbane Comedy Festival in March, and the Melbourne Comedy Festival in April. comedy.com.au*

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH JAMES PENLIDIS BACKGROUND PHOTOGRAPHY SAM MCADAM COOPER STYLING PHOEBE McEVOY



“GROWING up, it never occurred to me that we lived out the back of nowhere. Tambar Springs was the centre of the world. Outside that was Gunnedah and then Tamworth, and if you went a bit further still you'd get to Newcastle. Sydney was barely on the fringes of my existence. I can remember going to the city and it blowing my mind that houses had a second storey. No-one had one where I grew up, because why would you? You've got all that space. Going upstairs was just something people did on TV.

We lived on the side of Tambar Mountain, where the earth is a dark-brown volcanic ash loam — very rich, and great for growing cotton. You could climb up and see the patchwork farmland disappearing into the distance. Most people in the area mustered cattle on motorbikes, but we stuck to horses. We'd do it together, and spend the whole day in the saddle, which was hard work but I never remember thinking of it that way. >





FROM LEFT "That badge on my lapel says school captain, which sounds impressive until I tell you there was only one other boy in year 6"; Tom and Phil with their father; Jim and Annette Gleeson with their children; 11-year-old Tom with his dad.



I learnt to drive the Land Rover when I was six, and I must have been seven or eight when I got a motorbike. The muffler had snapped off, so it was really loud, but Mum liked that because she could still hear me even a couple of kilometres away. I was never one for speed, but I liked difficult terrain, winding around various gullies. It made me feel like an adult, out on my own.

I've got two sisters and two brothers, and we were outdoors a lot. Once, my mum and dad went into town to do some shopping, telling us not to get up to anything dangerous... So we built a flying fox from a windmill down to a tree. We found an old pulley and a rope that wasn't quite long enough, so we had to attach another bit to reach the tree.

The incline from the windmill to the tree was really quite steep, bordering on a free fall, and I went so fast that the pulley hit the knot and I flew off into the long grass. Even at that age, I knew that if it wasn't for that knot, I'd have gone smack into the tree. Of course, I stood up and declared it a success.

We were taking turns on the flying fox and having one of the best days of our lives, but then that wasn't good enough. So I got one of our pushbikes and tried to rig it up with two pulleys — one on the seat and one on the handlebars, because how good would it be to ride a bike off the windmill, and have it land on the ground like a flying bike? I'd just got my leg over the bike at the top of the windmill when our parents came

home... I'll never know if it would have worked. Mum says she feels like there were two lives on the farm: the one she thought we were having, and the one we were actually having.

These days everyone thinks boarding school is like Harry Potter and Hogwarts, so it's cool again, but back then it had a bad name. However, I was the second youngest, and the older three were already there, so if anything, I was gravitating towards them. I thought of it more like Scouts or pony camp — and after the first term, my parents came to visit and I proudly announced to my mum that I hadn't missed her once.

I loved coming home for the holidays. I'd be mad keen to get on the motorbike and ride the horses and go camping. School friends who lived in Sydney would come to stay, and for them to come out to the middle of nowhere and do all those things was a real thrill. We'd get the old XPT train for hours and hours, all the way out to Werris

Creek. Then it was another two hours on the bus to Gunnedah. Then my mum would pick us up and drive us another 45 minutes to the farm. They would have felt they were never going to get back to the city again. Then we'd turn all the lights out in the house and it would be pitch black. No street lights. No passing cars in the distance. Just a deep silence. It must have been unnerving for them.

My memories of the farm are very fond, and I think some of that is because my parents sold up in 1990, when I was 16 — they moved to Sydney to be closer to us at school — so I never had to face a lot of the harsh realities of rural life.

My wife grew up in Sydney, and when she eventually visited Tambar Springs, she found it frighteningly quiet and remote. When you're from the city, those things make you uneasy, whereas when I get somewhere remote, I feel like my nerve endings unwind. To me, the wide open spaces have always made me feel like anything's possible.



**TAMBAR SPRINGS** From its elevated position, Tambar Springs looks out over the plains that provide its livelihood, chiefly from wheat, sorghum, cotton and cattle, as well as coal. Beyond its agricultural blessings, the village's 15 minutes of fame came in 1979 when a farmer discovered the remains of a diprotodon — the largest marsupial to have ever lived, like a hippo-sized wombat, that roamed Australia up to 46,000 years ago. Its fossilised bones are now on display at the Coonabarabran Visitor Information Centre, an hour's drive to the west. Gunnedah, 45 minutes away, is the closest town, where locals head for anything beyond the essentials that can be bought from Tambar Springs General Store. There are still no two-storey buildings in the village.