

# THE COUNTRY

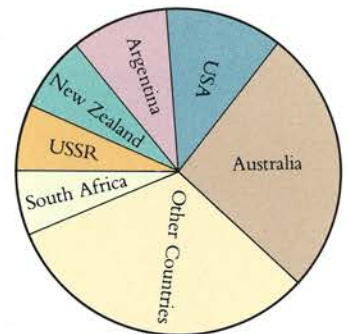
D. N. JEANS

AUSTRALIA RODE on the sheep's back: nearly 40 per cent by value of its exports came from wool. The continent also sold grain, meat, hides, fruit and minerals to the world's industrial areas. Demand and prices for all these products had collapsed in the depression and the country was still recovering. But there was a great deal of optimism about the future. The unemployed who had crowded the country roads, passing from town to town in search of the dole issued by the police, had largely disappeared, and wages were up. A ploughman paid 32s 6d a week in 1932 could now expect £2, and a shearer paid 32s 6d a hundred sheep shorn in 1932 now got 36s. These were lower wages than in the towns, but the commonwealth statistician estimated that country living cost 10 per cent less than city living, except in western Queensland and Western Australia. The rural unions had reached a low point in 1932, when many men had been made to burn their tickets to keep a job, but membership had doubled to 38 442 by 1938.

Yet this proved to be a year of particular economic hardship. International uncertainty in Europe, the war between Japan and China, and a recession in the United States combined to weaken the rural economy. Wool fell to the barely payable level of 9d a pound, while wheat, 5s 3d a bushel in 1936, fell to 2s, although it recovered a little after the Home Price Scheme for wheat survived a high court challenge. Dairying prospered, as did meat, assisted by the Ottawa Agreement of 1932, the introduction of chilled exports and a new fat lamb industry.

People had suffered, but country society had come through the depression largely unscathed. Change was arriving with the motor car and the wireless and motorisation of farming was under way, but underneath a rough and ready equality the old class distinctions remained. There were the gentry, the big pastoralists who drove large cars and dressed for dinner. There were the 'cockockies', who controlled medium to small holdings, sometimes as tenants, but who might be comfortably off in long-settled districts. There were the farm workers, from stockmen and general hands to tractor drivers. There were the seasonal workers, shearers, wheat carters, canecutters, perhaps with a wife and

WORLD WOOL PRODUCTION, 1937-38



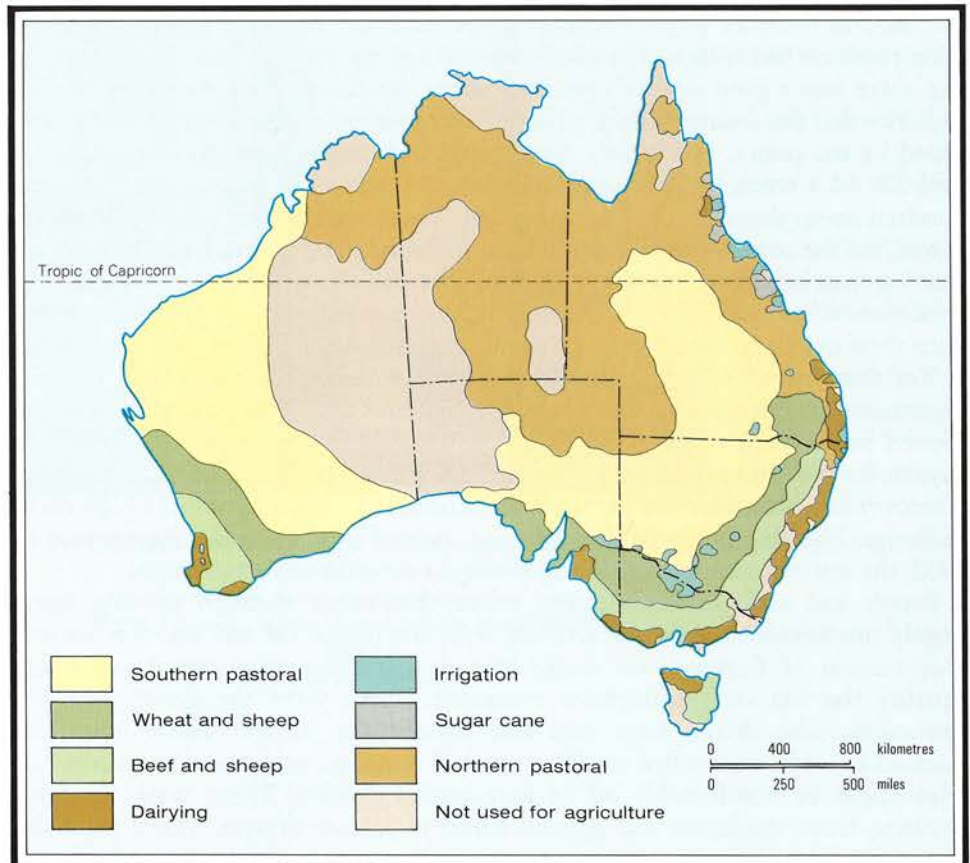
Total 3877.2 million lbs  
 Source: *Commonwealth Year Book*, 1940, 346.  
 STEVEN DUNBAR

family living in a town or on a small farm, or fruit pickers and corn pullers living on the road in vans and tents. Country towns too had their hierarchies, from respectable businessmen and professionals who commanded the platform at the shows and public meetings, to tradesmen and labourers, to the poor and sometimes the blacks who found a precarious place on the edge of town.

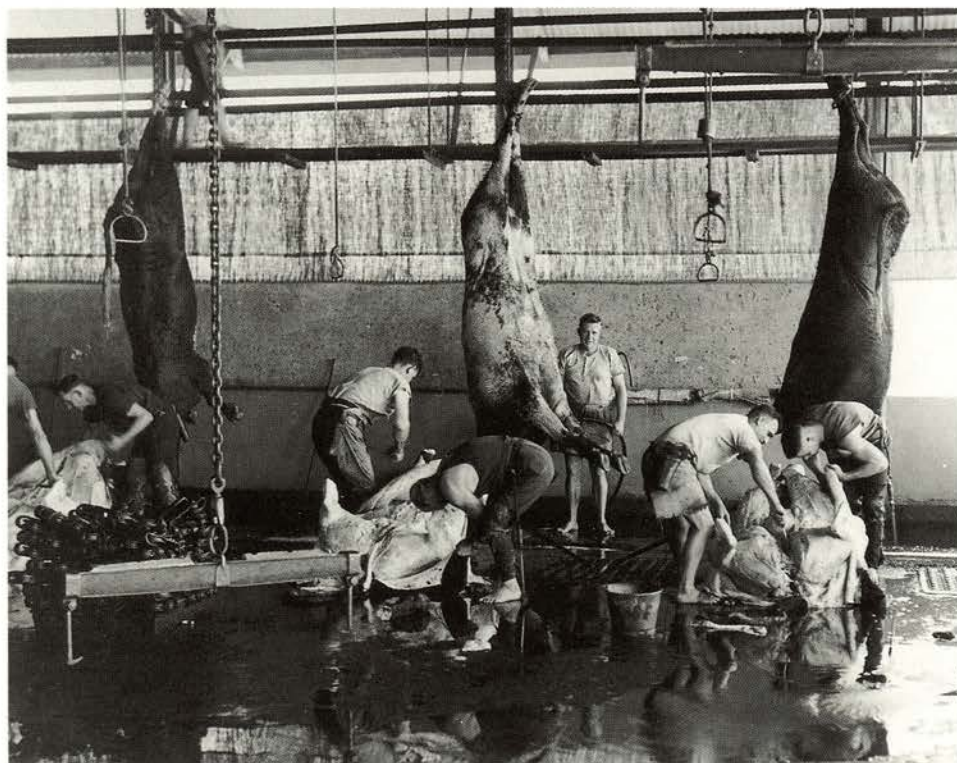
Yet there was much variety. Particular industries created distinctive social patterns. Mining towns, for example, although fiercely unionised, were company towns, and in places like Mount Isa the company store drove out private competitors. Country life also varied from region to region. A tour of the country, from the cattle stations of the Kimberleys to the temperate lands of the south and the productive canefields of north Queensland, reveals a mosaic of economic activities and social arrangements.



In Western Australia the vast spaces north of Perth were dominated by pastoralism. Drought had ravaged the whole area from the Kimberleys to south of Onslow in 1937, but the cattle drives to Wyndham, Derby, Carnarvon and Onslow resumed with rain in 1938. On the west coast iron ore deposits were being developed at Yampi Sound, but in September the federal government, professing concern about the possible exhaustion of what seemed to be a scarce natural resource, placed an embargo on iron ore exports. Broome, with its mixed



N. DUFFEY, ANU



*The slaughter floor of the meatworks at Wyndham, Western Australia. The men are removing feet and hindquarters from cattle. Beef not good enough for the local market was exported as 'frozen boneless beef'; bones and scraps were boiled down for tallow; the residue was used for fertiliser.*

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN  
GOVERNMENT PRINTER

population of whites, Japanese, koepangers (Timorese), Malays and binghis (Aborigines) was in decline, with pearl shell down from £140 a ton in 1937 to £90 in 1938, while the few pearls being found sold at low prices. Large Japanese vessels were taking 5000 tons of shell a year from north Australian waters—total world output was only 7500 tons—and the 59 Broome luggers employing 513 men could not compete, contributing only 850 tons.

Further south wheat was the rural success story for Western Australia, with over 1.4 million hectares grown in 1937–38, up 10 per cent from the previous year, so that lower prices were offset by higher production. Western Australia had become a pioneer in bulk handling. In the safer areas farmers had had a good harvest in 1937–38, those who sold early getting a profitable 4s a bushel. Rain in July and August promised another good crop at the end of the year and those who had survived the depression were optimistic. Many were replacing earth-floored slab houses with weatherboard or brick, and buying motor cars and tractors. The drastic fall in wheat prices during the year checked this optimism.

In an Australian wheat community life was full. Tennis was popular, as elsewhere in rural Australia, with clubs in every district. There were races, football, cricket and community dances. More formal functions included the Show Ball, the Race Club Ball, the Football Club Ball, balls run by churches, the RSL Ball and the Country Women's Association Blue and Gold Ball. On Saturday nights there was late-night shopping in town: the men went to the pub while the women shopped and gossiped in the main street. If the local police allowed it, the back door of the pub was left open on Sundays. Neighbours visited one another for cards or singalongs around the piano. Visits from touring vaudeville shows, circuses and buckjumping shows were falling off as the weekly picture show took their places. Many people now had the wireless, and could listen to the news, serials such as 'Martin's corner', and Bing Crosby or the Budapest String Quartet.



*Eric Robertson, a farmer and distinguished amateur photographer, had to sell his farm during the depression and was unemployed in 1938 when he took this photograph of a pastoral worker on his uncle Peter's farm. 'Tossing the sheaves' was selected for exhibition by the Royal Photographic Society, London.*

B.E. ROBERTSON, ADELAIDE

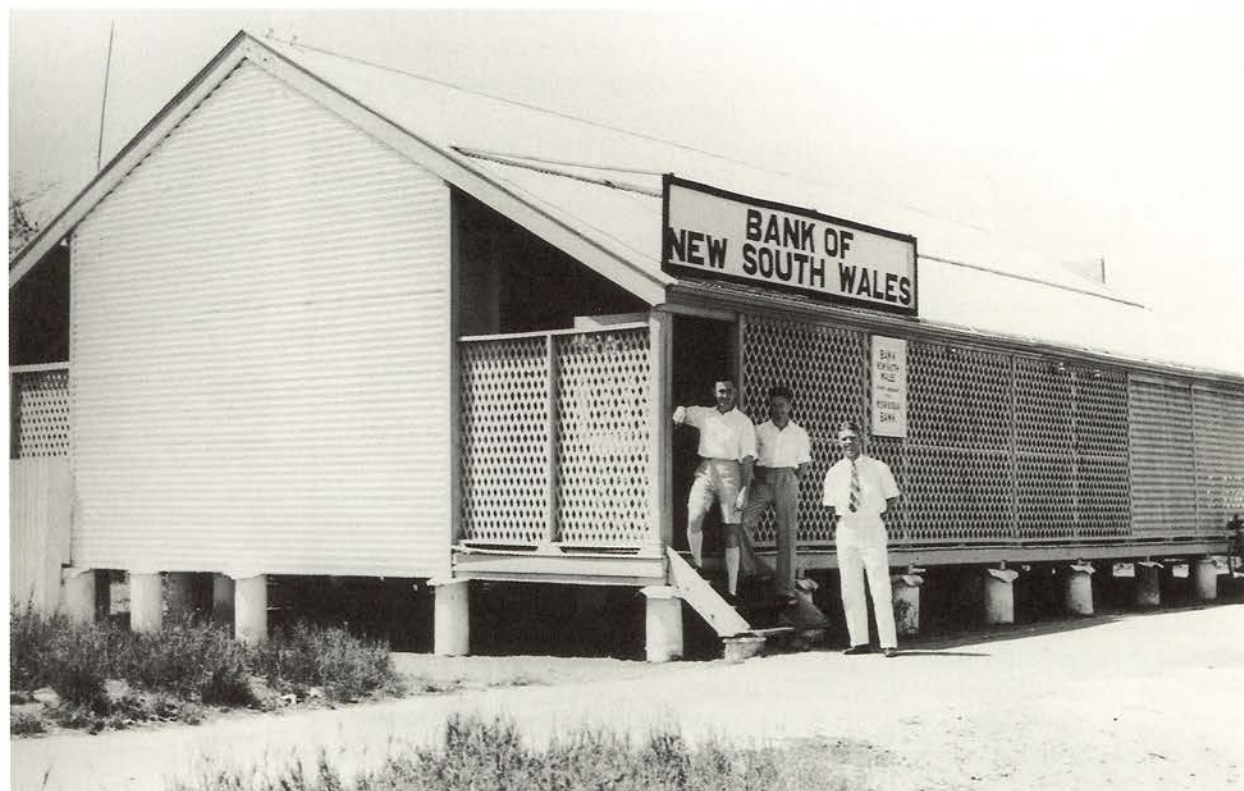
One serial, 'Dad and Dave', a saga of the daily life of a family of cockies at Snake Gully, had a special meaning for many farmers' sons. They worked at home for keep and pocket money, and to get some sort of independent income they went trapping or poisoning rabbits for fur in winter, or shearing if dad could spare them at home. As well there might be casual work harvesting, clearing, fencing and some sharefarming. Some farmers' sons, unable to stand such dependence, went off to the pastoral districts, droving and mustering. 'Dad and Dave' had its bitter side.

Most girls stayed home, helping mother and sewing for their glory boxes. Their help was needed in salting meat, making butter and jam, keeping fowls, taking lunch to men in the paddocks, and the endless job of washing and ironing without electrical appliances. Girls still asked mother's permission to go out with a boy, and parents hoped to be able to influence their children's choice of a marriage partner. Girls who left home might become domestics, barmails, shop assistants, or, one rung up the ladder, telephonists, while the more adventurous might do nursing despite the oppressive hospital discipline.

Wheat had been pushed optimistically into lower rainfall areas and here farmers were still struggling to make a living. After unemployed Australians or Yugoslavs had done the heavy work of clearing, settlers, often ex-soldiers with no farming experience, tried to cope with droughts, low prices and rabbits. Most could not afford proper fencing. Their communities, too, were impoverished, with one store selling everything from tinned foods to contraceptives, a farmer's co-op, and a soldiers' memorial hall with films once a week. At places like Bencubbin and Muckinbin in Western Australia farmers relied mainly on relief payments, and the Agricultural Bank had hundreds of abandoned farms on its hands. In an effort to improve diets and reduce the incidence of barcoo rot, or scurvy, in these districts, the state government sent in trains selling fruit at cost.

*The most northern and isolated branch of the Bank of New South Wales at Broome, Western Australia. Branch managers sent regular reports to head office in George Street, Sydney.*

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN  
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In the better-watered Western Australian southwest lived other struggling farmers, many of them soldier settlers or British immigrants under the Empire Resettlement Scheme. The Women's Immigration Auxiliary Council was supplying clothing and medical care for the women and children of destitute farmers. Many were leaving, the banks were selling up farms, and amalgamations were creating economic holdings. But this was an area with much better prospects. Butter prices were high, and subterranean clover and topdressing with superphosphate were improving pastures for dairy cattle and sheep. Using these enriched pastures, a new export opportunity had been created in the fat lamb trade. Only timber was faltering, with the loss of the Asian sleeper market to the United States and reduced shipments to Europe because war risk insurance rates were being pushed up by mounting international tensions. Only 2000 men were employed in the jarrah and the more devastated karri forests: 5000 had been employed in 1929. Bunbury's port had suffered from this decline, but was benefiting from prosperity in dairying and fat lambs, as were Busselton and Albany to the south.

To the northeast, Kalgoorlie, Australia's largest gold producer, had 16 174 of the 30 000 Australians employed in goldmining working in its eight mines. The largest mine, Lake View, produced 167 272 ounces at £8 13s an ounce, up from £6 in 1931. The mine furnaces and the power station were using 700 tons of firewood a day, denuding the country of timber up to 100 kilometres away. The Western Australian Goldfields Firewood Supply Company was one of the largest enterprises in Australia, employing 500 Yugoslavs and housing them and their families in portable communities. But its days were numbered: the mines were going over to oil.

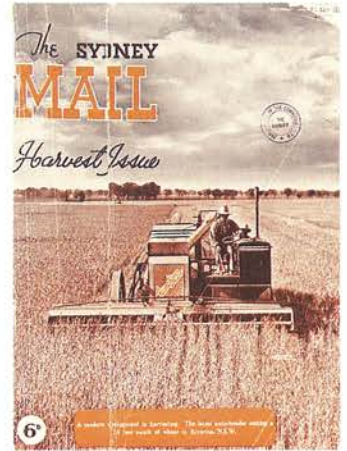


South Australia also suffered from low wheat and wool prices, and its stocks of unsold wine were mounting. But pasture improvement was going ahead, especially in the southeast, where sheep properties were being subdivided to make new dairy farms. The state was expanding secondary industry and had begun a blast furnace at Whyalla, bringing the promise of manufacturing employment. Low commodity prices were hitting holiday centres such as Victor Harbor and Glenelg, and so was the infantile paralysis scare which made people cancel vacations all over Australia. In the southern arable areas, the cradle of Australia's mechanised wheat industry, wheat had largely been given up for fodder crops and malting barley, and drought in Victoria and New South Wales had raised hay prices from £1 10s to £2 5s a ton. To the north and in the mallee, farmers suffered from low wheat and wool prices, motor cars were few and town businesses found their lists of unprofitable credits expanding. Nevertheless tractor purchases were high, for low rainfall made farmers realise the value of a machine able to speed up planting once rain fell.

Tractors got off to a bad start in Australia, for in the depression there was little money to buy them and the petrol companies, ignoring country tradition, demanded payment for fuel as soon as it was bought. But as the depression lifted, and more powerful machines arrived from Hart-Parr, McCormick, Sunshine-Massey Harris, and Allis-Chambers, tractors sold briskly. There were 4536 in South Australia in 1936, but 5969 in 1938, about one for every five holdings, while horse numbers fell from 268 187 in 1921 to 195 834 in 1938. The glory of 'Parade Day', when proud stallions and mares decked with ribbons stood disdainfully in main streets before admiring crowds, was coming to an end.

Beyond the wheat lay the sheep districts, their vegetation ruined by overgrazing, their land often drifting with the wind. Along the northern railway were large

*A header-harvester at work. This self-propelled machine had replaced McKay's stripper-harvester in the 1920s on larger farms. Mechanisation was speeding the amalgamation of farms and contributing to rural depopulation. Sydney Mail, 5 Jan 1938.*



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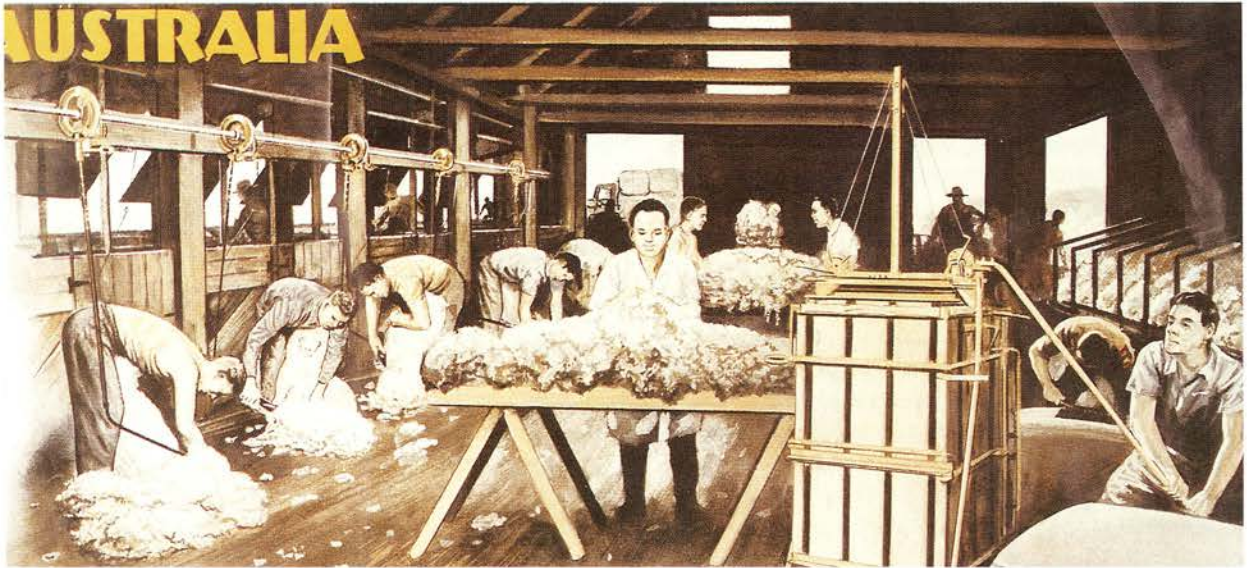
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Advertisement in Hindmarsh centenary celebrations 1838-1938 official souvenir, Adelaide 1938.



*This educational chart on wool production, showing overseas buyers valuing wool in a store, was used in Victorian schools. The end of the marketing process, the sales, attracted buyers from Britain, Europe, Japan and the United States of America.*

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company stations, their homesteads small villages of houses, stores, yards, woolshed, office, smithy and men's huts, waking up once a week when the men came in for mail and pay, and thronged at shearing time when casual workers arrived by foot, coach, car, bicycle, buggy, horse or motorcycle, or on an Afghan camel team coming to carry away the wool.

Further out, on the arid fringes, were the struggling cattle stations described by Myrtle White in *No roads go by* (1932). Here employees were few and men camped out for weeks on end, spending fourteen hours a day in the saddle, poisoning dingoes and dragging carcasses from boggy tanks. Their wives passed solitary hours fighting flies, ants, dysentery, barcoo rot, dust storms and water shortages, punctuated by frantic periods of cooking for up to twenty men during the annual muster. Stores came up once a year, and because of the heat it was usual to have fresh meat on the day a beast was killed and live on salt meat for the rest of the time.

The northern railway line had been extended from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs in 1928, and carried the 'Flash Ghan' with sleeping and dining car and the 'Dirty Ghan' without them. In two of the railway settlements, Marree and Oodnadatta, the Afghans lived on one side of the track and the whites on the other. In their pantaloons and embroidered jackets, Afghan hawkers were still a familiar sight in many parts of rural Australia, but in the arid regions they came into their own as camel drivers and carriers. Their wives and children waited in family settlements—a few wives were Afghan, most were Aboriginal or white. While motor trucks were becoming increasingly important, camels were still taking the heavy loads for which there was no hurry. They could carry up to 450 kilograms at 5 kilometres an hour, and were still needed to set up petrol dumps ahead of the trucks that were displacing them.

Oodnadatta, once a busy railhead with artesian water laid on to every house, was now a dead town, although the trains were bringing tourists and the Aboriginal camp about two kilometres west of the town was finding a good market for spears and boomerangs. Alice Springs, the railhead that had replaced it, changed greatly in ten years, its old population of drifters, alcoholics and deadbeats from the south overlaid by a more civilised community. The town now had several streets; a resident doctor supported the nurses of the Australian Inland Mission; dances were held in a hall instead of beneath trees strung with lanterns; and the 'half-caste' girls

had been moved out of town to a corrugated iron shed where they were locked up at night in the interests, it was said, of morality and a lower birth rate.

The surrounding cattle country had finally been explored, notably by the recent aerial surveys of Donald Mackay and C.T. Madigan. Cattle could now be railed south, raising returns, but demand for an old mainstay, horses, had declined. The cattle stations were large, the homesteads collections of corrugated iron buildings on a bare plain, havens for men wanting adventure or escaping drink, an unhappy love affair, weak lungs or domineering parents. They spent much time camped out, living on beef and damper and risking beriberi. Most homesteads had an Aboriginal camp providing house lubras and stockmen, and generally kept content by rations of flour, tea, sugar, beef, tobacco for the men, lollies for the children and gaudy clothing for all. Every three months or so the wild blacks would come in for a feast of beef, given in an effort to deter them from killing stock.

As civilisation crept in, some oldtimers were becoming ashamed of their liaisons with Aboriginal women, which had produced the numerous 'half-castes' who did much of the work on the stations. There was a growing horror of miscegenation, reflected in Conrad Sayce's *Comboman* (1934), a book portraying a central Australian station owner in thrall to his lubra, and through her to the degrading rites of her people. Their son, educated at a private school in Adelaide, flings off his clothes on his return and dances around the fire to the sound of the tom-toms. The book indicates the exaggerated passions involved in the post-railway invasion of easygoing pioneer central Australia by settled Australian values.



Race was also the key to understanding the Top End, around Darwin, separated from Alice Springs by a short northern railway line and 900 kilometres of bush track. Darwin was mainland Australia's only true colonial society. Public servants from the south employed mixed-race house servants, drank at the club, and lorded it in spotless white tropical suits over Chinese, who ran the town's business, and 'half-castes' and Aborigines who lived under a harsh system of control accurately portrayed in Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. This bureaucrats' eden was somewhat disturbed by the presence of irreverent Australian tradesmen and labourers, of the type whose industrial action had vanquished Lord Vestey's meatworks in 1920, wrecking the Top End's cattle industry and costing them their own jobs. The nearest meatworks now was in Queensland, 3000 kilometres away, a route taken by 80 000 cattle a year from Victoria River Downs and the Barkly Tableland. Most of the country was too poor even for the extensive cattle grazing then practised, and the ticks and buffalo fly caused great losses, but in 1938 some *Bos indicus* cattle were introduced as an experiment, a sign of better things.

Darwin was connected by ship to Perth and Sydney, and by regular calls from vessels plying between Melbourne and Singapore. At the other end of the continent ships also linked Tasmania to the southeastern heartland of the Australian economy. Tasmania escaped the worst of the disastrous drought afflicting much of the mainland. Feed was plentiful in the north, while in the south widespread winter hand-feeding was ended by good summer rains. Much stock was shipped to drought-stricken Victoria during the year at good prices, and in the north extensive pasture improvement accompanied an entry into the fat lamb trade: 20 000 lambs went through the Somerset meatworks in 1937 and 40 000 in 1938. Pasture improvement and high butter prices also boosted the dairy industry in the north, though not in the drier south. Fodder crops increased to support fat lambs and

Unemployed farmer Eric Robertson won first prize in a photographic competition run by the *Adelaide News* for this study of his uncle Peter Kemp. *Adelaide News*, 24 Mar 1938.



#### BURIED ALIVE

Sometimes, in particularly bad storms, scores and even hundreds of sheep will be buried alive. Often when not buried and smothered, their fleeces will collect so much sand that they cannot rise, and they will die of starvation unless they are discovered in time. I was told of one man who at shearing time had to cart a number of his sheep to the wool-shed in a lorry; and then, to free them of some of their sand load, he took them one by one and bounced them upside down on a wire-spring mattress, which he rigged up for the purpose. F.N. Ratcliffe, Flying fox and drifting sand, London 1938.

dairying, but the important potato industry languished due to blight, a series of dry seasons and low mainland prices. The outlook for fruit sales overseas was also uncertain. For the orchardist, 1937–38 was a bad season, with hail and heavy rains, and falls in prices and demand. There was no demand for orchard land.

The timber industry also suffered from economic uncertainty. A recovery in building had enabled mills to work to capacity in 1937 and much of 1938, but a downturn in investment was again producing unemployment by December. The bright spot was the opening of a new pulp and paper mill at Burnie in September, employing 480 hands and 200 more in the bush. The demand for timber and prospects for fat lamb production gave some hope to rural Tasmania, but already the state was turning to tourism. In 1938 the Tasmanian government set out for the first time to woo tourists from the mainland.



As elsewhere in rural Australia education was now widely available, though many children travelled long distances to school on foot, on horseback or in buggies. Their teachers, mostly young city girls, boarded with parents, sometimes moving from one house to another in rotation. Many suffered from boredom and most were moved on after two or three years, unless they married into the district. In some state schools with fewer than twelve pupils, children worked half-time, the teacher dividing his or her attention between two schools; elsewhere a travelling teacher moved from house to house, leaving set work behind. The most isolated children, 18 400 of them, mostly in New South Wales and Queensland, were reached by correspondence lessons, although wealthier families usually employed governesses until their children went to boarding schools in the city or in country educational centres such as Armidale in New South Wales or Toowoomba in Queensland. Governesses were privileged employees, but some had a hard life for 30s a week and keep, and might not only have to teach, bath and bed as many as seven children, but also to sew and mend for the whole family.



The drought hit most heavily in Victoria, compounding the fall in wool and wheat prices. Many farmers had gone deep into debt assuming that the price recovery of previous years would be sustained, but as the year wore on a light wool clip and falling prices made things worse, and though there were good germinating rains for the wheat crop no more followed. The 1938–39 season was disastrous, although Gippsland was a partial exception. Some dairy farmers did well: it had long been said that the third generation of Gippsland farmers would be the first to make a profit from the heavy investment in clearing, and that happy stage had now been reached. In the better watered northeast also, dairying was thriving and spreading west, and topdressing was working wonders, with a great increase in turnoff of fat lambs. Yet even here drought hit all but the ‘safe’ country on the hills, and bushfires destroyed much pasture, as at Corryong.

In central Victoria, Geelong was thriving. In a good year it could expect to export four million tons of grain through its brand new silos and 280 000 carcasses. International Harvester planned to spend £400 000 on a new plant, joining the Ford Motor Company, woollen mills, and cement and superphosphate works in the town. North of Geelong graziers had gone over to fat lambs, of which Victoria

*Frederick Henry Carter, born near Bendigo in 1886 and educated at Dookie Agricultural College, left Victoria in 1911 to obtain one of the first land selections in the Murgon district, near Kingaroy, Queensland. In 1935 he moved to Gympie to take up a Ford dealership and from then on he attended the Ford Dealers annual dinner in Brisbane. Country businessmen often travelled to their state capital for such functions.*

FH. CARTER COLLECTION







*Eric Sams says farewell to friend David Smith and son as he sets off in his 1927 Chevrolet for the 480-kilometre round trip from his home in Griffith, New South Wales, loaded with fresh fruit and vegetables for local farmers and their families. He was away for days at a time, sleeping out rough in a one-man tent if the next farm was too far away to make before nightfall and listening to the 'kangaroos thumping past the tent early in the morning and night, the kookaburra's greeting as the sun arose and the galahs and parrots screeching to each other from the tree tops'. Eric picked up bananas and tomatoes—both prohibited in the irrigation area because of plant quarantine regulations—at the Warburn siding on the Hillston line just out of Griffith but managed to escape attention by avoiding the inspection point on the main road and using the farm gates instead. The roads were the most hazardous part of Eric's job. As he later wrote: 'The roads in those days were dry weather roads, an inch of rain meant cars and trucks bogged down to the dif, with the exception of cars and trucks with chains on the back wheels, even then the dirt built up roads had a track cut out by the wheels about the depth of the wheels. Talk about a ride, once in the tracks, you swayed from side to side . . . hoping that you did not meet another car coming the other way. If you did one would back until one came to a little harder ground. If you tried to pass you nearly always slipped down the side of the road into the table drain. This would cause you to call for a tractor to pull you out. One time I can remember, after just 10 points of rain travelling from one farm down a lane lined with mallee trees and pines, my truck sliding sideways towards a pine tree, nothing I could do but just wait for the truck to hit, but as always near the trunk of the tree it was dry, so the truck would swing back on the road again'.*

E. SAMS, 1938 COLLECTION

*Tinamba, Gippsland, a small settlement on the rail line between Melbourne and Bairnsdale. Although only ten kilometres from Maffra, the regional centre, Tinamba had its own pig sale. Pen drawing by Francis Broadhurst. Art in Australia, 15 Nov 1938.*



was the major producer. They introduced English breeds and crossbreds and improved their pastures, and usually kept dairying as a sideline, which yielded a regular income in the bad times when lambs could not be topped off because of drought. Most central and western Victorian towns imposed water restrictions throughout 1938, and even the small remaining activity in goldmining, such as the cyaniding plant at Maldon, closed for lack of water. Only a little fossicking lingered.

On the Murray and Goulburn rivers, the difference in land values, £10 an acre for dry country, £30 for irrigated, was easily justified in the drought. While dry country became virtually unproductive, on irrigated land fat lambs were turned off without interruption, dairying flourished, the Shepparton canning factory processed fourteen million tins of fruit and profitable vegetable farming attracted an increasing number of southern Europeans into the area. Further irrigation was

in prospect with the Yarrawonga weir under construction and, meanwhile, the workers' wages gave a welcome boost to local commerce.

In the southwest the coastal dairying country was doing well, with a factory at Warrnambool and more land being cleared around Terang. Inland, the good basalt country normally carrying a sheep an acre was drought stricken, and hand-feeding and water carting were common. Merino sheep were giving way to meat-producing Polwarths and Corriedales, but returns were little better than from the farms around Horsham, which were producing only eight bushels of wheat to the acre, at only 1s 11d a bushel, compared with 3s 8d at the beginning of the year.

The drought was as bad in the Wimmera, an efficient wheat-producing area which otherwise could just have lived with the low prices. On its wheat-sheep farms the clip was light and broken and the wheat harvest, fair in 1937-38, was poor in 1938-39. Northwards, in the mallee, nearly all crops failed in 1938-39. Those who could reap at all got on average only three bushels an acre, little more than seed for the coming season. Although the government water supply scheme helped save the sheep and provide some income, most farmers would have to go even more heavily into debt to plant a new crop.

In the mallee much capital had been written off in failed postwar settlement schemes, but returned soldiers were doing well in the irrigation settlement at Red Cliffs, growing 4145 hectares of vines which in 1938 saw a record output of sultanas and raisins. There was orange production, too, with citrus prices up because New Zealand had resumed imports, and land here was fetching £250 an acre. The larger irrigation settlement at Mildura was also flourishing. In all Victoria, the only farmers who really did well in 1938 were on irrigated land.

Because capital cities and the nation as a whole had vested interests in the strength of the rural economy, the country towns were highly sensitive barometers of rural economic fluctuations. Country towns everywhere suffered from the reduced rural incomes. Already most of them had fewer than 2000 people, and only 25 had over 10 000. The smaller towns were suffering the effects of the motor car and bus, which took trade off to the better facilities of district centres. Even the larger towns felt people's increasing willingness to travel to the capital city, combining shopping with holidays: this was no longer confined to the very well-to-do. But the motor car was creating a new town trade in petrol sales and mechanical repairs. New car registrations had reached a peak of 75 000 in 1928, fell to only 13 000 in 1932 in the depths of the depression, but in 1938 reached 80 000. The district centres were still growing: new brick homes were going up at about £1000 each compared with about £450 for a weatherboard house; new shopfronts appeared in brick embellished with tiles, plate glass and cantilever verandahs, and art deco was much in evidence. Many towns put in sewerage schemes and built new council chambers, cinemas and hospitals.

The writer Vance Palmer noted 'how short a time had sufficed to create a privileged caste in the town, a little group of people who occupied the points of vantage, set the social standards, [and] took for granted their inherent right to respect and power'. The really wealthy went on ocean cruises each year, but in most towns it was enough to be the doctor, general storekeeper, bank manager, clergyman or headmaster to be among the elite, though such people might be overshadowed once a year when the rural gentry came to town for race week. Between the elite and the very poor, who often lived beside the tip in humpies of bags, kerosene tins, rusty iron and boughs, was a graded middling group comfortable enough to enjoy the activities of town life: from dances and cinema to lodges and, in some towns in 1938, sesquicentenary celebrations. Yet town opportunities were diminishing and more of the young were leaving for the city.



*The makers of Meggitt's linseed oil assured sheepowners that their product was scientifically prepared. Made in Australia, Sydney 1938.*

Kylie Tennant summed up country towns scornfully in *The battlers*:

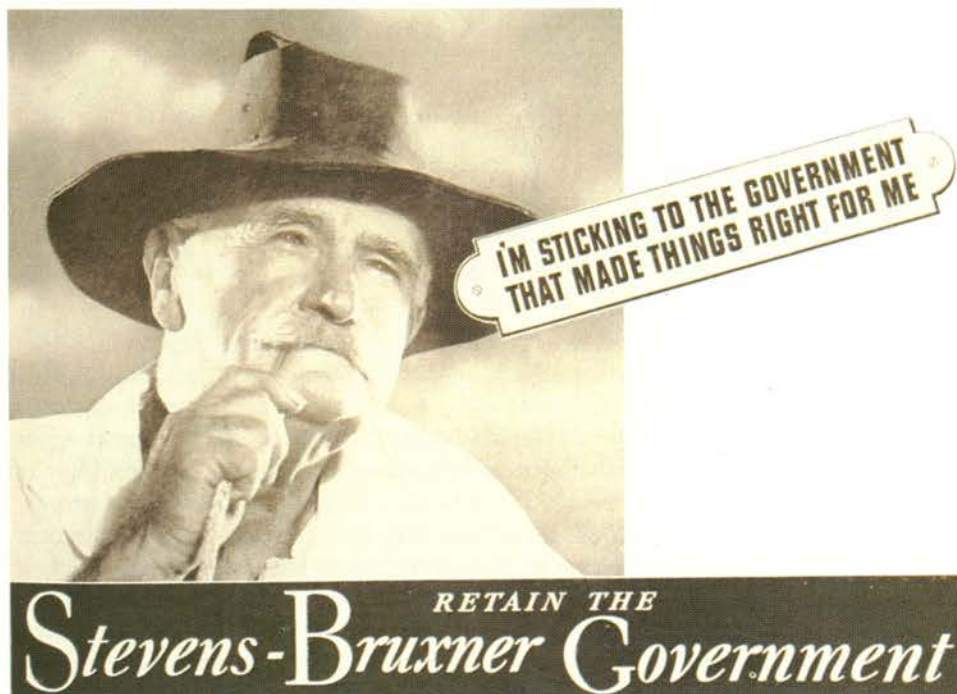
there was a well-equipped high school from which the brightest boys were taken away because their parents must send them out as labourers; a magnificent cinema with weak projection and worse sound; well-built churches with a few elderly women for congregations; and a town park in which a group of portly dowager palm trees flanked a war memorial and a machine gun.

Tennant despised the smug satisfaction of small-town life, but where rural enterprises suffered, the towns, too, were battling.

From his Crohamhurst laboratory in Queensland Inigo Jones, the long-range weather forecaster, had predicted a good season in New South Wales, but in fact severe drought prevailed throughout the Western Division, the Riverina and the south and central west. This was the culmination of a series of dry years beginning in 1935, which in 1938 also affected the northern tablelands and the south coast. Water became a serious problem for farmers and many townspeople. Stock were sent away on agistment; lambing was disastrous; stock routes were eaten out; milk became scarce in inland districts.



On the New South Wales south coast butterfat prices were up, from 10d a pound in 1937 to 1s in 1938, but this and the drought affected cheese and pig production, which had expanded in the early 1930s because of low milk prices, but could no longer compete with butter. The drought prompted south coast farmers to take a greater interest in fodder conservation, using maize, sacchaline (sorghum) and hay, and in pasture and herd improvement. At the same time they began to buy milking machines, now reliable and cheaper, to take some of the drudgery out of dairying. Drought also reduced incomes for lower Hunter valley dairy farmers,



The conservative Stevens-Bruxner government of New South Wales wooed the country vote in the March election. This advertisement was placed in the Sydney Mail, which circulated widely in country districts. On 26 March, 36 per cent voted for the United Australia Party, led by B.S.B. Stevens, 14 per cent voted for the Country party led by M.F. Bruxner, 35 per cent voted for the Labor party led by J.T. Lang, while the remainder voted for splinter Labor groups or independents. The Stevens-Bruxner coalition won comfortably. Sydney Mail, 16 Mar 1938.

but they, like farmers closer to Sydney, benefited from the regulation of the formerly chaotic city milk markets in the 1930s. Of all Australian farmers, the dairyman was most tied to a tiresome and endless routine, but the industry had enabled many to become independent, and the regular milk cheque made over-reliance on storekeeper credit unnecessary.

The north coast of New South Wales had a good season, including an increased turnoff of fat cattle owing to agistment from the inland, and improving cattle quality caused by selection for the export trade, which was becoming more discriminating as the Ottawa Agreement of 1932 created more opportunities for Australian beef in the British market. Dairying had an excellent year, with Norco's twenty factories producing 16 million kilograms of butter, and Foley Brothers another 2.5 million kilograms. Yet, ominously, smaller factories were closing down, taking support from small settlements such as Alstonville, Bangalow and Coopernook, already losing retail trade to larger centres such as Lismore and Taree. On the Clarence, Richmond and Tweed rivers sugar was protected from cheaper Queensland competition by an agreement forged at Federation. New South Wales produced 44 000 tons of sugar, but this was over the production quota, and much had to be sold on the free market at low prices. More profitable was banana growing along the Richmond and Tweed rivers and at Coffs Harbour. The industry was supervised by the government to keep it disease free.

To the west, New England was hit severely by drought, which as elsewhere made graziers think harder about fodder conservation. The regional centre, Armidale, had long been a town of private boarding schools, and its educational role was enhanced by the founding of the New England University College in 1938. Armidale was also becoming a fruit-growing centre, and new cold rooms had just been built to extend the marketing period.

The southern tablelands were also drought stricken and to add to the graziers' distress much fencing, stock and grass were destroyed by bushfires in 1938. The drought interrupted a good deal of pasture improvement, and hastened the changeover from cattle to sheep which had recently been made possible by inoculation of sheep against black disease. The lambing was light and the clip poor. The graziers drove their animals from the Monaro plains into the mountains, and the snow leases on the high Kosciusko country saved much stock. For drovers and the few who lived in the uplands, the year was busy.

The wheat-sheep country on the western slopes and plains was devastated by drought. After a very hot summer in the south, good autumn rains encouraged sowing and germination, but the winter rains failed and grasshoppers arrived in spring to take off the green blades. This added to the burden of many farmers still holding 1937-38 wheat in the forlorn hope of a rise in prices. They had virtually no income for two seasons, and were receiving assistance through the Rural Bank to plant the next crop and having their debts adjusted through the Farmers' Relief Board. To survive, storekeepers were restricting credit and trying to collect debts; some were being forced out of business. To add to the general misery, skeleton weed had recently appeared in the paddocks and spread rapidly despite the drought. Crops also failed on the central slopes, and—a sign of bad times—a good deal of fossicking and small-scale reworking was going on in the old goldfields country.

Wheat growing had been pushed west into very low rainfall country during the years of optimism and high prices in the 1920s. Many of the growers in these marginal lands were soldier settlers. By 1929, 11 million hectares had been set aside for returned men in all states and 37 561 had been assisted to set up as farmers with loans from state and federal governments. Ominously, even by that time nearly a third had already walked off the land and much public money had been written



Front and back covers of the Sydney Daily Telegraph's souvenir edition on the Royal Easter Show. The front cover (above) shows the 'ringmaster' of 'the greatest show on earth'. Below is WEP's (William Edwin Pidgeon) caricature of the annual district exhibits. The grape judge is after WEP's humorist mate, Lennie Lower, a famous drinker, while Henry was a well-known comic strip character.



'WEP PICTURES REVELATION of dastardly jiggery pook among District Exhibits. Grape Judge Lower plots with Ben Bowyang and Bill Smith to highjack coveted blue ribbon. Plot exploded by that nasty little boy, Henry. It made a big noise.' Sydney Daily Telegraph, 13 Apr 1938.

off as irrecoverable. In 1937–38 and 1938–39 as much as 95 per cent of the crops around Hillston failed, many soldier settlers left their farms and Hillston, with its empty houses and shops, took on a deserted appearance. Closer settlement was to continue in New South Wales, but in safer areas.

Further north, pastoral properties were going into wheat, using tractors and large areas. Interspersed among the big properties were small struggling farms such as that described in Isobel Ann Shead's *Sandy* (1936), where father earned his living partly by shearing and roadwork, while mother stayed in a house with hessian walls and only a Coolgardie safe to keep food fresh. In early 1938 the northwest had

temperatures of 48° Celsius for a month in a row and the cream was always sour by midday, except among better-off country people who could afford kerosene refrigerators. The Hallstrom Centenary refrigerator cost £59 10s plus freight from Sydney. The kerosene tins it brought to the country were used for storing and boiling water, picking fruit and even for milking. Flattened and nailed to the wall they made a good cladding which rusted only slowly.



In the Western Division of New South Wales there were large leasehold sheep runs. Government policy was to reduce these to 'living areas' carrying 4000 sheep, but many were still much larger in country that carried one sheep to eight hectares west of the Darling, and one sheep to four hectares east of it. A man was needed for every 3000 sheep: to muster and move the flock, control blowfly strike and repair fences and watering facilities. Conditions in the far west were said to be worse than in the legendary drought of 1902 and many sheep were either dead or on agistment in the east. Sheep numbers went down from 854 000 in 1936 to 458 058 in 1938 in the Deniliquin Pastures Protection Board district, and from 1 640 000 in 1936 to 848 000 in 1938 in the Bourke district.

Despite the drought, however, on the larger stations a genteel way of life persisted. The master and mistress of a big run would make frequent visits to Sydney, staying at the Hotel Australia (10s 6d a night single) or more homely Metropole (6s 6d a night single). While the men did business with their brokers and bought station supplies, the ladies shopped at Anthony Hordern's, Farmer's or David Jones, went to dances at the Ambassador, and were seen to lunch in fashionable restaurants.

In the far west stood Broken Hill, with 5000 miners employed profitably despite a recent fall in metal prices. Output in most mines was up, but it was known that the BHP mine was soon to close, putting 500 out of work. Lower lead prices meant that the 'lead bonus' negotiated by the unions had fallen from £2 a week in 1936 to only 10s: it was slight compensation for the many frail men who had been 'leaded' at Broken Hill. Conditions were beginning to improve, with the mining companies engaged in building a new hospital for £240 000, while the regeneration paddocks which the companies had begun to fence and plant around the town in 1936 to reduce dust were already having a beneficial effect.

In the Riverina the output of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, still being developed, was restricted by water rationing. Fat lambs were replacing dairying, originally intended as the mainstay, and there was a good rice crop of 42 000 tons. The fruit crop from 1937-38 was also excellent and the co-operative cannery at Leeton dealt with 7500 tons of peaches and apricots, using casual labour. The cannery was a major destination for those who travelled the roads in search of seasonal work. There was a regular seasonal round in which experienced 'battlers' moved: picking grapes at Rutherglen in Victoria perhaps, then north to New South Wales to pull maize at Gundagai and Tumut (where maize failed in 1938), back to Victoria to pick apples, pears, peas or hops, or to pull sugar beet at Maffra. There was a different circuit in the north, where 5000 assembled annually in Queensland's Callide valley to pick cotton, worked on beef in Queensland meatworks from March to July and on mutton and lamb in New South Wales works from October to January. Elsewhere cycles of lumping wheat, shearing, crutching, canecutting, sewing wheat bags, chipping turnips and ringbarking offered the fit itinerant worker a wide choice.

Casual workers travelled on foot, by buggy or in old motor vans, leading a full social life in their camps or rows of wooden huts close to the job of the moment. On the road there was the temptation of the grazier's sheep—'doing time for meat' was a hazard of the life, though in Queensland a hungry man might kill a sheep if he hung the fleece on the fence. 'Vagging', vagrancy or having no money, was another gaoling offence. Money could be made on the road by 'faking' products for sale: with much ingenuity metal polish could be made from nitric acid and mercury, and lavender bags from sawdust and lavender water. These products would last until a man got out of the district, but there were honest fakers, who bought pins in bulk and sold them off in small packets or made flowers of coloured paper or wove kangaroo skin belts. If all else failed, in the bush you could always get a rabbit.

There was plenty of work around Queensland's Darling Downs, clearing rainforest to make new dairy farms on the southern and eastern fringes, and clearing for wheat and grazing in the west, where hundreds of thousands of useful hectares had been almost freed of prickly pear by the *cactoblastis* caterpillars introduced a decade earlier in a successful attempt at biological control. Despite stem rust, the downs produced big crops in 1937–38 and 1938–39, but the drastic price fall led many producers to look to fat sheep or dairying as an alternative. Butterfat prices were high, and the growing tourist industry on the coast demanded summer milk.

The chief city of the Darling Downs was Toowoomba, with a population of 27 000 and two flour mills, two breweries and a foundry. Ipswich, nearer Brisbane, was more industrial, with a woollen mill, foundries and railway workshops employing 2100, and another 2100 employed in the coalmines. There was still some unemployment, but the start of a new sewerage scheme late in the year

*'WOOL AWAY.' Loading Wool at Tinnenburra station, Queensland. 'Another shearing season is drawing to a close—more than 112,000,000 sheep will yield a clip of somewhere around 1,000,000,000 lb. Australia supplies more than one-fourth of the world's requirements of wool.'* Walkabout, 1 Nov 1938.



absorbed most of that, and people hoped that a new Royal Australian Air Force base at nearby Amberley would increase employment opportunities still further. Kingaroy was booming, with a new shire hall, broadcasting station and dance hall, power station and town water scheme. Peanut silos were prominent; but peanut production, 7000 tons a year, was producing a glut.

The inland pastoral country of western Queensland was under drought. Sheep were just surviving, and many cattle had been sent elsewhere early in 1937. Wool was down to 9d a pound and as usual the people battled with isolation, dingoes, grasshoppers, flies, ticks and wild pigs. The mining towns suffered from lower metal prices, and Mount Isa's problems were intensified by a five-week coal strike, which prompted mine owners at Cloncurry to raise output despite the high cost of sending ore to Chillagoe for treatment.

Western Queensland had benefited from aerial medical services since the Australian Inland Mission had begun at Cloncurry in 1928. By 1938 the flying doctor operated as well from Wyndham and Port Hedland in Western Australia and from Broken Hill, while many pastoral stations were equipped with pedal transceivers. The aeroplane in the outback stirred literary imaginations. The popular novelist Mary Grant Bruce saw the pastoralist swooping low over his property daily, putting down occasionally to mend a broken fence or to pull a bogged calf from a waterhole. Soon, she predicted, children would be flying themselves to school every day. While her imagination soared, many inland towns now at least had regular air services.

On the Queensland coast, Brisbane was drawing southern areas into its orbit, pulling in milk and vegetables, while the motor car was turning Tewantin and Noosa into resorts. To the north was sugar country: 5 140 000 tons of cane were cut, but world sugar prices had declined, and the International Sugar Agreement guaranteed Australia only 400 000 tons of exports. Of the rest, 340 000 tons sold at good prices on the home market; the balance had to be sold at very low free market prices. The price each mill paid its growers varied, depending on its share of the national quota. At Innisfail it was 33s 6d a ton, but at Tully, with a low quota and a large input, it was only 30s 6d. A conference of mill owners held in Brisbane in March reached no agreement on a more equitable distribution of the quota.

A tour of Australia's rural districts, from the remote northwest to the far northeast, shows great variation in fortunes, depending on the chances of the seasons and prevailing commodity prices. On the whole 1938 was a bad year and producers struggled with their great traditional enemies, drought and low prices. There were signs of retreat where wheat had been extended into unsafe areas, but pastoralists bore the blows with their usual resignation, waiting for a return of better times. Not all was gloom: the new fat lamb industry, made possible by chilled rather than frozen exports, offered many areas new hope, and dairying was doing well. Both these activities benefited from pasture improvement through topdressing with superphosphate and sowing subterranean clover. New farms were still being cleared in many districts. If 1938 saw a slide back into recession, the country had by and large come through the Great Depression with its basic social and economic character unchanged. Country people had learned to rise above temporary setbacks.







*An Italian canecutting gang with cane loaded and chained down.*

ROVEDA COLLECTION

## CANECUTTERS

DIANE MENGHETTI

It is 3 am on an early November morning in a canecutters' barracks in the Victoria sugar mill district around Ingham, north Queensland. A lamp flickers on eight Piedmontese canecutters—migrants who have come, like their fathers and grandfathers before them, from inadequate family holdings in rural Italy to work for labour-hungry foreign agriculture. Each has a story of venturing into the unknown. 'I took off by myself, one remembers:

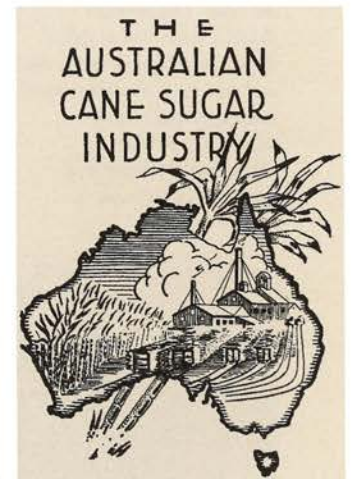
Don't know where to go. I got to Brisbane with sixpence in my pocket . . . Lucky in Brisbane those days was people they had a boarding house and they was going to the boat and pick up the migrants from overseas . . . And anyway I get to Ingham . . . I said, 'What a place! I look around and I go!' This fellow he come and get me . . . He come up with the sulky like. He say, 'Hey, hey! How you doing?' Well, in Italian of course, the Piedmontese dialect. We all speak Piedmontese dialect here . . . he was a canecutter . . . So he took me in the barracks there. Got a mosquito net. Hot. Lie down there looking up.

Coffee or a piece of cheese or a nip of gin began the day. Then the gang set off for the cane paddock. Each year in Brisbane the Australian Workers' Union argued that cutters should work no more than 44 hours a week, but Brisbane was far away and the canecutters had little faith in their union organisers. The union official

used to be like more on the farmers' side than the workers' . . . He was there but he never warned us about anything, never once. [He treated] Australian gangs the same . . . You talk about eight hours, you're a communist.

So the previous day's cut had to be loaded, illegally, before dawn. The cutters welcomed moonlight. In moonlight

you can see where you get that bundle and you can see if there are any snakes or anything like that. Because some friend of mine he had a carpet snake on his shoulder . . . And he said, 'What the hell is this?' And he say, 'Crickey it's a snake!'



The Australian cane sugar industry, published by the Sugar Industry Organisations, Brisbane 1938.

When there was no moonlight the men sometimes struck matches to avoid mistakes. But they still happened. In the words of one cutter:

instead to load my truck, I load your truck. You can't see. Sometimes rain. And still we load. We take the bundle on the shoulder and we load it in every weather.

After loading, the men hauled their trucks along portable rails to the main tramway leading to Colonial Sugar Refinery's Victoria sugar mill.

Then the cane inspector come and he take a look at it, and if there's just a little bit a trash he says, 'Unload that completely!' Make you tip the truck over, roll them all down, unload it. Clean it and load it again . . . Just because of a couple of leaves you know . . . Then you finish loading and you change yourself because you're all wet from the dew or the sweat. About six o'clock seven o'clock, something like that . . . We change in the paddock and then we put the things to dry on top of the cane. Flannelette shirts, long pants, long trousers and big boots . . . The cook comes that time with breakfast.

The award said that only men could cook for the gangs, but

the women used to cook . . . If they knew the organiser was about one of the fellows in the gang would come home and he'd say to the cook, 'You can go. Go down to the farmer's wife and have a chat. I'll do this'.

A ganger's wife took breakfast out to the gang,

sometimes by bike, sometimes walking. Sometimes I'd do a mile of a morning. They'd take the tin, I used to give them a kerosene tin, they made the handle. I used to give them forks and knives and the bread and the plates and the cups. They'd take all that. And then I'd take out their bacon and eggs or salami and

*An Italian canecutting gang with short-handled cane knives. The man on the far right later became a successful canefarmer. The sugar cane appears to be Badila, a purple variety common in 1938. The gang is cutting 'green'—without prior burning—hence the 'trash' in the foreground, consisting of the discarded leaves and tops of the cane. The farmer's children often had to collect these tops at the end of the day and feed them through a small hand-operated cutting machine to produce 'chop-chop' for horse food.*

ROVEDA COLLECTION



eggs or whatever I'd cooked, and the billy of tea, at seven o'clock. I used to have the plate. I'd put it in the plate and I'd have a big teatowel and tied it up in one hand. And in the other I'd have the billy with the coffee.

Another woman had just arrived in the Ingham district to join a husband who had been away from home, on and off, for more than twelve years, first on the maize harvests in South America, then in the north Queensland canefields. One of their children remembers his mother being

very frightened. There were that many snakes around ... You see we arrived Saturday, went out to the barracks on the Sunday. Next morning, well it was a working day, Monday ... And Monday morning Dad said, 'You come down the road a certain amount of distance, then you see where we're cutting.' That's to bring breakfast. We're going down the road, next thing we see is a brown snake. We're all scared of snakes; snakes in Australia are poisonous see. 'Mummy, look at the big snake!' 'There's another one!' The next thing there's bullocks on the road. 'Look at those bullocks!' So they [the canecutters] finally woke up and said, 'Eh Luce!' Dad was blond and Luce means light ... 'Eh Luce, you'd better go and meet your wife otherwise we'll get no breakfast.'

'Luce': an odd name for this sweat-stained, scarred, dirty man, her husband. He was a ganger, and she was proud of his standing:

The ganger was many years experienced cutting cane. Then he talk better the English because when the cane inspector came along he had to answer him then and there. He goes to the farmer and says, 'Are you going to give me a contract?' ... There are in a group three or four farmers ... and he's the main one, he's got the most cane, so you go to him. So he gives the contract away. Then you can pick your men ... Make a group. Then you go to the mill and sign on. A pound for the ambulance and two pound for the hospital ... So you had to sign.



*Breakfast in the shade of a farm building. In the background a sulkie is being rebuilt. Sulkies and buggies were still in common use among farmers despite the introduction of the motor car. Cutters occasionally owned horses or bicycles and it was still unofficially acceptable to hitch a ride on a cane train in areas not served by buses. The cutter in front sits on a rough sled which may have been used for planting and for hauling in boggy conditions. Some cutters are wearing sandshoes. These were light and cheap but quickly became saturated in the paddock. Although the man second from right wears laced boots, most others preferred the lighter leather shoes, kept well oiled and changed at breakfast time for a dry pair.*

ROVEDA COLLECTION



*Green cane at Hawkins Creek, Ingham, north Queensland. Photograph by P. Finch, 1983.*

They signed on late in May. ‘The Victoria “Sign On” took place yesterday ...’, the newspaper said,

and in all 60 gangs were signed on, with a total of 458 cutters ... , 42 Italian (321 cutters), 14 British (107 cutters), 2 Spanish (15 cutters) and 2 Finnish (15 cutters). As well as the above 60 cooks must be engaged ...

Luce’s was a good gang. Seven of its eight original members were still together. Their goal was 40 tons of green cane before sunset. ‘That was contract work you see: the more you cut the more you get. We used to get about 8s a ton ...’ The price quoted was for green (unburned) cane standing fourteen to fifteen tons to the acre, and in a day’s backbreaking work each man would cut up to five tons. ‘The cane knife was short’, a cutter explains

[with] long handles, [one] seven inch and the other ... about nine or ten inches at most ... We had a file and we put it on a stick with a little bit of oil and a cover in case it’s raining ... otherwise it gets rusty. Used to last a week a file for the gang of seven or eight ... We had to use the knife to take the trash out. Then you cut it. You get two sticks at a time, three or two or one, depends how many you can grab. You lean it down like that and you top it ... Hard are the swinging of the knife and the bending of the knife and the bending of the back see, because we cut smooth and topped. Down like this all the time. You top overarm so that it’s away from the other cane, and you throw the cane down and the next bloke throws onto that one and tops in between ... That time the farmer came across after you. He wanted to see all two bob pieces level with the ground where you’d cut the sticks level ... The cane inspector was going crook because you cut it too low and pick up the dirt. The cane inspector is bossed by the mill. The farmer was going crook because you go too high and cut too much cane off.

The morning's cutting ended at around 11 or 11.30 am, when the cutters stopped for dinner. They ate good food, well cooked by the ganger's wife:

I used to give at dinner time and tea time two courses. For lunch I'd give them soup and maybe a steak or a stew or a roast. And then their sweet, a pudding. I managed to make a pudding every lunch time. And the afternoon at three o'clock, smoko, I used to make—bake—a cake every day. Every morning I used to make a cake because they'd have a piece before they'd go out with a cup of coffee for whoever wants it. And then they'd have the baked one for three o'clock smoko. They used to take that out themselves . . . They used to pay so much a week for their food . . . My husband used to do it. When they got paid they paid me too, but he used to collect the money . . . Because I knew when he was doing it he was doing it right.

After dinner a rest for about an hour before going back to the cane at half past one. Already they had worked more than eight hours. For the strong it was exhausting; the weak or inexperienced remember it being almost unbearable:

the first week I cut cane, when I see this one fellow on the one hand and one fellow behind, and the other fellows push me, I cry. I couldn't get it. You know I couldn't catch up with them, and I was trying to do what the others could do, because I was—I got tangled up with the trash and everything. I couldn't help. It didn't take me long to learn. But I remember that I cried when I was fifteen, cutting cane and in Australia . . . I had a chap, a good friend of mine, he was from the same town where I came from, and he came and helped me sometimes. 'You go easy,' he used to say. 'Go easy.' He was only two years older than me, and he said he was like that when he started. He was a good cutter . . . A good cutter is a strong man, is a willing worker, is a tight man sort of, people he like to make money . . . He say, 'You cut behind me . . . Anyhow, he used to clean up and cut a little bit of my drill [row]—you have one drill each. And then when I come down I got that little bit cut . . . I was so tired I was dreaming I was loading cane. I was cutting cane all day and all night.

Weariness caused accidents. A truck chain might break and 'somebody take it in the head', or men might injure themselves with a file. Common injuries involved

cutting with the knife. Cuts in the legs, some they have to stitch them up you know . . . some they get canker in or something like that . . . I got what they call dengue fever out at Long Pocket, me and another chap. Both of us got sick. We got dengue fever or scrub typhus or something.

Low rainfall early that year kept down the rats which spread the canecutters' worst enemy, Weil's disease, a painful fever causing internal bleeding and sometimes death. In the whole of north Queensland only thirteen people got it in 1938, which was lucky, for sickness was costly and compensation hard to obtain. In March the *North Queensland Register* reported:

Mr A.E. George P.M. rejected applications for workers' compensation by three Italians—Angelo Cardillo, Salvatore di Prima, and Giuseppe Zanoni—who claimed they suffered and were still suffering from the effects of Weil's Disease contracted at Ingham. Sir Raphael Cilento said . . . three cases of the true type of Weil's Disease had occurred—two in Brisbane and one in Babinda. None of the sufferers was a cane cutter.

What made the canecutters tolerate such work and conditions? Some wanted to return to their family plots at home, with a small fortune from a few seasons' work



*The annual sugar cane burn, here seen at Hawkins Creek, Ingham, has been a feature of the north Queensland landscape for over a century. Photograph by P. Finch, 1983.*

in Australia. Others were saving to send for their families and make a new life as canegrowers. Everyone wanted to buy land and own a farm. But for the young single cutter there were distractions even in Ingham.

FOREIGN FARMERS AND EMPLOYMENT OF FOREIGNERS. In

*Queensland no foreigner can own property unless he is a naturalised British subject. Therefore, the only foreigners in the industry, in the true sense of the word, are the unnaturalised ones. At the last inquiry into the industry in 1930 it was found that 80 per cent of the employers and employees were British born, 10 per cent naturalised and 10 per cent unnaturalised. Since then a policy of increasing the employment of British born canecutters was agreed upon by the employers and employees in the industry, and a definite decrease in foreign cutters has resulted. In every mill area except three in north Queensland the proportion of foreign cutters employed is only 25 per cent, and in those three areas above-mentioned probably 200 Britishers have taken the place of an equal number of foreign cutters. In the districts south of Townsville the proportion of British cutters runs from 86 per cent to 98 per cent. In the Mills, which are responsible for the employment of 6000 men, there are practically no foreigners employed.' The Australian cane sugar industry, Brisbane 1938.*

After about ten year I was here we sent for my mother and sisters. Oh well, to tell the truth ... when I was cutting I never had any money to save ... I was working here and I used to send back home a few pound now and then, but not really that much you see ... We was a sort of happy crowd, and we used to go in the hotels and have a few drinks after the [soccer] game with all the boys like, you know the fellows we used to play against ... On Saturday, Sunday, we was always out to the pub or even the seaside. Nearly all the gang together. One who stays home wants to sleep ... Plenty company, good company. They sing the song and everything ... Some would drink all weekend and come and go womanising ... Otherwise they'd be in the barracks and play cards ... Bocce morra. But not in the barracks, oh no. Morra in the pub ... There was a dance on the top of the East Ingham Hotel, they called it the Roof Garden ... Italian dance. Then behind it was the old Workers' Hall ... We paid two shilling to get in ... About ten o'clock they stop the band to play and they go around with a plate. They give you a scone, a cake you know, sandwiches. We thought it was the [ants] pants.

It was hard enough to save money even if a canecutter was careful. He cleared about £200 during a six-month season, but little in between seasons. Employers discriminated against Italians. 'The Italian people', the cutters found,

couldn't go to the railway and ask for a job. You couldn't go to the mill and ask for a job. You couldn't go any government job or anything like that ... There was one Italian worked for the mill, Victoria Mill, because he was living that close to the Switzerland border that he had ... a Swiss name. But ... was an Italian. He got the job at the mill because he was Swiss. If he told them he was Italian he'd never get the job.

Sometimes there was a few weeks' work during the off- season, chipping the cane or fertilising it with ammonia; and even when there was no work a farmer might permit a gang to stay in his barracks, saying:

'You keep the barrack clean and we leave the crockery like and just the lights and everything' ... We play cards, read some books in Italian, bocce in the yard of the barracks. Depend. Some gangs they have somebody they could play the harmonica. Sometimes from one barracks you go in another one, just to talk, pass time. You got nothing to do off season ... We used to be days and days without coming out of the barracks because of the rain. For some there was a bit of nervousness, always closed in this blooming joint here, waiting. We used to walk around ... and have a look see the river height and all those sorts of things. There was too much water around and we only had the place at home and play cards, reading and tell stories and ... do a bit of singing.

For a few it was worthwhile. They sent for their families and put a deposit on a cane farm. The son of one successful cutter remembers:

Father said, 'I've always worked for a boss, I don't want you boys to do the same. I want you to have something of your own' ... There was just a shack with a kitchen and dining room and a dirt floor ... There was one bedroom with two double beds. Me and my brother slept in there till the age of twelve, and my father and mother in the other bed. The other two brothers had built a sort of



Tropical North Queensland (April to Sept.)

# Australia

*This Australian National Travel Association poster invites tourists to experience tropical North Queensland in the cooler months between April and September. Poster by Trompf.*

AUSTRALIAN TRAVEL  
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

barracks ... when we grew older the four of us brothers slept in that place ... I left school when I was twelve. Two hundred ton of cane got burnt on our farm through a fire which got away from across the creek ... So I cut cane when I was twelve years old ... My mother, I just can't understand how she coped ... We had this gang of eight men and us four brothers, and dad when he came home on the weekend. She used to cook for the whole lot, wash the clothes—the gang's as well. Heavy flannels, there was no shorts in those days ... And the second eldest, who had the brains, spending weeks coming to town and begging for those money lenders to come out and see the crop to lend you three, four hundred pounds so that you could pay last year's groceries and carry on.

Buying a farm was a gamble. 'Some tried ... but in that time to buy a farm was not good', one man explains:

I know many friend of mine who worked two, three years cutting cane and don't spend a penny. Don't buy a bottle of beer, nothing. To pick up some money, maybe get for spare two, three hundred pounds, like you know. They give that £300 alright and they go on the farm. And the farm cost £5000. You got to pay interest for ten per cent. On the land they charge you ten per cent. See you got to work hard, plant the cane. And when you pay the butcher, pay the store—you pay for all the year you know. Pay the baker and pay interest. You got nothing. Finish up you work three, four years then you got to go away. Lose everything. Lose it and three years work too.



Luce's gang completed their work under hurricane lamps. It was nearly eight o'clock before they got back to their barracks. The night would be sultry, the room alive with flying insects. The barracks were made of

Corrugated iron with a wooden floor upraised about two feet from the ground level on wooden stumps. It just had a bit of a verandah in front. But then there was more rooms, nine by nine or ten by ten; six, with two to a room, and that's how they managed. There would have been a room for the ganger and his wife and family, a bigger room ...

Furnishings, fittings and utensils were what the farmer had left over:

A spoon with a crook handle, that's going to the gang. A fork with three prongs, that's going to the gang. A plate with a chip goes to the gang, a cup half broke goes to the gang ... We had an American lamp, and when you go ask for kerosene the farmer was going mad because you use too much. Bloody terrible ... You come home from the paddock it is nearly dark. You going for a bath. They would give you a kerosene tin with holes punched in the bottom and a bucket for the water. Four sheets of iron. Well, you've got a little pulley over there, you put the water in, you pull it over like that, you soap yourself—by the time you finish up you've run out of water ... What you going to do? If you complain they used to send you away from the gang.

So they learned not to complain, and with persistence and ingenuity they made the barracks home. Gangers' wives remember making furniture out of empty kerosene boxes:

Well, with three I made the sofa—three for that ... I put some cretonne you know, and I padded a little bit with some rag—or I don't know now. Anyhow, and a little table in the middle, was the lounge like that. Well, and the wardrobe too. One corner I put a piece of wire and a shelf on top and made a wardrobe—and a curtain ... I made all the curtain for the lounge and the wardrobe. Sixpence a yard there ...

Another says:

I had these kerosene tins then. You'd cut them you know. They're square but you'd cut them this way and they'd open up. My husband fixed that for me, and then you could wash in one side and rinse the plates in the other. They'd make a triangle. And you'd put a piece of board there and I could rinse and wash up.

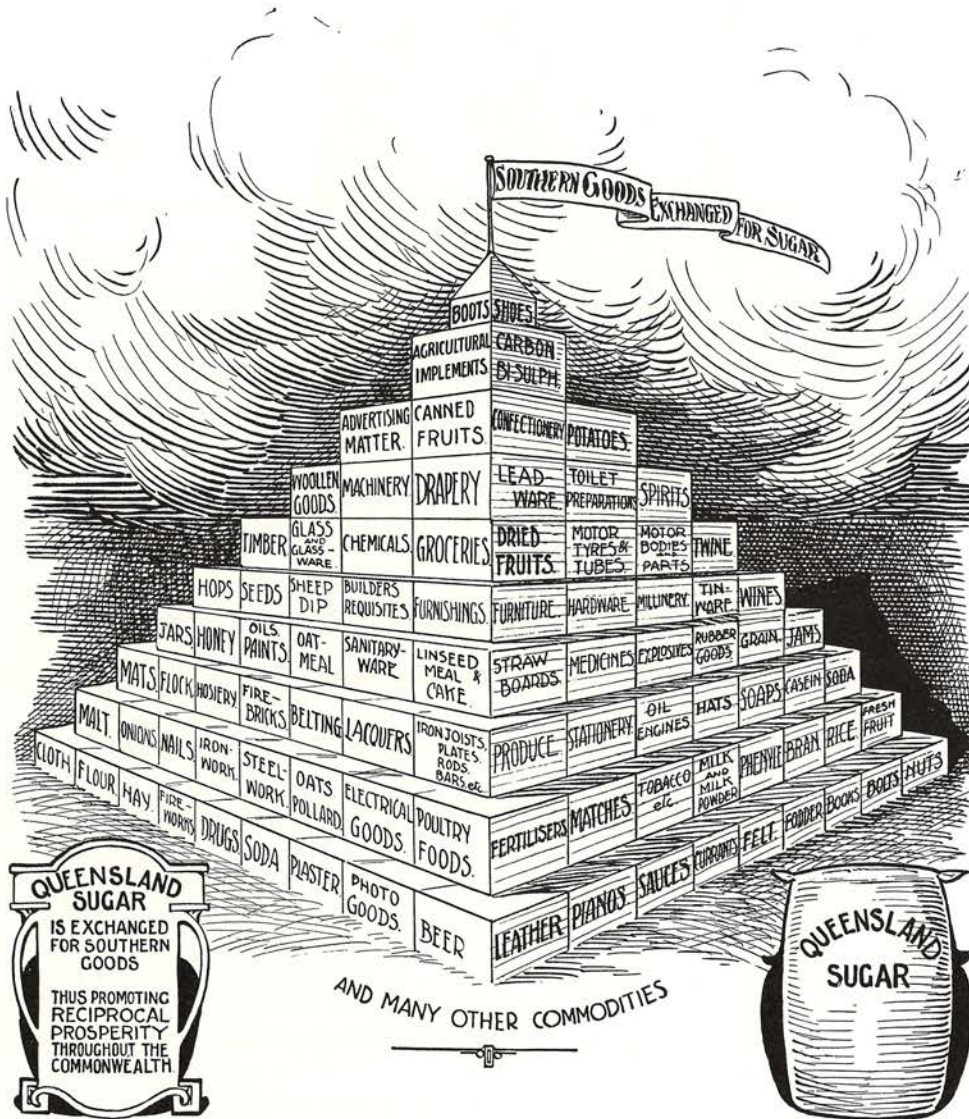


The work and life were hard. When the season ended in November some would go back to Italy: 4430 overseas migrants came to Queensland during 1938 and 3597 left. They took their stories home with them; those who stayed in north Queensland tell of slowly feeling at home in the new land. It was easiest for the young, 'Myself and my sister', one recalls,

we thought it was lovely. We loved the bush ... But my mother kept saying she only wanted to stay two years and when the first years were up she said another two years. But after the second two years were up she didn't even talk about going back, and as a matter of fact she never did.

Was it all worth it? People remember being disappointed, and it is a measure of their courage and endurance that many of them stayed, even so, and made do:

We came here to find the best, but here there was not much difference. We thought we were going to do better here. Some people did good, but we done a lot of work too ... We knew that when we got here we got to pull off our sleeves and work hard for a living. But we was thinking to find a little bit better.



The Australian cane sugar industry, published by the Sugar Industry Organisations, Brisbane 1938.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY Membership of the A.R.U., 42,000

# RAILROAD

**INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM**

President: **H. E. Turner**  
 State Secretary: **Lloyd Ross**  
 105-11, Post Office, REDFERN

Official Organ of the  
**AUSTRALIAN RAILWAYS UNION (N.S.W. Branch)**

"Transport House"  
 313 Cleveland St.,  
 REDFERN

*For INDUSTRIALISM! — INTERNATIONALISM! — SOCIALISM!*  
 WRITE FOR A SET OF A.R.U. PUBLICATIONS

## CALENDAR FOR 1938

**JANUARY**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
30	31					1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

LENIN DIED JAN. 21<sup>st</sup> 1924

**FEBRUARY**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

INITIATE 8 HOURS MOVEMENT ON FEB. 18<sup>th</sup> 1856

**MARCH**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

FIRST TRADESMAN COMMITTEE IN AUSTRALIA MARCH 25<sup>th</sup> 1859

**APRIL**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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VICTORY OF FRENCH PEOPLES FRONT APRIL 26<sup>th</sup> 1936

**MAY**

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29	30	31				

FIRST INTERNATIONAL LABOR DAY 1889

**JUNE**

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					1	2
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24	25	26	27	28	29	30

JUNE 19<sup>th</sup> AUSTRALIAN UNITY CONFERENCE

**JULY**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
31					1	2
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JULY 25<sup>th</sup> 1860 - CAPITULATION OF BARRAK

**AUGUST**

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28	29	30	31			

AUG. 18 1890 AUSTRALIAN MACHINISTS STRIKE DECLARED

**SEPTEMBER**

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					1	2
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SEPT 12<sup>th</sup> INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY

**OCTOBER**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
30	31					1
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29

OCT. 28<sup>th</sup> 1916 FIRST DEFEAT OF CONSCRIPTION IN AUSTRALIA

**NOVEMBER**

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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

NOV 7<sup>th</sup> 1917 RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

**DECEMBER**

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

DEC. 20<sup>th</sup> 1917 SECOND DEFEAT OF CONSCRIPTION

**WE REMEMBER THE PAST THAT WE MAY DETERMINE THE FUTURE**

The Australian Railways Union calendar reminded members of their political and industrial heritage, from the Eureka stockade in 1854 to the Russian revolution in 1917. The New South Wales branch of the ARU, with over 42 000 members, was one of the largest unions in Australia.

NATIONAL LIBRARY