

THE COUNTRY

A.W. MARTIN

IN 1939 Charlie Wallace was a dryland farmer on two thousand acres northwest of Gilgandra, in New South Wales, within sight of the Warrumbungle Range. It was red and black soil country, its extraordinary flatness thrown into strong relief by the sawtooth spine of the mountains, etched purple against a wide sky, an island pile visible from every angle for miles around. Rotting remnants of 'corduroy' roads—ways once built of slender casuarina logs laid side by side to carry bullock wagons over the mud when rains came—were reminders of pioneering pastoral days before World War I. But now the country was cut into farms like Wallace's, securely fenced. Beyond the outer lines of fences, graded gravel roads joined towns and villages, but to get to them one had often to skirt neighbours' paddocks on dirt tracks or wind through trees and stumps on 'green' roads, strips of land reserved when the survey had been made, but still too unimportant to be cleared and gravelled. So, for example, to get to his nearest general store and pub, in a hamlet fourteen miles away, Wallace had to go through eleven gates, all to be left carefully fastened behind him. His car, a 1930 Ford, lacked effective brakes, but that did not trouble him: it was a peculiarity of the model, he would calmly tell his alarmed city relatives, and it didn't really matter; the beauty of this flat country was that one simply 'cruised' to a stop at each gate. Mere braking was, after all, the crudest of driving skills.

The farm had been Wallace's for 21 years. He had come to the district a year before the war ended, a sensitive youth driven from his home in the state's central wheat belt by partial breakdown after a disabling accident. His left hand was gone, chopped to pieces in a chaffcutter just as he reached military age (and even that accident did not protect him from being sent white feathers in the post). A fresh life in a pioneering place where others were strangers seemed the recipe for salvation, and it was. Hard work tempered the loneliness of daily life in a two-roomed hut. At weekends there were occasional tennis parties; and in summer, renewing skills he had learned at school, he played for the local cricket team, his wrist's stump fastened to bat-handle by a strap of his own design. Though never



The Warrumbungle spine.
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Charlie Wallace's house, 1939.

IN PRIVATE POSSESSION



The patchwork green of north Queensland canefields, 1982.

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Apple picking in the Mersey Valley, Tas, 1980.

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Opposite. Looking back to the past: horse logging team and corduroy road.

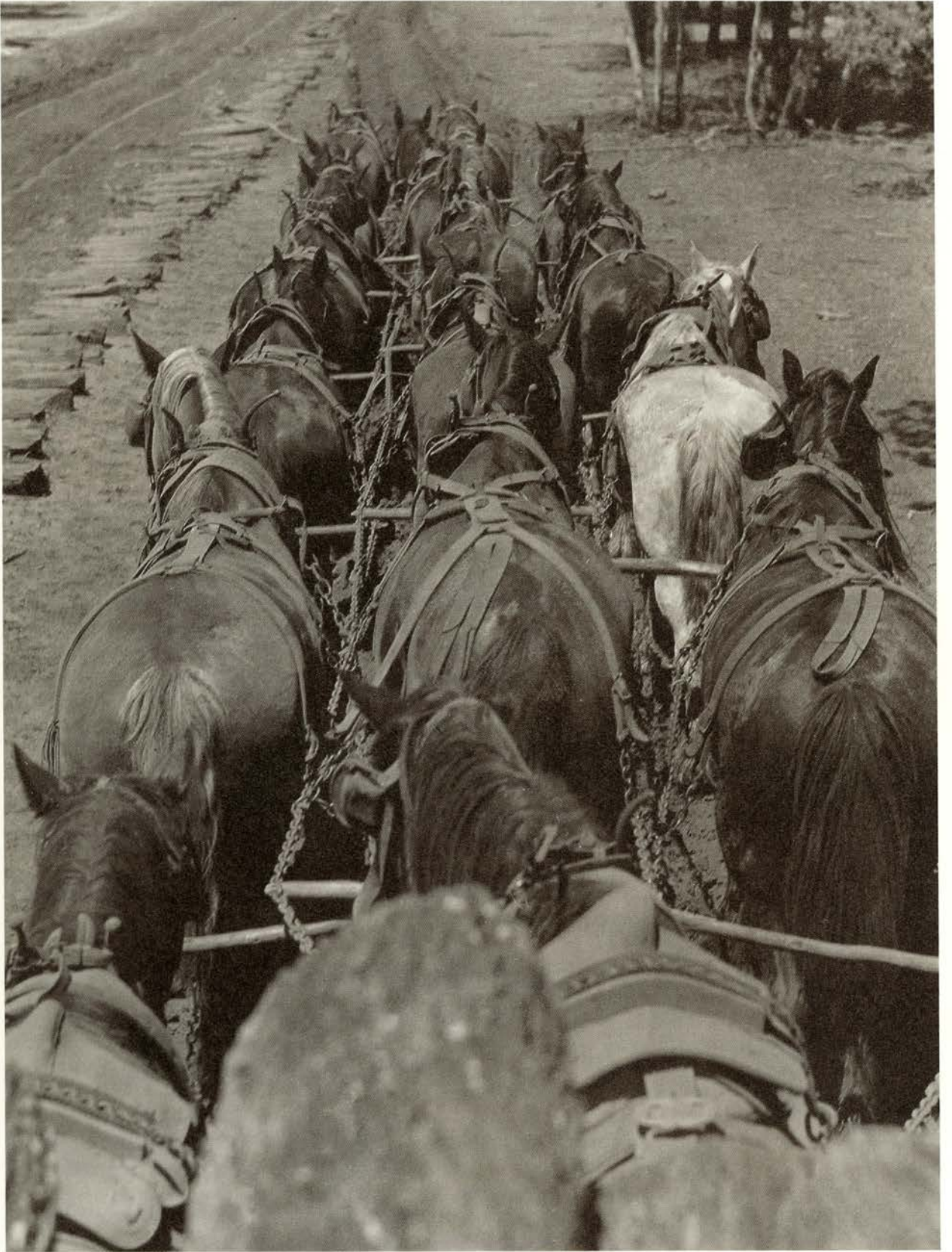
LAND NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

wealthy he survived the depression and in the late 1930s built a modest timber home, from whose wide verandahs one could watch the Warrumbungle spine disappear as evening faded into night. A young married couple came to share the house: he to work on the farm, plant fruit trees and tend a vegetable garden; she to cook and housekeep. It was here, in 1939, that the men came in from the paddock each lunchtime to hear on the big wet-battery radio the 'Watchman's' comments on a world drifting towards war, and then the announcement of Prime Minister Menzies that war had begun.

Wheat planted in the large paddocks in alternate years was the staple crop, though sheep also grazed, in varying numbers according to the season, amid stubble in the fallow paddocks improved by clover sowings when crops were drilled. Each year's wheat crop yielded hay cut in swathes from paddock's edge before the stalks turned golden and ears ripened. Though some neighbours now used tractors, Wallace stuck to the old ways. Harnessed four abreast in a team of eight his horses pulled plough, drill or harvester, and no-one who saw Wallace's expert management of them, with imperious shouts and a single rein crooked over his handleless left arm, could doubt the wisdom of his prejudice. The rounding up, feeding, harnessing and working of his horses gave each of Wallace's working days its shape and rhythm.

Wallace's daily routine is one of many thousands we could use to illustrate farm life of his day, both for its own interest and as a starting point from which to gauge the great changes of the years that followed. To sample more widely would be to reveal endless variations in experience and circumstance, for we can think of Wallace—or any other farmer—as 'typical' only in the broadest sense. Compare his land and his routine with those of, say, a cane farmer on the coastal strip near Innisfail in northern Queensland, where cloud-topped mountains brood over the patchwork green of sugar crops and the climate is the wettest in Australia. Well-worked volcanic soil produced the cane whose careful firing in the harvest months up to December made blue-smoke haze pervasive and, in destroying vegetable 'rubbish' and driving out rats and snakes, prepared each day for the heavy manual work of cutting. Or consider orchardists, in cooler regions like Tasmania or the tablelands of New South Wales, following the cycle of pruning, spraying, thinning and harvesting. Think, in contrast, of the scarcely varying daily routines of dairy farmers, whether in Victoria's Gippsland, coastal New South Wales and Queensland, or the river flats or irrigated pastures to be found in all states. Dairy farmers must 'harvest' their product every day, however much seasonal changes govern such matters as animal breeding and the management of pastures and fodder crops. Dairying meant relentless work, especially boring and distasteful in the days of handmilking, work commonly carried out by people chained to farms often kept barely afloat by unpaid family labour. They might well envy beef and sheep growers who on less moist savannah lands ran farms of varying sizes and whose work patterns, while embracing phases of intensive activity (haycutting, calving, lambing and shearing), could never be thought so grinding.

However great their differences, all these people shared a common setting: that of the lands 'tamed' by non-Aboriginal Australians and technically described as the 'crop, orchard and sown pasturelands' of 'rural Australia'. Though they account for only about 2.5 per cent of the continent these lands are the home of the great majority of Australia's 'country' people and yield the bulk of Australian primary production. Soils, topography and, above all, rainfall patterns have determined their position and at least partly shaped the ways in which they are used. The rest of the continent offers a sharp contrast. More than 40 per cent of it is too rugged, dry or infertile for cropping, forestry or other exploitation. On another 55 per cent thin



natural pasture allows rough grazing, chiefly for cattle. The livestock feed on native grasses and shrubs, the principal improvements are artesian bores and earth tanks; and in the vast cattle country of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, husbandry consists of little more than mustering, branding and drafting stock for market. The low carrying capacity of the land makes for large properties, many of which are leased or owned by companies. They depend for the most part on hired rather than family labour, and in their character and organisation they bear little resemblance to farming enterprise in the more highly developed and more closely settled rural areas of the long fertile crescent from Queensland to South Australia, including Tasmania, and Western Australia's southern corner.

In these more favoured lands the crops and animals produced by farmers had almost from the beginning of European settlement to be geared to export markets. So Australia's rural industries came to be marked by a high degree of specialisation. Subsistence or peasant-style farming was almost unknown, and the greater part of the modern farmer's income normally derived from the sale of one, two, or at most three commodities. Wool, meat, dairy products and sugar: these have been the major products, and by observing how the land has been used in raising them we can define distinct farming 'zones' which pattern the fertile crescent. Five such zones are commonly identified: the areas devoted principally to wheat and sheep, beef and sheep, dairying, irrigation, and sugar cane.

These zones are still what they were in 1939, though over the years great changes have occurred in the nature of rural life and production within them. For example, in the 1980s the wheat and sheep zone, though taking up only 11 per cent of all the land devoted to crops and livestock, produces a third of Australia's total agricultural output—including almost all of its wheat and more than half of its sheep. This zone, drier than the others, has made remarkable gains from advances in technology and farming techniques. The scientific improvement of pastures, for example, has enabled the wheat and sheep zone to overtake the beef and sheep zone, which before World War II carried most of Australia's sheep population. Sheep are, naturally, still important there; though less 'developed' (less cropped, less cleared and less advanced in pasture improvement), the best of the moist and largely savannah woodlands of the beef and sheep zone make fine grazing country. It still produces a third of Australia's sheep and a quarter of its beef cattle. Wool accounts for almost half the farm income, with prime lambs, surplus sheep and beef cattle the important additional supplements.

Between 1939 and 1945 our Gilgandra farmer, Wallace, found wireless still the best source of news and commentary, now more than ever absorbing with wartime events to be followed. Because newspapers were to be had only when the mailman did his rounds, three times a week, they were always stale, and Wallace took no dailies, preferring the less ephemeral and more practical stock and station journals. He personally felt the war most directly through rationing and shortages of supplies, though his ordinary working routine barely changed. It was often hard to get wire for fences, iron for sheds, some tools and even everyday items like nails, and he felt his standards of farm maintenance inescapably slipping. But the simplicity of his needs in machinery and fuel—the items most severely in short supply—helped him to carry on. His horses, whose fodder he grew himself, were the main source of working energy on the place, windmills powered the pumps which drew artesian water for his stock, and even his old motor car, its mileage cut back by petrol rationing, needed little maintenance and few spare parts. The only mechanically powered equipment he had, a circular saw-bench for cutting the wood used in house fires and fuel stove, was easily serviced and, even if it had

A wartime display at a country show: alongside the farm machinery is a gas producer unit which, installed on the farmer's motor car, makes him independent of rationed petrol.

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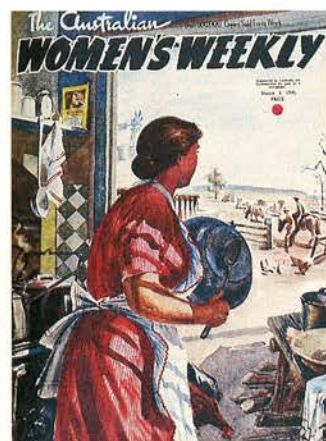
broken down, Wallace (his lost hand notwithstanding) was a good axeman. Besides, being single and, like the man he employed, beyond military age, he did not personally suffer, as so many farmers did, from the manpower needs of the armed forces. Then, as now, the great majority of Australian farms—more than 90 per cent—were family enterprises which depended far less on hired labour than on the work of sons and daughters. When thousands of these men, and women too, were recruited into the services, that compounded problems brought about by shortages and difficulties left over from the hard years of the 1930s. Before the war ended, and just as the threat of Japanese invasion seemed to be receding, a government commission which examined Australia's rural scene summed it all up by saying: 'Perhaps the apt picture of many farmers in 1943 is that of very tired men worried by ten years of difficulty, perplexed by doubts as to the future, but grimly carrying on with the tasks of the day'. It would be wrong to think of our Wallace absolutely in these terms but, his hardworking and ordered life notwithstanding, he did share the prevailing sense of pressure and uncertainty.

A GLIMPSE OF DAIRY-FARMING LIFE, NEW SOUTH WALES, 1940s

[In 1943–44 the sociologist Jean Craig carried out interview-surveys of almost 200 dairying households in the small communities of Comboyne, Coopernook, Denman and Woodville, as part of the Rural Reconstruction Commission's study of farmers' conditions, subsequently presented in its seventh report. The following glimpse of farmers' conditions is from one of Craig's original, unpublished reports to the commission.]

Farm houses are usually built and almost invariably designed by the farmers themselves. The original house is usually a two or three roomed cottage, functioning principally as a shelter from the weather. Eventually extra rooms are added here and there to accommodate growing families.

In the great majority of farm houses ... the focus of family life centres in the kitchen. This room is usually larger than any other, and located at the back of the house. Its equipment includes generally a fuel stove, a deal table and chairs, a bench, cupboards and a dresser. Only a small proportion of houses contain a kitchen sink (from 10 per cent in the Denman district to 17 per cent in Woodville). Where there is no sink, a tap may nevertheless protrude from the wall at a height of a foot or 18 inches above the floor, for it is connected only by a short horizontal pipe to the tank outside. The percentage of houses with running water in the kitchen ranges from 63 per cent in Comboyne to 45 per cent in Coopernook. Facilities for food storage vary greatly: in Comboyne no house visited had a refrigerator, though 36 per cent of Denman houses had one; in all areas there are dwellings with no form of food storage at all, ranging from 29 per cent in Coopernook to 17 per cent in Woodville. Ice chests or ventilated food cupboards are to be found in most of the other houses ... The percentage of farm houses where equipment includes a radio varies from a maximum of 100 per cent in Denman to 71 per cent in Comboyne ... The radio, perhaps the principal source of leisure-time entertainment, is often located in the kitchen.



Australian women's weekly, 3 Mar 1945.

The Rural Reconstruction Commission was a group of four men to whom the Curtin government, as part of its planning for 'postwar reconstruction', in 1943 gave the task of investigating Australia's rural life and work. For more than ten years before the war Australia's rural industries had been in an unhappy position.

The basic cause was falling prices for primary products on foreign markets, glutted and sluggish following the great worldwide depression of the early 1930s. In the ten years up to 1939 the average prices that Australian farmers received for their products dropped by 25 per cent, and the burden of debt they were carrying rose by more than 20 per cent. These were years of considerable distress, when numbers of farmers—mostly people who worked small properties in marginal areas—were forced to leave the land. Governments acted, often reluctantly, to help those who managed to stay, by subsidising many types of production, and by establishing debt adjustment or 'reconstruction' boards. But by the eve of World War II some economists and agricultural experts had become convinced that a free market, dominated as it was by the unpredictable needs of overseas buyers, could not always show best how Australian lands should be used. There ought to be other ways of deciding what to produce and how, and of seeing that the welfare of country people was properly advanced. Though the war solved the immediate problem of markets (the difficulty now, indeed, was to achieve *high* enough levels of production) the commission carried out its work in the shadow of bitter memories.

All four commissioners were men deeply concerned with rural policy and practice, the most expert being Samuel Wadham, professor of agriculture at the University of Melbourne and long-loved for his zeal in spreading, missionary-like, to practising farmers the gospel of new developments in techniques and management. In scarcely more than a year the commission took evidence in all capital cities and 200 country centres, examined more than 800 witnesses, commissioned pioneering studies of sample rural communities and gathered a mass of other reports. It was the most wide-ranging investigation ever made into Australian rural life and work, and in ten reports written between 1943 and 1946 the commissioners set down in plain language what they saw as the lessons of the past and the needs of the future. Policy-makers, they said, must aim always 'to arrange the occupation of the lands so as to make the most profitable use of them economically and socially without prejudicing the interests of future populations'. Production must be efficient and geared to known markets, country people should enjoy vastly improved amenities (particularly housing, and health and educational

*Soldier-sons return to
the farm.*

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services) and—above all—Australia's fragile soils must be cherished and preserved as a legacy for future generations.

What the commissioners called the 'inevitable association of home life with the farm' was the central theme of their reports:

It is impossible to ignore the social demand for the establishment of a farming society, based on independent, family, home and farming units, in which the farmer, subject to the over-riding powers of the State, exercises exclusive control over the land he farms . . . [This] is the only sound and lasting basis on which to combine capital and labour with the land in a vigorous rural population, educated through the exercise of authority and property to take part in responsible self-government . . . It appears to the Commission, therefore, that the problem is not so much to find an alternative system as to remove conspicuous abuses in the existing system and to abolish practices which are against the public interest.

In pursuit of these ends, however, the commissioners' means could only be exhortation. They pushed for more research and better education, and their reports took on a strong moral flavour as they pressed the rural community's right to better living conditions while at the same time urging farmers themselves to recognise their duty to handle the land responsibly, as trustees for the whole society. Sound views and an eloquent expression of the idealism of the time, though it is difficult to judge how widely the reports became known to practical farmers (our Wallace, for example, did not read them) or whether they had much effect on the day-to-day work of state agricultural departments. But there was one practical achievement: in 1945 the commonwealth government, on the commission's advice, established a Bureau of Agricultural Economics, to monitor market trends, keep track of new technical developments and, in general, work to inform and educate farmers. Here, it seemed, was the nearest Australia could come to realising the commissioners' dream of rational planning.

Agriculture advanced slowly. By 1950 total production had risen only 9 per cent above the prewar level. Equipment and materials continued to be in short supply, owing partly to the federal government's determination to foster secondary industry and to use what resources there were (especially hard-to-get dollar currency from the United States) to that end. A severe drought in 1945 did not help. But the war's end did not bring a collapse in world prices, as many experts, including the rural reconstruction commissioners, expected. The demand for food actually rose, thanks to continuing shortages abroad, especially in Britain, and to the unexpected growth which mounting immigration brought to the local population. By the early 1950s Australian agriculture could not meet rising market opportunities, and there was talk of a crisis. At the same time, rural interests had gained new political clout in 1949–50, when Menzies' Liberal–Country party government replaced Labor, and then the wool boom of 1951–52—that great upsurge in wool prices caused by the Korean War—inspired a new burst of confidence in the future of farming. In February 1952 the federal government announced a major reappraisal of rural policy. Machinery was to be more readily available, fertilisers subsidised, taxation concessions would encourage investment to increase productivity, new markets would be looked for, and new research would be funded.

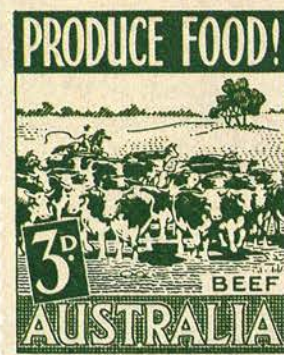
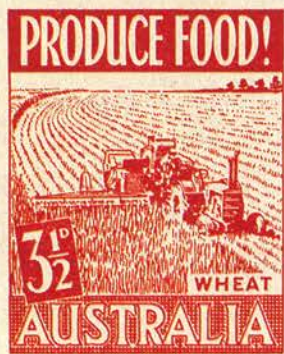
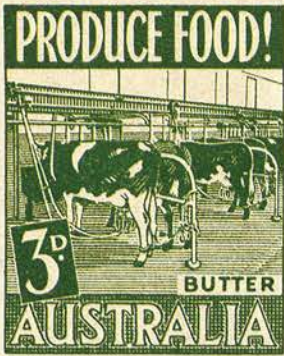
These measures were no doubt important in what we may now call an agricultural 'revolution' in the 1950s and 1960s, though the trend in those years towards enormously increased production was worldwide. The market forces and many of the advances in science and technology that lay behind that revolution



'It is impossible to ignore the social demand for the establishment of a farming society, based on independent, family, home and farm units . . .' (Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1946). An advertisement for Wigmores Limited in the Western Mail annual, 1953.

Postage stamps exhort
 Australians to increase food
 production, 1952.

AUSTRALIA POST



spilled over national boundaries: Australia's rural industries were in this sense only a small part of a wider capitalist system. But by 1960, farm production was 50 per cent greater than it had been in 1951, and in the next decade, despite seasonal fluctuations, it went on increasing at a yearly rate of between 3 and 4 per cent. Between 1949 and 1970 sheep numbers rose from 120 to 180 millions; the wheat harvest, at 5 million tonnes in 1950, reached a record 15 million tonnes in 1968; wool production, at a little over a million pounds in 1950, peaked at almost 2 million in 1970; over the same period sugar production rose from 5.2 to 17.7 million tonnes.

Beside this scale of change in the volume of production we have to set first a relative and then an actual decline in the rural (farm and non-farm) population. In 1921, when there were 2.03 million rural dwellers in Australia, they accounted for 37 per cent of the Australian people; but by 1947, while their number had increased to 2.35 million, these country people formed only 31 per cent of the total population. By 1971 there had been an absolute drop in the rural population, to 1.82 million, 14 per cent of the total. The numbers of people directly employed in agriculture, both farm operators and farm employees, increased from the end of the war until the later 1950s, then began sharply to decline, from 12.6 per cent of the total workforce in 1954 to 6.5 per cent in 1976. There are difficulties about making exact estimates of the labour that goes into farmwork. Women's work on farms is often hard to define; farmers and farm labourers may spend part of their time in supplementary, non-farm work; much rural work is done by off-farm contractors. The latter, who range from providers of special skills, such as shearing, to owners and operators of expensive equipment, such as bulldozers and aeroplanes, increased in numbers and importance, particularly from the 1960s.

If we notice as well that since the mid-1950s the number of farm businesses in Australia has been falling, it becomes clear that the revolution in agriculture has been more than just a spurt in the volume of production. More fundamentally, it was a great leap in productivity. And what lay behind that was a surge of mechanisation and of other forms of innovation.

The rural reconstruction commissioners could show in 1945 that since the worst of the depression years, from about 1936 onward, the number of tractors on Australian farms had been increasing. But this did not mean that the machines' virtues were generally accepted. Horses still had stout defenders: our Wallace was no oddity! And so the commissioners felt they must set down the arguments for 'tractors versus horses'. Tractors, they said, were not affected by summer heat, so they did more by getting through the working day without needing a rest. They drank far less water than a horse team of equal power, and did not have to be fed when not in use. Most important of all, a tractor allowed every bit of labour on the farm to be used to the best advantage: 'occasionally even the wife takes a turn or two during a meal hour or smoke-oh'. Certainly, horses cost less to buy, could reproduce themselves, could be fuelled with chaff and hay which the farmer grew, and were particularly useful when slow-moving work—such as spraying fruit trees—had to be done.

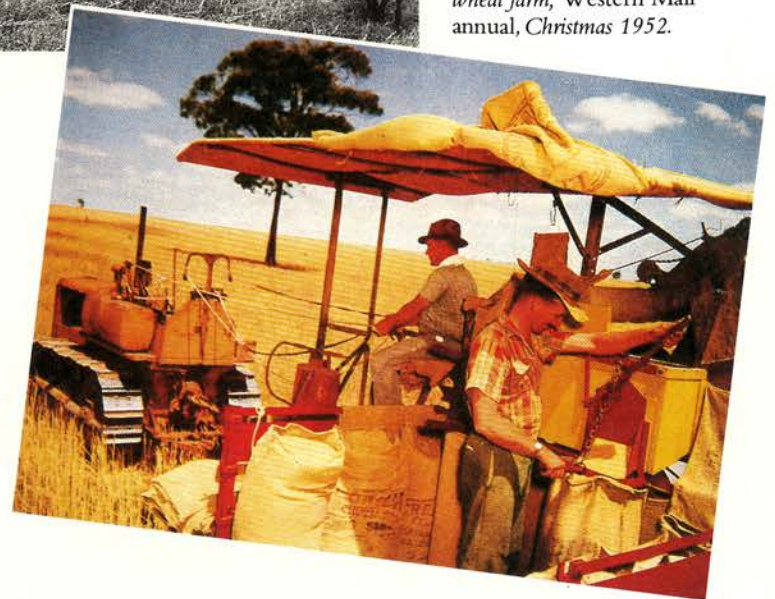
A quaint argument, as it now seems, but a telling illustration both of the commissioners' urge to educate and of the uncertainties of the time. For some years after the war, shortages frustrated even the most enthusiastic mechanisers, who had often to be content with converted army vehicles. The real transition came from the 1950s. Australia's draught horse population fell sharply, from 803 000 in 1943 to 49 000 in 1962. Tractors came to provide almost all the motive power for field machinery, growing fast in numbers and power. The change by 1980 was nicely summed up by the agricultural economist Keith Campbell in a passage which, after



The old reapers and binders are still used by some farmers in the 1940s and 1950s; a few stick to horses, while others turn to tractors.

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Below left. 'Men tame the earth': farm machinery idealised. Advertisement for Allis-Chalmers tractor division, Western Mail annual, Christmas 1950.



'Mechanised harvesting' on a wheat farm, Western Mail annual, Christmas 1952.

35 years, unwittingly offered a neat parallel to the reconstruction commissioners' argument about tractors. Discussing the difficulties caused by recent rises in oil prices, Campbell wrote:

Some unthinking people have suggested a return to the horse as a source of draught power. What they overlook are the millions of horses that would be required and the decades which would be necessary to breed up such a horse population. In addition, to feed these animals would involve the removal of millions of acres from food production. To revert to such pre-Depression technology would also necessitate the re-employment of many thousands of urban workers. Such technological retrogression makes no biological or economic sense.

Wallace did not survive to experience the changes we have been discussing. Though still only in late middle age, he died in 1951, a victim of cancer. The seeming timelessness of his methods of husbandry died with him. His farm, unlike most of its kind, could not pass to a son. It was sold, to one George Hodson, a young married man whose father and brothers farmed in the district, and who well knew the care that Wallace had long devoted to his land. Both Hodson's purchase and his lack of shyness about capital outlay (he preferred the tractor rather than the horse)

involved a heavy burden of debt. But in the prosperous 1950s and early 1960s he consolidated his position, adopting the improved methods of the day in cereal culture and leguminous pasture making. Electrification (another of the reconstruction commissioners' hopes for the future) reached him in the late 1950s, transforming his domestic arrangements and opening new possibilities for powering fixed mechanical operations on the farm. So Wallace's old fuel stove, Aladdin lamps, kerosene refrigerator, battery wireless and chip bathheater were now all replaced with electrical appliances; outside, the new electricity powered pumps, circular saw and shearing machines. 'Modernisation', wrote another farmer from this region, 'was the chief religion of the 1950s', but in his opinion the benefits did not outweigh the aesthetic drawbacks. Eric Rolls, farmer, poet and naturalist who, like Wallace, raised sheep and grew wheat in the shadow of the Warrumbungles, remembers how at that time 'new-gashed power lines webbed the countryside. We carted beautiful old kerosene lamps with fluted glass chimneys to the rubbish dump and replaced them with electric bulbs and bakelite shades'.

In 1965 Hodson extended Wallace's old farm, buying out the ageing couple next door, who had reluctantly decided to retire from the land to provincial town life, with its medical and other amenities. The machinery Hodson had progressively acquired, helped when seasonal need arose by the equipment and services of contractors now operating out of Dubbo and Gilgandra, enabled him to cope unaided with a much larger holding. He thus became a tiny element in the overall statistics which reveal a marked upward trend in the average size of wheat farms in the twenty years after 1960: that average was 829 hectares in 1960–61 and 1399 hectares by 1978–79.

Averages, however, muffle special changes, and one of these was the creation of large farms in what had hitherto been marginal or undeveloped areas. In truth, there were places where, thanks to a combination of scientific innovation and the use of high-powered machinery, farmers were pioneering a new frontier. Our Wallace had a nephew Bob, whose enterprise exemplifies this experience. Bob's father had taken over the old family farm in central New South Wales when Charlie left for Gilgandra so long ago. Now, in 1960, to establish a place of his own, Bob left home with his young wife, moved to Western Australia, and took up 3000 acres of virgin mallee country being opened up to the north of Albany. The new land, at 5s 6d per acre, was cheap but poor. It first had to be cleared, with anchor chain and crawler tractors, then treated with trace elements, copper and zinc, and given heavy applications of fertiliser. A planting of clover pasture followed, to establish the kind of farm then common in the Western Australian wheat-belt: one based on clover pastures which sheep or cattle grazed, and cropped every three to five years.

In the 1950s and 1960s similar developments occurred in a number of areas, some carried out by private enterprise (such as the 1.5 million acres developed by American syndicates on the Esperance Plains in Western Australia, or the 833 000 acre Coonalpyn Downs project financed by the Australian Mutual Provident Society on the border of South Australia and Victoria), and others government-sponsored. The most notable of the latter was the 10 million acre development of brigalow country in the Fitzroy River basin west of Rockhampton. Brigalow, an acacia with a strong suckering habit, had been too difficult and expensive for individual settlers to clear. But the Bureau of Agricultural Economics made a detailed cost-benefit analysis which concluded, before the project was sanctioned, that brigalow could be economically eliminated if handled on a large scale. The times had certainly changed since the 1930s when farming in marginal areas had been such a hit-and-miss affair, so often tragic for the individual farmer.



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Australia to-day, 1957.

The opening of these lands was made possible by research (much of it Australian) which identified missing trace elements, improved seed-types and fertilisers, and—above all—developed the techniques of ‘minimum tillage’. Traditional fallowing with cultivation to preserve moisture and check weed-growth endangers topsoil, especially when thin and sandy, through wind and water erosion. As the phrase suggests, the aim in minimum tillage is to disturb the ground as little as possible. Weedfree seedbeds are made by spraying herbicides rather than ploughing, enabling the planting of crops by ‘direct drilling’. Where machines are used, they tend to be large and powerful, reducing the number of passes required over paddocks and speeding up operations to make the cropping of low-yield land profitable. Because erosion remains in many districts as spectacular a problem as when the rural reconstruction commissioners reported, many experts welcome minimum tillage as one advance that deserves to be widely adopted in open-field dry-farming, in old-established areas as well as new. Others, however, point to the still barely understood dangers of toxic sprays to both humans and the environment, are deeply critical of their often-indiscriminate use, and press the need for meticulous research on the potential effects of herbicides of specific kinds on people and animals, soil structure and organisms.

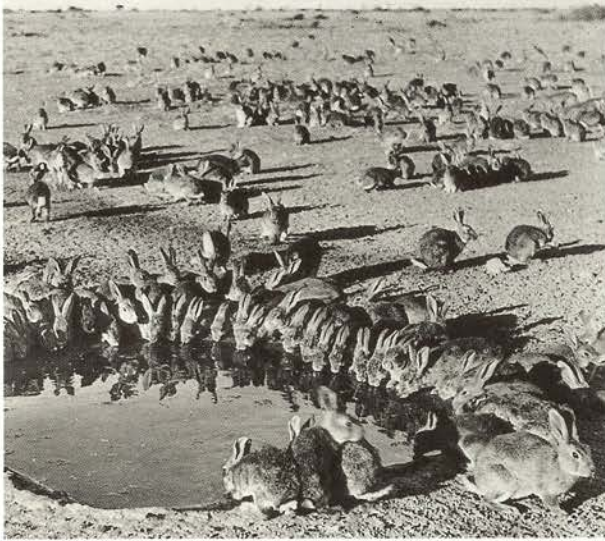
In the 1950s and 1960s the most important single innovation in Australia’s rural industries was the extension of pasture improvement, based on the sowing of exotic leguminous plants, and most notably of Mediterranean clover. This plant thrives in areas that have a winter growing season and dry summers. Its special promise in Australian conditions was recognised by a farmer in the Adelaide Hills, Amos Howard, as long ago as the 1890s, but it was another 30 years before agronomists began generally to advocate its use. Its spread was a postwar phenomenon, which enabled a sweeping extension of the climatic zone in which improved pastures can be sown in southern Australia, from about 150 000 square kilometres to more than 600 000. Such areas included short-term pastures created by ‘ley’ farming: the planting of clover or similar legumes in rotation with cereal crops. Pioneered in the wheat–sheep zone during the late 1930s by progressive farmers (like Wallace), this practice gradually became universal after the war. Fertilisers and legumes (the producers of nitrogen) combined to raise the fertility of soil, to the benefit both of cereal cropping and grazing capacity. In the twenty years up to 1970, every additional hectare of sown pasture led to an increase of four sheep (or the equivalent in cattle) in the national flock. Over that period, almost half of the huge increase in stock numbers was due entirely to pasture improvement. The other half is accounted for by the conquest of stock diseases (the sheep blowfly, internal parasites and the cattle tick remained the only—but formidable—serious pests), better understanding of nutrition, and the virtual disappearance of the rabbit. Myxomatosis, by removing at the beginning of the 1950s a scourge more than a century old, guaranteed that the new pastures would be eaten primarily by what farmers thought of as profitable animals, not vermin.

In the case of the more intensive crops, important improvements in yield resulted from heavier use of fertilisers, more effective control of diseases and experiments with new varieties. The yield of potatoes rose from 9 to 20 tonnes per hectare in the twenty years after 1950, the yield of apples from 25 to 55 kilograms per tree, and the yield of raw sugar from 8 to 11 tonnes per hectare. The sugar industry, indeed, boomed in the 1950s, when the acreage under cane rose more than a third and production almost doubled. Mechanisation was an important part of this story, at first through the growing use of tractors for field work and mechanical loading: unit numbers rose by over 60 per cent between 1947 and 1951. For a time the industry still depended on manual labour for harvesting: 1500



The new frontier: clearing scrub with tractors and chain, 1982.

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Rabbits and drought before the introduction of myxomatosis.

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Above right. A doomed occupation. After 1950, the rabbit population was rapidly reduced by myxomatosis, a highly contagious viral disease of rabbits.

LAND NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

Italian cane-cutters, for example, were admitted in 1954. But by the late 1950s an Australian firm had perfected a harvester which moved into a crop after burning, removing the cane's leafy tops and cutting stalks at ground level, then chopping them into billets for loading into bins for delivery by road or rail to the mill. It was a far cry from the traditional hand-cutting days when gangs laboured in the heat and dirt with machetes, loading the long cane stalks on to flat tramway trucks for transport to the mills. In 1963 the new machine cut 10 per cent of Queensland's sugar crop, and twenty years later 99 per cent, the harvester's capacity having grown from about 100 tonnes a day to well over 400. The changeover to mechanical harvesting brought heavy unemployment to Queensland, aggravated by labour-saving expedients such as the development of bulk loading terminals.

To list these and other advances is to tell the rural story of the 1950s and 1960s as a tale of success, and so it was for many farmers. The gloomy fears of the reconstruction commissioners seemed a world away, and old-style farmers like our Wallace would have been staggered could they have seen now what had happened to their rural world. Agricultural productivity had never expanded more rapidly, farmland values had never been higher, technological opportunities had never been greater. And yet, there was a canker in the apple.

By the 1960s most farmers were being troubled, and not a few ruined, by financial difficulties arising from the 'cost-price squeeze'. The trend of the prices received for farm products on overseas markets (and about 60 per cent of Australia's were exported) was nearly always downward, as the other primary-producing countries increased their efficiency, expanded their output and intensified competition. On the other hand, the cost of farm inputs (fuel, machinery, fertilisers and other improvements) tended to rise. The farmer himself was powerless to change either of these trends: all he could do was try to adjust to them.

For a time, greatly increased production offset that fall in real farm incomes to which the cost-price squeeze seemed bound to lead. Experiments in changing the mix of their products also helped some farmers, and from the later 1960s the need to combat the cost-price squeeze fostered a remarkable growth of interest in farm management. Private managerial consultancy firms boomed, and there was also a marked shift of emphasis in agricultural education towards management, including the development of short courses for practising farmers; extension officers in state departments of agriculture provided management advice; and firms specialising in



The cartoonist of 1951 wonders whether rain can be produced as surely as rabbits eliminated. It was not to be: after a long run of failures, rainmaking experiments ended in the 1980s. Sydney Morning Herald, 8 May 1951.



agricultural machinery, fertilisers and chemicals also offered supplementary help.

But the management boom hardly offset the real difficulties of ordinary, self-trained, lightly educated and often poor farmers. In the 1960s, indeed, poverty began to be seen as a serious farm problem, in some cases as bad as it had been in the 1930s. In 1965 a committee of economic inquiry noted that of the 308 000 primary producers who in 1961 furnished provisional tax returns 26 per cent earned less than £700 and 9.2 per cent less than £400. (At that time the basic wage was £750 per annum.) Two years later, the director of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics thought it likely that a third of all Australian farms had an income of less than £2000, which he judged to be the upper limit for what ought to be reckoned as 'low income'.

Hardest hit at that time were dairy farmers and fruitgrowers, though a number of wool and wheat growers were suffering too. Dairy farmers' problems were of long standing. Many of their farms were too small, established in unsuitable areas and geared to a now collapsing market for cream for 'manufactured' dairy goods: butter and cheese. By the 1960s economic necessity was forcing 'spontaneous' adjustment. On the north coast of New South Wales, for example, half the dairy farmers (3500) of 1958 left the industry in the next ten years. Even so, a Commission of Inquiry into Poverty found in 1973 that 30 per cent of those who remained earned less than \$2000 a year. The inadequacy of this income, it noted,

was reflected in a poor standard of housing and a sub-standard diet in many cases. The linoleum in most houses had lost its pattern and it was often difficult to distinguish the colour of the paintwork. One cream producer with five dependent children claimed that his family lived mainly off fried onions. He said that he couldn't remember the last time they had eaten steak or bacon and that the only meat they could afford was pork bones.

When that was being written, the dairying industry had begun to move into a new phase of rapid 'adjustment'. The scale of change turned out to be great. In New South Wales the number of dairy farms fell by 60 per cent (over 5000) between 1970 and 1980. Milk production per farm rose by more than 50 per cent and cream production dropped by 60 per cent. Government funds helped these spectacular changes to a limited extent. After 1971 three government schemes offered financial incentives to farmers to leave the industry, but only one in 50 of the

The first successful cane harvester was developed and built in Australia and on the market by 1959. Mt Tully, Qld, mechanical harvesting in 1972.

AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

Above left. Before mechanical harvesting, cane cutting was among the most arduous of rural jobs.

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES

farmers who did so used the help offered. What really drove farmers out of the old style of dairying was its inability to provide a reasonable living and the soul-destroying work it demanded of families (especially wives) who had once provided almost all the labour. As well as that a state dairy authority, set up in 1970, pressed farmers to change to whole milk production and install bulk milk equipment. For many the expense was prohibitive, a sad contrast to the old 'cream culture', which used simple equipment (principally hand-operated mechanical separators) and produced a skim milk residue on which pigs could be raised to supplement income.

To help orchardists leave the industry when their markets had failed, a fruit-growing reconstruction scheme was set up in 1972. A new dairy adjustment program began in 1974, then in 1977 the Fraser government established another general rural reconstruction scheme, planned to bring together existing schemes, under more generous terms. The commonwealth and state governments jointly administered all these schemes, which were designed to secure efficiency and reduce poverty by inducing some farmers to leave the land and helping those who stayed to operate on a larger scale and, where necessary, to change their methods and perhaps their products. The means were various. They included debt reconstruction and loans for 'farm buildup' when farmers had good prospects of continuing but lacked resources; household support (the equivalent of unemployment benefits) for two years while distressed farmers decided whether or not to leave the land; and rehabilitation assistance—loans of up to \$5000—to alleviate hardship on farmers who did decide to leave.

By 1979 about 7000 farmers had been enticed off the land. But at least five times that number left spontaneously, without assistance. The schemes, in other words, worked as a fillip to adjustment—a means of speeding up the process by converting some waverers—but were not its main cause and were certainly not a mere welfare handout. By 1980 they had, all the same, cost \$435 million, and had come to be accepted on both sides of politics as a normal instrument of agricultural policy. This bipartisan tendency suggests another reason for looking on the adjustment scheme as it had evolved by the 1980s as much more than a welfare measure. It was a symbol of the growing understanding that, to put it bluntly, agriculture would have to pay its own way.

This understanding lay at the heart of a major shift in emphasis in Australian agricultural policy during the 1970s. Labor's enemies, particularly in the countryside, blamed the Whitlam government for it all, and certainly that government did not seem to find it too painful to grasp the nettle of agricultural reform. But even if it had aspired to, Labor could not have claimed a monopoly of hostility to agricultural protection. The fact is that, apart from the Country party, disagreement about the level and kind of assistance to be given to agriculture tended to take place more *within* the main political parties than between them. And when change did occur circumstance, not ideology, was its principal motor.

After 1952 it had been settled policy to foster the expansion of agriculture, at whatever domestic cost, because it was the country's major export earner. In this sense, agriculture had in the economy a special place, which was taken to justify a variety of measures to help farmers. They received tax concessions, bounties and subsidies. 'Orderly marketing' schemes were used to shelter many producers from the worst fluctuations of overseas prices. In some cases, governments stabilised growers' prices by making direct payments when foreign returns were low (wheat was the major instance); in others, so-called two-price arrangements subsidised growers' incomes by setting the home price of a product independently of (and usually above) that secured on overseas markets. The taxpayer and the consumer

thus paid to keep agriculture viable; or to put it another way, the balance of payments on foreign trade was being maintained in part by a transfer of income to rural producers from those who worked in other parts of the economy.

After 1965, however, new economic developments, and especially the boom in mining, changed the setting. In less than a decade, agriculture's contribution to Australia's export trade fell from almost 80 per cent to just over 50 per cent. Rapid growth in mineral exports accounted for most of this change. Both as export earner and magnet for foreign capital, mining was bound to weaken agriculture's privileged position. Moreover, as we have seen, these were also the years when rural poverty and the small farm problem came under intensive discussion, from which reconstruction, not relief measures like subsidies or price manipulation, emerged as the preferred remedy. Along with this went a new concern about the dangers of overproduction: there were curious echoes of the agonies of the 1930s when in 1969 the government imposed market quotas on wheat growers.

The Whitlam government took up and developed these tendencies, at first with an enthusiasm that deeply antagonised country people. In 1973 a *Review of the continuing expenditure policies of the previous government*, carried out by Dr H.C. Coombs at the prime minister's request, listed 40 items of rural assistance which

WOMEN IN TODAY'S RURAL WORLD

By 1980 women who either ran rural properties alone or were managers in partnership, usually with husbands, numbered about a third of Australian farmers. A few rural studies, and much feminist propaganda, argued that farmers' wives tended to be better educated than their husbands: they thus adapted readily, it was said, to managerial work. Moreover women were prising open the doors of Australia's tertiary agricultural colleges: in the country's chief eleven colleges, no woman was enrolled in 1965, but by 1979 31 per cent of all students were women.

A first national conference to discuss women's place in rural Australia took place in 1979. The director was Alison Teece, agricultural graduate, former lecturer and, with her husband, manager of a property at Carisbrook, Victoria. A visit to Australia in 1981 by Ruby Ringsdorf, first vice-president of American Agri-Women (an organisation representing 24 000 women and an effective political lobby) triggered a second conference, 'Women in agriculture—expanding our spheres of influence'. There Mrs Ringsdorf spoke on 'the American experience', delegates discussed matters ranging from soil conservation to rural education, and it was decided that a network, 'women for agriculture', must be established across Australia.

Networking moved slowly, but Victorian agricultural colleges and the Department of Agriculture established an experimental program of self-development workshops for rural women which proved an instant success. And by the mid-1980s a few women had begun to infiltrate the male world of rural power. Victoria's rural water commission had its first woman member; the president of the New South Wales cattlemen's union was a woman; and in 1985 the Victorian farmers' and graziers' association elected a woman vice-president and decided at its annual general meeting to conduct a study 'to determine the feasibility and possible methods of encouraging women to become more active in the affairs of the VFGA'. But Cicely Bungey, a training and development officer with the South Australian agricultural bureau still seemed to be right when she observed in 1985:

Until farmers' wives get 50 per cent support in the home from their husbands there will be no 50 per cent representation of women on statutory boards or in agricultural organisations. Women just haven't got the energy for everything.



Women who work and run rural properties increasingly claim a share in the making of agricultural policy. Alison Teece on the Carisbrook property she runs with her husband. Melbourne Age, 5 Nov 1981.

the author thought could with justification be ended. The government phased out many of them. So, for example, longstanding subsidies on cotton and manufactured dairy products disappeared, tax concessions (especially investment allowances) were reduced, bounties on superphosphates and other fertilisers were cut. And some of the broader social measures originally designed to ease the disadvantages of life in rural areas (such as petrol subsidies and concessional rates for telephone and mail services) were eliminated. Rural interests at first also saw as threatening the decision to establish an Industries Assistance Commission (IAC). This body, which replaced the Tariff Board, was to advise the government on aid to both primary and secondary industry and—as its architect, Sir John Crawford, put it—‘to bring under public scrutiny the arguments for and against assistance to particular industry groups’. Rural industries had not before been subject to this discipline. The Country party predictably opposed the legislation to establish the IAC but the Liberals supported it, no doubt with an eye to the commission’s usefulness, if they came back to office, for protecting their party from what had sometimes been the overbearing demands for rural assistance by their coalition partner.

The coalition ministry which returned after Whitlam’s dismissal showed no wish to change drastically the main thrust of existing policy. Relief measures were forthcoming when crises arose (as indeed they had been in Whitlam’s day) but the tendency towards parsimony strengthened. For now, in addition to other problems, serious inflation had to be fought. The IAC was accepted as an established institution and an indirect source of expert advice. Its recommendations came to complement the vigorous policy extension work carried out in the 1970s and 1980s by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Both bodies advised strongly and consistently a reduced emphasis on price stabilisation and a greater exposure of Australian producers to world market forces.

Top.
The Bulletin, 29 Oct 1985,
notes the revolt down on
the farm.

Bottom.
The farmers’ demonstration of
1 July 1985.

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On 1 July 1985 farmers staged a large and flamboyant demonstration in Canberra. It was on the occasion of the 'tax summit', a meeting at Parliament House, convened by Prime Minister Hawke, where representatives of business groups, unions and other sections of the community were to discuss with the government plans for restructuring the tax system. On the day before, thousands of rural protesters poured into Canberra. Next morning, an estimated crowd of 45 000 people packed the lawns in front of Parliament House. They carried placards abusing the government and demanding justice for farmers. Many sported clothes calculated to identify them as being from the land: wide-brimmed hats, tweed jackets, leather leggings over fawn drill trousers. A Tiger Moth aircraft droned slowly overhead, dragging a banner in praise of private enterprise. When Hawke, surrounded by a protective wall of police, came out to address the crowd, abusive uproar drowned him out.

Observers at first had difficulty judging how it had happened, who the protesters were and what it all meant. Light aeroplanes at the airport and Mercedes cars in the transport fleet suggested that not all the demonstrators were the victims of rural poverty. But placards made it clear that complaints were being made against proposals to introduce capital gains and wider, indirect taxes. Government expenditure must be cut, other banners said (none explained how), and taxation reduced. The major complaint was against dear fuel. Whitlam, it will be recalled, had cut farmers' petrol subsidies. Then in 1978 the Fraser government had introduced oil import parity pricing, by which a tax raised the retail price of Australian oil (and the country was 70 per cent self-sufficient) to the level of world prices. Hawke had continued this arrangement. There were good if complex economic reasons for the policy, but it meant that the prices which farmers paid for fuel, after rising sharply in the early 1970s due to OPEC policies, more than doubled again from 1976 to 1979. Here was a prime element in the cost-price squeeze to which everyone could relate. A farmer's wife from Walcha, New South Wales, writing indignantly to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, told city readers that 'it costs me 60 kilometres worth of petrol to visit the "corner store"'.

Top.
Mick Kinsela and Robbie Lawrence, two farmers from Canowindra, NSW, hold a protest banner in front of the dumped wheat outside Parliament House. Canberra Times, 30 Dec 1985.

Bottom.
In a spectacular gesture to draw attention to wheat farmers' financial difficulties, Canowindra freight contractor Frank Daniel dumps 30 tonnes of grain outside Parliament House in Canberra at 4 am on 30 Dec 1985. Canberra Times, 30 Dec 1985.



Ian MacLachlan, president of the National Farmers' Federation, 1985.

NATIONAL FARMERS' FEDERATION

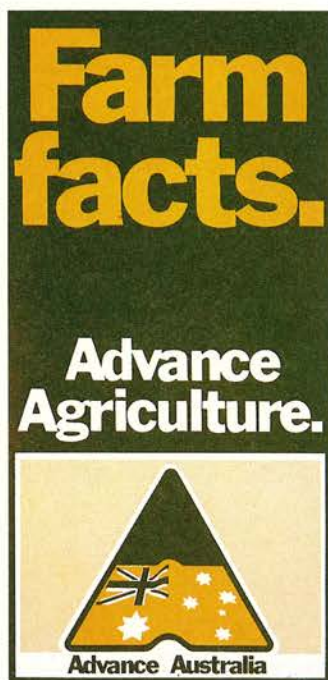


Such demonstrations do not just happen, and this one was an impressive display of what farmers' organisations could do. Afterwards a propaganda campaign of full-page newspaper advertisements, paid for by the 'Australian farmers' fighting fund', gave the public periodic reminders of the 'Australian farm rally—July 1, 1985: bigger, by a factor of 5, than any previous rally in Canberra'. Though written and authorised by specific organisations such as the livestock and grain producers of New South Wales, these advertisements also expressed the spirit embodied in the recently formed National Farmers' Federation (NFF). Australian farm organisations, each centred on particular commodity interests, had not effectively united until 1979, when commodity federations agreed to pool their resources and form an executive, the NFF, with headquarters in Canberra. Agriculture's difficulties in the 1970s, and the sense of being under siege during the Whitlam period, provoked the decisive drives towards amalgamation. The feeling of persecution resumed when Labor was returned under Hawke in 1983. At the beginning of 1984 the NFF devised a \$100 000 propaganda campaign, 'Advance agriculture, advance Australia'. Launching the campaign, the federation's president, Michael Davidson, reminded hearers that agriculture still earned more than 40 per cent of export income and urged the need for a better understanding of its problems. He quoted public opinion surveys which showed that 60 per cent of city people saw farmers as conservative, and 30 per cent thought them 'whingers'. In Sydney 92 per cent of those surveyed confessed they 'did not understand' the man on the land, and in Melbourne puzzlement—or perhaps apathy?—was even greater. It was time, clearly, that rural people stood up for themselves.

Country-city tension, one of the oldest themes in the Australian experience, remains what it has always primarily been: one manifestation of the competition for resources in an increasingly complex economy. Its crudest expression juxtaposes public expenditures: in former times, say, rural roads and bridges as against urban transport improvements; more recently, easing back direct assistance to farmers to help fund the attack on urban social problems. More intricate issues engage economists' attention and inform the decisions of the people they advise: politicians, union leaders, businessmen and the wide variety of interest organisations in town and country. In question here are such matters as the competition for capital between agriculture and other sectors of the economy, particularly mining and manufacturing; the indirect effects, on farmers' costs and access to capital, of tariffs which shelter other producers; who gains and who loses from movements of the Australian dollar in the international money market. In such matters competition and hence tension are inevitable as long as Australia remains part of the world capitalist system—and that appears unlikely to change. To explain the rural position in economic terms to those city people who can and want to understand it can therefore be little more than a propaganda exercise, useful in informing but unable to transcend the political struggle which the defence and advancement of the rural interest ultimately involves.

There is of course another dimension to understanding. What of the metropolitan appreciation of the rural 'way of life'? Ambiguity here locks us in, research is almost non-existent, and the concepts we must use are woolly. Still, there are obvious points to be made. The most important concerns those severed personal contacts implicit in the inexorable migration off the land. It is striking how frequently this theme recurs in Australians' autobiographical memoirs and how readily, and diversely, ordinary family experience shows it up.

The connections of our sample farmer, Wallace, offer one variant. Of his three sisters, two married, one to a schoolteacher who had come to work in the nearby town, the other to a budding entrepreneur, at that time a motor bike mechanic.



Pamphlet. National Farmer's Federation, 1984.

Both eventually settled in Sydney, but in school recesses their children enjoyed farm holidays with uncles and aunt. One boy, adolescent in 1939, was still able, in his sixties in the 1980s, to remember vividly how, through Charlie Wallace's wet-battery radio, he had heard Menzies announce the outbreak of war. But Wallace had died before that adolescent became a man and had two children of his own. Neither of these boys ever had a family farm holiday. So they never learned how radio news filtered into the farm environment, never played Sunday tennis on neighbouring farmers' courts, never watched lambs being born, sheep being shorn or horses pulling ploughs. At a pinch, such things could be observed in pictures or movies, but what was the compensation for not having known farm smells (horses' sweat, newly shorn fleeces, kerosene on dusty floors) or sounds (windmill's rattle, crows' caw or tractor's starting cough)? Sensuous experience alerts observation and understanding: although Wallace and his nephews lacked the poetic gift of Eric Rolls, his description of ploughing, years later and with wildly new equipment, would have wakened in them a thrill of recognition:

The glass-walled, air-conditioned cabs of modern tractors are superior seats in a natural theatre. Machinery, even noisy machinery, does not worry animals much. Life goes on as if one had not intruded except that the dust of cultivation, like smoke, attracts many birds. They know well it means disturbance, unwary behaviour and easy prey.

I plough paddocks of good soil studded with Kurrajongs, shapely trees with glossy dark-green leaves. There is an occasional tall native pine among them or a scant-leaved eucalypt. The Kurrajongs are good cover for small birds, the others good lookouts for hawks.

The eaters of worms and grubs work behind the plough. Half a dozen ravens strut the furrow. Small flocks of magpies, a hundred or so black and white peewits search the broken ground. They probe with beaks, rake with their feet. Often they stop, watch and listen. A magpie will approach a propped-up clod, bend low, turn its head on one side, peer beneath and reach in cautiously with open beak. But if it has to reach so far it risks dislodging the clod on its head, it withdraws carefully, plants its feet firmly, braces its legs and with beak and neck as lever overturns the clod. It snaps quickly and moves on.

Perhaps if enough people read it, writing like this will partly compensate for the great disjunction—the creation, almost, of two Australias—which the generational decline of real contact with rural Australia has created. To learn to know the country by seeing and doing, to be related to it through friends and relatives who have loved and drawn their livelihood from it, seems to become less and less possible. In their efforts to promote understanding, farmers' organisations need to find ways of communicating not merely a sense of justice toward rural Australia, but a feeling for it.

'The glass-walled, air-conditioned cabs of modern tractors are superior seats in a natural theatre.'

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*Melbourne-born artist John Brack painted The car in 1955.
Cars enabled Australian families to explore the countryside
as never before.*

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA