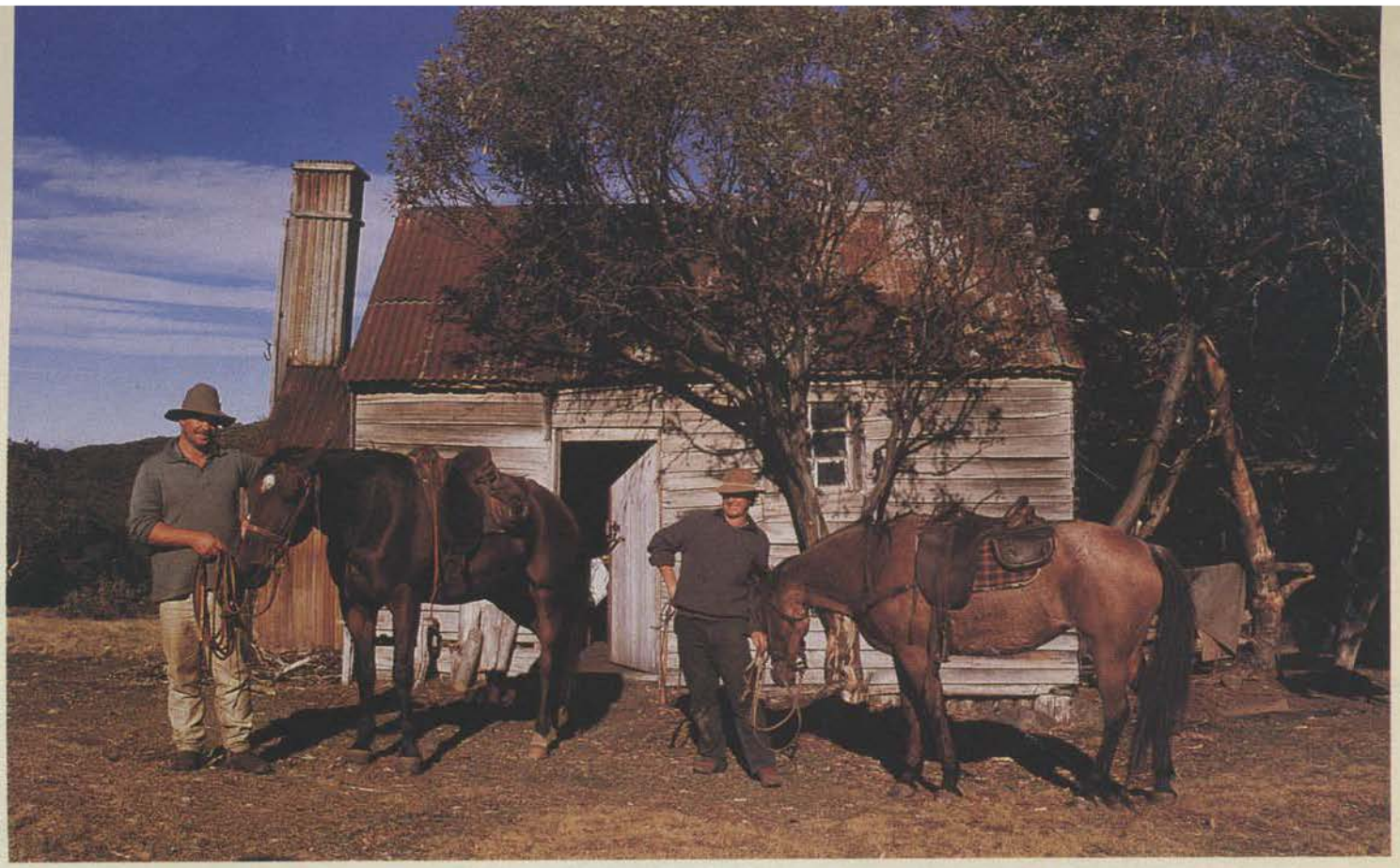


PHOTOGRAPHY BY SANDY SCHELTEMA

HIGH PLAINS

OUT ON the northern end of the magnificent Bogong High Plains, a chapter of history is ending. The mountain men have just finished the last muster, bringing their cattle to the lower country before the snow blankets the hills and the skiers replace the bushwalkers. For the last time in this area, the Fitzgeralds, the Kellys and a handful of other families, most with local histories stretching back a century, have rounded up their herds and driven them down to farms in the Omeo and Kiewa valleys in Victoria's north-east.

The mountain cattlemen don't own this land. It is in the Alpine National Park. But it has traditionally been "their" country, and the right to graze cattle in summer has been a vital supplement to their properties in the lower country, particularly in drought years. Across the alps, most grazing will stay, but the push from conservationists and politicians has led to 11 families in this part of the high plain being moved on, despite years of argument and protest by the cattlemen. ▷

Above, John and Barry Fitzgerald at the family hut. Left, the hut in 1928 during an excursion for Melbourne businessmen.

Conservationists have cattlemen on the run in part of this Victorian National Park. MICHELLE GRATTAN joined what may be one family's last muster.

LOCKOUT

HIGH PLAINS LOCKOUT

(One such protest involved a ride on the Victorian Parliament in 1984, claimed to have been the largest mounted display in Melbourne streets since a World War I Light Horse parade).

The mountain men are angry and frustrated. There is no evidence to support claims that cattle damage the country, they say, and they can't understand those who say the high country should be returned to its pristine state. The families have had a decade's notice that the end was coming; they have also been told they can expect to get some grazing rights further south on the plain. But they are sceptical. Even if they do get access to other country, it will be a greater distance and they will be able to run fewer cattle. And it is not just the income that will be lost — though in these hard rural times, that is important enough. They feel their heritage is also threatened.

The cattlemen are passionately attached to this land. "God's own country," Barry Fitzgerald calls it. "It's in the blood — it's born into us now." Fitzgerald is a typical, laconic, old-style man of the bush, with a country drawl, a weathered face that looks older than his 43 years, and a ready chuckle. He does not seem the sort to make threats lightly. But he's making one now.

Barry, his two cousins John, 31, and Tony, 40, and the other families will not accept that, after some 140 years of high-country grazing, cattlemen are being denied the right to run their stock here. Barry swears, with a wry laugh, to be back next year with his Herefords. The authorities, he says, could impound the cattle and fine him. "But if we don't make a stand, we'll be lost forever. Once we go, it will be just a step down the road to all grazing going on the high plains."

Another picture from the Fitzgerald family album: the 1928 excursion rides out. Below, talking over old times: from left, Billy Kelly, John Fitzgerald, Kevin Kelly, Barry Fitzgerald and Doug Treasure.

THE Fitzgeralds' muster begins on Friday, when they take horses, dogs and provisions up to the hut built by their forebears in 1903. They come via Shannon Vale, now Tony's property, 45 kilometres north of Omeo, land which has been in the family since the 1880s.

It will be the following Wednesday before the cattle reach the Omeo farms of Barry and John. Usually, the three cousins muster together; this time Tony is not here. The mustering party includes Doug Treasure, a member of one of the old cattle families from the Dargo Plains. He's president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria and has a strong line of political patter.

The cattlemen on the Bogong plains have stock allocations from the Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment. John and Barry have been allowed to run 60 head each and Tony 150, although they don't send the full number up. Altogether, the Bogong High Plains has had licences for 4,100 cattle above the snowline; the section of the plains that is being phased out has been running 1,100. The farmers are also told when they can take the cattle up (shortly before Christmas) and when they have to bring them down (in April).

Rules in the National Park are tight. Only authorised vehicles may enter, and then only by a certain route. When Doug and I arrive, with Doug's horse, Hero, in the float behind his new ute (bought with proceeds of shooting 3,000 sheep), Barry meets us at the park gate. We set out on the ride across country to the hut.

The mountains, covered with snow-grass and heath and, in lower places, wooded with snow gums, are a vast unfenced paddock. Mostly, the muster riding is slow, as the steep inclines are searched for cattle. On the side of Mt Nelse, the horses pick their way through close-packed rocks and stones, so slippery it seems that at any moment horse and rider will tumble. But Jemma, the little chestnut brumby they've given me, is born and bred to the country and as sure-footed as you'll find.

Despite the huge area, the cattle come readily to the cattlemen's call. The magic cry is "Come on . . . SALT." In summer, the cattlemen have "salted" the herd ting out bags of the stuff, which country lacks.

On Saturday the party reconn Sunday is the actual round-up. weather is glorious. Bushwalkers, o force, stop to chat or ask directions. Fitzgeralds are delighted with those are pleased to see the cattle. One o complaints against the mountain has been from bushwalkers who feel spoil the naturalness of the place and object to walking through the cow and associated flies.

By afternoon, 80 cattle have mustered: 50 of John's and 30 of Ba They are nine short — some have al made their way to the low cou deciding for themselves that summ over. As we drive the herd towar Fitzgeralds' hut, the fog and mist cl quickly. Picture-postcard scenery su ly appears threatening — the sc country you wouldn't want to be l The cattlemen are cutting out a cou beasts they don't own. Three h three men, against one heifer: cl and wheeling, stockwhips crackin separate the reluctant beast fro fellows. The heifer breaks away,

Perhaps for the last time, the Fitzgeralds reclaim their cattle after months of summer grazing on Bogong High Plains. Right, Doug Treasure tall in the saddle.

them a chase, then concedes defeat and is pushed away from the herd.

Behind the hut are rough yards in which the cattle are penned for the night, ready to start next morning on the three-day trip to Omeo, where those not kept will be sold as store (non-fat) cattle.

The Fitzgeralds' hut is one of several family huts in the area. Over the years, it has acquired an iron roof and a new chimney. The billy boils in a fireplace of uneven stones. Modern civilisation encroaches in the form of tinned smoked oysters. A chair, made out of a wooden box, is dated August 1944; there are two wooden beds with mattresses; a table; a meat safe; graffiti on the walls left by passers-by; a hole-in-the-ground loo out the back.

When the cattlemen aren't here, the hut is left unlocked and as with most of its kind, used by bushwalkers and skiers. A logbook records their comments, lyrical or prosaic. One entry on Gulf War day, January 17, says, "While we don't know if war has broken out in the Gulf, I can't think of a more peaceful place to be than here." The grazing debate gets its guernsey. "Boil the water from the soak. Damn the mountain cattle," complained one visitor, but another writes: "What a tragedy to Australia's heritage if they stop the cattle coming up here."

At muster time, the cattlemen gather in the near-zero night air round a big fire outside the hut, yarning about the past, lamenting their future. The Kellys, father Kevin and daughter Billie (who runs a shop at Mt Beauty), come over from their hut, less than a kilometre away, to spend an evening with the Fitzgeralds.

The Kelly family has been in the area since the 1880s. Kevin, who, despite major heart surgery, has put in a nine-hour day in the saddle recently, remembers his first mustering trip, at age eight. "I came up here with my uncle. We stayed 10 days and never saw one other person. I remember we had damper, hot butter and honey. It was bloody beautiful." Barry remembers his "sore backside" on his first muster, when he was 10.

In this area, the wives don't come mustering, though they may be there when the cattle are brought up in early summer or for the salting. "They are ▷

looking after things at home," explains Barry. The assumption is that mustering is for the men. Tony Fitzgerald's mother, Betty, recalls "cooking a leg of lamb, making cake" before musters. She says that in the Dargo area, where the Treasures live, the women muster too.

It's a narrow, parochial world in this part of north-eastern Victoria. Both Barry and John left the local school at 15. Barry has travelled only as far as Brisbane and Adelaide; the longest time he has been away is two months, one of which was spent working in an Adelaide factory. "I don't think I really have the travelling bug," he says.

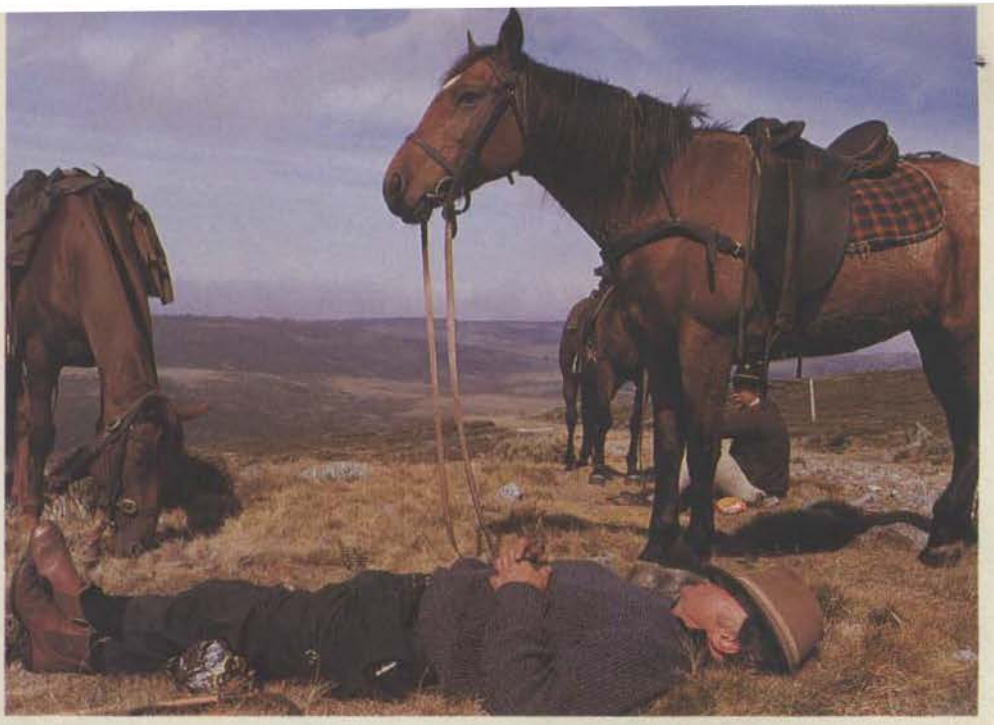
As a schoolboy, John saw Darwin, Queensland and Adelaide with his father. "I've never travelled on my own anywhere — not really. I would have liked to have gone away shearing." Both had elderly fathers and had to stay home to help on the properties they inherited.

They've been badly hit by the wool collapse, and now the day of reckoning has come on the high country. But Barry never thinks of packing it in and leaving the farm. "It's the worst thing I could do, since we've had it 130 years. To toss it away after what my father had been through — I could imagine him turning over in his grave."

He'd like his own two young sons, now aged seven and nine, to acquire a trade and for one to return to the land, but with "something to fall back on". His elder son is named Edward D'Arcy after Edward D'Arcy Fitzgerald, originally from Iowa, in the United States, who arrived at Omeo in the 1850s in quest of gold. D'Arcy had the land that now forms Barry's 300-hectare place, Homevale.

Last December, young D'Arcy wanted to go with the cattle to the High Plains, but the boy and his pony weren't quite up to the rigours of the journey.

"He's very upset. He thinks it's the last time, but we said it's not," says Barry. Bravado, belief, or a line to comfort both child and father? □



Barry Fitzgerald takes a break, but he says he won't take the grazing ban lying down.

Michelle Grattan is The Age's political correspondent in Canberra.