

THE HARD BUT SATISFYING LIFE OF MEN ON THE LAND

By
Graham Pizzev

WOOL-GROWING HAS BEEN AUSTRALIAN FOR SO LONG THAT IF YOU TRY TO IMAGINE the land without sheep you cannot, and you cannot imagine wool growing the way we do it anywhere else but in Australia. The ocean-curved, roly-poly lumpy plains where the silence is a presence in your ears, were made for sheep, and if you travel over these plains and there are no sheep you miss their bunched moving roundness. You may disturb a stiff-springing, red kangaroo, but, if there are no sheep, it is not complete.

THE RIVERINE IS IN PARTS such like this, with wide-lying flats and a waiting, timeless feel in the air. When you are here you feel that there could not be country more Australian. The chief difference between the land as it is there at present and the land as it was before is that there is now irrigation, which has changed much of the land from dry, half-a-sheep-to-the-acre country to one-sheep-to-the-acre country the 12 months round.

Where previously people worked their "dry" properties as light country and could not afford to carry capacity stock except in excellent seasons because of the possibility of dry spells which would mean selling stock on falling markets, the properties, which have irrigation, can work most differently.

A property with irrigated pasture can withstand an ordinary dry period because there is a reserve of food sweet feed available for a time and the excess good feed from normal years can be held as hay orlage for supplementing the dwindling dry country growth.

"God made the country, and man made the town; what wonder then, that health and virtue should most abound and least be threatened in the fields and groves."

Cowper

But the intention of this article is not to discuss the merits and practice of irrigation, for I am not an irrigator and I know comparatively little about sheep farming. I want to talk about the Riverine because I spent the Queen's Birthday week end there, and because sheep and Australian landscape are so much part of each other. So are the men and the women whose lives are centred on the growing of wool.

I have known such a family for 10 years. They live in the Riverine in country as Australian as you could ever know. They bought their property soon after the war. It had not recovered from the 1944 drought or from the wartime shortage of labor and equipment.

After 10 years of thoughtful and determined work they have turned

it into a fine property of healthy stock and it has recovered its original full-growing natural look. Now, where during the drought the wind once chased willy-willies of dust across the bare country there is good growth, and although it is dry the sheep are shoulder-deep in it.

When we were there the rain had not come, but a letter received today says they have had good, drenching rains. It should give them a good year. I can see the country now, after rain. The roadside growth is cleaned of its mask of dust and across one skyline is marching the curved grey sweep of a shower. The air is clean and cooler, the earth darker. The whole face of the land will be changed.

Next week, if the rain does not delay them, they will be shearing, and

the sheds and yards will be a loud baa-ing, dust-floating, foetid-smelling jostling mass of sheep.

As the shears plunge and trim and the warm, white, greasy fleece is stripped from the scrawny bodies there will be the woolshed scenes which have colored all our beginnings.

The rouseabout diving to lift the fleece and fling it, slow-turning, on to the classing table—the sweat-shiny, leaden-singleted shearers, knee-gripping the big Merino rams and one clipping a snick of skin from the loose skin-folds; the eager barking dogs leaping across the heaving massed backs.

All these things will happen for a week because they are the normal part of shearing. And my friend's wife and her Dutch woman help, the female half of the married couple, will cook scones and legs of lamb, make tea and wash dishes—for shearers have a heroic capacity. And the children, home from school, will sit on the sheep-yard rails and cheer as the sheep go surging through.

Hay Making

Shearing is hard work but so is much else of the daily routine. Sometimes until I learned to judge the seasons better, I used to arrive during hay-making and join in, standing swaying wide-footed on the wagon behind the tractor as it rolled on down the long irrigation bays, trying to seize the bales as the conveyor picked them up and carried them up to me to catch and stack. Always there seemed to be a brassy sun hanging over us and it was hot.

The cool, dark water-bag swinging below like a canvas udder was tipped and squeezed with all the pleasure of a Spanish peasant and his wine-skin.

If I arrived a week early I could perhaps cut the hay, and that was a fragrant business of guiding the tractor-mounted mower blade through the heavy rye grass and clover, the yellow-green crewcut stubble left bare. And always there were quail and once a brown snake that held his angry flat head high for just a moment too long as the snickering blade rushed through him.

There was also post-hole digging behind the Land Rover, and the whining of the gears as the auger bit deeper into the ground and spun slower as it sank. But these things were only play. Their sole purpose was to show me the constant backlog of work on a property like this.

of he can weed the inferior animals from his flock.

Sheep which have been shorn are, for fine purposes, much like another shorn sheep of the same strain. They can be best sorted when they are carrying a good fleece, their essential characteristics stand out more strongly. For that reason it was necessary for my friend to cull fifteen hundred sheep and brand each of them with branding fluid down on the skin between the wool, so that the brand showed after shearing.

These sheep had first to be driven in from the outer parts of the property, and driven carefully because some of them had small lambs. Then they had to be divided and penned, and while penned they had to be kept supplied with water and hay.

Many Duties

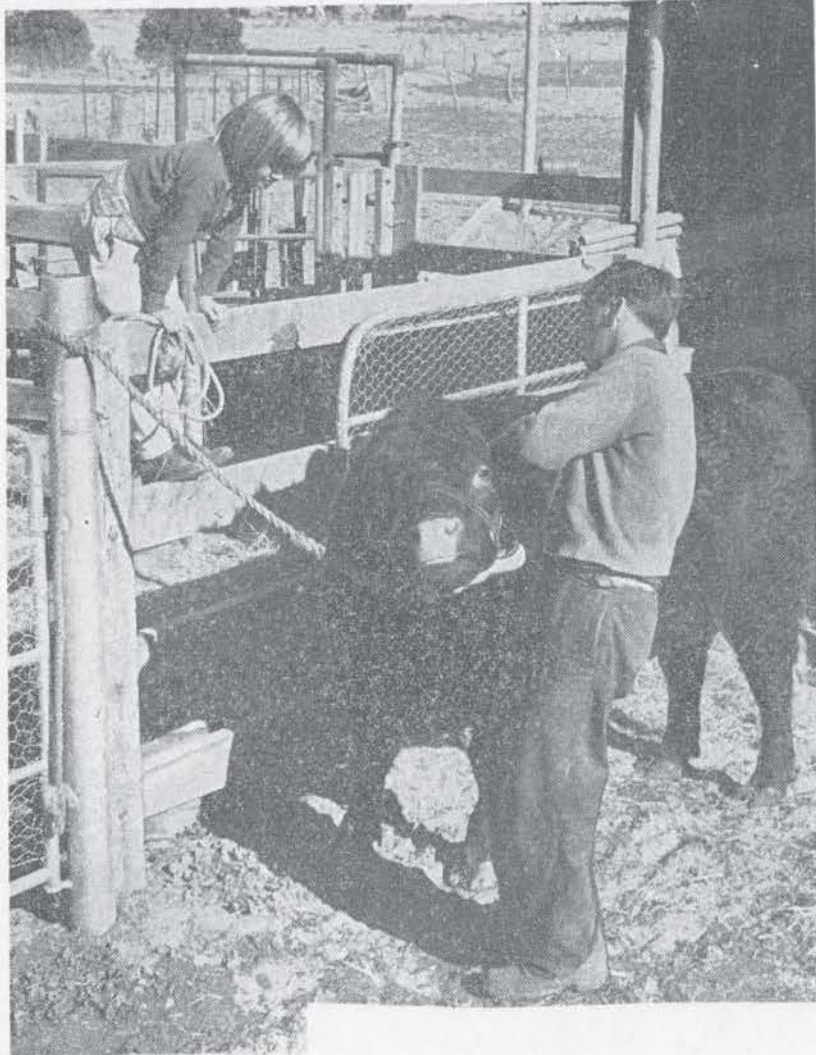
Also, there were 700 lambs which had to be marked, oats for ten days ground for the stud bulls, wood for the stove, hot water and house fires to be cut with a swingsaw out in the paddocks and brought into the house and split. The cow to be milked night and morning, cattle in one large paddock to be hand-fed, a hot-water service to be shifted from the house to one of the out-buildings; and all the time there was the possibility of something unexpected.

The country, two weeks ago, was dry and yellow and even in June with such conditions there is the chance of fire. There is more chance this season than in previous seasons because the floods last year backed up the tracery of red-gum standing creek-beds that give the Riverine its name and for months the water lay in them, and the growth along the edge of the water and in the surrounding country, which was wet from much rain, was thick and green and high.

My friend and his family were cut off for 4 months and each time they went out and every morning and evening when the children went to school they had to row and punt across two 100-yard wide creeks.

Fire Danger

Dock and thistle and Bathurst burr seed were carried into the property, and now there are thick stands of dry growth in many parts. All these could burst into flame if a fire reached them. So in addition to other things, they must be ready on the property to meet a fire, or on neighboring properties. There is a system of water drums ready to drop on to the carrying platform



"Washing the new stu

Australia's Frederick

FOR A POET TO BECOME a decade, and return content might expect to find in Harte, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, the far West or deep South, the sheriff's star and holsters. But an Australian poet, Frederick Literary Essays."

MR. MACARTNEY WAS sheriff, clerk of courts, public trustee, registrar of companies and general useful in the Northern Territory during its frontier period of land-grabbing with associated scandals, of

