



**Hats off:** entrants in the The Modern Man From Snowy River contest salute Jack Riley, hero of the Banjo Paterson ballad.

**VICTORIA:** Corryong

# Spirit of the Snowy

Mountain man Jack Riley's horsemanship is still celebrated, writes Richard Cornish

IN THE summer of 1890, Banjo Paterson was travelling through the Upper Murray Valley when he heard talk of a remarkable bushman who lived in the Snowy Mountains.

Being a poet who gathered his stories from the land and its people, he was naturally interested to meet this legend.

He was taken up high up into the hills to a pastoral lease called Tom Groggin, where he was introduced to the manager, a man called Jack Riley.

Riley was a tough and wiry mountain man who lived alone in a log cabin.

He was born in County Mayo in Ireland, but emigrated to Sydney in the 1840s.

A tailor by trade, Riley lived with his widowed sister in Omeo until she remarried, when he headed for the bush and gained an impressive reputation as a brumby hunter.

Over a bottle of whisky Riley told a captivated Paterson tales from his days riding the mountains and high plains.

Some time during the night Riley told how a thoroughbred stallion escaped to join a mob of brumbies. Stockmen were sent out to retrieve the stallion, but the only rider foolhardy enough to ride down the slopes of Mount Leatherhead was Riley.

Five years after hearing this tale, Paterson published *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*. Riley lived on at Tom Groggin for almost 20 years after the publication of the poem.

In the winter of 1914 Riley became seriously ill. When news reached the town of Corryong several men set out to bring Riley to town for medical help. Through rain and snow they carried the old man down the mountain on a stretcher.

In a deserted mining hut where they stopped to shelter from the snow, Riley died.

A report from *The Corryong Courier* at the time read: "He seemed to rally a little, and spoke to his friends, but his weakness reasserted itself and shortly afterwards, he swayed over, and would have fallen had his mates not saved him."

"The old heart had ceased to beat, and out there among the great silent trees ... his spirit went home to rest."

His body was brought down to Corryong, where he was buried. A rustic granite headstone in the town's cemetery marks his grave.

As a tribute to Jack Riley and to mark the beginning of the 2000 Man from Snowy River Festival, 50 riders are retracing Riley's last journey.

From the rugged country of Tom Groggin at the base of Kosciusko they are riding a narrow bridge path, crossing the Murray River to Corryong.

After paying their respects the riders will kick off the three-day festival, which starts today at Corryong and runs until Sunday.

Here the perseverance of the mountain-man spirit is celebrated with poetry, high-country art, music and food, bringing an extra 5000 people to Corryong.

But the real highlight is at the showgrounds, where the Modern Man from Snowy River Challenge is staged. Hopefuls are put to the test by cross-country riding, stock handling, whip cracking and riding an obstacle course bareback.

Entrants from around the country are whittled down to 10 finalists, who must complete the hardest part of the course: riding a bucking brumby, stock-saddle buck jumping, and catching a brumby.

The winner gets \$10,000 and is named The Modern Man from Snowy River.

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