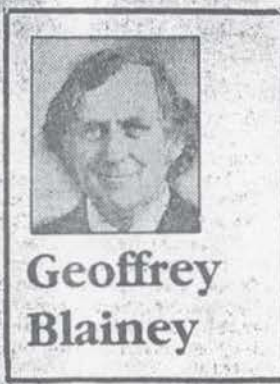




Gathering of the cattlemen ... the race over Sheepyard Flat at the weekend

Picture: JOHN HART



Geoffrey Blainey

Temple of the high country

It was one of the finest scenes Australia could offer. Last Saturday night, in a valley deep in north-eastern Victoria, people celebrated an Australian legend — the mountain horsemen. The night was hot, the air was sticky. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed every few minutes. Now and then a whinny was heard, for a few riding horses were tethered nearby in readiness for the next day's events. People far outnumbered horses, perhaps 3000 men, women and children sat or stood on the grass. Nearby were their tents and caravans, their utilities loaded with bedding. On a semi-trailer a bush band called Lazy Harry played country music, and people danced on the grass below. The Howqua valley at that spot is an amphitheatre — a vast grassy version of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, except that tall manna gums rise from the river flats and the steep slopes. While the Melbourne Cricket Ground has glamor, this dark rural arena conveyed magic. With a few arc lights skilfully arranged, the tall, straight gums resembled the pillars of a temple.

When the clouds drifted away, later in the evening, the sky and its half moon were brilliant. A few stars were almost perched on top of the steep surrounding hills. It was then that Lazy Harry sang the verse by "Banjo" Paterson — "at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars". You could instantly see why his poetry held such an attraction for

whip tournament and the other contests held on Saturday and Sunday help to keep alive the bushcraft and horsemanship which had once epitomised this continent. The Man from Snowy River belonged to this steep country — not the plains. He belonged to mountains where cattle had to be rounded up at the end of the summer, before the snow trapped them. To round up

asked to launch a new book which challenges that wishful thinking. *Movement at the Station* (published by Collins), Bryan Jameson points out that the removal of cattle from the famous Barrington Tops in NSW simply paved the way for the swift invasion of the voracious yellow-flowering plant, the Scotch broom. "In Victoria," argues Bryan Jameson, "High Country grazing has been an established practice for 150 years. The annual presence of the cattle is now part of the ecological balance." As for the old accusation that mountain cattlemen started great bushfires — an argument eloquently stressed by Judge Stretton after the bushfires of 1939 — Jameson replies that the judge was misled. For example the judge did not understand the enormous capacity of lightning to set fire to the bushland. Thus in the year 1984-85, in lands controlled by the Forests Commission, four of every 10 fires were the result of lightning. Much has to be learned about the beautiful, lonely terrain of the Victorian Alps. But the mountain cattlemen in the last few years have defended themselves so skilfully that they are likely to be riding the high plains for a long time to come.

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Australians of his era. The gathering at the Howqua was really a tribute to those families who each summer walk 200 or 300 of their cattle — mostly Herefords — to the high plains where the cattle, unwatched, graze until the first snow falls. The gathering was also honoring the stockmen from the high plains. The cattlemen's races, the stock-

the cattle required stamina and skill as well as a sure-footedness in the horses. For years there has been a political campaign to drive the cattlemen from their summer grazing lands in north-east Victoria. Spurring that campaign is the faith that once you drive out the cattle the high plains will become a Garden of Eden. On Sunday at the Howqua I was