BIGmobs

The Story of Australian Cattlemen

… this was a romantic period in our history, when unremitting hardships, constant danger and even death were facts of life which were met with both foolhardiness and courage. Perhaps more importantly, they were also met with consummate skill.

Big Mobs is a major social history telling the story of Australia's stockmen. It is a fascinating and detailed insight into the lives of the people who work on the stations and farms, on the stock routes and in the camps. Drawing on both personal accounts and archival research, Glen McLaren has written a rich history of the development of the industry and the technology and skills associated with horsemanship, bushcraft and working cattle.

Glen McLaren was born in York, Western Australia, in 1948. He received a Diploma of Agriculture in 1965 and spent the next ten years developing a farming property, as well as working as a shearer, bulldozing contractor and farm manager. He commenced full-time studies at the University of Western Australia in 1977, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in 1979. While studying he began riding racehorses to keep fit, and this interest grew into a full-time horsebreaking business, which he still operates. Continuing his studies part-time over the ensuing years, he was finally awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy by Curtin University of Technology in 1995.

Glen McLaren's first book, *Beyond Leichhardt: Bushcraft and the Exploration of Australia*, was published by Fremantle Press in 1996. His second book, *Life's Been Good: The Children of the Great Depression*, was published by the Press in 1999. He has also published *Distance, Drought and Dispossession: a history of the Northern Territory pastoral industry* (NTU Press, Darwin, 2001), *75 Years on: a history of the Muresk Institute of Agriculture* (2001), *Miners and Mentors: a centenary history of the Western Australian School of Mines* (2001), *Beverley; our journey through time: a history of the Shire of Beverley* (2002), *A much-loved home* (2003), *Lunatics, Legends and Lotharios: a history of showjumping in Western Australia* (2003) and *A long, hard road: a centenary history of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia* (2006). He is currently working on a 50th anniversary history of the Mullaloo Surf Lifesaving Club and a biography of prominent Northern Territory identity Roger Steele, and has also commenced his autobiography.

GLEN McLAREN

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Introduction

In an interesting and provocative article written in 1995, Professor Jim Hoy of Emporia State University, Kansas, claims many Australians tend to see the cowboy of the United States of America rather than the stockman of the northern cattle industry as the 'benchmark for equestrian success'. Hoy bases his assertion on the fact that, whereas he knew very little of Australian rodeos, many Australian stockmen and rodeo identities were conversant with US happenings. Furthermore, he believes most Australians seem 'either a bit defensive or a bit deferential in comparing the [working] cowboy to the stockman.'[1]

His comments, while potentially a rich source of irritation for many Australians, cannot easily be dismissed. Hoy possesses a rare blend of academic knowledge and practical skills, and is perhaps uniquely qualified to comment on the similarities and differences between the two pastoral traditions. Not only has he ridden competitively in United States rodeos, he has also drawn on a family background rich in frontier and pastoral history to

produce a series of books on the cowboy and life on the ranges. Furthermore, he has undertaken limited studies of the Australian outback. During a trip to this country in the early 1990s, for instance, he met with R M Williams, rodeo historian Peter Poole and others, examined Australian outback action art, and studied some of our early classics, including Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life.* Thus his perplexity at the deferential attitude of some Australians warrants attention. As Hoy points out:

> In almost all respects I found Australian ranching customs and traditions far more intriguing, more dangerous, more 'western' than those of North America. The heyday of the open-range, trail-driving cowboy in America, for instance, lasted barely a generation … Not only was the open range a thing of the past by the turn of the century, but the tendency, still continuing as we near the end of the twentieth century, has been to cut large ranches into smaller ones. Big roundups with branding fires were soon replaced by cattle yards and squeeze chutes on the new, smaller ranches, and by the time of World War Two horses were being hauled to the pastures in trailers instead of being ridden there.
>
> But in Australia long cattle drives continued well into the latter half of the twentieth century … Where an American drover might spend several weeks on the trail, his Australian counterpart often measured his trips in months, even years … Hostile Aborigines were not only as much a threat Downunder as Indians on the Great Plains, but that threat continued well over half a century longer …
>
> Ranch size and working methods also favour the notion that Australian stockmen are more rugged than American cowboys … staying aboard a pitching outlaw in an Australian stock saddle would be, it seems to me, a much greater test of horsemanship than managing

> the same feat in an American saddle. Moreover, while roping a wild cow can provide all sorts of tests for bravery … the Australian practice of tailing down wild bullocks seems much the more dangerous practice.
>
> So why, in light of what seems to me convincing evidence that Australian stockmen are possessed of skills in horsemanship and cattle working that are at least the equal of and in many cases surpass those of the American cowboy, why should the stockman look to the cowboy as his superior?[2]

The answer lies in the fact that the US pastoral experience has been comprehensively documented by historians. Moreover, novelists and artists, and of course Hollywood, have romanticised the 'West', and this blend of fact and fiction has become mythologised. Indeed, according to Hoy:

> popular culture has [capitalised on] our West, making it both accessible to a wide audience and creating a sense of poignance and nostalgia, turning it into a golden age with noble knights roaming an awe-inspiring landscape.[3]

By contrast, Hoy believes that through lack of interest by novelists, artists and historians, 'neither Australian film nor Australian art seems to have [used] … the Outback experience in the same way.'[4]

While few Australians would disagree with Hoy's premise thus far, many would claim — rightly or otherwise — that the northern pastoral cattle industry[5] does underly some of our myths and legends and typifies much that is 'truly Australian.' Unarguably this was a romantic period in our history, when unremitting hardships, constant danger and even death were facts of life which were met with both foolhardiness and courage. Perhaps more importantly, they were also met with consummate skill. Indeed, whether understood by urban

Australians or not, images of breakaway bulls being turned back to the mob by a hard-riding, stockwhip-wielding horseman are underwritten by the fact that the horse is well trained, the rider can competently employ the lash, and he is capable of pursuing the beast at full gallop through uncleared timber and across dangerously uneven and broken country.

Such skills were a remarkably constant feature of life in the northern cattle industry for almost a hundred years. Certainly, until the mid to late 1940s, the extremely large size of holdings and the unimproved nature of most properties meant that, in large part, station life and work had scarcely changed. Yet, by the 1960s, former stockmen and drovers H M Barker and Matt Savage were adamant that much of the painstakingly acquired cattle sense and everyday skills of that era had already been irretrievably lost. Barker, for instance, asserted that:

> a film of station stockmen trying to yard a mob of cattle in a good many places nowadays would show how far things have slipped. There would be a scared-looking mob of a hundred or so being driven towards the yard gate, whips cracking, men yelling and now and then a bellow from some beast that is being bitten by a heeler dog. Every cow in the mob that has a calf somewhere is either searching for it or trying to protect it in some way and hoping to make a dash with it to get right away. Horses that the four or five men are riding are so upset by bad hands jagging the bit in their mouths that they do not pay any attention to the cattle, so if one beast breaks away the old-time sort of stock horse that would turn and head it in a flash is conspicuously absent. A wild-looking bullock, aged and with long sharp horns, makes a dash away [into the] bush and is out of sight by the time the nearest man has got his horse going. Excessive swearing proves that it is not the man's fault that the bullock got away. That is their idea of it. When the

> mob is within fifty yards of the gate, pressure, noise and dust increase, but the cattle do not look a bit like entering the yard. From the back a collection of about a dozen cattle break away and two men set off after them. One gallops on each side of this small lot, so the result is a foregone conclusion; neither can turn the leaders because the other man is forcing them towards him. They give it up and ride back to the main mob which they have left short-handed. They meet the main mob sooner than expected because they are now all off, going full gallop. Nothing can stop them, though a few fruitless attempts are made. Bad horsemanship shows up through the whole performance, the men abuse one another, and two days' work for the gang is lost and much damage done to the cattle as well as the horses.
>
> It would be useless trying to tell these men that fifty years ago, probably on the same station, with the herd, horses and men as they were, and no dogs, two men would have driven the same size mob straight into the yard with no noise other than a few cracks of a whip at any beast that showed signs of planning a breakaway. They just would not understand. Station cattle are getting more out of hand while men and horses become less competent, owners and managers included.[6]

In the thirty years since then the situation has deteriorated considerably. Radical changes have been wrought by the immense development of the road system in northern Australia and the corresponding introduction of road trains, the fencing of properties and the introduction of four-wheel-drive vehicles and two-way radios. The granting of award wages to Aboriginal stockmen, the provision of considerably more watering points and cattle yards (with drafting races and crushes), the quietening of the herd through the frequent musters required under the BTEC scheme,[7] the cutting down of properties and

the introduction of aircraft and helicopter mustering have also played a role. Indeed, droving is a thing of the past and helicopter-based contract mustering teams have replaced permanent staff on many properties. Perhaps more tellingly, Heytesbury Pastoral Group, recognising the massive loss of skills which has occurred over the past thirty years, now offers employees TAFE accredited training in such laughably elementary aspects of stockmanship as saddling a horse.

Thus it is vital that this important component of our rich pastoral heritage be adequately documented by historians and cultural heritage professionals before further information is lost. Some progress has already been made in the form of a considerable amount of non-academic writing on the origins and refinement of such skills. Unfortunately these sources of information, though valuable, are frequently less than satisfactory. Often they embarrassingly romanticise the achievements and qualities of men and animals, or are diffuse and tangential. Some exhibit both faults. Such works include nineteenth century Australian explorers' journals, the accounts by British gentlemen such as the Reverend William Haygarth and Captain Peter Cunningham of early nineteenth century bush life, and the late nineteenth century quasi-historical summaries of exploration and settlement by highly proficient bushmen and pioneer graziers such as Edward Palmer and Henry Russell. Turn-of-the-century and early twentieth century examples include reminiscences by Northern Territory customs officer Alfred Searcy and Jeannie Gunn of *We of the Never-Never* fame, as well as the descriptive writings by bushman and author Ion Idriess. Recent works include the memoirs, published in the 1980s and 1990s, of retired drovers, buffalo-shooters, camel teamsters and stockmen such as Tom Cole, Bruce Simpson, Savage and Barker. The few academic writings are generally limited in scope.

This work draws together much of the existing information and corroborates, revises and supplements it with the oral testimony of some of the generation surviving from this colourful era in our history. Given, however, that the major

technological developments and writings on the pastoral cattle industry have been contributed by white Anglo-Saxon and Celtic males, there is a strong likelihood this approach will invite criticism. Revisionist historians, for instance, have justifiably documented earlier omissions of Aborigines and women from our colonial history. Certainly no argument is made with claims that some Aboriginal technology might have been appropriated without recognition by the cattle industry, nor that a proportion of those directly involved were women. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the pastoral cattle industry has essentially been a masculine pursuit, and that the origin of most of its technology cannot be traced. Consequently, although of passing interest, little emphasis is placed on addressing these concerns. The primary focus of this study is the technology itself, and its chronological and developmental sequence.

The Beginnings

The pastoral cattle industry began, unofficially, when two bulls and four cows escaped their convict herder within a few days of settlement and ran wild in the unlimited bushlands surrounding the fledgeling colony.[8] According to British commentator George Boxall, these cattle, which came from Cape Town, were 'big-boned, slab-sided animals, with enormous horns.'[9] Apart from isolated and accidental contact, they roamed undisturbed for several years.

> A fear of venturing far amongst the natives, then somewhat hostile, repressed all attempts to regain them: indolence succeeded these fears, and no search was ever instituted. [10]

Gradually these cattle moved to and settled in the area later named the Cowpastures, which adjoins the Nepean River. Here they thrived and bred prolifically. Eventually though, in late 1795:

> an officer's servant, shooting in the woods, between twenty and thirty miles from Sydney, discovered them, and conducted the Governor and a party of his friends to the spot, where they found a heard [sic] consisting of nearly sixty head of remarkably fine cattle. The bull attacked the party, who, with some difficulty, escaped unhurt.[11]

Within a further three years the cattle, which were reported to be of 'an uncommon size, and very fierce,' were estimated to number 230.[12]

The earliest official attempt to recapture them was made in 1801, when 'three convicts, who profess themselves equal to the task, … made an offer [to Governor King] to catch some of them … by stratagem.' Optimistically, they asked to be paid one beast in ten for the first hundred[13] but, as they lacked horses, stockwhips and practical experience in mustering wild cattle, it is hardly surprising that they and others who followed had little success. Perhaps the best illustration of the complete lack of necessary expertise was the curious finding that a drum beaten in the bush would attract cattle. Clearly this was of no practical advantage, for the mobs of up to three hundred head, having once seen the drummers, inevitably rushed for cover in the gullies and scrub. King acknowledged this technique was of little value when hopefully suggesting it 'may lead to our hitting on some plan to take them hereafter.'[14]

Mustering became more difficult each time the cattle were unsuccessfully pursued, and the task was made no easier when mobs began to reach the broken and scrubby ranges. In a logical attempt to overcome his stockmen's shortcomings, King proposed building a trap on the permanent watercourse at Stone Quarry Creek, in the vicinity of what is now Picton, and using quiet cows as decoys. He admitted, however, that should the plan fail he knew 'of no [other] expedient to take them alive after what has been tried.'[15] Even when sufficient horses became

available, the riders lacked the skills essential for mustering in thick scrub and broken country. In 1805, for instance, King was persuaded to surround the cattle 'with a number of horsemen and people on foot [but they] did not succeed in driving any part of them towards the Nepean.'[16]

As the unmanageable herd had little realisable value, both King in 1805 and Governor Bligh in 1807 ordered that the outcast bulls be shot and salted for consumption. Bligh also had as many calves as possible run down and captured alive. While moderately successful numerically, heavy expenses made the operation only marginally viable. The nineteen bulls and one calf shot and eleven calves caught in the 1807 operation were valued at £390, while labour costs and the value of the horse killed by a charging bull were calculated at £307.[17]

In short, all early attempts to control and redomesticate, or at least gain commercial benefit from, this herd, which by 1811 numbered four to five thousand head in the Cowpastures region alone,[18] proved fruitless as the necessary skills and equipment were not available. These problems were replicated on a larger scale once the Blue Mountains were crossed and squatters streamed westward to take advantage of the vast and superb natural grasslands of inland Australia.[19] Now, instead of cleared and fenced agricultural properties, where stock could be managed relatively easily, these new landholders were confronted with extensive, unbounded pastoral runs which were almost devoid of improvements such as buildings, fences, stockyards, roads and clearings. Not surprisingly, their stock ran wild too.

Yet within a very short time these pioneering squatters and graziers began to develop the skills necessary to hold and work stock in a given area. The explorers of the period, such as Assistant Surveyor-General George Evans, Surveyor-General John Oxley and Captain Charles Sturt, also made an important contribution by determining how to traverse unmade country with teams of bullocks and horses, how to find water and how to deal with Aborigines. Their achievements were later rapidly expanded and refined by the first drovers.

Edward John Eyre, the son of an English clergyman, who arrived in Australia in late 1832 as a teenager with limited capital and no bush experience whatsoever, typifies these men.[20] After a brief stint working for a successful and experienced grazier, Eyre went into business, trading in sheep. He rapidly acquired bush experience and skills, so that when within twelve months he decided to take up a property on the Molongolo Plains, near the site of the future Australian Capital Territory, he was capable of moving men, equipment and stock three hundred miles across largely unmarked and unsettled country. Soon afterwards he entered into a lease agreement over three thousand sheep, which had to be transferred to the Liverpool Plains. Eyre encountered considerable difficulties, for the weather was appallingly wet. As a result his drays were continually bogged, and their wheels frequently broke or fell off under the rough conditions. These problems, coupled with his assigned convicts' complete lack of interest in the proceedings, meant that men, equipment and stock were often spread out over unworkable distances. Accordingly, Eyre and his partner were compelled to spend very long hours in the saddle, bringing supplies forward to his disgruntled shepherds and rounding up straying stock, as well as having to extricate bogged wagons. Often:

> After a hard day's work and being wet thro' all the day we had to lay down in the open air at night, frequently in damp clothes and subject to the contingency of the weather which, if not rainy, was bitterly cold. The dews were also very heavy and penetrating. Often we were badly off for provisions, sometimes being for several days at a time without meat … Each had to cook for himself after his day's work as well as keep watch over the sheep for half the night. Frequently owing to the rains it was impossible to bake even the indigestible bread called damper and the only alternative then was to mix flour and water into a paste and boil it, making what was technically

> called 'dough boys', neither a very wholesome nor agreeable way of cooking the staff of life, but still far from unwelcome after a hard day's work …[21]

This was a hard though valuable apprenticeship for Eyre, and he quickly learnt how to keep large herds of stock together, how to track them if they strayed, and how to cope with unknown and changing conditions. The last factor was of particular importance in 1838 when, after overlanding sheep to the settlement at Port Phillip, he and fifteen men, with two drays, ten horses and fourteen working oxen, set off to drove six hundred cattle and a thousand sheep to Adelaide.[22] At a point well into the north-west of Victoria he found his line of march impossible, for all water supplies had dried up. He reconnoitred extensively in advance for three days but found no water, and was eventually forced to turn back when 110 miles distant from the camp. Eyre soon realised that he would have to punish his horses severely if he was to get back to the camp, and drove them until they could go no further. He then removed their saddles, set them free and, with his men, began to walk the remaining fifty-four miles. Suffering severely from exertion and poor food, they eventually reached their destination, where they took several days to recuperate. Subsequently, the party managed to reach Adelaide via an alternative route.

By the time Eyre completed his overland journey he had been on the track for 147 days and travelled 955 miles. Not only had he further developed and refined the skills necessary to drive livestock over long distances, he and another pioneer drover, Joseph Hawdon, had demonstrated it was possible to move both cattle and sheep from New South Wales to Adelaide.[23]

Within one or two years the overlanding of stock had become an established practice, with large numbers being moved. In his journals of exploration Governor George Grey points out that, in fifteen months during 1839–40, overlanders shifted 11,200 cattle, 230 horses and 60,000 sheep from New South Wales to South Australia. These men quickly learnt to cope with very

large outfits of stock, while ideally keeping them fit, sound and thriving. An indication of the size of their operations can be gained from the fact that in one overlander's team there were sixty-two workhorses. Grey, perhaps romantically, described the overlanders as resolute, undaunted, self-confident in difficulties and dangers, and a 'fund of accurate information.'[24]

Certainly, by the end of the 1830s, settlers, explorers and drovers had established many of the features of the pastoral cattle industry. Remote bush life was now an everyday fact. Stockmen had become relatively self-sufficient, more time was being spent in outcamps far away from the homestead facilities, and living and cooking took place primarily out-of-doors. Supplies and equipment were conveyed by packhorses and drays, and the techniques necessary to control livestock without the aid of fences or yards had, to some degree, been developed. Thus the scene was set for the immense expansion of the pastoral cattle industry into the unknown north of Australia.

The pastoral settlement of what was to become the state of Queensland began in June 1840, when Patrick Leslie of Collaroy in New South Wales took up the first station on the Darling Downs. He settled his flock of 'nearly 6,000 sheep, two teams of bullocks and drays, one team of horses and dray, ten saddle-horses and twenty-two … ticket-of-leave men' at the site he named Toolburra, close to the present-day town of Warwick. Although within four years a further twenty-nine properties had been established in the region, expansion was steady rather than dramatic for the following two decades.[25]

In part, this rate of settlement can be attributed to lack of information. In the early 1840s, maps of inland northern Australia were almost virginally white. Cartographers such as Captain Wickham and Lieutenant John Lort Stokes had carried out limited waterborne reconnaissances along major watercourses such as the Victoria, Albert and Flinders rivers. Moreover, Stokes had whetted appetites with his description of the magnificently grassed plains adjoining the Albert River, which he named the Plains of Promise, but little else was known.

This situation changed on 29 March 1846, when the previously little known Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt returned to Sydney as a hero. In a gruelling fourteen and a half months he had covered 2500 miles from Moreton Bay (near Brisbane) to Port Essington, north of the future site of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Leichhardt brought details of extensive grasslands and plains, of a generally interlinking series of watercourses and of permanently running rivers such as the Lynd and Burdekin. According to the early Queensland pioneer Edward Palmer, Leichhardt provided 'the first knowledge we had of the capabilities of North Queensland' and 'his discoveries have been followed by the most extensive and advantageous results.'[26]

Yet, for at least another fifteen years, expansion was slow. Indeed, the rich Peak Downs district, which now supports a variety of grazing and agricultural pursuits, and which was glowingly described by Leichhardt in early 1845, was still only lightly settled in 1857. At that time the Western Australian explorer Augustus Gregory, who was nearing the end of his outstandingly successful North Australian expedition, found the first outpost of settlement there. It was not until the Canoona gold rushes of 1858 and 1859 that pastoral exploration gained impetus. Then, within less than a decade, much of Queensland was taken up and partially stocked.

These must have been heady times, for Palmer speaks of roads being:

> lined with flocks and herds of those entering on the pioneering work of the North of Queensland, and business men [who] were following in the wake of the early stock settlers to commence a trade wherever an opportunity offered.[27]

No time was wasted. Driven by the desire for good grazing country, these pioneer settlers streamed westward and north-westward, continually moving out beyond earlier arrivals. According to historian Noel Loos, within six weeks of George

Dalrymple and his forward party landing at Port Dennison in 1861, settlers pushing inland had taken up all the country for the first 350 miles. Within fourteen months, these pioneers had applied for 454 runs covering 31,504 square miles.[28]

The first cattle, a large mob of five thousand, arrived on the Thompson River in 1862 and at the Flinders and Barcoo rivers in 1864. In the same year the most daring land-seekers reached as far as the Barkly Tableland. George Sutherland, for one, finally settled his mob of eight thousand sheep at Lake Mary. His station, Rocklands, which straddled the Queensland border, is reputed to have been the first property selected and stocked in the Northern Territory, then part of South Australia.[29]

The rapid stocking of new pastoral regions made tremendous demands on drovers, agents and breeders alike. Cattle and sheep were driven very long distances. James Gibson, for instance, set two mobs of cattle under way from the Barwon district of New South Wales in 1861. Passing through Goondiwindi, the Darling Downs, Rockhampton and Bowen, these mobs were then turned inland to Leichhardt's Clarke River. Here they were settled on the first runs taken up in the Burke district and supplemented with other cattle from New South Wales. In 1864, when these properties were sold, the cattle, now numbering in excess of ten thousand, were driven to the lower Flinders region which was then 'quite unoccupied.'[30]

In part, the early Gulf settlers' enthusiasm was underwritten by their firm though mistaken belief that they were ideally located to take advantage of the trade sure to develop, through northern ports, with South-East Asian countries. Nehemiah Bartley, for instance, commented that:

> Normanton, the Gulf port, will be the Singapore of Australia — the great outlet gate of the island continent … showing by thousands of miles the nearest way to Java, China, India, and all the great markets of the East, for meat, gold and other products …[31]

Then in 1864–65 a serious drought temporarily checked progress. Conditions were so severe that:

> the native dogs crowded in on the Flinders in thousands, and the blacks themselves had also to resort to it … None of the rivers ran in their channels and … stages of thirty or forty miles without water were frequent.[32]

During 1865 and 1866, after conditions had improved, a further group of graziers moved beyond the now partially settled Flinders region and began to settle more closely the Albert, Leichhardt and lower Gregory river basins. At the same time large areas of the central and western plains country of Queensland were being explored, selected and settled. By 1868, however, the outward impetus had lost momentum. The collapse of the British Agra and Masterson Bank, which had underwritten Queensland Government loans, meant credit was frequently revoked.[33] Consequently many of these properties, with their particularly high establishment and running costs, became unviable. Accordingly, stock were moved southward or rendered down locally. Thus, by the late 1860s only 'a few hardy old bushmen held on with grim determination [to their runs in the Gulf region], living on beef and pigweed, and hoping for better times.'[34]

The situation did not stabilise until the Etheridge goldfield, some 250 miles east of Normanton, was discovered and worked. The subsequent discovery of rich alluvial gold deposits along the Palmer River in 1872 rescued the northern pastoral industry. Miners on the Palmer fields consumed an average of fifteen to twenty thousand head of cattle each year[35] and prices soared, for the destocking and abandonment of most Gulf properties meant there were insufficient local cattle to satisfy demand. Speculation in pastoral leases then became rife, leading to the rapid purchase and restocking of abandoned properties, and the resumption of westward expansion.

During the early 1880s large properties on the Daly, Victoria

and Ord Rivers were taken up by pioneers such as Fisher and Lyons, the Gordons and the Duracks. These two western regions of immense grasslands, discovered by Augustus Gregory on his 1855–56 North Australian expedition and by Alexander Forrest during his 1878 De Grey to Port Darwin expedition, were stocked with cattle and sheep from Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. The increase in stock numbers during this expansionary pioneering period was dramatic. In Queensland there was a 730 per cent rise over twenty years, from 432,890 in 1860 to 3,162,752 in 1880.[36]

The initial enthusiasm underlying this unparalleled expansion of settlement soon faded, however. Much of the country so readily taken up, often at ruinous expense, proved unsuitable for sheep. Problems encountered included losses to native dogs, low breeding rates in the Kimberleys and Northern Territory, the cost of freighting wool, the inherent unthriftiness of some of the country,[37] and the difficulty and expense of obtaining shearers and shepherds in isolated and dangerous areas.[38] In addition, during the 1890s large areas of coastal Queensland were found to be heavily infested with liver fluke, intestinal worms and spear grass. The latter was:

> a terrible scourge — [the seeds] … are finely barbed and intensely sharp and hard; once entered they pass right through the skin of the sheep, even into the flesh, causing great annoyance and leading to poverty and death. [And as a result] … from Wide Bay to the north scarcely any sheep are now to be met with on coastal runs.[39]

Consequently sheep gradually gave way to cattle over most of the northern pastoral region. Barker notes, for instance, that in 1913, forty-nine years after George Sutherland heroically drove his mob of eight thousand sheep from Rockhampton to Rockland, the 'last of the Barkly sheep enthusiasts also gave it up and changed over to cattle.'[40] The future was similarly bleak

for the few hardy west Kimberley pioneers who, in the mid 1930s, were battling dingoes, prohibitive freight costs, grass seeds and blowflies.[41] Overgrazing, poor wool prices and a 33 per cent net advantage to beef producers during the early 1960s meant that by the early 1970s all graziers in the region had converted to cattle.