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The Rabbit Industry in South-East Australia, 1870-1970

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In 1929 the rabbit industry was reported to be the largest employer of labour in Australia. During the hundred years covered by this paper, over 20 billion rabbits were trapped or poisoned in south-east Australia for commercial purposes. Each rabbit carcase or skin was worth money. Carcase prices varied from 3d a pair in the 1890s to 24d a pair in the early 1950s, while skins were worth between 1.5d and 10d a pound in the 1890s and reached 249d a pound in 1946. Thousands of rabbiters in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and southern Queensland earned in a week up to ten times the rates of pay earned by building and metal industry tradesmen, and earnings remained high until 1970. Trappers were independent suppliers who chose when to work, how long to work, what to work for, skins or carcases, or a mixture of both, and who to sell to. Unlike other rural workers, who had to travel continuously in search of seasonal or intermittent work, rabbiters were able to reside in one location all year. The rabbit industry revolutionised work practices in rural areas and stimulated local businesses like no other industry. Wool remained the nation's major export earner but income from

wool ended up in relatively few hands, while the rabbit industry provided cash money on a daily basis to thousands of trappers and workers. This money was spent locally in hundreds of rural businesses, used to buy cars, homes and farms, or saved. Unlike other rural industries, the rabbit industry prospered during war, depression and drought.

By the late 1920s the rabbit industry in south-eastern Australia (southern Queensland, New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, Tasmania and eastern South Australia) was one of the largest employers of labour in the country. Over 20,000 trappers worked full-time trapping for carcases or skins, or poisoning for skins. Thousands were employed in numerous freezer works located in rural towns and capital cities, grading, sorting, packing, skinning and transporting carcases by the tens of millions. Thousands more were employed by the multitude of skin buying firms located throughout rural areas and in capital cities. Hundreds sold rabbits in the streets of cities or worked in small goods shops that retailed rabbits. Nearly 10,000 workers made felt hats out of rabbit skins, pine boxes for the rabbit export trade, gelatine from skin scraps, and fertilizer and animal feed from the remains of rabbits unfit for human consumption.[1]

The focus of this paper is on the commercialisation of the rabbit and how the rabbit industry became an economic powerhouse in rural Australia. The central argument is that the export of preserved rabbit meat, rabbit skins and frozen carcases, and major increases in rates of local consumption established and enlarged the industry. Also important is the dramatic economic impact the industry had on rural workers and the communities they lived in. The paper highlights that instead of poorly paid seasonal work, unskilled and semi-skilled rural workers who trapped had well paid employment all year and earned large amounts of money. This money was spent in local businesses. Workers could reside in one location and did not have to travel continuously in search of paid work. The paper also shows that urban-based workers in many different occupations rushed to enter the industry. Trappers, as independent suppliers, chose when to work and for how long, whether to work for skins or carcases or both, and who to sell to. After the literature review and

a brief account of the introduction of the wild rabbit, the paper analyses the preserving industry, the skin and carcase export trade, local consumption and the financial benefits enjoyed by the trappers and the communities they lived in.

This paper is part of a larger project that is on going. Papers on specific topics such as the rabbiters and the wider working experience, the conflict over land use between farming and grazing interests and the rabbit industry, the Danysz experiments during 1906 and 1908, class, power and status relationships in rural towns, the benefits of the industry to the rural economy, and the rabbit industry in the nineteenth century have been submitted to academic journals or are in the process of being written.

Literature Review

The rabbit as a pest is one of the most studied topics in Australia. Scientists seeking answers as to how to stop the spread of rabbits and how to eliminate them entirely began their research in the 1880s and it continues today. There is no need to review the scientific literature other than to say it exists as none of it moves beyond the rabbit as a pest.[2] Over the last 90 years, James Matthams (1921), David Stead (1928), Eric Rolls (1969), Rae Pennycuick (1995) Brian Coman (1999) and Stephen Dando-Collins (2008) have all published work on the rabbit as a pest that includes sections on the rabbit industry. They all regard the industry in a negative light and argue that commercialisation has produced more harm than good.[3]

The most comprehensive study of the rabbit industry is L.J. Dunn's 1948 economic survey compiled for the Federal government's Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Dunn lists all the major groups in the industry from its inception and provides detailed statistics on the carcase and skin export trade from 1904 to 1948 for each state and the commonwealth. There is little analysis of the industry and its impact on individual trappers and the communities in which they lived and worked. [4]

Other secondary sources have touched on aspects of the rabbit industry.

Catherine Watson's 1996 biography of Jack McCraith shows that McCraith started buying and selling rabbits as a 15-year-old in Melbourne in the early 1930s and by the late 1940s his company was one of the largest exporters of rabbits in Victoria (over 130 million rabbits were exported during nearly 40 years of operations). The study highlights how McCraith grew his business and its profitability (he was a millionaire by the early 1950s), the work done in the factory and the relationship between McCraith and his workers and trappers. Watson shows that while myxomatosis killed millions of rabbits after its release in 1951 it did not kill the rabbit industry. After 1951 McCraith sourced his rabbits from central Australia, an area that was too dry for the virus carrying mosquitoes, and continued to export until the early 1970s.[5]

G.B. Eggleton's 1982 study of rabbiters and the industry in the Mildura area during the first half of the twentieth century is a positive study of the trapper and the rabbit industry. Eggleton emphasises how the rabbit industry was one of the more profitable businesses in Mildura during the 1929–32 Depression. He believed the industry was a far better solution to the rabbit "problem" than either poisoning or myxomatosis. The wider impact of the industry on rural life is not discussed.[6]

In 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Commission published a book of stories about rabbits and life in rural Australia that had been sent to Radio Australia as part of the station's "Rabbiting On" storytelling competition. While entertaining, the stories add little to the story of the rabbit industry.[7] Publications on the stock and station agent industry in Australia, the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company, and life in the nineteenth century add little to this study. [8] Studies of the manufacturing industries linked to the rabbit industry are scarce. C.B. Schedvin's pioneering work published in 1967 on Lysaght Brothers and Company Proprietary Limited and the production of rabbit proof fencing highlights the rapid growth in demand for this product and how Lysaght supplied up to two-thirds of local demand.[9] K.T.H. Farrer in his 1980 study of food technology in the nineteenth century provides little more than a summary of the rabbit preserving industry.[10] Academic publications on

the wool industry add little to this study. [11]

The trapping and poisoning of the rabbit for its fur was one part of a very large skin and fur industry. The possum, kangaroo, koala, wallaby and fox were also hunted. N.L. Howlett has highlighted how in Queensland from 1915 to the late 1920s large numbers of koalas were slaughtered each year and the trappers/shooters made very good money. The Queensland government supported koala hunting because it employed surplus labour in rural towns and benefited local businesses. The hunts stopped in the late 1920s after the government came up against an increasingly vocal environmental lobby. [12]

The Rabbits

Rabbits are not native to Australia. Five rabbits arrived with the first fleet in 1788 and a second consignment from Capetown arrived in 1791. By the mid-1820s rabbits were breeding around houses in Sydney. Wild rabbits were released in Tasmania in the early 1820s and by 1824 a firm in Hobart was manufacturing felt hats out of rabbit skins. On the mainland the Hentys "imported" rabbits to Swan River in 1829 and to Portland in 1834, while rabbits were recorded in Adelaide in 1837 and around Ballarat in 1839. [13] Thomas Austin imported wild rabbits in 1859 and bred them at his property at Barwon, near modern day Geelong, for hunting. Austin was one of many landowners breeding rabbits at this time. Within eight years the offspring of Austin's rabbits were located at Barwon Heads, 35 miles away, and north-west of Winchelsea on the Bellarine Peninsular. In the early 1890s rabbits were in plague proportions in western Victoria around Colac, Hamilton, Portland and Warrnambool, and in south-east South Australia around Mount Gambier. [14] In Sydney in the early 1860s, Thomas Holt bred rabbits at his Marrickville property on the Cook's River. Within 20 years the offspring had spread west to Camden and south to Bulli. [15]

Settlers often carried rabbits over long distances and released them. In 1862 rabbits were taken to the New England area of NSW, in 1866 two settlers near Donald in Victoria released four pairs and they flourished, and there were two significant releases in the 1870s, in the Kapunda district in South

Australia and around Wentworth and Balranald in NSW. [16] The releases at Wentworth and Balranald were decisive:

Wentworth is at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers. Balranald is on the Murrumbidgee. Putting a pair of rabbits on a river-bank is like putting a passenger on a slow train. Eventually and almost certainly he will reach the end of the line … The Darling was a broad track to Queensland; and the Murrumbidgee and its tributary, the Lachlan, were signposts to the centre of New South Wales.[17]

The rabbits spread north and north-west reaching the rabbit proof fence on the Queensland-NSW border by 1891, Dubbo and Coonamble in 1898, Armidale in 1903 and Boggabri around 1905. [18] They also spread eastwards along the rivers; millions of rabbits were being caught around Wagga Wagga in the 1890s.[19] In 1895, at the beginning of the eight-year Federation Drought, dead rabbits were found two-feet deep along fences west of Nyngan in western NSW and gates couldn't be opened until the dead had been scrapped away. [20]

Commercialisation

Commercialisation of the rabbit commenced in the first half of the nineteenth century but it only became important after 1870. Rabbits priced between 4s 6d and 8s a pair were being sold in markets in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide during the 1840s and 1850s. The Melbourne trade grew rapidly from the early 1870s. Trappers from Bacchus Marsh sent over 200 tons of carcases (approximately 150,000 rabbits) to the Melbourne Fish Market between 1872 and 1874.[21] During the winter of 1875, trappers from Colac sent 8,000 rabbits a week to markets in Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat.[22] A rabbit preserving factory was established at Colac in 1871 and, despite several closures, canned over 6,650,000 rabbits in its 15 years of

operations.[23] In Tasmania bales of skins were exported from the 1830s. During the 1870s the colony exported around 650,000 skins a year, with a Hobart firm making £5,000 a year out of the trade[24] In Melbourne in the 1860s, an unknown journeyman hatter who had served his time at a leading London hat manufacturer began buying quantities of skins and exporting them to London. By the end of the 1870s the colonial trade in rabbit skins was substantial, with over 3 million skins auctioned in London in 1878 and close to 6 million skins in 1879. [25] The number of establishments in Victoria making hats doubled between 1870 and 1880. In one year in the mid-1880s a Melbourne firm manufacturing felt hats spent £2,500 purchasing 240,000 rabbit skins at an average price of 2s 6d a dozen. Joesph Bidencope's hat factory in Hobart used 350,000 rabbit skins a year from 1874 until it closed in the late 1890s.[26] In 1882, J.D. Fitzgerald, a rabbit skin buyer employed by Messrs Charles Cox and Company, a Melbourne firm that was buying skins for export, argued in letters to regional Victorian newspapers for greater commercialisation of the rabbit. He wrote that poisoning rabbits in their burrows was wasteful and costly; the skin could be used to make hats, gloves, fake furs, glue, and for stuffing bed mattresses, while the carcase could be eaten by humans or used for poultry and pig feed; the manufacture in Victoria of felt hats would offset a large part of a yearly import bill of over £200,000 for felt and like products; and trapping would pay well with skins at 1s 8d to 2s a dozen.[27] His argument was ignored: colonial politicians and landowners were determined to exterminate the rabbit not to commercialise it.

Parliaments from Queensland to South Australia attempted to legislate the rabbit away. Tasmania passed the first act in 1871, South Australia followed in 1875, Queensland and Victoria in 1880 and NSW in 1883. All legislation made it compulsory for landholders to destroy all rabbits on their farms and stations and made it illegal to aid the spread of the rabbit. The NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland governments funded the erection of rabbit proof fences along colonial borders and within colonies. The 648 mile fence erected between 1886-90 along the Queensland and NSW border cost the Queensland government £123,000 to erect and £11,000

a year to supervise and maintain, while the NSW government spent ⬚69,808 on 1,330 miles of rabbit proof fencing from 1883 to June 1905. Given that the fences did not stop the rabbits, they were costly failures. The Victorian Act paid for the destruction of rabbits on crown lands, and payment of up to 1s 9d per dozen skins cost the government over ⬚414,000 to 1903. The 1883 Act in NSW compelled the government to pay three-quarters of all costs related to killing the rabbits, with landholders or leaseholders to pay the final quarter. By 1890 the government and landholders had paid trappers ⬚1,543,000 for rabbit scalps at a penny each.[28]

Preserved Rabbit

Commercialisation of the rabbit continued during the last two decades of the nineteenth century despite opposition from governments and landholders. The meat preserving industry was at the forefront of this growth. In addition to its Colac works, the Colac Meat Preserving Company opened a branch factory in Camperdown in 1881, which treated up to 1 million rabbits from April to October each year. Up to 90 men and boys worked in the factory and between 200 and 300 trappers supplied it.[29] A Melbourne syndicate headed by Robert Inglis, a landowner in western Victoria, formed the Stonyford Pastoral and Preserving Company in 1884 and commenced work at Stonyford in March 1885 in competition to the Colac firm. It treated a minimum of 600,000 rabbits each year[30] Inglis was the prime mover behind the establishment of a factory in Hamilton in 1892, which during its first six months purchased 960,000 rabbits. High railway freights and lack of sales lead to its closure in mid-1893. It reopened as a co-operative in February 1895, following a concerted campaign by local landholders and businessmen. Profits from buying and canning 1 million rabbits a year were small, sale of the canned product normally just covered costs, while sale of the skins generated the profits, but the co-operative venture paid dividends of between 10 and 25 per cent a year until the early twentieth century[31] The Euroa/Longwood, Port Fairy, and Portland works each purchased between 400,000 and 750,000 rabbits a year during the 1890s.[32] The works in Victoria canned

2,800,000 rabbits in 1896, and similar numbers were recorded before and after this date.[33]

In South Australia preserving works were first established by the Northern Rabbit Meat Preserving Company between Kapunda and Eudunda in 1877. The company purchased 45,000 rabbits a month until the factory closed in 1879.[34] In June 1897, the Mount Gambier Rabbit and Meat Preserving Company opened works at Compton. The company operated for just under 20 years and during peak times purchased around four million rabbits a year.[35] In 1896 five south-eastern District Councils opened a factory at Millicent to combat the rabbit, reduce expenditure on rabbit destruction, and generate local employment and business activity. It was taken over by a private company on 5 May 1897. The following two years were hectic with large orders warranting larger purchases of rabbits and the working of double shifts in the factory.[36] Factories were also located at Robe and Port Augusta, both of which operated for a short time[37]

Preserving rabbits was not as popular in NSW despite the plenitude of rabbits. The Bourke Meat Preserving Company, the Menindee Boiling Down, Freezing and Meat Preserving Company Limited, located in Menindee on the Darling River in western NSW, and the Euroa Preserving Company's factory at Whitton, a small township located north-west of Wagga Wagga, preserved rabbits for the local and export markets during the 1890s. All three works canned for short periods but production at all sites stopped in the late 1890s due to a shortage of water, a consequence of the Federation Drought.[38]

The preserving industry struggled in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It could not compete with the frozen carcase trade and was badly affected by the 1906 Chicago meat scandal, where meat-producing factories were guilty of "using foul or diseased waste meat to make cheap products." In response, the English public briefly stopped buying preserved meats, which closed the industry's largest market. Large military orders from Japan (1904), the British Admiralty (1908, 1910) and from the British and Australian governments during World War I sustained the industry. Factories in south-east South Australia, Victoria and in NSW at Wyndham

(1911–12), Berrima (1913) and Merriwa (from 1917) produced the canned rabbit.[39] Most works had closed by 1920 and the British Admiralty removed preserved rabbit from its list of service provisions in 1922.[40] Modern authors have condemned the quality of the preserved rabbit given the rudimentary production methods used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the contents of a tin produced in Mount Gambier in 1910 was consumed by boarders and guests at the town's Federal Hotel in 1944 and "all were loud in praise of the quality of the meat."[41]

The Skin Trade

During the 1890s Victoria exported between 6 million and 10.5 million skins a year (skins from western NSW were "imported" through Echuca and "exported" through Melbourne) and Tasmania exported between 3 and 4 million skins a year over the decade, while in 1894 South Australia exported 835,086 skins.[42] Local sales commenced in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide and prices ranged between 9d to 18d a dozen skins or 1.5d to 10.75d a pound. [43] The skins were sourced from a wide area of the south east. In 1891, at Terowie, a settlement 220 miles north of Adelaide, one settler accumulated 25,000 skins during the year and sold them for approximately ⬚78.[44] During January and February 1893, Mr C.J. Miller, the managing director of the Riverina Skin and Hide Purchasing Company Limited at Hay, in south-western NSW, spent ⬚601 15s 0d purchasing 288,604 rabbit skins at 6d a pound. Other buyers from Sydney, Melbourne and overseas were also in Hay "competing for the various large parcels very keenly," and purchased a further 300,000 rabbit skins. At this time 200,000 skins were purchased in Whitton. [45] Close to 150,000 skins were purchased at Warrnambool, in western Victoria, during 1893 at 18d a dozen and by 1895 the trade was worth ⬚5,000 a year.[46] The Harrow correspondent for*The Horsham Times*, reported in May 1899 that, "rabbit trapping is the chief industry in our district at present. Trappers are at work on all the stations, and seem to be making very good wages … They are trapping chiefly for skins, which are bringing high prices." [47]

The trade in rabbit skins grew rapidly in the 20 century. Figures provided by Dunn show that 411,867,000 pounds of skins (approximately four billion skins) were exported between 1904 and 1947. After 1905 just over 67 per cent (278,355,000 pounds) of the skins went to America, while Great Britain accounted for most of the remainder. Each year the trade accounted for between 10 and 28 per cent of total exports to America. Among other uses, American companies treated the skins with various processes and chemicals and made them resemble more expensive furs and exported the finished product. Large quantities of fake furs and fur coats were imported into Australia and sold at exorbitant prices to the unsuspecting and naïve, many of whom were wealthy members of the local elites. Local hat and furrier manufacturers took between 20-25 per cent of all skins each year, and for the period 1904-47 they purchased around 1 billion skins. Offerings at the fortnightly Sydney auctions regularly exceeded 100 tons of skins. Prices fluctuated wildly from lows of 1.5d a pound to highs during 1918-20, 1926-29, 1935-39 and 1941-49 of between 120d to 249d a pound (in 1946 rabbit skins made a ⬚ a pound, six years before wool did the same thing). [48]

Skin buyers made big money. Local store owners in Victoria started buying large quantities of rabbit skins in the 1870s and made excellent profits, which prompted a number of shire councils in the colony to enter the trade in the early 1880s. The Bacchus Marsh Shire Council, for example, started buying in 1882 but lost over ⬚130 in the first year, which convinced the majority of councillors to accept an offer from Tait, Smith and Company of Melbourne to take over the local trade[49] Storekeepers in NSW followed the lead of their Victorian counterparts in the twentieth century. After taking over the family store in Bungendore in 1902, Albert Daniels spent ⬚8,000 buying over one million skins over the next four years. Daniels made substantial profits from these purchases, which enabled him to buy larger premises in Bungendore and to make other investments. He continued to buy skins and trade in Bungendore until, as a wealthy man, he and his family relocated to Sydney in October 1913. During 1906 Daniels' counterpart at Bimbi, a small town located near Young, paid out "over ⬚70 [on one day and] is in the habit of paying out large sums for rabbit skins almost daily," while Mr J. Morgan, the

storekeeper in Boomey, a small town located to the north-east of Molong, started "buying rabbit skins on a large scale, and the trade is opening up."[50] Mr H.L. Tebbutt, a "prosperous Boggabri storekeeper" who still worked in his shop in his late eighties, told Eric Rolls in the mid-1960s how the profits from buying rabbit skins had enabled him to purchase his shop.[51]

At Wagga Wagga, Edward Collins established a skin merchant business in the town in 1903 and he regularly travelled by train between Wagga Wagga and Goulburn buying rabbit skins at every railway station along the way. Over a four month period in 1904 he spent ⬛5,800 to purchase over 90 tons of skins (approximately 1.3 million skins). Collins or an employee repeated these trips each year until he opened branch offices at Murrumburrah and Yass, and he continued to trade in rabbit skins up until his death on 8 April 1936. It made him a wealthy man and an influential member of the Wagga Wagga community.[52] Collins's counterparts in Wellington and Dubbo in mid-western NSW paid out over ⬛500 a week for rabbit skins during 1905.[53]

Collins and his skin buying compatriots either sold or consigned the skins for sale to the pastoral and stock and station companies. Dalgety and Company Limited, The Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company Limited, The Co-operative Wool and Produce Company Limited, The New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company Limited, John Bridge and Company Limited, Younghusband, Row and Company, The Australian Estates and Mortgage and Agency Company, Harrison, Jones and Devlin Limited, J.C. Young and Company, McBurney, Wallis and Company, F.L. Barker and Company, the Pastoral Finance Association Limited and James Fay, McDonald and Company Limited were all heavily involved in the trade. The company with the heaviest involvement, however, was Winchcombe, Carson and Company, whose Sydney office placed letters in the farming and country newspapers on how to prepare rabbit skins and regularly sold around 1,000 tons a year.[54]

Carcase Export

By far the greatest impetus to the commercialisation of the rabbit was the export trade in frozen carcases. The export trade in frozen beef and mutton from Australasia to England commenced in the early 1880s.[55] Rabbits were not part of this trade, despite the English having eaten rabbit meat for centuries. Joan Druett claimed in her 1983 study of introduced pests in New Zealand that "rabbit stew is so well founded in English recipe books that it could be rated a national dish." To satisfy this national craving Britain had imported up to 2 million rabbits a year from Ostend in Belgium from the 1830s and each year during the 1880s and 1890s imports of rabbit meat cost the nation between ▯300,000 and ▯400,000.[56]

The Fresh Food and Ice Company in Sydney started exporting rabbits and hares to England in 1891. The initial shipment was small but the trade had grown to 7,000 rabbits and 10,000 hares in 1892. In this year the company received an order for 1 million rabbits but could not fill it as it was unable to obtain sufficient rabbits. The bulk of the rabbits were found in western NSW and most trappers worked for skins due to uncertainties of transporting carcases long distances over the rail network. Inland freezing works, at locations like Narrandera, only commenced freezing rabbits in 1895.[57] A Mr F. Newby, from Sydney, of whom little is known, exported 7,200 frozen rabbits to Messrs Chate and Harris, produce merchants in London, in mid-1894. They arrived in "good condition" and were "sold privately."[58]

Further private consignments were exported from NSW and Victoria and sold well in London. The success of these initiatives and the fact that state financed destruction was an expensive failure, prompted the governments of NSW and Victoria to support a number of trial shipments of frozen rabbit and hare carcases to England in 1894. The shipments consisted of 5,000 rabbits frozen in crates from NSW and over 20 tons of rabbits and hares hung, frozen in boxes from Victoria. The Victorian rabbits were larger by a pound a pair and presented better when unpacked; the hanging maintained their shape while the freezing in crates resulted in the NSW rabbits emerging "in all kinds of shapes". The Victorian rabbits sold for 1s each while the NSW shipment made 9d each; a profit of 4.5d

and 1.5d respectively a rabbit.[59]

The success of the trials, knowledge that the British market for rabbit meat was substantial, positive advice from the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency about the future prospects of the trade and the need to generate employment and raise revenue to reduce government debt, the result of financial calamities during the previous three years of depression, convinced George Turner's government in Victoria to enter the trade through its Agricultural Department. The Victorian trade grew quickly. The Agricultural Department provided at minimum charges workers and facilities for grading, inspection, freezing and storage, and private firms, with contracts with British counterparts, purchased the rabbits from the trappers who had consigned them to Melbourne and exported them. By 1895, as more firms entered the trade and competition for rabbits became fierce, buyers were placed at country railway stations. Exports grew from 178,834 rabbits and hares in the first year to 5,678,224 in 1900 (these figures also include exports to NSW and Western Australia).[60]

NSW did not follow Victoria's lead. A combination of a lack of inland freezer works, problems with the railroad network, and opposition from farming and grazing interests stymied attempts to start an export trade. However, opponents of the trade were fighting a losing battle. State financed destruction of rabbits continued to be costly. The Stock and Pasture Boards in NSW in 1896 spent ⏷5,800 buying rabbit scalps, while Victoria, who had encouraged exports, was making "about ⏷200,000 a year" from the trade. Delegates from the English Co-operative Societies visited Sydney in August 1896 and at receptions hosted by the Premier, George Reid, and the Governor, Viscount Hampton, and in meetings with the press, stated they could take all the rabbits and hares the colony could export. In 1897 the colony was in the third year of drought. Solutions were needed to lessen the environmental and economic damage wrought by the drought. The NSW Board of Exports decided that export of rabbits should commence, and James Stephenson, the Board's secretary, conducted a tour of inland towns and spoke in favour of exporting. The Minister of Agriculture, Mr Sydney Smith, "determined that the colony

shall no longer lie under the stigma of neglecting to turn the rabbit and hare pest to useful account … completed arrangements for inaugurating an export trade in these animals with London." The first shipment of five tons of hares left Sydney on 30 May 1897.[61]

Government sponsored exports of rabbits and hares proceeded slowly over the next three years. Despite Stephenson claiming during his country tour that half a million rabbits and hares a year were expected the Board of Exports exported only 250,000 over this period, a consequence of the Federation Drought and increased local demand. The majority were hares that were sourced from around Cooma, Bathurst, Goulburn and Bungendore, areas close to Sydney, while the rabbits came from Condobolin, Junee and "down the Hay [railway] line" in the west of the colony. The Board of Exports followed the example of the Victorian Department of Agriculture by providing to private exporters at minimal cost facilities and staff to receive, grade, pack and freeze the produce. Initially the trappers forwarded the rabbits by train to the exporters in Sydney, but buyers were located in rural centres from 1897. Limited freezer space and problems with the railways restricted exports until the early twentieth century. The rate of rejection, for example, was between 15 and 50 per cent due to slow trains or poor handling on the trains or by the trappers (rejects that were still fit for human consumption were sold in Sydney). [62] In 1900, one Sydney firm received an order for 10,000 crates of rabbits (240,000 head) which was difficult to fill as freezer space was limited in Sydney. Privately owned companies erected freezer works around the state (at between ⬚3,000 to ⬚6,000 each) from 1902 or leased established ice works or dairy co-operative cool rooms in rural towns and froze the rabbits before railing them to depots in Sydney and Newcastle, or directly to the ship. This reduced the number of rejects as the rabbits were graded by government approved graders and frozen shortly after being trapped, ensured trappers were paid in cash immediately they handed over the rabbits and allowed trapping to be carried on for longer periods each year. The state railway started running special rabbit trains three days a week from 1902 and up to 50,000 rabbits arrived at Darling Harbour by train every day, the majority from stations in small towns and hamlets

in the south west of the state. The advances in freezing and transport pushed exports from 570,736 rabbits in 1901 to 11,877,036 in 1906.[63]

Carcase exports remained strong during the twentieth century. A total of 522,134,000 carcases were exported from 1904 to 1947. NSW was the largest exporter of rabbits with Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania providing smaller totals. Exports remained high during World War I, despite a shortage of shipping, the Great Depression and in the late 1940s. The lack of shipping during World War II stopped exports, but the loss of this market was offset by the rapid growth in local consumption.[64] Exports slowed after the release of the myxomatosis virus by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in 1951. The spread of the mosquito borne virus was helped along by diligent rabbit inspectors, aided and abetted by their employers, the Pastures Protection Boards, who inoculated rabbits with the virus and by farmers, who had read articles about how to spread the virus in farming newspapers, deliberately mixing infected rabbits with healthy ones. By mid-1953 it was estimated that four-fifths of all rabbits in south-east Australia had died. [65] The only landholders not rejoicing about the release of the virus where those in far western NSW who had been rabbit farming on land unsuitable for sheep and cattle grazing for at least two decades and who, in the 1940s, earned ⌧3,000 to ⌧4,000 a year from rabbit skins.[66] Townships where the rabbit industry was the major industry continued to depend on the rabbits until the virus wiped them out in the surrounding countryside. Weethalle, a small town located due west of West Wyalong in western NSW, and Nyngan, for example, were still heavily dependent on the rabbit industry for their economic survival during 1952. After 1952, exporters sourced their rabbits from central Australia, an area too dry for the virus-carrying mosquito, and continued to export until the early 1970s[67]

Local Consumption

Increased consumption of rabbit meat by Australians provided a stable market for rabbit carcases. Increased demand was not just from the larger urban areas, it included rural areas as well, and it was not just from the

poorer classes, it included rich and poor alike. In 1896 each person in Australasia (the six colonies and New Zealand) consumed on average 256 pounds of beef, mutton and pork a year, the highest by a factor of two of any country in the world at that time.[68] The consumption of rabbit meat did not feature in these calculations, but rabbits too were being consumed in large numbers.

Victorians were the largest consumers. The Melbourne Fish Market wholesaled around a million rabbits a year during 1880-1900, with a major spike in numbers to around 5 million rabbits a year in the early to mid-1890s. Other markets in Melbourne, and in Geelong and Ballarat, also wholesaled rabbits. By the end of the decade Melbournians were consuming over 10,000 rabbits a day.[69] Rural towns and hamlets in the colony were usually supplied by local trappers. In Castlemaine in 1894, the Mount Alexander Common Trust hired Mr H.R. McNiece to clear the commons of rabbits, and paid him a subsidy of ⊠20 and allowed him sell the trapped rabbits. In six months McNiece and his assistants had dispatched approximately 30,000 rabbits to markets in Melbourne as well as supplying all demand in the Castlemaine area. [70]

Although NSW was overrun by rabbits, the colony prior to 1894 imported rabbit carcases from Victoria and Tasmania for consumption in Sydney. [71] Problems with not knowing if the rabbit from the interior of the colony had been poisoned and the inability of the colony's rail network to transport rabbit carcases from the western areas without the carcases putrefying during the journey prompted the imports. In February 1890, Robert Hudson shipped 50 frozen mutton carcases in insulated rail trucks from Narrandera to Sydney and they arrived in "excellent condition", despite a 30-hour journey. This experiment showed that rabbit carcases could be carried long distances by rail, which eventually opened up the rabbit infested country to the city market.*The Australasian* reported that on 28 April 1894 "over 6,500 rabbits left from the stations on the Hay line and Narrandera per train … for Sydney" and further shipments followed in 1895.[72] By 1895 Sydneysiders were reported to be consuming 20,000 rabbits a week, and by the end of the decade the figure had grown

to 30,000 rabbits a week.[73] By the late 1890s rabbits were being sourced from all areas of the colony that was serviced by rail; upwards of 50,000 rabbits and hares a month were dispatched to Sydney from railway stations around Bathurst from 1897 to 1900[74] When demand outstripped supply as it did during 1899 in the depths of the Federation Drought, frozen rabbits were imported from Victoria; Joseph Cook, the Minister for Mines and Agriculture, reported in June that "considerable numbers … [arrived] from Melbourne to meet the Sydney requirements."[75]

There are no figures for rates of consumption in rural NSW in the late nineteenth century. Reports in regional newspapers indicate that rabbits and hares were being sold locally from the early 1890s.[76] The following reports from 1902, at the end of the Federation Drought, support the claim that rural people also consumed large quantities of rabbit meat. On 4 September 1902, the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* reported:

By far the greatest bulk of the rabbits trapped are sent to Sydney, but in addition to these, many hundreds are consumed locally. The butchers' meat is so scarce and dear that many householders are glad to procure the rabbit for food. As proof of this we might mention that a few days ago a dealer with 40 or 50 pairs was making his way to Sofala with the object of disposing of them. [When he] arrived at Wattle Flat [a small mining town north of Bathurst] the people became aware of what the man was offering for sale, and before he passed through that township his stock was exhausted. The man will doubtless be tempted to take another consignment at the earliest opportunity.[77]

This occurred daily in nearly every town in rural NSW. If country people could not find a trapper they increasingly bought rabbit from the town butcher but the price was a lot higher; in Tumut in August 1902 trappers

were getting 5d for a pair of rabbits, while local butchers retailed the same rabbits for 12d a pair and couldn't meet local demand.[78]

Rates of consumption remained high during the first half of the twentieth century. Sydneysiders consumed between 2 million to 6 million rabbits a year between 1910 and 1950, and up to 9 million were consumed in the state each year[79] The well-to-do also ate their fair share of rabbit, which belies the claim that rabbit was only fit for the poor. A Sydney rabbit-o was quoted in the *Evening News* (Sydney) in February 1914 as claiming that:

Potts Point likes its little bit of rabbit pie as much as Woolloomooloo, only they're too modest to own up to it … This thing [his barrow] ain't no cop for toffs. It's too loud for her ladyship. Yer wants a basket with the rabbits tucked out of sight underneath a clean white cloth so as not to give the show away. Then you sneak up to the kitchen door and do a deal with me lady on the QT.[80]

The Adelaide fish and game market sold around 150,000 rabbits a year from 1900 to 1914, while the Melbourne fish market continued to wholesale up to a million rabbits a year up until the mid-1920s. Sales spiked at the fish market between 1924 and 1930 to between two million and four million rabbits a year, possibly a consequence of the large industrial disputes in the shipping and timber industries. Numbers fell back to just under two million a year through the worst of the Great Depression, which also raises doubts about the argument that it was only the poor consuming rabbits.[81] Residents of Brisbane and Adelaide consumed between 10,000 and 20,000 rabbits a week during the depression. [82]

The rate of consumption rose across the country during the late 1930s. The 27,000 residents in Launceston consumed between 80,000 and 100,000 rabbits each financial year, nearly double the figure achieved in 1928-29.

Demand was so strong in Sydney in October 1936 that local authorities started "importing" an unknown number of carcases from Melbourne. During this year one large Sydney firm spent ⬚50,000 buying rabbits in rural NSW to sell through 500 city and suburban shops. "Last spring," the firm,

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put away 20,000 pairs for the winter, and soon these in addition to the normal winter supplies, were consumed. It sells close on 1,500,000 rabbits to shops in the metropolitan area every year, and has 52 chilling depots in the country, all of which buy rabbits from trappers … Demand for rabbits as a food in the city has increased so tremendously in the last 12 months that export figures have fallen as a result. The local price is so good it would be unprofitable for dealers to send the rabbits overseas.[83]

Rabbit meat was also scarce in country districts. The*Wellington Times* reported in September 1938 that "many people enjoyed eating a rabbit just as much as poultry. They could be had for the mere asking at one time, but now they cannot be bought."[84] The Brisbane *Worker* claimed that NSW no longer had a rabbit problem. "The situation has been reversed; and, instead of 'the rabbits eating the settlers out', the danger now to be feared in NSW … is that the humans will eat the rabbits out and then have to face a severer stage of starvation."[85] Adelaide, too, was dealing with a severe shortage of rabbits in butcher shops and for street hawkers.*The Mail* (Adelaide) reported that "more rabbits are being eaten now than ever before. Many people who had not previously eaten rabbits had them on their tables, and acquired a taste for rabbit, which has been retained."[86]

Rates of consumption spiked during World War II. The cessation of exports resulted in increased local supplies of rabbit meat while supplies of beef, mutton and lamb were rationed. Dunn estimates that Australians

consumed 27 million rabbits a year during the 1940s and figures published in *The Official Year Book of New South Wales*, which showed that consumption of rabbit meat "per head per annum" increased from 9.7 pounds in 1938-39 to 16.1 pounds in 1948, support this claim. [87]

Following the release of the myxomatosis virus retailed rabbits could not be purchased anywhere in Australia for under 4s a pair, which priced them out of most household budgets.[88] Chicken replaced rabbit on household tables from 1960 onwards. Andrea Insch and Bradley Bowden estimate that during the last third of the twentieth century "chicken meat consumption per person rose from 4.4 to 32.9 kilograms, rivalling beef in totals of consumption."[89]

The Trappers

The majority of trappers were from the ranks of the casual labour force that lived and worked in rural areas. These workers usually found work on farms as additional labour during harvest, ploughing and shearing times at the beginning and end of each year. The winter months were normally a time of deprivation with little money and little or no work. Rabbiting also attracted building and metal industry tradesmen who were in secure employment, urban workers employed on low wages, shearers, policemen, miners, clerks, boot makers, blacksmiths, storekeepers, publicans, bank managers, urban professionals, seamen, undertakers, newspaper editors, railway workers, rabbit inspectors, printers and a former cabinet secretary. These men believed they would lead easier lives rabbiting and they could make more money than following their normal occupations. Whole families rabbited as a unit, which impacted on the children's attendance at school, and regularly earned up to ⏥10 a week.[90]

Continual waves of new workers entered the industry, with contemporaries likening each influx to the 1850s gold rush. In NSW in 1906:

there was a 'rush' something like that caused by a new

discovery of gold. Quite a remarkable state of things is revealed by the report of the Labour Bureau. 'Practically all the unemployed in the country districts turned to rabbiting,' the report says. One of the country school inspectors reported: 'At the present juncture it is a difficult task to get children to do any home lessons [because they are rabbiting half the night]' … In some parts of the state a wood famine existed, because carters would not waste their time in getting wood when they can earn such huge profits rabbit trapping … In the Forbes district men could not be obtained for ploughing, fencing or wood-carting. They were all rabbiting.[91]

In mid-1906, the *Sunday Times* (Sydney) reported that it has been "inundated with inquiries from city labouring men, clerks and others for information as to how, when, and where to go trapping." On 3 June 1906 the paper published an interview with an employee of Curtis and Curtis, one of the bigger exporters of rabbits in NSW, who highlighted how trappers working around Wellington, Molong, Forbes, Gundagai and Crookwell were making ⏣3 to ⏣4 a week clear of all expenses, advised how men could enter the industry and offered the company's help to get men started. Each day the following week 100 to 150 men, mostly lowly paid workers employed in Sydney, called in at the company's offices at Darling Harbour hoping to take advantage of the offer, and after placing 60 men the company was forced to withdraw its offer. Hundreds of men also rushed the offices of the other six rabbit exporters in Sydney.[92] Fifteen years later after prices for rabbit skins made 12s a pound thousands of trappers "flocked" to rural areas "as though it was gold rush". The same occurred in the late 1920s, the late 1930s and the 1940s when the prices for skins or carcases reached new highs. In 1941 when trappers were easily earning ⏣40 a week, "the little town of Adaminaby, in the southern highlands, [became] rich overnight, and scenes like those of the gold rush days are being enacted on the main street. Rabbits, not gold, are the source

of Adaminaby's new-found wealth". [93] Five years later, when skin prices made £1 a pound rural areas were overrun with trappers and the rabbit inspector employed by the Tamworth Pastures Protection Board claimed "it is a wild rush similar to that for gold many years ago".[94]

The rabbit industry absorbed so many workers that there were severe labour shortages across all sectors and even when wages were increased there were few takers. Labour was unprocurable for land clearing, general farm work, wood carting, potato digging, road repair work, rock splitting (used in road construction) and harvest work; and there were shortages of rouseabouts, shearers, shed hands, chaff cutters, ploughmen, fencers and council workers. Several rabbit inspectors resigned and went rabbiting, while in 1919 the Tamworth Pastures Protection Board could not hire men to destroy rabbits because all available men were rabbiting for themselves and earning between £10 and £30 a week. [95] Labour shortages pushed up wages for many other occupations in the bush and made all work far more expensive. Rates for land clearing rose from between 10s and 20s an acre in 1907 to between 60s and 140s an acre in 1927. Rates demanded for fencing doubled in the same period. [96] In 1907, Dr John Langley, the Anglican Bishop of Bendigo, suggested that unless districts in the diocese increased stipends paid to local clergy from £100 a year to £300 a year, they should be allowed to go rabbiting, where they could earn £5 a week.[97] During 1917 wheat lumpers in NSW and Victoria told employers that they would go rabbiting unless daily rates were doubled to 20s a day, and many walked off jobs to start rabbiting even after the higher rates were paid.[98] Local councils could not attract tenders for road work even after increasing contract rates by 25 per cent and private building contactors could not hire tradesmen even after offering to double the award rate.[99]

Rabbiting became the economic mainstay in many rural towns. Geurie, a hamlet located south-east of Dubbo had "50 to 60 tenements" in 1906 and "over 150 trappers", while over 15 per cent of Tumut's residents were trapper in this year.[100] When Billy Hughes, the federal ALP politician, visited Bathurst in early 1906 he was told by the largest shopkeeper in the town

that 500 people, just over five per cent of residents, were earning their living by trapping and the town would be in a "very bad way" without the income from the trappers[101] The following list, while being far from exhaustive and only relating to small areas of NSW and Victoria, shows that at times during the twentieth century there were 650 trappers working around Murrumburrah, 300 to 400 at Young, 550 at Cowra, 500 at Bathurst, 250 each at Tumut and Galong, 120 at Narrabri, "over 500" on the Harden-Blayney railway line, 100 at Corowa, 80 to 100 at each of Dubbo, Queanbeyan, Bungendore and Yarrawonga, "hundreds" at Carcoar and "about 200" trappers around each of Forbes and Benalla. Smaller towns had up to 80 trappers, a high proportion of the local population[102] William Schey, Director of the NSW Labor Bureau, estimated in late 1906 that 16,000 people in the state were engaged in rabbit trapping and the industry was worth £1 million a year. Victoria, at this time, had 8,000 trappers and 24,000 people who were "dependent upon rabbits for their livelihood". [103]

High earnings were the prime attraction. While rabbiting was not for everyone, inexperienced trappers quickly earned more in a week than tradesmen would, and the more experienced regularly exceeded tradesmen's rates by multiples of between four and ten times. With regard the preserving sector in the nineteenth century, Farrer claims that at the Colac factory during its heyday in the 1870s, "nearly 200 men, including trappers and carters, had been employed, and about £400 per week paid out". Trappers supplying the factory averaged between £3 and £5 a week.[104] The Camperdown factory also paid out around £300 week in wages and payments to trappers. One carter to the Camperdown factory (h carted rabbits for trappers and charged them half-a-penny a pair) claimed in 1883 that he was making £9 a week (at half-a-penny a pair this amounted to 8,640 rabbits a week), and he was quoted as stating in an interview with the local correspondent of *The Argus*:

that the introduction of rabbits into the colony is the finest thing that ever took place in the interests of the working man.

Upon my venturing to suggest that the raising of wool and mutton would be more profitable where rabbits abound, and that it would add more to the wealth of the country if the grass consumed by the rabbits were used by sheep, the [carter] gravely shook his head and declared that he could not see it, as he knew well enough that he could not make ⛝9 a week off the same ground if the owner ran sheep on it.[105]

During 1894-1895, the Euroa factory paid out ⛝500 a week in wages to 70 employees and for rabbits supplied by over 200 trappers (at 3d a pair), the Hamilton factory in 1896 paid over 300 trappers ⛝12,177 for 1,670,000 rabbits at 3.5d a pair, the Mount Gambier Rabbit and Meat Preserving Company paid out ⛝11,175 to trappers and ⛝5,718 in wages between mid-1896 and October 1899, and the Port Fairy Preserving Company paid 155 trappers and 60 employees over ⛝15,000 a year during the late 1890s. Trappers supplying these factories throughout the 1890s, especially during the worst of the depression at the beginning of the decade, earned between ⛝3 and ⛝9 a week, up to three times the wages earned by tradesmen. The Millicent correspondent for the Adelaide based *Chronicle*, reported in April 1899 that the rabbit factory was working "day and night" and "some families are living solely on the results of their rabbit trapping operations".[106]

In the early twentieth century earnings by trappers in the carcase and skin trades exceeded these figures. During the first decade, when tradesmen in the cities were earning between 9s and 11s a day, labourers 7s a day and farm labourers 16s a week with board and lodging, the majority of rabbiters earned between ⛝2 and ⛝10 (40s to 200s) a week, with a minority earning ⛝20 (400s) a week or more.[107] Figures taken from account books of rabbit purchasers in Young in April 1904 support these conclusions:

One man in 9 days earned ⛝6/1/6

One man in 19 days earned ⊠6/5/8

One man in 6 days earned ⊠2/8/6

One man in 14 days earned ⊠6/11/6

Three men for 1 week earned ⊠10/13/3

Three men in 4 days earned ⊠6/10/11

Three men for 1 week earned ⊠9/18/0

Three men for 4 days earned ⊠7/11/9

One man for 6 days earned ⊠3/17/5 (this man had not trapped till January in this year, and is now averaging 10s per day)

Three men for 8 days earned ⊠13/15/3

All these accounts are clear, there is nothing to deduct for cartage, as for every case they do their own carting.[108]

Further examples include a trapper in the Bathurst area who earned ⊠29 over one week trapping for carcases in 1903; a trapper from Gilgandra who trapped 4,000 rabbits in a tank trap (a wire enclosed dam or waterhole with non-return funnels where thirsty rabbits could enter but not get out again) over four nights in January 1905 and earned just over ⊠41 for his efforts; a Dubbo trapper in early 1905 who trapped 800 rabbits in one week using conventional spring traps and earned ⊠8 6s 8d; a father and son from the Young district working a tank trap in 1906 who earned ⊠10 pounds in four nights; one man in the Yass district who averaged ⊠5 a week from 1902 to 1907, usually earning ⊠1 a night over five nights; another trapper from Yass who trapped 1,800 rabbits over two days in 1906 and was paid ⊠21 5s 0d for the haul at 5.5d a pair (he either used a tank trap or drove the rabbits into a wire enclosure); "the Callaghan brothers

[from Yass, in 1906, who were] forwarding an average of 2000 pairs weekly [£45 16s 8d a week at 5.5d a pair], and three brothers named Davis have made as much as £25 a week"; a trapper from Queanbeyan who delivered 798 pair of rabbits over one week in May 1907 and earned £18 5s 9d; and a Molong trapper who trapped 728.5 pairs of rabbits in six days in June 1908 and earned £15 14s 3d. During April to September 1910, 200 trappers at Forbes were earning £1,600 a week, an average of £8 each, a figure that most experienced trappers who used steel traps earned at this time.[109]

The trappers knew they were on a good wicket. While a rabbiter's life was an isolated one and rabbiting was hard work generally undertaken in unpleasant conditions and not for the faint hearted or the squeamish, the majority of trappers considered it easier than other rural work. They chose when to work and how long to work each week. It was common for many to work a four or five day week at a time when nearly all other workers worked a six day week. It was possible to trap 12 months a year, which enabled rabbiters to remain "almost permanently in their own towns".[110] A former shearer who had been rabbiting for six weeks and clearing £4 a week claimed in May 1906 that he would never return to shearing: "You can't go wrong for rabbits: they're everywhere. And they're as good as cash all the time".[111] A representative from Curtis and Curtis claimed in 1906 that two men had been recommended to them and the company outfitted the men and sent them up country. Within two years the men had repaid all their debts and purchased wagons, tents and other equipment. As well, "they had kept their wives and families in comfort. They are prosperous, and can afford frequent holidays in town and pleasures and comforts not generally within the reach of the working man". [112] A rabbiter at Narrabri, a former labourer for over 30 years and one who never had surplus cash, claimed in February 1909:

This [rabbiting] is the best ticket I ever struck. I consider I have the life of a gentleman. I make from £4 to £5 [a week] all the year round. I am never short of a 'tenner,' and I went down to

the Burns-Squires and Burns-Johnson fights [staged in Sydney on 24 August 1908 and 26 December 1908]. The rabbits paid for these trips. Talk about exterminating them! I say preserve them – they are a Godsend to many a poor man and his family.[113]

Payments remained high during economic downturns during the early 1920s and the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Towns with a freezer works or two continued to prosper through these bad times. During a 21-month period beginning in June 1932, the freezer works in Texas in southern Queensland exported over 4,000 tons of frozen carcases (approximately 3 million rabbits) and supplied the area around Texas and most of the rabbits consumed in Brisbane each week. The works paid between 300 and 400 trappers £37,500 for these rabbits at 6d a pair. Similar figures were achieved by the Yelarbon works, located midway between Inglewood and Goondiwindi in Queensland. Over 150 trappers supplied the works with 5,000 rabbits a day, at 5d a pair, and total daily earnings amounted to £52 1s 8d.[114] Balranald and Mildura, located in south-western NSW, both had two freezers operating throughout the depression years and combined they spent approximately £20,000 a year to purchase over 2 million rabbits. The financial benefits were felt in the two townships and throughout their hinterlands; "Some 37 rabbiters working along the north edge of the Millewa are sending about 9,000 pairs a week to the Mildura factory [and making £9 a week each]".[115] Rainbow, located in the north-western Victorian Mallee region, had a population of 916 of whom 75 were trappers supplying the local chilling rooms. The trappers supplied over 4,000 pairs a week and earned between £4 and £8 a week each, significant earnings in a small town. [116] Identical economic benefits from freezing works or chilling rooms can be listed for many other towns. Monthly payments at Ararat (Vic) amounted to £1,000; Tottenham (NSW) £1,200; Merriwa (NSW) £750; Horsham (Vic.), £1,200; Tamworth (NSW); £2,000, Ouyen (Vic.), £1,000; Swan Hill (Vic.), £500; Gulgong (NSW) £800; and Renmark (SA), £500. [117]

Earnings reached astronomical levels during the 1940s and early 1950s. Increased prices for both carcases and skins pushed average earnings to between £20 and £50 a week, with some trappers earning up to £100 a week. Carcases were worth between 20d and 28d a pair at most freezer works due to increased demand for meat and a consequence of the high prices for skins. At 20d a pair 50 pairs a night, a moderate catch, returned £4 3s 4d. Prices in Kyneton (Victoria) in 1941 were 22d a pair, which caused townspeople and farmers to forsake "their regular callings in order to trap rabbits".[118] In what was a common experience around Nyngan in the late 1940s and early 1950s, three trappers in early January 1949 caught 25,000 rabbits in a tank trap in one week and sold them to the freezer works at Hermidale, located on the Barrier Highway to the east of Nyngan, for £1,197 18s 4d at 23d a pair.[119] Skins also brought high returns. During 1941, 80 trappers at Adaminaby (NSW) easily earned £40 a week each and children who rabbited on weekends made £1 without much effort. Two years later a trapper from Inverell sold skins worth £93, the result of 11 nights trapping, and three teenagers from Bukkulla, near Inverell, made £142 from four weeks of trapping[120] In 1944, trappers in the Singleton district consistently earned an average of £7 a night or around £30 a week.[121] One of the best earners in Australia was 32-year-old Frank Hogno. Hogno trapped around Tamworth for five months a year and averaged £100 a week. For the remaining seven months of the year he stayed with his wife and two girls in Kirribilli in Sydney and lived the life of a gentleman. Despite not working for most of each year he had savings of over £5,000 by 1946. He started this routine in 1942 and expected to continue it for as long as he could.[122]

The rabbit industry had a profound effect on the lives of thousands of rural Australians. Over 100 years, trappers were able to earn considerably more money each week than any other manual occupation. The difference in pay rates was measured in multiples of between two and ten times. The major beneficiaries were unskilled and semi-skilled workers who had been part of the reserve army of labour in rural areas when farming was relatively labour intensive and required large numbers of workers at peak times of the year. They were joined by thousands of other workers from a

host of different occupations. Apart from the high earnings rabbiting allowed workers to reside in one location all year and to enjoy the benefits that higher incomes brought, especially holidays, rest, trips to the city, acquiring possessions and bank savings, and meeting the daily necessities of life. Commercialisation of the rabbit commenced in the early nineteenth century and it powered ahead after 1880. The preserving industry and skin trade were dominant in the late nineteenth century. While the skin trade remained dominant until the 1950s, the frozen carcase trade became a major feature from the late 1890s until the 1970s. Increased consumption of rabbit meat by Australians also bolstered the trade. Rabbit meat was consumed by rich and poor alike in cities and towns across Australia. Claims that rabbit meat was only a poor person's food or that rural people didn't eat rabbit meat belie material reality. The industry was the economic mainstay in many rural towns, villages and hamlets. Local businesses became dependent on the trade, which enabled them to carry sheep, wheat and dairy farmers over the frequent bad times, some of which were the result of the competition for feed with the rabbit. Depression, drought and war had little impact on the industry or the earnings enjoyed by the trappers. Like gold the rabbit industry was a depression beater, and for 100 years it was a boon for the working class.

Endnotes

* This paper has been subject to double blind refereeing.

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Bron Larner

28 March 2017 at 11:55 am

Amazing article. Beautifully written.

Gordon

7 August 2017 at 6:48 pm

I use to pick up rabbits in a semi trailer, I would pick up 6,000 pair twice a week. I would go over all of NSW. I worked for Sydney Rabbit Supply at Punchbowl. This was in 1969 and we did not have refridgerated trucks then. The trappers and shooters would bring the rabbits into town where there would be a chilla, they would get 7 cents a pair. I would take the rabbits back to Sydney where they would be skinned. The skins use to be sold to Akubra hats at Kempsey, the meat was sold around Sydney and exported. I left when they moved the business to Inverell NSW in 1970. I think they closed up around 1975

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