

STATE LIBRARY OF N.S.W.
MITCHELL LIBRARY

DSM/
632/
C



David Scott Mitchell.

67. 2

437

THE PROBLEM OF THE FAR WEST,



THE LAND ACT AND THE RABBIT PEST ;

BY

“ T. C. ”

SPECIAL COMMISSIONER FOR THE “DAILY TELEGRAPH” AND “TRIBUNE.”

REPRINTED FROM THE “DAILY TELEGRAPH.”

SYDNEY :

“THE DAILY TELEGRAPH” NEWSPAPER COMPANY, LIMITED.

1887.





THE PROBLEM OF THE FAR WEST.

(By T. C.)

I.—NATURAL FEATURES OF THE COLONY.

UNDER the Land Act of 1884 New South Wales is divided into three sections. In the physical geography of the colony are three prominent and distinct features with which these legislative divisions may be said to roughly coincide. They are the coast districts, the table lands and the great plains. The adaptabilities of these three natural divisions are as different and as distinct as those of any three separate countries on the face of the globe. Previous to 1884, however, our land legislation absolutely ignored this governing condition of settlement, and it consequently followed that the more we legislated the thicker the muddle of our laws became. Nature takes no account of arbitrary lines drawn on a map, and the fact that we enclosed the coast districts, the tablelands and the great plains of New South Wales within the one boundary made not the slightest difference with regard to the totally independent forms of climatic government subsisting in each of these divisions. The supremacy of this government remained, and still remains, undisturbed, while the measure of wisdom in our land legislation is the accuracy with which Nature's edicts are interpreted and the fidelity with which they are obeyed.

Inasmuch as that it starts with a full admission of this fact, our present Land Act has at all events the primary element of wisdom in it which previous enactments did not possess. We now recognise that nature has one law for the east of New South Wales and another for the west, and the intention of the Act of 1884 was to pay due respect to these facts by which land occupancy is inexorably conditioned. The division of the colony into at least two if not three areas for separate legislative treatment was obviously the first requisite to obtaining even a rough understanding of the problem which our land legislation involved. Until this was done the question to be solved was not intelligibly stated. The great credit of the Land Act of 1884 is that it removed that initial obstacle. It fairly grasped the question to be solved, a thing which was not done before; but to say that it has succeeded in solving it is another matter.

In the series of articles to which this is the introduction it will incidentally come in my

way to show that the Act contains, at least as far as the Western Division is concerned, some very grievous mistakes. There is a great national question looming up in the west of this colony which few of our public men, and perhaps fewer still of our private citizens, seem yet to have discerned. I do not say that it is altogether the question of framing an equitable system of land tenure. Land tenure is a factor in the question, and the most important one, but it is not the whole question.

Our Far Western problem is first to bring this portion of the colony under a fair system of productive occupation, and secondly to secure the fruits of this occupation to New South Wales. The present state of things prevailing throughout the greater portion of the vast territory beyond the western boundary line of the Central Division cannot possibly be continued much longer. It is only owing to the public ignorance that it is tolerated now. When once the country realises the true position of affairs in these regions, a change will be demanded in a tone of voice which representative Governments never dare to disregard. It is not too much to say that New South Wales would be in a far better position to-day if the major part of her Far Western territory had never belonged to her. At present she is holding it at a price which is absolutely ruinous, and unless this is put a stop to by some means which I have not yet seen made public, the ultimate result will be most serious to contemplate. It is already eating into the consolidated revenue at a rate which the general taxpayer has not the slightest notion of; and if this goes on, it is only a matter of time when it will cost us more to keep our Western Division than the rest of the colony will be able to earn.

I have not the slightest doubt that this will be considered by many of my readers as an extravagant statement—perhaps as the mere wantonness of pessimistic hyperbole. Very probably I would have jumped to the same comfortable conclusion myself had I heard a similar statement made a month or two ago. Since then, however, it has come in my way to make a careful investigation into the conditions of settlement in the Far Western territory, the result of which has convinced me that the case as I have just stated it is one of absolutely de-

monstrable fact. In company with the Ministers for Mines and Justice I have just accomplished an extended journey through the Far West with the view of obtaining information regarding the rabbit question, and testing by personal observation the nature of the ravages which this pest was alleged to be committing. During this tour I have had an opportunity of inquiring into the whole question of western settlement, and testing, in the light of what I saw with my own eyes, the value of the information obtained. The essence of all these facts I now propose to place before the readers of *The Daily Telegraph*, and I will ask them to suspend their judgment as to the gravity of the problem of the Far West until my series of articles on the question is complete.

What I am setting out to prove is this:—That under present conditions almost the whole of our western territory is, instead of being any support to the financial strength of the colony, a ruinous and daily increasing downdrag which, unless matters are speedily altered, will cause a serious state of national embarrassment. This arises from

two causes—the cost of keeping down the rabbits by any means as yet discovered and the comparative uselessness to New South Wales of her Far Western territory under its present system of occupation whether the rabbits are kept down or not. As to the destructiveness of the rabbit pest I shall show that where his gnawing affects New South Wales most is in the Treasury at Sydney, not in the infested sheep runs of the west. I am not going to deny, after what I have seen, that the rabbit is a potent and threatening enemy to pastoral occupation, and that he is even now consuming to an enormous degree public wealth in the shape of wool and mutton-making material. I shall have to show, however, that of a great proportion of the wool and mutton raised from the grass of the Western Division, New South Wales is only the nominal owner. This is where the real knot of the Far Western problem comes in. Making the western territory capable of productive occupation is a fair and laudable object to spend money on, but it should be the money of those who are to reap the fruits of such occupation.

II.—PASTORAL PROGRESS DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROBLEM.

THE problem of the Far West is one of entirely recent growth. Seven years ago saw the dawn of a new pastoral era in the dry country and it is from about that time that the history, of the present question has to be dated. Up to the year 1880, except in specially favored spots, little or no attempt had been made to bring this portion of the colony under any system of permanent occupation. The Act of 1861 cordially invited "the sturdy yeoman" to go out and settle there with the view of cultivating the wilderness, and lest this man of presumed phenomenal enterprise should ever experience the disappointment of not being able to find a desert location when he felt inclined for one, the whole of the western wastes were kept perpetually open in expectation of his advent. While waiting for the "sturdy yeoman" pastoralists were allowed to run stock over as much of the wilderness as they cared for by paying an annual license of £10 per one hundred square miles. If anyone thought the privilege worth more, tenders were received; and the right to occupy these hundred-mile runs from Thursday to Thursday went to the highest bidder. As a rule, however, the minimum of £10 per block was seldom exceeded, and under this nominal rent the country was nominally occupied pending the "sturdy yeoman's" arrival.

While this state of things prevailed there may have been very little progress, but at the same time there was very little risk. If the pace was slow, it had the merit of being sure.

The "sturdy yeoman," wiser in his generation than those who professed to legislate on his behalf, was careful to give the Western Division a wide berth, and if there had been nothing but the possible inroads of settlement to fear, the Thursday to Thursday tenure of the western pastoralist would have been as good as a freehold. The country was for the most part barren, bare and desolate—its whole contour one hideous repellent frown, warning the agricultural pioneer peremptorily off. Waterless creeks here and there gape up at hot, steely-colored skies in piteous appeals for moisture which does not come. Ranks of stunted gums line the edges, keeping close up to the marge or crowding into the middle of the creek's dry bed, waiting mournfully for an occasional drink from the ephemeral streams which at intervals few and far between run over it. None live save those which succeed in crowding close up to the creek's bank. Out on the plain patches of low scrub may or may not appear in sight, the foliage of which is nearer black than green, as if from its continuous struggle against the tortures of an intolerable thirst. Salt bush, blue bush, spinifex and other desert growths, half weed and half scrub, in ordinary seasons make up the rest of the vegetable life of these regions. Sometimes even these fail, and nothing is to be seen but the dismal expanse of brown plain extending on every side to the horizon. The waterless creeks, tired of meandering along their tortuous

tracks of hot sand, plunge into the first dry lignum swamp that they meet and end their mocking courses as they began them. Tracts of country the size of kingdoms will then be without a sign or vestige of water. This was the condition of affairs throughout almost the whole of the Western Division when it was held by squatters at £10 per hundred square miles under the Land Act of 1861.

An unproductive hundred miles, more or less, then was a matter of little or no consequence. A squatter as a rule held several such blocks and did the best he could with them. If the season would admit of his stocking them all he did so; if not, the nominal rent did him no harm. He was under no temptation to overstock for the purpose of making the dry blocks yield a profit over their rent, as practically speaking when the land returned him nothing it cost him nothing.

Between 1870 and 1880, however, the colony experienced a great boom of prosperity. Money became abundant, and the pulses of industrial enterprise were consequently quickened. In the eager search for new fields of activity which this state of things stimulated a large amount of attention was given to the vast and practically unused territory west of the Darling. The runs held at £10 per annum were improved by the sinking of tanks, construction of dams and erection of machinery, which increased their productiveness while the cost of occupancy remained the same as before. There is no doubt that within the limits of ordinary prudence this was sound enterprise, from which the country was entitled to expect substantial and permanent benefit. A western run upon which provision for the artificial conservation of water is made, no matter how small the rainfall may be, is unquestionably capable of carrying more stock than the same country would be in its natural state. At the same time, stock do not live upon water alone. Feed is an equally essential requisite, and it is just where the rainfall is least that water conservation of this kind may be most easily overdone. It is useless going to the expense of providing water for any more stock than there is grass to feed; and the supply of grass is not a question of water storage; it is one of rainfall.

The work of improving these runs, commenced after the splendid seasons of the early seventies, was mostly of an experimental kind. Grass was as abundant then as it is now, and the one thought was to conserve as much water as possible with the view of working the runs up to their highest degree of productiveness. While this was going on, an amendment of the Land Act was passed raising the minimum rents tenfold. The hundred-mile blocks, which were formerly let at £10 each, were in 1880 increased to £100 each.

This made it necessary for the holders of dry country to improve it, as rent had become a tangible consideration and there was no

use paying for runs unless they were made to carry as much stock as would yield a margin of profit over rent and working expenses. The object of the legislation of 1880 was to compel improvement in this way.

This, therefore, brings us to the date at which the new pastoral era began. Squatting in the dry country was now taken up in earnest. Men who held runs held them for the purpose of working them. System was introduced into the business of wool-raising; and although the whole thing was to a great extent experimental, money was sunk without limit. Looking back to that period now a singular fact presents itself. When the rent of the hundred-mile blocks became raised to £100 per annum they were more in demand than when they could have been had at £10. This shows the new ideas that had suddenly come into existence as to the power of capital to develop the dry country. Capital can no doubt do a great deal in that way, but there is, nevertheless, a limit to its capabilities. It can conserve water but it cannot compel rainfall, upon which depends the other stock-raising requisite—feed. Perhaps the plentifulness of grass caused this all-important consideration at that time to be in a large measure overlooked.

The Act of 1880 was a direct challenge to capital to go and exert its powers in the Far West. It was taken up with an alacrity which, looked at in the light of subsequent events, appears simply astonishing. The original pioneers, however—the men best acquainted with the treachery of the then plausible climate—were not, as a rule, smitten by the mania for Far Western sheep stations. They took the tide in their affairs at its flood and sold out while the boom was on. I have often thought that land speculation is an instinct which has received a special and peculiar development in the New South Wales colonist. Comparatively little New South Wales capital went out west at that time, but a great deal came in from there. Intercolonial money replaced it. Backed up chiefly by Victorian and South Australian financial institutions, buyers appeared who offered enormous prices for the goodwill of these runs, and, having purchased them, further advances were obtained on a proportionate scale for making improvements. Meanwhile the sturdy yeoman selector never turned up, but a good thing began to be made by dishonest persons in personating him. These people, finding out that the man who possessed the few and far-between spots suitable for water catchment held the keys of the whole country, began purchasing 40a. blocks under the Act of 1861, and it was imperative that these should be bought off at any cost. Intercolonial capital has done this likewise, and intercolonial capital consequently dominates in more ways than one the greater portion of the western territory of New South Wales.

This was the position of matters in 1884, when the additional factors of bad seasons, rabbits and a new Land Act came into play. These have reduced the occupiers of our Western Division as a rule to the position of mere bailiffs holding possession of the land for the benefit of outside capitalists. After the occupier has battled against drought and rabbits and then handed over to the intercolonial owner or mortgagee his enormous primary lien on the products of the run, it is impossible in the majority of cases

for him to pay the present rent of the land and live himself out of it. We are asked, therefore, to forego the rent and in many instances we are, as I will show, not only foregoing it, but giving the occupier a substantial bonus out of the consolidated revenue in order that the extravagant investments of outside capitalists may be secured. It is not likely that the colony will consent that this should go on much longer. Should it refuse, however, the question is to suggest an alternative. That is the problem of the Far West.

III.—THE RABBIT INVASION.

ABOUT six years ago a pastoral representative, fresh from the wilds, was selected by the Parkes-Robertson Government to move the adoption of their Address-in-reply to the Governor's Speech. This was Mr. Quin, then the newly elected member for Wentworth. The speech which Mr. Quin made on that occasion is a matter of history. It gave the first warning of the approach of an enemy with which the pastoral industry of the Far West has now to prepare for a mortal grapple. Mr. Quin expressed regret that the Ministerial programme as then propounded did not include a bill for the extermination of rabbits. The House laughed at Mr. Quin. And one ironical cackination sounded high above the general titter. It came from the ruck of the Ministerial supporters where sat Mr. Abigail, and it was followed by a suggestion from the same quarter that Mr. Quin should go further and propose a bill to exterminate fleas. In this manner was received the first public announcement that the rabbit had seriously invaded New South Wales.

Quite ignoring this invasion, the Government succeeding the Parkes-Robertson coalition framed its new Land Bill. It was Belshazzar's folly over again. Mr. Quin's writing on the political wall was understood by no one. While the rabbit was like the Mede and the Persian, swarming into the country from both the south and the west and taking possession of it, we went on feeding our imaginations with the dreams of fabulous rents that the pastoral territory could be made to yield us under the new Act. The pastoralists themselves are, more than anybody else, to blame for this. The tremendous prices paid for the good-will of western runs and the money sunk in experimental improvements placed a fictitious value upon the land in the eyes of the public, to which the extravagant estimates of the present Act are mainly to be attributed.

Knowing the wild estimates of rent value that the bill rested upon, the pastoral lessees nevertheless clutched at the measure as eagerly as if it had been a godsend to them. The enormous amounts of money which they had just staked upon the runs caused them to regard fixity of tenure as

the first of all things to be secured. The bill offered them this, and that took precedence of all other considerations. Absurdly increased rents were to be demanded as the price of tenure, but although this was fully understood few protests were raised. "Give us tenure" was the one cry in which all others were swallowed up. The financial institutions behind the lessee would have tenure at any price. Increased rent would not matter to them so long as the man who worked the run had enough left to pay their interest. Whether he had anything remaining for himself as the reward of his own toil was not their look-out. Tenure was the great security for their capital and tenure they went for, regardless for the moment of all other considerations. Well, for half their runs they have got a fixed tenure. They plunged for the stake and have won it; but the prize with the rent stipulations attaching to it is a fatal one.

It is absurd to suppose that a 15 or a 20 years' lease legitimately enhances the value of an ordinary Western Division run to anything like the extent calculated by the Land Act of 1884. As I have previously asserted, if the pastoral lessee in the dry country had nothing but the inroads of genuine settlement to fear, his Thursday to Thursday tenure under the old Act would have been to all intents and purposes as good as a freehold. With protection against the black-mailer and fair consideration for his improvements, he could have afforded to pay as much for the country on a weekly tenure as on any other. In the Eastern and Central Divisions this is not the case, but throughout the whole of the dry country it will hold good. The great blunder of the present Act is that it did not give fixed leases for the whole of this country. All these leases would be practically required for would be to keep off the black-mailer and water thief, or in other words to prevent masked crime. With regard to genuine selections, they would virtually speaking operate neither one way nor the other. In the vicinity of towns some one may honestly take up a homestead lease to run a few horses upon, or if the spot is exceptionally favorable perhaps run a milch cow or two. This is all. These, however, are merely the ex-

ceptions proving the rule that any general system of homestead leasing in the dry country is out of the question.

Dread of the back-mailer and apprehension for the security of the recklessly invested capital caused the pastoral lessees or those financiers whom they represented to tacitly agree to any increase of rent provided they got fixity of tenure. Thus it was that the Government itself unconsciously took up the rôle of black-mailer when passing the present Act. Every penny that it extorts as mere consideration for locking half the runs of the Far West against selection is black-mail. Practically speaking there are no selectors to lock them against.

The squatters accepted the new Act, however, with eagerness and on went the dance. Meanwhile, the warning that Mr. Quin had sounded three years before began to be loudly repeated from other quarters, and eventually the country woke up to the fact that the rabbit invasion was a reality. In 1883 a bill to cope with the nuisance was brought in. On the first of May of the same year it assumed the form of law, and along with their new Land Act the squatters had also presented to them a new Rabbit Act. Both were to a very great extent measures of their own choosing. The Rabbit Act especially was framed almost entirely from recommendations made by direct representatives of the pastoral interest. Instead of being an Act for the destruction of rabbits, however, it has simply turned out to be an Act to enable the squatter and the State to mutually ruin each other. The rabbit thrives under it while the State beggars the squatter, and the squatter retaliates with financial havoc upon the State.

This is the condition of affairs now actually prevailing, and it is this which has now brought the problem of the Far West to a head. The rabbit has now got such a footing in many portions of the Far West that the cost of dislodging him by any method so far tried is found to enormously exceed the value of the land. Take one instance. Just this side of the Darling there is a run of close on a million acres, owned by a Victorian proprietary. From these blocks we expected to get under the present Land Act £3500 a year. The present subsidy paid by the State for rabbit destruction on this run is at the rate of £25,000 a year, while the owners have to pay about double their rent as their share of the cost. What it means is ruin to both parties if persisted in. Despite this expenditure the rabbits are rapidly increasing on the run. Even by paying the occupiers a bonus of over £20,000 a year, which we are doing instead of demanding anything from them in the shape of rent, they are not able to work the run and keep down the rabbits. This is only one case cited for illustration's sake, but before concluding I hope to be able to place before the public the total rents received under the Land Act of 1884 from the infested country and the total amount handed back to the lessees under the Rabbit Act of 1883. When it is remembered that the area of the infested country is rapidly extending and the rabbits upon it are increasing, it will then be seen that I have made no rash statement in saying that if the present state of things goes on it will soon cost us more to keep our Western Division than the rest of the colony is able to earn.

IV.—THE MORTGAGEE AND THE TAXPAYER.

MY previous three articles have been devoted mainly to a swift glance at the history of western settlement from the year 1861 up to the present time. This was necessary in order to fully set forth the case of the western squatters as it now stands. I am appearing here neither for nor against them. Advocacy or any kind whatever is quite foreign to the purpose of these articles which aim only at telling an unvarnished tale. Hitherto where I have found the squatter or the State sinning this has been pointed out in just the same way as where I have found either being sinned against. And to this course I shall adhere right through to the completion of my present task.

The position to which matters have now arrived is a most serious one. It is full of dangers and at the same time full of perplexities. Get out of it we must, and get out of it at once; yet where is the plan for accomplishing this. So far nothing even remotely feasible has been publicly suggested.

At the present rate of going on it is only a question of a very short time when what I have shown to be the case on one run will be the case throughout the whole of our Western territory. Enormous demands are already being made on the taxpayer of New South Wales in order to allow Victoria and South Australia to sheep farm a great portion of our Western country, and under the present system these levies growing, as they must grow every year, will have to be indefinitely continued. Virtually speaking, New South Wales is to receive nothing in return for this money.

We are accustomed to reckon the wool raised in the dry country as part of our national assets, and while the consolidated revenue has had this to show as per contra, our rabbit expenditure could within fair limits be, perhaps, justified on business principles. The export of wool from our dry country, however, is from causes which have already been described, a very misleading gauge as to the value of this territory to New South Wales.

Although the wool goes out of New South Wales, and figures to the full extent of its value amongst the colony's exports, the money which pays for a large proportion of it in the European market does not come in. It does not go to swell the current of our commercial circulation as it should do in order to recoup the general taxpayer for the money he is now obliged to spend on the production of it. The whole profits of the runs go to other colonies, and if from the ravages of the rabbits or other cause there are no profits the general taxpayer in New South Wales is called upon to make good the deficiency.

The interest of the intercolonial money-lenders is a first charge on most of the wool that the dry country produces. We have seen that in many cases the advances made have been on an exorbitant scale, and it is impossible for the occupier, harassed by rabbits, droughts, and an occasional blackmailer (for the present Act does not quite wipe out the latter pest), to pay his interest and pay his rent. Unless the Government comes to his aid and kills the rabbits for him, he can pay neither. The cost of wool production is now rendered so heavy by the various pests of the dry country that the general taxpayer must bear a large and annually increasing proportion of it in order that there may be a sufficient margin to pay the interest of money-lenders who have, in many instances, overloaded the runs on the strength of false estimates as to the value of their goodwill. Where the rabbits have appeared rent is, under these circumstances, impossible; it is the other way about; instead of the squatters being able to pay anything to the State for their runs, the State has to pay heavy sums to the squatters for occupying them. To what purpose are they occupied when the terms are such as these? Rabbits or no rabbits, the rent stipulated for in the Land Act of 1884 could never, as a rule, be paid. With the rabbits, it is the State that has to pay rent to the occupier of the land, while other colonies reap the products of its occupancy.

But leaving rabbits out of the question, if we attempted to enforce a fair rent for the dry country in many instances it could not be paid. Why? Simply because, after meeting his engagements to the banks or to his own capital sunk in the runs, the occupier has nothing left—rabbits or no rabbits—to pay a fair rent with. Which party, therefore, should forego its claim—the money-lender or the taxpayer? If money-lenders (whether they belong to this colony or to any other) have formed mistaken estimates of the value of the dry country and made injudicious advances, is the taxpayer to guarantee them against loss not only by foregoing his own rights in regard to rent, but by putting his hand in his pocket and assisting the occupier to work the runs simply that the interest of the investor at the back of him may be paid? It is

safe to say that, whatever comes or goes, the New South Wales taxpayer will never deliberately consent to this.

At the same time the taxpayer or those by whom he has been represented are not wholly irresponsible for the present dilemma in which the country finds itself with regard to the far western lessees. The general community has never properly understood the position of these intrepid pioneers, and until very recently our public men have taken no trouble whatever to make themselves acquainted with it. Our legislation in respect to them has been one long series of blunders, from which some of the most perplexing features of the present situation are the direct outcome. In former times the blackmailer and water thief were worse enemies to the squatter than even the rabbit is now, and he was a direct creation of our laws. What else was a law which encouraged persons to go and select land where the genuine purposes of selection were impossible to be carried out but a direct invitation to blackmailers to go and ply their detestable trade? And now, forsooth, because the law limits the field of the blackmailer to half instead of the whole of the squatter's run the State demands a large increase of rent for even this partial measure of protection. It seems, therefore, that the squatter is to pay blackmail in any case. If he is not called upon to keep a special account for buying off water thieves and improvement brigands he has to give the State an annual subsidy in consideration of its forbidding them to trouble him. So far as the increases of rent in the far Western country under the new Land Act are based upon the security afforded by the leases granted, this is precisely what they amount to. It must of course be borne in mind that it is only of the far Western country that I am now writing. In the Eastern and Central divisions totally different conditions prevail.

The interest of the money squatters have had to spend in buying off the water thieves and improvement brigands whom the State would persist in turning loose on the runs is an inevitable charge against their rent value. The lessees are not able to pay as much as they would be if they had not the weight of this dead capital on their backs, and more than they are able to pay no law is able to enforce. For that the State only has itself to blame, and ultimately it is the State that will have to bear the consequences of it. Heaven help the actual worker of the run in any case. He is deserving of a far better fate than to be compelled to spend his splendid energies as man in possession for a gold-spectacled board of directors in Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide, as the case may be. Neither did nature ever intend him to be a mere counter in a game where feather-bed financiers gamble with purblind politicians.

The men who now face the real work of pioneering our Western wastes are not of the

sort which shrink from any common difficulties. Had they been men of ordinary stamina the Gordian knot of the present problem would have been cut long ago by the majority of them abandoning the Herculean struggle and leaving the State and the financial institutions to settle matters between themselves as best they might. But they are not the class of men who ever say die while there is the semblance of a shot remaining in the locker. They have invested their all in these wastes. Many of them have been woefully taken in in the bargains they made, but they stick to them with a Spartan determination calculated to inspire enthusiastic admiration in the most phlegmatic observer. The pity of it is that they are not working these runs on far terms as New South Wales citizens, instead of as the managers for intercolonial capitalists. The question of dealing with them in the present difficulty would be much simplified if that were the case. The taxpayer would then be in a position to show a leniency and consideration which with justice to himself as matters stand he cannot show.

The western pastoralists now, leaving rent out of the question, are utterly unable to work their runs without annual assistance from the consolidated revenue in keeping down the rabbit plague. Last year official returns show that the amount of this assistance exceeded £100,000, and this year it will be still more. Under the present Rabbit Act it would soon absorb the whole revenue of the country. Granting that the Act may be superseded by a better one, which is a mere matter of speculation, it will still be necessary to expend large sums on rabbit destruction, and we now come up face to face with the question—Where is this money to come from? It is usually argued that the State should find it, as the expenditure of the money is for the purpose of saving the pro-

perty of the State from destruction. This is the principle that we have so far been acting upon. The State is put in the position of an ordinary landlord and the lessee of an ordinary tenant, and it is said that it is the business of the landlord to conserve his own property. If that were the case the State would not do as it is doing—that is, spend more on making the rabbit-infested runs occupiable than it receives from them in the way of rent. Once let the lessees make out that they stand towards the State in the position of an ordinary tenant to an ordinary landlord, and their subsidies will cease as soon as they exceed the amount of their rent. The State, however, has a deeper interest in the land than the mere collection of rent from it. It expects to get the products of the land as a contribution to its aggregate wealth, and it is for the sake of the products, not for the mere sake of the rent, that it spends money on making the land habitable. It happens, however, as I have shown, that the products of our rabbit-infested country do not belong to New South Wales. They are immediately exchanged for money in outside markets, and the bulk of this money goes to other colonies. Even the proportion required to buy the necessaries of life for the men working the stations is spent in Victoria or South Australia, so that practically speaking we here get nothing from our far Western territory beyond the mere rent received from it and the trifling amount collected in Customs dues from that portion of the land's products which comes back in the shape of imports of goods. Should we, therefore, go on spending any more of the taxpayers' money to render this portion of our territory occupiable under present conditions? This involvestwo separate questions—Why? and How?—both of which will be treated in future articles.

V.—RABBITING AS AN INDUSTRY.

IF we are to continue taxing the general public in order to subsidise the occupancy of our western territory it will be necessary to show that some corresponding benefit is received in return. We need not look for this in the shape of rent, neither are we getting it in the shape of trade. The rent, even when we pay for making the infested runs occupiable, is bespoke by the mortgagees, and the bulk of the trade from geographical necessity goes to other colonies. And now let us consider what the task of making these runs occupiable means. Until very recently the State repudiated any such obligation towards the lessee. When water failed it did not undertake to supply tanks; it had nothing to do with fencing, ringbarking, or any of the other expedients which pastoralists adopt to ensure the profitable occupancy of their holdings. It

has simply leased them the land in its natural condition and left the lessees to make the most of it as they found it.

If the State is under no obligation to provide the lessee against failure of water, whence then arises its duty of guaranteeing him against the failure of grass? It never undertook to find him in grass any more than to find him in water. This obligation, however, is what it really saddles itself with when it accepts the duty of keeping down rabbits on his run. Except that they interfere with the sheep-carrying capacity of a run and make its occupancy less profitable to the tenant, rabbits do no injury. They are not enemies of anyone else but the squatters whose grass they devour. It is to protect this grass—to guarantee it to the squatter—and for no other reason, that the State proclaims its costly war of aggressio

against the rabbit. I don't know why it should do so merely for the squatter's sake. Of course the assumption is that it is doing it for its own sake, but the fallacy of that assumption I have already sufficiently exposed.

The war against the rabbit was entered upon with a light heart, which arose from ignorance as to the nature of the undertaking. It was by no means intended to develop any such state of things as that which it has brought about. The country never for a moment imagined that it was creating a standing army larger and more expensive than our permanent military force to guard the runs of the western lessees. The intention was simply to exterminate the rabbit pest off-hand and be done with it. Certainly no one dreamt of making rabbit repression the enormous and permanent charge upon the public revenue that it has since become.

The woeful mistake which the country then made is due in great measure to the difficulty most uninitiated people experience in realising the power for evil that the rabbit possesses. Many regard him with a sense of peculiar tenderness, as one of the cherished pets of their childhood. To think of him as an enemy threatening the destruction of great national interests appears to them absurd. The coral insect, however, is a smaller animal than the rabbit, and he is the builder of vast islands and effects alterations in the map of the world. The power he exercises is the power of numbers indefinitely multiplied, and in the rabbit this is as effective to destroy as in the coral insect it is to build up. The fecundity of the rabbit is simply phenomenal. Various calculations have been undertaken with the view of ascertaining to what extent a single pair of rabbits are capable of reproduction, but usually the investigator loses himself in the appalling vastness of the mathematical vista which immediately opens out. Mr. Riddick, of Wienteriga run, makes the statement, which I give for what it is worth, that in four years' time the descendants of one doe have the power of multiplying to the astounding number of fifteen hundred millions. Those who care to check this calculation may occupy their spare hours in doing so. I have no spare hours to devote to the purpose. It is sufficient to know that the development of rabbit life is one of Nature's marvels; and having seen the demonstration of this in practice, I am indifferent about theory.

Now, the average weight of a wild rabbit is, I believe, about 3lb., and a fair sheep should weigh about 60lb. That is to say, that every 20 rabbits have the same amount of tissue to sustain as every one sheep. Both mutton and rabbit flesh are made from the one material, and approximately, therefore, for every 20 rabbits that a run has to sustain its sheep-carrying capacity should be reduced by one. Most squatters whom I interrogated on the point gave the number of rabbits required to eat as much as a

sheep at considerably less than 20, but taking the latter number as a reasonable proportion, it can easily be seen how soon a colony of rabbits established on a run would drive the sheep clean off it. Instances have already occurred where they have actually done this despite all the effort of the runholder backed up by the most lavish expenditure on the part of the State to keep them down. In South Australia, where the conditions of back settlement much resemble ours, many cases of this kind can be cited, notwithstanding that repressive Acts have been in force in that colony for years back. Many of the runholders there are now said to be merely holding on till the end of their leases, which expire with the present year, when they will be entitled to claim the value of their improvements, after which whole blocks of country will be entirely abandoned to rabbits. On these runs the work of killing is given up in despair, and the Government are afraid to enforce it lest the lessees should surrender and claim their improvements at once. What the Government intend to do when the leases fall in and the infested runs are thrown upon their hands is a question seriously agitating the public mind of that colony. Here we have not yet had any runs thrown up in consequence of the rabbit invasion, but there are nevertheless holdings which the rabbit is rapidly conquering.

At Teryawynia I saw a paddock of 62,000a which, after a desperate struggle, he has succeeded in entirely subduing, and now holds absolute possession of to the exclusion of a single hoof. On this run half a million rabbits have been killed and paid for within the past three months, and they are now more numerous there than ever. This case, again, I merely cite for illustration's sake, as it is by no means the only one of its kind that the recent history of the back country affords. How the rabbit got into the back country is useless now to inquire. The fact to be faced is that he is established there and strengthening his footing day by day in defiance of every effort that is made to dislodge him. According to the report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council, appointed to inquire into the rabbit question during the early portion of the present year, at the passing of the Act in 1883 the pest had already extended over the south-western portion of the colony, bounded by a line commencing at a point on the River Murray where the colonies of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales meet, thence northward to a short distance above Silverton, then across the Darling easterly between Wilcannia and Menindie, then down to the Lachlan above Hillston, then by a line almost due south to intersect the Murray near Corowa. This took in an area comprising about a fifth of the whole colony. Since the passing of the Act the infested area has been extended to the Queensland border, between the South Australian

boundary line and the Warrego River, and now embraces about two-fifths of the colony. This is in itself a sufficient commentary on the efficacy of the present Act. Under it we pay now an army of about 2000 men at rates ranging from £3 to £10 per week, and the

result is that after four years' fighting the rabbits have succeeded in spreading themselves over just double the area which they previously occupied. About the composition and work of this extraordinary army I will have something to say in my next article.

VI.—WHO GETS THE SUBSIDY.

THE number of men now employed rabbiting in New South Wales cannot be accurately stated, but it is known to considerably exceed two thousand. They are paid on the bonus system at prices ranging from 8d. up to 1s. per scalp, and the gross money earned per man ranges from £3 to £10 per week. Rabbiting, therefore, has become one of the recognised industries of the colony. Throughout the back country it is customary to hear it described as "about the best line going." This is usually the outsider's description of it, though occasionally a rabbitier is to be found whose account is somewhat different. Cases will be cited for you of men giving up good situations to go rabbiting, and on the other hand you will hear of men abandoning the profession in disgust and starting business as "unemployed." All this, however, goes to prove but very little either way.

Again, it is a common thing to meet a rabbitier driving to work in a buggy and pair. As a matter of fact, when a trap showing a little bit of extra style is met with in some parts of the country the immediate inference is that the occupant is a rabbitier. And not uncommonly that conclusion will be the correct one. When I was in Silverton a squatter told me he had just been in a tobacconist's shop. While transacting his business there, in came a gorgeous individual in quest of a supply of cigars at 1s. each. He was a rabbitier. At Wilcannia the champagne supper of the rabbitier has become a recognised institution of the place. Here also is told the tale of a rabbitier who recently entered an hotel and put down on the bar counter a cheque for a thousand and seventy odd pounds to be changed in payment of a 6d. drink. It must be remembered, however, that neither the 1s. cigar, the champagne supper nor the four-figure cheque episodes are matters of every-day occurrence. Rouseabouts and shepherds, if they only succeed in getting past the first wayside shanty and reaching a town like Silverton or Wilcannia, can knock down the compulsory savings of a twelve-month in the bush in just as gorgeous fashion and just as short a time as a rabbitier can dispose of his similarly accumulated cash. But nobody takes this as any evidence of phenomenal wages being earned by rouseabouts or shepherds. Neither does it prove very much with regard to the average net pay of the average rabbit-slayer. Touching the stylish buggies and horses affected by rabbitiers, it may be mentioned that the most dashing turn-outs of

all are not infrequently sported by the aboriginal members of the profession. Blackfellows make excellent rabbitiers when they can be got to work, and the first big cheque that one of them draws is invariably devoted to the purchase of a buggy and pair of horses, and the more showy the turn-out the better is his fancy suited. It may be that the squatter when handing him his cheque remembers that he has a stylish pair of horses to sell, and a blackfellow's money is as good as anyone else's. It is better for him to spend it on horseflesh, anyway, than on rum. So the dusky son of the soil plants his bare foot on the step of his new carriage, vaults on to the cushioned seat and *voilà!*—the cheque is never cashed but the ambition of a lifetime is gratified.

Still, in all this we are only looking at one side of the rabbitier's life. But be this as it may, let his net earnings be what they will, there is no doubt that the amount which the State actually pays its rabbit-catchers is ridiculously in excess of the wages of any other branch of unskilled labor in the colony. The squatter is obliged under the Act to put men on at whatever rate per scalp he can get them. If an inspector reports that an insufficient number of men are employed rabbiting on a run the lessee must find more. Where or how he is to get them is not the inspector's look-out; he is simply to see that they are put to work on the run, and failure on the lessee's part to secure the requisite number after 14 days' notice will entail liability to a fine of £50.

Against this section of the Act many lessees are extremely bitter in their complaints. They say it obliges them to pay exorbitant rates per scalp, and nothing but collusion between the inspectors and the rabbitiers is required to render the position one of complete helplessness. What they ask is to prevent an inspector from saying to a camp of rabbitiers:—"Stick out for such and such a bonus, and if you don't get it leave the run and get the owner fined." I am not by any means laying this charge against any single rabbit inspector. What I saw of them, they seemed a class of men incapable of such conduct. Activity, energy and intelligent earnestness were conspicuous qualities in every officer that I came across. At the same time rabbit inspectors are human, and squatters, being human also, know the necessity of preserving them as a class from any more temptation than can be helped. Legislation always assumes every man to be a rogue

We do not flatter ourselves in our laws, which leave nothing to any man's honesty when they can adopt means for circumventing his possible dishonesty. The complaints of the squatter as to the retention of this undoubtedly dangerous power by the rabbit inspector are therefore not totally groundless. But it is merely a bad part in a whole system that is bad. It is essential to the working of the Rabbit Act that inspectors should possess this power, and being essential to the carrying out of a blunder, it is necessarily in itself a blunder. "What does it matter to you how much you pay as bonus—it comes out of the Government pocket not out of yours," is said to be a common rejoinder of the men when remonstrated with against the amount of scalp money charged. There is a depth of meaning in this which will take a somewhat long line of reasoning to plumb.

If rabbiters and rabbit inspectors are only human, so also are pastoral lessees. Both as a class may be honest enough; but it is not the business of the law to trust to the *bona fides* of either any more than there is absolute necessity for. Let us, therefore, see if it is not in the power of the squatter to conspire with the rabbiters for the purpose of defrauding the revenue, as well as in the power of the inspectors. The price paid for the labor of rabbit-catching should in the ordinary course of affairs regulate itself like the price of everything else by the law of supply and demand. It is common unskilled labor which, by the law of supply and demand, is certainly not entitled to anything like the rates of pay now alleged to rule in the rabbiters' market. The question therefore arises how do the rabbiters manage to enforce from £3 to £10 per week as the price of their labor, where other men with abilities of equal value to dispose of, have to be content with a fraction of that amount. Why do not as many of the latter go rabbiting as would equalise these apparently anomalous rates in the labor market of the far west.

The answer to that obvious question will depend on another question, which is—are the rates of pay said to be received by rabbiters real or only nominal? The State pays its subsidies on the basis of these rates, but to whose pocket does the money go? It has to

be remembered that it is the State which virtually employs the rabbit-killer. At any rate it provides three-fourths of the bonus paid to him, but by a peculiar anomaly it has nothing to do with fixing the rate of this bonus. That is left entirely to the lessee, who only provides one-fourth. The rate of bonus necessarily varies in accordance with the ease with which rabbits are killed or in accordance with any other conditions affecting the cost incidental to the work. Thus it might from different causes pay a rabbitier better to work for 4d. per scalp on one run than 6d. per scalp on another. It is said that on some runs it is a binding condition of employment that rabbitiers shall purchase their supplies from the station store, and that where this is the case goods are charged for at unheard of rates of profit to the squatter. One instance has been related to me in which the squatter's price exceeded that of the ordinary hawkier or town storekeeper by as much as 122 per cent. On this run, for a rabbitier to purchase a single fig of tobacco from a hawkier would involve the penalty of instant dismissal. I am giving these statements just for what they may be worth, as I have given those concerning the possible collusion between the rabbitiers and inspectors. Why do the men submit to such tyranny, it may be asked? But can the squatters not meet them with their own alleged rejoinder—"What does it matter to them how much they pay for their stores; the money comes out of the pocket of the Government, not out of theirs. If it does not pay them to work for 3d., 4d., or 6d. on a run where they have 122 per cent. more than they ought to pay for their necessities than is fair, they can demand 8d., 10d., or 1s. and it will come to the same thing as far as they are concerned. What seems strangest to me, however, is that the Government would leave it in the power of a squatter to make terms with a man whom the State virtually employs by which the cost of his labor is thus wilfully increased. And this leads me to ask, Have any instances of the exercise of such power ever come under the department's notice, or have any steps been taken to test the truth of the numerous statements that are made as to the prevalence of these fraudulent bargains?

VII.—RABBITS MORE VALUABLE THAN STOCK.

I HAVE already pointed out that since the passing of the present Rabbit Act the area the infested country has been doubled. In 1883 one-fifth of the whole colony was infested. Now the pest is established in two-fifths. Roughly estimated in round numbers, therefore, the rabbit conquest of New South Wales since we have begun to resist it has been at the rate of about ten million acres of our territory per annum. Unfortunately, I am able to give

no approximate statement as to the rate of this advance before we commenced legislating to oppose it, but it is quite clear that there could not have been many years of similar progress before 1883, as otherwise the rabbit would by this time have been in possession of the whole colony.

Why, then, has his advance been so rapid since we have set ourselves to oppose it? The report of the Select Committee of the Legisla-

tive Council which recently undertook to elucidate the whole rabbit question directly blames the present Act for the alarming rate at which the pest is now spreading. "The committee," says the report, "without desiring to draw any imaginary picture, think it is their duty to emphatically point out the possible position which will be the result of the present system of abating the rabbit nuisance. Instead of abating the pest it is really spreading it, and it will only require a few years' further delay and disregard of the danger to consummate the fact that from one end to the other this colony will be rabbit-infested." The committee, however, do not appear to think it their duty to point out the manner in which the present Act operates for the spread of the pest.

In the opinion of most men practically versed in the subject, the great cause of the extraordinary increase of the pest at the present time is to be found in the breaking up of the drought. The rabbit can appreciate a good season just as well as the squatter can, and in their competition for the possession of a run it ultimately helps the former perhaps more than it helps the latter. Just now there is in most parts of the country enough feed for both sheep and rabbits put together. This, however, is not going to last for ever, and after the first spell of dry weather one or the other will, on many of the runs, have to succumb. The rabbit and the sheep have lived together, both in their limited numbers, during drought, and it was hard enough for the sheep then. With the return of good times the sheep have increased, but the rate of their natural progress has been nowise comparable to that of the rabbit. The change from good times to bad, therefore, or even from abundance to ordinary sufficiency, will find the situation quite different from what it was during the last dry cycle.

There is one instinct in the wild rabbit which works to spread the pest in a somewhat peculiar way. The male rabbit dreading evidently the abnormal fecundity of his race will destroy the young ones whenever he gets a chance. He is, by instinct, a Malthusian of the most inveterate type. The female on the other hand appears to hold the opposite theory, and consequently always takes care to remove her young out of her ord and master's way. The instinct of the male to lestroy seems to have developed a counteracting instinct in the female to protect, and the two working in conjunction cause the tribe as it multiplies to be continually spreading out. A female about to bring forth young, always goes away from the burrow where she previously resided, and makes a new home for herself at a safe distance. Here a new rabbit colony is founded, and so on. The plentifulness of feed and water everywhere necessarily favors this advance, making it possible, where it were otherwise impossible, and there is no question of a doubt about its having largely assisted the rabbit invasion since the breaking-up of the late drought.

But where was the repressive legislation while this was going on? Why the rabbits have been able to spread since 1883 is a matter simple enough to be explained; the interesting point, however, is to be found out why they were not prevented from spreading.

Now we come to the working of the present Act. Since it has been the business of that Act to keep down rabbits it cannot be allowed to throw the responsibility of their increase on to the seasons. It is solely to counteract the effect of good seasons on rabbit life that a repressive Act is required. At a time when rabbits die off from natural causes legislation for killing them would be supererogatory. But instead of exterminating rabbits it pays better under our Act to propagate them. The great mistake which it made was to give the wild rabbit a commercial value. Making rabbits worth from 3d. to 1s. per head when they can be produced in such appalling numbers was placing a terrible temptation in the way of men on the look-out for an easy and profitable industry.

There are many parts of the country now in which the rabbits are more valuable than the stock. From two to three thousand men now live by selling rabbit scalps to the Government, and the more rabbits there are to scalp the better it is for their calling. It is not to be imagined that every one of these men would wish to see rabbits totally exterminated. It matters not what system of capturing the rabbits the Government bring into vogue—let it be trapping, poisoning, digging out, or what it may—as long as they remain purchasers of scalps the scalps will be forthcoming. It is simply a case of demand creating supply. Where 20 rabbits will bring the price of one sheep there will always be some desperate hard-pressed squatter tempted to raise rabbits on his run instead of sheep. You will find exactly the same percentage of honest and dishonest men amongst squatters as amongst any other class of persons, and as long as our laws can be manipulated so as to make rabbit-breeding pay better than sheep-breeding, and I have in a previous article indicated the manner in which this may be done, we are offering not a reward for exterminating the pest, but a premium for spreading and preserving it.

It is under legislation of this kind that the country is being so rapidly overrun, and it will be useless looking for any other result while such legislation continues in force. Ninety-nine squatters may act honestly and the dishonest practices of one will keep the runs of the whole hundred infested. Instead of devoting all his energies to raising wool, the profits of which go to his banker, what is to prevent this one, under the blind of sheep breeding, from carrying on the combined businesses of storekeeping and rabbiting, the profits of which he may put in his own pocket. To the ninety-nine honest lessees, as well as to the

general public, the present system means, if persisted in, nothing short of absolute ruin.

It has been suggested to try various natural enemies of the rabbit at the work of extermination. I have very little reliance on any of these. In the first place, the rabbits have now become too numerous to be ever eaten down without the number of their devourers being such as to render them a greater pest than the rabbits themselves. Secondly, the "natural enemy" of the rabbit is also the natural enemy of the rabbit, and this fact, even at the present time, when their competition does not affect the business in any appreciable way, is said to be the reverse of conducive to the health of the few iguanas, cats and other unpaid rabbiters that occasionally fall into the clutches of the paid ones. Inasmuch as he is content to work for "tucker" only, the iguana is voted a black-leg by the rabbiting fraternity and treated accordingly. So would any other imported animal be which started rabbit-killing on the same terms. They might have had a chance before we created our present army of rabbiters, but such chance cannot possibly exist now. Another method of getting rabbits killed without creating a vested interest in their

propagation is to introduce amongst them some form of epidemic disease. I am informed that savants in Adelaide are experimenting in this way upon some carefully-looked-after rabbits, and in giving his evidence before the select committee in Sydney, Dr. Creed suggested the advisableness of pursuing such inquiries, but strongly urged the necessity of thoroughly demonstrating the innocuousness of the disease to man and other animals before bringing it into use. The difficulty is in obtaining such demonstration. Nothing could give this but time, and in coping with the rabbit pest time is a thing that cannot be spared. It is sincerely to be trusted that our Legislature will long hesitate before taking steps to turn the face of our western country into a reeking mass of tuberculosis such as would be the effect of inoculating the rabbit life of that region with this disease. All parasitical diseases are equally dangerous and equally to be distrusted no matter what learned opinions may be advanced as to the effect of spreading them broadcast throughout the country by any medium whatever. What, then, are we to do with the rabbit pest? This question will be discussed in my next article.

VIII.—THE REMEDY.

THE factors of our Far Western problem may now be presented in their most simplified form. What we have before us is this. First, we have as the result of the pastoral mania which set in about seven or eight years ago, the great bulk of our back country ruinously overloaded with intercolonial capital. All that the land can produce would, in some instances, be little enough to pay the interest on this even if the public of New South Wales were to forego their share altogether in the outside money-lender's favor. The land, therefore, as now occupied is, practically speaking, not New South Wales territory at all. Most of its products, from the present necessities of the case, go to increase the wealth and augment the trade of other colonies not of ours. Our interest in this territory is confined chiefly to administering government in it and constructing public works that the representatives of the outside capitalists may have better facilities for meeting financial engagements to their principals.

Next we have before us the fact that a vast expenditure of money on rabbit repression is now necessary to render this land occupiable. Not only that; the rabbit pest has to be dealt with on these lands of which we are only the nominal owners, in order to prevent it from affecting the territory of which we are the real owners. The question, therefore—the knot of the Far Western problem—is, Upon whom should this expenditure devolve?

To answer this, let us consider how the case

would stand if both of the interested parties declined this expenditure. To New South Wales the first result would be that the general taxpayer would feel a very considerable burden lifted off his back. When commencing these articles I did intend before concluding to put before the public a statement showing the amount of rent received from our rabbit country, together with the annual sums we were spending in keeping down the pest so as to make the runs occupiable. Since then, however, I have learned that the department are not in a position just now to make the return as complete as I expected, but I have nevertheless been able to obtain one covering a sufficient area to serve all practical purposes of demonstration. From a departmental document furnished to me I am able to show the amount of rabbit subsidy due for the past half year or 50 separate runs, and to set this in each case against the rent at which these holdings are assessed. With regard to the rest of the runs in some cases the rabbit claims had come in but the rent had not been appraised; in others the rent had been assessed but the rabbit claims were not to hand. My only reason for selecting the subjoined 50, therefore, was that on none others could the actual difference between what the State paid the lessee and what it received from him be conclusively shown. The following table will show what the State receives for the past half-year from each of these runs in the one hand

and what it pays back to them with the other:—

	Rabbit Subsidy.			Rent.		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Albermarle ..	5,566	19	7	1,400	2	11½
Alma ..	205	0	0	428	19	8
Bcondara ..	220	10	9	444	12	5
Burra ..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Buioigal ..	392	15	7	157	11	11½
Bitilla ..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Baden Park ..	1,090	19	4	231	19	7
Buckambe ..	95	12	10	153	16	8
Corona ..	253	15	11	3,016	8	11½
Cuiपाल ..	909	11	5	425	9	4½
Cultowa ..	1,473	10	0	782	1	3½
Corrong ..	2,612	18	2	1,871	7	2½
Goongal ..	324	7	10	415	13	11
Gnaita ..	422	8	1	830	4	4
Kilfera ..	5,359	11	11	..	..	..
Kew ..	444	13	5	134	15	10
Langerwerri ..	1,336	8	1	845	16	8
Mount Gipps ..	1,210	11	1	1,525	18	5
Menamurtee ..	1,037	5	2	760	5	5
Mundi Mundi ..	195	2	2	628	8	5½
Marfield ..	2,896	12	10	867	9	2
Merangie ..	463	0	7	607	6	10½
Murtee ..	770	2	6	746	10	10½
Marra ..	167	17	0	419	7	9
Moolwingie ..	234	12	3	142	19	7
Morden ..	82	5	3	561	10	7½
Munthuringie ..	773	9	4	673	9	0
Nelyambo ..	347	5	6	1,867	5	11½
Nekarboo ..	551	19	3	445	13	0½
Nap Nap ..	319	2	0	891	18	6½
Oplara ..	259	4	0	114	3	4
Outer Nettalie and Grassmere ..	1,167	10	1	590	3	4
Poonamca ..	230	17	4	646	9	4½
Sturt's Meadows ..	248	6	7	407	11	0½
Tupra ..	1,905	3	10	2,114	16	0½
Teryawmia ..	8,040	4	6	1,737	18	10
Tintinology ..	9·9	6	3	488	11	4½
Tom's Lake ..	77	14	8	177	10	0
Turkey Creek ..	97	2	3	89	17	11½
Tubbo ..	122	16	0	53	3	6
Tarella ..	852	0	2	1,296	19	6½
Tolarno ..	5,945	9	10	1,760	11	1½
Thackaringa ..	448	3	9	231	7	1
Thononga ..	238	16	11	646	13	4
Uardy ..	122	14	0	182	3	3
Ulonga ..	389	15	4	1,141	7	2
Untagoona ..	47	18	10	392	18	5
Yandenbah ..	27	18	9	131	5	9
Yancannia ..	411	15	8	1,997	2	5½
	£51,381	6	7	£35,261	17	5½

Just look at these totals. From 50 promiscuously selected runs, covering an area of several millions of acres, we derived during the past six months £35,261 as rent and handed back to the tenants £51,381 to enable them to stand against the rabbit. We lost in hard cash over £16,000 on that transaction. As the State subsidy only is supposed to cover three-fourths of the cost of rabbit repression the pastoral tenants on these runs had presumably to pay another £16,000 or so in addition to their rent, equal to almost an increase of 50 per cent. And the net result of all is that the rabbits have made more progress during the past six months than ever they did before. But the totals for the 50 runs put the case in its mildest form. A number of the runs have only been recently attacked, and on these as a rule the subsidies have not yet exceeded the rent. Take, however, such individual cases as Marfield, where we pay £2896 and receive £867, or Albermarle, where we pay £5566 and receive £1400. There is no reason in the world why on any of the other 50 runs the same state

of things will not be in existence by the end of the next half-year. Indeed it is only a question of time when, as I have said before, the whole revenue of the colony at the present rate of going on would be insufficient to pay the "rabbit subsidies" of our western runs. And here I may remark that that departmental word "subsidy," awkward as it may at first sight appear, is, when looked closely into, about the most neatly-polished expression that could have been selected. How the squatters would go on paying their fourth of this rabbit money is a matter beyond the scope of ordinary conjecture.

Well, coming back to the point. Suppose the public of New South Wales declined to tax themselves any further to "subsidise" the occupancy of their nominally owned territory in the Far West. That would at all events be so much gained. But what would be on the other hand lost? Would we lose any rent? No; since when we pay the rabbit subsidy the balance between landlord and tenant is against us. Would we lose any trade? None to speak of, since the trade of the back country we never had. Would we lose any wool? None to speak of, since the bulk of the back country's products is at once turned into money and appropriated by outside capitalists.

Still we have vital interests that the rabbit may seriously injure, and it is impossible for us to ignore him. What system of destruction do I propose, therefore, to exterminate the pest? I propose nothing at all different from the methods already known. The rabbit is an animal that is very easy to kill wherever it will pay to kill him. Settlement by the white man will always wipe him out, as it will wipe out every other animal antagonistic to it.

In those parts of the colony where settlement is impossible the rabbit might have been prevented from getting a footing; but now that he is established there it is extremely doubtful whether the game of exterminating him can ever be made worth the candle. On the barren and remote land of the Far West, the cost of destruction is necessarily greater than in the good country near at hand, while the results of the work are of less value. There is some land out west, of which it takes 15s. to sustain one sheep or to produce on an average say 3s. worth of wool per annum. In other places one acre will do this. The rabbit question will always be a comparatively simple one in the latter class of country, no matter how thickly infested it may become. On the other kind, however, it is totally different. We have seen from our rent returns, which is the best of all tests, that it will not pay in the dry country to keep the number of men rabbiting that are now employed. And what are two or three thousand men scattered over such a vast area? What would five times that number be?

Let us at once and without delay have a thorough examination of the colony made

with a view of ascertaining where the rabbit is thoroughly established and where he is not. Fence off with wire netting the conquered from the unconquered country, and make the interest of the money so expended a charge against all the land inside the protected area. Let the State be its own judge as to how much of its own territory is worth protecting in this way and how much is not. Then deprive the rabbit once for all of his commercial value. Inside the fenced area, fine any lessee upon whose land wild rabbits are found within a reasonable time after his attention is called to the fact. If he does not wish to retain his lease under these conditions, let him surrender it and be paid by the incoming tenant compensation for the actual value of the improvements he leaves behind.

Outside the fence, let the tenants have the option given them of also surrendering their leases and being paid the present actual value of their improvements to the State, irrespective of what they may have cost the lessee. Re-appraise all this land and offer the whole of it in fixed leases, for which fair rents will be strictly enforced irrespective of whether there is anything left to pay the money-lenders' interest or not. Let the lessees do as they please as regards rabbits. They take the country for what it is worth, and, provided they pay their rent, may conserve grass by killing rabbits or water by sinking tanks, just as they find it suits them best. At the expiry of a lease let rabbit extermination, provided it is proved to be completely performed, rank as an improvement on the run and be paid for by a sum equal to the capitalised value of the

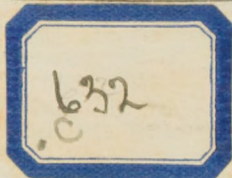
additional rent which such run will thereafter bring. Every lessee to be let deal with the rabbits by poison, trapping, suffocating with carbon, or not deal with them at all, just as his own interests dictate to him.

It may be that the cost of working the dry country runs and paying rent under these conditions would be more than many of the present lessees could dream of undertaking, while going out with mere payment for the actual extent to which their improvements have enhanced the value of the State properly would necessitate their leaving behind nearly the whole of the capital which they sunk on it. It is hard that this should be so, but it is not the public lookout. When speculators plunge in other businesses and lose, the State does not recognise any obligation to recoup them. As far as the actual occupiers of the run are concerned, it would be better for many of them to be released from their present thralldom as slaves to financial institutions at once. It is no mercy to them for the taxpayer to go on impoverishing himself in order that they, in the interests of their financial taskmasters, may be kept in the subsidised occupancy of unprofitable runs. Even if it was, the taxpayer could not possibly afford to do it.

The task which I undertook at the commencement of these articles is now complete. On what I feel to be the eve of a great national crisis I have endeavored to put the problem of the Far West calmly and dispassionately before the public opinion of the country. While we have been asleep an unsuspected enemy has approached to the very gates of the citadel. Everything now depends on the promptness of our awakening.



C.I.R.L.



DSM/ 632/ C
The problem of the far west,
or, The Land Act and the
rabbit pest

**STATE LIBRARY
OF N.S.W.**



N2181022

