Life on the land

Living and working on the land has been part of the popular image of Australia since the earliest days of settlement. Colonisation of Australia saw a transformation of the natural landscape of our continent though agriculture.

For thousands of years before the first Europeans arrived, Indigenous Australians had been living on and manipulating the land and the environment. Indigenous Australian methods of agriculture, horticulture and aquaculture included crop-growing, fish-trapping and controlled burning (‘fire-stick farming’) to encourage new growth in native plants and to facilitate hunting.

Regularly burning off vegetation had the long term effect of turning scrub into grassland directly increasing the food supply of the aborigines by changing the composition of plant and animal species in an area. It also promoted growth of edible ground level plants, such as bush potatoes, and boosted the population of grass-eating species like the kangaroo.

When the First Fleet arrived, in January 1788, the new settlers found themselves in a land with a very different climate from the one they had left. Their tools, methods of farming, crops and livestock were unsuited to the harsh, comparatively barren country around Port Jackson.

Governor Phillip had been instructed to begin cultivation immediately on landing. Once basic shelter had been provided, the main task was clearing, cutting, grubbing and burning of trees. English axes were blunted by the hard Australian timbers. Land clearing was achieved by sawing trees above the surface of the ground leaving stumps which had to be removed by teams of convict labourers before the land could be tilled.

The first settlers, convicts and military personnel were keen to farm the land and raise food, but their inexperience in farming techniques and the unfamiliar landscape resulted in near starvation due to early crop failures. Arrival of the second and third fleets with supplies saved the colonists, and made officials in London aware of the desperate need for experienced farmers and labourers in New South Wales.
Banks Papers - Series 36a Papers of Sir Joseph Banks - charts and illustrations, ca 1790s, 1803

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Opp. p. 225. "Governor's House at Sydney, Port Jackson 1791"
Governor Phillip quickly realized that the land around Farm Cove would not support the colony. The search for suitable land for agriculture led to the discovery of arable plains fed by the waters of the Parramatta River, which Phillip named Rose Hill. By late 1791, agriculture had been abandoned at Farm Cove and all efforts were concentrated on the spread of cultivation at Rose Hill, now called Parramatta. The success of these farms was crucial to the food obsessed colony and Governor Phillip rewarded early agriculturalists, like James Ruse, with grants of land.

When the British settled Australia, the colonial government claimed all lands for the Crown. Successive governors of New South Wales had exclusive authority to make land grants. In 1824 an Act of British Parliament established the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo.) which was set up on one million acres at Port Stephens, NSW, to improve production of fine wool and other crops for export.
From the 1820s, however, the occupation of Crown land without legal title became a widespread practice in the colony. Such landholders, who took up residence on large unoccupied tracts of land for pastoral purposes, were known as 'squatters'.

In isolated rural districts pastoral properties, or stations, were centres of activity & hospitality which often belied the constant struggle for self-sufficiency and the loneliness of station life.

Life on the land could afford wealthy pastoralists with an elegant lifestyle and plenty of time for rural leisure pursuits outside hectic breeding, sowing, shearing and harvesting seasons.

The advance of settlement saw a swift transformation from the natural to the cultivated landscape. Post and rail fences kept the bush at bay while verandahed homesteads surrounded by carefully manicured lawns and gardens created a picturesque contrast between the wilderness of spreading plains and dramatic mountain backdrops.
Foreign field sports, fisheries, sporting anecdotes &c. &c. / from drawings by Messrs. Howitt, Atkinson, Clark, Manskirch, &c., containing one hundred plates, with a supplement of New South Wales.
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