

## Review

*Freedom of Contract: A History of the United Graziers' Association of Queensland* by Ruth S. Kerr. (Brisbane, UGA, 1990) (pp viii + 192, biblio., index, illus; available from the Association for \$15 plus postage).

The history of the United Graziers' Association of Queensland is an extremely complex subject which requires a wide knowledge of the state's past. With her ever expanding list of publications including mining, local government, the cattle industry and Aboriginal history, Dr Kerr is well qualified to undertake such a study.

The opportunity to examine an organisation which spans both cattle and sheep has presented Dr Kerr with a challenging task in that she was required to have a good understanding of both industries. As the two are quite different, most historians to date have concentrated on one or the other. *Freedom of Contract* in fact offers an interesting comparison between the two industries with a major theme being the conflict between cattle and sheep producers. The author skilfully describes the split within the United Graziers' Association in the early 1970s which led to the formation of the Cattlemen's Union.

The book marks the centenary of the organisation known originally as the United Pastoralists' Association. It grew out of a number of Graziers' District Associations and at its first meeting on 16 December 1890, the objectives of the Association were clearly defined. These included the prevention of strikes and the maintenance of "freedom of contract". These particular goals were embraced because of the growing militancy at the time of the Australian Labor Federation and the Shearers' and Labourers' Unions. Ruth Kerr devotes a chapter to the 1891 shearers' strike which had a significant impact on the course of industrial relations in Australia. She acknowledges that the causes of this dispute are shrouded in the mystery of pastoralists' and unionists' politics and the interpretation of the events depends very much on the individual's own political leanings.

The history of the United Graziers' Association gives an interesting insight into the workings of a highly effective lobby group which in its earlier years had formal affiliation with the Country Party. The epitome of its power in the political area must surely be the part it played in the change over from rail transport to road haulage in the 1950s. Graziers had always resented the support which railway workers traditionally gave to shearers during strikes including the 1956 Shearers' strike. When the Nicklin Government came to office in 1957 the UGA applied pressure to have road transport upgraded, a step which greatly advantaged members of the Association. With the federal and state governments outlaying money on extending and

improving the road system, the railway unions' ability to frustrate stock and wool movements was greatly weakened.

Other contemporary political issues addressed in the book include the foreign ownership of Queensland grazing land, a matter raised by the Association in the 1960s. *Freedom of Contract* also chronicles the long history of "reserve prices" for wool, an issue which attracted considerable media attention recently. The Association began emphasising marketing strategies early in the twentieth century culminating in the formation of BAWRA to stabilise prices in 1921. Graziers have always had mixed feelings about such schemes as it has meant handing over partial control of their industry to government bodies and wool brokers.

Many of the leading figures in the pastoral industry have taken a prominent role in the United Graziers' Association. The experience gained in rural politics has been a stepping stone to the wider political area. Dr Kerr reminds us that federal leader of the Country Party, Jack McEwan, learnt his political skills through Grazing Organisations and former Queensland cabinet members, Ken Tomkins and Russell Cooper were active in the United Graziers Association before entering state politics.

Throughout the book key figures in the Association are continually brought to life with concise biographical sketches. One of the most interesting was that of Sir Richard Boyer who was present of the United Graziers' Association between 1941 and 1944. To the Australian public he is probably better known as the chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission and as the person after whom the famous Boyer lectures are named. However he was a highly successful president of the UGA. Dr Kerr points out that he had a "meteoric rise in grazing politics because he could argue a case lucidly based on his personal experience on the land, his cultural interests and his broad intellectual grasp of economic questions."

There were a few omissions from the book. For instance I was a little surprised to see that there was no mention of Aboriginal labour in the cattle industry and the question of stock stealing, two issues which certainly did attract the attention of the Association. Overall though, *Freedom of Contract* is a scholarly piece of work which is meticulously researched and makes a valuable contribution to the body of literature dealing with the pastoral history of this nation.

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