

## THE UPPER DAWSON RIVER COUNTRY

[By Mrs. K. EMMERSON]

(Read at a meeting of the Society on 25 June 1964.)

Ten thousand years is not too great a time for the Jeeman people to have occupied the area known as the Upper Dawson district. These dark tribes came from the north, slowly infiltrating, pushing back and annihilating their predecessors. They were a superior race with better weapons, a finer physique, more ability than the men they found there. Possibly the conquerors took wives of the smaller, feebler horde.<sup>1</sup>

It can be said the district has not altered a great deal in that time. Great floods may alter the shape of lagoons, twist the course of streams and change hill contours; droughts too can have an effect on land and water.

But these are small matters. Some of the animals may have altered slightly; the dingo was brought to what became known as Australia by the dark people and must have lessened the numbers of marsupials, small creatures, reptiles and ground-living birds.

But overall changes would be slight. The Jeeman people flourished in such a fertile centre; they grew strong and pugnacious, in the Upper Dawson region. Except for drought periods there was always plenty of water, with its teeming bird and animal life. In the gorges too the aborigines found shelter in winter months on the walls of which they transferred motifs or hand-signs by a sort of stencilling. Water could be found in wells; rock wallabies abounded and other food necessary to their well-being.

Well-fed people are usually more war-like than those whose larders are not well-stocked. Thus we find the Jeemans were feared by their neighbours, as late as the early sixties. When corroborrees ended in fights the fact that the Jeeman of Upper Dawson were participants daunted their

1. R. A. Keble (Melbourne Museum) suggests that the first wave of migrants to Australia came by a land bridge about 18,000 years ago. This land bridge, the mid-post-glacial coastal plain, became the submerged floor of Torres Strait about 8,000 years ago, and in the intervening 10,000 years other waves of migrants of practically the same stock as the first reached Australia by the same route. These migrants, Keble terms Prot-Indics or Australoids; they were, he thinks, a jungle people of whom remnants are still found in Southern India, in Ceylon, and in Sumatra, Borneo, the Celebes, Malaya, and Siam.

opponents. "The feared Dawson blacks" is one old-time description of them.

The death at one blow of eleven whites at Hornet Bank<sup>2</sup> in 1857 was considered to be a demonstration by these dark people. "Get out, whites, or else" was the attitude of these truculent people. Other murders had taken place earlier; a Mr. McLaren of Isla and Waterton was waddied to death at twilight on Kinnoul in the winter of 1854—and shepherds were often attacked.

However, by the early sixties the natives of the Dawson were for the most part subdued, mainly as a result of the 1857 massacre, after which white men hunted down the adult males of that particular horde and wiped out as many as they could.

### THE FIRST COMERS

The first white men to cross over the Great Dividing Range to Dawson country were Ludwig Leichhardt and his five white followers in November, 1844. They spent a month in that fascinating district.

There is some legend that the Rosses passed through sometime in 1846. In 1847 when Leichhardt and his party of six white companions and two aborigines passed through, a stray horse was seen. This could have been a horse lost from the Ross's party. Ross took up Redbank in Burnett country in 1850.

The first pastoralist to take sheep to the area was Thomas Windeyer in 1847. Tom Archer, who with young Chauvel and a blackboy had taken a route west on the northern side of the Great Dividing Range and had returned on his second trip the same way, saw Thomas Windeyer there with men and sheep.

Windeyer was acting for his uncle. The present Chief Justice of Australia is a descendant of relations of this young man.

Windeyer was on Wolebee Creek but lost the run. In 1849 he met with an accident and for nearly a year lay ill before dying in 1850 at Juandah.

So much for the first pastoralist.

### EARLY PROPERTIES

Early properties taken up were Juandah, Cockatoo, Mark-

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2. Hornet Bank station, on the Dawson River, a property held on lease by Mrs. Fraser, widow of a carpenter, of Toowoomba, was the scene of the massacre on 27 October 1857 by aborigines of most of the Fraser family, and three of their employees. One brother, Sylvester ("West") was stunned by a nulla nulla and left for dead. William Fraser, the eldest son, was absent in Ipswich at the time of the tragedy.—Ed.

land, Hornet Bank, Kinnoul, Taroom and others. In 1856 there was a post office in Taroom, also a postal service between Taroom and Condamine. In 1857, a C.P.S. was appointed to the centre.

People were there in the early fifties. By the sixties it is known the Upper Dawson was for the times fairly well populated. The names of over 60 children are on a list in St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, of those baptised between 1863 and 1866. Visiting clerics from Gayndah rode the long miles to attend to the people's spiritual wants.

By this time Taroom was a smallish town. Three hotels of a sort were built, the first in 1858. The graziers of the area were called upon to act as magistrates when cases had to be tried.

It was nearly all sheep in the 'fifties and 'sixties. The Spear Grass had not then made its appearance and wool had to be taken by bullock or horse teams from the more northern runs to Rockhampton. From the southern properties the teams came south and then east to Ipswich.

At this time, too, the Upper Dawson Valley could boast of many plains. When Leichhardt and company rode down the first waterway they struck on the Dawson side, they found little or no brigalow. The Leichhardt party likened the area and soil to the Darling Downs district. Forty years later this area was covered with dense scrub. Where they travelled on this open land became, in later years, a training ground for brigalow scrub stock-riders, whose prowess in handling "scrubbers" became a household word in outback Queensland.

### DROUGHTS STRUCK HARD

For some time the district prospered, but the droughts of 1866 and 1868 struck hard; also by this time shepherd labour was running short. Chinamen were brought in, and in some places kanakas were employed. In the early 'seventies girls, daughters of graziers, worked as shepherdesses.

The ups and downs of the sixties, particularly the latter, resulted in changing the names of lessees. Glenhaughton, Carrabah, and Bungabun were three big properties whose lessees failed and were obliged to move away. In the late sixties the State of Queensland was nearly bankrupt and was only saved by the finding of gold at Gympie.

The Upper Dawson's troubles then were many. The price of wool had fallen, spear grass was growing, and the flocks of sheep had in drought periods eaten away the best of the

natural grasses, leaving burr and other weed pests. Overstocking with drought conditions had taken its toll.

By the late seventies the days of shepherds were over. A new enactment demanded fences on properties and the man handy with the axe and splitting wedge was the worker needed. Boundary riders also were employed to man the fences. It has been claimed that no man on horseback can be termed a peasant, so with the introduction of horses a new era dawned.

### CATTLE OUST SHEEP

Though the price of wool rose in the early seventies, which brought a certain prosperity to the Dawson country, at the end of that decade graziers were turning to the breeding of cattle. The frozen meat industry was on the move by 1880 and, though in spite of the tremendous rise of mineral output in the State and the consequent need of meat food in mining areas, graziers in the south were not able to dispose of their beef stock locally and were obliged to have their surplus cattle taken to New South Wales and Victoria. The big days of droving had begun.

The droughts of the middle eighties caused trouble, but the graziers held on, not knowing that the grimmer nineties were before them.

The flood in 1893 is said to have been the worst in white man's records on the Dawson country. The waters reached to the Leichhardt Tree in the shopping area and gave locals a real fright.

*Pugh's Almanac* in 1895 shows there were more than 6,000 head of horses in the Taroom Division, 151,000 cattle, nearly all of the old Durham-Shorthorn breed, but only 25,000 head of sheep. There were still two hotels.

At this stage the Government had begun to reduce the size of runs, believing that no one grazier should hold vast acreages.

It is depressing to record the havoc wrought by the drought which really started at the end of the century and went on until November, 1902. It was Queensland-wide. Water supplies hitherto considered permanent failed and thousands of head of stock died. Many graziers were ruined, and one man shot himself.

The good season of 1903 heartened the survivors. By this time another breed of beast had been introduced—the Hereford. "The good old Queensland Bally" became the favoured breed. They were a smaller type, and developed earlier and were thought to stand the hard Central Queensland conditions better.

The coach still ran from Miles, the nearest railway line. This was claimed to be the fastest coach run in Queensland. It left Miles about four in the morning; reached the Range after a change of horses at the Ten Mile; stayed again at Juandah where travellers could get a cup of tea, then set out for Taroom, 38 miles north.

When conditions were good the coach would arrive in Taroom at four o'clock in the afternoon.

### CLOSER SETTLEMENT

The move by the Government early this century to place as many people on the land as possible brought to the Upper Dawson a different class of people, i.e., farmers and the breaking up of some of the big properties, especially that of Juandah, the boundaries of which had become wider and wider. Most of it on the Dawson side was, when cleared of brigalow or prickly pear, some of the best agricultural soil in Queensland.

So we find one group of people coming overland from South Australia to take up their blocks of land; others came from Victoria. It was hard, tough work; the brigalow grew thick and dense and it meant axe and saw. In some groups the women helped on the land.

The Government, anxious to further development, made the first move to construct a railway line from Miles northwards. This took some years to build but in 1914, the first year of World War I, it reached Juandah. And there it stopped. The war, as such calamities always do, stopped progress.

The line was intended to end at Taroom, but at the conclusion of the war the prickly pear had become such a menace in good country that the plan fell through. So Taroom is still without the advantage of a railway. Eventually a line was built to Theodore, north of Taroom, connecting the middle Dawson to Rockhampton.

So Taroom, the old town, was marooned. However, today, good roads are cancelling out the handicaps under which the centre has struggled.

### DEMON PEAR CONQUERED

With the war over the prickly pear fight was on. Strangely enough the poorer land came to be more favoured by graziers; the prickly pear did not advance there.

The prickly pear story cannot be appreciated by people who saw nothing of it.

It is an epic story.

A whole province was given back to Queensland at the end of that battle. The little insect, the cactoblastis grub, did the job that poisoning, burning, ploughing-out, ploughing-in, and rolling could not do.<sup>3</sup>

Better days dawned in the thirties, although the low price of farm commodities still kept the farmers and graziers poor.

The war of 1939/1945 again robbed the Dawson Country of men and progress.

It was not until the fifties when prices rose that the Upper Dawson really prospered.

The number of beef cattle in 1962/63 was 211,000—90 per cent of them the Hereford breed. There were 7,923 dairy cattle. Production value of agriculture and dairying was £600,000; production value of the pastoral industry, £2,148,000; wheat produced amounted to 260,000 bushels and whole milk produced, 1,056,000 gallons.

The Shire has several times gained the top marks in Australia-wide wheat competition.

The towns of Taroom and Wandoan are provided with electricity by the Taroom Shire Council. Both centres have high-top schools for secondary education. The Upper Dawson River country has rich timber resources, and the stand of Spotted Gum in the Glen Haughton area is considered to be the last great stand in Queensland, perhaps Australia. Cypress also is found in quantity throughout the Shire.

In spring time after winter rains the wild flowers in the west section are worth inspection; even Leichhardt recorded some rare species.

There are a few families in the district whose name goes back many decades, some over a hundred years. The Goldens have been on Bundi for a century and Scotts on Hornet Bank. Anderson is another old name on the Upper Dawson country, also Williams, Becker, O'Sullivan, Presho, Mundells, Jerrard, McConnells and others.

These people have found the centre to their liking and descendants continue to live on Upper Dawson territory.

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3. By 1925, 60 million acres in Queensland were over-run by prickly pear. The two major pests were the common pest pear (*Opuntia mermis*, and, in Central Queensland, the spiny pest pear *Opuntia stricta*). The pest was invading another million acres annually. Professor T. Harvey Johnston in 1912-14 made two world tours in search of a suitable natural enemy for cactus. He was accompanied by the late Henry Tryon. From this investigation followed the introduction of *Cactoblastis Cactorum* at a later date (the first attempts at its establishment were unsuccessful) and the triumphant reclamation of the land. Johnston was Controller of the Commonwealth Prickly Pear Laboratories (1920-23), A. P. Dodd from 1925 to 1939. Kingsley Lewcock also did good work in this field. By 1940 the land was brought back into production as thriving farming, dairying and cattle and sheep-raising areas. (See *Triumph In The Tropics*, Cilento and Lack, p. 436.)

## OLD TOWNS OF QUEENSLAND

An aura surrounds old towns such as Gayndah, Leyburn, Drayton, Condamine, Taroom and others.

Surely ghosts walk their streets, ghosts of shepherds, who might have known the stripe of the whip on their backs and who were glad to get away from their old associations. We remember that one of the first white men in the Upper Dawson area was a ticket-of-leave man, Phillips. He proved his value on that 1844/45 trip; he was the oldest of the party and kept himself to himself very much on the journey. At times he would plant flowers in front of his tent

Leslie, the first pastoralist on the Downs, gave a good account of his ticket-of-leave men, and by his efforts one of the best of them was pardoned.

In such old towns would be found men at the other end of the social scale—men of breeding and education, men looking for adventure. There were a few who in the late fifties and very early sixties made fortunes selling their runs before the disasters occurred, such as droughts and the fall in the price of wool.

These men tried to keep up a certain style even in the bush. Some were married and took their wives with them—the Huttons of Mt. Hutton, the Millers of Kinnoul, John Scott of Palm Tree Creek.

There were the trading types too, and many of their descendants are still found in the old towns, especially Taroom. Something about the place on the river must have appealed to them. The climate was not bad . . . the ups and downs that were everywhere did not upset them unduly; there was an early school for their children to attend. Everybody knew everybody and tried to lend a helping hand when difficulties occurred.

The first hospital in Taroom was built in 1899. There was never a shortage of meat.

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During the address, stills were screened of the Robinson River Gorge, and the magnificent forest of spotted gum, claimed to be the last virgin stand of this useful timber in Queensland. An interesting picture of a shepherd's hut was also screened. It was still in a reasonable state of preservation, although at least 80 years must have elapsed since it was erected. The picture of a dingo in its native habitat completed the screening.

There was also a tape-recording of a corroboree by Arnhem Land natives, complete with didgeridoo. Mr. Norman Emmerson projected the slides, and played the tape-

recording. A poem extolling the famous scrub riders of the Dawson was recited by Mrs. Emmerson's son.

The speaker was supported in her address by Archdeacon E. Leo Hayes of Oakey, who, many years ago, was in charge of the natives in the Catholic Mission at Taroom. He related several amusing incidents and anecdotes associated with the Taroom district.