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OUR NATAL YEAR.

CHAPTER V.

QUEENSLAND IN 1860.


Thus was Queensland fairly launched on her career as a self-governing state of the Empire. The very announcement of impending separation had caused a rush of population from the southern colonies; while even the Crown tenants, who had for years regarded the movement with aversion, found much compensation in their escape from the operation of the imminent Robertson land-law which threatened free selection before survey throughout the entire area of New South Wales. The rush for new pastoral country not only attracted the most adventurous bushmen in Australia to the new colony, but also sent up the prices of sheep and cattle to fabulous rates, as country tendered for could not be held unless stocked to the prescribed minimum number. At the time a large area of coast country was occupied by sheep, and symptoms of disease were so menacing that the sales for stocking up new country proved the salvation of some of the "inside" squatters; although looked at in the light of experience it may be doubted whether the too rapid occupation of the wilderness country, then inhabited solely by the aborigines, was not partly accountable for disastrous results when the demand for stocking up ceased, and the natural water on most runs proved wholly insufficient to carry stock through the mildest drought. Still, at the time Queensland attracted a population of seasoned Australians whose colonising value was inestimable; and these in addition to many immigrants from the mother country. Consequently the colony made phenomenal progress.

A glance at the official statistics for the year 1860—the earliest available—will illustrate the insignificance, compared with the vast area of the territory held, of the population, trade, and liquid capital of the community. The total population on 31st December, 1860, was estimated at 28,056, most of these people being more or less concentrated in the towns. The rest were scattered sparsely over the country between the southern boundary and the tropic of Capricorn for a distance of about 250 miles back from the coast-line. Rockhampton was then the most northerly port of entry; the site of the present town of Bundaberg was virgin
forest, the entrance to the Burnett River from Hervey Bay being as yet unknown; Mackay, Bowen, Townsville, Ingham, Geraldton, Cairns, Port Douglas, Cooktown, and the Thursday Island settlement were non-existent; and of the coast waters beyond Keppel Bay little more was known than the narratives of Captain Cook and Lieutenant Flinders at the close of the eighteenth century disclosed.

The existence of the magnificent natural harbour of 1,000 miles in length formed by the Great Barrier Reef was undreamt of; the passage was regarded rather as one of Nature's traps for the unwary navigator than the future safe and easily traversed route of great steamship lines along a coast dotted with prosperous ports kept busy as the outlets of a richly productive hinterland.

The tropical climate of the northern coast lands was then supposed to be deadly to members of the white races; the interior was declared to be almost entirely devoid of surface water—for the greater part of the year a fiery furnace, and at intervals of capricious periodicity ravaged by destructive floods. It was assumed to be a country where the white man would wither and the coloured man thrive—a land wholly unfit for the home of civilised peoples, and only adapted to the wants of the degraded aboriginal native. It was ignorantly affirmed that the sheep stations intended to be formed in the far western country must be failures, and English experts held that under the tropical sun the sheep, if it could live in Queensland at all, would soon carry hair instead of wool. Even in Southern Queensland the agricultural possibilities of the land were sadly unappreciated. True, in the population centres there were loud preachers of the gospel of reclamation of the wilderness so that it might bud and blossom as the rose; but their homilies for the most part fell upon deaf ears—the seasoned bushman, like the great squatter, tenaciously held that even the Darling Downs would not grow a cabbage.

So backward was the farming industry that in 1860 the total area under cultivation was 3,353 acres in a country of greater extent than France and Germany combined. Of this trifling cultivated area only 196 acres were under wheat, and not an acre under sugar-cane. True, there were nearly three and a-half million sheep, half-a-million cattle, and 24,000 horses finding subsistence on the limitless but ill-watered natural pastures. But at that time the annual clip from the sheep, though wool was the chief export of the colony, totalled only 5,000,000 lb., or equal to about 1 1/2 lb. to each fleece. Mining, except for coal, of which 12,327 tons was raised in 1860, was almost non-existent, although 2,738 fine ounces of gold are shown by the statistics to have been won during the
In 1860 there was not a mile of railway either open for traffic or under construction; not a mile of electric telegraph wire; nor, save between Brisbane and Ipswich, was there a formed or metalled road, the only avenues of transport being along the bridle path or the teamsters' track. The country was destitute of culverts and bridges over watercourses, and the so-called roads were impassable for days, weeks, or even months in succession after the seasonal rains. The northern shipping trade was limited to a small steamer running once a fortnight between Brisbane, Maryborough, and Rockhampton, but even that had been arranged after the proclamation of the colony, partly to meet administration exigencies, with the assistance of the new Government. A fortnightly steamer from Sydney ran direct to Maryborough, and another to Rockhampton, with the apparent object of discouraging mutual intercourse among the ports. A weekly steamer ran between Brisbane and Sydney, in addition to a few small sailing craft for cargo purposes.

Although Sir George Bowen declared that on arrival he found nothing in the Treasury save a few coppers, the revenue for the first year reached £178,589. The expenditure for the year 1860 was £17,086 less than the revenue, yet, through the Government having to lean upon the banks in December, 1859, there was an overdraft of over £19,000 at the end of the first year. But the banks themselves had little money among them, the net assets slightly exceeding half a million sterling, and the aggregate deposits totalling less than a quarter of a million. At the end of 1860, out of the 28,000 people in the colony 163 were "small capitalists" with an aggregate of £7,545, or about £46 per depositor, in the Savings Bank. Yet there were six charitable institutions in which 397 persons found relief. Of subscribers to "public libraries" there were 538, and they had at their disposal 5,000 volumes from which to select reading for the leisure hour. There were 41 schools, with a total of 1,890 pupils. The number of letters posted showed a low degree of cultivation, for the average number posted as well as received by each person was just seven a year, or slightly more than one every two months. Of newspapers a rather fewer number passed through the post office. Surely all these things were on a microscopic scale, recollecting that the people of Queensland had been endowed with autonomous government, and had unfettered control of more than one-fifth of the total area of Australia.

Old Queenslanders who still survive, and can meditate retrospectively upon the past, will be impressed with the marvellous optimism of all classes of the population 50 years ago. The townspeople, enfranchised with most political power by reason of their numbers, knew little of the dormant resources of the inland country or its climatic vagaries. They could not realise the privations, the hard labour, and the deadly monotony
of early settlement upon the land. The farmer had usually no market, and in raising his produce he had to contend against droughts, floods, pests, and isolation, and he was fortunate if his produce brought from the store-keeper the cost of rations on which his family could frugally subsist. The squatter, too, incurred enormous risks, though he had a market for his wool at all times; and, if there was no domestic consumption of sheep and cattle upon which he could rely, his surplus stock brought a fair return from the boiling-down pots. But he had to get his produce to port before a money return could be secured; and as pastoral settlement pushed further out transport obstacles were often crushing. It was no unusual occurrence for one wool clip to be detained on a remote station until the next year's shearing had commenced. A lien had therefore usually to be given on the clip, and the rate of interest, including agent's commission, was commonly 12 per cent. per annum, while the high carriage rate made rations extremely costly; so that even with good seasons the margin of profit was small. In bad years ruin became well-nigh inevitable. The pioneer squatter spent most of his strenuous life in the saddle, alternately worried by bad seasons, low prices, and his bank overdraft. It is easy, therefore, to understand the temptation which assailed him to regard as his own the country which he had reclaimed at the expense of his vitality as well as his capital. When he visited town after a term of voluntary exile human nature often asserted itself, and the holiday-making squatter disbursed his hard-earned money with a prodigal hand, a fact not forgotten by his political opponents. The shepherd, too, yielded to temptation, and at the end of a year's solitary life in his bush hut longed for nothing so much as an alcoholic stimulant or a bottle of pickles and gay human society. Thus he prodigally knocked down his cheque in town, and in a week or two again abandoned civilisation at the call of the bush. Fifty years ago the urban people perhaps lived almost as comfortably as they do to-day, but the bushman, whether farmer, squatter, shepherd, or stockman, had usually a life of exhausting labour, bad food, dull surroundings, and often in consequence indifferent health. Still the landless colonist of 1860 had unbounded faith in his country; and if he fought earnestly, sometimes passionately, against what he termed squatting encroachment, it is now apparent that had not the pastoral tenure been jealously limited by Parliament insurmountable obstacles would have been placed in the path of progress. In future pages of this work it will be seen that the often too sanguine anticipations of individual colonists of Queensland's natal year were rudely shattered by stern experience; while, on the other hand, the opening up of unsuspected resources as often enriched the general community.