

An Early West-Country Sheep Farmer in Australia

By JOHN ROWE

THE unhappy decades through which British farming passed after Waterloo ended the long French Wars also saw the emergence of south-eastern Australia as the wool-farm of Britain. The development had begun even in the days when British settlements in Australia had been limited to convicts and their guardian jailers. Once Merino and other good wool breeds proved successful in Australia, and once explorers had revealed the lush grazing country in parts of the Murray-Darling valley, emigrants began to go to what was now hopefully designated *Australia Felix* to mark it off from convict-tainted Botany Bay and Van Diemen's Land. Many of them were farmers, like the Henty family of Sussex¹ but there were others who went out intent on following a pastoral career, and one of them was a naval lieutenant, James Ross Lawrence, who for some years had been the Preventive Officer at Looe in Cornwall, a fishing port that had its fair proportion—if not more—of those who had a constitutional aversion to paying the customs and excises demanded by H.M.'s revenue service.

Lawrence seems to have left to "superintend a very extensive sheep station near Melbourne", where he arrived in April 1842. In September 1843, a letter he had written to a female relation or friend was published in the *Exeter Flying Post*,² with some editorial prefatory remarks indicating that "several persons have gone to the Colony at the request and under the advice of Lieutenant Lawrence, and all are doing well," and that since free emigration to 'Port Philip' had been resumed

Lawrence's letter was likely to be of interest to "many among our Western readers [who] may probably be directing their attention to the subject," i.e. of emigration. The editor pointed out that the letter contained much "interesting information" about the climate, soil, natural productions, and mode of life of the settlers, and then directed the reader's attention to Lieutenant Lawrence's statements with regard to the "miserable servants the settlers are obliged to put up with, and would take this opportunity of reminding respectable and industrious persons in that station of the comfortable homes and very good wages which are awaiting them at the hands of their countrymen in the above fine Colony."³

Lawrence wrote: "My new occupation began in April last. The dray⁴ drawn by eight fine oxen arrived at Melbourne the 25th March and on the 27th I started with my bedding and boxes by that conveyance." He did not mention that this was the beginning of the antipodean autumn, but went on: "We were a week on the road; and every night I stretched my bed on the grass, and enjoyed sleep in a manner you people of England can hardly imagine, not having the least idea of the climate we have."

It is possible that the former lieutenant regarded the ox-wagon transport as somewhat old-fashioned; in the country he had left horse carriages had long been the most general mode of transportation and were, in fact, already being superseded by rail. Pioneering in colonial communities inevitably involved some considerable sacrifice of

¹ M. M. Bassett, *The Hentys*, Oxford, 1954.

² i.e. 'Port Philip'.

³ Bullock-dray transport is briefly mentioned by A. Barnard, *The Australian Wool Market, 1840-1900*, Melbourne, 1958, pp. 50, 81, 182.

⁴ *Exeter Flying Post*, 14 September 1843.

the comforts and amenities of civilization; and on his arrival at the 'station' or farm, Lawrence found: "a hut constructed of slabs and covered with bark, ready for my reception; one apartment serves for parlour and kitchen, the other as a bedroom. My first care was to look to the sheep, which numbered then two thousand four hundred, and I found them as fine as any I have seen in the Colony; very soon we had a large increase for the lambing season had begun. I have often seen as many as nine hundred lambs at their gambols and on many occasions have I stopped my horse to witness their innocent frolics."

For some reason the ex-seafarer did not indicate to the western farmers who read the *Exeter Flying Post* why, on this sheep station, autumn and not spring was the lambing season. The most likely explanation of this fact is that in this district sheepmen had taken advantage of the long breeding season of the Merino to arrange lambing for autumn to benefit from richer spring grazings following winter rains, so avoiding the rare and thin pickings that resulted from the over-prevalent summer droughts. It is, however, just possible that these sheep, like Lawrence, were fairly recently arrived British 'immigrants' and it would take a few seasons to change their lambing season to the more general time of spring (September).¹ Nor does Lawrence anywhere make the slightest suggestion that drought was a bugbear to the sheep-keepers of *Australia Felix*; pioneers in that region had, it is obvious, arrived during a moist climate cycle; later arrivals were to be less fortunate. The only thing that struck Lawrence as being somewhat 'extraordinary' was that he himself "brought up to employment so opposite should feel an interest in sheep, but some way or other I liked it directly after I arrived, and that liking has increased to such a degree, that if they were to offer me the best appointment the Colonial Government could give, I would reject the offer, preferring wool growing to any other occupation. I may say generally that *I rise with the ewe and go to*

bed with the crow; indeed our whole life is as near a return to the good old customs of by-gone years in England, as the difference of climate will admit; and as our drink, except in time of sheep-washing, is tea or water, we are a sober, steady sort. I have two fine horses, one for saddle or harness, the other I generally ride."

Possibly the convivial assemblies of sheepmen when flocks were brought together to be washed preparatory to shearing,² a practice that does not seem to have been particularly necessary in Australia and which, in fact, has largely died out in Britain since 1914, reminded Lawrence of features of the 'free-trade' profession which it had formerly been his business, as a preventive officer, to suppress. Pioneer existence in the Australian 'bush', however, may well have been more staid and sober than one would expect; certainly it lacked the Bacchanalian undertones of the rum-sodden jailers and convicts of Botany Bay a generation earlier and of gold miners a decade or so later.

In any event farmers with an eye to quicker and more substantial profits have tended to be rather more inclined to temperance than the majority of men. At the time Lawrence was writing such material prospects, indeed, were glowing for "We have had very good success in lambing, numbering now about three thousand eight hundred, and we gather like snow balls as we go. I expect that next month and April will add a thousand more, and eventually it will be a concern which will pay more handsome interest for the money than anything at home—like any business commenced in England, of course, all at first is outlay, but after the two first years I shall send home a good return. I feel the deepest interest in the undertaking, and devote all my time and attention to it; but in fact the duties are a pleasure, and I am heartily glad that I have exchanged the sea for a land life."

The figures that Lawrence gives might give rise to some speculation and queries by English sheep-farmers. His first flock in-

¹ I am indebted to Dr M. L. Ryder for information on Australian sheep-breeding seasons.

² A. Barnard, *The Australian Wool Market*, p. 15.

crease, apparently by lambing and not by additional purchase, from 2,400 to 3,800, would have been good in any wool-producing flock when there was little if any mutton-market to cull off surplus male sheep. A third of Lawrence's original flock may well have been under breeding age; he almost certainly had less than a hundred working rams and for fifteen hundred ewes to produce fourteen hundred lambs on the extensive grazing ranges of Australia at that time would have been excellent indeed. Yet one is left to surmise why, in the coming season, Lawrence expected a lamb crop of only a thousand, which would not be an excessive increase to expect in Australia from fourteen or fifteen hundred breeding ewes.¹

Lawrence, however, was going in, naturally enough on a pioneering frontier, for self-sufficing husbandry. Some types of livestock were liable to be more troublesome than others, while certain crops were prolific and others unexpected failures. He wrote: "I have two cows (both yielding milk, and I get now cream butter as well as milk) besides a heifer calf, a pretty young creature, and three steers that will certainly come in as yokers [i.e. as draught animals]. I have abundance of fowls, and therefore obtain eggs as I want them, and yesterday I found two broods of young ones, one six, the other eight. Immediately after my arrival, I set to work, putting up a fence to enclose about an acre as a garden, the fence was of a fashion I had seen in America, which, without nails, was nevertheless pig-proof; begging of one and borrowing of another, I got together a goodly variety of seeds, and planted at the proper season, peas, beans, onions, carrots, turnips, cabbages,

etc. etc. All I planted came to great perfection, except my carrots, which went to seed; peas I had plenty of, and my onions, although put in without manure of any sort, grew to a very large size, and were almost as mild as the Portuguese onions; cucumbers I have also had abundance of, and with a flavour I never yet met with in England. My melons are just getting ripe. The castor-oil plant, which is a beautiful one, has grown to great perfection, and my Indian corn grew to ten feet, but was blighted and is useless to the purposes intended, namely my fowls, who, ever and anon, fixed many a longing look at the stalks as they were advancing to maturity."

In Lawrence's new Eden, however, the ideal female element was lacking. He described "having plenty of vegetables, the richest milk which, in the hands of a Devonshire or Cornish woman, would turn out *scald cream butter*, not to be excelled by either of the counties; also mutton, which I would challenge England to surpass. You would conclude that my living is of no ordinary kind; but unfortunately the cook is wanting, for although, as an Irish woman, the bullock-drivers' wife is about the best importation from the Emerald Isle, still a girl of your training at the age of ten years would have considerably more of housewifery than she. This woman attends upon me, and notwithstanding I have scolded her into habits somewhat more cleanly than were at first exhibited, still she is brutally ignorant of those duties so well understood by English women. What would you think of a woman—a married woman—deficient in the knowledge of salting meat? Why, there were three of these Irish married women here at one time, and not one

¹ The annual 'lamb-crop' almost defies generalization. Normally in Britain a ewe has one or two lambs, but triplets are fairly common. Fertility varies with particular breeds and crosses, but over and above this must be reckoned lamb—and ewe—survival and mortality. Although Australian climatic conditions on the whole must be regarded as decidedly more favourable than those in England, this may have been offset by less attention being given to larger flocks throughout the entire breeding season while certain breeds, including the Merino, are much less prolific than others. In Victoria at this time it seems that an average of 8 lambs per 10 breeding ewes would not be excessively prolific; Arthur Young in his *Survey of the Agriculture of Norfolk* (1803) mentions that in some of the early years of the century one flock of 160 'New Leicesters' produced only 100 lambs, whereas a Southdown flock of 630 produced 830 as against another 'crop' of 645 lambs being borne by a flock of 600 ewes. For the object of prolificacy in Australian sheep *vide* R. H. Watson, 'Reproduction in Sheep' in *The Simple Fleece*, ed. A. Barnard, pp. 67 *et seq.*, Melbourne, 1962, while the topic in England is briefly treated by J. F. H. Thomas, *Sheep*, 1946 edition, pp. 58-60.

of them could cure a bit of mutton, and I was actually compelled to seek the assistance of men to do it for me. Where such is the case, you may easily imagine how great the destruction is in a warm climate, and there is more wasted in the shape of mutton taking all the Port Philip district together, than would be required to feed the whole of the poor in the Western counties. As I looked more narrowly into things than many other persons in charge of stations, perhaps there was less [waste] here than in many other places; but this was owing to my mollyng, as I made the pickle myself after the same manner as well as I could remember you adapted. About a month since I called at a station, and there were two whole sheep just throwing away to the dogs that had spoiled from mismanagement; the fact was they were killed about sunrise, and every effort to make the meat take the salt of a hot day was unavailing, and the whole stank aloud. I always kill *after* sunset, and salt *before* sunrise the following morning. A more kindly climate cannot be found, for whether one is wet or dry—sleeping in the open air or under cover—disease appears to keep aloof, and, in fact, I have arisen from the grass of a morning as much refreshed as I ever did from the softest bed old England ever found me.”

Lawrence then proceeded to praise the ‘simple’ pastoral life, marred, however, slightly by the ignorance of his Hibernian housekeeper: “As to clothes, we require very little here, and thanks be, the quality is of no consequence, for there are neither forenoon or afternoon visits to be made, excepting to the sheep; and they don’t appear to care if I appear before them without a coat—an article, by the way, which I wear about once in three months. I had a pair of worsted stockings, good everywhere except in the heels, and I gave the Irishwoman, mentioned in another part, some worsted, requesting she would mend them. Judge my surprise, when instead of worsted, I found a piece of black cloth let in after the manner you would patch a pair of trousers; the truth was, she did not understand darning, so I removed the cloth and darned them myself.”

The one-time sailor then proceeded to pen one of the most lyrical accounts of *Australia Felix*, and this was probably the main reason his letter was communicated to and published in the Exeter paper—to promote emigration to the future colony of Victoria by agriculturists and agricultural workers of south-west England.

“On the banks of the Murray, which I visited the other day,” he wrote, “although during the very height of summer, the grass was as green as a leek, and, notwithstanding my horse stands fifteen hands high, in some places it was a foot and a half above her head—the earth a deep black mould, I sat down, struck a light, and commenced smoking, whilst the horses began eating, and filled themselves without moving two yards; it was a delightful day, for although the rays of the sun were ardent, and the sky cloudless, yet a refreshing breeze was blowing from the southward, and all nature was smiling round me. How happy might a family man be here, who had the means of building and cultivating; here every necessity in the shape of food for men, as well almost every luxury, might be raised in the greatest abundance; the water of the Murray, with that of the Goulburn, equals any either of Millbrook or the two Looes, and fish of various sorts, all excellent (we caught fourteen and made a gridiron of green sticks to broil them on), with lobsters, shrimps, and mussels, are all plentiful.

“The Fort Philip district has sufficient rain, as not a crop has yet been lost from drought. Our last spring, tell all my farm friends with kind remembrance, was as fine and growing a one as was ever experienced in Cornwall. The weather alternating between sunshine and shower in a climate genial as ours; everything grows with astonishing rapidity, and my peas were up and ripe in a crack. This sort of weather continued until the wheat required no more rain; the operations of agriculture in places remote from towns are carried on in so slovenly and careless a manner that the results do not fairly test the capabilities of the land; if we had such men as GR working out here, an acre would

carry what two can hardly now perform, everything in this country will be very cheap from the great abundance—butter, which formerly made 2s. 6d. per lb. is now 1s., and so of everything else including bread.”

Possibly neither Lawrence nor the lady to whom he wrote realized the ominous note his closing lines struck. The Old Country was

suffering and enduring what became notorious as the ‘hungry forties’. *Australia Felix* plunged into a slump before the end of the year in which Lawrence wrote, and a season or two later the antipodean flockmasters could get only a monetary return from their sheep by slaughtering them off and boiling them down for tallow.⁴

⁴ S. H. Roberts, *The Squatting Age in Australia*, pp. 234 *et seq.*; E. O. G. Shann, *An Economic History of Australia*, pp. 105 *et seq.*

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Sheep farming is a significant industry in New Zealand. According to 2007 figures reported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, there are 39 million sheep in the country (a count of about 10 per individual). The country has the highest density of sheep per unit area in the world. For 130 years, sheep farming was the country's most important agricultural industry, but it was overtaken by dairy farming in 1987. Sheep numbers peaked in New Zealand in 1982 to 70 million. Sheep farmer John Ryrie, who has been lambing since he was 14, explains the fine art of how to produce the best milk. "This means, weather permitting, cutting the grass in early May, when it is at its most nutritious, for silage – fermented, high-moisture fodder. An important part of Ryrie's job is to make sure the fields produce good quality grass, supplemented with cereal. The silage is piled into huge mounds, covered by tarpaulin, weighed down by rubber tyres." He wants to see more sheep farmers in Britain in the belief that sheep milking can be a financially rewarding business for a family farm. "In this country, sheep milk production is only a cottage industry and demand is greater than supply," says Ryrie, whose eldest son may well be following in his stepfather's footsteps. When sheep farmers talk about growing wool, that's exactly what they mean. The ultra soft, blindingly white merino wool originates from the back of the male ram, female ewe and baby lamb. The best farmers in the world make sure the grass, earth, air and shelter are of unprecedented quality. Furthermore they analyze the genetics and DNA of their new sheep every year, and always pair the best male and female in order to; grow wool. Many farmers call their lifeline and future fabric "the white", and they are proud of what they have managed to evolve and produce during the last two centuries. The f