

Continuity and Change in the Northern  
Territory Pastoral Industry 1933-1965  
With particular reference to the  
Victoria River District.

This Thesis is submitted for  
the Honours Degree in History  
at Murdoch University.

I declare this thesis is an  
account of my research.



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# ABSTRACT

In 1933 the Commonwealth Government, beset with problems created by the Depression and aware of the threat posed by Japanese expansionist moves in Asia, had to face up to another problem: the Northern Territory was becoming an increasingly more costly burden to administer and seemed in no way ready to prosper. Chief among the factors contributing to the situation was the economic failure of the Territory's pastoral industry. By establishing a Committee of Inquiry to investigate the industry the Commonwealth hoped to find a means of dealing with the difficulties. In fact by 1950 (and two more surveys later) little had changed, and the industry continued to flounder.

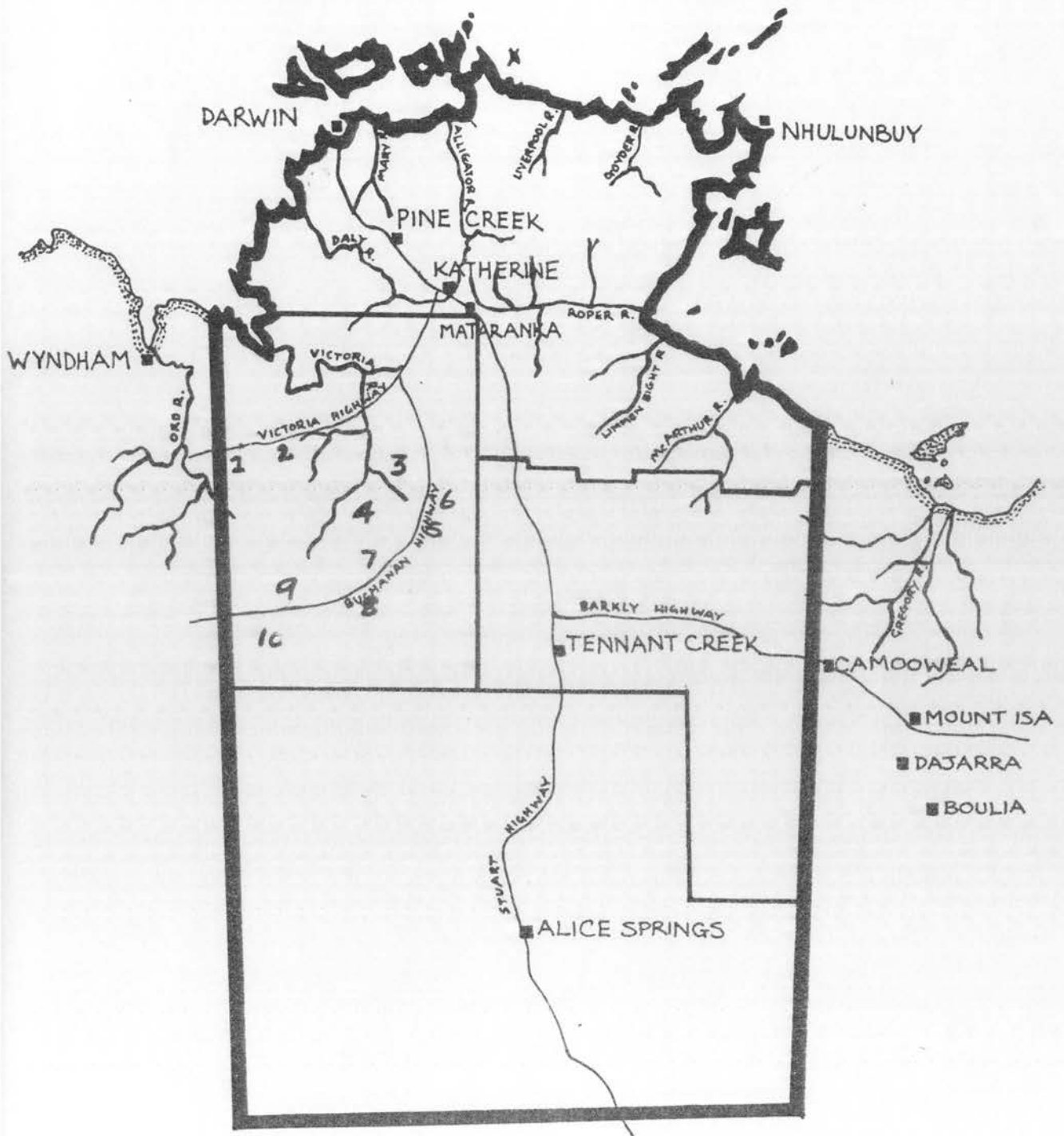
But social and political forces generated by the Second World War were to combine to force change - the presence of a large number of Servicemen and Allied Works Council personnel in the Territory during the War served to break down its isolation from the rest of Australia. The scene had been set by 1948 when J.H. Kelly, commissioned by the Bureau of Agriculture Economic to undertake a survey of the cattle industry in the North, came and began his long crusade to improve conditions in the industry.

This thesis examines the industry between 1933 and 1965 for an understanding of the factors of continuity and change that affected it. Kelly's thesis that major restructuring, particularly in the area of land utilization, was necessary is tested against the evidence. In the absence of secondary sources the analysis is based on archival material, oral evidence and government report. Four major areas are analysed: Northern Development i.e. the context in which the industry was placed; The Pastoral Industry, and special mention is made of Vestey's role; The Aborigines, archival evidence is used to give the background to change in their status and role in the industry; The Victoria River District, a case study of a new station, Camfield, commenced in 1953 on undeveloped land resumed from Victoria River Downs Station Lease - the district was one of the worst examples of land abuse and mismanagement in the Territory.

This dissertation contributes new material to the historiography of the Northern Territory and of the pastoral industry. It shows that changes did happen and that those changes led to improvements in the social and economic

aspects of the industry. The evidence supports the view that change was wrought by individuals (Kelly, the Aborigines, and the Vandeleurs on Camfield Station) who creatively responded to the physical environment of the Territory in the face of strong opposition from Vestey's and the conservative attitude of Commonwealth Governments.

# NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA



**Key:** 1 Rosewood 2 Auvergne 3 Killarney  
 4 Victoria River Downs 5 Montejinni 6 Top Springs  
 7 Camfield 8 Wave Hill 9 Limbunya 10 Inverway

## INTRODUCTION

The history of a century of occupancy of the cattle lands of the remote regions of Northern Australia is largely one of primitive animal husbandry; of inefficient low-investment production on low rental, inadequately improved leasehold of an outmoded open-range system of cattle grazing in some parts to the lasting detriment of the native pastures and vegetation through over-grazing.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory since 1911 remains unwritten.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of an article by Fred Rose in 1953<sup>3</sup>, secondary source materials related to the industry and its remarkable lack of success, have been the works of agricultural economists and agricultural scientists. Much of the source materials exists only in typescript form, unpublished government reports and in archival collections held in Darwin and Canberra.

One of the major contributors in the field of agricultural economics was J.H. Kelly who produced between 1949 and the early 1970s a substantial body of writing on the pastoral industry. Most of Kelly's work is available in report form, but he published two books: Struggle for the North and Beef in Northern Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Kelly was sent to the Territory in 1948 by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (B.A.E.) to collect data and report on the pastoral industry. His books, based on the field work experience, were an attempt to draw public attention to the situation in the North. He argued that poor management of land and herds by managers employed by absentee leaseholders of over large stations was the combination of factors contributing most to the failure of

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1. Kelly, J.H., Struggle for the North (Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1966) p.20.
  2. The history of the pastoral industry up to 1910 has been undertaken at least once: Duncan, R., The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910, (M.U.P., Melbourne, 1967).
  3. Rose, F.G.G., "The Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory during the period of Commonwealth Administration, 1911-1953" in Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand, Vol. 6, 1954, pp.150-172.
  4. Kelly, J.H. Beef in Northern Australia, (A.N.U., Press, Canberra, 1971).

the industry. In addition poor transport systems and lack of markets combined to make matters worse.

Kelly's view was that land reform was essential and the Commonwealth should (i) break up the big leases (in 1950 some were over 6,000 square miles), (ii) insist on resident owner management, (iii) control development by attaching strict conditions on leaseholders (iv) create perpetual leasehold subject to those conditions. To support his argument he cited the case of Rosewood Station, a small holding owned and managed by Jack Kilfoyle in the Victoria River District. Kilfoyle, had over a period of nearly 20 years, established a well run profitable station in a district which generally demonstrated the worst aspects of land abuse.

Partly as a response to Kelly's advise, but also to open land for soldier settlement, the Commonwealth created three new leases in 1952, Montejinnie, Killarney and Camfield, from land resumed from Victoria River Downs (V.R.D.) Station. The leases were small, none were larger than 1,200 square miles, and had strict conditions attached. They presented the opportunity for Kelly's thesis to be tested.

In the absence of secondary source materials this dissertation has been largely based on an analysis of primary sources illustrating continuity and change in the Northern Territory pastoral industry 1933-1965. These have been used to test Kelly's thesis that a small station in the Victoria River district run by a resident owner, along the principles established by Kilfoyle, could increase carrying capacity from one beast: 2 square miles to one beast: one square mile. Camfield Station was chosen for the case study because of the availability of primary sources, including oral evidence.

The three new stations can be viewed as "new" from more than one perspective: they were recent in the terms of a 70 year span of pastoralism in the district; two of the owner managers, Vandeleur on Camfield and Tapp on Montejinnie (later on Killarney), had recently arrived in the Territory; the management practices and land utilization policy they employed were new (at least) insofar as no-one in the district, other than Kilfoyle, had followed them. Finally they were new in the sense that they represented a change in official policy.

To understand the changes exemplified by the "new" stations it has been necessary to distinguish between those components of the industry which represented continuity and those which represented change.

When the new stations began in the early 1950s the pastoral industry had long been depressed. Kelly's survey was the third major field work survey of the industry 'designed to investigate the industry's problems', a Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee had been commissioned by the Commonwealth in 1933 to undertake a station by station survey in the Territory.<sup>5</sup> And in 1937 J.W. Fletcher and Labbatt-Payne investigated the industry as part of their broader inquiry into Land and Land Utilization in North Australia.<sup>6</sup> In each of their reports these committees noted the failure of pastoralists to come to terms with the physical environmental factors of the country they were grazing. They made particular reference to the problems of mismanagement and land abuse in the Victoria River District.

One of the major differences between the circumstances of the Kelly inquiry and the two earlier ones was that Kelly undertook his survey after the Second World War when there was an atmosphere of cautious optimism for Northern Development. Australia had emerged from the Depression and the War with a sense of national purpose - politicians, public servants and people generally were committed to the "New Jerusalem". There was hope at last of Government action in the North. During the earlier years of the 1930s and early 40s the concept of Northern Development had been debated in parliament, in the press and published works, but little had happened other than Government inquiries.

During the whole of the period 1933-65, the pastoral industry and northern development were bound together. Parliamentary debates of the 1930s for example show that Australians clung to a nostalgic view of pastoralism, and that it was commonly expected that beef cattle raising would provide the economic base for development in the Territory. The view persisted despite the facts of the situation: the industry in effect generated almost no income for producers and actually cost the Commonwealth money.

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5. Report of the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee (Shepherd Report), unpublished typescript held in Australian Archives, Darwin.

6. Report of the Board of Inquiry: Land and Land Industries in the Northern Territory of Australia (Fletcher-Payne Report) (Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1937).

The 1930s inquiries highlighted two issues, transport and land use, which were raised again by Kelly. And the "new" stations were affected by the issues particularly during the early years of development. Paul Vandenleur, owner manager of Camfield, took a public stand on the question of transport when he argued in 1963 before a Senate Public Works Committee for resiting of a proposed beef road.<sup>7</sup> It was a courageous action in support of the little men<sup>8</sup> on the new stations and taken in opposition to Vesteys whose station Wave Hill was Camfield's neighbour.

The Vesteys Company was another of the factors of continuity in the pastoral industry in the Territory, especially in the Victoria River District. They were not good neighbours largely because their stations were not managed in the interests of the industry as a whole. Indeed there is evidence to support my contention that Vesteys were interested more in holding onto large tracts of land than in good management, development or progress. (They appear strangely enough content to let their Territory stations run down). Until the mid 1960s the Vesteys stations in the Victoria River district were run along the old lines, employing outmoded and unprofitable practices and dependent on cheap, or even free, Aboriginal labour. And while Kelly argued publicly for the need for change Vesteys Lobbied in Canberra for maintenance of the status quo.

The changes within the industry came after World War II partly in response to some stimulation by Government through, for example, the Beef Roads Scheme of the 1960S, but largely because of the commitment and hard work of a number of little men prepared to take risks. An opportunity for some of them was created by the release of land for new stations. And the families on the new stations used the opportunity, despite physical and economic hardship, to great advantage.

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7. Minutes of Evidence taken by Committee Investigating Top Springs to Wave Hill Road, N.T. (Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1963).
  8. In the Northern Territory individuals owning and running a cattle station, or engaged in a small mining venture, are commonly referred to as "little" or "small" men. This title distinguishes them from the company owned and managed ventures.

But perhaps the most dramatic change was brought about by Aborigines. During the War many of the station Aborigines had been employed by the Army in camps along the Stuart Highway. The experience of sharing on a roughly equal basis with white men helped create the conditions for change, a situation not left unnoticed. Both within Government and the big pastoral companies people monitored these events and acted to stall dramatic change. More surveys were commissioned, more conferences held, but in the end the Aborigines acted. In 1966 stockmen on Newcastle Waters and Wave Hill went on strike over pay and conditions. Significantly, some of the Wave Hill people, having refused to return to work there, went to work on Camfield for Paul Vandenleur.

An evaluation of the facts of continuity and of change establishes that Kelly's contention regarding the need for change and the potential for success was correct. The structure of the thesis has thus been designed to place the new stations in the Victoria River district in the context of continuity and change in the N.T. pastoral industry.

Chapter I examines the form and substance of the debate over the question of Northern Development in the period 1930-1965. It is based on an analysis of mainly secondary sources and parliamentary debates which highlight the issues: Defence and Population, the number and nature of Government Inquiries and Transport.

Chapter 2 addresses the problems endemic to pastoral industry in the North. It examines archival material and government reports for evidence to test Kelly's thesis and as well for evidence of change and continuity. In this chapter I open up the question of Vestey's relationship with the Commonwealth Government and its role in the industry particularly in the Victoria River district during the period 1933 - 1965. The evidence supports my view that Vestey's actively created a unique relationship with the Government (something other large companies such as Bovril did not do) and exploited that relationship to maintain a privileged position not necessarily in the best interests of the industry.

In Chapter 3 the role of Aborigines in the industry is examined from two perspectives: an Aboriginal view based on Aboriginal historical material; and an employer view based on archival materials. In the second instance

changes linked with World War II, and the subsequent conditions for change in the later 1940s, are pre-eminent. In this chapter material related to Vestey's employment of Aborigines has been included.

Chapter 4 is a Case Study of Camfield. The questions raised here are: why was the pastoral industry in the Victoria River district depressed in the 1940s, and how was that manifested? Could change be effected and would change necessarily mean improvement? And what were the special circumstances in which the "new" stations, especially Camfield, developed? This section shows that the "new" stations created improvement in the industry by carrying forward Kilfoyle's ideas and giving a lead to others.

In the absence of secondary source material the argument is based on archival and oral sources and contributes new material to the historiography of the pastoral industry and of the Northern Territory. In other words this dissertation carries forward the early work of F.G. Rose on the history of the Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory since 1911.

## CHAPTER 1

NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

But emptiness is apparently provocative whatever the fact about resources.<sup>1</sup>

Northern Development is a term, a concept, hardly a reality. Yet there is a history of Northern Development that spans nearly a century.

In the Northern Territory, as in Western Australia, the tropical north proved to be a drain on resources of government, on the energies of local colonisers and on a nation which hoped to create in the north a white bulwark against the menace of Asian invasion. Hopes for development were high in the late 19th Century based, in the main, on stories from explorers and early settlers of good pastures, wide rivers, auriferous soil, apparently tractable natives and co-incidentally, on prospects for trade with South East Asia.

But as C.L.A. Abbott remarked in 1933 during one of the Canberra debates on the north:

the Northern Territory is the only place that Great Britain definitely failed to colonize... Eventually the Territory was taken over by South Australia, because the other colonies realized its development would impose upon them an unduly heavy burden. However, South Australia pluckily faced the task, but in 1920 was glad to surrender the Territory to the Commonwealth.<sup>2</sup>

Defence and Population

Governments persisted with settlement, and continued to plan for development, in the north largely because the fear of invasion from Asia persisted. It was a commonly held view for a century between the 1860s and the 1960s that Australia needed a white population there to act as a deterrent to land hungry Asians.

Ironically, one of the major capital works projects of the late 19th century, the North-South railway line, was dependent on indentured Chinese

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1. Lambert, C.R., "A Survey of Transport Needs" in Northern Australia: Task for a Nation, (A. & R., Sydney, 1954), p.107.
  2. Abbott, C.L.A., Commonwealth Parliamentary Debate (C.P.D.), House of Representatives (H. of R.), 29 September 1939).

men for labour. Between the 1870s and the early 20th century most of the fresh produce provided for the white population in Darwin was grown by Chinese market gardeners. Pearling and trepanging survived because of the Indonesian, Malay, Japanese and Torres Strait men who worked in the industries, and Chinese were the dominant racial group on the Top End goldfields.

Governments involved in administering the north were aware that development would require massive capitalization and skilled project development. Neither was beyond the capacity of Australia, but the north did not rank high on the list of priorities in resource development. Successively South Australia,<sup>3</sup> the Commonwealth and Western Australia<sup>4</sup> looked beyond Australia for groups of immigrant settlers who might be prepared to work for the development of the north. The failure of the Commonwealth experiment of divided administration of the Territory, led in the early 30s to the government seriously considering giving support to chartered Company activity in the Northern Territory.

During the 1930s the imminence of war in Europe and the growing realization that Japan posed a potential threat to Australia combined to heighten public consciousness of Australia's under-populated and under-developed north. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates for the period of 1932-1938 record a number of references to the peril of Asian invasion. Fear of invasion was compounded by an expressed moral stance that we were as a nation wasting land and its resources.<sup>5</sup>

Gregory, the member for Swan, spoke of this during a 1932 debate in the House of Representatives:

It must be realised that our empty north is a great menace to the rest of the Commonwealth, for, living in a comparatively close proximity to the coast of Northern Australia are many strong and virile races whose countries are over

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3. Donovan, P.F., A Land Full of Possibilities, Ch. 8 pp.168-171. (Unl of Q. Press, St. Lucia, 1981).
  4. Steinberg, J., "A Jewish Settlement in the Kimberleys", Australian Quarterly, (A.Q.), March 1940, pp.24-30.
  5. C.P.D., H. of R., 25 October, 24 November, 4 December 1933, interalia

populated. The teeming millions of the East are looking for room in which to live. How could we justify, before a League of Nations tribunal, our right to hold North Australia, seeing that we have done nothing to develop it? We took this country from the blacks, and our sole right to retain it is in the fact that we are developing it.<sup>6</sup>

In March, 1933 Nelson, member for the Northern Territory, referred specifically to the Japanese expansionist moves towards Manchuria and inferred that the Northern Territory would appear even more attractive to the Japanese. In his opinion: "The means of defending North Australia is to populate and develop it."<sup>7</sup>

Gregory returned to the matter late in 1933,<sup>8</sup> and Stacey, member for Adelaide, spoke in much the same way in 1936.<sup>9</sup> Blain, the new member for the Northern Territory speaking in the Adjournment of 18 May, 1938 referred to the Payne Commission Report and urged that the recommendations of the Report be implemented "in the interests of the development of the Northern Territory, as well as the defence of Australia."<sup>10</sup>

Defence, given as the main reason for the need to populate and develop was a common theme during the 1930s and 1940s in literature written about the north. Australia's Empty Spaces published in 1937 addressed the matter squarely if somewhat dramatically. Upton wrote:

It is not possible to read the inscrutable mind of Japan, but Australians would be wise to take time by the forelock and enter into an arrangement with Great Britain on a basis, which while helping to confirm them in the possession of their continent, would give Great Britain a stronger status in the Antipodes and several millions of people of British stock, while still obtainable, a definite stake in the Commonwealth. Failing this, even an arrangement with Germany or Italy would be better than the present policy of complacency. In all probability the road for Japan to take has long been chosen, but in any case Australians have reason to fear the figure of the little yellow man looming over the Southern Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

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6. C.P.D., H. of R., 15 September 1932.

7. C.P.D., H. of R., 29 November 1933.

9. C.P.D., H. of R., 12 May 1936.

10. C.P.D., H. of R., 18 May 1936.

11. Upton, S., Australia's Empty Spaces, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., U.K. 1938), pp. 267-8. References of a similar nature can be found in Connigrave, C. Price., North Australia, (Jonathon Cope, London, 1941)p.247, Casey, R.C., Double or Quit, (F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1949) p.23.

To a very large extent the events of 1943-43 with Japanese air-raids on Darwin, Wyndham and Broome supported these views even though Japan did not actually invade Australia.

At the end of the war, H.C. Coombs as Director of Post-War Reconstruction, and as one personally very interested in Northern Australia, concluded:

that development would be justified only by defence considerations and recommended that if the Government decided to proceed it should set up a 'defence area' incorporating parts of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland and establish an Authority with power to plan and control development to the extent considered necessary by Defence authorities.<sup>12</sup>

In any case the arguments whether the defence of Australia necessitated northern development became quite academic when the facts of northern development are examined. Baldly stated: there was very little development in the Northern Territory and hardly any economic growth in W.A., until the mining boom in the 1960s. Lack of development does not appear to stem from Government disinterest as the subsequent analysis of the 1930s and 40s will show, but depends more on lack of Government action.

#### Government Inquiries

Nature has not been lavish in bestowing resources on the Territory.<sup>13</sup>

When the Depression began to take its toll on the National economy the question of large government deficits in the Northern Territory could not be ignored. Statistical returns for the late 20s and early 30s made it clear that the Territory was a drain on limited government resources.<sup>14</sup> No progress at all was being made there, and the Lyons Government determined to investigate the major question of land utilization in the Northern Territory.

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12. Coombs, H.C., op.cit. Trial Balance, (Macmillan, Melbourne, 1981) p.71.

13. Report of the Board of Inquiry into Land and Land Industries of the Northern Territory of Australia (Fletcher-Payne) Canberra 1937 p.xi

14. op.cit. p.9.

A Committee, with the official title of the Northern Territory Investigation Committee, was set up in late 1936 under the chairmanship of W. Labbatt-Payne, at the time a member of the Queensland Land Board, and with J.W. Fletcher a Director of several pastoral interests in Northern Australia, as the other member. A most detailed and comprehensive Report, subsequently referred to as the Fletcher-Payne Report, was tabled in 1937.

There were however, other earlier investigations and reports on aspects of the development in the Territory and one of these, commonly referred to as the Shepherd Report, could be regarded as having inspired the Fletcher-Payne inquiry. The Pastoral Lease Inspection (Shepherd) Committee, announced in March 1933,<sup>15</sup> based its findings on an exhaustive station by station survey of pastoral properties in the N.T. Its findings, discussed in Chapter 3, exploded many of the commonly accepted myths about the industry.

In the end, the Shepherd Report was officially ignored, but it can be conjectured that its existence provided stimulus and ideas for Fletcher and Labbatt-Payne. Their investigation covered some broader issues than Shepherd's Committee and addressed some very difficult and controversial problems: the fact that the Territory's small white population had not grown as had been hoped; primary production - agricultural as well as pastoral; transport; markets; and environmental factors such as climate and the effect these had on non-indigenous residents of the tropics. Fletcher and Payne were keen to set their investigations in a national context and their Committee sat in every State except Tasmania as part of their policy of seeking information and advice Australia wide.

They stated:

**"The Northern Territory as it exists today is a national problem, a national obligation, a challenge to other nations and a detriment to ourselves".<sup>16</sup>**

In the section of their Report called "Facing the Facts", Fletcher-Payne clearly indicated that they understood the nature of the problem created by

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15. Sydney Morning Herald, 25 March 1933.

16. op.cit. p.XI.

high but futile expectations of the Territory based on experience of settlement in the Southern colonies.

The progress of colonization in Australia during little more than a century, surpassing as it does anything of like nature accomplished by other peoples in a similar period, inspires us to greater efforts. The wilderness has so often been successfully subdued, natural difficulties have so frequently been overcome, that many Australians still continue to hug the delusion that greater prospects comparable to those of the populous parts of the continent lie hidden in the Territory. Indeed, this view found expression in a pamphlet issued by the Prime Minister's Department as recently as the year 1933.

It has, at length, become necessary to re-assess values, and to recognise the natural limitations of this region, as a condition precedent to sane efforts at development.<sup>17</sup>

They set about the task of reassessment with impressive thoroughness. In the introduction to their Report, they set out their twelve research objectives. The first of these reflected some of the exasperation Territorians felt about a romanticized view of the country's possibilities.

To lift the limitations and possibilities of the Territory from the realm of conjecture so that the Commonwealth may know, with some degree of definiteness what the Territory is, or is not, capable of doing....<sup>18</sup>

Fletcher-Payne formalised what was common knowledge in the North - that the physical and administrative limits to development were not clearly known, not at all understood by people in the South, and that government from a distance made things worse. People living and working in the Territory were only too aware of its limitations, and unafraid of speaking out on this matter.<sup>19</sup> Writing of the North in March 1937, W. Wynn Williams, Deputy Chairman of the N.T. Land Board, used irony to deal with what he termed "The Bogey of the Empty Spaces".

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17. op.cit., p.6.

18. op.cit., p.XI

19. Connigrave, C. Price, North Australia, p.297 and Abbott, C.L.A., Australia's Frontier Province, (A. & R., Sydney, 1950).

Australia is fortunate in possessing such a worthless tropic territory fronting the populated East. No more effective barrier than this swamp-ridden and waterless interior could be devised to protect us. It is beyond comprehension for an invading army to land on the tropic coast to emerge the interior plateau, where for at least a thousand miles, nearly every watering place can be destroyed, and two thousand miles of foodless territory must be traversed to reach the nearest wheat field.<sup>20</sup>

The Fletcher-Payne Report was a strong statement on the problems of the Territory and outlined an equally strong programme for the reforms necessary for development. It was to become the definitive statement on Northern Development and had an enormous influence on the debate which continued for the next thirty years or so.

The validity of their challenge seems never to have been questioned. Although development remained quite static until the mid 1950s, the lack of action stemmed from an amazing delaying process employed by Federal Governments of both major parties.<sup>21</sup> It was as if the time was never quite right for forward movement. Ironically Fletcher-Payne contributed to the delay: they defined the issues so clearly and set the parameters so well that the debate on Northern Development gradually came to be divided into its component parts until the arguments centred on specific issues. Right up to the mid 1960s specific proposals of the Report were still being investigated; in some instances by other Committees of Inquiry, in others by Departmental officers employed as J.H. Kelly was, to report on particular matters related to the North. In 1942 Wynne Williams wrote a laudatory article reviewing the Fletcher-Payne findings: he highlighted two significant features of the Report: Land Reform and Railways.<sup>22</sup> The Committee had given official recognition at last to these two major areas of contention.

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20. Williams, W.W., "The Bogey of the Empty Spaces", A.Q., Vol.6., March 1937

21. See Abbott, C.L.A. op.cit., p.177 - he refers to a lapse of six years, i.e. 1938-44, experienced in the process of promulgating amendments to Crown Lands Ordinances. Part of the delay is accounted for by draft amendments being lost in Canberra.

22. Williams W.W., "The Payne-Fletcher Report on the Northern Territory", A.Q., Vol.10, March, 1938

These were two of the stated twelve objectives:

- (v) To reform lands administration of the Territory so as to make increased development and increased settlement of its lands possible and greatly increase the production therefrom
- (vii) To show the wisdom of building two short railway lines that would soon pay their way, to serve the Barkly Table-land and the northwest portion of the Territory respectively,...<sup>23</sup>

In Chapter 3 the issues of Land Reform as they related to the Pastoral Industry will be analysed, but the other major issue - Transport - bears consideration in this context.

#### Transport

In the 1930s the matter of transport was quite an important national economic issue and one of particular note in the Territory. The North had played a vital role in the opening up of aerial routes between Australia, Asia and Great Britain but was still serviced on the ground by an inadequate road system and a railway system with two ends that didn't meet in the middle! Movement of freight was a costly and time consuming business and many different modes were in use ranging from donkey teams to camels at one end of the scale of technology to government owned trackless-trains and some aeroplanes at the other. Cattle were walked from cattle stations in the Victoria River District and Barkly along stock routes to rail heads in Queensland, and from Central Australian stations to the rail at Alice Springs. There might have been a greater use of road transport had road conditions been adequate, but they were unmade dirt in the main and subject to the ravages of weather and the sheer weight of the vehicles that might use them. In the Victoria River district, some use was made of shallow draft river boats plying between Wyndham, Darwin and Timber Creek Depot.

Fletcher-Payne devoted a section of their Report to the transport question. They commented further in other sections where they dealt with either

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23. op.cit. p.xi.

specific development proposals, e.g. in their discussion of the Vanderlin Island Scheme, or with particular geographical divisions, such as in the section dealing with the Barkly and the Victoria River areas.

They supported, indeed strongly recommended the idea of Commonwealth Government investing in a properly developed railways scheme for the North. They emphasized the need for rail lines to service the Western and Eastern areas of the Territory and in each case commented that these developments could only properly occur with the agreement of the Queensland and Western Australian State Governments. And there lay the rub, for in 1954 the Commonwealth having decided against the line linking the western side with Wyndham, still had not progressed with the line across the Barkly, (which it agreed to), because of unresolved difficulties with the Queensland Government over priorities for capital works programmes.<sup>24</sup>

The argument for rail transport, first developed in 1925 by Sir George Buchanan, mentioned again in 1928 by the North Australian Commission in their Initial Report,<sup>25</sup> was developed fully, and eloquently, by FletcherPayne who realized that some efficient transport system was a fundamental part of Northern Development. But willingness to debate and argue does not necessarily predicate action and Australian conservative governments display a marked reluctance to be involved with rail transport. To this day the debate continues.

War overshadowed the whole debate on Northern Development and despite the interest Fletcher and Payne aroused, their Report was in effect shelved.

In the late 1940s Jack Kelly was sent by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics to the Territory to undertake a review of the pastoral industry. Kelly, a dedicated man of the land, was also a great advocate of railways. His contribution to the discussion was well informed being based on sound practical knowledge of primary industry's needs. It is probable that Kelly's persuasive articles<sup>26</sup> and detailed analytical reports almost

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24. Lambert, C.R., op.cit., p.119-121.

25. North Australia Commission Initial Report on Scheme for Development of North Australia, (Canberra, 1928), pp.7-8.

26. See for example, Kelly, J.H., "Movement of Cattle in Northern Australia - Problems of Remote Areas", Agros, (1959), pp.14-15 and pp.69-71, and "The Transport of Cattle in Northern Australia", A.Q., June 1963.

swayed the balance in favour of rail development, but came too late to be acted on. Events during World War II had brought a change in emphasis and by the mid 40s road transport, and the possibility of air freight even for livestock, was coming to the fore as the most economical means of moving goods in the North. The "Bitumen" built during the war by the Allied Works Council from Darwin to Alice Springs contributed a visible example of the efficacy of road over rail - most importantly that a road existed where rail did not. In effect the construction of the Stuart Highway set the seal on the argument, but there were to be many years of lively debate before any real improvement occurred in the N.T. transport situation.

During the late 1940s some experimental movement of cattle by road had taken place under the supervision of Colonel Lionel Rose, Chief Veterinary Officer in the Territory,<sup>27</sup> and in the 1950s private entrepreneurs began long range haulage in primitive fore-runners of the modern road-train. The case for rail transport was lost by default, but the transport debate continued. During the 1960s beef roads became a contentious issue; a matter to be taken up in later chapters.

This was the context in which the pastoral industry operated and the industry's failure to prosper became a national issue because of its role in Northern Development. The move to bring changes to the cattle industry were inspired as much by a sense of urgent nationalism based on the need to "populate or perish" as by an concern for the industry itself.

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27. Australian Archives, CRS:F1, 48/76, Part 2. Report on Trials for transporting live beef cattle by road transport. A.L. Rose, (Chief Veterinary Officer, Northern Territory Administration) to Chairman, Australian Meat Board, 4 October 1948.

CHAPTER 2THE PASTORAL INDUSTRY

The economic and political factors which shaped Northern Development also affected the pastoral industry in the Territory. There was however an industry long before governments concerned themselves with the trappings of Northern Development: the committees of enquiry, commissions and study plans which characterized government involvement in the North.

Until the 1960s the pastoral industry was the most visible and potentially viable form of economic exploitation of the North, that is until it was replaced by the mining industry. Iron ore in the Pilbara, manganese on Groote Eylandt and bauxite on the Gove Peninsula provided the apparently solid basis of a mineral industry boom which lasted for nearly two decades. Beef cattle in the Territory were not the large success expected.

Studies of the pastoral industry in Northern Australia customarily deal with the industry on a regional basis, a practice which I will follow in this chapter, for although the broad issues are similar for all the regions of the Northern Territory Zone, some matters of particular relevance to the Victoria River District will be highlighted.<sup>1</sup> In the main this chapter will concentrate on the period after 1933, but there are some important preliminary remarks to be made.

Early Period to 1933

Pioneers of the pastoral industry in the far north of Western Australia and in the Northern Territory held high hopes for success. Their hopes were based on reports from explorers of wide full rivers and good grazing country, especially on the Barkley Tableland and in the Victoria River-East Kimberley regions, open country with abundant native Mitchell and Flinders grasses which were known to be excellent cattle fodder.

The Durack family, pioneers of pastoral and grazing properties in New South Wales and Queensland, considered the prospects for development and found

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1. For descriptions of the beef producing zones of Northern Australia see Kelly, J.H., Struggle for the North, (Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1966), p.23, f.f.

them good. In 1880 Patsy and Michael Durack sailed from Sydney to Western Australia to interview the explorer Alexander Forrest regarding the "cattle country" in the Kimberley area. By 1881 the family had organized an expedition to the Kimberley. Mary Durack wrote of the decision.

It was agreed on the return of the travellers from the western state that the proposed journey of inspection called for a party of expert bushmen of proved toughness and resource, including at least one scientist... Distances and travelling times had to be nicely calculated, for once in the unknown wilds of Kimberley they would be cut off from all means of communication until their journey's end. The estimated cost of the expedition was 4,000 pounds which Grandfather and Emmanuel agreed to share equally.<sup>2</sup>

Fisher and Lyons, original leaseholders of the Victoria River Downs Station, were also prepared to take risks and made a large commitment to the development of cattle. VRD, as the station became known, was first settled in 1883. They had arranged for overlanding of good cattle to stock their Northern Territory leases. Nat Buchanan was hired to move 20,000 head from Queensland to their Northern Territory stations. The drive was of such magnitude that Jock Makin, writing of it in the 1970s, was moved to say.

The stocking of Glencoe and Victoria River Downs has gone down in history as one of the greatest pioneering feats ever undertaken. Could it be otherwise for a C.B. Fisher? The sound of stockwhips and bellowing cattle came to be heard over outback areas unseen by even the most intrepid explorers. The exploits and hardships experienced by the drovers are still recounted by old-timers from Winton to Wyndham.<sup>3</sup>

In those early days the Duracks, Kilfoyles and their partners on the one hand, and Fisher-Lyons, on the other, began a pattern of ownership and husbandry that has set a seal on the industry in the area. Duracks and Kilfoyle were quietly successful in establishing reasonable sized well managed stations which were run by family members. VRD and the other very large stations were run by managers employed by absentee leaseholders. Family, owner-manager, stations maintained a steady, if slow, growth; the other stations were often spectacular failures.

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2. Durack, M., Kings in Grass Castles, (Corgi Books, U.K., 1981), p.210

3. Makin, J., The Big Run, (Rigby, Australia, 1971), p.66.

Other patterns were set in the first twenty years that persisted at least until the mid 1960s. Holdings were large and were worked on the open range principle: capital could seldom be spared for yards and fencing or for an adequate provision of artificial watering points and this had its effect on the quality of Territory cattle and their command of good export markets. Relations between white and Aboriginal employees were often poor. Men and beasts battled disease. Malaria and dengue fever attacked humans, and the pressures of isolation and loneliness not infrequently led to alcoholism and a high suicide rate. Red-water fever, introduced by the Javanese cattle tick in the mid 1890s, caused immense problems for the producers. Not only were cattle killed off in large numbers but probably a third of the Territory's herds succumbed to the first epidemic, and although some immunity was built up, losses continued - and in addition markets were closed to cattle from infected areas.<sup>4</sup>

Another characteristic feature was the involvement of overseas interests in the industry: a big country for big men, or so it was believed. Big was an operative description - the lease-holdings were huge. Two of the largest, VRD and Wave Hill, were over 10,000 square miles, and both were held by English companies which had pastoral interests in the Argentine as well. Bovril had purchased VRD in 1909, and Wave Hill was purchased by Vesteys in 1913. Each company held other leases in the district, but Vesteys held the larger areas and maintained leases in an almost continuous run East to West from the Queensland border across the Territory into Western Australia.

The trend towards company held leases of pastoral properties increased during the period 1900-1936. Fred Rose in his article on the pastoral industry highlighted this: in 1910 single individuals held 58.5 percent of leases, by 1936 the percentage had decreased to 34.5, while holdings by pastoral companies increased from 20.4 percent in 1910 to 45.2 percent in 1936. He continued:

The actual areas held by single holders remained virtually stationary (57,219 square miles in 1910, 60,064 square miles in 1936) while company holdings increased nearly fourfold.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Bolton, G.C., A Survey of the Kimberley pastoral industry from 1885 to the Present. Thesis presented for the degree of Master of Arts, October 1953, University of W.A., pp.79-97.
  5. Rose, F.G.G., "The Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory during the period of Commonwealth Administration, 1911-53", Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand, Vol.6, 1954, p.152.

The introduction of the 1924 Crown Land Ordinance had done nothing to control stocking and development of leases, and had probably contributed to instability in the industry: under that Ordinance leases were granted for 42 years but were subject to resumption of one quarter of the area held in 1935 and a further quarter 1945. The Minister however had the right to allow subdivision of an area equivalent to that which could be resumed.<sup>6</sup> Vestey's was one company which successfully exploited this loophole.

#### The 1930s - An Illusion Shattered

Commonwealth Government expenditure in the territory pastoral industry was not lavish as Nelson, Member for the Territory complained in 1933.

A sum of 600 pounds is provided in the Estimates for the encouragement of primary production in the Northern Territory and a further sum of 1800 pounds for the encouragement of mining... the most charitable language one can use respecting those two items is that one is ridiculous and the other absurd.<sup>7</sup>

The problem facing the Commonwealth was that as South Australia had discovered the Territory gave no return on the money invested. It was in an attempt to meet that problem, and to answer criticism in the House of Representatives over its Administration of the N.T. that the Government established the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee on a recommendation made to cabinet by A. Parkhill, who had visited the Territory during 1932 when he had been Minister for the Interior.<sup>8</sup>

Three men formed the Committee, Shepherd (Chief Surveyor of the Northern Territory), Smith (Engineer, Department of the Interior), and Brackenregg (Officer, Department of the Interior).<sup>9</sup> Their charter was to investigate pastoral leases and "ascertain whether the lands were being put to the best

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6. Kelly, J.H., Report on the Beef Cattle Industry in Northern Australia; (Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Canberra 1952), pp.44-45.

I have found no satisfactory reason for the introduction of such an unusual piece of legislation.

7. Nelson, M.H.R., C.P.D., H. of. R., Estimates Debate, 29 November 1933.

8. The Canberra Times, 8 December 1932.

9. Sydney Morning Herald, 25 March 1933.

possible use, and whether they were carrying as much stock as possible".<sup>10</sup> Pastoralists were warned that if the committee found that lessees were not making proper use of their holding "the Government might consider cancellation of their leases. If, on the other hand, justification was found for a variation of rentals this would be considered."<sup>11</sup>

Shepherd Smith and Brackenregg travelled extensively throughout the Territory and reported on each of 64 stations. In 24 cases they recommended the Government act under the Ordinance to resume the first quarter, but recommended waiving resumption in the other 40.<sup>12</sup> Victoria River Downs and Wave Hill Stations were among the former, Rosewood (owned and managed by the Kilfoyle family) was among the latter. Rosewood was used by this committee and subsequent inquiries as an example of the efficiency of the small owner-managed run over the large absentee leaseholder stations.<sup>13</sup>

The committee viewed the situation on the company leased properties as bad, and detailed thirteen reasons for their opinion. Four of these reasons are most worthy of mention because they highlight the major contributing factors to the failure of the industry. They were to form the basis of recommendations for change made by this committee, by Fletcher Payne in 1937 and by Kelly in 50s.

- (a) The areas held are too large for the staff employed...
- (b) There is an atmosphere of confusion in some cases as a result of divided control in the management in others lack of the business experience necessary in the running of such large holdings...
- (e) On many holdings there is no bullock paddock
- (j) No control of bulls.<sup>14</sup>

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10. Sydney Morning Herald, 24 February 1933

11. *ibid*

12. Report of the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee to the Commonwealth Government, unpublished typescript, Australian Archives CRS F987 Schedule "Y". (*Shepherd Report*)

13. cf Report of Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee, 1933 Rosewood Station Report, Fletcher Payne Committee Report, 1937, p.53. Kelly, J.H., Report, 1952, Appendix A.

14. *Shepherd Report*, p.14.

While the Inspection Committee was conducting its Survey the Government took other steps to help overcome its financial embarrassment in the Territory. Drawing on reports compiled in the 1920s which had been very positive about the potential for the North the Prime Minister's Department compiled a "prospectus" which it intended to use to promote charter company activity in the N.T.<sup>15</sup>

Despite constant questions in the House the Government delayed the release of the Shepherd Committee Report perhaps in the hope that the Prospectus could be circulated before the real situation regarding the cattle industry became known. But by December 1933, the Minister for the Interior, Perkins, had begun to stall on questions asked by Nelson, member for the Northern Territory, regarding both the Committee Report and the Prospectus, neither of which was mentioned the following year.<sup>16</sup> The Report was never tabled, the chartered company plan was submerged. The pastoral industry continued to flounder.

In 1937, and in circumstances quite similar to those pertaining to the 1933 committee of enquiry Fletcher and Payne were commissioned to conduct their enquiry into the Northern Territory. In fact, over the period 1932-1952 there were three major surveys made into the pastoral industry, the third was conducted by Jack Kelly over a four year period 1948-52. There were others not as substantial, e.g. an investigation into the cattle industry on the Barkly was commissioned by the Development Branch of the Prime Minister's Department in 1934 and conducted by J.N. Whitley, Agrostologist, Department of Agriculture, N.S.W.<sup>17</sup>

Fletcher and Payne recommended land reforms which, had they been introduced in 1938, would have helped real growth in the N.T. beef industry, but again the Government delayed implementation and the devastating events of 1939 overshadowed the problems of the Territory. They recommended that the

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15. Prime Ministers Department, Memorandum by the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia on the Development and Settlement of North Australia (Canberra, 1933), which quotes inter alia a report prepared by F.J.S. Wise in 1929.

16. C.P.D., House of Representatives, 25 October 1933, 24 November 1933, 4 December, 1933.

17. Australian Archives, CRS:F1, 48/76, Part 1, Memo J. Carrodus to Administrator, 3 March 1947.

Government exercise its right to resume land in the big holdings and to make the resumed land available for new settlement. Referring to stations in the Victoria River area they said:

**The stations in this section of the Territory are generally too large for effective handling.... Generally the holdings are insufficiently improved for effective management....<sup>18</sup>**

The situation on most of the stations in the 1930s was found by Jack Kelly to be largely unchanged in 1948. It could be summed up as bad management by uninterested and often uninformed employees whose masters were thousands of miles away, and often in another country. For, with few exceptions there had been no growth of interlinking station families who built over generations deep bonds with the country they worked, as rural communities in the south had done. The stations were generally in a bad state: yards and fences where they existed were not maintained; few stations had any properly regulated breeding programmes, and wild bulls, 'scrubbers', mixed with the herds and turn off figures were low. There were few adequate artificial watering places to supplement natural waters so that grazing was patchy, occurring in areas close to permanent waters. Consequently these areas were overgrazed and the waterholes spoiled. Factors such as isolation, distance from markets and from service centres, and shortage of investment capital helped make the position worse.

If the Territory was to develop through primary production as other Australian colonies had, then a massive programme for change was needed. The consistent advice given to the Government was that successful development depended on a number of factors most of which could be controlled by the Government. Pastoralists needed security of tenure on small manageable blocks, of say, 1,000 square miles, held under perpetual lease but subject to regularly reviewed leasehold conditions attached under a specific schedule of minimum improvements. Kelly added adamantly that absentee leaseholders should have their land resumed and the land redistributed to resident owner-managers.<sup>19</sup> There was general agreement that transport systems had to be developed to serve rural producers.

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18. op.cit., p.51.

19. Kelly, J.H., Struggle for the North, (Australasian Book Society, Sydney 1966).

## Post-War Reform

During the period immediately after the war and into the early 50s interest in the North was very high particularly among that group of men who had served there during the War. Many dreamed of owning land in the Territory: there was so much land it seemed and the possibilities for rural production appeared endless. Men from all parts of Australia wrote to the Government spelling out their schemes for a new society in the Last Frontier.<sup>20</sup> Some did not wait, but encouraged by the promise of developments, especially in the growth of a railway system, came and started work. One of these, Sid Hawks, settled in 1948 at Top Springs near to the northern boundary of the VRD outstation Montejinne, and opened a store-cum-pub. Sid secured a franchise from Mobil for the delivery of fuel through the district as far west as Inverway Station, and provided a regular service to the people of the Victoria River area. He stocked food and supplies, stock-camp gear and grog - his was a civilizing influence in the area.<sup>21</sup>

Development was largely stimulated by the "little man" who was prepared, where governments and large corporations were not, to take risks. Progress in the transport industry was largely the result of the efforts of Kurt Johansen of Alice Springs,<sup>22</sup> and Buntine from Katherine, and men like Gus Trippe contributed greatly to the opening up of overseas trade.<sup>23</sup> They were ably supported by sympathetic and competent government officers based in Darwin and Alice Springs: officers employed in the Lands and Animal

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20. Australia Archives, CRS:F1, 43/16. A file which contains many letters from ex-servicemen who had been in the Territory during the war and others, who wrote with schemes for Northern Development in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

21. Based on interview, Darwin, August, 1982. Notes of interview to be lodged with Special Collection, Learning Resources Centre, Darwin Community College.

22. Kelly, J.H., Report... 1952, p.195.

23. Based on interview, Darwin, September, 1982. Notes of interview to be lodged with Special Collection, Learning Resources Centre, Darwin Community College.

Industries Branch supervised a programme of increased government spending on the pastoral industry: bores were sunk; stock routes cleared and watering points established at reasonable staging points; experiments, supervised by Colonel Rose, were conducted in long range haulage of cattle by road-trains.<sup>24</sup>

Other men, sons of pioneering families from the western part of the Victoria River had stuck it out during the War on remote stations, surviving on damper, salt beef and tea - stuck because they were ineligible for armed service working as they did in an essential industry. They held on to grazing licences on the larger properties hoping for subdivisions and resumptions which would open land up to them.<sup>25</sup>

The railway was not built despite the strong arguments in its favour; eventually a beef road was built instead. And the promised land was subject to a Lands Board hearing. The Northern Standard commented in an article "Absentee landlords will score again", 20 October 1950 that the new leases would probably go to businessmen" interested in the pastoral blocks because the pastoral industry is tax free... experienced N.T. cattlemen with little capital are unlikely to be selected as lessees of any of the six pastoral blocks recently thrown open for selection unless the Federal Government will assist them financially".

The Liberal Country Party in Opposition ostensibly also took a strong interest in the Territory and particularly in the beef industry. Casey, later to be the first Minister for National Development visited there in 1947 and incorporated material collected during his visit in his book Double or Quit.<sup>26</sup> J. McEwen visited in August of that year.<sup>27</sup> It seemed then that even if Labor lost office the Territory would still flourish and the pastoral industry seemed finally set to prosper.

24. Australian Archives, CRS:F1, 48/76, Part 2.

25. Based on conversation with Pearl Ogden, Darwin, September 1982. Ms. Ogden's typescript of a family history lodged with Oral History Unit, Department of Chief Minister, Darwin.

26. The Age, 9 May 1947, "Our Undeveloped Wealth in Northern Territory".  
The Age, 12 May 1947, "Young Men of Resource have Chance".

27. Adelaide Advertiser, 21 August 1947, "A Plan Wanted for the North"

A change in Government in 1949 was to have effect in the Territory. Despite the opening up of beef export markets through the 15-year meat agreement negotiated with the U.K. during the Chifley era the development finance essential for capital works programmes in the N.T. did not come when it was needed.

An officer employed by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics commented recently on the 1950s:

Top priority was given to revitalising agriculture, and boosting output, where it could be done at least cost in scarce materials, and in the quickest time. To the extent that there was any policy of Northern Development, its furtherance was of low priority. The BAE's work on beef in the North was as much to do with the need (long term) to increase our capacity to earn export income, and to increase exports under the U.K. contract as it was to do with Northern Development, per se.<sup>28</sup>

The area most in need of revitalising - the leasehold system - was in control of the policy makers in Canberra and they in turn were subject to pressure from the vested interests. First a Labor Government and then a Liberal Country Party Coalition failed to take the one decisive action which could perhaps have stabilized the industry, reform of pastoral lease conditions. The changes introduced tended to favour the status quo or to further enhance the privileged position held by the large companies. Of these, Vestey's, acted to reinforce its position in the Territory and it is possible to infer from the available evidence that the company spent a great deal of energy, time and money making sure its voice was clearly heard in Canberra.

#### Vestey's - a very special relationship

Vestey's' role in the development of the Territory's beef cattle industry has often been debated, and it is unlikely the matter will ever be resolved, the facts are very elusive, and the debate tends to revolve around statements of opinion. Many people connected with the industry regard the company with distrust, and accuse it of being at best a bad neighbour. Two events

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28. McKay, D.H., Canberra, 25 April 1982. L. Riddett, Private Correspondence File.

indicate that there is some just cause for the complaints. But first the relationship between Vestey's and Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees Association (N.T.P.L.A.) needs to be examined.

The N.T.P.L.A. is a Sydney based organization which represented the interests of large company leaseholdings in the N.T. Lobbying was often carried on through the press as for example in 1933 when the N.T.P.L.A. complained, perhaps with unwitting irony, about the failure to include on the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee "someone with actual practical experience of trying to make a property pay in the Northern Territory".<sup>29</sup>

During the late 30s and the 40s the Association maintained a proper, but also very cordial, contact with C.L.A. Abbott, the Administrator of the Territory, and on one occasion at least Abbott attended an executive meeting of the Association while he was south.<sup>30</sup>

At the time of the 1947 Conference on Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industry, Brodie, executive officer of the NTPLA, offered to stand aside in favour of Bingle, managing director of Vestey's. Bingle wrote to Driver, the Administrator, and indicated he felt it would be inappropriate if he attended as the NTPLA representative, but said "we will of course prepare and give Mr. Brodie any data he may require to put before this Conference".<sup>31</sup> On this occasion, at least the NTPLA represented the views of Vestey's. It may reasonably be inferred that they performed the task often.

In 1943 Vestey's were notified that the second quarter resumptions were due in 1945.<sup>32</sup> In this case their ability to work within the system, always to their own advantage, is most clear. Vestey's moved with finesse, taking

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29. Sydney Morning Herald, 21 April 1933

30. Australia Archives, CRS:F1 44/182 N.T.P.A. to Administrator, 8 December 1944; Administrator to T.N.P.L.A., 18 December 1944; Telegram N.T.P.L.A. to Administrator, 18 January 1945 - refers to a letter from Administrator Bingle, not on file, Administrator to N.T.P.L.A., 18 January 1945.

31. Australian Archives, CRS:F1, 58/170, Bingle to Driver, Administrator, 30 December 1946.

32. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, Item P.L.196N, Carrodus, Secretary, Dept. of Interior to Managing Director, Wave Hill Pastoral Company, 9 June 1943.

advice from legal counsel, arguing their case with officials, lobbying Ministers (Lord Vestey came to Australia for that purpose in 1947).<sup>33</sup> They successfully stalled resumptions until after new and more favourable Ordinances were drafted, and finally through the mechanism of subsidiary companies achieved sub-division instead of resumption.

Despite warnings in 1944 by Johnson, Minister for the Interior, that the Government would not automatically renew Vesteys leases,<sup>34</sup> the Chifley Government introduced legislation in the Northern Territory Legislative Council in 1948 which in effect did just that. Despite strong arguments presented in favour of creating a number of small stations the Government effectively maintained the status quo, i.e. a situation which favoured large pastoral leases held by big companies. Four elected members of the Council led by Dick Ward, Member for Alice Springs, telegraphed Johnson in July 1948 strongly opposing what appeared to be preferential treatment for the Vestey and Bovril companies. They referred to the fact that Vestey and Bovril leases were "'insufficiently improved and... running numerous unbranded wild cattle involving despoilation of large areas of fertile lands'".<sup>35</sup> They contended that the "Northern Territory's future lay in smaller fenced holdings such as found in the Centre, and not in the open range policy."<sup>36</sup>

The debate on the Ordinance, which allowed for the extension of leases due for resumption in 1965, was conducted in the Council in August 1948. Under the terms proposed by the Government for new Pastoral Development Leases

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32. ~~Australian Archives, CRS:PG30, Item P.L.196N, Carrodus, Secretary, Dept. of Interior to Managing Director, Wave Hill Pastoral Company, 9 June 1943.~~

33. Australian Archives, CRS:F1, 48/76 Part 1, Carrodus to Administrator, 17 December 1947, refers visit of Lord Vestey, Messrs. Bingle, Holland and Melville to Minister, "discussed generally the question of pastoral development in the Northern Territory". Lord Vestey made a number of proposals for changes to Lease Conditions.

34. Northern Standard, "Ministers Blunt Criticism of Vestey Monopoly" 19 December 1947

35. Northern Standard, 2 July 1948, "Territory MLC's strong opposition to extension of Vestey, Bovril leases".

36. *ibid.*

leaseholders were to be given special assistance to develop these leases for only a limited period, at the end of which the leases would be subdivided into smaller blocks.<sup>37</sup> (Vesteys exploited the idea of subdivision in their own favour during their protracted negotiations with the Government).

Ward proposed a number of amendments to the Ordinance, one of which restricted to 5,000 square miles the land available to the big companies for use as a Pastoral Development Lease. Another of his amendments transferred the power to grant leases from the Administrator to the Land Board which would in future conduct hearings in public.<sup>38</sup> In introducing the Amendments Ward declared his intention was to test whether or not the ordinance proposed by the Government was a "Vestey benefit law".<sup>39</sup>

Barclay, Director of Lands, who had put the Ordinance forward agreed to accept Ward's amendment concerning the Land Board hearings but rejected the other regarding the size of leases. The four elected members agreed to accept Barclay's compromise and the legislation was passed on Friday 13 August 1948.<sup>40</sup> The ordinance never came into effect however because the regulations were not gazetted.<sup>41</sup>

During the debate the Government officials who were members of the Council strongly denied there was special consideration being given to Vestey and Bovril interests. But in September 1948 in the House of Representatives, Johnson made a statement which cast another light on the matter.

**The Minister said the urgency of obtaining more meat for Britian had led to the Vestey and Bovril interests opening negotiations for extension of tenure of their leases.**

**Mr. Johnson said that because of shortage of Crown lands it was considered necessary that one of the conditions of extension of tenure should be surrender by Vesteys or certain leases which could be developed by individual settlers.**

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37. Northern Standard, 6 August 1948, "The 'Vestey benefit law'?"

38. Minutes of Proceedings, Legislative Council of N.T., 11 August 1948.

39. *ibid.*

40. Northern Starndard, 13 August 1948, "Elected Members fail in gallant fight to restrict beef barons holdings."

41. Rose, F.G.G., "The Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory...." p.166.

Other conditions were that a programme of improvements in leases should be prepared and stud stock should be introduced.

Negotiations with Bovril interests had reached a more advanced stage and the area held by them had been reduced to 5494 square miles.<sup>42</sup>

There had been a case put by the large companies and the Government had not only listened but acted. The concessions the Government demanded of Vestey's that is the surrender of leases, did not come into effect. By 1953 new Ordinances had been introduced which gave leaseholders a fifty year lease on their properties and Vestey's had created its subsidiary companies in time to take advantage of the new legislation. One of the officers of the Lands Branch commented acidly: "It is extremely galling to see Vestey's adopting our ideas regarding subdivision and blanding expecting us to fall into line..."<sup>43</sup>

The 1953 Ordinance had not been passed easily. Hasluck, Minister for Territories in the Menzies Government, had incurred the wrath of the Northern Territory Council by leaving the Bill aside for comment. Members of the Council alleged that Hasluck had allowed the N.T.P.L.A. to recommend amendments to the legislation before it was presented in the Council in Darwin.<sup>44</sup>

It must also have been galling for the pastoralists in the Victoria River area in the early 1960s that the proposed beef road designed to service their properties was going to follow a line along the old Murrarji Track thereby giving Wave Hill, a Vestey's station, easy access to the east but by-passing them. Paul Vandeleur, owner-manager of Camfield, would have been thirty miles off the road had the proposal been implemented. He appeared before the Public Works Committee to state his case.

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42. Northern Standard, 17 September 1948, "Minister Johnson's excuses for Sell-out to beef baron".

43. Australian Archives, CRS: F630 P.L. IIIN. Barclay, Director of Lands to Administrator, 10 September 1947.

44. For an excellent discussion of the complexities of this and the 1948 Ordinance see Rose, F.G., "The Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory....." pp.165-167.

...I came to Darwin and ... saw the Acting Director, Mr. Richardson. He told me it was most unlikely that the new proposal would ever eventuate as it did not serve the heavily stocked cattle areas in our district, and as it was supposed to be built as a beef road.... It appears now that the new proposed road would serve Wave Hill only to the fullest advantage.... However, if you consider the extent of Wave Hill, which is 6,225 square miles, the turn-off on average from Wave Hill is a shade over a beast a mile taken year in and year out. The turn-off of cattle from Camfield which is 1,050 square miles would be nearly a beast to half a square mile. Montejinnie would do even better than that. In 1962 the three resumption blocks of Victoria River Downs, Camfield, Montejinnie and Killarney turned off 6,400 head from 3,500 square miles against 7,119 from Wave Hill with its 6,225 square miles. So I would not say that Wave Hill is any more densely populated with cattle than either of the other three places.<sup>45</sup>

The issue was finally resolved in favour of the majority of the leaseholders in the area, but there was another Committee of Inquiry, in 1964, before the matter was finalized.<sup>46</sup> Vestey's were not good neighbours, living by them was costly in terms of time and energy spent combatting their influence on Canberra. The cost for the small man would have been prohibitive, and the small leaseholders did not present a common front to government. Moves towards unity came in the 70s and as a result Vestey's influence waned. But the small leaseholders were not the only group to move against Vestey's; in the mid 1960s Aborigines also protested the influence of the company in the Northern Territory, and against its role in the pastoral industry. And once again the Victoria River District was the place where the movement for change happened.

A pattern which related to the process of change emerged from the events in the industry during 1930-1965. 1) A problem surfaced within the industry and was brought to the notice of the Commonwealth by public servants, politicians or the press. The problem was usually serious and a source of potential embarrassment to the Government. 2) The Government initiated an inquiry

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45. C.P.P., Minutes of Evidence Relating to the Proposed Construction of the Top Springs to Wave Hill Road, Northern Territory, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works 1962-63, p.48.

46. C.P.P., Vol.IV, 1962-63, Report Relating to the Proposed Construction of the Top Springs to Wave Hill Road....

C.P.P., 1964-65, Report Relating to the Proposed.... etc.

into the situation. 3) Conservative elements within the industry, notably Vestey's or its agent the N.T.P.L.A., lobbied Government successfully to divert attention from the problem or to reduce its importance so that no urgent action was taken. 4) Action was taken to improve the situation, but it was slow and hampered by the cumbersome bureaucratic structure which involved referral from the regional to the Territorial offices of the Northern Territory Administration thence to Canberra and back again (sometimes more than once). 5) Individuals within the industry affected by the problem and frustrated by lack of Government action acted on their own behalf to change the situation. This pattern is very clearly demonstrated by the changes which occurred to the Aborigines in the Industry.

## CHAPTER 3

ABORIGINES IN THE PASTORAL INDUSTRY

The pastoral industry in Northern Australia has depended from the start on the co-operation and hard work of Aboriginal people. During the early contact period programmes of pacification were instigated when Aborigines reacted against the continued presence of the pastoralists by killing stock and harassing settlers. Contemporary white accounts tell of immense problems but as later writers have come to see there were difficulties on both sides. Mary Durack's account of a compromise in the Kimberley and Grant Ngabidj's more recent story of the early days both record the deaths that were typical of the pioneering days.

Durack wrote in Kings in Grass Castles of an incident in the late 1880's:

At least a temporary compromise was reached in a decree that the law, not the individual, must deal with erring blacks. Any white found guilty of murdering an aboriginal must suffer the supreme penalty in the same way as black murdering white. But the decree was no more than a pious statement of principle. No native brought to justice in Kimberley was acquitted nor was any white found guilty on a charge involving the treatment of an aboriginal.<sup>1</sup>

Grant Ngabidj gave an account of the early days to Bruce Shaw, he said:

The blackfellers who were born very early were shot everywhere, from Auvergne, Bullita and Newry Stations in the Northern Territory right down to Kununurra. At first out in the bush the blackfellers used to kill and eat the kangaroo. Later they hunted the bullocks, and in those days the white men did not like to see the bullocks killed. They would come along, find the tracks and say 'Oh blackfeller bin kill a bullock', and they would chase after them and shoot them.<sup>2</sup>

The degree of violence involved in the clashes often depended on the humanity or in some cases the economic good sense of the pastoralists, violence being moderated when it became clear that Aboriginal men made good stockmen, their wives good domestic staff, and their children lived as a guarantee of a permanent future labour pool.

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1. Op.cit., p.320.

2. Ngabidj, G., My country of the Pelican Dreaming, p.36.

If the matter was simply of land then very often Aborigines were hunted away by parties of mounted white men, and in some cases hunted down and killed. On the other hand there were some pastoralists who perceived the usefulness of Aborigines and so offered them enticements to stay near the station.

Often the enticements worked and there are records that show bands of Aborigines occasionally moved great distances from their traditional country to be close to the men who supplied "white man tobacco." The lure of tobacco was so great for one group that in the course of their trek from the Hooker Creek area to Wave Hill, they had to enter into negotiations with Gurindji, who were traditional enemies, for permission to enter their territory.<sup>3</sup>

Sandy McDonald from the district on the Territory-Western Australian border illustrated one of the "quietening" processes:

There were three half caste and two black people in my family. A boy had my mother before my father got hold of her when he was a boundary rider on Ord River station. I had one half-brother and one half-sister, that was all. How that came about of course was the old feller had a lot of natives in his camp and through their custom they gave my mother to him. That was why in those days a lot of whites did not have any trouble with the fullblood Aborigines. The elders gave them wives, promised them just like in their custom. That was how I was born.<sup>4</sup>

#### Second World War - a turning point

Similar stories are told by the Mudbara, Gurindji Ngarinman and Bilinara clans of the Wave Hill and Victoria River Districts. In the more northern reaches of that country, open and often violent conflict between Aborigines and white settlers continued until the late 1920s. The government at the time considered a scheme to move non-working Aborigines off pastoral

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3. Read, P., and Engineer Jack Japaljarri, "The Price of Tobacco: The journey of the Wormala to Wave Hill in 1928", in Aboriginal History, 2-2 1978, pp.141-148.

4. Shaw, B., and Sandy McDonald They did it themselves: Reminiscences of Seventy Years", in Aboriginal History, Vol.2 1-2, 1978, pp122-139. See also Merlan, F., "'Making People Quiet' in the Pastoral North: reminiscences of Elsey Station", op.cit., pp.70-106.

leases onto a ration station, but good judgement prevailed and the scheme was rejected because "it is practically impossible to keep a bush native out of his own country."<sup>5</sup> By the early 40s stations in the area had begun to experience a new problem: "Station blacks" were drifting from their tribal areas to the army camps set up along the Stuart Highway. Vestneys in particular found difficulty in recruiting enough workers to maintain the turn-off of cattle needed to meet their contracts for supply of beef to the Army.

Significantly, conditions of employment for Aborigines working in army camps were so much better than those on pastoral properties that as word spread many left the stations permanently to work for the army. Wages, it is true were minimal, only ten pence a day, but the attraction appears to have been equality of conditions. Aborigines and Europeans were fed, housed and clothed under the same conditions, and for the first time since settlement, Aborigines could work in something approaching equality with whites. There were subtle social factors operating which created the preconditions for substantial and very fundamental changes in the relationship of Aborigines in the workforce. The changes became more evident during the 50s and unavoidable during the 60s.

Despite the war, the army had no power to force Aborigines to work for it, but once employment commenced, and it could be shown that Aborigines were performing an essential service, then the officer in charge of an area could use his discretionary authority to prevent Aborigines from returning to pastoral work. The civil administration, however, believed it had the authority to act in allocating Aborigines for employment.

In a memorandum to the Administrator, C.L.A. Abbott in 1943 V.J. White, Deputy Director of Native Affairs commented:

In the first instance the Army Labour Unit was intended absorb the loafing element and the unemployed only. It was not intended to denude the pastoral or mining industry and approved essential industries...

The Army has no prerogative in the matter of the disposition of native labour... it remains, therefore for this

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5. Easton, W.K., Chairman of N.T. Land Board, quoted in A Claim to an Area of Traditional Land by the Mudbura Traditional Owners. (Northern Land Council 1979), p.89.

Branch to indicate where and by whom a native should be employed. It is not, however, intended to interfere with personnel at present employed in the Army.<sup>6</sup>

Abbott disagreed to the extent that:

The employment of the natives by the Army is now definitely a matter of Government policy and under the present emergency conditions in my opinion the Army has prior call upon native labour provided it request this labour for useful army purposes....

... I quite agree that the Army has no prerogative in regard to employment of natives and that the proportion they require should be allocated by you.<sup>7</sup>

During the early months of 1944 the question of who had the prerogative was put to the test when a pastoralist, Harry Hayes, from Brocks Creek requested that he be given some "boys" to work on his station and was refused the assistance by the Officer in charge of Native Personnel. At no time did the officer, Lieutenant Morris, deal directly with Hayes. The matter was handled through V.G. Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Welfare staff employed in the N.T. monitored the situation, being mindful of the conditions on pastoral properties. Abbott also appeared aware of the situation in the cattle industry. In his memorandum to White in March 1943 he made the telling comment:

I think that the natives get better food and treatment from the army than they do from many employers.<sup>9</sup>

and in a letter to the Secretary of the Department of Interior, Giles the Government Secretary commented that "no difficulty should be experienced by stations in holding their employees provided they receive reasonable treatment."<sup>10</sup>

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6. Australian Archives, CRS, F1, Item 42/61, Part 1, Memorandum V.J. White to Administrator.

7. Australian Archives, CRS F1, Item 42/461, Part 2, Memorandum Administrator to V.J. White, 3 March 1943.

8. Australian Archives, CRS F1 Item 42/4612, Part 1, Correspondence between Haynes and Administration and Administration and Army, March 1944.

9. op.cit.

10. Australian Archives, CRS F1: 42/461, Giles to Secretary, Dept of Interior, 13 January 1944.

During the period Chinnery who was Director of Native Affairs observed the developments and acted to obtain more concrete information regarding conditions on the stations.

It is, of course, well-known to you that there is now an increased, if belated, appreciation of the capacity of the aboriginal and at the same a wide-spread demand for this labour particularly in specialised occupations like those connected with the cattle industry and other developments, where the services of the aboriginal have been widely used in the past, but in many instances, inadequately appreciated.

The aboriginal himself has long been conscious of these factors and it will be obvious to you that his sense of relative values is developing rapidly through contact with the friendly soldiers with whom he has been working, men who openly express their admiration of the part the aboriginal is playing in the war effort.<sup>11</sup>

In a letter to Abbott in August 1944, A.S. Bingle wrote that:

Some time ago Mr. E.P. Chinnery called and put a proposition to us that we should engage a practical anthropologist who should be a welfare officer amongst the natives that we were working on our respective stations, also as a recruiting agent to obtain further labour from the tribes; further to advise on problems generally associated with the handling of natives.

I went further into proposal with Professor Elkin.... I felt that this welfare officer should, if he proved to be practical in his work for us, at least have some status or blessing from the Department of Native Affairs and perhaps your Administration, for his duties would undoubtedly be to look after all natives within the area over which we operate<sup>12</sup>

It is not clear from the archival materials available whether the officer achieved the status sought by Bingle, but it is clear that Vestey's were in a position to expect co-operation from the government in these matters when others were finding it difficult to get Aboriginal labour at all.

Ironically the study which Vestey's funded highlighted the appalling conditions on NT cattle stations. The study was undertaken by Ronald Berndt and his wife, Catherine, both anthropologists. The Berndt's were interested

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11. Australian Archives, CRS F1: Item 42/461, Part 1, Memorandum from E.W.P. Chinnery to Secretary, Dept. of Interior, 4 June 1944.

12. Australian Archives, CRS F1, Item 44/441, A.S. Bingle to C.L.A. Abbott, 10 August, 1944.

because they saw an opportunity to undertake the first major study in applied anthropology in Australia. They were not at all comfortable with the suggestion that they act as recruiting agents for Vesteys.<sup>13</sup> Elkin and Chinnery were concerned that there was a lack of real information about Aborigines living and working on pastoral properties. Vesteys was concerned to find a means of maintaining its labour supply.

The Berndts visited five Vesteys stations, Victoria River Downs, owned at the time by Bovril Australian Estates, and Inverway a small owner-managed property. They reported on the situation to Chinnery and Elkin and helped to provide some of the background information necessary before improvements could be made in conditions of employment for Aborigines.<sup>14</sup>

Generally the relationship between black and white could be described as one of economic interdependence, grudging mutual respect and aloofness. Given the appalling conditions under which the Aboriginal people lived it is a near miracle that any good relations existed. It could be taken as a measure of their strong need and desire to remain in contact with their country that Aborigines tolerated what struck sympathetic observers as intolerable. A high price was paid by Aborigines so that they could maintain traditional legal and ritual obligations to, and in, their country. Aborigines also stayed within the industry because they enjoyed stockwork and the camaraderie of stock camp life which coincidentally provided a suitable environment to take young male initiates, who by law had to be isolated from the women.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Based on conversation with Professor Berndt, March 1982. Transcript to be lodged with Special Collection, Learning Resources Centre, Darwin Community College.

14. Ibid. N.B. None of Professor Berndt's Reports were available from Commonwealth Archives in Darwin, but a good discussion of the material can be found in Stevens, F.S., Equal Wages for Aborigines the Background to Industrial Discrimination in the Northern Territory of Australia, (Distributed by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Vic, 1968), pp.14-21.

15. Based on information supplied to me in 1979 by an Aboriginal man who had lived and worked on Wave Hill and Inverway Stations. The name of the man cannot be "called" in case of his death.

If degrees of squalor are measureable then in most instances, women, children and old people were worse off than men employed as stockworkers. Camp life was often a period of enforced idleness for people not directly or actively engaged in the cattle work. Women were often required to work as domestic staff for four or five hours a day, six days a week that is, just long enough each day to prevent them participating in foraging or hunting excursions, and thereby from enjoying the contact with the wider area of clan country that the stockmen had.

Until the 1960s white man's schooling was not available for Aboriginal children, a mixed blessing because freedom from the acculturation of that contact did not mean freedom to roam - for them many parts of the station remained out of bounds. But it was observable in the early 1970s that children raised on cattle stations, and not subject to regular schooling, played and sang a much wider variety of traditional games and songs than children raised on Government Settlements where schooling was a regular feature of their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Maps of cattle station home areas indirectly indicate the relationship of the camp or compound to the big house - in some cases only an arrow pointing off the page captioned "To Native Compound" gives any indication that Aborigines had any living quarters at all.<sup>17</sup> Aboriginal camps were on open, often barren ground, downstream and downhill from the house and despite efforts by people to plant and maintain trees for shade and small vegetable gardens little grew. The effort for women and young girls of bringing water to the camp in two 4-gallon drums balanced on a neck yoke was tiresome enough when drinking and cleaning needs were to be met, and a totally unrewarding task if the purpose was to water plants reluctant to grow in rocky ground.

Over the years of the Depression and through the War there was in the Territory an acute shortage of building materials so that lack of adequate housing was a problem generally shared, except on some of the large company owned stations which provided well for manager and senior white employees such as the bookkeeper. Even in this a hierarchy based on race existed: if

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16. Based on own personal observations and anecdotal material collected Wattie Creek, 1970-73. Reports of my work were lodged with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Canberra.

17. Holmes, J., Australia's Open North, (A.&.R., Sydney 1963), see Chapter 16, "The Pastoral Way of Living". pp.210-236.

housing for whites were poor then it was often in those cases non-existent for Aborigines. In some instances the total lack of provision for Aboriginal employees and their families was based on an untested assumption by pastoralists that Aborigines did not want housing or could not care for conventional housing if it were available.

A characteristic ambivalence marked the inter-racial relationship. It was not uncommon for a pastoralist to hold such a view as that expressed regarding housing and equally expect Aboriginal women to maintain the domestic life of the station house, including cooking and cleaning. High, almost rigid, standards of hygiene were expected by the "missus" and met by Aboriginal women who returned at the end of the days work at the "big house" to hovels, with little or no sanitation, dirt floors, no windows and no electricity.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1945 to 1965 - a time of change

The Berndts, however were not the only people to report on the plight of Aborigines on cattle stations. In October 1945, Carrington wrote a detailed memorandum, eleven pages in all, as a report on investigations concerning "the conditions of native employment on the various station properties" on the Barkly Tablelands and in the Victoria River District.

Carrington noted the conditions on stations in much the same way as the Berndts but drew some quite different conclusions. He persistently excused the pastoralists on the following grounds: "In the past there has been practically no supervision of native employment other than by the Police Officers stationed in the various districts, and consequently station owners were without instruction or guidance as to Departmental requirements. Similarly, Police Officers have acted in accordance with precedent, and although some actions may have been regarded as undesirable in the light of present policy, I can see no culpability on the part of the Police Officers."<sup>19</sup>

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18. Based on field work experience Wattie Creek-Wave Hill, VRD, 1970-73.

19. Australian Archives, CRS A431. Item 46/1879, Report made by V.G. Carrington, October 1945.

On the question of accommodation which he acknowledged as bad, Carrington demurred that "it might be well to say that no specifications have been laid down" and that although some managers insisted on periodical clearings "the natural habits of the natives are such that the litter quickly accumulates again."<sup>20</sup>

The Administration was faced with the fact that, despite Carrington's attempts to justify the pastoralists' inaction, things were not well in the industry. Even Carrington realized that change and improvements were necessary and he recommended new regulations be enacted, the conditions of which to be supervised by regular patrols of cattle stations. His report carried seven recommendations which ranged from the introduction of a scale of cash payment for Aboriginal employees to a scheme whereby the Government would "meet the cost of maintenance of old and infirm people on the stations".

During the latter part of 1946 at the request of the Minister for the Department of the Interior, a Committee was formed to consider Carrington's Report, and to decide whether his recommendations would be suitable as a basis for new regulations to govern the employment of Aborigines in the Pastoral Industry.

The committee chaired by A. Blakely, a Conciliation Commissioner and former Minister for Interior, met in Alice Springs on 8 and 9 January 1947. Members of the Committee were: the Administrator, Carrington and F.H. Driver, F. Moy, representing the Administration, F.A. Brodie (representing the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees Association) and J.N. Nelson (representing the Central Australian Pastoralists Association.)

The composition of the Committee did not suit all the interested parties. Bingle, having rejected Brodie's offer to withdraw, had nevertheless a strong feeling that "the conference would have achieved more had there been greater representation on the employers side"<sup>21</sup> On 10 January and 17 January 1947, the Northern Standard carried items about the Conference and on 10 January noted

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20. Ibid.

21. Australian Archives, CSR F1, 38/1710, Bingle to the Administrator, 30 December 1946.

Despite all request and urgent appeals, representatives of the N.A.W.U. were not invited to attend.

Debarring the press has given the conference an almost sinister aspect.

It would seem that there is some reason why those concerned do not want too much publicity on conditions of employment of natives on N.T. cattle stations.

The only people attending the conference - the station owners themselves and representatives of the Native Affairs Branch - are the very people responsible for the existing state of affairs.

Blakely wrote to the Minister of 15 January 1947 and inter alia set out the minutes of the meeting. He mentioned that Carrington's Report had not been "successfully challenged at any time during the conference" and that "the ultimate agreement is based upon the principle incorporated in the Carrington Report."<sup>22</sup>

Eventually the minutes and terms of the meeting were ratified by the interested parties, and regulations governing employment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry announced by the Director of Native Affairs on 24 June 1949.<sup>23</sup> The delay in bringing in the regulations stems in part from documents relating to the case being lost for some time during 1948.

The period during the 1950s was one of increased government activity in the pastoral industry generally and the question of Aboriginal employment received attention quite frequently. There were for example new ordinances drawn up during the decade which sought to enhance the position of Aborigines in the Territory, but they were essentially paternalistic in nature and in any case not sufficiently well enforced to gain any substantial improvements. For most of the 1950s and 60s Native Welfare gave its energies to establishing Aboriginal Settlements and spared little for the people on cattle station, a situation which suited the pastoralists who had written to the Minister for Interior in 1947.

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22. Australian Archives, CSR F1 413, A. Blakeley to H.V. Johnson, Minister for Interior, 15 January 1947.

23. Australian Archives, CSR F1 58/1710, Statement by the Director of Native Affairs, (Mr. F.H. Moy), 24 June 1949.

In conveying to you the advice of this ratification, my Executive Committee has asked me to express the hope of the Association that in the Administration of new regulations, there will be co-operation between the Administration and the industry for the supply of adequate labour and for ensuring the contentment of native labour by due consideration to tribal habits and customs. My Association urges that no action be taken which would tend to the detribalisation of the natives of the Territory.<sup>24</sup>

Blakely had already predicted in his letter to the Minister that the N.T.P.L.A. would take this line.<sup>25</sup>

Stephens, in his extensive survey of the industry during the early 1960s, found little that was very different from conditions described by Berndt and Carrington in the mid 1940s.

There was a tendency in the Territory for the Welfare Branch to act in the interests of Aborigines as if they were not competent or capable of handling their own affairs. In 1964 the Director of Welfare proposed that Aborigines in the pastoral industry should be covered by an extra-legal Tribunal working within the confines of the Arbitration Commission. The Tribunal would fix standards for conditions and wages which would be unique to Aboriginal people and "theoretically dependent on the individuals level of competence".<sup>26</sup> But moves within the North Australia Workers Union (N.A.W.U.) to action on behalf of Aborigines employed in the pastoral industry began in that year, and the Administration's action became redundant.

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24. Australian Archives, CRS F.1, 58/710, quoted by Carrodus in Letter to Administrator 31 January 1947.

25. op. cit.

26. Stevens, F., Equal Wages for Aborigines, The Background of Industrial Discrimination in the Northern Territory of Australia, (Distributed by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Vic, 1968), p.27

The Arbitration Commission had always maintained it could not interfere in the matter of Aboriginal employment on cattle stations because special Territory and State legislation covered the situation. But in 1965, without giving any reasons for changing their opinion they agreed to hear a case presented by the N.A.W.U. for an equal wage for Aborigines working in the pastoral industry.<sup>27</sup> In March 1966 the Court handed down a decision in favour of the Union but deferred its full implementation until December 1968.

But the most dramatic change in the employment of Aborigines occurred elsewhere in 1966 and was brought about by Aborigines. Aborigines continued to be the main labour force within the pastoral industry beyond 1965, but the circumstances of their involvement changed. The change happened in spite of conservative action during the 1940s and 50s by the large pastoral companies to maintain the status quo. In March a Gurindji man working on Newcastle Waters Station led his fellow workers in a strike - they walked off the station. And in August another group of Gurindji and Njinning stockmen totally frustrated by the lack of improvement in their pay and conditions "tracked" from Wave Hill Station to Wave Hill Settlement taking their families, their dogs and their meagre possessions with them. The events that followed are part of another story, but two important facts should be noted: these strikes were the beginning of a revolution in black-white relations in the Territory and to a large extent eclipsed the earlier industrial actions by "coloureds" in Darwin in the late 1940's;<sup>28</sup> some of the striking stockmen went early in 1967 to work on Camfield for Paul Vandeleur because he had introduced the equal wage system in 1966.

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27. Stevens. F., Equal Wages for Aborigines....., p.27.

28. For a discussion of this see Rowley, G.D., The Remote Aborigines, (A.N.U Press, Canberra, 1971, pp.290-294.

## CHAPTER 4

THE CASE STUDY: VICTORIA RIVER DOWNS - CAMFIELDThe Setting

In 1933 Victoria River Downs Station comprised an areas of 11,356 square miles in the north western part of the Victoria River district. Early explorers held that the country would be good grazing country, and, to a large extent, this view was confirmed by the experience of settlers. Problems in the pastoral industry of the district, although compounded by factors such as isolation, were largely man-made and not directly caused by physical conditions.

The station, and its outstations, lay within the tribal boundaries of the Ngarinman, Bilinara, Gurindji, Mudbura, Karranga and Ngaliqurru peoples of the Ngumbin language sub-group of Aborigines.<sup>1</sup> People from these groups still maintain strong affiliations with the area and have been a constant physical, social, political and spiritual presence for the whole of its post-contact history. Some of the significant dreaming paths leading in and through the country include Nguku (Rain) Mulyukuna (Black Headed Python) and Jurntakal Kujarra (Two Giant Snakes).<sup>2</sup>

Apart from its grazing potential, the country was rich in bush foods: fish, shellfish, wallaby, echidna, crocodile, turtle, yam and many fruits. There are open grassy plainlands, deep river gorge country with sandstone cliffs, lightly wooded savannah, small permanent waterholes shaded by pandanus, paperbark, leichhardt pine and native figs, and flat-topped mesas intersected by "deep and rocky ravines".<sup>3</sup> A very beautiful country, rich in resource and an important centre of Aboriginal law. Land which would have responded well to careful husbandry, but which was instead abused by unthinking and careless pastoralists.

A Cycle of Seasons

In 1970 Slayter described the climate of the Ord-Victoria area:

This predominantly semi-arid region, lying between latitudes 14° and 19°S., has a warm dry monsoonal climate

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1. A Claim to an area of Traditional Land by the Mudbara Traditional Owners, Northern Land Council, 1979, Map 2.
  2. A Claim to an area of Traditional Land..... pp.52-61.
  3. Makin, J., The Big Run, p.6.

characterized by a rainy season of 4-5 months and a dry period of virtual drought for the remainder of the year.

Day temperatures seldom fall below 84°F, and even in winter night temperatures remain sufficiently high to preclude frost occurrence in all but the most inland areas and parts of the highlands where frosts have occasionally been recorded.

Definite marked climatic trends are evident, due primarily to latitude and also to proximity to the coast of the northern portions of the region. In these areas there are higher total rainfall, less extreme temperatures, and a climate more generally humid than in the inland sections to the south.<sup>4</sup>

Aborigines adjusted their lives to the extremes of temperature, the heavy monsoonal rain of December to March, and to seasonal responses of indigenous flora and fauna by leading a semi-nomadic life within tribal boundaries. Later settlers, the pastoralists, are also constrained by climate: it is just not possible to "work" cattle much beyond October because of the heat and shortage of water, nor is it easy to move around the black soil country once the rains have come. Rain is so vitally important in this dry country which experiences high evaporation during the pre-wet season of September-November, the months of highest temperature and gradually increasing humidity.<sup>5</sup>

#### RAIN (NGUKU)

Do you see that white cloud up there? That started from the Dreaming. Do you see that black cloud? The Dreaming made it. Do you see those streaks of rain falling like legs underneath the cloud? That is the rain which comes from the Rain Dreaming. That black rain which falls at night is not nothing; the Dreaming made it. Sometimes the rain moves away. We look around and see no rain, because the Dreaming has taken it away. It isn't us humans who make it, the rain follows the path of the Dreaming. The rain keeps us all alive, Aborigines, children, dogs, horses, Europeans, goannas, bluetongues, and so on and so on. If there were not rain, we would all die. Those birds which you hear singing would all die. All of us are only alive because of rain; if there had been none, we would all have died long ago<sup>6</sup>.

Albert Crowson  
(translated from Mudbara)<sup>6</sup>

4. Lands of the Ord-Victoria area, Western Australia and Northern Territory  
(C.S.I.R.O., Melbourne, 1970) p.62.
5. Lands of the Ord-Victoria... pp.64-67.
6. A claim to an area of Traditional Land... p.52.

The settlers talk of the rain too:

Every year we used to watch the rain in the desert, follow the desert all the way - Hooker Creek, Cattle Creek, Limbunya, Montejinnie, Killarney....Unless the river ran in October from storm rains in the desert we didn't have any water supply. Every Christmas during the 50s and 60s I'd look at the cattle and think 'what are they eating?' Our first green Christmas was 1970.<sup>7</sup>

Kelly in 1952 describing the Victoria River district said: "the natural waters, however, are not sufficient to provide full utilisation of the grazing potential."<sup>8</sup>

For practical purposes of working cattle the year could be divided as follows:

|                  |                                                                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| January - March  | Rain                                                                                   |
| April - June     | Green grass and water stock in good condition.                                         |
| July - September | Feed drying off, and stock at end of September going back in condition.                |
| October-December | Drought. Stock generally in only store condition, but breeders very poor. <sup>9</sup> |

#### Resources Misused

Bulls of all shapes, sizes and colours were seen in mobs.<sup>10</sup>

In 1934 the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee visited Victoria River Downs and came away with a negative view of the way the station was being run. There had been negligible introduction of new blood stock, but as they remarked this was not the worst feature, "for whilst the books disclose 1,260 branded bulls (we noted one during our casual inspection) thousands of clean skin bulls were seen of all ages and the most mongrel types

7. Betty Vandeleur, interview, Katherine, July 1982.

8. Report on the breed cattle industry in Northern Australia, p.27.

9. Australian Archives, CRS:F1 48/76, Part 1, "Notes on the cattle industry in the Kimberley district of Western Australia:

10. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, PL121n (part 2), G.A. Buchanan, field officer to Senior Field Officer, Lands and Surveys Branch, 26 May 1952.

imaginable. We have it on reliable authority that 20,000 clean skin bulls would be a conservative estimate and that on part of the run they have been unmolested for years."<sup>11</sup>

VRD also employed a system of double mustering which adversely affected cattle and horses. The early muster was for bullocks needed for turn-off, and some of the bullocks mustered early were often held for months while the required numbers were being made up. Being deprived of the good April-May feed, they lost condition quickly. The second muster was for branding and cutting, carried out when the calves were beginning to lose condition and unable to recover quickly from being worked. At the end of season animals would be exhausted, some having been mustered twice, and the ones turned-off not prime fats.

The committee also noted that the carrying capacity was severely limited by the lack of paddock accommodation, weaning not being practised, the presence of many scrub bulls and the resultant in-breeding. Some environmental factors were seen as contributing factors:

"periodicity of rainfall and consequential greater loss of breeders and progeny" and "loss as a result of storms and drying waters more pronounced in a large run of this nature."<sup>12</sup>

In the report the Committee mentioned a number of times, the vast and unmanageable size of the "Big Run", a situation made worse by the insufficient number of stockmen employed. They recommended that the Government act on its right under the 1924 Crown Lands Ordinance to resume the first quarter of the lease in 1935 Martin, the manager, and the Bovril Company lawyer based in Perth, wrote to protest against the resumption of 1,475 square miles but the Government proceeded.<sup>13</sup>

Vesteys, meanwhile, were also in a position of having land resumed, but they bargained with Canberra and arranged for those areas to be resumed which suited their purpose. The deal gave them the land they wanted and in the process whole leasehold areas were yielded so that more profitable areas on

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11. Report on the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee...Victoria River Downs Station Report, p.1.

12. Report on the Pastoral Lease Inspection Committee... p.2.

13. Makin, J., The Big Run, p.149.

other leases could be retained. The total area resumed was 5,432.5 sq. miles.<sup>14</sup> Obviously it was canny to have representatives on the east coast close enough to keep in touch with Canberra.

The experience of having land resumed does not seem to have changed Martin's management practices. He had difficulty in convincing his London based owners of the pressing need for capital improvements<sup>15</sup> but appears in any case to have been disinclined to alter long established patterns. Fletcher and Payne noted in 1937 that the annual double muster was still taking place. They suggested a simpler, more efficient method which was dependant on the station constructing bullock paddocks for holding bullocks for fattening on good feed before they were turned off.<sup>16</sup> Fletcher and Payne were also of the opinion that many of the holdings including VRD were "too large to be developed to their full capacity... the larger holdings, at present, are being continuously worked at a loss."<sup>17</sup>

In 1945 the second quarter resumptions were due and VRD again had land subject to resumption. Bovril took stronger action this time and Lord Luke came, in 1946, to help fight the company's case before Mr. Justice Wells in the Supreme Court in Darwin. The matter was settled out of court.<sup>18</sup> No archival materials are available which can shed any light on the terms of settlement, but an area of 3,000 square miles was resumed. This area was to be the basis for the new stations, Montejinni, Camfield and Killarney.

Compensation was due to Bovril for the value of the improvements on the resumed land, and after the Surveyor-General and his team had completed what was one of the first large surveys of pastoral leases in the Territory, the Land and Survey Branch field officer inspected the improvements for valuation in 1952. Their report gives a depressing picture: yards, bores and fences were in a bad state and the new Camfield boundary fence "the poorest effort I have seen. It would have been better if no fence had been constructed at all than to do the shoddy work that has been done here..." The total assessed value of the improvements of £4,246:13:0.<sup>19</sup>

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14. Australian Archives, CRS:P630 PL196N, Carrodus to Administrator, 17 February 1936.

15. Makin, J. The Big Run, 17 February 1936.

16. Land and Land Industries of the Northern Territory..., p.52.

17. Land and Land Industries....., p.51.

18. Northern Standard, (8 November 1946, "Land Resumed for Ex-Service Settlers".

19. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, P.L.121N (Parts2) Buchanan, Field Officer

There were other problems that year, which was a year of drought, but the real problem was the lack of intelligent care for the land and its potential. In late 1949 one field officer had reported that in his opinion only 50,000 head were running on the property despite the manager's claim of 150,000.<sup>20</sup> And Buchanan, a Lands Branch Inspector, in 1952 noted that six mustering camps on VRD could not be guaranteed to find enough bullocks to meet the 2,000 head required for Wyndham meatworks.<sup>21</sup> This was to be the inauspicious start of the "new" cattle stations.

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20. Australian Archives, CRS:F630 P.L.121N (part 2), D. McInnes, Field Officer, General Inspection Report, 24 November 1949.

21. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, P.L. 121N (part 2), Buchanan Field Officer to Senior Field Officer, Lands and Survey Branch, 26 May 1952.

## Camfield

Camfield Station is an area of 984 square miles in the Victoria River District. It lies almost wholly within the boundary of the Mudbura people's country; to the south west lies Gurindji country, and to the west, Bilinara.<sup>22</sup> The clan holding law in respect of most of Camfield is Janama - Jangari.<sup>23</sup> Two sites of significance in the Nguku Dreaming (Rain) Warrarrangpurru (Paperbark Hole, Camfield River) and Tirnini (Horse Spring, one of significance in the Mulyukana Dreaming (Black Headed Python) at Marlurlwa (a billabong on the Murranji stock route), and one in the Kankanparlarra Dreaming (Crested Bellbird) also at Tirnini, are all within the station boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

The country is regarded as good cattle country. In their report to the Chief Clerk, Lands Branch in June 1948, Field Officers Macinnis and McBride referred to 65 percent of the block as good pasture land carrying good Mitchell, Flinders, Crowfoot, Wallaby and Kangaroo grasses, 10 percent of medium quality and the remaining 25 percent of poor quality. In the same report, referring to Killarney, they gave percentages of 42, 28 and 10 respectively, and in respect of Montejinni 42, 20 and 35. These were to be the "new" cattle stations developed from the land resumed from VRD, and although each block was considered capable of carrying 9,000 - 9,500 head Camfield was regarded as the best of the three (blocks). There was however, the problem of providing sufficient watering places so that the station could fulfil its potential. The problem was considered to be even greater on Killarney.<sup>25</sup>

At the time the Field Officers thought it probable the three blocks would be retained for War Service Land Settlement,<sup>26</sup> but the leases signed in 1952 did not bear this out. After the Lands Board hearings in Darwin Montejinni went to Bill Crowson in partnership with Bill Tapp. Crowson was a man with long experience in the North both as a drover and a manager of stations; Tapp was a young Sydneysider recently arrived in the Territory who had learnt to work cattle with Crowson. Killarney station was given to a Darwin businessman, Izod, who was in partnership with a man called Hall. Hall had experience in the pastoral industry. Only Camfield was leased by an

22. A claim to an area of Traditional Land..., Map 2.

23. A claim to an area of Traditional Land..., P.45

24. A claim to an area of Traditional Land..., pp.52-59

25. Australian Archives, CRS:F630 P.L.121N (Parts), Inspeccion Report from  
D.E. Macinnis and R.C. McBride to Chief Clerk, Lands, 17 June 1948.

26. *ibid.*

ex-serviceman, Jim Edwards, and he was in partnership with an affluent lawyer from Innisfail in Queensland, Mick Vandeleur of whom it was assumed that the attraction of the pastoral industry was its freedom from tax. This was a shortlived boon as it turned out, the concession was revoked in 1953.

Early in 1953 Edwards and two of Vandeleur's sons, Mick and Paul, trekked from Queensland to Camfield. While not as grand as the Duxack expedition in the 1880s, dramatic effect was achieved by 19 year old Paul, who drove a wheeled tractor from Mt. Isa in Queensland to Elliott in the Territory where he "bailed out" and continued by means of more conventional transport. The enormous openness of the Barkly was his first experience of Territory grasslands and he was certain when he saw it that three months in the Territory would see him out. He had come reluctantly anyway, sent by his father to keep an eye on Edwards, who was an unknown quantity, and as a punishment for an adolescent misdemeanour. His first view of Camfield, suffering from drought and with red gibbers everywhere, did not enhance his impressions of the Territory. He saw dried native grasses which did not look as if they had any good in them. But his greatest difficulty was the vastness of the run he found he "could not relate to the expanse of the area."<sup>27</sup>

The modern overlanders helped by six "coloureds" from the Georgetown area, and a man called Jack Douglas who had worked for the Vandeleurs on their cane farms, brought in 400 horses from the Gulf Country. Ironically these Aborigines wanted to come to the Territory because the prospect for freedom was greater. There was no permanent camp of Aborigines on Camfield (or Killarney) so Vandeleur had no ready supply of Aboriginal labour. In the first few years Camfield employed Aborigines from Katherine. Until the homestead and outbuildings were constructed (late 1950s) conditions were tough on Camfield for all its workers and Vandeleur had difficulty attracting staff. Gradually the station developed a good reputation for fair treatment of all employees, good conditions and Union wages. In 1967 Gurindji stockmen who had gone on strike from Vestey's Wave Hill station came to work on Camfield.

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27. Most of the material in the Camfield story is based on interviews with Betty and Paul Vandeleur, Sid Hawks, Vern O'Brien, and Gus Trippe, 1982. Transcript of interviews will be lodged with the Special Collection, Learning Resources Centre, Darwin Community College.

Camfield was basically an unimproved block when Edwards and Vandeleur moved onto it, there were no buildings, no bores, yards worth only £210 and fencing valued at £713:10:0.<sup>28</sup> Paul Vandeleur estimates there were between 5,000 and 8,000 head of cattle on the block. Contemporary accounts record the policy of VRD "had been to concentrate all the station camps on the resumed area before it is taken from the lessees, and brand and remove everything to the remainder of the lease. Owing to shortage of labour and horses, and the difficult nature of the country and the cattle concerned, it is extremely unlikely that this hopeful programme will be carried out".<sup>29</sup> The cattle were predominantly cleanskin bulls, although there were "cleanskin cows and young cleanskins of both sexes"<sup>30</sup> in evidence.

But before the cattle could be worked the new owners had to commence a programme of improvements. Each of the new stations had strict covenants attached to their leases and these were rigorously enforced by the Lands Branch. The government applied to Montejinni, Camfield and Killarney the kinds of conditions that Kelly had insisted should apply to Vestey's and Bovril leases. Writing in 1954 about the 1953 Crown Land Ordinance Rose commented:

Under the legislation it is 'the Administrator...with the consent of the Minister' who determines 'the conditions...relating to minimum developmental work and minimum improvements' in the converted leases; minimum conditions are not specified in the Ordinance, nor is provision made for them to be prescribed by regulation. This lays a heavy responsibility on the Administrator, for he will be able to make development conditions as harsh or as light as he wishes. On the one hand, company leases could be converted for the maximum period of fifty years with virtually no procedure under the 1924 Ordinance. On the other hand, development conditions might be made so onerous as to force the inefficient company operator out of the industry. It will be interesting to see what policy is in practice followed, and whether the stated objective of improving the industry's efficiency and thereby production is in fact obtained.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, P.L.121N (Part 2), G.A. Buchanan, Field Officer to Senior Field Officer, 26 May 1952.

29. Australian Archives, CRS:F630, P.L.121N (Part 2), Inspection Report, D.E. Macinnis and R.M. McBride, 17 June 1948.

30. *ibid.*

31. Rose, F.G.G., "Pastoral Industry in the Northern Territory..." p.167.

Camfield had 10 years to complete: boundary fencing, 80 miles of internal fencing (fencing cost 100 a mile), a cattle yard large enough to work 1,000 head, 8 bores, breeding cattle so that stocking was at the rate of 10 to square mile and a homestead to the value of £10,000. Keeping to the conditions of the lease would have been impossible without substantial financial backing and some cash flow.

Almost immediately, as work started at Camfield, Vandeleurs bought Mataranka Station, a grazing licence at Buffalo Springs and a butcher shop in Katherine. They purchased store bullocks at 7 a head, kept the best for fattening for sale at 15-18 pounds a head, and sold the rest to Angliss (Vesteys) in Darwin. Jack Grimmett ran the butcher shop buying beef from local producers. (For a while Mick stayed at Camfield and Paul worked on Mataranka). These measures provided 2/3 of the working capital Camfield required, and important training for Paul in aspects of the cattle industry.

Success in the pastoral industry depends on more than faith and hard work: the men had to learn new techniques for managing the land, and perseverance when outdated technology could not handle hard country - drilling rigs that could only drill an inch a day. Success depended on intelligent response to the seasonal changes, "the periodicity of rain". It was, for example necessary to introduce a breeding programme that did not leave cows, weakened from calving late in the year, unable to move in boggy black soil.

In the first five years many mistakes were made. For a while the men tried to work the run along farming lines and yarded horses in a waterless paddock from which they were led daily to the river. From mistakes and experiences lessons were taken and by 1955 Paul had learnt the value of internal fencing, paddocks with watering points, not to build on the black soil banks of a river and enough managerial skills to begin supervizing Camfield. In 1954 the partnership with Edwards was dissolved and from then until 1957 the station was managed by an old territory cattle man, Wayson Byers, as Paul came gradually closer to his eventual role of owner-manager.

Mick and Paul had to learn the cattle business thoroughly, including how and when to sell. Until 1959 the ventures did not go well. Sometimes ignorance or lack of experience was a problem, other times the markets were depressed, there was sheer bad luck, and drought. The first lot of cattle turned off

(in 1954) were walked up through Jasper Gorge, very rough country, and through to Wyndham meat works. Vandeleurs expected that their mob of stags (recently cut young bullocks) could be sold under the 15 year meat agreement but they were not sufficiently good quality and the whole lot went "down the chute for fertilizer." In 1955 a mob was sent to Katherine along the Dry River Stock Route. A new idea was tried out in 1956: a mob of 3,000 were sent to Queensland for agistment on fenced land. Paul went across and checked them in May 1957, but only 1400 were mustered and no buyers could be found for these because of drought. Eventually an offer of one pound a head was made but it was turned down because Vandeleurs had decided to leave the cattle for sale after the Wet. It never came. The next year the mob were sold for £ 9 a head. The family came out of the situation £ 8,000 in the red.

Low prices and drought were not the only problems, the Murrnaji Track was a source of many losses.<sup>32</sup> Buyers used to quote two prices for cattle that were to travel the Murrnaji: one price for cattle delivered at Pussy Cat Dip, 20 miles east of Top Springs, and a higher price for the ones that made it to No.7 Bore. Vandeleurs commonly accepted the lower price, bearing in mind the high risk of losses on the stock route. There are authenticated stories told of whole mobs being lost on the Murrnaji.

A turning point in Camfield's fortunes came in 1959. Gus Trippe, an American living in Darwin, had established a live cattle export trade with the Philippines and he offered good prices for cattle. Paul Vandeleur sold 600 cattle for £17 a head delivered at Katherine. And in the same year cattle were sold to Queensland buyers. From that point the market for Camfield cattle seemed assured. The building of Katherine export meat works in 1963 gave the pastoralists from the Victoria River the guarantee they had needed for so long.

As Paul grew more confident in his role he experimented. In 1961 he tried taking cattle by road transport to Katherine, but the truck was old and

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32. In 1947 an investigation into stock losses on one stretch of the Murrnaji Track was carried out by Veterinary Officers of the Animal Industries Branch. They concluded that ingestion of ironwood leaves was the cause of death. See Northern Standard, 26 Decmber 1947, "Ironwood Poisoning of Cattle".

could only carry 22 head a time. It took 30 hours to travel 300 miles and there was a problem with bruising. But it was a sign of the times, these were the first cattle by road into Katherine from so far west, and although the venture was not successful Vandeleur realized the necessity for road transport as his evidence a year later before the Public Works Committee clearly showed.

The constant worry during the early years on Camfield, however, was water, either rain fell at the wrong time or there was trouble with bores. One year there was a fall of 11 inches over 2 days which flooded creeks and rivers at a time when the native grasses could not respond. The result was bogged cattle, 2 miles of fence line washed away, and none of the fresh green 'pick' pastoralists expect after rain.

Until the rotary drill rigs were introduced in the late 60s, drilling was a long, difficult and often frustrating task. Most small stations contracted drilling teams or called in the government contractors. Vandeleur's experience was that as soon as the drillers hit basalt they pulled out. There was no subsidy from the Government until the 1960s. Under the terms of the lease on Camfield, the Government was required to drill two bores, the cost to be repaid by the leaseholders, but only one, Farquharson Bore, was successfully drilled on Camfield under this scheme.

On one occasion, after the Vandeleurs had made five unsuccessful attempts to get water, Harry McCuller divined water for them, and when the drillers were called in there was water where McCuller had said. Another bore was named Hoodoo because three or four holes were drilled and tools lost down each one, the drilling on this bore took 9 months. And one bore pumped at a rate of 3,000 gallons per hour for 12 months then dried up completely.

The country on Camfield was good for cattle and despite the gloomy prognostications of the older settlers that cattle wouldn't breed in paddocks, Vandeleur realized within a couple of years that the pastures were adequate and that it made sense to use paddocks because then "you know where the cattle are". So, as they got water, they fenced and gradually introduced the cattle management programme which led to success.

Practices followed by Vandeleur, and later by Bill Tapp when he bought Killarney, were based on those worked out by Kilfoyle on Rosewood: small holding paddocks built near the main stock camps, small horse paddocks so horses didn't have to be hobbled, substantial stock camps with galvanized iron sheds. Double mustering the traditional system on VRD, was eliminated and on the new stations the whole mob was mustered once, brought into paddocks, settled down, "meat workers" drafted, breeders yarded and branded, tailed for a couple of days and then let go.

By the 1960s when Development Bank money became available it was possible to build on the basis of a well run station and make improvements according to a prepared plan, and on Camfield troughs were made for the bores replacing the old "44's", turkey nests<sup>33</sup> and dams were constructed using Station plant and new bores were sunk. It had become obvious that Camfield could carry twice as many head to the square mile as MacInnis and McBride had recommended in 1948.

People face other problems in the North: isolation and loneliness are major social factors particularly on the small owner-manager station which operated with a small permanent staff and uses contract teams for mustering, fencing and drilling. Cattle work is demanding. Concentrated in the Dry each year, it often required commitment to the job 7 days a week from sun up to sun down. Little time is left, even if people had the energy, for a social life. Even small stations cover vast areas and are often in remote locations difficult to reach in the Dry and impossible to reach in the Wet. In these circumstances many men have had their spirits broken by the loneliness, and the rum bottle and Aboriginal women have often been used to take the place of family life.

In the Victoria River area there are no large thriving service centres; towns like Wyndham and Katherine still have populations of less than 5,000. Little exists in the way of social networks of established inter-family friendships, for until recently white Territorians did not stay long in one place in the bush.

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33. "44's" are 44 gallon fuel drums, they are cut in half lengthways and used as water troughs. For "Turkey Nest" see The Macquarie Dictionary, (Macquarie Library, Sydney, 1982) p.1862. In short it is a small earth dam.

The Vandeleurs were new and from "down south" and with the exception of other newcomers like the Hawks at Top Springs and Bill Tapp, most of the locals treated them with suspicion. A hard life for a young man to lead. Then on a trip to Katherine in 1957, Paul met a young woman, Betty, who had come from Queensland to nurse at the Hospital, and with her found affection and companionship. They were married in 1958 and established an enviable relationship which flourished because "we have always been good mates". And now there was a reason to build a homestead worth 10,000 pounds.

In characteristic style, Paul decided not to build in asbestos, the common material of the time, and was equally determined not to have a Sydney Williams hut.<sup>34</sup> Camfield Homestead would be brick. So, in 1957, with help from two Italian "blokes who were mates" Paul started making bricks. They used pumice stone from the disused Bovril meat works in Katherine.<sup>35</sup> Timber was brought in from Innisfail on Camfield's 'new' second-hand Mack truck, fittings came in from Townsville loaded on another station truck (a 'new' second-hand International), and the aluminium frames for the large sliding glass windows came up from Brisbane. Started in '57, the house was habitable by 1960 and Betty who had been living over the butcher shop in Katherine moved out to Camfield. The kitchen, one bedroom and a breakfast room had been completed, the rest took another 2-3 years.

Water was once again a problem and for years during the late months of the Dry as the Camfield dried back the pump drawing water for the house sucked fish up into the tank. The introduction of rotary drilling rigs in the late 60s made a difference and the Vandeleurs were able to drill bores on the stony land where the house stood. The ground there was so hard that when Betty wanted to make a garden, she had first to arrange for a post-hole digger to make a hole big enough to hold a stick of gelignite which was used to blow a second hole big enough to plant the station shade and fruit trees.

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31. A rectangular construction of asbestos, timber and corrugated iron, often ventilated by use of wooden shutters which opened out from unglazed windows and were kept open by means of a small wooden prop.

32. In 1948 Bovril had undertaken to construct a meatworks in Katherine in return for Government approval for an extension of lease. (The meatworks was never completed), Northern Standard, 17 September 1948.

After the hardships of the first ten years, dramatic changes affected the Vandeleurs in the 60s. The Commonwealth Development Bank, which made capital available to primary producers commenced its operations in the N.T. in the early 1960s, improved technology helped drilling and fencing techniques. The introduction of long range beef road trains in the 1960s and of beef roads of either graded gravel or bitumen in the mid to later 1960s facilitated quick and safe movement of cattle. Pastoralists could turn off cattle of only 2-3 years age (more tender beef) because the risk of huge losses, common when cattle were over-landed, no more existed.

These improvements did not come easily as Paul's experience in the Beef Road debate showed, and sometimes a game man had to stand alone against the big companies to win. But it was during the first decade that Vandeleur sank the eight bores, and built the house, and fenced the land. And he learned from observation as much as from trial and error the way the land should be worked to maximize turn off without creating long term damage to the environment. And the country responded.

#### Postscript.

In 1973 Camfield was put up for sale, a decision forced on the Vandeleurs by family problems. There were close to 200 horses, 180 miles of internal fencing, 27 station paddocks, 22 bores and the homestead was less than a quarter of mile from the Wave Hill - Top Springs beef road. But the mark of the stations success were the cattle statistics. Since the mid 60s Brahman bulls had been introduced into the herd. The station carried 1900 head of cattle, i.e. twice the number suggested and at no apparent cost to the environment because of sound management.<sup>36</sup> It seems Jack Kelly had been right.

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36. Information contained in Prospectus prepared by Auctioneers, Elder Smith Goldsbrough Mort Ltd (Katherine N.T.), for sale of Camfield Station in 1973.

### CONCLUSION

After a period of sluggish inactivity during the 1920s and 1930s the 1940s and 50s was a period of tremendous change in the Northern Territory. Although the Territory remained Australia's Frontier Province the isolation and separation from the rest of the nation had been broken down by the events of World War II. In 1945 the Territory was ready to be opened up for increased settlement, for development and growth. Many southerners having experienced its open freedom during the War looked to the North. The time for renewal had arrived. Between 1950 and 1960 development and growth did happen and the events in the Victoria River District pastoral industry are a good example of the process of change.

The new stations, Camfield, Montejinnie and Killarney owned and managed by hard work and dedicated families exemplified the revitalized Australian spirit. Special factors contributed to their success, some of which were specific to the new management style; others were contributed by new Commonwealth Government land use policies for the pastoral industry. Although there appears some inequity in the way those policies were administered - the covenants on the leases for the new stations were particularly tough - the people on the new stations met the challenge and achieved remarkable success. Indeed it can be conjectured that in rising to meet the challenge they developed the tenacity and patience required to make a success of grazing in the Victoria River District.

The three families most involved in the new stations, Vandeleur, Crowson and Tapp, brought special skills to the industry: Paul Vandeleur and Bill Tapp came from established east coast families who had financial security and managerial expertise, Crowson had long experience in the industry. All three closely observed the physical conditions of the country they grazed and responded to the environment rather than act in spite of it as earlier pastoralists had done. They treated employees, black and white, well and were noted in the district for their fairness. They were conservative of their resources and treated the country, the soil and the grasses and water, with respect and they avoided harsh treatment of cattle. The country was good cattle country, as indeed it had been for Vestey's and Bovril, with large tracts of black soil hosting good sweet native grasses, and it responded to good management just as Jack Kelly had predicted it would.

In some regards, however, Camfield was different. It was the only one of the three stations which was entirely undeveloped in 1953. When the Vandeleurs started on Camfield they were beginning from scratch. And although Paul Vandeleur was only a young man he displayed a flair for management and, perhaps even more importantly, an ability to find new answers for old questions. His experiments in moving cattle by road are proof of that. Paul, possibly because of his youth and his "newness", did not bow before the weight of long established large pastoral companies and was prepared if necessary to fight them. Vandeleur's fresh approach to the industry influenced others, and when Bill Tapp left Montejinnie and took up the Killarney lease in the early 1960s he introduced the ideas learnt from Vandeleur. (He also built a substantial homestead of brick as Vandeleur had done on Camfield). Paul Vandeleur offered leadership, and although all three stations prospered Camfield occupied a unique position in the pastoral industry in the district because of Vandeleur's contribution.

During the 1960s two quite separate streams of influences affecting the pastoral industry converged in the Victoria River District and created the new form of industry which was to have impact on the whole of the Territory. They were the development of the new stations (supported by improved technology, availability of development capital and new export markets) on the one side; and the dramatic manifestations of social and political change among Aborigines on the other. As a result of that confluence the long standing influence of Vestey's began to wane, the small man having proven his ability on the new stations began to be heard in Canberra and Darwin, and Aborigines moved from being a cheap labour source for pastoralists to ownership, in some areas, of their own small cattle stations. A new era in Northern Territory history had begun.

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| Librarians:              | Murdoch University<br>Elizabeth Estbergs, Special Collection,<br>Darwin Community College<br>Colleen Pyne, Northern Australian Research<br>Unit, Darwin |