

THE EUROPEAN EXPLORERS AND SETTLERS

WE SUDDENLY FOUND OURSELVES ON THE BANKS OF A NOBLE RIVER ... THE CHANNEL OF THE RIVER WAS FROM SEVENTY TO EIGHTY YARDS BROAD, AND ENCLOSED AN UNBROKEN SHEET OF WATER, EVIDENTLY VERY DEEP, AND LITERALLY COVERED WITH PELICANS AND OTHER WILD FOWL. OUR SURPRISE AND DELIGHT MAY BETTER BE IMAGINED THAN DESCRIBED. OUR DIFFICULTIES SEEMED TO BE AT AN END, FOR HERE WAS A RIVER THAT PROMISED TO REWARD ALL OUR EXERTIONS, AND WHICH APPEARED EVERY MOMENT TO INCREASE IN IMPORTANCE TO OUR IMAGINATION.

CHARLES STURT ON REACHING THE DARLING RIVER, 1ST FEBRUARY 1829

EXPLORING THE BASIN

The Darling River Basin had been occupied by Aborigines for 30 000 years before the new white colonists pushed their way over the mountains and into the outback. For the clans that inhabited the Basin, the Darling was mapped out in stories and songs that described the rivers and the countryside. For the Europeans, the geography of the Basin was a perplexing jigsaw puzzle that took over fifty years to complete. The framework of the river system that made up this vast inland Basin was mapped out by the government appointed explorers who set off across the Divide in search of new pastures, imaginary rivers and dreams of an inland sea. The intrepid pastoralists who followed in their footsteps filled in the finer details of the landscape.

Rich Pastures and Promised Lands

George Evans became the first known European to look upon the rivers and plains of the Darling Basin. In November 1813 Evans descended from the Blue Mountains into the valley of the Fish River, and explored the upper reaches of the Macquarie Valley. He returned with a diary full of glowing descriptions—a promised land of lush pastures, rich soils and park-like woodlands. The promise of such rich rewards ensured that within a year of Evans' return the first road over the mountains had been constructed.

Five years later Surveyor General John Oxley set off with Evans to determine where the western flowing Macquarie River might lead. But the river would not give up its secret easily—Oxley was defeated by the flooded reedbeds and endless channels of the Macquarie Marshes. Unable to find their way through the marshes, Oxley and Evans turned east and discovered the Liverpool Plains, another fertile area with great agricultural promise.

By 1824, British colonisation to the south of Sydney had reached the southern coastline of the continent and was extending west along the Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers. Much of the country to the north remained unknown to them. However, one thousand kilometres north of Sydney was the newly established and remote penal settlement of Moreton Bay. It

had been established by sea and the governor's office was eager for information on the territorial claims in its interior.

In April 1827 the botanist, Alan Cunningham, headed north from Sydney with a party of six convicts and eleven pack animals to investigate the commercial potential of the northern interior and determine if an overland route to Moreton Bay could be established. The party travelled north from the Hunter River, traversing the Namoi and Gwydir Rivers, before reaching the river now known as the Macintyre. From there Cunningham turned north-easterly exploring the various creeks and luxuriant floodplains of the Condamine Valley which drain the rich uplands less than 160 kilometres west of Moreton Bay. He had mapped one of the most fertile of the Darling's headwaters—well-watered grasslands, which Europeans would covet for pasture and the proximity to a seaport. Cunningham named this rich area the Darling Downs.

A Noble River

Fifteen years after crossing the Great Divide, Evans, Oxley and Cunningham had contributed significantly to the picture of the Darling Basin by 'discovering' most of its eastern tributaries. But the ultimate course of these rivers remained a mystery to the colonists. Speculation about their destiny optimistically suggested that they flowed into a large inland sea. Oxley had come across impenetrable marshes on both the Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers, adding fuel to this fanciful theory. Charles Sturt was appointed as the man who would attempt to solve the puzzle. Sturt himself was a strong believer in the idea of an inland sea—it was to be a relentless quest that would almost cost him his life.

Sturt and his party set out from Wellington in November 1828. In preparation for their encounter with inland waters they carried with them a boat, nautical almanac, boat compass, signal flares and provisions for five months. Travelling through the Macquarie Valley, the drought stricken country they encountered made a mockery of their hopes. Even the Macquarie Marshes, which had defeated Oxley, were parched and lifeless. When Sturt's party finally stumbled down the banks of the Darling near Bourke they found only salty water coming from springs in the riverbed. Nonetheless Sturt sensed the importance of the river and he later named it in honour of Governor Darling, who had appointed him to lead the expedition.

Governor Darling was so pleased with Sturt's achievement that he immediately requested him to lead a second expedition along the Murrumbidgee River to determine whether it joined the Darling. Sturt and his party attracted considerable attention from the local clans as they travelled along the lower Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers in their whaling boat.

Sturt bid farewell to around 150 Aborigines when breaking camp one morning but was soon met by a hostile war party of around 600 people on a large sandspit further down the river. Just when Sturt was forced to raise his rifle in defence, a warrior who had been following Sturt for several days threw himself into the river and crossed to the sandspit to confront the crowd. Sturt described in his diary how the Aboriginal man

trod its margin with a vehemence and an agitation that were exceedingly striking. At one moment pointing to the boat, at another shaking his clenched hand in the faces of the most forward, and stamping with passion on the sand.

Sturt's brave warrior friend convinced the group that Sturt should go unharmed and the party dispersed. Only when the tensions had subsided did Sturt notice that the sandspit marked the entry of a large new river from the north—the Darling.

In Search of the Kindur

The exploits of a runaway convict, George Clarke, alias 'The Barber', were responsible for the next phase of European exploration of the Darling Basin. Clarke escaped from his posting near Singleton and spent five years living on the Namoi River with the Kamilaroi clan. When re-captured, his amazing adventures stirred the interest of the government and the newly appointed Surveyor General, Major Thomas Mitchell. Clarke told of a mighty river flowing from the Liverpool Plains to the north or north-west. To this, Mitchell added his own vision—that such a stream, which he called the Kindur, might flow right across the continent, forming a direct line of communication to India and England.

Mitchell's expedition departed from the Hunter Valley in November 1831. Along the Namoi River the party found remnants of Clarke's escapade in the form of stockyards and Aboriginal shelters on the banks of a lagoon, which is now called Barbers Lagoon. As they continued down the valley, Mitchell began to suspect that the Namoi would lead to Sturt's previously discovered Darling River. It was presumed that this river flowed to the south-west. From Narrabri, Mitchell turned northwards, crossing waterless plains and dry creekbeds in search of his great river. In January 1832, he stood upon the banks of the Gwydir River, perplexed and somewhat disappointed:

I could not believe at first that this was the Kindur—as it neither answered the idea I had formed of that river from Barber's description—nor did it appear to me sufficiently far to the northward for the centre of the basin formed by the Coast mountain.

Mitchell followed the Gwydir downstream hoping in vain that it might lead to greater waters. But the channels of the Gwydir grew smaller and less significant and it appeared that it too would lead to the Darling River. Travelling northwards again, Mitchell encountered the largest river the expedition had yet seen—the Barwon. But after following this river downstream Mitchell became convinced that this river and the Darling were one and the same. A tragic turn of events laid rest to any further plans for exploration. An attack on the depot left two members of the party dead and the remaining stores in short supply. Mitchell turned his back on 'the Kindur' and returned to Sydney.

Charting the Darling

Sturt had taken the honour of 'discovering' the Darling River, but the colonisers wanted more detailed information and the task of exploring its course was assigned to Mitchell. With the largest and most aggressive expedition yet seen in Australia, Mitchell travelled by way of the Bogan River, reaching the Darling in May 1832.

His previous travels had already made him familiar with the traditional landholders' assertions of their rights of ownership and their reluctance to allow Europeans to penetrate their lands. On the banks of the River, Mitchell built a depot, which he named Fort Bourke. It took the form of a stockade to defend the stores while the main party explored the river by boat. However if Mitchell had spent more time studying the river and less time erecting a stockade, he would have realised that the river was very shallow. After one day of dragging the boats over rocks and sandbars, the party were forced to abandon the boat trip and return to Fort Bourke. After a short reconnaissance the stockade was abandoned and the expedition continued on land.

A month after leaving Fort Bourke Mitchell's party arrived at Laidley's Ponds, now known as Menindee Lakes. Although his orders had been to trace the course of the Darling River to its ultimate end, the frequent appearance of the fearsome Barkindji people daubed in war paint made Mitchell extremely nervous about the safety of the party. While camped at the lakes the war party began lighting fires around the camp, and Mitchell's men added to the strained relationship by harassing one of the aboriginal women. During a retaliatory fight over the possession of a tea kettle, Mitchell's men opened fire and a woman and child were killed. Mitchell hurriedly conceded that the river was likely to be the same one that Sturt had seen entering the Murray, and wasted no time in turning northwards, retracing his steps to Fort Bourke and the Bogan River.

While his achievement in tracing a large part of the Darling River was commendable, Governor Bourke was somewhat disgruntled at Mitchell's failure to complete the full course of the expedition. With new instructions to join the river at Laidley's Ponds and follow it to its conclusion, Mitchell set off along the Lachlan River in 1836. On reaching the western end of the valley Mitchell became apprehensive about the impending 320 kilometres journey across waterless country. Deviating from his instructions once again, Mitchell continued along the Lachlan to the Murrumbidgee River and then the Murray.

Mitchell turned inland near Dareton and reached the Darling River 30 kilometres north of the Murray junction. Not wishing to waste any more of his time with the 'survey of deserts' Mitchell turned the expedition south instead of north towards Laidley's Ponds. It was Mitchell's opinion that a survey of the lower part of the Darling River was a fruitless task that would exhaust the resources of his party for little personal gain. Crossing the Murray River he proceeded to explore new country in western Victoria, and it was these discoveries of verdant green plains and beautiful streams that ultimately brought him the recognition he was looking for.

While Mitchell had been exploring the Darling, much attention had been focussed on developing a stock route for the overlanding of sheep and cattle to supply the growing European presence in South Australia. By 1840, the overlanders and their stock were severely testing the patience and hospitality of the local clans, and settlers called for a police presence in the area of the Murray-Darling junction. In October 1841 Edward John Eyre was appointed as Resident Magistrate and Protector of Aborigines for the Murray District. Eyre travelled extensively from his station near Blanchetown in South Australia into the remote areas around Lake Victoria and the Darling junction. In December 1843 he became the first white man to travel the lower reaches of the Darling River to Laidley's Ponds, thus filling in the longstanding gap in exploration of the Darling River.

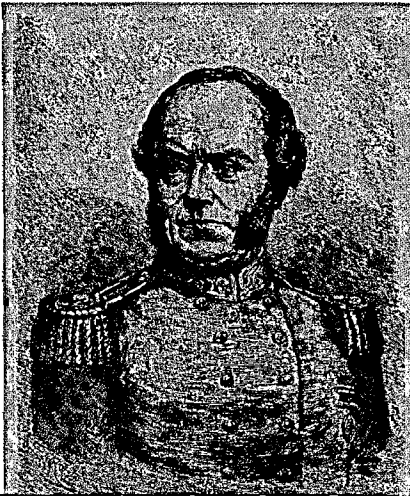
Our Brightest Hopes Destroyed

During this time, Charles Sturt, having already contributed significantly to inland exploration, had been serving in the honourable position of Registrar General of South Australia. But the lure of the bush was strong and Sturt was still tantalised by the thought of discovering an inland sea. In letters to his friend and former patron Ralph Darling, Sturt wrote of his desire to perform 'one more important service' and of his dream that he 'shall unfold the interior to the world'.

Sturt left Adelaide with much pomp and ceremony in August 1844. The country around the Darling River was green and luxuriant and Sturt's party were cheered by the beautiful scenery and security that the river provided. The expedition reached Laidley's Ponds in October. The key to Sturt's plans had been a stream, the Williorara that was thought to enter Laidley's Ponds from the north-west. But the Williorara was a big disappointment—it was merely a flood channel that fed the river's floodwaters into the lakes of Laidley's Ponds.

Thus in a moment were all our brightest hopes destroyed. Instead of having a fine stream to follow to the westward we had to commence forcing our way across barren plains.

John Browne, Expedition Doctor



Sir Thomas Mitchell
The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia.
 Edited by Andrew Garran
 (1825–1901). Originally published,
 Sydney: Picturesque Atlas
 Publishing Co., 1886–88

Fourteen months later Sturt and his party finally returned to the Darling exhausted from the rigours of their desert journey and the gruelling retreat from the putrid waters of Depot Glen. While Mitchell had considered the Darling a hostile place unworthy of his time, Sturt developed a clear fondness and respect for the River. The El Dorado of vast inland waters had proved a fantasy and now the value of the humble Darling was all the greater. On leaving the Darling for their final return to Adelaide, Sturt wrote in his journal:

On turning my back on my old friend it is not likely I shall ever see it again. It has however treated us well. We have found an abundance of feed on its banks, and have passed in peace among its inhabitants.

A Northern Journey

Mitchell led a final expedition to the Darling Basin in December 1845, just one month after the return of Sturt. An Aboriginal guide, who Mitchell knew as Yuliyally, escorted the party north to the Barwon from the Macquarie Valley. From there they were guided by another two Aboriginal people north to the Narran River. They followed the Narran into what would later become known as Queensland. Mitchell spent almost all of 1846 in the field following the Balonne north to its junction with the Maranoa, then on to the Coogoon River until he reached the source of the Warrego River in the Carnarvon Ranges. He went on to explore the headwaters of the Channel streams in the west and the Burdekin River system to the north.

Two features are striking about Mitchell's journey through the northern part of the Basin. His journal records his delight in the scenery and detailed descriptions of the River, its flora and fauna. The Balonne, Mitchell declared, was *as fine a looking river as I have seen in the colony, excepting only the Murray.*

Elsewhere he noted the luxuriant grasses of its lagoons and wetlands, its large fish, ducks, black swans and pelicans.

Mitchell's earlier journeys had instilled in him an ambivalent respect for the local Aboriginal clans in the lands he traversed. His account of his last journey is an unmistakable record of a journey through a foreigner's land rather than an exploration of unconquered territory.

While Cunningham had been disappointed that he had only met Aborigines on five occasions, Mitchell's party could not avoid the evidence of Indigenous settlement:

... the natives seen yesterday had disappeared, having set fire to the grass. We camped on the Narran two miles beyond their fires. A small path along the river margin, marks on trees where portions of bark had been taken off, some ancient, some recent, huts of withered boughs and dry grass, freshwater mussels besides the ashes of small fires and a heap of pulled grass, such were the slight but constant indications of the subsistence of man on the Narran.

March 1846

He reported on the variety of nets about their huts and noted the high population of Aboriginal people along the river system, evident by a number of large mussel shell middens. Mitchell came upon children swimming, saw people fishing and at night he heard singing from their camps. Everywhere he went Mitchell sought contact with the local clans for evidence of the nature of the river systems and names of local features. The success of the expedition was largely attributable to the assistance of the Aboriginal people who directed him to the main channels where tributaries branched, prevented him from getting bogged in wetlands and from dying of thirst in arid country. They advised him in what direction to head, and named rivers, mountains and other identifying features for him.

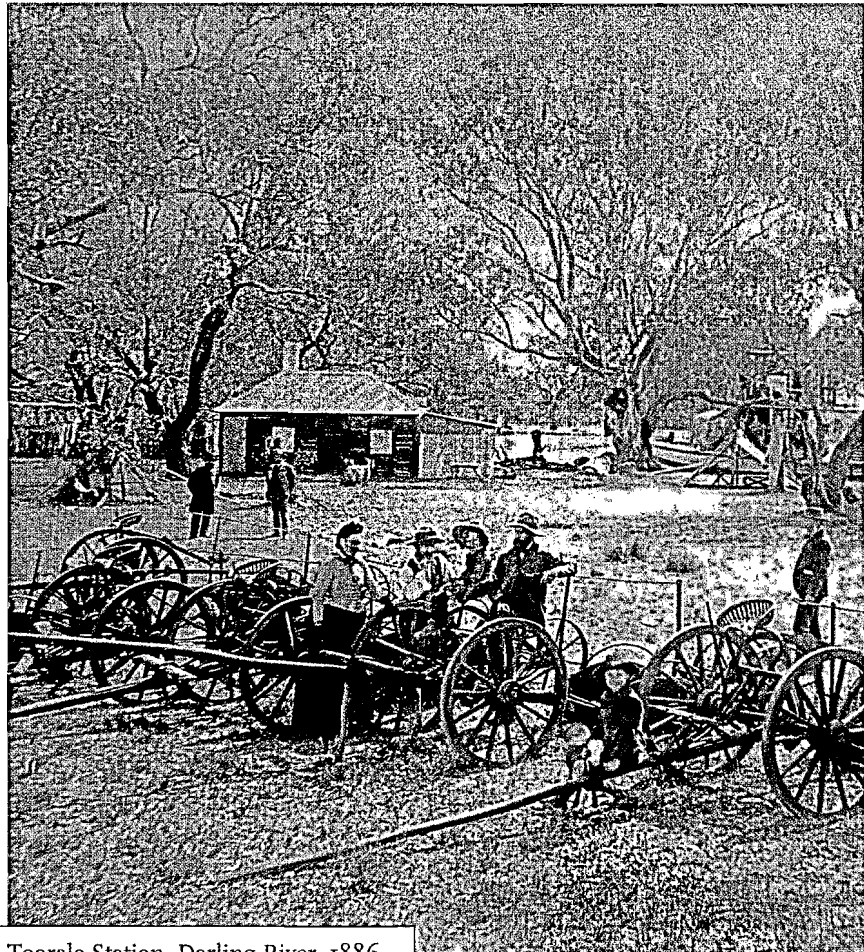
First impressions

The diaries and journals of the explorers are filled with poetic descriptions of the rivers and countryside they encountered. George Evans and Charles Sturt, in particular, were as gifted with words as they were in navigation, and their accounts of their expeditions make fascinating reading. In hindsight, it is easy to scorn the inevitable comparisons of Australian woodlands to England's parklands and eucalypts to weeping willows. The Australian countryside proved to be so radically different that at times it was beyond description, and the landscapes of their mother country were the explorers only reference.

First impressions of the value of the Darling Basin for European pastoralism and habitation depended very much on the seasonal conditions encountered at the time of each expedition. Oxley and Evans saw the countryside of the Macquarie and Liverpool Plains at their best, while Mitchell and Sturt travelled further afield over numerous expeditions and saw the countryside in both good and bad seasons. Mitchell was also able to view some of the Darling's eastern tributaries before and after European pastoral occupation. The fragility of the minor waterways and billabongs was apparent to him as he retraced his steps on his last expedition and found formerly clear and secluded waterholes destroyed by stock.

People rushed to take advantage of the more temperate parts of the Basin assuming that the lush conditions so enthusiastically reported were the norm, rather than the exception.

Perhaps this could be forgiven in the eastern part of the Basin, but the explorers and early squatters were well aware of the incidence of drought in the semi arid regions of the Darling River. However, there prevailed an unfailing belief that 'improving' the land could perform pastoral miracles. That the early explorers, surveyors and settlers formed too optimistic an opinion of the Basin's capabilities was a point that was sadly recognised in the outcomes of the 1901 Royal Commission into the Western Division.



Toorale Station, Darling River, 1886.

Charles Bayliss

TABLE 1: EXPLORERS' JOURNAL ENTRIES

<p>George Evans Macquarie Valley near Bathurst</p>	<p>10 Dec 1813 The extent of the plain following the river is 11 miles and about 2 wide on each side, the whole excellent good land, and the best grass I have seen in any part of New South Wales; the hills are also covered with fine pasture; the trees being so far apart must be an acquisition to its growth; it is in general the sweetest of an open country.</p>
<p>John Oxley Macquarie River downstream of Wellington Liverpool Plains</p>	<p>June 1818 The river expanded into beautiful reaches, having great depth of water, and from two to three hundred feet broad, literally covered with waterfowl of different kinds. The richest flats bordered the river. 1818 The view which was on all sides presented to our delighted eyes was of the most varied and exhilarating kind. Hills, dales and plains of the richest description lay before us, bounded to the east by fine hills, beyond which were seen elevated mountains.</p>
<p>Charles Sturt Darling River near Bourke</p>	<p>1st Feb 1828 The paths of the natives on either side of it were like well trodden roads; and the trees that overhung it were of beautiful and gigantic growth. Its banks were too precipitous to allow of our watering the cattle, but the men eagerly descended to quench their thirst, which a powerful sun had contributed to increase; nor shall I ever forget the cry of amazement that followed their doing so, or the looks of terror and disappointment with which they called out to inform me that the water was so salt as to be unfit to drink! This was, indeed, too true: on tasting it I found it extremely nauseous, and strongly impregnated with salt, being apparently a mixture of sea and fresh water.</p>
<p>Entering the Darling River from the Murray</p>	<p>1830 The river preserved a breadth of one hundred yards and a depth of rather more than twelve feet. Its banks were sloping and grassy, and were overhung by trees of magnificent size. Indeed its appearance was so different from the water-worn banks of the sister stream that the men exclaimed, on entering it, that we had got into an English river. Its appearance almost certainly justified the expression; for the greenness of its banks was as new to us as the size of its timber. Its waters, though sweet, were turbid and had a taste of vegetable decay, as well as a slight tinge of green.</p>

Thomas Mitchell
Gwydir River

9 Jan 1832

... the living stream and umbraceous foliage, gave us a grateful sense of abundance, coolness and shade. Trees of great magnitude give a grandness of character to any landscape, but especially to river scenery....Such trees overhung the water of the Gwydir, forming dense masses of shade, in which white cockatoos (*Plyctolophus galeritus*) sported like spirits of light....The bed of the river was flat, and consisted of small pebbles, not much worn by attrition, and mixed with sand. Many dead trees lay in parts of the channel. The average breadth of the water was forty-five yards; the breadth from bank to bank seventy-two yards; and the perpendicular height of the banks above the water, twenty-seven feet.

**Barwon River downstream
of Mungundi**

23 Jan 1832

At eight miles, our course was intercepted by a deep and rapid river, the largest that we had yet seen. I had approached within a few yards of the brink; and I was not aware of its being near, until I saw the opposite water-worn shore, and the living waters hurrying along westward. They were white and turbid, and the banks consisting of clay, were nearly perpendicular at this point, and about twenty feet higher than the surface of the stream. On further examination I found the course was very tortuous and the water deepWe were all delighted, however, to meet such an obstruction, and I chose a favourable spot for our camp, within a bend of the river.

**Darling River downstream of
Fort Bourke**

31 May 1835

The water being beautifully transparent, the bottom was visible at great depths, showing large fishes in shoals, floating like birds in mid-air. What I have termed rocks, are only patches of ferruginous clay which fill the lowest part of the basin of this river. The bed is composed of ferruginous sandstone—exactly similar to that on the coast near Sydney ...

Edward Eyre
Darling River below Pooncarie

Letter to Colonial Secretary 20 Jan 1844

... its waters tho' muddy were fast receding nor did there appear to have been a greater rise than three feet this season—in many places the river was shallow and easily fordable... In many places however the actual width of the water could not be fifteen yards and fallen trees frequently obstructed the channel nearly quite across—To compensate however for this the river banks were lined with the most beautiful gum trees gracefully overhanging and with a wide spreading dense foliage to the very ground. I have nowhere seen in Australia so pleasing or picturesque an effect produced by the Eucalypti as was the case along the whole course of the Darling.

Charles Sturt
Darling River near Wentworth

24 Sep 1844

Our first encampment on the Darling is on a bend of the stream. Magnificent trees droop like willows to the waters edge with evening's mildest radiance in their foliage, throwing a soft haze over the distance, but deeper shadows on the nearer ground forming a scene that we may seldom hope to witness.

Darling River near Burtundy

28 Sep 1844

We have stopped about two miles from the camp of the Natives on an extensive and verdant flat. Today for the first time we have noticed rocks in the bed of the Darling, and observed sandstone extending along and protruding from the sandhills bounding the flats ... As far as we have traced it up, the Darling certainly has richer and larger flats than the Murray, although the whole line of the river is not equal in fertility to the latter but is on the contrary sandy in many places. The left bank as far as I can judge is similar to that on which we are travelling, and if the river has to boast its rich flats, the country beyond them is an absolute desert.

Thomas Mitchell
Culgoa River

April 1846

... gigantic blue gums overhung the banks and the Mimosa grew near the bed of the current.

Balonne River

April 1846

... soon saw the majestic trees of the river in a line circling round to the northward. We encamped on a beautiful spot. The river was magnificent, presenting a body of water of such breadth as I had only seen in one other river of Australia and the banks were grassy to the water's edge.

Lagoon of the Balonne River

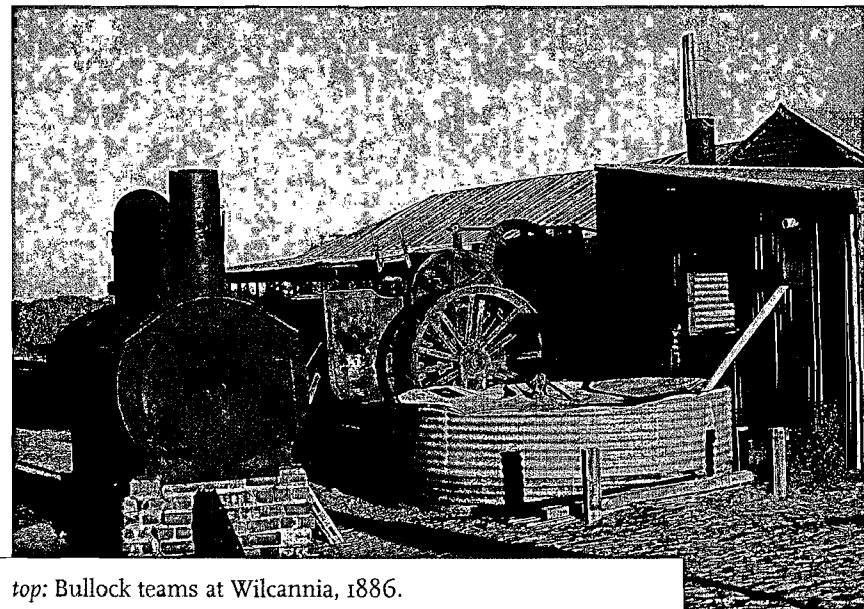
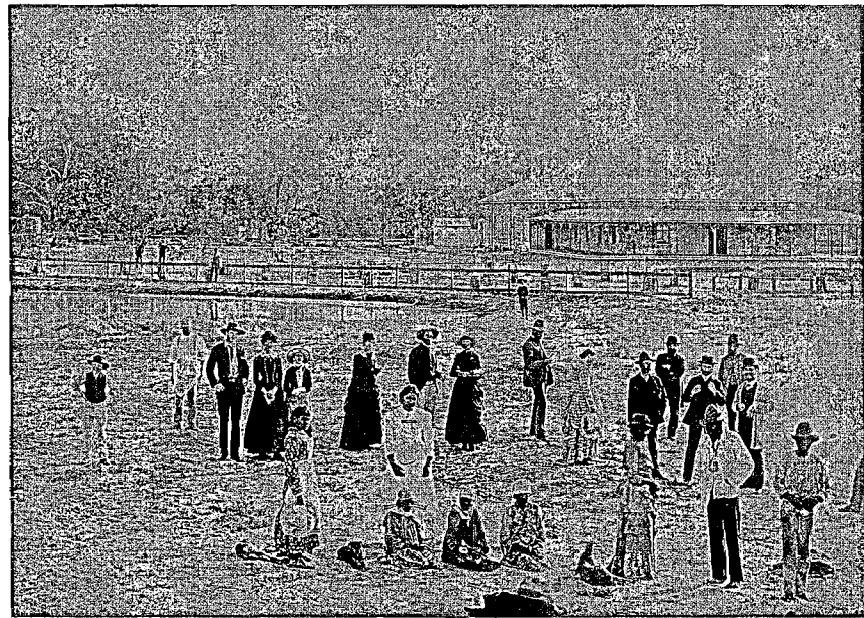
April 1846

... we continued the same course over open forest land and at length saw an immense sheet of water before us with islands in it. This was also a lagoon supplied by floods in the Balonne. It was covered with ducks, pelicans, etc. I called it Lake Parachute, no natives being near to give me their name for it.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT IN THE BASIN

The pattern of development across the Darling Basin arose from the same major influences that affected the rest of rural Australia—the failure of government attempts to control squatting, and the dream of a white society based on family farms. A culture of noble and contradictory values developed around these two principles that dominated Australian history for more than a century. These principles invested the pastoralists and farmers of the west with a certain moral authority as the stories of their lives became incorporated into dominant national culture. The independence and heroism of the first squatters became the embodiment of manliness. The bravery of the women who accompanied them became an icon of devotion and homemaking in a hostile environment. The daring of the bushrangers, the anti-authoritarianism of the bush workers and the righteousness of the farmers—all of these themes feature in the rich folk, literary and historical traditions of the Darling River system.

These values and images still resonate with Australians even though agribusiness and the quest for global markets have become the dominant agricultural features of the Basin. From an environmental and social perspective, the history of white settlement in the Basin has been one of rejection of centralised authority and a fierce assertion of property rights.



top: Bullock teams at Wilcannia, 1886.

middle: Homestead, Dunlop Station, Darling River, 1886.

bottom: Kinchega Station woolshed, Kinchega National Park.

Top and middle: Charles Bayliss, bottom: John Baker

Early Settlement in the Eastern Tributaries

Following the discoveries of George Evans, and the opening of a road over the Blue Mountains, Governor Macquarie took it upon himself to inspect first-hand the valley that bore his name. He was suitably impressed, and in 1817 he selected the site for the town of Bathurst, the first of the inland towns. Until 1837 Wellington was the official limit of settlement. However, a few intrepid squatters were unofficially occupying land around Dubbo in as early as 1828, and stock enjoyed the virgin pastures of the lower Macquarie near Mount Harris in the early 1830s. Faced with the impossibility of controlling the spread of people, the government in Sydney settled for a system of annual licensing of stockholders. With the opening of the lower valley to licenced squatters in 1837, there was a rush to take up runs along the River.

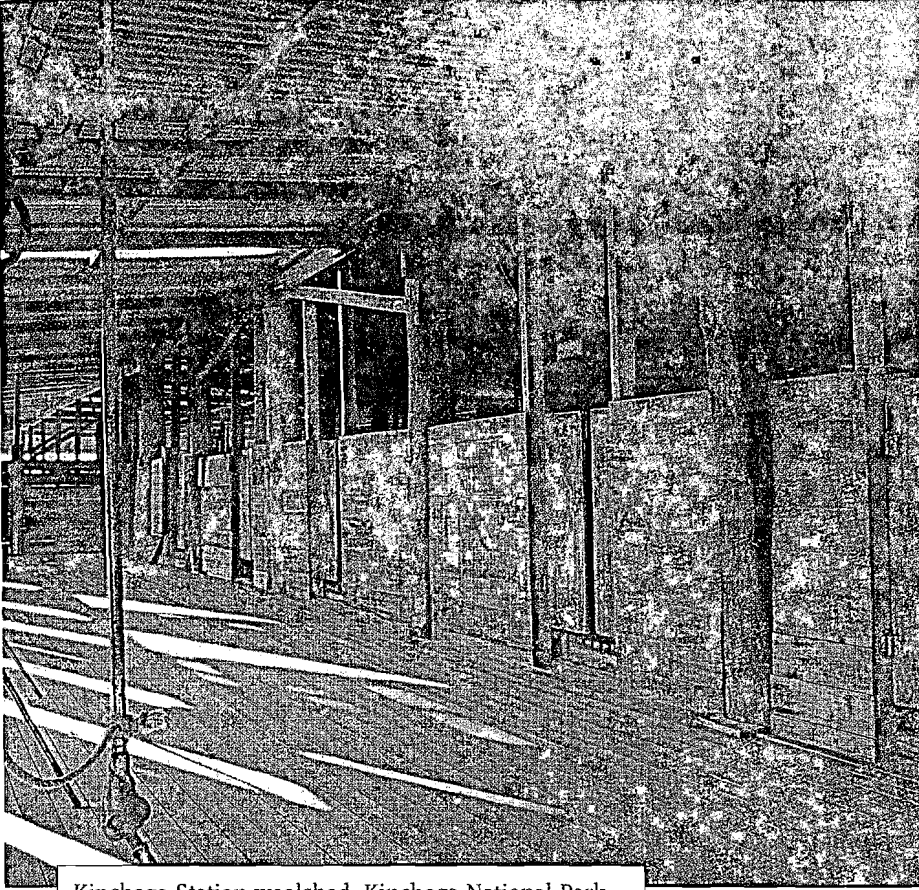
It didn't take long for pastoralists and their stock to move into the adjacent valleys of the Castlereagh and Bogan Rivers. The first cattle station in the Castlereagh Valley was established near Coonamble in 1840 and the valley was fully occupied over the following ten years. However, next door along the Bogan River, relations with the Indigenous Kamilaroi people were hostile. A number of pastoralists died during territorial conflicts, forcing the government to cancel all leases along the River until 1858 when a second attempt at settlement occurred. Severe drought in the 1860s took its toll on the enthusiasm of many white settlers and it wasn't until the mid 1870s that river frontage of the Bogan River was fully occupied by white settlers.

Squatters were already occupying land in the Peel Valley when Major Mitchell travelled through it in 1831. The following year a large parcel of land in the Tamworth area was granted to the Australian Agricultural Company and the company's stockyards and boarding houses became the first consolidated development in the valley. By 1832 pastoral runs had been claimed on the Namoi River as far downstream as Narrabri and by 1836 attention had turned to the Gwydir Valley. Most settlers came from the Hunter Valley, where even at this early stage, the countryside was showing signs of overstocking and degradation. By 1848 the Gwydir Pastoral District was home to almost 100 squatters, with about 60 of these being in the area around Moree.

The Northern Frontier

The floodplains of the northern Darling system were a magnet for the sheep and cattle graziers of the 1840s. Europeans had successfully occupied the frontages of the Macintyre by 1837 and, from there, Patrick Leslie followed Cunningham's track north-east in early 1840 to the Condamine. By June of that year he had claimed the best of its floodplain for himself and his brothers. Arthur Hodgson confirmed the quality of the Upper Condamine pasture by taking up a pastoral lease in September and over the next two years the most well-watered sections of the Condamine catchment were occupied by small groups of European men and their vast herds of sheep and cattle.

Pastoralists moved northwards as the Darling Downs became fully claimed, while others followed the Condamine to the north-west and on to the Maranoa. Stations were taken up and relinquished on the western Downs between 1846 and 1849 as local clans fiercely reasserted their ownership. The Barunggam, Bigambul and Mandanji, traditional owners of the Macintyre, Moonie, Condamine-Balonne watersheds, were pressed on all sides by European occupation. In less than five years, all pastoral lands along the Macintyre and Barwon Rivers were taken up by white settlers. The north-eastern Queensland rivers were appropriated in the 1840s, and even parts of the Warrego were claimed in the 1850s, although occupation of the entire Warrego and Paroo was not complete until the 1860s.



Kincheha Station woolshed, Kincheha National Park.

Administering this vast territory, more than 1 000 kilometres from Sydney by land and 160 kilometres from the seaport of Brisbane, was extremely difficult. Officials in Sydney divided the areas into pastoral districts and appointed Commissioners of Crown Lands who were responsible for ensuring that licence conditions were being fulfilled. They were also in charge of settling disputes and maintaining law and order. A local representative of the Crown was now present but pastoralists were disdainful of government decrees issued from so far away and with such limited powers of enforcement.

Racial Conflict

Racial tensions ran high in the early period of settlement as Aborigines responded to the violation of their land and resources. In return, the new European occupiers overtly and covertly waged war and asserted themselves over the traditional owners.

Racial conflict was inevitable given the opposing uses of water resources by Aborigines and the invading Europeans. Riverine flora and fauna were rich food sources that sustained high Aboriginal population densities, but the riverine products were rarely acknowledged by Europeans. The Indigenous people prized its vegetable, grass and waterfowl resources as well as its water. For the people of the Condamine, some stretches of the stream were spiritual places and the site of male initiation ceremonies. On the Warrego River, the waters of Lake

Wombo were forbidden, while Maranoa Waterhole and Bootha Waterhole were the initiation sites for Kunja men and women respectively.

The pastoralists valued the fresh drinking water but its primary function was water for their sheep, cattle and horses that grazed on the floodplains. Consequently their stock were provided free access to eat the herbage of stream banks, to trample riverbeds and muddy waterholes. Prior to shearing, European landholders dammed rivers and waterholes to provide washpools to clean the fleece of thousands of sheep. The riches of the floodplains were to be converted into personal fortunes for young British men by grazing exotic herds for fibre to export to British cloth mills. They did not intend to allow the government to stand in the way of their fortune even if it meant resorting to, or at least concealing, murder and assault.

The Darling Basin was the site of Australia's most infamous massacre in 1838. When some stockmen on Myall Creek, part of the Gwydir catchment in northern New South Wales, ruthlessly murdered a group of about thirty men, women and children of the Kamilaroi, the authorities in Sydney were determined to make a stand against the violence of the pastoralists. Eleven whites were prosecuted for murder and despite numerous legal obstacles, seven of them were finally found guilty and hanged. Yet the legal system brought only a temporary reprieve for the northern and western clans.

The Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Darling Downs was shocked at the way in which the white community closed ranks against him when he investigated the murder of some Aboriginal women and children. On the Macintyre River one white family reported the murder of their Aboriginal servant and other local Bigambul, while other whites denied the murders and provided one another with *alibis*. On the one hand, settlers demanded the protection of British law for themselves, wrote angry letters to Sydney demanding courts, lock ups and scourgers to punish their free, bonded and convict servants, but rebelled when the government attempted to offer that same legal protection to the Indigenous people of the region.

In 1846 the government converted the annual squatting leases to 14 years, and the border police, the subject of much contempt, were abolished. Within a year landholders on the lower Condamine, Maranoa and Macintyre were complaining about the lack of police protection and intimidation from Aborigines. The New South Wales government responded in 1848 by forming a mounted Native Police Force with headquarters at Callandoon on the Macintyre River. Yet even this did not placate local whites who continued to complain about the lack of government concern for their safety. In 1856 when self-government was achieved and colonists had less to fear from objections from London to the treatment of Aborigines, their rhetoric became even more frank—it was not policing that they wanted on

the frontier but a war of retribution. The initial resistance to state intervention on race relations had been replaced by demands for state assistance once white landholders were confident that they could subvert and control racial policy.

Racial conflicts were not confined to the north of the Basin. War was waged by the Europeans in the Bathurst region where martial law was declared in 1824. Around the Murray-Darling junction there were cries for intervention and protection by 1840 as Aborigines began helping themselves to the numerous sheep and cattle that were continually traversing their river banks. Here racial antagonism was exacerbated by the presence of overlanders travelling to the Victorian goldfields. Many overlanders employed Aborigines as guides or porters, and had a low moral character with a propensity for horse and cattle stealing.

When white settlement extended up the arm of the Lower Darling there were serious clashes occurring by 1851 with murders of both Indigenous people and whites. Here, as with the Kamileroi on the Bogan River, temporary victories were made by the Barkindji reclaiming their traditional lands, forcing Europeans to retreat to other areas, and the government to cancel leases in areas where conflicts were frequent.

Along the Darling

While white settlement was advancing in the eastern tributaries, the Darling River itself remained a remote and uninhabited curiosity to the Europeans. It was not until Eyre and Sturt paved the way in their separate expeditions in the period 1844–45 that intrepid settlers began to move their flocks up the lower part of the Darling River. White settlement on the Darling River was within 70 kilometres of the Menindee Lakes by 1848 and just one year later squatters were setting up makeshift stations up to 130 kilometres north of the lakes.

Early white settlement on the river was a primitive affair of simple huts and temporary yards. These early stations were held mainly by young adventurous men with properties already established in the Riverina. The Darling runs were usually only supplements to their primary income, and once established the owner returned to the main station leaving shepherds or stockmen to endure the elements, loneliness and frequent attacks by Aborigines.

The goldrushes of Victoria and New South Wales during the 1850s drew many people away from the western stations. Drought conditions prevailed and the wandering stock made easy meals for hungry dispossessed Aborigines. Attacks on poorly protected stations and travelling drays became an increasingly frequent occurrence. Outnumbered and afraid, many settlers were forced to abandon their stations and retreat south. By the end of 1852 there was virtually no white settlement remaining on the Darling River north of Polia near Pooncarie.

Surveys of the southern Darling were undertaken over the ensuing years and portions were adjusted where necessary so that each squatter held an adequate water frontage. By April 1855 the forfeited lands to the north of Polia were surveyed and opened for tender. By this time two factors had significantly decreased the isolation of the Darling River—riverboats were operating on the Murray River and a courthouse had been established at Moorna in South Australia. The riverfront blocks taken up at this time formed the beginnings of the great Darling River stations such as Yartla, Cuthero, Willotia, Netley, Kinchega, Bonley, Weinteriga, Culpaulin and Netallie. The most northern run allocated was Mount Murchison, near Wilcannia, and this became the new limit of settlement for the middle reach of the Darling.

With regular passing trade on the Murray, a new interest in the Darling River stations emerged:

... the value of the stations is raised three or four hundred per cent within the last four or five months. The reason for the rise is the benefit to be derived from the steamers plying on the Murray.

*South Australian Register,
August 25, 1856*

By 1858 settlers along the Darling knew that their own dreams of river navigation were not far away and there was a rush to take out new leases on the grassy plains that stretched between the river and the Barrier Ranges. Only one year later the commencement of river navigation had a significant effect on settlement of the Darling River country and beyond. The upper Darling suddenly became attractive for a number of reasons. The riverboats greatly decreased isolation, yet it was still too remote to be significantly affected by the inconveniences of the government's 1861 Selection Act. Secondly, the upper Darling was free of scab, a fungal disease, which was already affecting sheep in the lower Darling. With all of the Darling frontages occupied, there was a steady movement west into the outback, which was explored and largely taken up during the 1860s and 1870s.

Into the Outback

Major Mitchell had explored the Narran, Culgoa-Balonne, and Warrego, and Charles Sturt had noted the Bulloo River during his explorations. However much of the exploration and settlement of the country north and west of the Darling resulted from the purposeful wanderings of a few hardy bushmen who went in search of pastoral riches beyond the river.

The existing Darling River stations provided the training ground for some of these men while others like Vincent Dowling of Fort Bourke were established river squatters. These pastoral explorers usually travelled in small parties of two or three, sometimes with an Aboriginal guide. Many were freelance land seekers who took up the runs they discovered simply to sell to others who could afford the capital to develop them.

Vincent Dowling was responsible for exploring much of the Paroo and Warrego country, pioneering a watered route to the Warrego and 'discovering' the Paroo River in 1861. Dowling built the first homestead in the area near springs at Yantabulla and then began establishing further stations on the upper Paroo and on the Bulloo River near Thargomindah.

The outback land was cheap and supported magnificent untouched pastures. Many of the first stations were established with the support of Victorian financiers but squatters from the Riverina were also attracted when their main stations began to show signs of deterioration from overstocking.

Local control over land and native policies in Queensland after it separated from New South Wales created an optimism that resulted in boom conditions across the northern part of the Basin in the 1860s. Settlers established themselves along all the surface waters west to the Paroo and even non-river frontages were occupied in the good seasons of 1859 to 1864. The great Darling flood of 1863–64 provided significant momentum to the outback movement. With local rains the outback became lush with feed and waterholes filled with fresh water. For the first time the outback runs were preferable to the quagmire of the river frontages.

Soon enough the drought of 1865 heralded a retreat to the river frontages and settlers were forced once again to consider a more realistic appraisal of the northern Darling's limits as many landholders failed. The greatest wool fortunes were made in the 1860s and, by the end of the decade, overstocking was taking its toll on the native pastures. After this time, the degraded regrowth led to declining quality of stock, and steady falls in the price of wool led to reduced returns.

The introduction of mechanical boring equipment and the subsequent tapping of artesian water supplies considerably eased the struggle to water the outback country, and increased the viability of these pastoral stations. By the late 1870s much of the lands that could be easily watered were occupied, either as extensions of river front runs, or as outback stations in their own right.

Andrew Tinnell



Major Mitchell cockatoo.

EARLY POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

Land Administration in New South Wales

By the early 1830s settlement around Sydney was divided into 19 counties extending from Taree in the north to Moruya in the south and inland as far as Orange. Settlement beyond these bounds was actively discouraged until 1836 when an Act was passed that legalised squatting in unsettled areas. The Act gave the right for any reputable person to graze stock over as much land as they pleased for a licence fee of 10 pounds.

Ten years later the colony was divided into three districts—the settled areas comprising the 19 counties, intermediate areas, and the ‘unsettled districts’. The unsettled districts, comprising most of the Darling Basin were thrown open to tender with leases of up to 32 000 acres available (13 000 hectares).

Bribery and corruption were commonplace in the early years of pastoral settlement. After little more than a decade of settlement in the western parts of New South Wales, there were concerns that large areas of land were being locked up in huge runs controlled by a few greedy squatters. In 1861 the government threw open virtually all the land in the colony on a ‘free selection before survey’ basis to ease the growing agitation of potential settlers looking for land.

Selectors, as the beneficiaries of the 1861 Act were known, were entitled to lease 640 acres (with grazing rights over an additional 1 280 acres). Adjoining land could be taken up by different members of the same family. There was no restriction on taking up land on existing stations and many selectors took over strategic parts of a property in an attempt to blackmail the existing leaseholder. The only way to make money and hold one of the small selected areas was to combine the keeping of stock with another activity. Some selectors opened up hotels to take advantage of the growing population of the Basin's river frontages while others maintained woodpiles for the river steamers or ran bullock teams.

The 1861 Act fostered an antagonistic relationship between the squatters and selectors. From the squatters point of view selectors were a nuisance, forcing them to buy the freehold title of valuable areas of the run such as watering points, if they wanted to keep them secure from selection. In 1883 it cost up to 25 pounds per acre to buy these freehold titles.

An enquiry into the pastoral areas was held in 1883 and this resulted in the passing of the Crown Lands Act in 1884. This Act recognised the need for a more formal tenure system and gave squatters the security of tenure they desired but at a very high price. Each holding was divided into two portions—the ‘leasehold’ and the ‘resumed’. Resumed land was retained by the squatter under an annual grazing licence but was open to selection, while the tenure of the ‘leasehold’ portion of the land was increased to 15 years.

Theoretically any improvements taken over by selectors were to be paid for, but most selectors had little money, and many squatters never received the compensation owed to them. The squatter's previous right to buy up the surrounding land as freehold title was also withdrawn. Loath to spend any money on the resumed portions of their land, squatters devoted their whole attention to improving their leasehold portion, over-improving and overstocking in an effort to recoup the loss of their resumed land.

The 1884 Act was also a rather poor deal for the selector. It assumed that a reasonable living could be made from as little as 5 760 acres, and that stocking capacity could be improved by hard work and simple living. But no matter how hard the new selectors worked, their homesteads rarely prospered. Even with an increase in area to 10 240 acres in 1895, only a quarter of the original homestead lessees in the Western Division remained on their original holdings by 1901. There was a higher rate of

survival on the river frontages, or close to mining towns as lessees were able to supplement their incomes with timber cutting or wool carting.

The Darling Basin was fully settled by the early 1890s but there was considerable unrest brewing amongst the crown tenants in New South Wales. The Lands Department and the press were subjected to an endless torrent of correspondence detailing the dire situation of those in the Western Division and the need for immediate relief from high rentals and short tenures. The cumulative impacts of closer settlement, a depressed wool market, rabbit plagues and a major drought resulted in a pastoral disaster, which marks the darkest period of the Basin's social and environmental history. The government responded by appointing a Royal Commission in 1899 to hold an enquiry into the 'Condition of Crown Tenants in the Western Division'.

Members of the Commission travelled widely throughout western New South Wales gathering comprehensive evidence from squatters, homestead lessees, pastoral companies and the government. Witness upon witness gave the same bleak and depressing evidence of degradation that became blatantly obvious to the Commissioners as they experienced the drought stricken lands first hand. For perhaps the first time it brought a full appreciation of the harsh conditions experienced by settlers in the western part of the state to a government and population that were based firmly in the east.

The Commission predictably recognised overstocking, rabbit infestation, severe erosion and low wool prices as the major causes of the disaster. The Western Lands Act was passed in 1901, within weeks of the delivery of the Commission's findings. The Act was based on legislation already in operation in the arid areas of South Australia. It placed the Western Division under the control of a board of three Commissioners. It provided for pastoralists to be granted a 42-year lease with a reduced rental. The Act also provided for withdrawals of one-eighth of the area of large holdings to extend the runs of smaller holders. The Act stated that all lessees must eradicate rabbits and foster the growth of edible shrubs and plants on their holdings. The Western Lands Commission was formed in 1901 to administer the Western Lands Act. Apart from minor amendments in 1934 and 1949 the Western Lands Act has remained largely unchanged for almost 100 years.

Land Administration and Agricultural Development in Queensland

Pastoralists based in the northern parts of the catchment resented governance from the distant haven of Sydney and, in as early as 1849, began to agitate for a separate self-governing colony in the north. Their initial grievance was the decision to end the convict system that had provided them with cheap labour, but they also complained of the government's sympathy for the Indigenous community when they would have preferred some strong arm tactics. This concern was only partly placated when New South Wales was granted self-government in 1856; by this time the rise of democratic reform movements in the parent colony added to the northern pastoralists' misgivings.

The government in New South Wales resisted the northern separation movement, although it was more concerned about the potential loss of the Clarence and the eastern coastal rivers than about the arid lands of the Darling. However, by 1859 the northerners had won their case in London and the separate colony of Queensland was established. This imperial decision would have two major impacts on the Darling River system. Firstly, pastoral interests were able to dominate the new Queensland Parliament and the colony's new land and racial policies were made in the favour of grazing interests. Secondly, administration of the Darling catchment was forever hampered by a line drawn on a map along the 29 degree parallel to

become the border. A new boundary cut the natural catchment into two separate administrative systems.

The Queensland Pastoral Leases Act of 1863 was a very liberal piece of legislation allowing graziers to claim up to 1000 square miles for a 14-year tenure. It provided long periods to achieve required stocking rates and a rental assessed only on the acreage within a run deemed available for pastoral use. Following the drought of 1865, graziers began petitioning for relief which was granted in the form of a revised Act in 1869 that reduced rent to a mere five shillings per square mile for runs with natural waters and three shillings for unwatered runs. Tenure was extended to twenty-one years and gave lessees the right to purchase up to 2 560 acres at ten shillings per acre. In effect, Queensland landholders were given the legal right to select the best-watered land while in the southern part of the Basin such practice was an abuse of the land reform legislation.

The increased political influence of the pastoralists was evident in the slower introduction of closer settlement and land selection in Queensland. The land issue was constantly before the parliament between 1860 and 1910 with 50 amendments successfully passed. Despite allegations of corruption and cronyism and the resistance of the pastoral leaseholders, the real stumbling block to closer settlement on the Condamine, Queensland's most fertile part of the Basin, was a viable cash crop. Wheat and cereal production were capital intensive and

produced uncertain cash income. Those selectors who succeeded were established on the creek frontages near Warwick in the south and around the waterholes of Toowoomba and Drayton. Development was slow—even by 1892, after three decades of political propaganda in favour of farm selection, only three percent of the fertile soils of the Darling Downs were under cultivation.

The turning point was the introduction of refrigeration and government assistance to establish family dairy farms. Queensland had imposed a duty on the importation of dairy products into the colony in 1874. A Department of Agriculture was established in 1887 and it provided a travelling dairy plant to train farmers and introduce them to new equipment and techniques. The regular income from cheese, milk and butter enabled family farms to diversify into grain production as well as maintaining an average farm herd of less than 100

cows. Within the space of two decades the number of dairy cattle on the Darling Downs increased eight-fold, the number of horses doubled and cultivation for animal fodder quadrupled. The acreage under crop more than trebled, confirming the commercial consolidation of family farming in the upper Condamine catchment. By World War I the area had become a grain exporter and the pattern of growth was set for the next three decades.

Further west on the black soil plains, democratic land reformers were intent on subdivision of the large estates. Pastoralist opposition and delays to land reforms won them even further reductions in their rents and increases in their tenure. In 1886 in exchange for the resumption of up to half their runs, Queensland pastoralists were granted an annual rental of as little as one quarter of a penny per acre for a twenty-one year lease. If they had rabbit-proofed their



holdings or increased stocking capacity such as through drilling artesian bores they could also be granted the security of a twenty-eight year lease. The resumptions were to enable grazing farms to be established on sub-divided pastoral runs, but where selection did not proceed pastoralists could continue to graze this land on an annual lease.

Despite this state support, drought in the 1880s followed by floods in 1890 and the Shearers Strikes of 1891 and 1894 resulted in many properties being taken over by banks and finance companies. Like their neighbours south of the border, Queensland graziers and company investors demanded further rent and security relief and in 1902 their leases were extended until 1949—more than trebling their lease tenure.

As wool prices rose in the years before World War I there were again attempts at establishing family grazing farms based on a larger perpetual-lease holding, capable of providing a family with a reasonable living. By World War I government intervention had finally achieved its aim of a framework of family farms across the Queensland part of the Darling Basin, it had reduced rents for large and small pastoralists and provided support for rabbit-proofing and artesian wells. There were detrimental consequences for this achievement, and by the turn of the century, the environmental deterioration of the Darling's northern tributaries required even greater state support and co-operation among landholders.

Pastoral Empires

Friction over land policy across the Darling Basin originated from a democratic vision of family farms. This friction was aggravated by the scale of pastoral enterprises that emerged in the 1880s, a period of significant expansion and development on the Darling River. The cheap and speedy transport provided by the riverboats brought prosperity to the river stations. Instead of hiring teamsters to cart wool over hundreds of kilometres of rough country, the riverboats made it possible to bring a wool clip 1 600 kilometres from Wilcannia to Echuca for only one pound per ton, a fraction of the price charged by teamsters. Freed from high transport costs, the stations were able to expand with bigger and better shearing sheds. The 1880 Land Act in New South Wales also resulted in a tendency towards larger holdings managed by pastoral companies and syndicates with access to the large amounts of capital required to improve the stations. Both of these influences were reflected in the scale of operations and amenities that were a feature of the great Darling River stations.

In 1889 the station of Momba near White Cliffs was over two million acres in area while Cuthero, Corona, Kinchega, Lake Victoria and Moorara all exceeded one million acres. The equipment of some of these large holdings was on a grand scale. The property of Henly had its own tramway connecting its woolshed with the river steamers. Dunlop station owned its own boring equipment, while most stations were

content to rely on contractors. On the Lower Darling, Tolarno station owned the largest private fleet of steamers on the inland rivers.

Samuel McCaughey was one of the most successful of the Darling River pastoralists. He began his career in the Riverina and later moved to the Darling River where he bought the properties of Toorale and Dunlop, covering an area of 2.5 million acres. Dunlop shearing shed had 40 stands and was the first shed to carry out a complete shearing using mechanical shears in 1888. Dunlop employed 100 men and shorn sheep at four outstations as well as the main station. Toorale shearing shed was built in 1869 and was the first shed in Australia to have electric lighting. In good years up to 500 000 sheep were shorn between the two holdings.

At various times McCaughey was owner or part owner of twelve properties in New South Wales and three in Queensland. In 1905 he

acquired Fort Bourke Station and added Nocoleche Station on the Paroo to his holdings in 1909. Together with Dunlop and Toorale, the four adjoining holdings had a total area of 3.25 million acres, frontage to the Darling River for 200 kilometres, and frontage to the Wanaaring Road for 200 kilometres.

On the Lower Darling a similarly impressive empire was built up by Ross Reid and his brother William, who secured the abandoned run of Tolarno in 1862. The brothers gradually acquired other selections until they had a property extending over 72 kilometres of Darling River frontage and 96 kilometres east to Boolaboolka Lake. The station boasted two hotels, its own school, and its own private fleet of steamers.

Queensland pastoralists in the Warrego country had similar grandiose visions. The legendary James Tyson bought Tinnenburra station in 1867. It became one of the largest holdings in the Basin with a shearing shed said to be the largest in the world with stands for 100 shearers.

By the early 1880s extravagant spending combined with the ravages of drought and rabbit plagues began to take their toll on many of the large stations and they went into unrecoverable decline. Worsening commodity prices signalled the coming of the 1890s depression and in 1891 and 1894, workers united across the Basin in the great Shearers Strikes for a greater portion of pastoral profits. By 1895 more than half the properties of the Western Division had changed hands, most falling by foreclosure to banks and pastoral companies.

The Environmental Consequences of Settlement

When drought gripped the western sections of the Darling Basin in the 1890s the widespread environmental degradation that ensued triggered apprehension among some of the Basin's white settlers that European grazing practices may in fact have caused these droughts. Europeans did not cause droughts but neither did droughts cause land degradation. Europeans not only unleashed their exotic flocks and herds upon the landscape, they also destroyed native plants and animals, unwittingly brought pests and weeds, cleared vast areas of land in the belief they were 'improving' it, and polluted and disrupted natural watercourses.

Local wildlife was often seen as a threat to increasing production and landholders complained bitterly of 'plagues' of local fauna, which competed for pasture and grain. In Queensland the war against nature was carried out relentlessly and with government support under the *Marsupial Destruction Act 1877* (Qld), and later the Marsupial Board Act of 1897. On one station, between Goondiwindi and Mungindi, in the 1880s over 6 000 kangaroos and wallabies were killed in twelve months. The real environmental crises, however, were caused not by indigenous flora or fauna but by an introduced mammal and plant.

The first rabbits entered the Darling Basin in 1880 travelling overland from the Riverina. By 1881 they had reached Bourke and, by the late 1880s, rabbits were recorded in the Bulloo, Paroo, Warrego and

Balonne River catchments. Western regions were worst affected with pastoral properties such as Bulloo Downs and Thargomindah eaten out by rabbits by 1895. The heavy black soils of the Darling Downs and the eastern rivers were difficult for rabbits but the scrubby sandhills on both sides of the Darling River provided ideal habitat for their breeding grounds, as did the lignum covered channels of the Paroo and Warrego Rivers.

Numerous mechanisms were employed to try and halt the advancing armies, although none proved particularly effective. In New South Wales, the *Rabbit Nuisance Act 1883* (NSW) imposed a levy on every landholder to create a fund for the payment of bonuses in return for scalps. Momba Station near White Cliffs spent 10 789 pounds on rabbit destruction in 1887, employing up to 20 men for the task. Weinteriga Station spent 12 000 pounds in 1886, with over 1 million rabbits being caught. Despite the large numbers of scalps netted, the system was flawed by the fact that rabbiters were often tempted to allow the female rabbits to run free so as to maintain their lucrative income.

Darling River, Kinchega National Park.

Between 1885 and 1887 the construction of an ambitious rabbit-proof fenceline had cut the Darling Basin in half, running all the way from Corowa on the Murray River to Barringun on the Queensland Border. In 1888 the Queensland government attempted to rabbit-proof the south-west of the state by extending the New South Wales and South Australian border fences at a cost of 116 820 pounds. But damage by floods, fires, sand drift and livestock all weakened the defence line, while in other areas rabbits simply tunneled under the fence. By the 1920s and 1930s the Australian Pastoral Company's large Queensland runs including Cubbie, Narine, Bullamon, Gnoolama, Noondoo, and Doondi stations on the Balonne were heavily infested.

Concurrent with the development of rabbit-proof fencing came widespread attempts at the destruction of rabbits by poisoning. The poisoning of watering holes and tanks was a common practise. Many native mammals, birds and livestock also fell prey to the deadly waterholes, while other animals that ate the baits, or dead rabbits were also at risk.

By 1896 the country west of the Darling River had suffered a fifty percent decline in carrying capacity. As rabbits grazed the paddocks bare, pasture species were replaced by less nourishing varieties, and pastoralists were forced to lop young trees to feed their starving flocks. In the red soil country rabbits ring-barked the mulga and took over the sand hill country, the graziers' supplementary feed in time of drought. Fleece quality declined as the soils became more mobile.

While rabbits invaded the catchment from the south-west, another exotic pest was over-running the catchment from the north-east. Prickly pear was introduced to the Darling Downs in the 1850s to provide fruit for pastoral workers, as well as for its properties as a hedge plant, a stockfeed and a garden plant. By the 1880s it had become a nuisance. The pear thrived in the brigalow and belah woodlands of the eastern and central sections of the Basin. People cut, burnt and poisoned it but could not match the rate of pear infestation. Properties were rendered useless and being abandoned by 1900 because of the density of prickly pear.

Prickly pear was declared a noxious weed in 1910 and the following year the Queensland government established a Board of Advice on Prickly Pear Destruction. Despite the offer of large rewards a viable method of controlling the cactus remained elusive and, in 1912, the Queensland government funded a Prickly Pear Travelling Commission to investigate natural control factors in countries where the pear is native. Meanwhile the pear continued to spread and by 1920 it was estimated that 65 million acres of land in Queensland was infested. In 1920 the Commonwealth Prickly Pear Board pursued research on biological control and introduced the moth larvae, *cactoblastis cactorum*, which ate into the prickly pear flesh with spectacular results. In the mid-1920s, a concerted government campaign to distribute the larvae via the post successfully spread the cactoblastis throughout the catchment. Prickly pear was eradicated within ten years and the government was re-leasing abandoned pear selections.

Disease and pests were short and sharp experiences of environmental disturbance. Land clearing and soil erosion were slower and more insidious in their effect. In as early as the 1860s, pastoral stations on the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers were already beginning to show the impacts of overstocking, and the Darling settlers who came from these areas should have been more aware of the dangers. Some were obsessed by the lure of quick returns and an early retirement, while others had an overwhelming faith in the potential of

the country and their ability to turn it into a pastoral paradise.

However, the settlers cannot be apportioned all of the blame. The New South Wales Land Act of 1861 encouraged their excesses with lease conditions requiring them to show an improvement in the carrying capacity of the land of at least 50 percent. The advocated pathway to these increased stocking rates was by clearing scrub, putting down watering points and firming the soil. In 1880, the New South Wales government put further pressure on squatters to increase their production by raising the minimum rent from 10 pounds to 100 pounds. Extended tenures were offered as incentives to water the unimproved lands. In 1883 the commission appointed to inquire into the problems of the crown lands continued to propagate the myth that 'judicious stocking undoubtedly increases the capability of the country to carry sheep'. With the incentive of a high wool market, the efforts to improve the runs way out of proportion to the real value of the land continued.

In New South Wales, some of the most dramatic descriptions of environmental degradation in the Basin come from the Royal Commission into the Western Division held in 1901. On the Talywalka Anabranch, the manager of Teryaweynia Station stated that of his 460 000 acres of leasehold land, an area of 100 000 acres was 'as bare as a floor', while on Tarella Station north of Wilcannia soil had been 'carried away to a depth of one foot'. Reports of fences, sheepyards, tanks and drains being buried under sand

deposits were all too common. On Outer Netallie one witness stated that 10 or 11 miles (16 kilometres) of fences on the property had been rendered useless, while another witness stated that 12 feet (3.6 metres) of sand had been deposited in one of the station tanks in a period of three months.

In the northern part of the Basin, the development of major towns marked the most extreme disturbance to the Basin's water resources. By the end of the nineteenth century, half of the Darling Downs population of 60 000 lived in three major towns, Dalby, Warwick and Toowoomba, which grew up around favourable water supplies. At Toowoomba, European settlement had an immediately degrading impact on Gowrie Creek and its wetlands. Orchards were established around the edges, tree clearance elevated the water table, stock destroyed native reeds and other vegetation, and discharge from local industries and backyard septs ended up in the wetlands. Public health in the township was consequently poor and triggered several epidemics in the 1870s and 1880s. What had once been

a valuable resource of fresh water and abundant plant and animal life became an obstacle to transport, an eyesore and a serious health hazard.

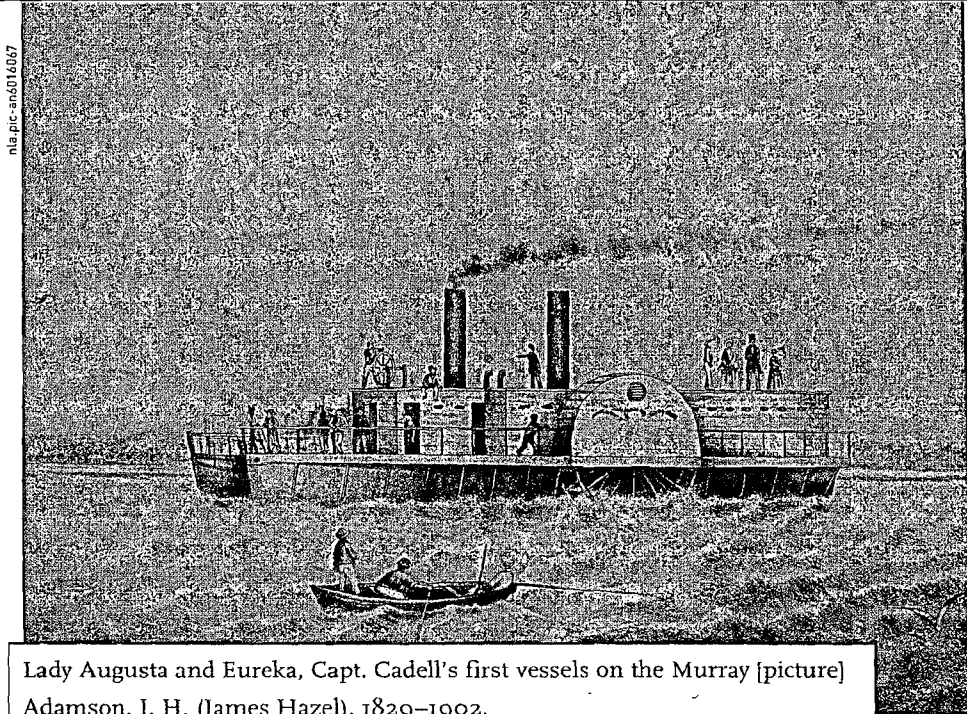
As well as polluting water sources graziers and farmers altered the natural hydrology of the Basin's rivers and creeks. Temporary banks and weirs were built by settlers across many streams including the Darling Anabranch, Paroo, Warrego and Bogan Rivers, while diversion schemes on the Macquarie and Gwydir Rivers distributed flows through networks of creeks allowing the precious resource to be shared over a wider area. Wetlands were drained for cropping, levies built to protect townships built on natural floodplains, and creeks were dammed to create washpools for sheep. The consequences of this engineering for the Basin's natural ecology are far reaching and only recently understood.

TRADE AND TRANSPORT

The race to conquer the inland rivers was driven by two men of vision who each saw the potential of the inland rivers as major trade routes. Captain Frances Cadell, a sailor, and William Randell, the son of a wealthy landowner, both began operating steamers on the Murray. Randell launched the steamer *Mary Ann* at Mannum in February 1853 becoming the first person to operate a paddlesteamer on the Murray River. Later that year Randell and Cadell raced each other to become the first to travel upstream to Swan Hill. Cadell led the race into Swan Hill in his boat the *Lady Augusta*, with the *Mary Ann* arriving shortly afterwards.

Within 10 years of the voyage of *Lady Augusta* and *Mary Ann*, the infectious enthusiasm of Randell and Cadell had motivated people all along the length of the Murray River. Boat building reached fever pitch as everyone attempted to be part of the new era of river trade. Boat designs improved rapidly with experience. Shallow draught steamers with a broad beam for stability and a length of no greater than 33 metres were required to negotiate the sharp bends of the River with safety.

After opening river trade up the Murray as far as Albury, both Cadell and Randell turned their attention to the Darling. However, the Darling River presented more of a challenge for navigation than the Murray. Settlement was sporadic, the river was particularly tortuous, its flow was erratic, and it contained numerous navigational hazards such as sandbars, submerged bedrock and timber snags.



Lady Augusta and *Eureka*, Capt. Cadell's first vessels on the Murray [picture] Adamson, J. H. (James Hazel), 1829-1902. 1854

Cadell surveyed the River and decided that it required thorough desnagging and the erection of a system of locks before it could be used as a reliable shipping lane. He devised a system of eight or ten locks and added the design of a self-adjusting waterwheel suitable for use on Australian rivers. Armed with these grand plans, and evidence of the enormous advantages of opening up the Darling to trade, Cadell presented his findings to a Select Committee on river navigation in 1858. The Committee accepted his proposals but did not act on them. The New South Wales government were reluctant to spend money on an enterprise which would only serve to enhance the trade of South Australia.

Despite this disappointing outcome, Cadell set off on his first trading run up the Darling in January 1859 in his steamer the *Albury*. In just eight days the *Albury* reached Mount Murchison, delivering a cargo of flour and stores and returning with 100 bales of the station's wool clip. Not to be outdone, Cadell's old rival

Randell followed up the river in February, travelling as far as Fort Bourke station where the terrified men mistook the sound of the *Gemini's* engines for Aboriginal war cries and loaded their guns in self defence. Randell pushed his boat right up to Brewarrina before returning downstream with the remainder of the Mount Murchison wool clip.

By 1865 there were 27 steamers plying the Murray and its tributaries. As people realised the full scope of the river trade, the varieties of cargo increased. Copper ore was brought down the Darling from Louth, after being carted overland from Cobar. Many of the headstones in cemeteries along the Darling were carved by Adelaide stonemasons and transported up the river by paddlesteamer. However the wool industry was the mainstay of the river trade. New and more powerful steamers and longer and wider barges were built to carry it. With better organisation, improved boat design and experienced skippers, the volume of wool transported by river increased rapidly.

Floods, Droughts and Mishaps

River trade on the Darling was a boom and bust affair even more so than on the Murray. By the beginning of 1860, just one year after the commencement of trading, the river was too low for steamers and the frontages were once again in drought.

The successful navigation of the river last year induced many persons to take up or purchase stations on it, under the impression that boats would be able to ascend annually. This was however a mistake, as they now find to their cost; bullock teams and horses cannot take up stores on account of the utter want of pasturage; nor does the state of the river admit even a small steamboat going up.

*Sydney Morning Herald,
10 March 1860*

In contrast, when the River was in flood the paddlesteamers could go almost anywhere. Narrow channels became navigable and short cuts were possible although with significant risks of sharp currents and hidden snags. In 1886 the Gem travelled 96 kilometres along Talywalka Creek to Albemarle Station while, in the same year, the Moira travelled 16 kilometres down the Creek and 16 kilometres along a billabong to deliver shearers and stores to the floodbound Murtee Station. In another flood, a paddlesteamer sailed up the swollen waters of the Paroo River to the Queensland border, almost 320 kilometres from the Darling River channel. In the 1870 flood, both the Ariel and the Jane Eliza called on isolated stations far from the river

channel. To illustrate the rivers contrary nature, the Jane Eliza also holds the record for the longest time a boat was stranded in the Darling River—a period of three years.

Pastoralists had no choice but to learn to live with the natural rhythms of the river, making the most of high water periods to consign their wool and have stores sent up, and tightening their belts when it was low. The shipping companies and riverboat captains also were well aware that the profit they made during a high river would have to carry them over many months of inactivity when the steamers could not operate.

Life on the rivers was not without its dangers. The sinking of steamers and barges was an all too common occurrence. Refloating the sunken vessels and drying and scouring the sodden cargo of wool was a laborious process. Captain Charles Payne operated a steamer service between Bourke and Wilcannia at the turn of the century. He holds the unenviable reputation for sinking more boats and barges than any other skipper on the Darling River. On his most infamous journey he left Bourke towing two barges. The first barge sank after hitting Nulty Nulty reef, the second barge went down at Curranyalpa Reef, and then the steamer tore its hull and sank on Murtee Reef. Captain Payne and his crew arrived in Wilcannia in a dinghy.

An early tragedy in the Darling's navigational history was the destruction of Randell's steamer, the Bunyip, in 1863. The steamer and two barges were carrying 500 bales of wool to Adelaide when a fire swept through them, killing a mother and her baby. However the most dramatic incident on the river occurred in 1872 when the paddlesteamer Providence exploded at Kinchega killing all five people on board. Fragments of the vessel were scattered over 400 metres, with some embedded in trees on the bank.

The journey of the Jane Eliza is one of the most famous riverboat stories of the Darling. It illustrates the enormous risks and frustrations that were part of the river trade. In May 1883, under the command of Captain William Porter, the Jane Eliza left Morgan in South Australia for Bourke. The steamer was towing two barges heavily laden with timber for a new hotel to be built in Bourke in readiness for the railway that was soon to reach the town. The Jane Eliza reached no further than Avoca, 52 kilometres above Wentworth, when progress was halted by falling water levels. With the Jane Eliza stuck fast, Captain Porter was relieved by a new skipper Abe Dusting.

In September 1884, the River rose and the Jane Eliza continued its journey upstream until a week later the barges began dragging on the bottom. Dusting was forced to tie up 58 kilometres below Wilcannia. In the company of three other stranded steamers the Jane Eliza remained in a hole in the river for another two months. In November, Dusting made

another attempt to move upstream but his journey was fraught with mishaps. After dragging the barges one at a time past Culpaulin Island near Wilcannia, the barges then broke their lashings and ran into the bank. After refloating them, the Jane Eliza hit a snag. Further upstream the steamer Ellen helped pull one barge through another very shallow section while the other had to be half unloaded before it could be pulled through.

Captain Dusting found a deep waterhole for the Jane Eliza and settled in to wait for the next high river. He was in for a long wait. Seventeen months went by before the next flood swept down the River and, in June 1886, the Jane Eliza finally reached Bourke 37 months after leaving Morgan. The hotel had already been built with timber brought in from Sydney on the new railway line that had beaten Dusting to his destination by 10 months. The cargo of timber was eventually taken by camel to Broken Hill and used to build a bank.

Snagging the Darling

Branches and whole trees had crashed into the Darling River for centuries filling it with a mass of snags, which provided shelters for breeding fish and habitat for the river's biodiversity. But the snags were a major hazard to navigation of the River and within two years of the start of river trading snagging parties were employed to keep the rivers clear for navigation. Snagging boats stayed out for weeks at a time clearing entire stretches of river, only to have the next flood re-stock supplies, and so the snagging boats would start all over again. Trees removed from the river brought employment for woodcutters who chopped up the wood hauled onto the banks and sold it to passing steamers. Despite this opportunistic 'recycling', many of the gracious red gums along the banks also contributed to the appetites of the steamers.

De-snagging of the Darling River was seen as the single most important activity that would improve navigation. On the Darling, the dangerous rocky reefs within the channel formed an even greater danger at low water than submerged timber. Numerous investigations in the 1880s reported on the degree of hazard presented by the reefs along the extent of the river. There is little evidence of major work being carried out on these reefs, although smaller obstructions such as boulders were removed from the channel. Channels were cut through sandy sections of riverbed when the river level was low and the steamers and their barges were hauled through using ropes and pulleys hitched around trees on the bank. The morphology of the river channel was being altered from an early stage.

The Darling River Ports

The owners of the steamers dealt directly with stations in the early years of trade, but river ports developed along the Darling very quickly and these then became the focus of trade.

Wentworth was the first of the Darling River ports, although it owes its initial development to activities on the Murray rather than the Darling. With its strategic position at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers, Wentworth's commercial influence was widespread and it became the third most important river port on the Murray. Wool was brought to Wentworth from all over outback New South Wales for transshipment to either Echuca or Morgan. It became the social and commercial centre for the whole of the lower Darling. A large wharf was erected at Wentworth in 1883 to encourage greater use of the Darling River. By this time there were 193 boats with a total capacity of 30 000 tons operating out of the port.

A small hotel opened on a sandhill near the Menindee Lakes in 1854, and in 1859 Cadell consolidated this outpost with the addition of a small store. From these humble beginnings the little town of Menindee emerged, the first on the Darling River. The town was surveyed in 1862 and given the official title of Perry. However, the name Menindee, a derivative of the local Aboriginal name, prevailed and in 1863 its name was officially changed to reflect this local preference.

The Darling River ports were strongly influenced by South Australia and, to a lesser extent, Victoria. Most

of the developing towns felt sadly neglected by the distant authorities in Sydney. The residents of Menindee were particularly unhappy with their lot and frequent letters to the Sydney media lamented the lack of facilities—there was no courthouse along the Darling, the River always needed desnagging, the district roads were a disgrace, and they were in need of a bonded store. Despite this, the town had no serious rival on the middle Darling until the 1870s when copper ore began pouring in from the Cobar mines. The short-lived gold rush at Mount Browne in the 1880s was also instrumental in the establishment of Wilcannia as the major river port of the central Darling. Menindee's business and importance began to decline in the shadow of Wilcannia.

The township of Wilcannia had been surveyed on Mount Murchison Station in 1865 and the first land sales held in August 1866. Soon a hotel and a bank were added to the settlement. The first newspaper, the *Wilcannia Times*, was published in 1873. With help from profits generated from the Cobar mines and Mount Browne diggings in the 1880s, many of the original weatherboard buildings were replaced by handsome stone houses and public edifices. There was continual activity at the waterfront with steamers loading and unloading at the woolstores and warehouses, while coaches brought weary travellers to rest at the hotels.

The port of Bourke developed some distance upstream from the site of Mitchell's old Fort Bourke. The town was surveyed in 1862 and the first land sales were held in

September. Prior to this the only buildings that existed were some bark huts, a store and two hotels. A courthouse and lockup followed in 1863 and by 1866 there was a hospital and several stores, banks and hotels. A weekly mail service operated to Menindee, another to Walgett and a fortnightly service operated to Wilcannia. Bourke was a strategic point in this era as it was generally the limit of riverboat navigation on the Darling River. By the 1890s Bourke was considered to be one of the greatest stock and wool loading centres in Australia, and had grown to a population of over 3 000 people.

By 1875 the increasing volumes of passengers and mail had made Wentworth, Wilcannia and Bourke important coaching centres as well as river ports. Cobb and Co. coaches travelled from Bourke up the Paroo River to Hungerford and into Queensland and they later serviced the Mount Browne gold diggings from Bourke and Wilcannia. Burtons was a similar company operating from Wilcannia, with a weekly service down the river to Sandhurst in Victoria and another to Sydney via Deniliquin.

All the river ports—Bourke, Louth, Tilpa, Wilcannia, Menindee and Pooncarie—owed their vitality to their function as business centres for the outback country being taken up on either side of the Darling from the mid 1860s. Bourke supplied the Warrego country and vast areas of new settlement beyond the Queensland border. From Wilcannia, bullock and camel teams travelled up the Paroo, out to Tibooburra and as far as Coopers Creek. Meanwhile

Menindee was a focal point for the middle Darling and the mining settlements of the Barrier Ranges. For hundreds of kilometres beyond the river, the outback country clung to the Darling and its ports for survival.

The End of an Era

The year 1880 marked an important turning point for river transport on the Darling River. For the first time, wool from Toorale Station was sent overland to the railhead at Wellington rather than being loaded onto steamers. Other stations soon followed suit and the railheads of Wellington and Gunnedah began receiving increasing quantities of wool from stations along the Darling River and in southern Queensland. When the railhead reached Bourke in 1885 a quick and reliable means of transport was within the reach of many of the Darling stations. Queensland's rail system finally reached Charleville and Cunnamulla in the 1890s and the New South Wales steamers lost the Queensland trade from the Channel country and upper Warrego.

The paddlesteamers were to play one more important role in the narrative of Australia's history. In 1891 the steamer *Rodney*, loaded with wool shorn by non-union shearers, was set on fire in the midst of Australia's worst industrial conflict. But by the turn of the century the spasmodic and unreliable riverboat trade had been brutally affected by the loss of business to the railways and was in terminal decline.

Camel Trade

Bullock teams provided the main form of transport for early settlers and pastoral stations throughout the Basin up until the 1880s. Bullocks were hardier and more reliable than horses but they were terribly slow. Wool from Narrabri in the Namoi Valley was sent by bullock teams to Morpeth on the Hunter River. Even in a good season a team could take up to two months to make this journey. Similarly, on the Lower Darling the journey from Menindee by dray to Adelaide took eight or nine weeks.

Camels made their debut along the Darling River with Burke and Wills in 1860, but these apparently cumbersome animals were slow to capture the imagination of the Darling River pastoralists. In 1869 a caravan of 90 camels with 16 drivers made its way up the River carrying stores for Mount Murchison and some of the other northern stations. However, it was the recurrent drought conditions that occurred during the flurry of goldmining activity in the Corner Country that finally sparked a real interest in camel transport in outback New South Wales. In 1882 Cobb and Co. hitched a team of camels to their fortnightly coach to the gold diggings. Camel camps began to be established

around the railheads at Bourke and Broken Hill and at commercial centres such as Wilcannia. By 1900 there were around 500 camels used in this way in western New South Wales.

Wilcannia and Bourke formed the main centres for camel trading on the Darling River. In as early as 1883, some stations 1000 kilometres north in Queensland were ordering stores from Wilcannia, but the high cost of bullock teams, lack of communications and problems of water significantly hampered outback trade until the introduction of the camel teams. From Wilcannia, camel trains travelled over unmade roads to Menindee and Pooncarie in the south, UMBERUMBERKA, Mount Gipps and Thackaringa gold diggings to the west, and up to Milparinka and Tibooburra in the north. Because no railhead was built at Wilcannia, camel teams continued to provide an important trade function long after their importance began to decline in other areas.

One of the earliest records of camels in the Bourke area depicts a team contracted to take a wool load from Bourke to Broken Hill in 1886 while the Darling River was low. By 1890 the Bourke camel trains had become essential to the survival and continuing prosperity of pastoral stations as far away as Thargomindah and Charleville. Camel trains carted supplies from Bourke along the Wanaaring Road, north to Hungerford and over the Queensland border. At one stage even the mail coaches to Wanaaring were operated by camels. The importance of the camel trains to the district was emphasised during

the 1891 shearer's strike when the bullock drivers, members of the Teamsters Union supported the shearers and refused to carry loads to the sheep stations. A major drought in 1894 saw 18 tonnes of flour left on the roads between Barrington and Charleville because the bullock teams were without feed along the roadsides, and unable to carry the supplies in to waiting stations. Once again camels saved the day.

Although the term 'Afghan' has historically been used to collectively label the camel drivers, their countries of origin included India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The camels were imported from the northern parts of British India (which at that time included Pakistan) and most of the drivers were citizens of British India who travelled to Australia as subjects of the British Empire. Although Afghanistan never came under British rule, its people were nomads who passed along the northern trade routes, and some are likely to have settled in India.

In their new homeland, the camel drivers sometimes worked as free agents, but many were employees of camel owning proprietors, sometimes of their own nationality. Most of the drivers were practising Moslems who kept themselves and their religion away from the white community.

Most pastoralists favoured camels over bullocks as outback carriers. They could go for several days without water and could eat poorer quality pastures. Their padded feet were suited to long sandy stretches and they could travel over sandhills, creekbeds and stony plains as easily as a road. However,

what appealed most to the pastoralists was their speed. A trip that would take a bullock team five weeks to complete could be undertaken by a camel train in twelve days.

Animosity towards the Afghan camel drivers emanated from the horse and bullock teamsters but whether these feelings arose more from the economic impact of competition or from racism has been disputed by historians. In droughts the camel teams were the only ones able to take to the roads and, therefore, took much of the teamster's trade during those times. During the good seasons the Afghans would often operate at reduced rates for short hauls that could normally be undertaken by bullocks. Their expectations and standard of living were not so high, and their power to demand comparable rates was weak compared to the bullock teamsters who had a very powerful union for support.

By the 1920s the camel trains had almost entirely taken over bullock and horse teams as the main form of transport in the outback. However, their sovereignty was short lived and in the 1930s road transport began to push its way into the Darling region replacing the camel teams and their Afghan drivers. For almost 50 years, the Afghan teams made a significant contribution to the viability and prosperity of the northern part of the Darling Basin.

CONCLUSION

The European history of the Darling River system has been driven by an eagerness to turn the system's water, grasslands and soils into products for sale in an international market place. The early Colonial government facilitated the process by supporting European exploration ventures and by failing to recognise the rights of the tribal clans who occupied the Basin. Early explorations focussed upon the discovery of country that would provide rich pastoral and agricultural returns. An expedition that returned having found fertile lands was deemed a success, while those that found waterless country and deserts were seen to contribute little to the economic future of the new colony.

Part of this obsession stemmed from necessity. Permanent settlement could only be maintained if supported by permanent sources of food and water. While this may have been the overall aim of the government, many of the Basin's early settlers were driven by the desire to make their own personal fortunes. As an encouragement for economic development, the government offered cheap land and low rents as reward for higher levels of exploitation.

Government attempts to regulate landholding and racial interactions, were faced with constant opposition from pastoralists. In the north of the Basin opposition was so extreme that it resulted in the creation of a separate colony where their political influence would be assured. The administration of the Darling Basin was consequently fractured along an arbitrary line, and this political division was compounded by unrealistic assessments of the system's productive capabilities.

The current environmental state of the Basin is the result of a complex web of social and ecological forces that have acted together. In isolation the introduction of an exotic species may not upset the balance, but when combined with overgrazing, the influences of land administration, a poor understanding of climatic variability, and the desire for fast financial gain, the result is far more dramatic. It has taken over one hundred years of land management within the Basin to dispel the fanciful theories of the explorers and early pastoralists and to begin to understand the fragile environment of the Darling Basin.