

## Chapter 4

### HOW GRAZIERS USED THE SNOW COUNTRY

I have described snow country grazing as the movement of livestock to and from the alpine and sub-alpine grasslands and woodlands for the summer grazing season. This gives a simple overview and a basis for asking questions of detail. For example, how many graziers were involved? Why did they do it? what types of livestock were taken up and in what numbers? How was the landscape affected?

#### Cattle Country

Most snow country grazing was by cattle. There were always some horses as well, and periodically, usually in dry years, sheep would also be brought up. Amongst the cattlemen there were some large property owners who kept licensed bush country primarily as drought insurance – they generally maintained some kind of presence on the high plains each year, but their underlying commercial interest was to have somewhere to take stock in the event that the home paddocks were exhausted. In these cases, numbers of cattle grazed and the length of time spent on the runs fluctuated greatly from year to year.

A good example was Thomas McKnight Hamilton, of Ensay Station, who had large tracts of improved lowland and used the high plains mainly for summer relief when the home paddocks were parched. In 1885/86 cattle from Ensay were grazed on the Bogong High Plains from early December to late May,<sup>1</sup> while in 1895 stock were only grazed there from February to late April.<sup>2</sup> Hamilton normally stocked the high plains with young cattle, representing a minor proportion of his total beef herd: in 1885/86 only 302 of Ensay's 2,000 cattle were sent to the high plains<sup>3</sup> and in 1894/95 the number was only 380 out of 3,500.<sup>4</sup> The Bogong high plains were clearly peripheral to the overall operations of Ensay, which was primarily a sheep station, and in the early 1890s carried upwards of 50,000 merinos.<sup>5</sup> None of these sheep were taken to the high plains. Moreover, Thomas Hamilton had little to do with the runs himself and engaged Osborne Young, new small pastoralist and fellow high plains licensee, to manage his Bogong run.<sup>6</sup> Station owners in other districts who had similar arrangements included J. C. H. Graves (Mt. Battery Station and the upper King River country)<sup>7</sup> and Charles Ibbotson (Tawonga Station and Bogong High Plains).<sup>8</sup>

To most mountain graziers, however, the snow country meant more than just summer relief and in many cases, especially after the coming of the rabbit, it was their prime country. Normally it was used in conjunction with lower bush runs and cleared paddocks of unimproved pasture which carried herds through till the winter snows melted. Where possible young livestock were wintered in

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1 Hamilton Papers, Outwards LB 1, No.571, T. M. Hamilton to O. Young 19 December 1885

2 Hamilton Papers, Outwards LB 3, No.456, T. M. Hamilton to O. Young 14 February 1895

3 Fennessy, K. M. 1974. "Thomas MacKnight Hamilton and the improvement of a pastoral station. Ensay Station, 1883-1892". Thesis for Master of Arts, Melbourne University, p.101; Hamilton Papers, Outwards LB1, No.571, T. M. Hamilton to O. Young 19 December 1885.

4 Hamilton Papers, Outwards LB 3, No.456, T. M. Hamilton to O. Young 14 February 1895

5 Fennessy (1974), p.101, op cit

6 Hamilton Papers, Outwards, LB I, No.538, 26 September 1885.

7 Mansfield Courier, 22 February 1896.

8 Hamilton Papers, Inwards, Q6, 18 April 1883.

the bush and breeders were kept on the cleared home paddocks. Graziers who had enough good country were able to retain the bulls and other valued stock at the home property all year round, moving the young bush stock and later the cows and calves to the tops for summer. But smaller graziers who relied almost entirely upon licensed Crown lands often had to move all their stock to the high plains where calving, branding and joining were carried out. Classic examples were those who put cattle on Mt Bogong from the early 1880's to 1930's – in particular Peter Howman, a former gold prospector who from at least 1882 and possibly earlier started with a small herd of maybe 100 head and over thirty years later finished with over 1000 head all grazed on the mount in summer – including cows, bulls and calves – and all wintered in the surrounding bush.

In the early years when cattle were sold at local mining centres for slaughtering, quality would not have been a real issue in the face of scarcity. But as the local demand for fattened cattle contracted throughout the 1880s and 1890s and graziers had to sell store cattle in a more competitive market environment, the quality of herds improved and the snow country became renowned for the class and quick fattening properties of its cattle. Noted cattle man, Sir Sidney Kidman, referred to the mountain grown Herefords of Gibson Brothers, Benambra, as the best line of Herefords he had ever seen.<sup>9</sup> For the smaller and less well-off graziers with modest or no lowland paddocks breeding activities had to be conducted on the mountain runs which were rarely fenced so breeding activities could not be controlled satisfactorily, to the disadvantage of all licensees.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the quality of high plains cattle was considered to be remarkably good throughout the region, and when marketed, at three to five years old, they were well sought after by fatteners.

As the market changed so did the breed of cattle. Originally shorthorns were universal because they were a multi-purpose breed: beef cattle that could also be milked commercially. However, Herefords became more popular as the emphasis on beef production developed and by the early 1900's they were the predominant breed throughout the mountain region. They were regarded as specialist beef cattle and were better able to handle the cold alpine conditions than shorthorns. Station owners and the bigger new pastoralists had been producing for the large store markets at an early date<sup>11</sup> and undoubtedly they set the pace in choosing Herefords. However, other breeds had their enthusiasts, hence Red Polls owned by J. C. H. Graves were often found in the upper King River area prior to the 1920s<sup>12</sup> and cattle from Ensay Station continued to be shorthorns.<sup>13</sup>

### Dealing

While alpine beef growing was generally characterised by breeding, at times, and in some localities, purchasing and growing young cattle bred elsewhere was also popular. This was known as dealing. Of course at opportune times in dry years run holders throughout the region would acquire small numbers of cheap stock and hold them in anticipation of higher autumn prices. But there were some graziers who specialized in dealing.

Speculative buying and selling depended upon the availability of cheap, young cattle which could be held and grown for a season or two and then resold at a higher price. It was important that

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9 Peck, Harry H., 1942. *Memoirs of a Stockman*, Melbourne, Stock and Land P/L, p.328.

10 Lands Department file T 72982.

11 Gippsland Mercury newspaper, 31 October 1876; W. Hollands, Interview

12 Mansfield Courier newspaper, 4 June 1904; Interview with F. Ross and A. Graves.

13 The Australasian, 2 July 1917.

purchased store cattle be cheap because of the regular losses incurred through poor acclimatisation, adverse weather and unfamiliarity with the unfenced mountain rangeland.<sup>14</sup>

In the 19th century large scale speculative transactions were the realm of a few big station owners who had their fingers on the livestock pulse of Victoria and other colonies, particularly New South Wales and Queensland. Advice given to T. M. Hamilton in 1883 indicates that the Bogong High Plains were used for sizable sheep transactions by Ensay Station from 1875 to the early 1880s; in the following quotation the probable mode of operation is described and its inter-regional aspect is highlighted:

*I see you have given up the idea of buying sheep for the top or high plain country. Owing to the shortness of grass in Riverina it would be a very good season to buy in Manaroo as that is partly their outlet and prices will certainly be low. I think you are going wrong not to try 400 or 500. You cannot but make money out of them. It is only a question of how much ... aged wethers would suit best ... However I will not try to persuade you against your will. Store bullocks have not been selling quite so well lately but will get better later on I suppose.*<sup>15</sup>

Sheep from the Monaro district of NSW were considered the most appropriate as they came from a cold environment and would not be adversely affected by the climatic fluctuations of the Bogongs. But Hamilton preferred to dabble in cattle, though not without some difficulties. For example, in January 1891 he purchased 480 shorthorn bullocks at the Wodonga saleyards and had them driven to paddocks on the Cobungra High Plains being sublet from A. H. Sharpe. By April the cold conditions were adversely affecting the stock which had been bred in Queensland and were unable to acclimatise.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 1895/96 he had what he described as 'a large number' of cattle on the high plains and took out a 6-month license of the rough adjoining bushland of Pastoral Allotment K to carry them over the winter – because the weather had been dry and he had nowhere else to put them.<sup>17</sup> We don't know what proportion of the Ensay cattle herd this 'large number' represented, or whether it included cattle purchased at auction the previous spring. However, we do know that large scale speculative buying was common amongst large station owners, and Ensay was certainly a large station.

After 1877 speculative buying of stock from other colonies was somewhat restricted by the imposition of a tax on sheep & cattle crossing the border into Victoria. This tax was introduced to support land settlement as well as to raise revenue.<sup>18</sup> It had been the practice for sheep and cattle bred in the Riverina and Queensland to be driven down to Victoria for fattening and sale at Newmarket, Melbourne. Stock were bred on a larger scale and at a lower cost north of the River Murray and could be sold in Victoria at a low price which threatened the viability of small graziers, especially those from marginal areas. The border tax was therefore designed to lift prices and give the small grazier a better chance to compete. But by raising prices it also had the effect of discouraging dealing.

Other factors besides Stock Tax also retarded the development of dealing in the late 1800's. To be successful dealers, mountain graziers needed to accurately assess the adaptability of stock to the

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14 For example see 'Nunnit' Cattle Account, Bindi Station Records (SLV).

15 Hamilton Papers, Inwards 10 October 1883, T. W. Grant to T. M. Hamilton.

16 Ibid. Inwards 16 January 1891, 20 April 1891.

17 Lands Department file 690/187, Remnant of Pastoral Allotment K, County of Bogong.

18 Parnaby (1951), op cit.

cold mountain environment as well as having a specialist knowledge of regional markets and climatic conditions. Until the early 1900s the former skill was not fully evolved because regular snow country grazing was still in its formative years; the latter talents were not widely held simply because many snow country graziers were only growing cattle on a part-time basis.

Stock Tax was abolished at Federation in 1901, about which time dealing really began to flourish. This was also the period in which the rabbit infestation of the whole mountain region was gaining pace and new grasslands were desperately being sought.

Dealing became common at the western end of the mountain region, particularly in the Mansfield district, amongst small operators who had little or no paddock country, but did have access to large tracts of bush. Their capacity to breed cattle at their small and now impoverished home paddocks was very limited, but the capacity of the bush runs to carry store cattle was comparatively high. So bush runs became a venue for parking and growing small herds of store cattle. Dealing was a means of by-passing the breeding stage for those small graziers who did not have sufficient lowland and was favoured because young animals eat less grass than cows and calves and therefore enabled more stock to be carried on the runs. This kind of dealing contrasted with the more speculative ventures undertaken by large station owners, who purchased big mobs in spring, with a view to making a quick profit the following autumn.

Young cattle, generally two to three-year-old bullocks,<sup>19</sup> were bought at spring sales in the immediate district and at nearby centres such as Wodonga and Euroa and placed straight on to the snow country until autumn. They were then mustered off the tops with the saleable three to four year olds being taken to market and the remainder turned out on lower timbered hills and valleys for winter. Roadsides in settled areas also provided some valuable winter pasture. Most purchased cattle were resold as stores after approximately 18 months, depending upon the market conditions. Dealing operations were usually conducted by extended families or partnerships as it was difficult for small graziers to manage bush runs and conduct the buying single handed.

A typical example of a small cattle dealing operation was that of George Hoskin and Richard Dale of Jamieson. Hoskin held land at Mitchells Creek which he worked with his brother Robert as a mixed farm up until approximately 1913, after which time he resided at Jamieson and managed the Mitchells Creek property for cattle raising only. However, in the absence of frequent human contact cattle bred at Mitchells became increasingly difficult to handle so Hoskin teamed up with Dale and went into dealing: Dale did the buying and Hoskin and family worked the runs which comprised the old home selection, adjoining bush country and the nearby snow country around Mt. Skene and Mt. Sunday.<sup>20</sup> Dale was an astute judge of stock and he generally bought Herefords and Shorthorns. They frequently averaged 250 - 300 head, although at times close to 400 were put out on the runs<sup>21</sup>

**Table 4.1**

**Cattle Dealers in the Snow Country, 1900-1920**

<b>Name</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Area Used</b>	<b>Date</b>
W. Hoskin & R. Dale	Mansfield	Mt Skene - Mt. Sunday	1915 —>

19 Bullocks were favoured because of their greater growth potential

20 Lands Department file Alexandra H 77808 (P.R.O.).

21 Interview with G. Hoskin, Appendix F

F. Klingsporn and family	Mansfield	Mt. Buller, King Billy, Upper King River	early 1900s-+
J. Barclay and J. Bullock	Mansfield	The Bluff	1906-1914
W.F. & G. Lovick	Mansfield	Mt. Cobbler and Upper King River	1903 ->
J. Lovick	Mansfield	Mt. Buller	1919 -
Phillips & Ritchie-> Wonnangatta Syndicate	Mansfield	Howitt and Bryce Plains	1914-1934
J. Lawler	Ovens	Mt Hotham & Bogong High Plains	mid-1890s- 1909
P. McCoy	Omeo	Nunniong plateau	1910 —>
P. Duane	Ovens	Bogong High Plains	1890s-1920s
J. Lewis	Ovens (Moyhu)	Mt. Cobbler	mid-1890s - 1902

Source: Appendix F: Interviews with Snow Country Graziers

One of the largest and most well-known dealing enterprises was born in 1914 when Arthur Phillips and Geoff Ritchie of Mansfield purchased the remote Wonnangatta Station. The station was managed by Jim Barclay who did the spring buying, normally at Wodonga or in the NSW Riverina. Cattle were then walked to Wonnangatta where they were grazed on the adjacent high plains for the summer and on the narrow alluvial plain of the upper Wonnangatta River during the winter. Up to 300 or 400 bullocks would be bought each year and held until market prices improved. Then they were sold locally at Mansfield or Alexandra. The station would carry approximately 700 head through the winter.

Dealing was also carried out regularly in the 1920s by snow country graziers based in North Gippsland, particularly the Heyfield-Maffra area. These cattlemen were basically breeders but they also bought young cattle, bred in the Omeo district, for growing on the bush and snow country runs. Omeo cattle were suitable for putting in the mountains as they were used to cold climatic conditions and they were sold after two years or so, usually as stores.

Dealing, whether for growing or short-term speculative purposes, continued into the 1930s. Gradually it became less popular as small graziers improved the size and quality of their lowland paddocks and became more able to breed their own cattle. Breeding was regarded as more desirable as it dampened the fluctuations in, and uncertainties about profitability by at least partially replacing the market place as the source of young stock. The Great Depression also played a role in the decline of dealing by squeezing some of the principal dealers, including the Wonnangatta Syndicate, out of business.

### Horses

Horses were introduced to the snow country by some of the earliest squatters as they were always needed for stock work and general transport. Pioneer squatters such as the O'Rourke family are known to have run mobs of horses in the mountains<sup>22</sup> and the early occurrence of wild horses in areas such as the upper King River arose because of squatting occupancies.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the succeeding years most pastoralists grazed at least a few horses on the tops with their cattle, but occasionally they had a serious commercial interest.

The British army in India purchased approximately 2,000-3,000 horses each year as artillery and cavalry remounts<sup>24</sup> and from the mid-1880s to World War 1 this market was well served by graziers from Omeo and Gippsland, some of whom were regular contributors.<sup>25</sup> Horses were selected by buying agents in the paddock, but the commercial transactions took place in India so producers or their agents were responsible for shipping to the main buying centres at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Some large Gippsland breeders sold direct to India and organised transport individually; in other cases, where graziers did not aim specifically at the Indian market, or where the number of horses they produced was small, they sold to specialist buyers who attended local sales.

A notable snow country horse breeder was Osborne Young who is said to have had between 300 and 600 head running on the Bogong High Plains and his adjoining Bundaramunjie run.<sup>26</sup> He had licenses on the high plains from 1879-1913 and specialised in horses which he sold in large mobs annually at Sale; some mobs also found their way directly to Melbourne for shipping to India. Another large horse breeder was Murdoch Macintosh from Dargo, who had runs on the Dargo High Plains and Mt Wellington.

Horses presented a fundamental management difficulty when grazing the high plains: while cattle will move towards lower country with the onset of snow, horses will often travel on to higher and higher ground and may ultimately perish through exposure.<sup>27</sup> This danger was particularly acute if mustering was delayed till late autumn. Nevertheless, wild horses originating from saddle stock or mobs bred for the local or Indian markets have been able to survive in the snow country for well over 150 years. They are normally found on the lower and more dissected lands where winters are not so severe and where the access between snow and low lands is not difficult.

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22 Interview with K. Higgins; Bairnsdale Advertiser 28 April 1936

23 Interviews, Appendix F.

24 Omeo Standard, 3 October 1892.

25 Ibid 3 October 1892, 15 January 1893, 13 March 1899.

26 Appendix F, Interview, Ross Blair.

27 Maffra Spectator, 4 May 1896.



Roping wild horses in a trap yard near Mt. Wellington Gippsland, c.1913  
Photographer: Waugh, Arthur John, 1868-1928. Identifier(s) H2016.167/96, SLV

### Dairy Cattle

There are only two known examples of dairying in the snow country, on the Dargo High Plains during the gold era and on the Nunnett Plain in the very early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously the major

commercial difficulty was the distance of the high plains from markets, which was generally prohibitive.

In the case of the Dargo High Plains people were living on the high plains all year round, milking cows for their own domestic needs and for local miners. In the early 1890s the Treasure family milked approximately 30 cows.<sup>28</sup> On the Nunnett Plain, commercial dairying was carried out by Thomas Doyle and family for a season or two in approximately 1904/05 following disastrous rabbit infestations of their selections at Bindi, 15 km away. A hut and milking shed were constructed and about 20-35 cows were milked, with cream being transported 40 kilometres by wooden sledge to the Swifts Creek butter factory, three times a week.<sup>29</sup>

### Sheep

Sheep grazing occurred periodically in some mountain areas, but was not common except on the Bogong High Plains. Dingoes could easily disperse a flock and inflict casualties, so it was necessary to have shepherds watching the sheep at all times, yarding them at night and taking them out during the day to graze. Cold weather was also a hazard, & sheep often died in large numbers during blizzards, which could occur at any time; and if early snows preceded autumn mustering shepherds had a tough job rescuing survivors and carrying them to safety.<sup>30</sup> Open plain country and bald mountain tops were the only suitable places for sheep to graze in the mountains, as here there were long lines of sight and relatively little scrub that could contaminate the wool with burs and seeds.

Many alpine areas received sheep at some time in the history of mountain grazing, but usually it was only small numbers for a short period. Appendix E tabulates the known events related to me by interviewees (Appendix F). Some of the estimates of mob size seem exaggerated, and some are clearly contradictory. Nevertheless, the overall picture is clear: the Bogong High Plains and Mt Hotham area were the main venues, and sheep were also tried at various times over a surprisingly large number of other sites.

The earliest 'hard' evidence I have found for sheep grazing in the alpine country is for the Bennison Plains, towards the southern end of the Snowy Range. Richard Bennison rented the Mt Wellington run from 1861 to 1869 and Lands Department archives record that this was a sheep run centred on the lower reaches of the Wellington River and its junction with the Macalister River. The Stock Assessment of 1862 recorded the run carrying 1200 sheep. Evidence that Bennison actually took sheep up to the high plain that carries his name is in fact the place name itself, local oral history (Appendix F) and the extremely close proximity of the Bennison Plains to the low country licensed by Bennison.

A short time later, in the summer of 1866/67 the Dargo High Plains also hosted sheep, almost certainly in very large numbers. The evidence includes a local tradition that the famous squatter Hugh Glass put sheep on the Dargo High Plains<sup>31</sup> plus an unusual array of registered licensees appearing in the official records. This has already been discussed at length in an earlier chapter. Through these intermediaries Glass also had access to the Bogong High Plains and perhaps also the

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28 Extracts from diary of Harry Treasure. Submission to the Land Conservation Council, Alpine Study Area.

29 Interview, G. Doyle, Appendix F

30 Interview J. Klingsporn, Appendix F

<sup>31</sup> Interview, James Treasure, Appendix F

Snowy Range in 1866/67. Both areas have extensive treeless plains that were ideal for sheep. It is likely that Glass also directed sheep to the Bogong High Plains as they were easier to access and had in all probability been receiving sheep since at least 1862/3 when the Bundaramunjie run was acquired by the wool brokers J H Clough & Co. So rudimentary infrastructure and local expertise were already in place. But whether or not Glass's sheep also reached the Snowy Range in 1866/67 is a moot point. The only 'evidence' I have suggesting that this area was part of Glass's portfolio is that the licensee, Walter Duke, was one of a handful of successful bidders at the 1866 pastoral license auction who:

a/had no other known connection to the snow country or the wider mountain region; and  
b/ only held the license for one season. All the other successful bidders have been linked to Glass, and I am simply guessing that Duke was another of Glass's intermediaries. It is probably correct but I have no proof. That aside, for sheep coming from northern Victoria and the NSW Riverina district, where Glass's squatting runs were located, the Snowy Range was a lot harder to reach than the Bogong and Dargo high plains, and the subalpine meadows are a lot smaller. So, if it was part of Glass's portfolio then it was probably to be used as a last resort if the other areas turned out to be insufficient to meet his needs.

Drought conditions prevailed in the Riverina district during the second half of the 1860's, and that is where most of Glass's livestock were located. The 1862 Stock Assessment tax returns show in that year Glass reported over 130,000 sheep for his Victorian pastoral stations.<sup>32</sup> It is likely he had more than that on his Riverina stations in NSW. He clearly had the capacity to totally saturate the Victorian snow country with sheep, and the scale of his apparent acquisitions at the 1866 pastoral license auction suggests he had this in mind for the summer of 1866/67. What actually happened that summer is unknown – perhaps future research will unearth some specific details. But it seems that whatever it was, it wasn't repeated on the same scale in following years. For the summer of 1867/68 only one snow country run was retained<sup>33</sup> – the Dargo High Plain run – and that continued to be used for sheep until Hugh Glass's estate was wound up in 1872.

Between 1875 and 1883 sheep were again on the Bogong High Plains in smaller numbers when the run was licensed to the owners of Ensay station. Archival records indicate that mobs were purchased at Wodonga in spring & taken to the high plains for summer with the expectation they would be sold the following autumn for a handsome profit.<sup>34</sup>

Sheep were also taken to the Bogong high plains by local graziers in the first half of the 20th century, though frequently only in dry years when lowland paddocks were parched. Tongio Station, owned by the Johnson family, held grazing blocks on the high plains from 1908<sup>35</sup> and supplied the greatest

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<sup>32</sup> Government Gazette, 1862, pp 850

<sup>33</sup> William's license for the Bogong High Plains was listed as forfeited for non-payment of rent in February 1868 (GG 1868, p 465). That meant rent had been owing for the previous 6 months, so the run was effectively abandoned at the end of the 66/67 summer. His license for the Dargo High Plains was transferred to Ettershank in April 1867, and remained paid up to June 1868 after which the run was put in the names of other intermediaries. Licenses in the names of Simon Fraser and Walter Duke were also not renewed after the first year

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton Papers, Inwards 1 August 1883, 10 October 1883; evidence presented by A. W. Howitt to Crown Lands Commission, see Chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup> Grazing Blocks C5 and C 12, see Appendix D(l)(a).

numbers<sup>36</sup> and was perhaps the exception, missing the summer grazing season only in cool wet summers. In 1945 grazing of sheep on the Bogong High Plains was prohibited.<sup>37</sup>

Starving sheep were brought to the Native Dog, Native Cat snow plains, Rams Head and Cobberas snow plains when these areas were licensed on behalf of Riverina pastoralists, the Desailly Brothers, between 1866-1869 – see Appendix A. The Desailly's had huge capacities, similar to Hugh Glass. And in the 1902/03 and 1914/15 droughts F.E. Whitehead brought starving sheep to Native Dog from Urana, NSW.

On the Mansfield side, the Klingsporn family routinely took sheep to Mt Buller each summer from about 1905 to 1918, and to the more remote Mt Koonika in 1919 and 1920.<sup>38</sup> After shearing, young sheep intended for sale as stores were placed on the tops and shepherded there till autumn when they were returned to the home paddocks or sent to market. But the scale of this operation was small, with mobs of around maybe 500 head. The practice was discontinued when prices rose and losses became less tolerable.

Elsewhere sheep were rarely seen.

#### The Number of Snow Country Graziers

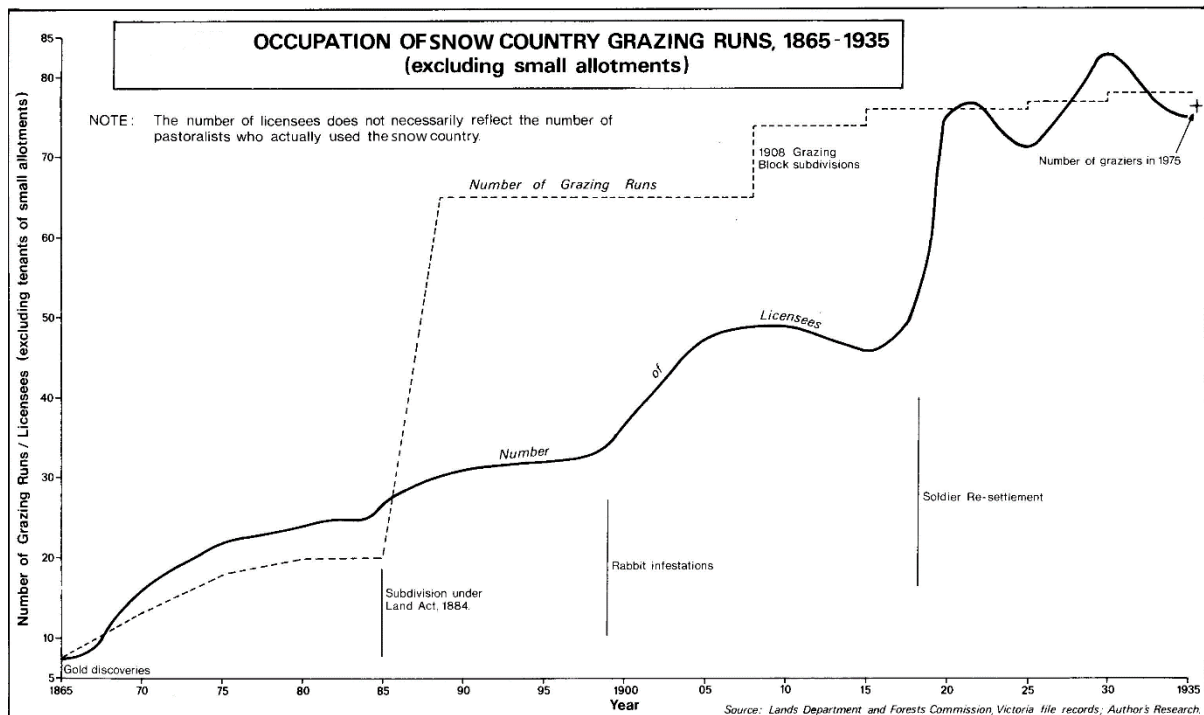
The number of graziers using the snow country varied over time and according to the weather. Figure 4.7 gives a trend line estimate based on the tenancy data tabulated at Appendix D. Starting in approximately 1860, when there was only a small handful of graziers involved, the numbers grew slowly at first, with a modest rise after the subdivision of runs by the 1884 Land Act, and more significant increases with the onset of the rabbit invasion, and the resettlement of returned soldiers from the 1914-1918 world war. Numbers peaked in the late 1920's and 1930's and remained at that level through to the late 1970's. This was without a doubt the heyday of snow country grazing, notwithstanding the long history reaching back to 1835.

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36 Interview B. Fitzgerald.

37 Mitchell, A., 1968. "Range Management, Catchments and Conservation", Victoria's Resources, June-August

38 Interview John Ware, J. Klingsporn, Appendix F



The maximum number of licensed snow country graziers evident in any one year was approximately 85 (1930), and most were small operators who used the snow country every summer to supplement their lowland paddocks. However, in the 1860's the scene was entirely different: only a few licensees, including some very big players from outside the region whose interest in the mountains was relatively short term and sometimes opportunistic: for drought relief, resting traveling stock, or speculative buying and selling.

The 1860's was a decade of opportunity for big operators because there wasn't much local demand for snow country runs and often unused land was there for the taking. This situation didn't last into the 1870's, and so, with a few exceptions, that was pretty much the end of big capital running amok in the snow country. Rapid land selection under the 1869 Land Act and the slow and steady decline of mountain gold mining centres heralded more regular use of the snow country pastures by a growing local pool of new graziers. Opportunities slowly increased as the Lands Department released new runs for tender, and new licensees in the 1870's were former miners, and store keepers who served the nearby settlements – as indicated by Table 2.1. Opportunities for small farmer-graziers were subsequently provided by the creation of much smaller grazing blocks under provisions of the 1884 Land Act – though as the graph shows it took some time for these opportunities to be popularly subscribed. However, from the mid 1890's small local farmers and graziers were pushed into a heavy dependency on the snow country by a triple-threat of a general economic recession, continued decline in gold mining activity, and the subsequent rabbit plague. As an example, the Doyle family, comprising three brothers, their spouses and three sisters, selected land at Bindi in 1877 and concentrated on producing grain, potatoes, wool and milk for local consumers and the Bairnsdale market.<sup>39</sup> They leased the Nunnett grazing run in 1886, a tract of relatively low altitude snow country, and used it for growing beef cattle,<sup>40</sup> an additional source of income. They also had bullock teams carting goods between Omeo and Bairnsdale and a stock and

39 Lands Department files Omeo 226/19.20, 227/19.20, 228/19.20, 233/19.20, 234/19.20, 244/19.20, 225/19.20 (P.R.O.), Interview with G. Doyle, Appendix F; papers about the Doyle family held by R. Grinter.

40 Omeo Standard, 39 May 1896

station agency in Omeo.<sup>41</sup> However, by the turn of the century the agency had closed and rabbits had reduced the productive capacity of their lowland paddocks to such an extent that part of the family was obliged to take the dairy herd up to Nunnett plain for the summer period.

These new part-time mountain graziers joined the new small pastoralists and station owners during the 1880s and early to mid-1890s and contributed to a relatively slow but steady growth in the number of snow country graziers; and stocking rates increased as graziers became more dependent upon the high pastures for their livelihood. These increases occurred gradually during the 1870s and for a decade after the introduction of the 1884 Land Act. But in the late 1890s the rabbit plague created a surge of interest which added to the volume of livestock and number of graziers using the snow country.

### The Rabbit Plague

The decline of mining was a gradual process which took place over a number of decades, slowly squeezing some farmers and traders into beef growing. But the infestation of low country by rabbits was dramatic and forced graziers to search for quick solutions to a sudden shortage of fodder. The threat posed by rabbits had been recognised before the 1884 Land Bill was formulated, but the intention of the Bill to encourage tenancy as a solution to the plague on Crown lands was overly ambitious; farmers had an uphill battle keeping the rodents off their selection paddocks, leave alone the large bush runs.

Rabbits spread through the mountain region in a clockwise direction. Problem numbers were experienced in the Mansfield district in the late 1880s<sup>42</sup> and finally reached North Gippsland at the turn of the century;<sup>43</sup> a minor path of infestation was in a southerly direction from Monaro to East Gippsland.<sup>44</sup> The explanation for this phenomenon may possibly be attributed to major points of liberation in the Port Phillip region, and the thick forests and swampy lands of West Gippsland which would not have provided ideal habitats for rabbits and may therefore have retarded their movement eastwards. Instead, rabbits, like the early squatters, spread throughout the good grasslands before tackling the mountain forests.

The severity of the problem is indicated by the following report of control measures undertaken by station owner and snow country grazer, J. C. H. Graves of Mansfield, in 1895, six years after rabbits invaded his property:

*J. C. H. Graves informs us that he had 13 men working to destroy rabbits at Mt. Battery station proper (1200 acres) and in five weeks had dug out 11,000 rabbits, not counting those fumigated in their burrows ... the 1200 acres were poisoned six times this year before Graves started the men digging out.*<sup>45</sup>

The impact of rabbit plagues upon farmers and graziers was enormous. The productivity of their lands was slashed and in attempting to control the pest valuable capital was used up. Moreover, financial problems thus caused were accentuated because, in most cases, rabbit infestation

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41 Papers held by R.Grinter.

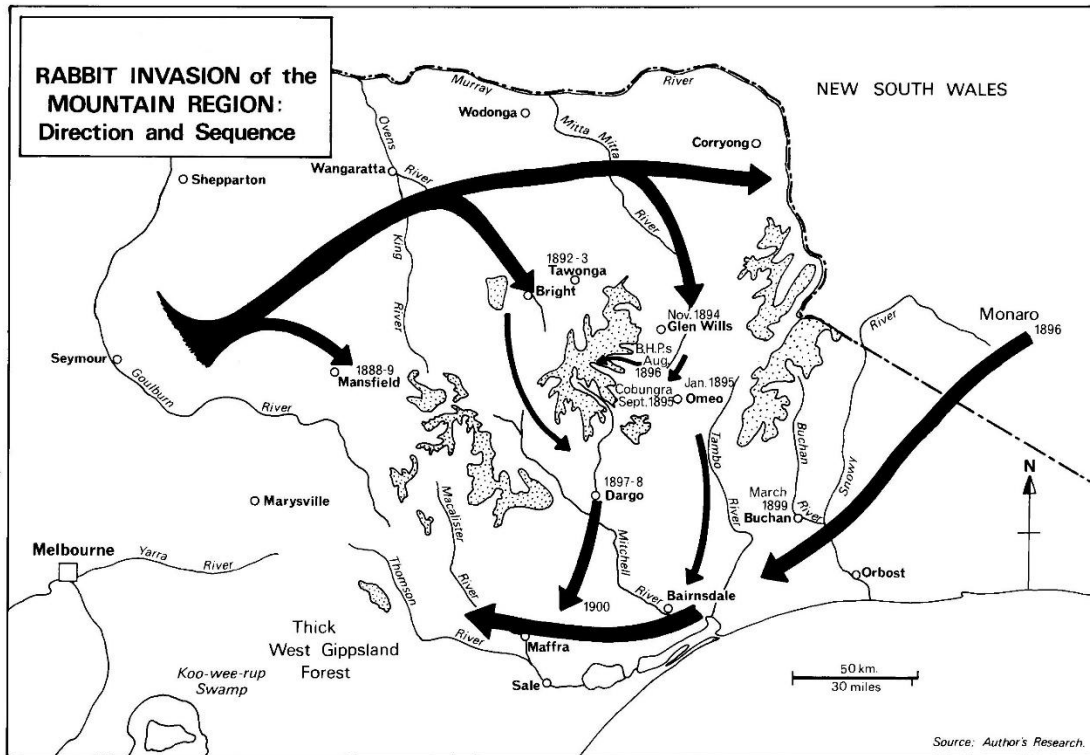
42 Mansfield Courier, 21 December 1889.

43 Maffra Spectator, 1 August 1898; O.S. 5 March 1897; Davidson (1954), p.49

44 Davidson (1954).

45 Mansfield Courier, 26 October 1895

coincided with, or followed closely upon the heels of, economic recession. Consequently, the viability of many grazing enterprises was seriously tested.<sup>46</sup>



Cold, snowbound winter conditions prevented rabbits invading all but some of the lower altitude snow country so the high ranges became infinitely more valuable for grazing. Existing run holders became even more dependent on them and new graziers took possession of the remaining available tracts for permanent "rabbit relief" summer grazing. The latter group were concentrated on the Bogong High Plains, because of its finer subdivision, and the high mountains east and south-east of Mansfield. Elsewhere there was little scope for new pastoralists because most grazing blocks had been licensed.

The dramatic rise in grazer numbers immediately after the 1914-18 war was associated with the resettlement of returned soldiers and also improved economic conditions. This subject has been covered in the previous chapter. For the first time the occupancy rate approached capacity, and it remained high for the next 60 years.

It appears to me that after 1920 the finite number of grazing blocks put a halt to what might have been an even greater increase in grazer numbers. Had the Lands Department conducted further subdivisions, one wonders what might have happened.

#### Trends in Stocking Levels

Estimating historical stocking levels for the snow country as a whole, and for individual localities, is a difficult but not impossible task. Though records are scant, they are sufficient to draw a general picture when related to the very comprehensive details of grazing tenancies, which are compiled at

<sup>46</sup> See for example Lands Department file Omeo 244/19.20 (P.R.O.) regarding Doyle family's difficulties

Appendix D and summarized at Figure 4.1. This data set tells which areas were licensed for grazing and how many people were involved each year. Using this information as a basic framework we can combine other historical records and oral traditions with some reasonable assumptions to formulate indicative time series estimates.

### Finding the Starting Point

The first step is to establish a starting point, that date range in which the first snow country grazing is believed to have taken place. Cattle were obviously not in the mountains before the arrival of Europeans, and to begin with they made only small, occasional and temporary appearances as pastoralists explored the snow country or moved between regions. Tenure records give a good first estimate of starting dates for more regular grazing, although it is clear from local histories that some of the earliest graziers occupied mountain areas without license.<sup>47</sup> So, in addition to tenure records I have used other historical information to form a view on the time period in which the first significant grazing of the snow country was likely. In particular, I have tried to establish whether historical lowland stocking data can be used to throw any further light on the matter.

The annual rent payable by squatters on each of their licensed runs was published in the Government Gazette magazine for every year throughout the duration of squatting tenure in Victoria. For the period 1855 to 1871 there is an almost fully complete data set that allows us to calculate the assessed carrying capacity for each lowland run and hence the total carrying capacity for each administrative region abutting the Eastern Highlands. Additionally, for the years 1862 and 1871 the carrying capacity of each pastoral run, as assessed by government officers, was published as separate reports in the Government Gazette.

Carrying capacity tells us the optimum maximum number of livestock that could have been kept on licensed pastoral runs in one's region of choice. On its own this data is of limited interest. But if combined with an annual census of livestock held on each run we would have a useful indicator of how close to capacity the low land was stocked. And that index would help us evaluate when regular snow country grazing was likely to have commenced. Such a census indeed exists!

The Stock Assessment Act of 1854 required that managers of each pastoral station report the maximum number of sheep, cattle and horses held on each run during the months of January and February each year. That census provided the raw data for calculation of a tax, known as the Stock Assessment, which was payable annually. As usual it was published in the Government Gazette. The rate of tax was:

2 pence per sheep; 1 shilling per head of cattle; 2 shillings per horse. Ratio 6 s : 1 c : 0.5 h

The Stock Assessment was abandoned by the Land Act 1862.

I have crunched the numbers for 1856, 1859 and 1862 – see Table 4.2, below. What is suggested is a low rate of stocking in 1862 across the administrative districts north and south of the Eastern Highlands, with little indication of substantially higher rates (based on the Assessment numbers) in the six preceding years. One might therefore suspect that regular snow country grazing had probably

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Malcolm McFarlane at Mt Wellington, Richard Simpson at Nunniong; the earliest use of McFarlane's Flat near the Snowy River

not commenced by this time, to any significant extent. Existing graziers appear to have had plenty of spare capacity on the low lands, so there would have been little advantage in regularly taking livestock to more rugged and inaccessible places.

**Table 4.2 Lowland Stocking Summary**

Lands District	Stock Assessment - cattle equivalent			Carrying capacity	Stocking rate
	1856	1859	1862		
Beechworth	57902	53065	49380	155052	32%
Benalla	94409	105720	126644	417300	30%
North Gippsland	24925	25615	28877	96144	30%
Omeo	12897	13954	16058	45850	35%
South Gippsland	31211	31433	27144	87074	31%
Total	221345	229787	248103	801420	31%

Source: Government Gazette

Of course this kind of historical data has many limitations and potential biases. Stock Assessment was a tax, and graziers would be expected to minimize their exposure by reducing or understating holdings in January/ February. On the other hand, the comprehensive review of carrying capacity in 1862 was probably a genuine attempt at an objective estimate. It was carried out by government officers and was based on system of land classification and a more accurate estimate of the size of each run.

The data suggests that nearby lowland stocking was probably not sufficiently high to warrant regular use of the snow country in the 1850's & 60's. This conclusion is supported by the observations of Government Botanist Ferdinand Mueller during his scientific expeditions across the Australian alps in the 1850's and early 1860's. It is also consistent with records of pastoral licenses for that period and beyond.

There is evidence, already discussed, that the larger high plains – principally the Bogong High Plains and the Dargo High Plains - were used in the 1860's, and perhaps earlier, by large operators from outside the region. However, we can say with reasonable confidence that regular and routine grazing of most of the snow country didn't start until the late 1860's or early 1870's.

### Regular Grazing

Regular grazing of the high plains and mountain tops was precipitated by a redeployment of gold miners from the late 1860's through to the early 1900's; the rabbit invasion from the 1890's represents a second stage, and soldier resettlement after 1918 brought about full occupation,

meaning that virtually all available areas were tenanted for grazing – these events were described earlier in this chapter.

Occupation of the snow country remained remarkably stable for the next 60 years. It is in this period that underlying stocking levels reached their peak and then entered a phase of steady decline. By 'underlying stocking levels' I mean the stock numbers one would expect in an average year, given the number of graziers and their normal scale of operation. Actual stocking levels moved up or down according to bad or good seasons, fluctuations in the price of livestock, and of course there were particularly sharp spikes during major drought years, especially the summers of the mid 1860's, 1884/85, 1902/03 and 1914/15, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The graph below is my estimate of the indicative underlying stocking levels for the Victorian snow country between 1850 and 1975. A few things need to be explained before I interpret the graph.

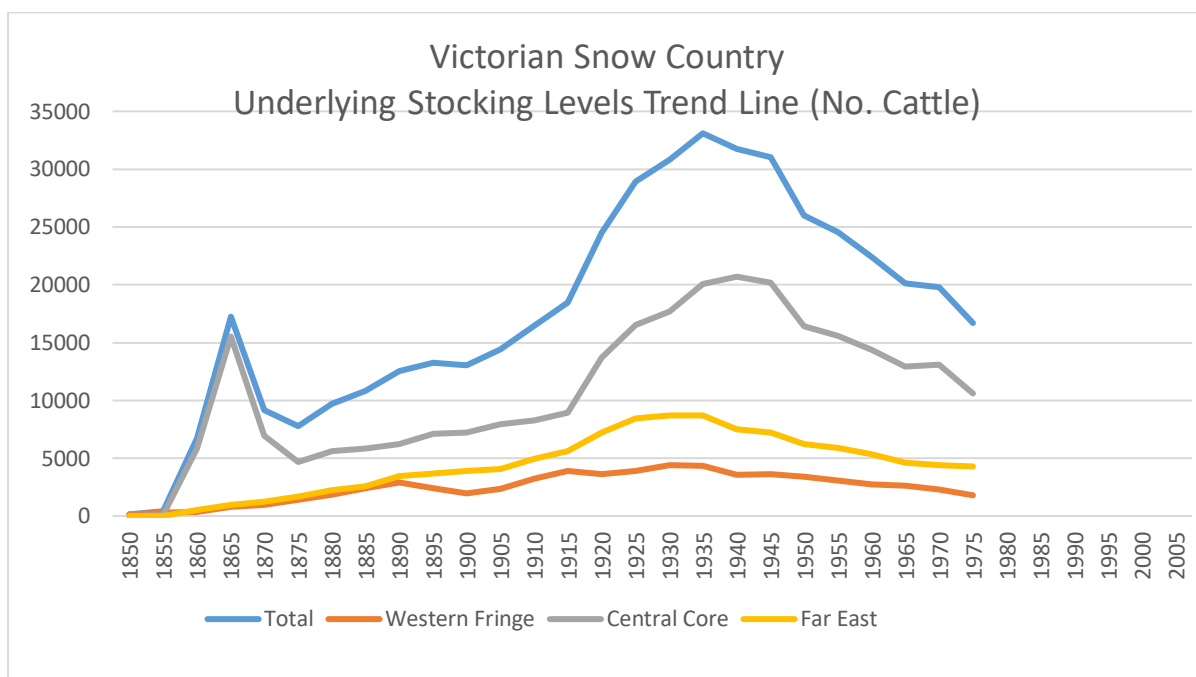
Firstly, the totals are based on estimates for smaller tracts of snow country (eg Dargo High Plains, Nunniong plateau, etc), which have then been grouped under three geographical headings:

- The Western Fringe, which stretches from the Buffalo Plateau, southwards to the Cobbler Plateau, the upper Goulburn watershed (including Mt Stirling, Mt Buller, The Bluff, sections of the Great Dividing Range, & Mt Skene), and the Baw Baw plateau. The Western Fringe is characterized by small sub- alpine tablelands and narrow sub-alpine ridges.
- The Central Core, encompassing the large sub-alpine tablelands (Bogong High Plains, Cobungra High Plains, Dargo High Plains, and the Snowy Range), and Victoria's highest alpine ridges and peaks, and,
- The Far East, snow country situated east of Omeo, much of which is adjacent to the Kosciusko National Park.

Sub-graphs for each of these groupings can be found in the Appendix A (Local Histories).

Secondly, my estimates are essentially guesstimates based on the interpretation of a multiplicity of random rough estimates and clues (sourced from old newspapers, interviews and Lands Department tenure archives), viewed in the context of my understanding of the land settlement sequence, changes in grazing management practices, environmental events and economic trends. The only hard data available are annual stocking numbers for the greater Bogong High Plains area, compiled by the Soil Conservation Authority between 1948 and 1976. These limited data are, nevertheless, very significant as they cover the largest expanse of snow country in the state.

The grand total trend line clearly takes its shape from that of the central core areas. The early peak reflects the use by livestock agencies in the 1860's, and thereafter, till the 1930's, the trend line parallels the growth in the number of license holders (previously explained). The annual number of livestock grazed peaks between 1925 and 1945, exceeding 30,000 head of cattle. There then follows a steady decline in the number of cattle grazed, which falls to under 17,000 at the end of the study period. Curiously though, the number of licensed graziers remained much the same despite the decline in stocking levels, suggesting that graziers were progressively reducing their dependence on the snow country. Lowland pasture improvement, and biological control of rabbits had a lot to do with this.



### Drought Relief Grazing

The actual number of livestock grazed in the snow country each summer fluctuated from year to year in response to the weather. In dry summers licensees would place more of their own stock on the high plains and would often also take in other local stock belonging to friends or relatives, or would buy speculatively. The size of these fluctuations depended on the severity of drought conditions and the regions affected. Localised droughts resulted in comparatively small increases in stocking as the number of properties affected was limited and lowland agistment could be acquired in neighbouring districts. Of the localised droughts, those affecting the Omeo district had the greatest implications for the snow country: mountain pastures border these lowlands in all directions and were more closely and conveniently situated than alternative paddocks in other districts.

Local droughts were probably the reason cattle graziers first started using many tracts of snow country in any kind of semi-regular fashion. The following news report refers to the dry summer of 1891/92 and what is likely to be one of the earliest popular dry season stockings of the Bogong High Plains, just a few years after licensed grazing blocks on the high plains were brought within the reach of small farmer-graziers:

*A telegram from Bright says that the winter has fairly set in with bitter cold rains. The mail coach to Omeo has stopped running. The Upper Kiewa high plains are overlaid with snow between 4 inches to 3 feet deep. Cattle are penned in by the thousands. About 20 owners of stock, who took their cattle up on account of the drought, will, owing to the early set in of snow, lose heavily.<sup>48</sup>*

<sup>48</sup> Ovens & Murray Advertiser, 7/5/1892, page 6

Twenty stock owners seems quite a lot considering there were only 12 licensees over the whole BHP's green area. Of these four were large operators (Tawonga station, Ensay station, John Evans of Myhree, near Wangaratta, and Osborne Young of Bundaramunjie) and the remaining eight licensees and eight unknowns were undoubtedly battlers. These were still early days for regular local snow country grazing, and so the number of stock taken to the high plains was quite small. My estimate of total stock numbers is around 2,480 head of cattle (assuming an average 300 head for each of the large operators, and 80 head for each of the battlers). This was probably twice the number of the preceding few years.

The intense local drought of 1908/09 saw the mountains around Omeo receiving large numbers of local sheep and cattle. The Bogong High Plains apparently carried 12,000 head of cattle which was said to be approximately three times its usual number for that era, and an unknown number of sheep.

**Table 4.3 Starving Stock 1908/09 Drought, Gippsland & Omeo**

Relief Country	Type of Stock	No. of Stock	Owner
Moroka	Sheep	?	Agisted by licensees
Nunniong	Sheep	?	Starving stock directed there by Lands Dept.
Bogong hp's	Sheep & cattle sheep	?	Agisted by licensees William Johnson, Tongio
Cobungra hp's	Sheep & cattle	?	Agisted by licensees

Periodically, extremely severe and widespread droughts occurred which were of such breadth and intensity to have serious implications throughout much of the mountain region. The droughts of the late 1860's, 1884/85, 1902/03 and 1914/15 were of this magnitude and resulted in large influxes of livestock from other localities. In Victoria the country most affected was the northern flank of the mountain region stretching from Mt. Buffalo to Mt. Pinnibar and centring upon the Bogong high plains and Mt Hotham.

To arrange drought relief grazing in Victoria the owners of starving livestock had two options: they could place a tender with the Lands Department for vacant grazing blocks; or, make private arrangements with existing license holders, probably with the assistance of a stock and station agent. The most attractive mountain areas for drought relief grazing were the open grassy Bogong High Plains, and bald mountain tops around Mt Hotham; and the snow plains along the watershed of the upper Buchan River. The map below indicates the areas that received starving stock.



Despite the border tax, in the summer of 1884/5 many starving livestock arrived from NSW. It is believed that Thomas Hamilton accepted 15,000 sheep for agistment on the Bogong High Plains, and the licensee of the Mt Buffalo run took on 9,000 sheep.<sup>49</sup> A staggering 12,000 sheep (from Moira, Victoria) were reported to be grazing on the relatively small Gould's run which included Mt Feathertop and gave access to the Razorback ridge.<sup>50</sup>

A local newspaper reported in February 1885 that:

*The Dargo and Omeo [Bogong + / or Cobungra] high plains are proving of great value to stock-owners during the present dry summer, which has resulted so destructively to sheep and cattle in portions of New South Wales. The passage of several large mobs of sheep through Bright, on the way to the Alps, has been noticed from time to time in these columns, and now we can mention that another mob of 11,000 'jumbucks' travelled through the town on Saturday last, their destination being the high plains.*<sup>51</sup>

In a variation of the same report, the Australasian magazine recorded:

*BRIGHT, FEB. 20.-large numbers of sheep have passed through Bright lately, en route to the Dargo and Omeo High Plains, from the dry districts in Riverina. Besides several previous mobs, 13,000 passed up the valley this morning.*<sup>52</sup>

Presumably one of those mobs would have been the 15,000 agisted by Thomas Hamilton on his Bogong High Plain run. That leaves at least two other large mobs of sheep that accessed the high plains via the Ovens Valley. So, in excess of 35,000 sheep were brought in from NSW, in addition to extra numbers of local drought affected sheep & cattle, as is indicated by the following news report:

*Pleuro at Omeo. — It is reported that pleuro-pneumonia has broken out at the Bogong High Plains, several cattle having died of the disease, states the Omeo correspondent of the "Argus." A large number of stock is now being depastured there, owing to the dry season and scarcity of feed in the lower country. Prompt measures are being taken to inoculate the cattle.*<sup>53</sup>

These are the only records I have of starving stock during the 1884/5 drought though no doubt there were others. Perhaps a grand total of 70,000 starving sheep might be a reasonable estimate for the BHP's green area and the Dargo high plains.

However, the drought of 1902/03 was something else. Very soon after the border tax was lifted large mobs of starving sheep crossed from the NSW Riverina headed mainly for the mountain region.

*The number of starving sheep which crossed [the River Murray] at Wodonga in November [1902] eclipsed all previous records, the total for the month reaching 193,000, as against*

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<sup>49</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser, Tue 24 Feb 1885, Page 1, BRIGHT DISTRICT NOTES

<sup>50</sup> Alpine Observer, 27/2/1885

<sup>51</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser, Tue 24 Feb 1885, Page 1, BRIGHT DISTRICT NOTES

<sup>52</sup> The Australasian (Melbourne), Sat 28 Feb 1885, Page 14, VICTORIA.

<sup>53</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser, Thu 22 Jan 1885, Page 2, METROPOLITAN RAILWAY FARES AND COUNTRY FREIGHTS

*92,000 for the previous month. The bulk of the sheep presented a pitiable sight. It is not expected that traffic will be so brisk from this [time] forward.*<sup>54</sup>

*The sheep arriving at Wodonga are being travelled to the Upper Murray, the Dargo, and the Omeo districts.*<sup>55</sup>

On the basis of these news reports we might guess that in the summer of 1902/03 around 350,000 sheep entered north-east Victoria from the NSW Riverina looking for grass. To that we must add an unknown number of starving sheep and cattle on the move from drought ravaged parts of Victoria. So perhaps half a million head were on the move towards the mountains. Some of these went straight to snow country bush runs, and others passed through the mountain region on the way to paddocks at Omeo and Gippsland.

Though the 1902/03 drought was an absolute calamity, for land holders in the relatively unaffected alpine region it presented an attractive commercial opportunity, and many pocketed a small fortune by renting out spare paddocks and bush runs. I wouldn't say starving stock were enthusiastically welcomed, but the chance to profiteer certainly outweighed the inconvenience.

*Starving Sheep — The Wodonga correspondent of the "Albury Banner" writes: — With the arrival of starving sheep from New South Wales and the despatching of fat cattle to the northern state, the Wodonga railway station has been exceptionally busy of late. Thousands of emaciated sheep, many of them more dead than alive, have been pouring in daily, while a large share of the fat stock for the Sydney market has latterly been supplied by Victoria. The hard struggle of the New South Wales pastoralists is being felt in another direction. In order to keep the remnant of their sheep alive, stock-owners have been compelled to secure land in more favoured parts, and as a consequence a considerable portion of the Wodonga and Upper Murray districts have been leased at fancy figures. It is stated that in more than one instance as high as 30 shillings an acre has been paid for 12 months.*<sup>56</sup>

Once on the high plains there was plenty of grass and water, but the sheep were still not safe; freezing weather claimed many lives, especially on the Bogong High Plains<sup>57</sup> and dingos were a constant source of irritation, making shepherding a constant necessity.

The sad physical condition of starving sheep entering Victoria was described in a local newspaper report:

*A large flock of starving sheep (numbering 9,000) passed through Tallangatta ... in search of grass. The animals for the most part were shockingly emaciated and weak, their gaunt hollow frames and tottering gait exciting generally pity from people in these parts who are not calloused by familiarity with such saddening sights. The stronger of the stock passed through about six hours ahead of the stragglers. Numbers of the first batch fell by the wayside; of these, some were able to get up after a short rest, while several others died where they dropped. A considerable number of the animals were young sheep - many of them had never*

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<sup>54</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser, Sat 13 Dec 1902, Page 3

<sup>55</sup> The Australasian, Sat 22 Nov 1902, Page 12

<sup>56</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser (Beechworth, Sat 25 Oct 1902, Page 2

<sup>57</sup> For example, Whitehead Papers (S.L.V.) Letter Book 1899-1914, 2 January 1903.

*seen grass until crossing into Victoria, having been hand fed previously - and these seemed to suffer more than the older members of the flock. The poor animals would lie down to rest, or fall from sheer weakness and fatigue and would simply be unable to rise again. When lifted up by the drovers however, they would go along alright appearing all the better for their spell. Later on in the afternoon the stragglers came along and it was easily seen that their weary march was nearly ended. The men had a heavy job saving numbers of sheep from drowning in river, where they were being watered, the poor animals not having enough strength to extricate themselves from the riverside mud or to climb the bank after slaking their thirst. The tail end of the rapidly diminishing flock was indeed a pitiful sight. The sheep toiled laboriously along, too weak to respond to the rounding "yap" of the trusty dogs, which seemed to know that something was wrong and asserted their authority with a discretion and tolerance that were wonderful to behold. The faithful old stockhorse brought up the rear, bearing on his back a sad burden of dead sheep, taking no concern of their stiffened limbs dangling about his legs; the poor brute was doubtless too used to this sort of thing to offer protest. It touched the humanity in people to see thousands of poor dumb animals dying of starvation; it brought home to us living in these parts the horrors of drought and its concomitant famine.*<sup>58</sup>

In 1902 drought relief in the snow country was largely arranged in the market place, with stock owners making private arrangements with grazing block licence holders. For this reason, government records shed very little light on the issue, and the sources we are left with are a shaky oral history 75 years after the event, a few local newspaper reports and a detailed account of the experience of one Riverina pastoral station. Nevertheless, this does give us enough to build an estimate of starving stock numbers.

The following local news report gives a concise summary of circumstances at the end of November, 1902 – ie a general influx of store cattle into the region purchased cheaply by local graziers, and the arrival of large mobs of sheep headed for the snow country.

**BRIGHT**

*From Our Own Correspondent [29/11/1902]*

*Several small mobs of store cattle continue to be brought into the district from drought-stricken areas, bought up by local land owners or holders of grazing licenses. Up to the present only one large mob of sheep has passed up the Ovens Valley travelling for feed; though several big mobs have gone up the Kiewa River and out on to the high plains of Mount Bogong. Mobs of 2000, 5000 and 8000 store sheep and one lot of 300 rams have gone to sample the herbage and enjoy the scenery from the commanding heights of Bogong.*<sup>59</sup>

From the archival records of Butherwah Station, Urana, NSW, we can identify that one large mob passing up the Ovens River as 8,500 sheep belonging to F E Whitehead and one of his neighbours. The Butherwah Station archives record the arrangements made for starving stock in 1902 by Whitehead - see Table 4.4. Whitehead engaged local stockmen from the Bright and Omeo districts to assist his own shepherds on the relief country and he made a brief trip to the high plains beforehand to ascertain the quality of pastures and subsequently to oversee proceedings. Considerable time and

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<sup>58</sup> Upper Murray and Mitta Herald 20 November 1902

<sup>59</sup> Ovens & Murray Advertiser, 29/11/1902, page 6

resources were ploughed into the venture which succeeded in carrying the station's livestock through what was described as a "fearful" drought.<sup>60</sup>



Whitehead sublet Bogong high plains allotment S1 from John Lawler of Harrierville, an area that encompassed Mt Feathertop, Mt Loch and Mt Hotham. An earlier consignment of 11,600 sheep was dispatched to Native Dog Plain, at the head of the Buchan River, east of Omeo, arriving there in October.

**Table 4.4**

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<sup>60</sup> Whitehead Papers, 24 September 1902.

**F. E. Whitehead, Butherwah Station, Urana, N.S.W.  
Starving Stock Arrangements, 1902/03**

Total Number of Sheep —	20,000															
Severity of Drought -	Described by Whitehead as "frightful"; preparations for moving stock to agistment were made immediately after shearing 16-25 September.															
Relief Pasture Secured —	<p>i) Mt. Hotham country, grazing block Bogong S1, sub-let from John Lawler, Freeburgh.</p> <p>ii) Native Dog, Pastoral Allotment Tambo E, apparently secured by tender</p> <p>iii) Paddock at Omeo district, possibly on Cobungra High Plains, arranged through a stock agent.</p>															
Organizational Problems —	<p>Inoculation of stock at the Victorian border (Albury).</p> <p>Rail charges: full rates had to be paid as stock were leaving N.S.W.</p>															
Number of Stock Moved	<p>-18,500 sheep (11,000 to Native Dog mid—October; 7,500 to Hotham in late November).</p> <p>-80 head of horses and several hundred head cattle to Omeo.</p> <p>-To cut costs, 1600 sheep belonging to a neighbour at Urana, Mr. Newton, were also taken (1,000 to Hotham, 600 to Native Dog).</p>															
Transport —	<p>Stock railed from Lockhart, N.S.W. to Bright, then walked to the snow country. All stock at destination by December 1902.</p> <p>Returned to Butherwah March-April 1903.</p>															
Casualties -	500 sheep dead in snow storm on Hotham and 700 at Native Dog															
Cost of Operation	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30%;">Hotham</td> <td style="width: 30%;">£1521 -</td> <td style="width: 30%;">8d</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Native Dog</td> <td>£1290 3s</td> <td>7.5d</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Omeo</td> <td>£ 305 2s</td> <td>6d</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center;">-----</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total</td> <td>£ 3122 6</td> <td>9.5</td> </tr> </table>	Hotham	£1521 -	8d	Native Dog	£1290 3s	7.5d	Omeo	£ 305 2s	6d		-----		Total	£ 3122 6	9.5
Hotham	£1521 -	8d														
Native Dog	£1290 3s	7.5d														
Omeo	£ 305 2s	6d														
	-----															
Total	£ 3122 6	9.5														

Source: Whitehead Papers, SLV and Butherwah, Urana.

Of particular interest are the stock losses due to a sudden snow storm in January 1903 that unexpectedly hit the whole alpine region. Note the casualty rates: 6.3% of the flock grazing at Mt Hotham; and 6.6% of the flock at Native Dog. These are remarkably similar figures for two alpine localities a long distance apart.

The oral history paints two broad pictures which together point to some indicative grand totals. One source (Edmondson) gives a figure of around one hundred thousand sheep on the Bogong High Plains.<sup>61</sup> Another informant (Ross Blair) records a belief that in 1902/03 a mob of 30,000 sheep came up the Kiewa River as did other mobs of more than 5000 & 6000; and 100,000 sheep were said to have been taken up the Ovens River.<sup>62</sup>

Assuming these accounts are reasonably accurate, in an indicative sense, the following can be concluded: if 41,000 sheep accessed the Bogong High Plains tableland via the Kiewa valley and the Mt Fainter track, then 59,000 must have entered the BHP's either from the Omeo side (which would include stock of local origin – perhaps not that many, say 9000, as Omeo wasn't experiencing drought; and conceivably some from the Monaro district, though I found no record of such) , or via the Ovens valley and the Mt Hotham road. And, of the 100,000 approaching via the Ovens river, half may have terminated on the BHP's with the balance travelling through to the Omeo and Gippsland districts or terminating on the Dargo high plains.

We know for fact that 11,600 sheep from Butherwah station travelled from the Bright railway yards to Native Dog plain, via Omeo in October 1902, so that reduces the balancing figure to 38,400. That would be indicative of the maximum number of starving sheep on the Dargo high plains, if no other flocks were simply passing through to other districts.

Although I have found the oral history to be surprisingly accurate, it is prudent to treat the above scenario with caution, and see if it is contradicted or supported by other sources. Fortunately, in this case we have some additional details about particular graziers and mobs of livestock that provide a level of confidence.

Besides the reliable figures we have are for Butherwah station which dispatched 8500 sheep to the Mt Hotham area, there are two other large Riverina graziers known to have sent sheep to Bogong high plains, and they may have brought similar numbers as Butherwah. In 1902 Joe McCulloch, from Rudd's Point, NSW, had obtained the grazing license for Pretty Valley, previously held for many years by Ensay station. McCulloch apparently brought a large flock of sheep in 1902, an interviewee relating that one of his drovers lost most sheep under his charge in a blizzard at Warby's Corner.<sup>63</sup>

The other large Riverina pastoralist believed to have a presence on the Bogong high plains in the summer of 1902/03 was Samuel McCaughey, a very famous Riverina sheep identity. He is remembered as having lost 3000 sheep in bad weather.<sup>64</sup>

The father of celebrated army general Thomas Blamey was a contract drover who is enthusiastically remembered for losing 1300 sheep in a blizzard at Rocky Valley during the 1902/03 summer. It is not known who he worked for, but obvious possibilities are McCulloch, McCaughey, or some other large operator who has managed to escape the historical record so far.

Yet another report of casualties was published in a local paper:

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<sup>61</sup> Appendix F, Interviews, Notes of Jim Edmondson

<sup>62</sup> Appendix F, Interviews, Ross Blair

<sup>63</sup> Appendix F, Interviews, D'arcy Fitzgerald

<sup>64</sup> Appendix F, Interviews, B Fitzgerald

*The starving stock that went to the [Bogong] high plains for summer feed have all returned, having had a very bad time. Two thousand sheep and 15 head of horses succumbed to the cold in one night.*<sup>65</sup>

It is not clear whose livestock this report is referring to, or whether it was a single grazier or more.

The following table summarizes and attempts to reconcile the above accounts. By applying the average casualty rate experienced by Butherwah station, at two separate locations (Mt Hotham area and Native Dog – 6.45%) to McCaughey’s losses (3000) gives a total original flock size of 46,500 sheep. Applying the same rate to the 2000 casualties reported above suggests another flock or flocks totalling 31,000 sheep.

**Table 4.5**  
**Sheep on the Bogong High Plains, 1902/03 Summer**  
**Drought Area: NSW Riverina & Northern Victoria**

	<b>Relief Country</b>	<b>No. of Sheep</b>	<b>No. casualties</b>	<b>% casualties</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	Bogong tableland	7,150			George Bell, Basin Creek, Yackandandah. Vic	Lands file Newspaper R Blair
2	Bogong tableland				J S McCulloch, Rudd’s Point, NSW	Oral history Gov Gazette R Blair
3	Bogong tableland	(31,000)	2000	Assume 6.45%	?	Newspaper
4	Bogong tableland		4000 put in Rocky Valley, 1300 died overnight		Stock from unknown NSW Riverina station in the care of contract drover Richard Blamey	Oral history
5	Bogong tableland	(46,500)	3000	Assume 6.45%	Sam McCaughey, Big Yanko station, NSW.	B Fitzgerald
6	Bogong tableland	2000			Unknown	Newspaper
7	Bogong tableland	5000			Unknown	Newspaper R Blair
8	Bogong tableland	300			Unknown	Newspaper
9	Bogong tableland	?			Omeo locals, including: J C Scott – Hinnomunjie C & J Condon –	Oral history Gov Gazette

<sup>65</sup> Ovens and Murray Advertiser, Sat 2 May 1903, Page 6

					Bingomunjie Wm Johnson - Tongio	
10	Hotham	8500	500	6.67%	F.E Whitehead, Butherwah station, Urana, NSW et al	Archive
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100,450</b>				
<u>Passing through only</u>						
	To Native Dog run	11600	700	6.1%	F.E Whitehead, Urana, NSW et al	Archive

Once McCaughey's flock size is estimated (line 5) it then becomes clear that the 30,000 sheep reported by Blair entering the high plains probably belonged to McCulloch (lines 2 & 3). Contract drover, Richard Blamey (line 4), could have worked for either McCulloch or McCaughey.

I assume the smaller flocks were more likely to come from properties in northern Victoria

Clearly, the table supports the Edmondson estimate of roughly 100,000 sheep on the Bogong high plains during the summer of 1902/03.

As for the number of cattle grazing the Bogong High Plains in the summer of 1902/03, a logical starting point would be the estimate for the local drought of 1908/09 – viz 12,000 head, which was said to be three times the normal stocking level for that era. So, 4000 head would be the base level to which is to be added cattle brought in by McCulloch, say maximum 1000, and drought affected cattle purchased cheaply by licensees in the expectation of a windfall profit when later sold in an improved market – a generous estimate being 1000 head, giving a total of 6000 head.

In summary, at least 100,000 drought stricken sheep may have been depastured on the greater Bogong high plains; and around 6,000 local cattle. Assuming six sheep eat the equivalent amount of grass as one head of cattle, this gives a total grazing load of at least 22,667 head of cattle for the 1902/03 summer grazing season.

Elsewhere in the alpine region, we have Butherwah station's 11,500 sheep at Native Dog Plain, and a memory of 5000 sheep in the charge of Cheyne's, livestock auctioneers, visiting Mt Pinnibar and Wild Boar Range in the Upper Murray region. There is no specific evidence of starving stock on the Dargo High Plains, though it is such an obvious venue that it is hard to believe it saw no action. Indeed, analysis of the Blair account suggests something less than 38,000 sheep may have been parked there.

Following the 1902/03 drought, the Victorian Government curtailed subletting of licensed runs and established a principle that depasturing starving stock not belonging to licensees was to be arranged through the Lands Department. The Department would, at its discretion, allocate vacant grazing runs or require existing licensees to host starvers. This procedure was precipitated by a public scandal in 1903 which saw the Minister for Lands resign over accusations of unethical profiteering.<sup>66</sup> Subletting had never been officially permitted but apparently this was not widely understood and

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66 V.P.Ps 1902-03, Paper No. 1.

general practice was to the contrary.<sup>67</sup> The new rules made emergency drought relief a political and bureaucratic issue rather than a strictly commercial one.<sup>68</sup> The official ways of dealing with starving stock applications, adopted after 1902/03, were: to agree to a consenting licensee taking on stock without charge; to make unlicensed land available; or to issue permits for grazing on already licenced land. The first two methods were commonly practised, but the third was apparently only used during the 1914/15 drought when the Minister for Lands issued a handful of permits to agist starvers on the Bogong High Plains tableland and Mt. Hotham areas.<sup>69</sup>

Arrangements for large mobs of starving stock were then conducted via the Lands Department, though as a matter of practicality small-scale sub-letting probably continued at the local level.<sup>70</sup>

#### *STARVING STOCK [1914]*

*For weeks past numerous inquiries have been made at the Lands department as to what Crown lands are available for the grazing of stock from the drought areas. Considerable attention is being directed to the range country forming the eastern section of the State, and, particularly to the snow region, on which, after the melting of the snow, good pasture may be looked for. This range country is held under annual license by a number of licensees, whose rights expire on October 31st. The question of renewal has been fully considered by the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lawson), having regard to the starving stock necessities. The Minister had also to consider the position of the existing licensees, very many of whom have held the land for years, and having stock of their own, would be placed in a difficult position if now deprived of the use of the land. To offer the right by tender would result in keen competition, due to the abnormal conditions, and this would be manifestly unfair. As an alternative, the Minister has decided to continue the existing licenses if so desired by the licensees, and at the old rates, but subject to the following conditions:*

*-That the department reserves the right to issue permits to holders of starving stock to agist on the areas a specified number of sheep or cattle at fixed rates per head, to be collected by the department. Stock owners seeking this privilege will be requested to lodge their applications at the department, and supply full particulars on application forms as to the stock on their hands, number for which grazing is sought, from where- brought, when purchased, etc. Rent for three months must be paid on issue of permit. When the necessity for the relief has passed, the Minister will take into consideration and decide as to any adjustment of rent that should be made in consequence of the stock put on the area under permit, and his decision in this matter will be final. The existing licenses give no right to the licensees to take in stock for agistment by private arrangement unless with the consent of the Minister in writing, and it is felt that the arrangement now proposed will be fair to both the former licensees and the necessitous stock owners, as, while reasonably preserving the interests of those who had previously been using the land, it will protect the other stock owners from excessive demands, and tend to minimize the losses to the State which would result from the death of large numbers of starving stock. Owing to the difficulty of transport, and the condition of the stock, it will not be possible to get stock on to some of the snow country, and in such cases there will be no interference with the existing rights. Owners requiring accommodation will be expected to prosecute their own inquiries, and ascertain*

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67 See for example Lands Department file Wangaratta 0553/121

68 Argus 18 September 1902, 25 September 1902, 3 October 1902; see also Lands Department File T 74845

69 For example, Lands Department files Omeo 0658/130, Omeo 92/130.

70 See for example Lands Department files Sale 0562/130, Omeo 021/35.

*where the relief areas are situated, and apply accordingly. It must be noted that the present licenses will not, as already stated expire until October 31st. There is a condition in all the existing grazing licenses forbidding the taking of stock for agistment without the authority in writing of the Minister for Lands being first obtained.*<sup>71</sup>

Thanks to this new role the Lands Department compiled some reliable information about graziers and stocking during the 1914/15 summer.

1914 was very bad year, much like 1902. The NSW Riverina was again in the grips of a shocking drought, but unlike 1902 this time north-east Victoria and the Omeo district were also badly affected so there was much less scope for agisting starving stock in the mountain region. Any spare capacity local graziers had was required for their own sheep and cattle. Starving stock from other regions were no longer a commercial opportunity but an unwelcome encumbrance. This change of mood was reflected in the local news reports:

*[Omeo Shire councillor] Petersen said that people of the high country were suffering great inconveniences as to the starving stock and it was time they took steps to have the starvers moved on. He moved that notice should be given to the people in charge that the sheep would be considered as trespassing.*<sup>72</sup>

Petersen, himself from an alpine grazing family, was not referring to the starving stock grazing on the high plains under the auspices of the Lands Department, but rather to itinerant flocks that had been taken up to the snow country to graze the roadsides and any adjoining land they could get away with – flocks that were deliberately being driven through the mountains as slowly as possible, supposedly on the way to some particular, maybe fictional, destination, with the objective of getting free access to grass. The long paddock, as the roads were called, was often a graziers last resort in desperate times. The Alpine Road, between Harrietville and Omeo gave access to mountain pastures, as did the Dargo High Plains road. These roads would have offered irresistible opportunities despite the ever present danger of blizzards.

Omeo's local newspaper reported 12,000 starving sheep entering the district in the summer of 1914/15, and most of these would have gravitated towards the Bogong high plains since the remainder of the shire was parched. One interviewee recalled that most bush cattle died during that summer because virtually all the water courses ran dry.<sup>73</sup>

All livestock grazing in the Victorian snow country in the summer of 1914/15 were there for drought relief, to a greater or lesser extent. The long standing licensees certainly needed the summer pastures more than ever, and those who came in just for that summer brought the truly starving stock. The following table shows those graziers in the latter category, who obtained licenses or permits in 1914/15 under the new administrative procedures for starving stock. We see some familiar names: five out of the eight listed had also visited in 1902/03.

**Table 4.6**

Year: 1914/15

Drought Area: Riverina, Omeo, N.E. Victoria

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<sup>71</sup> Advocate, Sat 3 Oct 1914, Page 40

<sup>72</sup> Omeo Standard and Mining Gazette, Tue 12 Jan 1915, Page 3

<sup>73</sup> Appendix F, Interview Jack Pendergast

Relief Country	Type of Stock	No. of Stock	Grazing blocks	Owner	Licence Permit	Visited 1902? Other
Bogong High Plains	Sheep	5000 ?	Bogong 35	Chris Johnson, Tongio Station	O*	Yes
Bogong High Plains	Sheep	2000	Bogong 25	George Bell, Basin Creek, Yackandandah	O#	Yes
	Cattle	350	Bogong 31		L	
Bogong High Plains	Sheep	3000 ?	Bogong 40	Clarke Bros., Burramine	L	
Bogong High Plains	Sheep	10,000/	Bogong 32, 36 & 38	J.S.McCulloch, Rudds Point, NSW	L	Yes
	Cattle	1600				
Hotham & BHP's	Sheep	9000	Bogong 28, 41, 43	F.E.Whitehead, Urana,NSW	L	Yes
Hotham / Cobungra	Sheep	1000		Thos.Ballintine, ?	P	
Hotham / Cobungra	Sheep	2000	Dargo ? (Mt Tabletop)?	R. Scott, Goree, NSW	P	
Bogong High Plains	Sheep	5000?	Bogong 45	J. C. Scott, Hinnomunjie	L	Yes

\* By arrangement with F J Ah Sam the licensee

# By arrangement with P Duane the licensee

Sources: Alpine Observer & Omeo Standard newspapers; Whitehead Papers; Lands Department grazing block files; Interviews

I consider this a reasonably reliable record of those who arranged drought relief grazing through the Lands Department. Falling outside this net would be stock agisted by established local licensees for friends and relatives, and starving stock being grazed along roads traversing the snow country. So I am confident we know most of the graziers responsible for most of the starving stock put on the Bogong high plains and Mt Hotham in 1914/15. However, the actual numbers of stock involved is a bit more problematic and requires some interpretation.

The firm figures we have are: the number of sheep brought by Whitehead (9000), as documented in the Butherwah station archives; Bell (2000, by private arrangement); Ballintine's permit to run 1000 sheep near Mt Hotham; & Robert Scott's permit to run 2000 sheep. To accommodate his 9000 Whitehead was allocated three grazing blocks totalling 19,000 acres. I doubt that the allocation was made on the basis of 3000 sheep per block or say two acres per sheep. The blocks had very different characteristics and capabilities, and such measures would make little sense. So I think allocation of blocks would have been based on the Lands Department's estimate of carrying capacity. Of the three areas allocated to Whitehead, block 28 contained high mountain tops and ridges stretching from Mt Feathertop to Mt Hotham and around to Mt St Bernard – largely treeless alpine meadows that had long lines of sight, enabling the flocks to be watched, and quite suitable for shepherding.

This was part of the country Whitehead sub-let on his previous visit in 1902. Block 41 contained steep forested slopes of the west Kiewa river valley, and the only portion suitable for sheep was its eastern margin at the edge of the Bogong high plains. And block 43 was by far the best as it included a large expanse of the Pretty Valley grasslands, some of the best grazing land on the high plains. My guess of the assessed carrying capacities of these blocks would have been 3,000, 1000 and 5000 sheep respectively.

McCulloch was also allocated three grazing blocks, two of which were towards the heart of the high plains and the other being mainly rough and steep slopes at the northern edge. These blocks would have had a combined carrying capacity equal to or greater than Whiteheads blocks – so around 10,000 sheep (or approximately 1600 head of cattle). The oral history is a bit confused as to whether McCulloch was a sheep grazier or cattleman, but it appears he brought both on different occasions. What particular type of livestock he brought in 1914 isn't known, but clearly it was a lot.

Of the remaining licensed drought relief graziers, I have given a likely estimate based on carrying capacity as this is how I think the Lands Department worked out what areas to allocate to which applicants. Further to that, the oral history tells us that John C Scott brought up all the sheep from his Hinnomunjie station (I am guessing the carrying capacity of block 45 would have been assessed at around 5000 sheep); and the Bell brothers are remembered to have purchased 300 – 400 head of drought stressed cattle, taken them up to Mt Fainter and lost most of them after they were snowed in late in the season.

In summary, at least 39,000 drought stricken sheep are tentatively 'verified' as depastured on the greater Bogong high plains, and probably a further 12,000 passed though making use of the roadsides. Added to that there were more than 12,000 local cattle (somewhat higher than the 1908/09 local drought). Assuming again that six sheep eat the equivalent amount of grass as one head of cattle, this gives a total indicative grazing load of at least 20,500 cattle equivalent during the 1914/15 summer grazing season.

Of course, unless some new source of information is unearthed<sup>74</sup> there is no way of telling the actual numbers of starving stock taken up, or the total grazing load: it may have been more or less. There is also now no way we can be sure where the starving stock were actually grazed. There are references in the oral history to starving stock owners having little idea where on the high plains their allocated blocks were located – so they just put their stock anywhere that was convenient. There would be some truth in this because the grazing blocks were not fenced or even pegged out on the ground. They were just shown as lines on a white piece of paper that also had a few key topographical features plotted on it. Not much to work with.

Comparing the big four early droughts is not so easy because the further one looks back in time the less information there is.

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<sup>74</sup> I certainly don't rule out this possibility. There may well be personal papers that could shed further light on the subject. And there is a real chance that a special drought relief file may exist in the former Lands Department's huge archive. The data my analysis has been based on was drawn largely from the Departments grazing block files – there being one file for each grazing block, and there were a lot of blocks. However, there almost certainly would have also been a general control file on which all the policy and overarching administrative work would have been recorded. Perhaps one day that file will be identified.

In 1866/67 virtually the whole central core (the greater Bogong High Plains, Dargo High Plains, & Snowy Range) appears to have been in the hands of only four very large pastoral interests. And the heart of the eastern fringe snow country, the Ingeegoodbee run, was the domain of another huge pastoral enterprise. Only God knows how many sheep & cattle these businesses dispatched to the snow country that summer, but it was potentially huge.

At least there is some data for the 1884/85 drought. In excess of 35,000 starving sheep are recorded to have been taken to the Bogong High Plains green area and the Dargo High Plains. A further 9000 went to the nearby Buffalo Plateau.

In 1902/03 over 100,000 sheep were grazed on the greater Bogong High Plains, plus 6,000 cattle, giving a total indicative grazing load to the equivalent of over 22,600 cattle. At least 11,500 sheep were taken to the headwaters of the upper Buchan River (Native Dog Plain), and less than 38,000 sheep to the Dargo High Plains.

A slightly smaller total grazing load is evident for the greater BHP's in 1914/15 (>20,500 cattle equivalent). Native Dog Plain was again used (same grazier, probably similar numbers); and an unknown number to the Dargo High Plains.

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There were many droughts, of varying severity, over the years but these early ones had particularly intense consequences because farm water conservation strategies and practices were not highly developed, and also it was before the advent of long distance road transport which would enable fodder to be quickly moved to areas of need. Until then starving livestock had to be taken either to distant relief country or to the local boiling down works where they were slaughtered and turned into candle wax.

The early droughts had a long term impact on the mountain communities. Local droughts generated positive social capital by forcing neighbours to work more closely together. For example, in the 1908 drought William Hollonds of Benambra arranged relief grazing for neighbours on his Tambo North run,<sup>75</sup> Other run holders did likewise, demonstrating the public utility of large areas of bushland now that much of it had been removed from the hands of big station owners.

Bad droughts in other regions, particularly the NSW Riverina, created some welcome commercial opportunities to either buy cheap livestock and hold them on bush runs till the market improved; or to rent out grazing land at premium prices. There were also commonly held and quite deep seated fears of big operators out-bidding locals for grazing blocks that the Lands Department chose to (unfairly, in search of more revenue) throw open to public tender in dry years. This appears to be a myth: while the Department did often go to tender if it was aware of competitive interests in particular blocks, I found no evidence for it doing so in the summers of 1902/03 or 1914/15. Another apparent myth was that some Riverina pastoralists rented rubbish bush blocks bordering the high plains and then used uncertain boundaries as an excuse for putting stock anywhere they wanted. Again, I found no supporting evidence in the tenure archives. These myths later supported a wider political narrative that attributed ecological damage, not to 150 years of seasonal cattle grazing but

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<sup>75</sup> Lands Department 'T' file on Drought Agistment suggestions by W. Hollonds in 1908

instead to the massive influxes of starving stock during only two big droughts. Local graziers were portrayed as victims twice over: firstly, suffering dispossession (by being out-bid during competitive tendering and also by being overwhelmed by multitudes of starvers), and then being blamed for the ecological damage caused by the starving stock. There may well have been a fear of the financial power of the Riverina pastoralists<sup>76</sup> but the Lands Department was acutely aware of the sensitivities and its record in 1914 certainly contradicts the myth.<sup>77</sup>

### Tenure Arrangements, Social Capital and Basic Infrastructure

In the very earliest years of snow country grazing little attention was paid to obtaining tenure. Tenure was often acquired only as interest developed during the gold mining era and often covered broad physiographic units. Subsequently the mountains were sub-divided into smaller parcels under the 1884 Land Act and this sub-division formed the basic framework under which full occupation of the snow country took place. Licences were the most common tenancies and were often held for long periods even though they were technically only of short duration, being annually renewable. If strong competitive interest was expressed in a run, the Lands Department could terminate the existing licence and invite tenders, and on some occasions this did happen. More commonly tenants were not disturbed and over the years they developed a personal identity with the land and a sense of pastoral tradition, both of which tended to over-shadow the technically short term nature of the grazing licence concept, and support the assumption that snow country grazing was a right rather than a privilege. A corollary to this perceived right was that range management was the sole prerogative of the grazier. For much of the study area until the 1940's this assumption went unchallenged.

Where individual grazing blocks corresponded to geographical units, or could be combined to encompass such units, runs were managed individually by their respective licensees. But where boundaries did not correspond to identifiable physical features and were not fenced, licensees often had to work together whether they liked it or not.

In 1977 Keith Rogers, whose family grazed the upper Buchan River watershed for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stressed the importance of having good neighbours in unfenced bush country:

*CHV Pendergast was my father's opposite on the Omeo side, & his son was Claude. At mustering time we would hold their cattle, & they held ours, & we exchanged at Rocky Plain.*<sup>78</sup>

This common bush courtesy of mustering one's neighbour's cattle was more than a polite social convention. In unfenced mountain country cattle could wander many miles and without the help of neighbours many would have been lost, or very troublesome and expensive to retrieve. So we can see that as more cattlemen began to use the mountains there was an incremental increase in overall efficiency. More graziers using more runs meant it was easier to retrieve cattle at the autumn muster, which made it easier for smaller operators to enter and remain in the field – provided most graziers observed the convention.

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<sup>76</sup> Alpine Observer newspaper, 21 September 1915; Lands Department file Omeo 0421/121.

<sup>77</sup> Advocate, Sat 3 Oct 1914, Page 40

<sup>78</sup> Interview with K.C Rogers, 1977, Appendix F

Co-operative management was at its best and most complex on the Bogong High Plains tableland. Different mustering groups were formed according to the entry / exit points and the localities where cattle were left for the summer. For example, the Tawonga mustering group comprised graziers from the Kiewa valley who accessed the high plains via the Mt Fainter track; their runs were generally on the western half of the tableland. Graziers from the Ovens valley used Dungey's Track, along the West Kiewa River, to access the southwest portion of the plains; and on the Omeo side access points were Fitzgerald's track (to the northeast portion of the plains) and the Bundar route at the southern end. At autumn time each group would muster into an open area all the cattle found on its particular portion of the high plains. Each owner would then cut out their stock from the mob and isolate them in preparation for a separate and orderly departure. Those animals that had wandered in from other localities would be separated into their respective home mustering groups and then taken to their owners who were mustering other parts of the high plains. The aim was to get all cattle off the high plains in an efficient, orderly manner, before the on-set of winter. The stakes were high because an early bad weather event could inflict heavy casualties on the herd.



Mustering cattle on Bogong High Plains, 1892 – artist: Samuel Calvert (SLV)

This sense of community, and the investments each participating grazer made in co-operative social relations, created a counter weight to the licensing power of the Lands Department. The Department decided who could legally graze livestock on the high plains, but the community had the ability to decide *who else* could take cattle up to the plains. For if no licensee complained about a new face appearing on the scene the Department would never know about it as there was no official in-the-field supervision of grazing until the Soil Conservation Board was given the job in 1947. Until then the licensed graziers were the gate keepers, and they were prone to let in friends and neighbours from time to time, some of whom later became official tenants.

Unlicensed grazing sometimes took place over long periods of time with the connivance of the local community. The experience of the Fitzgerald family, on the Omeo side, illustrates the process. Edward Darcy Fitzgerald, the founding father of the Fitzgerald clan actually had legal tenancy over a large area that fringed the north-eastern margins of the Bogong High Plains and included some long spurs leading up to the plains. The tenancy was taken out in 1882 and originally was 30,500 acres, known as the old Mt Wills run. The family also rented Bogong Pastoral Allotment K, which sat

between the Mt Wills run and the Bogong High Plains Green Area - later this tenancy was trimmed to just 6000 acres adjoining their farm 'Shannonvale' at Middle Creek. The abandoned part, which included the high spurs that might be construed as being part of the Bogong High Plains, continued to be used and was rented again by Edward's son, George Silas Fitzgerald, from December 1896<sup>79</sup> along with high plains allotment G which he briefly licensed in November 1896 but held for seven months only – probably because he concluded he could use both but get away with paying for only one! This was almost certainly when the Fitzgerald's started regularly taking cattle up to the high plains for the summer. The Fitzgerald's pioneered a track to the eastern end of the high plains which was subsequently chained by the government surveyor Simon Callanan. And later, in 1901/02, they constructed their high plains hut which was shared with other graziers. Their lowland Shannonvale property was routinely used as a supply depot by graziers accessing the high plains via Fitzgerald's track. The facilities they created and shared with others held them in good stead when, in mid-1903, the Lands Department terminated their tenure by dividing their pastoral allotment (K) into three smaller blocks and throwing them open to public tender.<sup>80</sup> All three blocks were lost to higher (local) bidders leaving the Fitzgerald's with no grazing rights to the high plains or adjacent bushland. Nevertheless, George Fitzgerald continued to use the land and in February 1907 was said to be running several hundred head of cattle on it,<sup>81</sup> apparently without serious objection from the licensee. Though there are gaps in the tenure records it seems this state of technical illegal occupation on the high plains continued for some 30 years. It was confirmed to me by the family during interviews,<sup>82</sup> and its lengthy duration can be explained by the valued contribution the Fitzgerald's made to the snow country grazing operations of other families – what academics would call 'social capital'.

The building of social capital was not unique to the Bogong High Plains but it was certainly most concentrated there. The main determining factors were topography and the tenure sub-division. The wide open expanses of the plains enabled livestock to wander great distances, and the small unfenced grazing blocks, affordable to rent by a myriad of small operators, inevitably meant that everybody's livestock would be mixed up. A high degree of organization and co-operation was therefore required to ensure all animals were removed from the tableland before the first winter snowfalls, and that was contingent on workable human relations.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were circumstances where snow country grazing could be very successful in the absence of any positive social capital. As a general rule, the lower the risk of livestock being caught up in blizzards at the end of the summer grazing season the lesser the need for social capital; and of course, where a mountain, ridge or tableland was licensed to only one grazier there was less practical opportunity to create social capital, as the following chart suggests.

		Value of Social Capital		
	Topography	Risk	Multiple graziers	Single grazier
1	High tableland	High	High	Low
2	Low tableland	Medium	Medium – Low	Low
3	High mountain / ridge	Medium	High – Medium	Low
4	Low mountain / ridge	Low	Low	Low

<sup>79</sup> Lands Department file Omeo 690/187

<sup>80</sup> Lands Department file Omeo 690/187

<sup>81</sup> Lands Department file Omeo 1078/187

<sup>82</sup> Interview D'Arcy Fitzgerald, 20/2/1978, Appendix F

We have seen that on the Bogong tableland, where risk was high, and the livestock of many graziers ran together, an unlicensed grazier might be accepted if that grazier was making a valued contribution to the welfare of the collective. Let's now see what could transpire in the opposite environment of low risk with a single grazing operation which chose to be unlicensed. The Beveridge brothers, Sid and Jack, from the upper Buckland valley, are a good case study.

For over half a century, from around 1911 to the 1960s they virtually monopolized grazing of the Barry Range, including the headwaters of the Buffalo and Buckland rivers, and the snow country ridge between Mt Selwyn and Mt St Bernard. One would imagine that with such a huge expanse of forest rangeland to manage, close co-operative relations with neighbours might be essential. But apparently not. This was partly because the mountains they grazed, west of Mt St. Bernard, are quite dissected and the snowy ridges quite narrow, enabling cattle to escape blizzard conditions of their own accord by simply walking downhill to less cold and more sheltered environs. The risk of casualties was much lower than on the high tablelands where escape was more difficult.

I had the opportunity to interview Sid Beveridge in 1978 at his home at Everton. He was then 86 years old and in the process of liquidating his very substantial property assets and donating the proceeds to local charities. His brother Jack had died 15 or so years earlier. He explained to me how easy it was to get cattle up to the summer rangeland: all they had to do was open the farm gate at the end of winter and the cattle would find their own way up, seeking the cooler conditions. For the same reason the autumn muster was much simpler, the main task being to get the breeding and saleable stock back to the home paddocks; the remainder of the herd could find their own way down to the winter rangeland, at minimal risk of losses. They were breeders and dealers, and were more concerned with quantity rather than quality of livestock; and because they didn't conduct comprehensive autumn musters they only had a rough idea of how many cattle they owned at any particular time. Their business model was high volume and cost minimization. It was a very successful strategy, enabling them to build a large freehold estate. But in their quest to save money they cut corners and engaged in some dubious practices. Some neighbours regarded them as a menace because their cattle were poorly controlled and frequently wandered onto neighbouring properties,<sup>83</sup> others felt they were being deliberately harassed with the aim of pushing them out of the district.<sup>84</sup> They also avoided paying rent for the Crown land they grazed, if they thought they could get away with it.

In this latter regard, Sid told me of one instance that didn't work out too well for them. Before the end of the 1914/18 war cattle prices were low and there was little demand for mountain grazing runs, but all that changed after the war and then '*some people came in and were going to raise hell*'.<sup>85</sup> What he was alluding to here is well documented in Lands Department files and local newspaper reports. Before the end of the war the Beveridge brothers had been grazing Crown land in the upper Buckland river area, all the way up to The Twins (mountain peaks west of Mt St. Bernard) without a license. After the war John Edward Lawler, a resident of Harrietville teamed up with local butcher and recently returned serviceman Jack Almeida to secure the nominally vacant grazing rights to this tract of bush. Lawler & Almeida knew what areas the Beveridge boys were grazing and:

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<sup>83</sup> Lands Department file Wangaratta 465/121

<sup>84</sup> Lands Department file Wangaratta 1031/121

<sup>85</sup> Appendix F, Interview with Sid Beveridge, 1978

*... decided to get the land for themselves. They took [i.e. legally obtained the license for] three blocks between them which were formerly held by the Beveridge's. As there was some of Beveridge's cattle on this land trouble began. The Beveridge's have 57 acres of freehold, but have fenced 100 acres, and about 1000 acres elsewhere and this is on land that Lawler now has. A fight developed as Almeida was driving cattle into a paddock that the Beveridge's had fenced and [Jack] Beveridge was trying to keep them out. The Beveridge's allege that Lawler drives their cattle all over the run, the stated reason being that he is getting their cattle off his run ...*

*... There have been fires springing up all over the hills in summer, and last month Beveridge's house [on the 57 acres they owned] was burnt [down]. There is no evidence, but I am of the opinion that the fire was started by Lawler and Almeida to push the Beveridge's out. (Police Superintendent Smith, Benalla, 27/2/1922).<sup>86</sup>*

Despite having started this whole affair by knowingly using Crown land without paying for it, the Beveridge's maintained an attitude of innocent indignation. They launched two largely unsuccessful court cases, one against Lawler for theft of an unbranded calf,<sup>87</sup> and the other against Almeida for assault.<sup>88</sup>

However, the Beveridge brothers were no saints. Besides their habit of using Crown land without paying for it, the oral history suggests that their penchant for cattle duffing was quite notorious.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, the police seemed to have assessed them as the lesser of two evils. In reports dated 5/2/1922 local officers noted that many residents were complaining about Lawler, that he was bad tempered and capable of anything, and was on such bad terms with other cattle owners that police were expecting to hear of a bush murder.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Almeida was assessed as of bad character, and a suspected cattle thief.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, the grazing licenses held by Lawler & Almeida were not renewed, and subsequently were briefly let in favour of returned soldiers, before once again falling back into the hands of the Beveridge brothers by the mid 1920's. In fact, it is unlikely that the Beveridge's ever totally removed their cattle from these lands. After all, at the time they had a herd of 600 head and only 57 acres of freehold; the obvious solution was to trespass on surrounding bushland licensed to other people for as long as possible if indeed they couldn't come to a private financial arrangement with those parties.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lands Department file Wangaratta 54/121

<sup>87</sup> Alpine Observer newspaper 3/2/1922, 31/3/1922, 7/4/1922, 14/4/1922

<sup>88</sup> Alpine Observer newspaper, 14/4/1922

<sup>89</sup> Appendix F, multiple interviews

<sup>90</sup> Lands Department file Wangaratta 54/121

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Lands Department file Wangaratta 0131/121, and file for Delatite county grazing block 19, 17,500 acres



Beveridge's Station, Easter 1976 (Author)

Despite their apparent lack of social capital, the brothers continued to thrive, expanding their bush grazing empire to the adjoining upper Buffalo River in the early 1930's, and progressively accumulating a large freehold estate.

However, the police assessment may not have been entirely justified. Wally Mortimore's book '*Who Killed Jim Barclay?*<sup>93</sup>' points directly to the young Beveridge's as the perpetrators of the Wonnangatta murders, and the circumstances he lays out are consistent with the picture that emerged during my research. Not that I ever sought after any information on the subject. But many informants, particularly on the Mansfield side where Barclay had previously lived and where he was still fondly remembered, insisted on telling me their theories. And then there was my interview with Sid Beveridge in which he made a condition of his cooperation that I not ask about the murders, and then later on brought up the subject himself.<sup>94</sup> He was particularly concerned that I know that the various X-rated theories of why Barclay was murdered were nonsense and that Barclay was an honourable man. I relate this story, not because it is particularly relevant to this study, but out of respect for a man who was gracious enough to grant an impromptu interview to a young researcher on a potentially vexed subject, and who clearly wanted something to be known. While he confessed to nothing, he spoke with the surety of someone who had intimate knowledge of, and a personal stake in the matter.

No informants ever mentioned the Beveridge brothers as possible suspects; if they did commit the murders, they certainly flew well under the radar. But as Wally Mortimore and Sid Beveridge both agreed, the Wonnangatta murders were all about cattle rustling, and it would appear that the Beveridge's were in an ideal position to steal cattle from Wonnangatta. They were close neighbours, grazing the mountains immediately north of Wonnangatta Station; they were steeped in the art of cattle theft, having been at it since they were kids; they were perfectly placed to quickly dispose of the stolen stock as they always sold to agents directly out of their paddocks (rather than going to market); and there being no other properties between theirs and Wonnangatta, their activities were unlikely to be observed by neighbours. And coincidentally, in 1918 many Wonnangatta cattle still carried the brand of the previous owner, Jack Bryce, 'JB' which was the same brand Jack Beveridge

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<sup>93</sup> Mortimore, Wallace Malcolm, 2009, *Who Killed Jim Barclay?*

<sup>94</sup> Appendix F, interview with Sid Beveridge.

used for his cattle!<sup>95</sup> So to opportunistic cattle duffers these particular Wonnangatta cattle were just as tempting as clean skins (cattle yet to be branded). The only problem was that Jim Barclay, the resident manager at Wonnangatta station, had apparently become aware that cattle were disappearing and the Beveridge's concluded that he believed they were responsible.<sup>96</sup> To avoid the possibility of suffering the quite severe penalties meted out to convicted cattle thieves at that time, they decided, according to Wally Mortimore's informant, to kill Barclay and his assistant.

Other conflicts between snow country graziers were comparatively trivial, and relatively few in number. They usually arose from personality clashes, misunderstandings and petty skulduggery. Some conflicts condensed around the issue of imprecise boundaries. Boundaries of grazing runs were not surveyed; they were merely lines drawn on government plans and frequently took little or no account of topography. The Lands Department refused to get involved in disputes between tenants other than to state the legal situation as set out in the statutes.<sup>97</sup> Resolution of differences, therefore, rested with conflicting parties or the courts.

**Table 4.7**  
**Some Court Cases Regarding Snow Country Grazing**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Locality of Incident</b>	<b>Form of Tenure</b>	<b>Case</b>
R Gow vs G Treasure	1889	Dargo High Plains	Nil	Dispute over possession of a hut
R.Riggall vs. J.Mathieson	28.8.1895	Mt. Wellington	lease	Claim for damages for trespass and driving of cattle
J.C.H.Graves vs. W.F.Iovick	13.2.1904	Upper King River	licence	Claim for damages and trespass: driving cattle across informant's land without giving notice
A.Dibbin vs. J.Lawler	10.3.1905 11.4.1905	Bogong High Plains	licence	Claim for damages for illegal impounding of cattle
D.Inge (Forest Officer) vs. J.Bullock	14.2.1923	Upper King River	Nil	Seeking penalty for unlawful depasture of stock on a Forest Reserve
Doyle Bros. vs J.O.Holstein	20.5.1896	Nunniong	lease	Claim for damages for trespass and damage to property

<sup>95</sup> Mortimore (2009), pp 85-101

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> For example, Lands Department file Wangaratta 69/130.

Source: Mansfield Courier, Alpine Observer, Omeo Standard & Gippsland Guardian newspapers (SLV)

### Capital Improvements

Rangeland grazing requires few physical structures, and the temporary grazing tenure system did not allow clearing or cultivation, or guarantee compensation for minor works such as fencing if a licensee was out-tendered for his run. So, by nature and by design snow country grazing was by and large a broad acre, low capital activity adopted essentially to supplement lowland pastures.

The only exception to this general state of affairs was on the few small allotments that were leased and sometimes freeholded under the old land settlement legislation. At these sites the forest cover was often cleared, and residences could be built.

Time spent in the snow country varied according to the size and nature of grazing operations. Small cattle breeders who relied heavily upon the snow country spent the most time there, and in some cases, for example on the Bogong High Plains, men were stationed on the tops throughout the summer to supervise stock.<sup>98</sup> In other cases, where only young bullocks were taken up, stockmen made only short visits each two or three weeks. The overall historical time-span is also important here. Before the mountains were thoroughly known by graziers and before management practices had crystallised over the whole region, there was a higher level of labour committed to stock work, and records indicate that cattle were constantly supervised in a number of areas.<sup>99</sup> In some such instances the runs were operated as outstations where one or two stockmen would be charged with supervision for the summer period. However, as time passed, there was less need for continuous supervision.

Improvements were, in the main, confined to small huts, fences and yards. Graziers who spent most time on the tops often built huts for shelter and storage of equipment; where appropriate, small sections of strategically placed fencing were sometimes erected, in conjunction with topographical features such as steep slopes and cliffs, to control stock movements;<sup>100</sup> yards were also used for branding or for holding cattle overnight immediately before droving back to the lowlands. Additionally, larger holding paddocks were useful at autumn time for depositing mustered stock and keeping them in relatively confined spaces till the end of the summer season. However, such paddocks were not common until fencing wire became available and made enclosure relatively easy. Subsequently they became popular in the more wooded high areas where locating and rounding up stock was most difficult. On the more open areas like the Bogong High Plains, mustered stock could generally be retained within sight on the broad, treeless sub-alpine valleys, so fenced paddocks were not necessary.

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98 Interview B. Fitzgerald, W. Ryder, Appendix F

99 Maffra Spectator, 22 February 1896

100 Ibid



Riggall's Hut near Mt Wellington N. Gippsland, c 1913.

Photographer: Waugh, Arthur John, 1868-1928.

Identifier(s) H2016.167/66 SLV

Prior to the 1890s, few of these minor improvements were evident. Huts and yards were built on snow country selections, but they did not become common throughout the snow country until after the rabbit-induced dependency on mountain rangeland occurred. Until then, stockmen would normally camp in canvas tents, and before stock were returned to the lowlands a practice known as

"tailing out" was often carried out. This involved stock being shepherded by day and night to prevent them from wandering back into the woodlands.

### Salting

Salting was a method of stock control which was particularly useful at mustering time. As the high plains soils are highly organic,<sup>101</sup> and as the streams are fed by rain and pure winter snows, the grazing environment is salt deficient and cattle living on the high plains find it particularly tasty. Strategically located salt troughs or "licks" were often used by graziers to control the location of cattle on the runs, and by training them to answer to the call "Salt", or some other signal, mustering the sub-alpine woodlands was made much easier. It took a number of years to train a herd to answer so the practice was confined to breeders who used the snow country on a regular basis for cows and calves. The practice was very useful where rough topography or thick vegetation made mustering on horseback and with dogs difficult.

### Burning

Cool burning of the sub-alpine woodlands was an almost universal practice prior to 1939. Burning was intended to increase or maintain carrying capacity by encouraging growth of more palatable young grass shoots and by controlling the growth of scrub and heath.

Every three years or so fire would be put through an area. This was normally done in autumn after the stock had been mustered and, once lit, fires were left to burn. In the right conditions they would smoulder through the forest floor and eventually burn themselves out or be extinguished by inclement weather. Autumn was the most popular time as it was the safest: the chance of fires getting out of hand was minimal, and being followed by winter snow and rain, spring growth was guaranteed. But in some instances spring burning was preferred to remove dead materials following from the snow season, as well as to remove scrub.<sup>102</sup>

### Cultivation

For a short time, the land selection at Nunnett (on the Nunniong plateau) was used for more intensive activities, when dairying, pig raising and grain cultivation were carried out there by Thomas Doyle of Bindi, and occasional cultivation elsewhere on the Nunniong plateau may have occurred prior to 1900. Similarly, around the turn of the century a portion of Cowombat Flat, near the Cobberas, is said to have been cultivated for oats to be used as horse feed.

Nodes of intensified land use also occurred in association with activities other than grazing. Miners cultivated small paddocks on the Cobungra High Plains prior to 1878 and wherever they went in search of gold they took with them small numbers of livestock.

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101 Costin, A. B., 1957. High Mountain Catchments in Victoria in Relation to Land Use, Soil Conservation Authority.

102 Interview with Joseph Gibson, Appendix F



Thomas Doyle's Plough on the Nunnett Paddock, Nunniong Plateau (Author, 1977)