

GRAZING THE VICTORIAN SNOW COUNTRY
A Traditional Land Use in a Changing Public Policy Environment

By

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ABBREVIATIONS & DEFINITIONS

‘SLV’ means State Library of Victoria

‘PRO’ means Public Records Office, Victoria

‘Lands Department’ means Department of Crown Lands and Survey

‘Forests Department’ includes the Forests Commission, Victoria

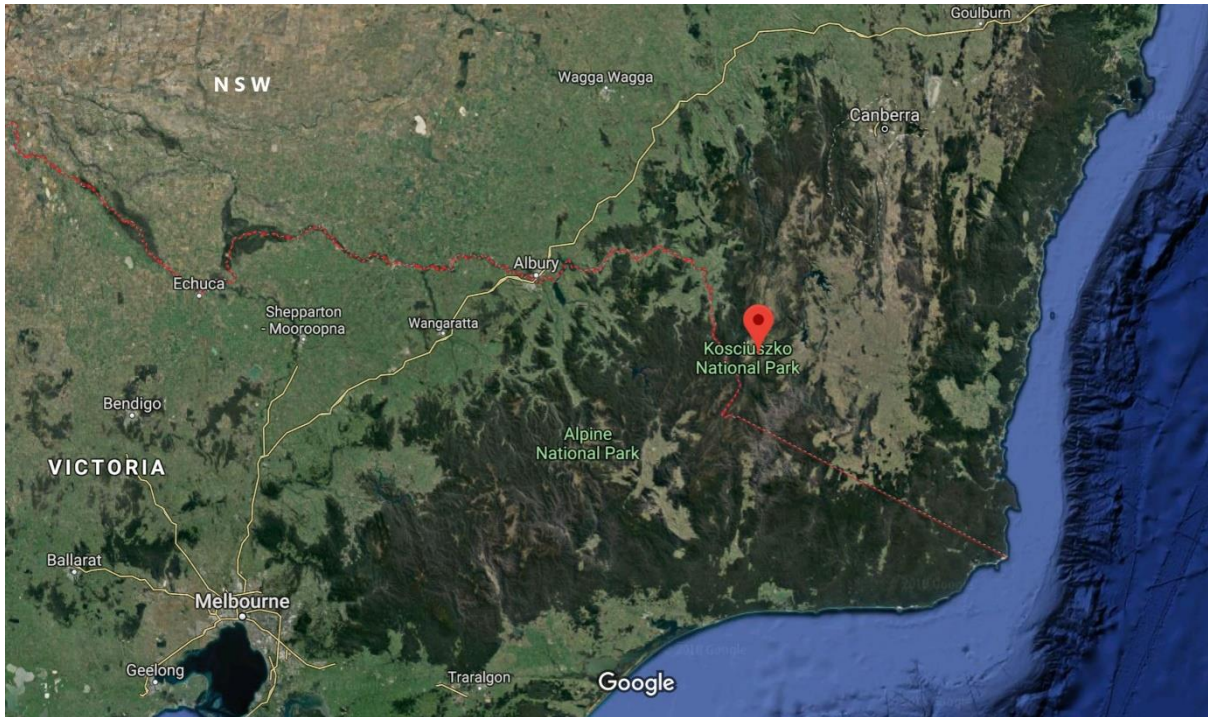
‘livestock’ includes sheep, cattle, & horses

‘squatter’ means owner of livestock who initially occupied large expanses of Crown land for grazing without tenure, and subsequently sought government consent for their use of such lands under colonial Orders-in-Council pre-dating 1862

‘pastoralist’ means holder of a license for pastoral purposes under provisions of the Victorian Land Act, 1862, and includes squatting tenancies continuing under that Act

‘small new pastoralist’ is a subset of ‘pastoralist’ and includes smaller operators who licensed the more limited (smaller & less productive & often more challenging) rangeland grazing opportunities made available under the pastoral provisions of the 1862 & 1869 Land Acts

‘station owner’ means the owner of a large lowland pastoral property formerly held under squatting tenure and subsequently significantly converted to freehold



INTRODUCTION

This book discusses the history of snow country grazing in Victoria: what it was, how it was conducted, what areas were involved and who participated, from 1835 till the late 1970s, a decade before creation of the Alpine National Park.

So, what kind of grazing are we talking about? And what is the 'snow country'?

We discuss European livestock, mainly beef cattle but also small numbers of horses, and periodically flocks of sheep, grazing bushland in the mountains. The snow country is the highest mountain ranges that receive regular snow falls during the winter months. It includes high, steep ridges and flatter tablelands (often referred to as high plains). These areas can experience snow falls at any time of the year, but lasting snow occurs only between the months of May and September.¹

¹ The snow country is commonly defined by the 1200 metre contour line which roughly marks the lower limits of persistent winter snow. However, I have varied this rule of thumb according to local circumstance: some lower tablelands are included, while some higher but more rugged and infrequently grazed mountains are omitted. This approach clearly also excludes the lower altitude forested slopes, ridges, and valleys adjacent to the snow country which were often used for winter grazing. These omissions were necessary because my study focuses specifically upon the differing land use and public policy issues that arose from the physical environment of the snow country – that is the seasonal grazing opportunity due to winter snow, and the need to move stock to and from the snow country range lands; the fact that the land could be used for only five months per year. However, in the broader context of mountain bush grazing, the snow country can't really be separated from the surrounding forested slopes and valleys that were grazed in conjunction with the mountain tops. It is unfortunate that by focusing so intensely on the snow country a whole additional story about grazing of less glamorous but equally significant low altitude bush country has been somewhat overlooked.

The forested mountain region of south-east Australia is pictured in the above satellite photograph, and the snow country within this region is shown by green shading on the sketch map below. Note the boundary line between the states of New South Wales and Victoria which roughly divides the mountain region in half. This is significant because the institutions, laws and procedures that governed the authorization and conduct of grazing differed according to what side of the border you stood. That resulted in different patterns of use, and different timelines.

Another thing to note is that most snow country in south-east Australia falls within NSW – one huge expanse which is the Kosciusko plateau. In contrast what we find south of the border is a more broken and dissected landscape. Pictured together it is something like an archipelago with one large island flanked on its south-western end by a scattering of tiny islets. These differing landscape patterns had a profound influence on the way the snow country was used and administered.

My research, and so this book, is focused on the metaphorical scattering of tiny islets – what happened on the Victorian side of the border. What happened on the NSW side is a different story, for others to tell.²



² I want to acknowledge that the larger storey is that of the Kosciusko National Park, what led to its formation, and the role of the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme in focusing attention on the importance of soil and water conservation, and the consequent termination of grazing in the park in the greater public interest. What happened in the Victorian snow country followed in the wake of the Kosciusko experience, some decades later. When first researching this book, in the late 1970s, I didn't have a clear vision of the Victorian experience as being only a small part of a much larger phenomenon. There was no comparable historical analysis of snow country grazing in NSW. Today we can draw on labour historian John Merritt's research published in 2003, and 2007 for a more complete picture. In the first of these books, *Currango Summers, A Snow Belt Pastoral Property 1851 – 1946*, Merritt places a single snow country property in its historical and regional context. In the process he surveys the beginnings of snow country grazing in NSW / Australia, and the critical role the northern end of the Kosciusko plateau played in providing emergency drought relief grazing for sheep stations in the Riverina and Monaro districts of NSW.

Why Graze the Snow Country?

Mountains are usually rough and inaccessible places, with challenging and often inhospitable climates, so why would Australian graziers want to go there? The reason is that the highest mountain ranges and adjacent high plains, where temperatures are coldest, include natural open grasslands comprising tussock grass, herbs and shrubs. Surrounding these treeless areas is open woodland of snow gum trees which are often adjoined at lower altitudes by alpine ash forest which was frequently well grassed. So the grazing was good, if you could get there and so long as you got out before winter set in.

Today we usually associate livestock with fenced paddocks and improved pasture. But in the early days it was all bush grazing – sheep and cattle being herded through a largely untracked wilderness by a handful of stockmen. That’s how European settlers first spread out across the Australian continent.

Because of the difficult access, the hostile climate, and relatively short grazing season there wasn’t much interest in using the snow country by the very early European settlers – at least not until the normally more productive lower country was fully stocked with sheep and cattle. The earliest known stocking of snow country in Victoria was in the mid 1830s but it wasn’t until the 1850s that regular seasonal grazing started in some areas. By the late 1870s most of the snow country was licensed for grazing and this continued to be the case for the next one hundred years.

Mountain grazing is carried on throughout the world and is sometimes described by the word ‘transhumance’, which refers to the movement of people and livestock to and from the summer grazing lands. In Europe it has traditionally been labour intensive, has often involved the cultivation of mountain fields and has been focused on dairying. Usually, livestock herders constructed and maintained special summer residences amongst the alpine pastures where they milked their cows and made butter and cheese. In some places the history of transhumance can be traced back over a thousand years. For example, in the western Carpathian Mountains of Rumania it is believed that pastoralism began when stock owners fled to the mountains during invasions in the Middle Ages.³

In contrast to older pastoral cultures elsewhere in the world, in Victoria cattle grazed in the snow country were raised almost exclusively for slaughter – for meat and leather. And there are only a few instances where graziers had summer residences in the snow country. The vast majority made short visits instead, taking the animals up in spring, mustering them and bringing them back home in autumn, perhaps with a brief visit in-between to repair yards and fences and put out salt for the cattle. Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s they mostly camped in tents, but many huts were constructed in the first half of the 20th century to make the stockman’s life easier. Some of these now are classified as historic buildings.

Who Owns the Land?

Whereas in our cities most land is privately owned, with only small patches here and there being public parkland,⁴ in the snow country the situation is quite the opposite: virtually all of it, barring a few scattered small plots, are national parks or state forest.

³ Matley I M, 1968. "Transhumance in Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Geographical Review*, 58, 2, pp. 231-261; 1971, "The Human Geography of the Western Mountains of Romania", *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 87, 2, nr. 116-127; 1970, "Traditional Pastoral Life in Romania", *Professional Geographer*, 22, 6, pp. 311-316.

⁴ Excluding roads, which are mostly public land.

To understand how this came about we need to think back to 1788, when the first British settlers arrived in Australia. At that time ownership of the land by indigenous peoples was not recognized by the new arrivals and instead all land of the continent was claimed in the name of the British monarch, hence the term 'Crown land'. In short, the British took the land from aboriginal Australians and made them refugees in their own country. British governors then began handing out small parcels of this land to their settlers, sometimes giving it away but mostly selling it. In fact, the sale of Crown land was a major source of government revenue in the colonial period.

Various schemes for allocating land to settlers were set up through colonial land legislation, and in Victoria the major Land Acts were those of 1860, 1862, 1869 and 1884. The main purpose of these Acts of parliament was to get land into agricultural production because agriculture was the primary mechanism for creating sustenance and wealth – it was considered the highest and best use. Along the way small plots of land were put aside for public activities that supported the agrarian imperative: roads, water reserves, timber reserves, gravel reserves, public parks and gardens, sites for public buildings, even sites of natural beauty such as waterfalls and other unusual geological features. Until lands were given over to this favoured land use regime, short term licenses were available for a whole host of temporary commercial activities, including grazing, general stores, hotels, slaughterhouses, and so forth. At the time almost no-one stopped to think about what would happen to the native vegetation and wildlife, or how natural ecological processes would be impacted by agricultural settlement. It was simply assumed that conversion of bushland into agricultural land was intrinsically good, in fact a moral responsibility. By the beginning of the 20th century most land that could be feasibly brought into agricultural production was already either sold or subject to settlement tenures that would end in private ownership. What then remained was all the land that could not feasibly be farmed: desert land, steep and rocky places, and the winter snow country. This miscellany of left over areas forms the nucleus of what is now our nature conservation estate.

Why Write this Book?

There are a few reasons:

- * to record a longstanding land use that is slowly passing into history – to acknowledge the efforts of those who were involved. I'm not the only person to have written about mountain cattle grazing in Victoria, but I think this work is unique in having scoped it out across time and geographical space. At the very least there is now an honour roll of many who participated in snow country grazing, and a consolidated record of the lands they used;
- * to describe and explain how public policies, including the 19th century land settlement legislation, and particularly the 1884 Land Act, shaped the remaining Crown land estate that was finally available for dedication as national parks, state forests, and other public land reservations in the 20th century;
- * to provide an environmental history – including a partly quantified record of past use, which may contribute to an understanding of the environmental impacts grazing has had on areas now being managed as national parks, forests and conservation reserves.

Sources of Information

This book is based on a thesis I wrote for the degree of Master of Arts in the late 1970s. Although that piece of research was completed in 1980, I was never really satisfied with it and felt it deserved a lot more attention. So I packed all my notes into a wooden box and there they stayed for over 30 years until I had the time and inclination to reactivate my interest. Going through those aged and dusty

papers I was immediately struck by the immense amount of information I had gathered in a few short years, and how little of it had found its way into the thesis. And in addition to that the thesis had only told part of the story, covering the period up to 1935. There remained a lot more work to do.

In Victoria details of grazing history are found in records of correspondence and land tenancies that were kept by Government organisations, mainly the former Department of Crown Lands & Survey (hereafter 'The Lands Department' or simply 'the Department'). These records include published lists of graziers, tenancy register books, correspondence files, and nicely composed maps and plans showing the boundaries of pastoral 'runs' (that is what the original grazing areas were called). They were compiled because the use of Crown lands was conducted under government supervision and because the snow country has largely remained in public ownership rather than being sold off for private use. The records survive because the Department habitually kept almost everything over its 130-year history and eventually its massive holdings were given to the Public Records Office for preservation.

I relied heavily on these government records to construct a list of licensed snow country graziers and their runs (Appendix D) which is the essential piece of research upon which the following narrative is based. I was able to do this back in the 1970s only because I had almost unlimited access to the Lands Department records, after having obtained employment at the Department's head office in May 1976.⁵ I made the most of the opportunity and became quite an expert in the Department's extraordinarily detailed archival resources. Countless hours were spent searching for papers relating to mountain grazing, hoping to find every tiny piece of the puzzle. Of course, I failed to locate all records for every area, but the final outcome was quite comprehensive. Other sources I used, which complemented the tenancy data, were old newspaper reports and local oral history. Appendix F contains notes of my interviews with graziers during the late 1970s.

I have more recently improved the data base by conducting a long and tedious review of tenancy lists published in the Victorian Government Gazette between 1851 and 1913. While extremely time-consuming this review has brought to light a new level of detail and some unexpected revelations which have both contradicted and confirmed (in different instances) the local oral history and extended further back in time the known beginning of grazing in some localities. What has become clear is that quite some time before the snow country fell into the hands of nearby grazing family's prominent areas were used by very large pastoral enterprises from outside the region for drought relief, resting travelling livestock, and perhaps speculative ventures. Also, some of the earliest regular local graziers had escaped recollection in the oral history. For example, oral history records Victoria's highest mountain, Mt Bogong, was first used by graziers in the early 1880s, but it is now clear that it was briefly licensed in 1859/60 and subsequently subject to a series of tenancies in the 1870s.

My original thesis covered only the first 100 years of mountain grazing. I had to cut short the time span to meet deadlines, partly because the topic was otherwise too big for a Master's thesis, and partly because I had spent too much time building up Appendix D. The cut-off date of 1935 which I was forced to choose turned out to be a very meaningful rough line in the sand. The first 100 years saw all the mountain grazing areas fully occupied, and the largest numbers of stock taken to the snow country. Over this period methods and patterns of land use became established, and administration of tenancies was the predominant focus of responsible government agencies in the manner set out in the land settlement Acts and Regulations. However, towards the end of the study period new trends

⁵ Unfortunately, I didn't enjoy the same freedom of access to the Forest Department's records (in the next building, only a few metres away), and that is one reason I was unable to compile a comprehensive grazing history for forest reserves post 1907).

in government policy and management began to influence how grazing was carried out. The 1930s marked the beginning of a proliferation of public interests in the snow country, particularly water management, soil conservation, prevention of forest wildfires, recreation and tourism, and nature conservation. None of these interests sat entirely comfortably with bush grazing with the result that from the 1940s onwards an increasingly restrictive regime of controls was introduced limiting the areas that could be grazed, and the numbers of livestock that could be taken to the snow country. At the same time the reasons why so many people took livestock to the mountains in the first place, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s, started to evaporate. Social, economic, and environmental conditions have changed to the point where there are now fewer advantages in taking cattle to graze the mountains. Consequently, the area grazed, number of livestock, and number of participating graziers have reduced considerably.

Context of research

When I began my research, in the mid 1970s, mountain cattle grazing was a controversial issue. The rising tide of public values threatened to sweep it away, and cattlemen were mounting a desperate defence of their turf. The Victorian Government had established a public body⁶ to review the use of Crown lands throughout the State and conservation groups, led by the Victorian National Parks Association, fought a strong and relentless campaign for the creation of a substantial national park in the alpine area.⁷ That campaign was ultimately successful, though it did not immediately or fully resolve the grazing issue. The cattlemen had good political connections⁸ and widespread support within their local and extended rural communities. Consequently, grazing was permitted to continue in the alpine national park until nature intervened by burning most of the range lands to a crisp in the summers of 1998 and 2003, rendering them unfit for grazing for many years. In 2005 the Victorian Government decided there should be no further grazing of livestock in the alpine national park and all licences were cancelled. That wasn't the end of snow country grazing, but it was extinguished in much of its historical and geographical heartland.

Now that many of the original reasons for taking livestock to the snow country are not as pressing, there is no reason to believe the activity will continue on indefinitely. This raises the question of an appropriate form of cultural heritage recognition, which acknowledges the former pastoral land use of the mountains, its associated stories and physical remnants, and memorialises the skills and lifestyles of these outstanding pioneers of the mountain region. I discuss this further in the final chapter.

⁶ The Land Conservation Council.

⁷ Johnson, D, (1974), *Alps at the Crossroads*.

⁸ See for example <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/baillieu-clans-key-cattleman-20111208-1olha.html>, sighted 19/10/2018; *Voice of the Mountains* No. 35 (2012).

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