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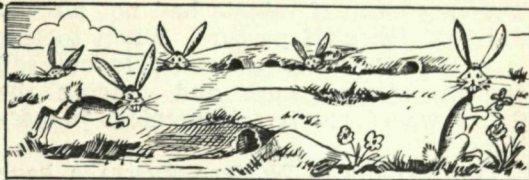
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# A Century of RABBITS



By A. R. TOMLINSON,  
Chief Vermin Control Officer

**T**HE year 1959 cannot be allowed to pass without mention of the centenary of an event which probably has affected Australia's primary production more than any other single factor. A century ago, the rabbits which were eventually to spread over the whole continent, arrived in Australia. The almost incredible cost of this introduction to Australia—it must amount to hundreds or even thousands of millions of pounds—and the stranglehold they have exercised over the rural industry should mark the day they were landed as one of the blackest in our history. Although it is not a centenary to be celebrated it is one that none of us can afford to forget.

Admittedly, rabbits were brought to Australia before 1859. There is a record of some arriving in 1788, and it is well known that others were liberated on islands around the coast including some off Western Australia. However, they remained localised and it is now generally accepted that the rabbits which did spread originated from a small shipment of the wild type brought on the clipper "Lightning" in 1859. They were released in Barwon Park, the property of Thomas Austin, near Geelong, Victoria, and within three years had reached pest proportions locally. Twenty years later, rabbits had crossed the South Australian and New South Wales borders. By May, 1886 and travelling at 70 miles a year, they were in Queensland.

The westerly branch which had reached South Australia by 1880 had crossed to the other side of the State in 12 years. They were in Western Australia two years later and had travelled 900 miles to Geraldton by 1907, or 25 years after appearing in Western Australia. In actual fact the Barwon Park rabbits had spread to the north and across Australia in less than 50 years.

The spread was not spectacular with a horde of rabbits advancing like a tidal wave. First one or two rabbits would appear, and often property owners welcomed them as curiosities. Then suddenly the district would be over-run with them as if a major invasion had occurred. We

know now that within the rabbit populations are some which colonise an area and are permanent residents, while there are others which are footloose and will move on. At the incredible rate rabbits breed, the small advance guard was all that was necessary to establish and to expand into the big colonies and, in fact, they brought their own reinforcements with them. From the age of four months does are capable of producing a litter of about five kittens in a month, and this will continue as long as conditions are favourable, possibly eight or more times in a year.

The initial invasion of Western Australia appears to have moved both north and south of the Nullarbor Plains and swept up into the North-West pastoral areas as well as into the agricultural districts. The northerly tide receded but there are still pockets of rabbits left even along the Canning Stock Route. In favourable seasons these rapidly multiply and then decline as dry conditions take over.

Although some rabbits had already moved westward the rabbit-proof fences which were erected early in his century slowed down the general advance in Western Australia. Despite this the rabbits multiplied until they had overrun the agricultural areas and reached plague proportions.

It was estimated several years ago that rabbits were costing Australia £400,000,000 a year in sheep and cattle which could



have been run if rabbits had not already deprived them of pasture. When to this is added the cost of crops taken, soil erosion, control work and fencing the figure would reach astronomical proportions.

The farmers in Western Australia have paid a great deal for this pest also. Tests carried out indicated that rabbits were depriving the agricultural areas of at least 50 per cent. of their pastures and even up to 85 per cent. This means that for every hour's work a farmer put in, every pound he spent on machinery, fertilisers, seeds and similar items, at least one half was for feeding rabbits.

There is hardly any need for me to refer to the seeming miracle a few years ago when myxomatosis, assisted by "1080" poisoning drives wiped out millions of rabbits throughout this State. Today, a hundred years after their forefathers were introduced, we are again witnessing the remarkable adaptability, tenacity and

resilience of this small animal. Despite the decimation resulting from possibly the most potent disease ever to attack any animal population, the onslaughts of the most effective poison yet produced, together with other organised attacks there can be no question that they are at least holding their own at present, and in many places they have actually increased again. In 1859 there were only a few rabbits at Barwon Park and they spread to give Western Australia—over 2,000 miles away—a rabbit plague. Today thousands of colonies as big as or even bigger than the original Barwon Park group are already in Western Australia. They are well distributed over the countryside and within easy distance of every farm. They certainly do not need to travel 2,000 miles to become a plague again in Western Australia. They only need to travel a few hundred yards at the most, so it behoves every land-owner to get busy—and to keep busy—on rabbit destruction.

## PESTS PLAGUE PASTORALISTS

Apart from the well-known vermin such as dingoes and rabbits, primary producers and vermin control authorities were troubled by many other animal pests including domestic animals which had gone wild such as camels, donkeys, horses, pigs, goats and even wild cattle.

The Minister for Agriculture (Mr. C. D. Nalder) said that with the exception of wild cattle, all of these have been declared vermin in various local authority districts—mainly in the pastoral areas—at the request of the road or vermin boards concerned.

While some of the authorities still relied on the bonus system others were realising that the most effective way of dealing with pests of this nature was organised destruction work and drives.

In some areas the authorities had appointed special rangers or hunters to destroy wild horses and donkeys with very good results. In others, pastoralists, local authorities and Agriculture Protection Board officers had combined in shooting drives against the donkeys.

Doggers were constantly shooting wild camels for the humps which are excellent for making wild dog baits.

The main damage caused by these pests was to pastures and other vegetation but they also competed with stock for available water supply as well as damaging water installations, fences, etc.