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The Australian Rangeland Society

A HUNDRED YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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Exactly a hundred years before this conference, in August 1900, a Royal Commission was appointed which historical geographer Michael Quinn has persuasively argued ‘deserves a prominent, if not defining, place in Australian environmental history’. This address will explore the social, political and environmental context of this very significant inquiry. What was the nature of the European occupation of the western lands of New South Wales in the late nineteenth century? Why was the Commission appointed? What environmental knowledge – scientific and popular – did it unearth? What were the origins and fate of these early, searing insights into the ecology of the rangelands?

Vast areas of Australia’s ‘outside country’ were rapidly and successfully colonised by sheep and cattle. Pastoral expansion into the Western hinterland of both NSW and Queensland in the 1860s and 1870s coincided with a sequence of above-average rainfall seasons. Only rudimentary technology was required for pastoralism, the imperishability of wool made its transportation relatively straightforward, and the high international demand for wool and beef made the industry independent of local markets and infrastructure. ‘For many years’, writes historian Jenny Lee, ‘it seemed that there was practically no physical limit to pastoral expansion.’

From the 1880s, the environmental limits of pastoralism in the West quickly materialised. Rabbits covered the red and black earth like a grey blanket, sheep and cattle reached their peak numbers and ate out grass and herbage, and a long drought settled on the land from the mid 1890s. In that decade sheep numbers in the Western Division were reduced by two thirds, from sixteen million to five.

By the beginning of the new century, the Western Lands were officially recognised to be in crisis. In 1900, the New South Wales Government established a Royal Commission into the Condition of Crown Tenants to enquire into the management of the Western Division. W Hogarth, the Inspector of Stations for Goldsborough Mort and Co, testified: ‘I have known the West Darling for the last twenty-one years, and consider the country has deteriorated at least 60 to 70 per cent within that period, through drought, rabbits, windstorms, and noxious vegetation, and do not think, with all the nursing one would give it, that it would ever recover so as to come anything near its original carrying capacity.’

The Commission unearthed a widespread understanding of the destructive effects of pastoralism in the rangelands. Guy Fitzhardinge observed in 1997 that ‘today, when reading through the Report of the Commission of Inquiry, one could be excused for thinking that one was reading a current document’. The Inquiry still resonates with meaning – and grimly multiplies its lessons - as we commemorate its centenary.