

10 June 2019

Transition and history in the grazing industry - then ... and now?

Much research is constrained by academic and professional restrictions not least by sources of funding. Accordingly, the ability to locate the research on a very long timeline is limited. Such research tends therefore to reflect a point in time albeit often over years but less often over decades or centuries. In Australia, many of the “wicked problems” which face the large-scale grazing industry are the outcome of previous land management over history. While acknowledging many thousands of years of management by the original occupants of Australia, their intuitive knowledge must be valued in the context of today and the future if only to establish a threshold against which to assess the management of the land over the last several centuries and from there, a basis to assess future land management, in this case for large scale grazing.

This story begins when, after landing in Adelaide in 1835, the first of my Cudmore relatives established various business and agricultural ventures in Adelaide and beyond (Yeates, 1979). The second of my relatives, this time Yeates, arrived in 1839 and established in Adelaide. These families were then connected by a marriage of their children. It seems there was a certain common pioneering spirit following relatively successful pursuits in South Australia including at “Baroota” near Mt Remarkable and as far away as the Murray River. By 1861, Cudmore interests had taken up ‘runs’ along the western tributaries of the Burdekin River. In 1862, Yeates interests (my great grandparents and relatives) set sail for Bowen via Sydney where several of the Yeates men set out to collect stock and equipment from “Goonoo Goonoo” near Tamworth, their destination being leases totalling 250 sq miles, east of the Gilbert Range and west of “The Lynd” and “Carpentaria Downs” including “Myall Downs” at the junctions of the Lynd, Copperfield and Einasleigh Rivers (pp 21-23) arriving in 1863. More recent information suggests this may have been encouraged by the need for fresh meat during a nearby short-lived mining rush, but this is unconfirmed. The venture was also short-lived as other products (tallow and hides) proved uneconomic. The leases were sold in 1867.

The families moved back to the area where others in the Yeates family were well established near Bowen, on the Don River and further south (Yeates Creek) but this area proved too wet for sheep so for a period, the Yeates families did well enough with mixed farming to support a growing population in Bowen. However, ventures further southeast proved difficult with increased thefts of stock and lack of reliable workers. Family notes indicate an increased interest as the southwest grazing lands in Queensland (SWQ) were being made available so by 1880, influenced by Daniel Cudmore (senior) who it is understood already had interests in SWQ, my great grandfather Sidney Yeates and his family prepared to move stock and equipment again, this time to the area near Adavale departing on 15 October 1880 and arriving on 2 February 1881 to take up the combined leases known as “Boondoon” totalling 553 sq miles located east of Blackwater Creek, “Wakes Lagoon” and “Milo” (a Cudmore property 8km west), with “Listowel” to the north, “Ambathala” to the east and “Gumbardo” to the south, the “Boondoon” home station being about 12km from Adavale (pp 42-44).

Detailed descriptions of “Boondoon” are recorded (pp42-45) and provide a very detailed description of the land both at that time from regular inspection by government officials ensuring lease conditions were being met, and from his own expertise, based on his visit to the area in 1978. Arriving in what my great grandfather described as an “awful drought” could not have been welcoming. Having purchased the leases for 10,000 pounds including 3000 cattle, the Yeates family set out to convert for carrying their flock of sheep. Yeates provides vivid descriptions and reports that suggest, at best, the property in the 1880s was what might be described as marginal, that is, it could support a family-run operation despite the difficulties such as reliable water being too far from good native pasture.

As Yeates puts it, “... it is clear that Sidney (Yeates) and his sons embarked on a herculean task in deciding to develop “Boondoon”. Besides being rough topographically and of only light carrying capacity, the run was described as ‘inadequately watered’. Water certainly appears, from all the descriptions, to have been insufficient or unreliable in dry seasons” (p44). Precise descriptions of the topography, geology and vegetation at the various blocks are given together with their location (p44-5). Yeates also notes that despite at its peak being a thriving town with a population of around 180 and a major Cobb and Co depot, by 1978 Adavale was “... almost a ghost town” along with the deterioration of the properties such as “Boondoon” where nobody now lives and the homestead and “improvements” are now in final stages of decay (p46).

“Boondoon” is reported as carrying up to 45,000 sheep. Nearby “Milo” at its peak had 566,217 sheep shorn in 1892 and was carrying up to 45,000 cattle. This was before government requirements led to the breaking up of the large agglomerations. These include those associated with “Milo” and “Gooyea” associated with such names as Elder, Smith, and Cudmore leading to the formation of a sequence of corporate changes including Milo and Welford Downs Pastoral Company Limited with over 4000 square miles of mainly cattle properties. However serious floods followed by the major drought of 1893 led to huge losses including some 160,000 sheep lost due to drought on “Milo” (Milo Pastoral Company Limited, 1963). By then however the Yeates interests in “Boondoon” had been disposed, with several of the family moving to rural interests in Charleville, Springsure and elsewhere in Queensland. Sidney Yeates retired to Toowoomba (Yeates, 1979).

The next step relates to records kept of “Milo” and “Ambathala” which indicate an annual average rainfall of 15.51 inches over the 80 years from 1880 to 1960 with the best rainfall in one year, in 1950, 44 inches which included 12 inches in one night (MPCL, 1963, p19). In 1963, a severe flood saw losses of 600 to 1000 sheep on each property, Adavale flooded 3 feet above any known flood level, and Ambathala Creek and the Bulloo River at record heights. Yet this was followed by warm weather which brought good feed pasture. However fires and drought often follow as occurred in 1950 (pp21-22). Due to it being vague or even unreal, reference to average rainfall is next to useless in such conditions creating what has been described as “... the shadow of the biggest single threat to Australian pastoralists – drought” (p22). The variable and unpredictable nature of drought remains the most significant issue facing grazing in Australia (eg McKeon et al, 2009) leading to seemingly problematic if not inevitable irreversibility (eg Ludwig and Tongway, 1995). Recent droughts and very recent floods appear to confirm an ongoing cycle. The question is what to do.

Conclusion: History and transition over time can make explicit the extent that negative and positive outcomes are utilised to influence future implementation and changes in accepted practices. It has long been understood if contested, that the threat to the grazing lands lies in the optimism, the opportunism and the lack of understanding that led the early pioneers of grazing. The story outlined here, and in much more detail elsewhere, of the adventures of my family and others like them, is indicative. They struggled but survived, in each location, until new opportunities created new optimism, a process that arguably continues.

The bigger question however is whether these experiences have a message for how to transition to preserve if not conserve the opportunities. Clearly the much-admired grasslands of the past no longer exist as they did. Provision of watering has increased the numbers and intensities of impacts of “plagues” whether of locusts, mice, dogs and/or kangaroos. There have of course been success stories, many of which form the basis of positive promotion and marketing. But what of the negative impacts?

As case studies show properties such as “Boondoon” and sections of others are no longer considered viable, if they really ever were, what should be their future? They appear to suffer from excessive optimism in good times then comes the difficult decision when to reduce or de-stock, arguably and understandably left too late too often, leading inexorably to loss of vitality, reduced or loss of permeability, loss of shade and tree cover and of natural and introduced feed. If drought is such a threat, should areas on the margin of long-term reliability as previously used, be considered as suitable for sustainable uses including transition to new uses?

Should new ways of measuring their deterioration but also the potential for new uses determine their future use? At present it appears the effort to create an image of a sustainable grazing industry is ignoring the lessons of history and transition instead turning towards arguments supporting financial support to continue current and previous practices albeit with initiatives that are considered beneficial. Clearly, reliance on government funding risks the grazing industry being seen as being subsidised including from a world trade perspective. If indeed there is inadequate reliable water and soils are degraded, should such areas be allowed to regenerate without government subsidies in order to provide environmental benefits such as a return to a much more natural tree cover over time with no opportunity to again graze the areas? Is this the future and perhaps the price or cost for those areas to provide benefits to more sustainable areas or properties? These questions are clearly in as much need of answers as are those relating to the release of dogs, cats and cane toads. It is past the time for saying “we didn’t know the gun was loaded”. We do know what has to be done.

Status: early draft

Bio: A retired architect with post-graduate qualifications in environmental education and environmental management, my interest is inspired by similar aspirations to sustainability in urban areas tempered by the burden of history and the perceived often implied threat of change to established accepted standards.



Loading wool at Milo for transport to Brisbane.

Photo source: Milo Pastoral Company Limited



Photo source: Facebook: Adavale - Outback History Southwestern Queensland

References:

Yeates, N. T. M, 1979 "Stone on Stone: A Pioneer Family Saga" privately published. Also at https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:416803/Stone_on_stone.pdf

Milo Pastoral Company Limited 1963 "A History of Milo and Ambathala: The sheep and cattle runs in South-Western Queensland", Adelaide, self-published.

G. M. McKeon, G. S. Stone, J. I. Syktus, J. O. Carter, N. R. Flood, D. G. Ahrens, D. N. Bruget, C. R. Chilcott, D. H. Cobon, R. A. Cowley, S. J. Crimp, G. W. Fraser, S. M. Howden, P. W. Johnston, J. G. Ryan, C. J. Stokes and K. A. Day; "Climate change impacts on northern Australian rangeland livestock carrying capacity: a review of issues" in *The Rangeland Journal* 31(1) 1-29, March 2009

J.A Ludwig and D.J. Tongway "Desertification in Australia: An eye to grass roots and landscapes" in *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 37 (1-3) 231-237, January 1995

Accessed at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00546891> on 11 June 2019