

'In the interest of the country' A history of the Pastoral Board of South Australia 1893-1993

By Peter Donovan (1995)

Publisher: Pastoral Management Branch of the South Australian Department of Environment and Natural Resources, GPO Box 1047, Adelaide, 5001, SA. \$30, 236 pp. ISBN 0 646 26803 1

It was a surprising pleasure to come across this readable and interesting history of a rangeland bureaucracy written by a professional historian. There are numerous rangeland histories of individuals and places such as the classic works of Mary Durak and the more recent volumes by Margaret Shaw. In contrast, this book provides a historical perspective from the viewpoint of the administrators that have been involved in the development and management of South Australia's rangelands. It is an important viewpoint that balances the personal stories of people living in the rangelands.

The Pastoral Board of South Australia has administered various Acts of Parliament specific to the rangelands for the past 100 years. Throughout this time, the Board has been the focal point of conflict between public and private interests. The Board has rarely driven the agenda, but rather reacted to broad changes in community attitudes to pastoralism in the arid interior of the State. The only initiative originating within the Board has been the development over the past 20 years of scientifically based assessment of land condition. The current land assessment of every pastoral lease may be an important legacy the Board will be seen to have left if another history is written in 100 years. These assessments may provide an important and detailed baseline in which to assess trends in land conditions.

This book is entirely based in South Australia, but there are no doubt parallels with other State Administrations and similar lessons to be learned. Peter Donovan concludes by questioning the influence of the Board on land condition. I agree with him that the Board's influence is more apparent than real. Stocking rate limits have always been contentious, difficult to police, and rarely enforced both in South Australia and in other States. Many of the improved changes in land management over the past 30 years could have occurred in the absence of any agency such as the Board. Improved practices stem largely from better communication, roads, stock transport, experience and the every growing urban interest in the outback with associated increase in conservation demands.

From my reading, the Board's long and consistent efforts to enlarge small leases and oppose the subdivision of larger leases has been its most direct and significant influence on land management. The Board has been largely successful in this endeavour without any fanfare or public drama in contrast to recent events in other States. The Board has simply declined to consent to the transfer of substandard size holdings where they were to be used as a sole livelihood, and instead sought to build up leases.

Rangeland administration in Australia continues to evolve and seek new directions and methodologies. This book is an important contribution to this evolution as it tells an important story of where we've been, so perhaps we'll have a better idea of where we want to go.

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