

ALONG AN AUSTRALIAN ROAD

BY WILL H. OGILVIE

IN the Australian bush the main roads follow the rivers. This is inevitable in so dry a country. The nature of the traffic demands water at suitable intervals — water for the huge over-landing mobs of cattle and sheep, water for the teamsters' horses and bullocks, water for the horsemen and footmen who traverse the giant plains under a scorching and pitiless sun. It is true that there are certain roads leading into the waterless wastes along which at certain points have been excavated huge tanks or dams for the convenience of the traveling public, but the greater part of the moving population keeps to the rivers, following faithfully every bend and curve as though afraid to trust itself more than a few hundred yards from the sluggish brown water that spells life and hope in the desperate days of drought. That the river itself is often dry for a mile or two at a time only adds to the irony of the situation; but the traffic follows on from pool to pool, adjusting its day's stage and its night's camp to the exigencies of the moment and the vagaries of the dwindling stream.

Upon these winding river roads we find much of the romance and much of the tragedy of Australian outpost life.

The river road! If you have conjured up in fancy a long white-metaled highway trailing like a ribbon beside a sparkling stream, you may dismiss the thought at once. Picture instead a dark line of gum trees traced across the level plain as though by some giant's careless hand. Along this line, hidden

between its deep gray-colored banks, moves slowly the tardy current of the ditch dignified by the name of river. In times of drought — and that is to say at most times — it trickles slowly over muddy shallows and round the stems of fallen trees, half-choked with eucalyptus leaves, and trimmed with the bleaching carcasses of dead sheep and cattle, the haunt of repulsive catfish, the drinking place of slimy snakes and scuttling iguanas; in times of flood it comes roaring, bank high, round the bends, a tawny-maned and angry tide, carrying down great uprooted trees and the spoil and wreckage of the river towns, swirling out among the gray stems of the gums and spreading in a shield of silver across the sunlit plains, driving the traffic of the river road back to the high ground of the sandhills.

The road itself is no macadamized highway flanked with heaps of broken metal destined for its upkeep and repair, but a mere collection of deep ruts, crossing and re-crossing, carved deep in flood-time mire and crumbled into drought-time dust. Here, all day, you may listen to the crack of the whips and drone of the wheels as the teams come trampling down in the heavy table-top wagons with the six-inch tires; ten to sixteen horses with their jingling chains; twelve to eighteen bullocks leaning on their burning bows with lowered heads and slaving mouths. And here you may see the great mobs of traveling sheep spread for a wide half-mile across the flats, nibbling hurriedly at the short dry

grass, incessantly turning in before the busy dogs, only to turn out again the moment that they have passed; and the mobs of slowly-moving cattle, stalking majestically forward with big horned heads alternately lifted and lowered, and eyes ever searching for a tuft of brown barley grass that some previous mob has missed. Feed is generally scarce upon the river roads, and the traveling mobs are mostly hungry; but a long experience of limited rations has given them a sort of resigned languor, as if they would say, 'It does not really matter; we shall find it further on! Why worry?'

And there, a lone pathetic figure on the river road, is the swagman, the sundowner — thus picturesquely named because of his habit of arriving at a homestead exactly as the sun goes down, and so insuring that he will be offered rations and a place to camp should he desire it. There he stumbles in the crossing wheel-tracks, Australia's tramp and wanderer, with an individuality of his own which marks him out from all the wayfarers of the world. The gray dust of the plains is on his bronzed and bearded face, on his simple dress of Crimean shirt and moleskin trousers, on his rough unblackened boots, on his blanket-bundle strapped across his shoulders, on his swinging billy-can and dangling ration-bags. He carries no staff or stick, but instead a light switch, broken from a wilga tree or buddah bush, with which to brush away the myriad persistent flies which follow him in a dancing cloud. At his heels is a dog which may be the veriest mongrel, or may be a champion sheep dog of purest pedigree and worth anything up to £50. His day's march may be two miles or twenty, according to the goal which he has set himself to reach as the sun goes down. Sometimes he will camp for a day or a week or a month in a

bend of the river. Time is of no account to the sundowner on the river road.

Here, too, is the traveling shearer on his way out to the early sheds. A typical bushman this, sitting with long, easy seat his ambling waler, and leading a pack-horse on which are strapped his tent, his blankets, and all the simple necessities of his six-month trip. Sometimes the shearer travels alone, but more often he is one of a company of six or eight or more, who enliven the solitudes with song and jest, and make merry at night round a common camp fire.

On the far-out river roads there are few signs of human habitation other than the ever-moving tents of the travelers. At long intervals bush townships may be found, perched on some red sandhill on the river bank, with a due regard to safety from flood on the one side and from drought on the other. Before them is the never-to-be-trusted river; behind them the ever-to-be-feared, grim, mysterious, forbidding, yet beckoning bush. Dust whirls in the sandy, unpaved streets; goats browse on the stunted saltbush that lays a gray mantle on the very doorsteps; withered sunflowers stand like weary sentinels in gardens ravaged by the drought; blown umbrella grass whirls along the boarded verandas and piles in golden banks against the fences, and galvanized iron roofs flash and shimmer in the sun.

Here and there between the scattered townships a lonely sheep station has planted its headquarters by the river, fencing off from the hungry traveling mobs and teamsters' horses and bullocks, a square of horse paddock waving with girth-deep golden grass. Here again are boarded buildings, glittering iron roofs, huge water tanks, a windmill, and a Chinaman's garden flourishing in the arid waste like an

oasis in a desert. It is at such a homestead as this that the sundowner arrives at nightfall and demands his dole of tea, flour, and sugar—and gets it, too, for the old custom dies hard in this land of long distances. This little group of station buildings, a lonely outpost on the river road, may direct and control half a million acres of sheep country stretching away for miles and gray miles into the shimmering mystery of the plains.

The only other habitation to be met with on the outer roads is the bush hotel—pub—shanty: call it what you will. This may be a little inn, well kept and clean, where decent food and liquor can be obtained and good lodging for man and beast; or it may be the veriest hovel, kept by drunkards and slatterns and thieves for the mere purpose of poisoning and robbing the public that passes its doors. It stands on some ridge of sandhill, convenient to the river, and facing the wheel-tracks of the river road. In front of it the half-mile stock route is generally fenced into a two-chain lane, so that all traffic must pass through a narrow neck within sight of the swinging signboard, which blazons to the passers-by its name of pride or infamy—‘The Shearer’s Arms,’ ‘The Swagman’s Rest,’ ‘The Mulga Hut,’ ‘Brumby Camp,’ or ‘The Traveler’s Joy,’ and so on. Here again are Kipling’s ‘thin, tin, crackling roofs’ and the rough outhouses thatched with boughs, the inevitable herd of goats, the wind-blown yellow grasses, the flies, and the dust. And here, at almost any hour of the day, you may see one or more saddle horses tied to the horse-rail; a sundowner’s swag flung down in the veranda, a team drawn up in the shade of the great kurrajong at the roadside, or the dust of a traveling mob drifting slowly over the buddah bushes, while within the

men to whom they belong quench a week-long thirst—the gift of the river road.

These roads are not entirely left to man. When the droning wagon wheels and clinking chains have died away in distance, and the shearer’s song and the drover’s shout and whip-crack have echoed away in the river timber, you may see, as the dusk gathers, the wild things of the bush come across the river road to water at the fast drying pools. Great, loping, deliberate kangaroos; emus with their slow, kingly tread; scrub wallabies, swift and alert; and maybe, if the spot is very remote and you yourself are silent as the trees about you, a lean brown shadow that glides ghostily from scrub to river bank—a dingo thirsty after long travel or grim in pursuit of prey; and down the trampled cattle tracks come the great half-wild, spear-horned bush bullocks, and the cows with their calves at foot, high-headed, suspicious; sheep padding in their thousands with a gray-blue veil of dust above them; station horses walking contentedly but with a purpose, glad at last to be rid of the flies, and reveling in the cool air that just stirs the gum leaves. Sometimes, perhaps, wild horses—brumbies—snorting and shy, tossing long manes and tails as they rush past one another biting and playing, but always quick-eyed and quick-eared, and ready at the snap of a twig beneath your foot to dash back to the dark scrub and safety.

Then the camp fires; the full night glory of the river road when the stars burn white above the gum trees in that deep, intense blue that only southern skies can show! One by one the fires leap up in the river timber; here on a sandhill, there in a black-soil bend; camping places chosen only with a view to convenient water and adjacent firewood. The drover’s twinkling

circle of watch fires, drawn round his footsore, coughing sheep; the teamster's fire showing up in relief the looming dark bulk of his wagon with its towering load of wool bales, and glinting on the piled chair-harness hung across his wagon shafts, while all round it clang and clash the team bells on his feeding horses. The swagman's small fire glows like a low red star against the dark line of the scrub. Beside it he has made his bed on a rare spring mattress of gathered pine plumes. On these he has spread one blanket, and, drawing another over him, has lain down on a couch fit for a king, sweet-scented and soft, under a glorious canopy of gold and blue; sung to sleep by the croon of the night wind in the river oaks and the far-off boom of the bullock bells on the sandhill.

The shearers' camp fire, fed generously by reckless and willing hands, flares up against the night in sheets of golden flame, lighting up the trodden sand for thirty yards on either side, and chasing the shadows high up into the gum boughs. It is a merry camp, and song and laughter drift across the river road and die away in the scrub. At last these merry light-hearts, too, will spread their blankets on the friendly sand, and lie down with spurred feet to the firelight, dreaming their dreams of soft-fleeced ewes and tallies of two hundred, and of fortunes to be won at euchre in the shearing huts.

There is stress and cruelty and tragedy on the river roads. When the floods have come and gone, and left the swamps a bottomless quagmire, you can hear the ceaseless whips at work as the gallant horse teams strain and struggle to move their gigantic loads through the clinging black soil; and you can hear now and again the bellow of a team bullock as the heavy thong comes down and leaves its

crossed red ribbons on his tortured hide. And when the land has been scorched and riven by two years of constant drought, and the last tuft of withered bluegrass has shriveled up and disappeared from the trampled stock route; when the river is nothing but a chain of water holes, hoof-churned and muddy, then you can hear the moaning of the great mobs of thirsty cattle — a sound than which there is no sadder on God's earth — as they move slowly forward down the river road, gaunt and thin and hungry, until fortune brings them to some deeper reach or pool where they may be safely taken down to drink.

The river road has become a haunt of horror through which stalk ceaselessly and mechanically scattered mobs of station sheep, which have traveled great distances across the plains to reach this, the last of the water; lean cattle; starving, hide-bound horses. The wild things share the suffering. Brumbies, mere skin and bone, with prominent eyes and shuffling feet, scarcely turn aside to avoid you as they plod stiffly toward the muddy pools, sniffing the blessed water with lifted nostrils. Kangaroos, grown gaunt and terrible in their leanness, hop painfully forward to the river timber; emus, suffering less than the others, searching for seeds on the parched ground as they go, nevertheless, hurry with the others toward the drying pools; rabbits, tucked up and wasted, run light-headedly to and fro vainly searching for food.

A sundowner, walking quickly and nervously, passes down among the dusty wagon tracks; his empty water bag dangles on his arm; the fear of death is in his eyes — no water — no water — and where is the next? In every bend and in every clump of timber along the river road lie the skeletons of animals, grim toll of the

drought. Here a horse that has fallen in the chains, there a bullock that has died in the bow. Great heaps of bones; little heaps; skulls; ribs picked clean by the crows and eagle-hawks; sun-dried hides that rattle in the wind. A cemetery of the wild!

Rain comes, and the scene changes as though at the touch of a magic wand. A green shade covers the stock route, spreads, thickens into verdure, mantles the gray half-mile, and cloaks the red sandhill. The wild melon springs up through the whitened bones, and covers death with a glory of flower. Sandalwood scents the air, and the buddah bushes break into pink-white bloom. The emu-bush is starred with white, and the gray gums freshen into green. The long procession of starved creatures ceases as if by magic; there is feed on the outer plains and water-in-every-clay-pan and *gilgai* hollow, and the river road knows them no more. The river itself rises steadily, joining water hole to water hole, mending its broken links, and running now in one continuous stream. And with the stream of the river returns the stream of traffic to the river road. Once more the broad-tired wagons

creak and swing across the flats, with fat horses and bullocks in good heart. Traveling mobs of sheep and cattle come gayly through, spreading wide over the lush green grass that decks both plain and sandhill.

No one who has ever traversed the outer highways can forget them. For him every heap of whitening bones, every circle of gray ashes, has a story. In his ears ring ceaselessly the threat of the whips, the gloating of the carrion birds, the welcome of the crackling *gidya* logs, the nightly comfort of the bells. Before him, like an open book, is spread the toil and tramp and laughter of the pioneers.

Time hurries on and brings with it the changes that keep step, and the river roads give way to progress like the rest. Motor cars and bicycles take the place of table-top wagons and shearers' hacks, and many a river road is now a kept and metaled highway, linking prosperous town to town and farm to farm. But always farther on and farther out are the roads that fascinate and charm — appealing in spite of their tragedy — roads cut by crossing ruts and edged by bleaching skeletons, and lit by lonely fires.

The King's Highway

EDUCATION BY SCIENCE

BY STANLEY DE BRATH

Les enfants étant si intelligents, comment se fait-il que les hommes soient si bêtes? Ca vient de l'éducation!

A RECENT, very excellent article on 'Education by the Humanities'* showed the admirable results obtained at Drighlington (Elementary) School, Bradford, by a system of vernacular literary reading. It was demonstrated that by this plan 'children of twelve will have read many good books, and, when left at school till fourteen, will be far in advance of the children in other elementary schools and will have read a mass of good literature which will enable them to live clean, useful, and intelligent lives after leaving school.' They also, it appears, take pleasure in collecting little libraries of their own, and the child so trained 'starts life with a ready-made library of good books and a love of reading them which is like wearing chain armor against the vicissitudes of life.'

The Education Director's report on five schools in Gloucestershire, which began the method only last year, says that 'it was quite plain that the children had plunged into the wealth of books with a whole-hearted enjoyment,' and that 'girls of eleven had so gained in command of words and facility of expression that they were writing three or four times as much as they would have done before the change, and were using a vocabulary they never would have used at all.'

This is all to the good; it is a great advance, and can hardly be praised too highly in contrast with the old

system. But there is another side to the matter. If taken alone, it may be repeating the colossal mistake of the Educational Department in India, which, by its purely literary methods, trained a proletariat of the pen, scorning handwork, exalting glibness and sophistry into fine arts, and living by political agitation. Command of words and facility of expression is the curse of India, as it is of Ireland; and it may easily become the curse of England also. Moreover, if not balanced with exact knowledge, it tends to encourage in after years that glorification of mere opinion which is the source of so many of our present social conflicts.

The great difficulty which is experienced in any discussion (however friendly) to which some definite conclusion is desired, whether it be a trade dispute, a political argument, or a religious question, is to find a common ground of admitted fact. Each party starts from his own limited experiences as if they were the whole truth; and they do not argue to reach truth, but wrangle for victory. This is very largely the result of the purely literary training which gives a command of language, called by each disputant the 'prejudices' of the other; and, as a rule, they separate, each fortified in his own opinion, because each has heard 'views,' miscalled 'reasons.' They 'agree to differ'—which matters little when no practical conclusions are pending, but much when

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