

FARMING IN THE PATERSON DISTRICT

Scattered throughout the coastal districts of New South Wales, from Port Macquarie in the north to the Illawarra district in the south, and in the inland valleys along the edge of the Great Dividing Range, were the paddocks and homesteads of the farmers. They were usually self-sufficient in food, and had little to sell to the outside world except occasionally a spare horse, sheep or ox, or some salted butter, wheat or corn. A settler who emigrated from India to settle in the district bordering on the Paterson and Allyn rivers in New South Wales commented on the three years he spent there:

During the three years I resided in Australia, I lived almost entirely on the banks of the Paterson, and the reader may therefore depend upon the correctness of my information regarding every thing in that neighbourhood. It bears a high character for the salubrity of its climate; and very justly so, according to my experience. Not a member of my establishment was ill the whole time we were there; nor do I recollect a serious case of illness among our neighbours. The winter is mild, — just cold enough to make a fire comfortable; while the fine frosty mornings do great good to one who has arrived from India. I used to enjoy them exceedingly, and invariably walked out before breakfast to breathe the fine clear air. The cold weather sets in in April, and continues till September. This is the season to enjoy a gallop in chase of that most extraordinary animal, the kangaroo. Notwithstanding that this part of the country is rather hilly, the hardy horses manage to carry their riders across it in safety. The river abounds with wild duck at this season, as well as with perch and a small fish here called herring, from its resemblance to that fish. The settler may thus not only find amusement for himself in shooting or fishing, but may make a very agreeable addition to his bush fare by his morning's ramble. . . . Speaking of a garden, we had an excellent orchard, which supplied us with abundance of apricots, peaches, nectarines, figs, green-gages, apples, pears, and oranges, while the garden furnished many a dish of strawberries: for gooseberries, the climate is not cold enough.

In March and April, the farmer is busied in preparing his fields for wheat-sowing, which ought to be finished by the middle of May. Of this grain, the ground here yields a fair crop, though not equal to that usually reaped near Maitland: it is, however, generally more than sufficient for the use of the district, which may be called a grain-exporting one. Some farmers sow wheat on land from which they have just reaped a crop of Indian corn: this proves, I need scarcely say, in the long run, very bad economy. On a farm where wheat, corn, and tobacco are grown, there is always abundance of employment for old and young. Should field labour be suspended by the inclemency of the weather, or by any other cause, the farmer finds his servants full occupation in husking maize, threshing wheat, stripping, shifting, and curing tobacco. I used to keep my convict-labourers employed in light work, such as the above-mentioned, till ten o'clock at night: this I had no right to exact; but my plan was, to keep a regular account current with every convict on the place, giving him credit so much for every extra hour he worked, and letting him know, every Saturday night, how much was due to him, which I allowed him to take out in any shape but money or spirits. Giving him the former, would have enabled him to procure the latter. It was generally taken out in tea and

sugar; and I never had the slightest trouble in settling these little accounts. I had ten convicts assigned to me by Government; and I confess that I would rather have had those men than most of the free emigrants that came to the Colony. Over the convict, the master has great power, the knowledge of which on the part of the servant, with good treatment and a firm hand held over him, will make him do a great deal of work. The Government allowance of rations does not include tea, sugar, or tobacco; but most masters allow two ounces of the first and last, and one pound of the second per week; which not only makes the men contented, but gives the master more hold over them, as they stand in fear of his stopping the indulgence in the event of misconduct. . . . Nothing tends more directly to promote the good order of a farm, than mustering everybody on it at noon on Sunday, for the purpose of reading Divine service to them. Setting aside the moral benefit that this practice may be supposed to produce, it puts an effectual stop to distant wandering on that day. A man who has to appear cleanly dressed on Sunday at noon, cannot stray far from home either before or after that hour. On farms where this custom is not kept up the convict starts at daylight for some haunt where spirits are to be had, to pay for which he has most probably robbed his master; there he spends the day in riot and ribaldry, and reels home about midnight in a state that renders him very unfit for resuming his work on Monday morning. The convict-servant soon finds out what sort of a master he has to deal with, and, to use their own slang, after trying it on for a bit, in nine cases out of ten, he yields to circumstances. Two of mine tried a few of their old pranks at starting; but a timely, though moderate application of "the cat," put an entire stop to them. It is, however, useless to say more on this subject, as the system of assigning servants to private individuals has been done away with by orders from the Home Government. The female convicts are much more difficult to manage than the men, and often set their masters at defiance: they are generally of the lowest and most wretched class of women.

—G. F. Davidson, *Trade and Travel in the Far East; or Recollections of Twenty-One Years passed in Java, Singapore, Australia, and China,*

London, 1846, pp. 130—7