

## *The Rabbit Industry in South-Eastern Australia, 1788-2000.*

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In 1929, newspapers reported that the rabbit industry in south-eastern Australia (southern Queensland, New South Wales [NSW], Victoria, Tasmania and eastern South Australia) was one of the largest employers of labour in the nation. Over 20,000 trappers worked full-time trapping for carcasses or skins, or poisoning for skins. Tens of thousands of men, women and children trapped part-time. Thousands were employed in numerous freezer works located in rural towns and capital cities, grading, sorting, packing, skinning and transporting carcasses by the tens of millions. Thousands more were employed by the multitude of skin buying firms located throughout rural areas and in the capital cities. Hundreds sold rabbits in the streets of cities or worked in small goods shops that retailed rabbits. Over 10,000 workers made felt hats, furs or fur strips out of rabbit skins, pine boxes for the rabbit export trade, gelatine from skin scraps, and fertilizer and animal feed from the remains of rabbits unfit for human consumption.

The focus of this paper is on the commercialisation of the rabbit and how the rabbit industry became an economic powerhouse in rural Australia. The central argument is that the export of preserved rabbit meat, rabbit skins and frozen carcasses, and major increases in rates of local consumption bolstered the industry. Also important is the dramatic impact the industry had on rural workers and the communities they lived in. The paper highlights that the rabbit industry provided thousands of trappers with cash money on a daily basis. This money was spent in local rural businesses. Instead of poorly paid seasonal work, unskilled and semi-skilled rural workers now had well paid employment all year. They could reside in one location and did not have to travel continuously in search of paid work. The paper also shows that urban based workers in a host of different occupations rushed to enter the industry. Trappers, as independent suppliers, chose when to work and for how long, whether to work for skins or carcasses or both, and who to sell to. After a brief account of the introduction of the wild rabbit, the paper analyses the preserving industry, the skin and carcase export trade, local consumption and the financial benefits enjoyed by the trappers and the communities they lived in.

Product flowed from the industry's various sectors. The preserving sector started in the early 1870s and over the next five decades works were established in Victoria, NSW, Tasmania and South Australia, all of whom worked each year during the 'season', from April to October. Most works purchased between 300,000 to 500,000 rabbit carcasses a year, while some repeatedly purchased over a million carcasses a year. Skin exports started in the 1830s, but export figures for the period to 1875 are patchy. Victoria exported 135,822,021 rabbit skins during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and Tasmania exported over 60 million skins between 1872 and 1900. During the first half of the twentieth century, Australia exported 463 million pounds of rabbit skins, up to 4.5 billion skins of different grades. Frozen exports commenced in the early 1890s and exporters in Victoria, NSW and South Australia exported approximately 20 million carcasses over the decade. These three states along with Queensland and Tasmania exported a total of 640 million frozen carcasses from 1901 to 1950. Consumption of rabbit meat commenced in the first years of white settlement in NSW and the civil, military, religious and landed elite in all colonies

maintained rabbit warrens or kept rabbits in hutches to at least 1860 to ensure a ready supply of meat. Consumption of canned rabbit or fresh rabbit meat accelerated after 1870. By the late 1890s, reports claimed that Melburnians ate 70,000 rabbit carcasses a week, while Sydneysiders consumed 30,000 a week. Consumption rates soared in the twentieth century, and by the late 1940s Australians in the south-east were eating 27 million rabbit carcasses a year.

After 1950, the industry began a slow but terminal decline. The introduction of myxomatosis in 1950, competition in the carcass export market from the People's Republic of China after 1957, changing eating habits and the growth of the chicken meat industry after 1960, and changing fashions as men stopped wearing fur felt hats (from the 1920s but increasingly so from the mid 1960s) and women stopped wearing furs reduced supply of product and closed markets. The accidental release of rabbit haemorrhagic disease in late 1995 (also known as rabbit calicivirus disease) and its spread throughout south-east Australia in the ensuing years brought what was left of the industry to a rapid halt. By 2000, rabbit numbers had reached historical lows.

### **References**

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