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PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

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“THE RABBITS DESTRUCTION ACT :”

REPORT OF CHIEF INSPECTOR.

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Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency's Command.



*Inspector of Stock Office,  
Hobart, June 30, 1891.*

SIR,

I HAVE the honor to forward my Report upon the working of "The Rabbits Destruction Act, 1889."

When submitting my Report for 1890 the present Act had only existed Six months, and as a large amount of preliminary work was necessary during the season when rabbits ought to be effectively and readily destroyed, no stringent measures were adopted, but Inspectors were instructed by me to exercise tact and judgment in the performance of their duties, and to enlighten those who were ignorant of the new law as to the way in which future action would be taken.

I can now, after 18 months' practical administration of the law, inform you that an amendment is absolutely required to enable Inspectors to enforce what I earnestly anticipate will be the means of materially reducing the rabbit pest. My opinion is borne out by several practical owners of rabbit country. The amendment required is a clause enforcing the simultaneous laying of poisoned grain throughout the country. Victoria has benefited by such action. This course of procedure, assisted by the erection of wire netting fencing will, I believe, be the most successful means to effect the dislodgment of rabbits.

A meeting was convened at Melton Mowbray on the 11th April last, to deal with the rabbit question. Twelve landholders were present, who passed a Resolution, "That the present Act should be abolished; that the Government should encourage the enclosure of large areas with rabbit-proof wire netting, by supplying it at cost price and allowing time payment."

One of the conveners in his remarks intimated that "the rabbits would not be destroyed by inspection," and "that rabbits cannot be destroyed by any amount of Inspectors."

I maintain Inspectors do not receive appointments or remuneration to destroy rabbits, but to see that occupiers fairly and honestly do their utmost to prevent the increase of the pest, which, to my mind, is a far more onerous and difficult duty than that required of occupiers of land. There is an opinion expressed by a few agitators (who themselves indifferently comply with the law) that the Inspectors fail to do good work, and they delight upon every occasion to impress upon those who do not think for themselves that Inspectors are the enemies of owners of rabbit country. If these gentlemen would take the trouble to ascertain what are my general instructions to Inspectors they would find how unwarrantable are the views they promulgate; and, further, the whole facts connected with the working of past Rabbit Acts have never been fully considered; which, in common fairness, should have been done before the endeavours of the Stock Department to deal with this difficult question were publicly denounced, as was the case at the meeting on the 11th April.

For your information and that of the public generally, I beg to give a brief outline of the staff of Inspectors that were at the command of this Department to administer the law of Rabbits Destruction Acts, 1882-83-84." Five Inspectors were employed to perform the duty; but prior to the advent of the Rabbit Board System in 1889, the Stock Department was only allowed two Inspectors for the whole Island to attempt the impossible work of supervision.

The distaste in which the present Act appears to be held is attributable in a measure to the fact that I am determined, as far as lies in my power, that all occupiers, large as well as small, shall comply with the law.

In 1889, when Board rule existed, 1,819,547 rabbit skins were exported through Customs, and in 1890, 2,991,916—showing an increase of 1,100,000 in round numbers taken under the present administration.

Those who favour the Board system may possibly argue that they had less rabbits to kill; but I hold more rabbits were alive and allowed to breed in the spring of 1889, which now, to a certain extent, have been reduced by means of constant inspection and agitation.

The Crown lands of the Colony have been constantly inspected, and when necessity arose poisoned grain has been used—in all cases with good results. This expenditure will continue, consequent upon the pest being hunted from the private holdings into the Crown estate.

I leave you, Sir, and the thinking occupiers of land, to judge from the above figures if the Stock Department staff have not fairly, honestly, and well performed their duty against the obstacles that many place in the way of dealing with this momentous question.

From the foundation of this Department in 1870 up to 1891, the Chief Inspectors past and present, with the staff of Inspectors, have been inveighed against as lazy officials and not able to earn their livelihood in any other employment, forgetful of our record that Tasmania has now immunity from scab, for which this Department was first created, and for which sheepowners must be thankful; and if uniform action were enforced, the result might be attained as regards rabbits. I have to inform you that, through the laxity of some large landowners, rabbits are numerous in certain favourite haunts throughout most districts, and this is brought about by some owners failing to fairly destroy rabbits during the breeding season. That being the period of the year when shearing and harvesting operations are general, occupiers urge Inspectors to give them time to accomplish the work before taking proceedings, so that the labour they are employing may be utilised to kill rabbits when the harvest work is over. Inspectors, knowing the labour difficulty, comply, for which good office they ultimately often receive abuse, as all neighbours make complaints, each blaming the other for the increase of rabbits, and the unfortunate Inspectors for showing leniency. It is important you should know that this is also the season during which the destruction of rabbits for consumption and their skins is unprofitable—the first from the difficulty of getting the carcasses to market in a wholesome condition, and the latter from the inferior quality of the fur. Occupiers in most cases, instead of being more active and energetic in destroying rabbits, simply perform sufficient work to prevent the possibility of Inspectors instituting successful proceedings: the consequent result is, rabbits are abundant for trappers to profitably continue their annual skin-collecting during the late autumn, winter, and spring months. The increased number of rabbits enable some settlers to dispose of the right of trapping at such a figure that no further outlay is necessary for at least nine months out of the twelve months, while for the three remaining months rabbits are, as I have previously described, allowed to breed, the owners being forgetful of the injury accruing to the estate and annoyance to possibly a careful neighbour. Wire-netting fencing under such conditions will certainly protect the careful settler. I fail to see that the abolition of the Rabbits Destruction Act from the Statutes of the Colony (which means no supervision), and the encouragement of the enclosure of large areas with rabbit-proof wire-netting, supplied at cost price upon terms by the Government, will possibly effect what speakers at the meeting at Melton Mowbray on the 11th April wish you, Sir, and the public to believe. With the knowledge I have of the pest, I am sanguine in the belief that if occupiers of land would work with and assist Inspectors in the performance of an unpleasant duty, by carrying out necessary work at the proper season of the year—viz., when rabbits cannot be trapped or be tempted to take poisoned grain, they would use an exterminator to destroy rabbits (old and young) in burrows, and this would prevent the staff of Inspectors being obliged to resort to legal proceedings, which are alike distasteful to occupiers and Inspectors.

The Torpedo Extermination Machine trials, made under the observations of the Inspecting Staff, proved this to be a valuable destroyer. The first cost is within the means of any settler. It is easy of conveyance, and the working expenses per diem small. I feel sure the general use of exterminators during the breeding season would materially reduce rabbits in burrowing country where they have established their colonies for distribution.

I must again refer to a paragraph in my Report for 1890, which is as follows:—

The next great evil to be apprehended is the establishment of any Rabbit Preserving Company for shipment. This will encourage landowners, as it has done in the past, to depend upon summer increase of rabbits for a profit in the shape of a bonus from trappers for the right of taking skins and carcasses, as has been frequently done in Tasmania. Such establishments should be suppressed as injurious to the country and revenue.

As long as rabbits and rabbit skins have a commercial value at certain seasons of the year, there is no doubt that there will be very great difficulty in eradicating the pest; but if the policy formerly adopted in New South Wales was followed in Tasmania, namely, the compulsory destruction of every skin, I am convinced that before long, a very marked reduction in the numbers would be the result, presuming always that the provisions of the Act were faithfully carried out by all landholders.

I have the honor to be,  
Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

THOMAS A. TABART, *Chief Inspector.*

*The Honorable the Chief Secretary.*