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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL.

SCAB IN SHEEP ACT.

INSPECTOR'S REPORT FOR 1870-71.

Laid upon the Table by Mr. Wilson, and ordered by the Council to be printed,  
November 8, 1871.



*Inspector of Sheep Office, Hobart Town, 1st November, 1871.*

SIR,

I HAVE the honor to submit for your consideration my Report upon the working of the "Scab Act, 1870," from the time it came into operation up to the present date.

The "Scab Act, 1870," was passed during the Session of 1869, and it was intended by its framer that it should come into operation on the 1st of January, 1870; but unfortunately, through some misconception of the probable results which might arise if a later date was fixed upon, an amendment was carried which postponed the date when the Act should become law until the 1st of March, 1870.

As the general shearing season terminates early in January, the postponement of the Act taking effect until the 1st of March acted generally as a postponement of the operation of the compulsory dipping provisions for twelve months, or until after the termination of the shearing season in 1870-71. But although this was the general result of the change in the date of the Act becoming law from the 1st January, 1870, to the 1st of March of the same year, there were many sheepowners who acted upon the impression that dipping was compulsory immediately after the shearing of 1869-70; and in many cases with such satisfactory results, that some gentlemen who had very strongly and earnestly opposed the introduction of a Scab Act, in the firm belief that it would be so detrimental to the interests of sheepowners,—that possibly, nay probably, it would involve the ruin of themselves and that of hundreds of others of the same class,—on finding how beneficial their compliance with the dipping provisions of the Scab Act had proved, wrote and otherwise informed me of the fact, and ever since that time have heartily lent me the weight of their influence upon public opinion, and the benefit of their advice in enabling me to frame such a Bill to amend the present Act as, it is hoped, will meet the defects which practical experience of its working has developed.

When the Act became law on the 1st of March, and I was appointed Chief Inspector, the question came to be considered how the contribution to the "Scab Act Fund" was to be levied, and who should be appointed Receiver. It appeared evident that if the contributions were to be paid direct to the Treasury, grave difficulties would be likely to arise through errors and inaccuracies on the part of sheepowners complying with a law new to them in its forms, and to a considerable section of them exceedingly distasteful both in its letter and its spirit; that these errors and inaccuracies would involve a large amount of correspondence which it would be inconvenient to carry on in the Treasury; and therefore it was considered by the Government advisable that in the first place, in addition to the duties of Chief Inspector, I should also undertake to receive the contributions under the Act.

I willingly acquiesced in this decision, although I was quite aware it would involve a great amount of labour not contemplated when I accepted the Chief Inspectorship. Undoubtedly the duties of Receiver have involved much labour, as the records of the office will show; but I do not regret having undertaken this additional duty, as after two seasons' collection, I am satisfied the arrangement has prevented difficulties arising which would have produced great irritation in the minds of many sheepowners; and although these difficulties would perhaps have been trifling in themselves, and the amounts involved of a very petty character indeed, still I am persuaded they would have very materially interfered with the successful launching of the Act.

The preliminary work which had to be done after the Act came into operation in March, 1870, the collection of the first contribution, and occasional visits to public sales, fully occupied my time until the month of June of that year, when it appeared to me to be necessary that two Inspectors should be appointed—one in the Northern and the other in the Southern portion of the Island, to attend public sales, and as far as possible gradually put a check upon diseased sheep being exposed for sale, or travelled on the public highways. This duty the two Inspectors, with my assistance, were enabled to perform up to the shearing season of 1870-71, when the compulsory dipping provisions having come into operation, it became necessary to appoint three more Inspectors. Accordingly in November three additional Inspectors were appointed, and stationed in such a manner as appeared to me best calculated to enable them to see that the law was carried out as fully as circumstances and the great extent of country over which their duties extended would admit of.

The wide extent of Inspectors' districts, and the large number of small sheepowners, have proved serious obstacles in the way of that complete inspection under the dipping provisions of the Act which I should have desired to see carried out; but I have every reason to be satisfied with the energy and judgment which have been exercised by every member of the Inspecting staff: and moreover, I have much pleasure in having it in my power to report to you that the results of the operation of the Scab Act up to the present time may safely be pronounced eminently satisfactory—an opinion which many of its former opponents with commendable candour now freely admit to be correct.

I am in receipt of written expressions of opinion from sheepowners in every District throughout the Island, bearing the amplest testimony to the great and beneficial change which the Act has already effected; and I feel confident that if it is amended in the way proposed in a Bill now in the hands of the Attorney-General, the leading features of which have received the assent of a large section of the sheepowners throughout the Island, the number of infected flocks in Tasmania will be reduced within very narrow limits before the end of 1872.

The feeling of antagonism to a Scab Act which existed in the minds of very many intelligent sheepowners, in common with those possessed of less general knowledge and consequently stronger prejudices, arising from imaginary difficulties and evils they believed would result from the introduction of such a measure into Tasmania, has almost entirely passed away. The evils and difficulties have proved myths,—the creation of heated imaginations carried away by the erroneous idea that it was an unconstitutional infringement of the liberty of the subject, and ran counter to the popular fallacy that every man has a right to do what he likes with his own;—in short, it was represented by some as an Act far more suited to the atmosphere of Russia or Algiers than a Colony of Englishmen. The dreaded evils, however, have not made their appearance, but instead thereof a most beneficial change in the appearance of the flocks throughout the Island has become unmistakeably apparent to every man of candour and observation who has had an opportunity afforded him of comparing the past, of only two years ago, with the present condition of sheep in Tasmania, as regards their freedom from Scab and consequent increased productiveness in wool, so far as that improved condition and increased productiveness is traceable to the absence of or greatly reduced amount of that disease.

In several points the Act has been found defective. Practical experience has shown that some of its provisions are not quite applicable to the circumstances of Tasmania in their present form, and require modification; others again are found to be unnecessary, and although very harmless in themselves, may as well be repealed; while at the same time it has become apparent to me and to many others who have devoted attention to the Act that it requires some serious defects of omission to be supplied, more particularly with reference to the dipping and travelling provisions, on the proper amendment and stringent administration of which must depend whether the time shall be short or protracted when the Scab disease shall cease to exist in the flocks of Tasmania.

I believe that the Bill now in the Attorney-General's hands, if passed into law without material alteration, will effectually cover the defects of the present Act and supply its deficiencies in every respect, so far as my study of the subject and observation of the working of the measure up to the present time enables me to judge.

Although it is quite true that a vast amount of good has already been effected, and is equally true that with the present staff I believe I shall succeed with the Act in eradicating Scab from Tasmania within the time stated when I introduced the Bill to the Legislative Council,—viz., 5 years from the date when the Act should become law,—still I feel persuaded that if I had two additional Inspectors during the next 12 months after the month of December of this year, it would greatly facilitate the speedy accomplishment of that most desirable object, and at the same time be more economical in the end. If the half-penny per head had been allowed to remain in the Bill as it passed the Upper House (*in italics*) with the sanction of some of the largest sheepowners in Tasmania, it would no doubt have afforded a fund more than sufficient to cover the then estimated current expenditure of the inspecting staff, if the number of sheep in Tasmania had proved to be what the Stock and Crop Returns indicated, taking an average of 4 years, 1864–65–66 and 67; viz., 1,736,946. The Stock and Crop Returns as taken at that time, however, turned out most deceptive with reference to the number of sheep in the Island, as the same Returns made in 1870 showed only 1,531,187, and the Returns made to me under the Scab Act only gave 1,418,883.

The discrepancy between the number of sheep returned in the Stock and Crop Returns for 1870 and the number returned to me under the Scab Act may be accounted for in some measure from the fact that persons taking the Stock and Crop Returns very often include the same or portions of the same flocks in two different Districts. This is often the case with some of the migratory flocks that remain a portion of the year in the Lake Country. There is another reason, however, which, in my opinion, accounts for the bulk of the difference in numbers before referred to, and it arises from a defect in the working of the Scab Act as regards Returns and the mode and time of making them. This defect I hope will be supplied by a provision in the Bill to amend the Act.

But although the difference in numbers returned in the Annual Statistics in 1870 and 1871, and the number returned under the Scab Act can be accounted for, I cannot in any satisfactory manner account for the enormous falling off from the average of 1864 to 1867 as compared with 1870, viz., about 200,000 sheep.

The loss of sheep from fluke and consequent turning sheep into cattle-runs would not reasonably account for much more than one-half of this diminution; and if we take the export of wool from Tasmania for a series of years from 1861 to 1870 inclusive, we are as far as ever from a satisfactory solution of the difficulty.

The number of sheep and cattle in the Colony as shown by the Annual Statistics for the years from 1858 to 1870-71 inclusive are as under:—

<i>Year.</i>	<i>Sheep.</i>	<i>Cattle.</i>	<i>Sheep on Crown Land.</i>
1858.....	1,504,393	79,460	
1859.....	1,693,199	79,950	
1860.....	1,700,930	83,366	
1861.....	1,714,498	87,114	
1862.....	1,661,225	83,143	
1863.....	1,800,811	90,446	
1864.....	1,736,540	89,801	
1865.....	1,752,719	90,020	
1866.....	1,722,804	88,370	
1867.....	1,742,914	86,598	111,965
1868-9.....	1,715,617	105,450	115,062
1869-70 ....	1,531,187	95,097	110,453
1870-71 ....	1,349,775	101,459	95,314

It will be observed that the reduction in the number of sheep on crown land is smaller in proportion than the reduction on private property. The prediction that the Scab Act would cause crown lands to be largely abandoned has turned out, as I expected, a mere delusion. Instead of causing crown lands to be abandoned, it will ere long tend to increase their occupation and enhance their value.

A reference to the Customs returns discloses the fact that no diminution in the quantity of wool shipped from the Colony has taken place, although there is an apparent decrease of nearly 400,000 sheep since the year 1867. The quantity of wool shipped in 1870, the clip of 1869, if we add the cargoes of three wool ships, or 4050 bales cleared out in December, 1869, fully comes up to the average of former years, notwithstanding the enormous falling off in the number of sheep.

How is this to be accounted for? 1st. I think the stock returns were most inaccurate until a recent period, and up to 1869-70 they were given by many sheepowners in an exaggerated form. 2nd. Taking an average of years since 1858, there would appear to be an increase of from 15,000 to 20,000 head of cattle. This increase of cattle arising from sheep-runs having been turned into cattle-runs in consequence of fluke, a steadier demand for beef and mutton having sprung up, and the total abandonment of large tracts of country as sheep-runs on account of fluke, reasonably accounts for a large diminution in the number of sheep since 1868-9, probably to the extent of 150,000. 3rd. The ravages of the rabbits in many parts of the Colony, I think without any exaggeration, would account for 50,000 more. As an example I may mention the fact of a gentleman in the Campbell Town district having informed me that where formerly he had from 50 to 60 bales of wool, his sheep had been so reduced in number from want of food that last year he had only 10 bales.

Therefore, if we take the diminished number of sheep from the abandonment of runs on account of fluke, the substitution of cattle for sheep on those and other runs, and the diminished number from the effect of the rabbit plague, we can account for the number of sheep being about 200,000 less than some few years ago. Still we have the fact of the undiminished quantity of wool shipped from the Colony unaccounted for; and this, I think, may be attributed to two causes: 1st. A tendency to an improved system of sheep farming by reducing the numbers of sheep on overstocked runs with a view to produce mutton for a steadier and more certain market, causing the sheep to be in better condition on those runs, and consequently more productive in wool; and 2nd. The greatly improved condition of the sheep produced by the operation of the Scab Act. For although the Act did not become law until March, 1870, it was passed in the Session of 1869, and its provisions, and what would be required by it, were very freely and fully discussed in Parliament and through the Press from the beginning of 1869 up to the time when the Bill finally passed. The subject had taken root in the minds of sheepowners generally, and with the Scab Act looming in the distance, a

very large number erected dips and prepared themselves to meet the requirements of the law when it should come into operation. In this manner I think the Act effected a great amount of good twelve months before it became law.

There has been for some years past a marked diminution in the number of fat sheep and bullocks imported into this Colony, arising principally from boiling-down and meat-preserving in the continental Colonies having so extensively absorbed their surplus meat as to create a less variable and more remunerative market for butcher's meat of all kinds. The prospect of a steadier market with remunerative prices, combined with, in many instances, a judicious reduction of the numbers of sheep on overstocked runs, has produced a sufficient supply of meat at moderate prices until a very recent period when importations of cattle from Twofold Bay and sheep from Victoria had to be resumed. A reference to the imports of Live Stock into the Colony from 1858 to 1870 inclusive, I think, may lead to the conclusion that ere long we shall be entirely independent of foreign supply for either fat bullocks or sheep.

In 1858 there arrived at the Port of Hobart Town 5517 bullocks and 25,869 sheep; Launceston, 1108 bullocks and 11,786 sheep; or 6625 bullocks and 37,655 sheep, at an estimated value of £114,358.

In 1870 the same Returns give:—Hobart Town, 1640 bullocks and 14,903 sheep; Launceston, 4357 sheep, at an estimated value of £27,945.

It may not be uninteresting or out of place here to give a statement taken from the annual Customs Returns of the value of bullocks and sheep imported into Tasmania from the year 1857 to 1870 inclusive:—

<i>Years.</i>	£
1857.....	88,371
1858.....	114,356
1859.....	88,405
1860.....	100,593
1861.....	64,521
1862.....	65,030
1863.....	58,000
1864.....	52,230
1865.....	37,883
1866.....	30,514
1867.....	39,090
1868.....	42,591
1869.....	25,216
1870.....	27,945
	£834,745

I have not got the materials by me to go further back than 1857, but I believe if 1856 and 1855 were included it would show that during the last 16 years Tasmania has paid in hard cash more than £1,000,000 sterling for an article which the country can produce well for itself under an improved system of farming.

Various causes in former years tended to produce a state of things which would naturally lead superficial observers to the conclusion that such enormous importations of fat bullocks and sheep in proportion to population was conclusive evidence that the country was naturally so ill adapted for the production of meat that it could not produce enough to supply its scanty population. This impression was produced not only on the minds of strangers, but was believed to be true by a large section of the Tasmanian people. The conclusion was very natural, although it was a most erroneous one. The causes which in the first place induced the importation of bullocks and sheep into Tasmania, and afterwards produced a chronic deficiency of meat in the country which rendered a large annual importation an absolute and confirmed necessity, are traceable to sources altogether independent of the natural capacity of the country to produce a sufficiency of fat beef and mutton at reasonable prices for the use of its inhabitants.

Before the boiling-down system was introduced into Australia meat was almost valueless. A leg of mutton from a sheep weighing 70 lbs. or more could be had for 6*d.* in Sydney and Melbourne. The contractors for supplying the Convict Establishments and the Military in Tasmania first began the systematic importation of beef and mutton from Victoria, which went on increasing until in a few years the Hobart Town market was almost exclusively supplied from that source. The Tasmanian settler, when he found meat down to a price so low that it paid him better to keep his sheep for the wool alone, gave up the idea of producing fat sheep, and depended wholly upon the wool. This system was carried out to such an extent that in a few years the country became so overstocked

with sheep that very little mutton was or could be produced. The butchers would not take the trouble to go to the country for fat sheep and bullocks when they could get them cheaper at the Slaughter Yards. As the price of meat rose in the other Colonies from increased home consumption, and boiling-down and preserving for the European market, it naturally affected the market here, and a greater demand gradually sprang up for colonial meat. But the former state of the meat market had so effectually introduced a system of overstocking the runs in order to keep numbers on account of their wool alone, that it took a considerable time for many settlers to discover that in proportion to numbers of sheep the wool bales were not increased when that increase of numbers went beyond the limits within which sheep could be kept in good healthy condition.

This fact I think sheepowners generally for some years past have been gradually becoming alive to: hence the diminished importation of beef and mutton during the last 5 or 6 years, while at the same time the market has been better supplied with good meat and at reasonable rates.

During those years when we were paying £100,000 per annum for imported meat, according to the Statistics, we had from 1,700,000 to 1,800,000 sheep in Tasmania; while the Customs Returns demonstrate that the export of wool was not greater than at present when we have between 300,000 and 400,000 fewer sheep, and a supply of meat very nearly equal to the demand. From which I conclude that, with a further reduction in numbers on the natural pasturages, we shall have an abundant supply of fat meat without importing either bullocks or sheep; together with an increased weight of wool of a more valuable quality.

It would be out of place in a paper of this kind to enter into the discussion of abstract questions of political economy, or enquire if a tax on beef and mutton is to be justified on the ground that beef and mutton have no higher claims to be styled necessaries of life now-a-days, in this quarter of the world, than tea and sugar and other articles which many consider quite as necessary adjuncts in the composition of a wholesome and palatable meal. Waiving, therefore, any expression of my own opinion upon the economic and political aspect of the question of the propriety or otherwise of taxing what are often somewhat arbitrarily termed the necessaries of life, I have no hesitation in stating my belief that the practical operation of the impost on bullocks and sheep has tended to induce farmers to turn their attention more to the production of meat; and while it has, combined with other causes, produced a steadier and more certain market, it has not enhanced the cost of the article to the consumer during the last 12 months,—if such an opinion may be deduced from the fact that the retail prices of meat in Hobart Town have ruled lower on an average than in many former years when the market was almost entirely supplied by importations from Victoria and New South Wales.

There has been a considerable export of rams to New South Wales and elsewhere, which may be expected to increase every year. The fact of a Scab Act being in operation here tends to largely increase this export; and I believe that in a few years, when scab in Tasmania has become a thing of the past, the export of rams and ewes for stud purposes to the northern Colonies will increase to such an extent that I hesitate at the present time to express an opinion as to its probable value to the Colony in future years,—because, if I was to do so, I should run the risk of being considered a visionary, whose judgment was dazzled and obscured by exaggerated ideas of the importance of the work he had in hand. I therefore content myself with stating that, in my opinion, before ten years elapse the annual export of stud sheep will form an important item in the general exports of Tasmania, and that it will owe its increased importance to the operation of the Scab Act seconding the efforts and protecting the interests of the few who are now, and the largely increased number of those who will in the future devote their attention to and invest their capital in improving the existing as well as in creating new stud flocks.

When I stated in Parliament that in my opinion the complete eradication of scab from the flocks of Tasmania would increase the income of sheepowners by £120,000 per annum, and was supported and confirmed in that opinion by the calculations of another practical sheep farmer of extensive experience in Victoria and in Tasmania (Mr. Robert Clerk, then of Malahide), many persons were disposed to laugh at what they were pleased to characterise as the exaggerated views of an enthusiast: they had no doubt about the great advantages which might be expected to flow from the eradication of disease from the flocks of Tasmania, but the idea of an increased income of £120,000 or more per annum was pooh-poohed as absurd in the extreme.

However absurd and exaggerated the statement appeared to many at the time, a review of the calculations upon which it was based, I venture to say, will convince any practical sheep farmer that I was no visionary enthusiast, but a careful understater of probable results in every item which composed the sum total of my estimated £120,749 per annum increased income. Mr. Clerk, I observe, calculated the amount at £145,676; and I now consider, as I did at the time, his calculation nearer the truth than my own. In my estimate I calculated that the labour of 400 men would be saved: this, at £50 each per annum, is £20,000. Now I have every reason to believe that, instead of a saving of the labour of 400 men, it will save the labour of 500 men, or £25,000 per annum, hitherto expended in wholly unproductive labour.