

RECOLLECTIONS  
OF  
SQUATTING IN VICTORIA

THEN CALLED THE PORT PHILLIP DISTRICT

*(From 1841 to 1851)*

BY  
EDWARD M. CURR

GEORGE ROBERTSON  
MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, AND ADELAIDE

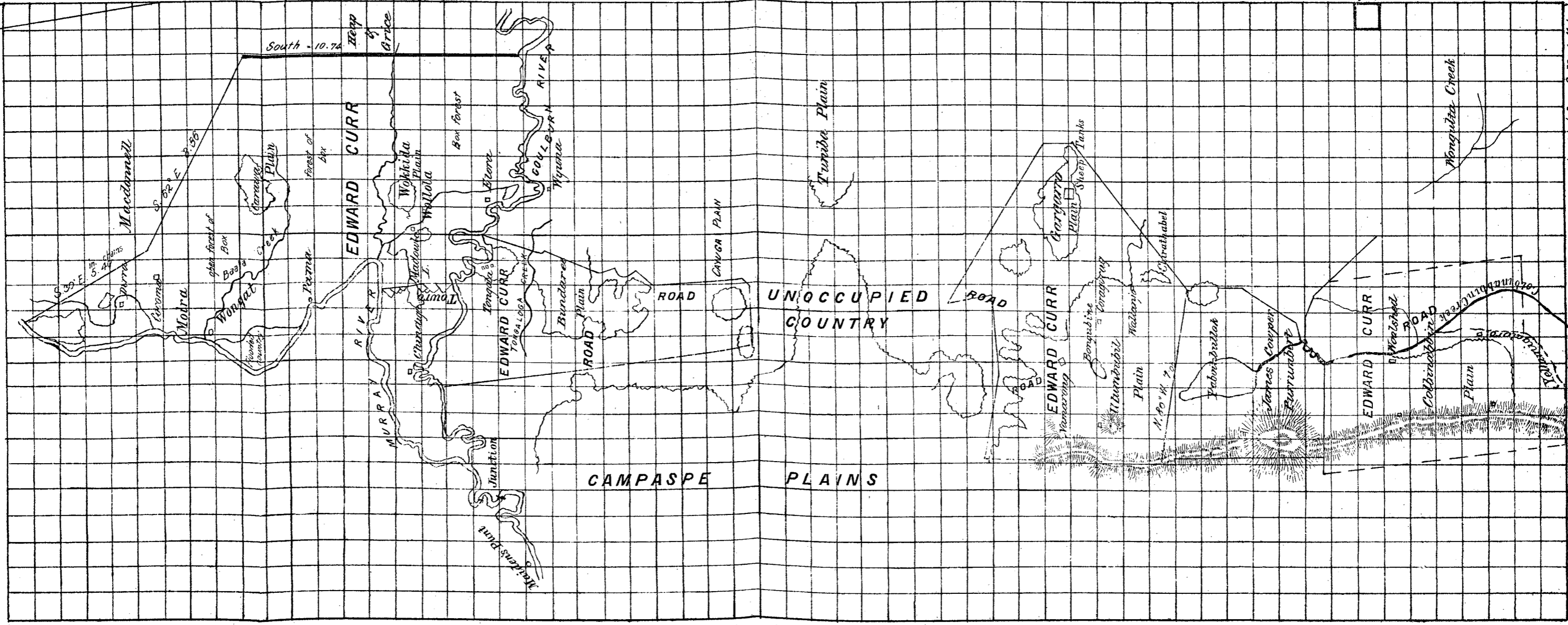
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# MAP OF THE RUNS

OF THE LATE

## EDWARD CURR, of St. Heliers.

North by  
compass



Geo. Robertson, Lith. Melb.

copied from Saziers Map  
6<sup>th</sup> December 1888.  
Nun

covered an abundant supply of feed and water for present use, a day sufficed to bring my sheep to the spot, and the scanty requirements of an out-station of the sort were quickly supplied. Merrily with saw and axe we felled the trees around, and with them constructed the required yards, a tarpaulin and a few forked sticks and poles being all that was necessary in the way of a hut for the shepherds. Then, having stripped for the men a sheet of bark each, on which to lay their beds, I left them almost as pleased with the change as the sheep themselves, and returned with my overseer to the head station.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### ALONE AT MY HUT.

FOR a time after I had got my sheep on to the burnt feed just spoken of I had very little to do but revel in the reflections that my miserable flocks, with dressed backs and pared hoofs, had at length their wants fully supplied; that I should have some prospects of a tolerable lambing; and that my shepherds were no longer discontentedly scrambling up and down the sides of grassless

ranges after their hungry wandering charges, but were now watching their sheep feed around, and in the enjoyment of that thorough idleness which, everyone knows, of course, is so congenial to the pastoral mind. As for me, I could not help wondering that such feed existed on the station, and that I had never heard of it; and this set me thinking about the boundaries of the run, a subject upon which, up to that time, I had never been able to obtain any information, the overseer having always told me that he was the last comer in the neighbourhood, and that the question of boundaries had never turned up, remarking that when my flocks met those of my neighbours some day in the bush it would be time enough to move in the matter.

It was a few days after my sheep had been located in the midst of plenty, that the term for which I had engaged my overseer expired; and as I had found that instead of making himself useful, or giving me an insight into the business, he had systematically tried to deceive me on every occasion, I determined to pay off both him and his servant, and let them go. This I did. We had no words on the occasion, however, and I gave him the use of my remaining pair of bullocks, dray, and driver to remove his luggage to town. As he had four bullocks of his own running on a neighbouring station, the team was made up with them, and it was agreed that

I should have the use of the lot to bring back a small load of supplies for the station.

The departure of my overseer forms one of the little epochs in my reminiscences which are particularly stamped on my memory, as it was on that occasion that I took on myself the responsibility of management. It was on that occasion, also, that I first found myself quite alone in the bush ; all my servants, with the exception of the bullock-driver, who was now leaving with the dray, being stationed, as the reader is aware, with the sheep some six miles away, so that there remained no one but myself to look after the stores and plant at the head station.

First impressions of things generally remain, and I well remember seating myself on a log near the hut, the morning the overseer left, and watching the dray as it toiled slowly and noisily up the gully which led to the road. For some time I could see the many-coloured bullocks ; the driver, in his cabbage-tree hat, walking near them with his whip over his shoulder, and the overseer and his servant following a little in the rear. I thought they were a long time getting out of sight. At last they disappeared into the scrub ; and when no longer visible, I still sat and listened to the creaking of the wheels, the voice of the driver, and the crack of his whip, till the sounds, growing fainter and fainter, at length ceased altogether. What appeared to me an unusual stillness and

loneliness then seemed to settle around me. Afterwards I got used to be alone, and very indifferent on the subject, but it was not so then; and I don't know whether it will strike the reader that the position in which I was placed was a nervous one, bearing in mind that with very little experience of the bush I was suddenly left by myself, probably for three weeks, in an unfrequented spot, and in a neighbourhood in which a considerable number of exasperated and hostile Blacks were known to be. At all events I was not without anxiety, knowing, as I did, that not many months since the owner of a station not ten miles away had been wounded, and some of his men killed, by the Blacks, and that four or six soldiers had been sent from Melbourne for his protection, whilst I, a lad just out of my teens, was here without a comrade, indifferently armed, and quite inexperienced. It should also be remembered that at this time I had never seen the Blacks, except in Melbourne, and was totally ignorant of their ways. These circumstances, which I had hardly thought of the day before, now came distinctly to my mind. My reflections on them were not, however, of very long duration, for the sounds of the retiring dray had not long ceased, when I set to work to put myself into a position to meet whatever danger might occur. To effect this my preparations were simply—loading carefully my two guns, chaining up my

pair of kangaroo dogs in such positions as to render surprise impossible, and seeing that the door of my hut could be effectually and easily secured.

The first day of my solitude passed over slowly enough, the stillness around weighing a good deal on my spirits, whilst such occasional sounds as did occur made me start involuntarily. The wind, the noise of a falling bough, the cawing of a crow, or the whistle of a hawk—which yesterday failed to arrest attention—made me now look carefully round. Unused to solitude and to the feeling of my life being in danger, I was much on the alert, and in a very prepared state of mind for fighting, magnifying a good deal the risk I was running. At that time I realized (though from boyhood I have always been satisfied to be a good deal alone) how necessary to me were a certain amount of conversation and fellowship. As regards my occupations when left to myself, some of my time of course was taken up with cooking (a novel industry to me at the time), with chopping wood for my fire, and other little household jobs; as well as looking after my two horses, which were hobbled about half-a-mile from my hut. These I used to bring to water twice a day. In the morning, as generally happens to those who live alone, I rose with the sun, when the monotonous routine of the previous day recommenced. A good deal of my time was naturally passed in read-

ing; and, when tired of my occupations, my only resource was to walk up and down before my hut, sometimes watching the few almost voiceless little birds that disported themselves on the trees around. If a flight of cockatoos passed screaming over the valley, I used to wonder whether they had been disturbed by anyone; and if so, by whom—by a White man or Black? and look carefully around to see if I could descry anyone coming.

After the first day or two, however, my feelings of loneliness and apprehension in a great measure left me. I got used to the position, and though I continued to live, as it were, gun in hand, my mind occupied itself with other thoughts, and dwelt but little on the subject of danger. The forced confinement to one spot troubled me, indeed, more than anything else, and I used often to regret that I could not now and then spend a morning in hunting or shooting. About ten days had passed in this manner, and I was sitting at my door with a gun in my hand, smoking my pipe and watching the sun go down, when I caught sight of a horseman riding at a walk up the valley. The prospect of having some one to talk to for the evening pleased me not a little, and I anxiously kept my eye on the stranger to see that he did not pass by without coming to the hut. My visitor, when he arrived, turned out to be a mounted policeman doing patrol duty, who came



to ask a night's lodging. This, of course, I very willingly granted, putting him in possession of the men's hut, and giving him whatever provisions he required. Before going to bed, I also went to the hut and had a long yarn with him, when I learnt amongst other things, that four bullocks with yokes on, such as I had lost, and which from his description I made no doubt were mine, had been seen on the Goulburn, and were then running on a station about eighty miles from Wolfscrag, where they could easily be had. This of course was great news for me. The trooper also informed me that the Blacks had been committing depredations in my neighbourhood down the M'Ivor creek ; that he had been sent to look after them, and recommended me to be on my guard, as he said that if they came upon me unarmed they would certainly kill me in revenge for some of their people who had lately been shot at a place about fifteen miles off, on the banks of the Campaspe.

In the morning the trooper got on his horse and started for his station, near the old crossing-place of the Goulburn, which he told me was about thirty miles distant, and I was again left to my own devices.

I think some three or four days must have passed after this visit, when I noticed, as I was dressing about sunrise, some wild ducks alight in a water-hole not far from the hut. A drizzling

rain was falling at the time—the first I had seen at Wolfscrag—and, without waiting to finish my toilet, I hastily put on a cloak, and, taking one of my guns, sallied out to try if I could get a shot at them; but though I took some pains to stalk them, they proved too wary for me, and flew off without my being able to get near them. After returning to the hut I had scarcely washed and dressed when the same, or a similar flight, of ducks again settled in the water-hole. Being in doubt whether the gun which I had had in the rain would go off, I hastily took up the other and again sallied out, and had a second time to return unsuccessful. Replacing my gun, I proceeded to cook my breakfast, and was thoroughly intent on that interesting occupation, when the kangaroo dog, which I had tied up at the back of my hut, suddenly sprang to the end of his chain and commenced barking furiously. Feeling sure that something unusual was afoot, I laid down my frying-pan, and, taking up one of the guns, stole cautiously around the hut, keeping close to the slabs, to ascertain what was the matter. Arrived at a position from which I could see behind the building, I discovered the cause of the commotion was a small dog close at hand, which, in my ignorance, I supposed to be a wild one. This seemed to me a lucky chance for a shot; so, quite inapprehensive of danger, I levelled my carbine and was about to fire, when something which

moved amongst a clump of bushes a few yards off attracted my attention. Quick as thought I turned the muzzle of my gun from the dog to the bushes, at which, though I could distinguish nothing for the instant, I nevertheless held it pointed, keeping myself still partly covered by the hut. This proceeding, I have no doubt, saved my life, for the next moment I caught sight of a pair of spears quivering amongst the boughs, from which, after a moment's delay, lowering their weapons, there stepped two Blacks, stark naked, and in all the beauties of war-paint. If any confirmation of their murderous designs were wanted, the expression of their faces supplied it. Laughing in a confused way, and in a hollow, unnatural tone trying to make some joking sort of apology for being found in such an equivocal position, the two worthies sauntered easily towards me, I, dropping my carbine into the hollow of my arm, keeping my finger always on the trigger. Though we began to talk on both sides in a friendly way, and as if things were just as they should be, I never saw anyone more put out than these two savages, who had probably been watching my movements since daylight, and counted on my falling unarmed into their hands. They seemed more put out than I was, and I was a good deal "*skeared*," as the Yankees say, and more, perhaps, by the murderous looks which even now my two friends were unable to get rid

of, than by the thought of the danger which I had escaped. The hatred which their looks could not hide disconcerted me, whilst the effect of their painted faces and chests, white circles round the eyes, and ribs like those of a skeleton, first seen under such circumstances, was most striking and forbidding. Whatever the reason of their attempted attack, and whatever might be the result of their visit, I made an effort to conceal my feelings, and, well on my guard, walked side by side with the two Blacks to my door, which (saying "*Stop a minute, my boys,*" and without turning my back to them) I entered at once; a savage dog which was chained to the door-post preventing them from following me.

The reader will readily believe that I drew a long breath of relief when I reached my stronghold. The Blacks, spears in hand, wearing the expression of men who had been sorely baulked, stood quietly beyond the reach of the dog, which made furious efforts to get at them, and I took up my position a little within the doorway. My visitors, I fancy, still entertained hopes that, being young and evidently unused to their ways, I should sooner or later expose myself, when they would kill me. If so, however, they reckoned without their host, for I had made up my mind to trust myself with them no more, but to fight it out, when the time came, at the doorway, where I should have

the assistance of the dog, and where two could not get at me at once. Had I known the ways of our aboriginal race I might have been quite certain that no attack of the sort would be made, as open warfare is not their system. My sable friends seeing, I presume, at last that I intended to stick to my cover, began protesting their friendly intentions, and asking me for food. Stepping back, as if to reach the damper on the table, I seized a tomahawk and placed it beside me, ready for the hand-to-hand fight which I anticipated would follow, being in great doubt whether either of my guns, which the reader is aware had been in the rain, would go off. In reply to their demands for food and assurances of friendship, which were made in quite intelligible English, I told them to be off; that I would give them nothing; that I knew they had come to kill me, and that if they came an inch nearer my door I would shoot them. In return they threatened to spear me, but did not raise the points of their spears from the ground; so, with my gun at my hip, covering myself partly with the door I invited them to come on. In this manner we stood confronting each other for a bit, both sides hesitating to begin—I, because I was afraid the gun would not go off, and they, because they were sure that it would. Had it not been for my doubts on this score, I should have shot one of them at once in self-defence, as it seemed to me that blows were inevitable. Ever

afterwards I was glad that I had not done so. Had the Blacks had an older man to deal with, I have no doubt they would have retreated at once; but probably they did not like being baffled by a very young man, combatants of that age not being much respected amongst themselves.

Finally, however, the prudence of the two worthies got the better of their valour, and seeing that nothing was to be got without running the risk of being shot, not even a smoke of tobacco, for which they begged hard, they retired to some bushes behind which they had left their opossum-rugs and other effects, and after a few minutes I had the pleasure of seeing them disappear in the scrub. When all was over, I wondered that when I reached my hut I had not shut the door and brought the matter to an end; but it never occurred to me. It was a great relief to me when I got rid of them. That they did not succeed in killing me I have always looked on as a special interposition of Divine Providence, for which, I trust, I have been grateful.

After the Blacks had fairly gone I tried my guns, *which both missed fire*. Of course I was not long in drawing the charges, rubbing out, and reloading them. I had had a narrow escape, and took it as a warning which never required repeating, being from that time scrupulously attentive to the state of my fire-arms. When

next in Melbourne I also purchased an excellent pair of pistols, which I learnt to use well, and had constantly at hand for several years—in fact, as long as danger existed.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### BULLOCKS RECOVERED, AND A NEW RUN DISCOVERED.

WITHIN a week after the visit of the two Blacks my dray arrived from town, bringing a married couple with two children, whom my agent in Melbourne had engaged for me—the woman as domestic servant, or hutkeeper, and her husband as shepherd. After my lonely time, these few persons and the little business of unloading the dray made Wolfscrag seem by contrast a centre of population; and of course it was quite a blessing to be relieved from my solitude, though I had still no one to converse with.

The servant woman, an active body, seized at once on my not very extensive *batterie de cuisine*, and transported it in a trice to the kitchen, whilst a course of sweeping, dusting, and arranging my hut was instituted forthwith. Fearing that I myself might be whisked off by my inexorable domestic, I was fain to give up possession tempo-

rarily to the new arrivals; so, mounting my horse, it being yet early, I proceeded to visit my shepherds, of whom I had only once heard during the absence of the dray. In the flocks I found that the succulent feed of the burnt hills, and the quiet which they had enjoyed for the last month (being able to get their food without much walking), had brought about a very perceptible change, so as to lead to the probability of a tolerable dropping of lambs. I also found, as I rode along on the flats near the head station, from which my sheep had originally been removed, that the grass was springing nicely after the late rains. The shepherds, who had seen nobody in the interim, were glad to have me break upon their solitude, hear a little news, and get a newspaper from which they might learn something of what was doing in the world; so, after chatting an hour with them, I cantered home in the twilight, not altogether indifferent to the prospect of a little change of food and cookery.

After allowing matters at Wolfscrag to settle down a little, taking rations to the shepherds, and initiating my new arrivals into the routine of their work, I determined to start with the bullock-driver and make an effort to recover my lost cattle, of whose whereabouts, the reader will remember, I had heard from the passing trooper. On my last visit to Melbourne, finding the showy grey mare which I had brought from the clover



fields of Tasmania but ill adapted to the rough starvation ways of Wolfscrag, I sold her, and bought instead, for £55, a powerful old horse, well bred and used to the country, and a hardy little Timor pony, for which, with the saddle and bridle, I paid £35. Giving the pony, therefore, to the bullock-driver, who was a light-weight, and taking the horse myself, we set out on our travels.

Our first day's stage of about thirty miles brought us to the old crossing-place of the Goulburn, some seven miles lower down that river than where the town of Seymour now stands. Our road so far was the Major's Line.

The stillness, so common a feature in Australian woods, I constantly noticed during my ride. Equally characteristic was the sinuous creek, and not a bit like what I had seen in Tasmania. I saw nothing to remind me of the Blacks, and yet they must have wandered along the creek, built their huts on it, killed opossums on its banks and ducks on its waters, for who shall say how many ages? whilst the single party of white men who had passed that way had left a road behind them which one might follow unaided.

At one of the ponds (so round that they might have been the work of man) which occurred every here and there in the bed of the creek my companion and I, availing ourselves of a shady wattle-tree, sat down at midday to eat our lunch, and allow the horses an hour to feed, as is the

custom with travellers in the bush. Mounting again and beguiling the way with a little conversation and a good deal of smoking, we arrived shortly before sundown at our destination for the night. This was an eating-house on the banks of the Goulburn, which, with a log punt, were kept by the owner and his two servants for the convenience of overlanders travelling with sheep or cattle to Port Phillip or South Australia. With him we put up for the night. Hearing from my host that an overlander and his party were camped close by, I strolled out after sunset to have my first look at a bushman's camp, a sort of thing of which in after years I was destined to have a good deal of experience.

The sound of the bullock-bells soon guided me to the spot, where, on some four acres of ground, surrounded by a number of large fires, I saw encamped a flock of five thousand sheep. Passing by a host of dogs which sallied out to meet me, two teams of bullocks, and six or eight saddle-horses grazing in hobbles, I got to the fire, where the men of the party—about a dozen in number—were eating their supper. They were all seated on the ground except the head of the party, for whom the water-keg did duty as a stool. Having quieted the barking of the dogs, the master invited me warmly to “have a feed;” but, as I had already supped, I was obliged to decline his invitation to join in the attack which

was being made on some fried mutton, and a damper of about the circumference of the front wheel of a phaeton. Altogether the scene was picturesque enough, and the overlanders seemed to be enjoying themselves. The camp-fire, made against the butt of a fallen tree, was on the brink of the river, which ran noiselessly through the towering gum-trees which over-shadowed its course. Around the fire were the shepherds and bullock-drivers of the party, seated, as I have said, at their suppers, each expectant sheep-dog waiting for his share from his master. Before us, contentedly chewing the cud, were the sheep, gazing at us by the light of the fire, and in the background were two tents; whilst scattered around, or hanging from neighbouring branches, one noticed bridles, bullock-gear, saddles, and other articles of that sort. A couple of guns leaned against a stump close at hand, and the large fire threw its mellow light alike on the leafy arches overhead and on the travellers and their belongings beneath.

In the course of conversation I learned from the head of the party that he had started with his stock from the neighbourhood of Bathurst; that he had already been over ten weeks on the road; and that it would still take him several months to reach his destination in South Australia.

By eight o'clock the smoking and yarning of

the overlanders had nearly come to an end ; the horses and bullocks had been looked to, and their whereabouts reported to the leader ; the first watch was set ; and as some of the shepherds had retired to one of the tents, and I saw others making their beds under the drays, I thought it time to retreat to my own quarters. The party were of course accustomed to their airy lodgings, and I noticed that they were in good spirits, and in the enjoyment of superlative appetites.

In the morning I mounted my horse, and, followed by my little bullock-driver, Dan, on his Timor pony, took the road which led from station to station down the river. We rode slowly, and about midday, I remember, were passing a station, when Dan trotted up and asked me if I would not call and get dinner ; which, in my ignorance of bush customs, I declined to do, being unwilling to trespass needlessly on the hospitality of strangers. Accordingly we rode on, my follower seeming somewhat downcast, until a little before sundown we reached the Protectorate Station, at which any aborigines who chose to locate themselves were supplied with food and blankets at the public cost. This establishment, which consisted of several slab huts in the occupation of the Protector and the half-dozen white men in his service, and, in some cases, of their wives and families, was prettily situated on the banks of the river. The buildings were neatly constructed,

and surrounded by trim gardens, with cultivation and horse paddocks, the whole giving promise of comfortable accommodation, as well as of dinner, a matter at that moment not without interest in my eyes.

In this way we went jogging on from day to day, and from station to station, with little variety. But though I have so far—in order to give some idea of the life of an early squatter in Port Phillip—entered into details about all sorts of trifles, it is clear that I must have some regard for the reader's patience, and carry on my narrative with longer strides. In view of this, then, I will cease to drag him with Dan and myself along our monotonous road through endless gum forests and over far stretching plains, contenting myself with noticing what is important in relation to the results of my journey.

After the delays usual in such cases—any amount of cattle-hunting and going from one station to another—I succeeded in recovering my bullocks, and having accidentally met a fit person out of employment, I engaged him as overseer, put him with Dan in charge of the truants, and directed him to take them back to Wolfscrag by the road which I had just travelled. In the meantime I had learnt from the stockman at Wyuna, the station at which I had found my bullocks, which was also the outside station in that direction, that there was abundance

of excellent unoccupied country close at hand, which, with the consent of his master, he volunteered to show me. This was quite a godsend to me, and of course I accepted his offer, and, the day after my new overseer left with the bullocks, rode over Tongala Plain in his company; and, as it appeared to me well adapted for stock, I made up my mind to abandon Wolfscrag, and take it up as a run with the least delay possible. To do this there were, in those days, no hindrances of any sort, the custom being to drive one's stock on to any unoccupied country, and then apply to the Commissioner of Crown Lands for a license to depasture, the application being granted as a matter of course. The extent of land licensed by the Commissioner was proportioned, in a rough way, to the quantity of stock owned by the applicant; this permission to occupy country being renewable yearly, until the ground should be required by Government for other purposes, on the annual payment of £10 into the Treasury. Besides this fee for a license, which, except in the vicinity of Melbourne, everyone thought would last for a generation or two, there was also a small capitation tax payable yearly on the sheep. The extent of country which I applied for, when I got back to Wolfscrag, was fifty square miles, half of it on each bank of the River Goulburn.

Having determined to remove my flocks from Wolfscrag to Tongala, as I called my new run, I

started with the stockman (to whom I gave £5 for his trouble) direct for the former run through the bush, by the places now known as Bundari, Coragorag, Colbinabbin, and Redcastle. By this time, as is usual with a little practice, I had become a tolerable bushman for a new chum, and the distance saved by the route I took going home, across entirely unexplored country, was about fifty miles, the distance through the bush from Tongala to Wolfscrag being about eighty miles.

Hence the reader will see that the most fortunate thing which befell me at that time was the loss of my bullocks, as it was the means of making me a bushman, and of my getting an excellent run; so right glad was I to leave the barren scrubs of Wolfscrag and its wretched creek for the well-grassed plains of Tongala and the ever-flowing Goulburn. The occasion was one of unmixed satisfaction; and the country between the two places being unoccupied, I took it for granted that the "Scab Act" offered no obstacle to the removal of my flocks in the proposed direction.

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