

DOG DAYS UNDER CAPRICORN

I DON'T know whether Gladstone is typical of the smaller towns of Australia or a place with its own character and ways, but if it resembles the others in its treatment of dogs, Australia is a good place in which to be a dog. I have not counted the dogs here, but the total must be one for every house and a few hundreds for the streets. They are

not only to be seen everywhere: they are to be picked up the moment you go out to shop or catch a fish or get your hair cut or watch a bird. There is, in fact, no choice in the matter. They will pick you up if you don't pick them up. For the dogs of Gladstone are not proud. They are democratic, friendly, blind to uppishness, indifferent to snubs. They know, when you tell them to go home, or somewhere else, that you don't mean it, or are forgetting yourself, or have come from a country where the humans still have a lot to learn. Even when you throw a stone at them they know that it is a joke, a rather clumsy piece of fooling by a half-civilised barbarian. They are so certain of this that they will sometimes retrieve the stone and return it to you wagging not only their tails but half their anatomy. If you drive a car—well, what are cars but big, quick, slightly dangerous, and always exhilarating playthings for idle dogs? What dog would refuse the invitation to a block or two of racing and barking and dodging? No dog in Gladstone, and only half-dead dogs anywhere.

There is, of course, another side to all this, but it is not for a visitor to dwell on it. When I went to Britain I had to accept the dogs or go somewhere else; and as I then had a good deal to learn, accepting them took some time. Here it has been easier—largely because two dogs in three are just tykes. They may, for their joke, now and again "put on a little dog" and wear collars, but they never go so far as to behave like chained and collared dogs in sophisticated communities. They are larrikins, but they have their pride, and one level to which they never descend is the discipline of the kennel and the back yard. I find it easier to accept their hydraulics and fleas than the more solid contributions of the dogs I used to meet on a leash in England.

I was going to add, too, that for some strange reason the dogs of Gladstone are never bad tempered; but it is not a strange reason at all. They are friendly because they are free; because they do precisely what they want to do wherever the mood comes to them (a horrible thought, if they dared to admit it, for parents and teachers). If there is anything strange about these dogs it is that they are all well fed and sleek. Where the food comes from to feed so many of them I have not yet discovered; perhaps out of the water, since everyone has a boat and catches fish; but I have yet to see in Queensland what it is impossible not to see on two out of three farms in my native land—dogs whose working weight ought to be 50 pounds thinned down to 30; 40-pound dogs working at 25; and a shepherd's whole team depending on

loose skin and shaggy hair to hide their bones.

I HAVE often been told by Australians that what they miss most in New Zealand is the smell of the Australian bush. Perhaps this is the off-season for smells, as seventy-one is the past season—past for ever—for good noses. But I am not strongly aware of the fragrance of the Australian bush. I expected

the smell of our own gum trees raised to the nth power, and at least something, if not much, from the winter blooming wattles. But I am hardly conscious of the bush when I stand near it in the dark, and even when my nose has my eyes to help it, very little happens to it. I am, of course, old enough to know that the nose ceases in time to respond to repetitions of the same stimuli—a merciful weakness for which we are not sufficiently grateful. But I don't think I smell very little in the bush after two months because I originally smelt so much. I think the stimuli never came strongly enough to dull me, and that it would make no great difference to me now if I were 30 years younger and entering the bush for the first time.

Yet I cannot doubt the sincerity, or question the longing, of bush-hungry Australians away from home. I do not doubt that spring, if it came while I was still here, would make many things clear to me that are now meaningless or dark. I remember the five elephants on the deck of the Wanganella in 1949 that stood for five stormy days with their tails to the sea, and on the sixth day, long before land was visible to the other passengers, turned about and swung their trunks in the direction in which land lay, and from that moment lost interest in their rations of bran and straw. An elephant's nose is a little bigger than a man's, and more powerful, but I am not sure that it was the bush of which those circus performers became suddenly aware. I suspect that it was all we mean by land and miss when we float on the sea.

AMONG my chief memories of the Royal Show at Brisbane will be the hornless Merino rams and the polled Shorthorn and Hereford bulls. The day is, of course, coming when the show sensation will be a horn of any shape or size on any domestic animal, but it is a day that I will not myself see. I have, however, seen today

pen after pen of polled Merino rams



THREE HUNDRED-FOOT EUCALYPTUS
"I cannot doubt the sincerity of bush-hungry Australians away from home"

and bull after bull in the Shorthorn and Hereford stalls that looked as if it had not carried horns for forty generations. That is sensation enough in the meantime.

I have also learnt today that hornless cattle are as old as the Pharaohs, and probably older. But that information did not come from Queensland. It came in a letter from John M. Ranstead, of the Waikato, who tells me that an authoritative book on Animal Breeding published in 1939 has a drawing of an Egyptian "model" of a polled bull at least 4000 years old. Why the artist has worked from a model and not from a living animal is made clear in this paragraph:

It was the Egyptian custom to bury with a dead man his tools and weapons; and if he was wealthy they included many additional articles, such as figures of servants at their daily work and miniature models of his other possessions. In the burial chamber of Prince Mehenwetre, who reigned about 2100 B.C., and whose tomb was not fully explored till 1919 A.D., were found models of cattle, barns, a brewery, a bakery and an abattoir. The largest of these models showed the Prince counting his cattle as they passed by, and the census, which was also found, disclosed that he owned 835 long-horned cattle, 220 polled cattle, 750 donkeys, 974 sheep, and 2234 goats.

I am tempted to try that paragraph with a little more that goes with it, on the breeders and judges at this Show But I want to come back tomorrow.

(To be continued)



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