THUMBS DOWN ON RABBITS

IT'S always dangerous to prophesy, but it could well be that 100 years from now the only rabbits moving in New Zealand will be the Bugs Bunnies of the TV screen or the inhabitants of zoos. For on Monday, April 1, another and major step in the long campaign against the rabbit takes place, with the coming into force of legislation forbidding the sale or export of rabbit skins and carcasses. This change in the New Zealand way of life will be marked the day before (Sunday, March 31) with the broadcast at 9.30 a.m. from YAs and 4YZ of *The Vanishing Rabbit*, a documentary produced by H. L. Pickering and Arnold Wall with the co-operation of the Rabbit Destruction Council.

For over three-quarters of a century rabbits poured from these shores in an endless stream into the food, fur, and felt industries of the world. The trade got off to a good start in the seventies with skins, the early seventies marking the export in thousands, the late seventies in millions. By 1881 over eight million skins were being exported annually, with a value of some £85,000, and the rabbit population—seemingly unchanged by these inroads—looked like a thousand years of increasingly big business.

But New Zealanders were slowly learning the truth—that these assisted immigrants were not only eating them out of house and home but even destroying the land that house and home were built on. Many a sleepless sheepfarmer counted rabbits instead of sheep—seven rabbits equalled one sheep (or should it be minus one sheep?)—and simply intensified his insomnia. The question, How will it end? was even more disturbing than How did it begin?—and that one was embarrassing enough. How did it begin, anyway?

G. M. Thomson writing in 1922 his book *The Naturalisation of Plants and Animals in New Zealand* considered the stimulus of social freedom in a new land a major cause.

"The early settlers of New Zealand . . . recalled the sport which was forbidden to all but a favoured few, but which they had often longed to share in—the game preserves, the deer in the mountains or in the parks, the grouse in the heather-clad hills, the pheasants in the copses and plantations, the hares and partridges in the stubble and turnip fields, the rabbits in the hedgerows and sandy warrens, and the salmon of forbidden price in the rivers—and there rose up before their vision a land where all these desirable things might be found and enjoyed."

In contrast to this, W. H. Guthrie-Smith wrote in the Centennial Survey *Making New Zealand:*

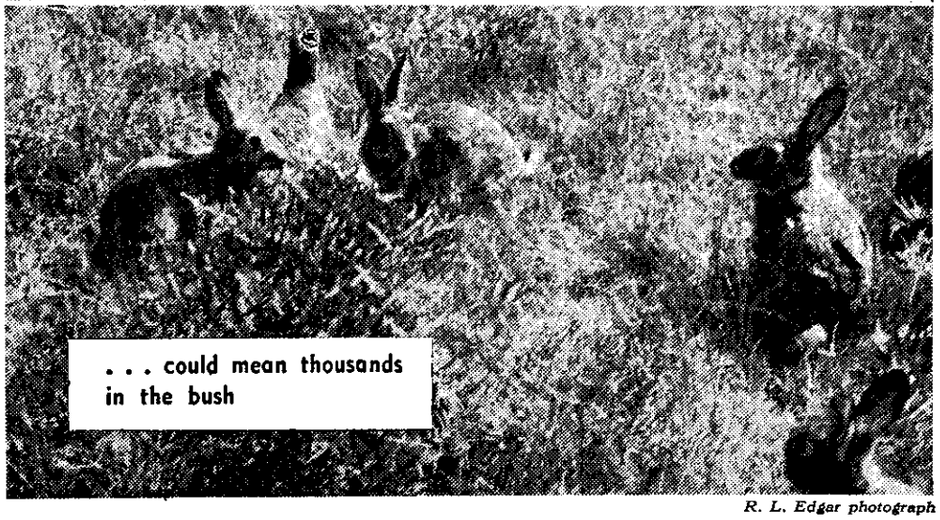
"New Zealand was destined to pass through a period in which an attempt was to be made to re-create of it a cocknified Britain. New wine was to be poured into old bottles, Nature was to be improved, her omissions remedied, her shortcomings rectified. The evils of acclimatisation are ineradicable; any results, except perhaps the introduction of trout—not wholly bad—were precarious and ephemeral. Many of the importations were ludicrous or futile. There were shipments of robin redbreasts of one sex only, of migrants like the nightingale. Sparrows and hedge sparrows were classed together. Science was unconsulted, no general programme agreed upon. Faddists and cranks were at a premium, crude enthusiastic ignorance enthroned."

If the same Victorian error had been made with the rabbit as with the robin redbreast, all would have been well, and the statistics of increase for New Zealanders would have remained only a matter of academic interest.

There is an often-forgotten and comic angle to the idea of bringing in rabbits to make this country more like Britain—for in Britain also the rabbit was a foreigner. All the evidence goes to show that there were no rabbits in pre-Norman times, that their introduction took place from France about the 12th Century. In time they became a valued possession, and as late as 1813 transportation for as much as seven years is recorded for the theft of one rabbit. And at the time of the first use of myxamatosis the value of their meat alone in England was estimated at seven million pounds annually.

Since the intention of the legislation coming into force on April 1 is to prevent the rabbit being a source of profit, clauses forbidding the keeping of rabbits without a permit are integral in the Act. People *may* be allowed to keep rabbits as pets, if they can get a special permit; but the permit will carry heavy conditions, the two most important being the provision of an escape-proof hutch and the prevention of breeding. For a rabbit in the hand may mean thousands in the bush, if the hand is careless.

A rabbit in the hand . . .



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R. L. Edgar photograph