

**A**LMOST all my memories of the ten years I spent in the Queensland bush, nearly 50 years ago, are associated with the smell of wood smoke. Life as we lived it then was hard enough, but every day, however long, closed with the smell of a wood fire. As one rode up to a head station, a drover's camp, or a boundary-rider's hunt, in the short gloaming of the Queensland day, the pungent smell of burning wood met one with the promise of rest and kindness and food.

Now a camp fire meant endless inconsequent rambling yarns. That is why I have chosen "Old Queensland Yarns" as the title of my talk. I have no exciting stories to tell, but with your leave I will spin a yarn which may recall some of the features of a life long since banished by the aeroplane, the motor and the telephone. I cannot go back to the convict days, though I knew many old "lags" who lingered on in the bush. For all that, Queensland 50 years ago was so different from the Queensland of today that I may well call it old.

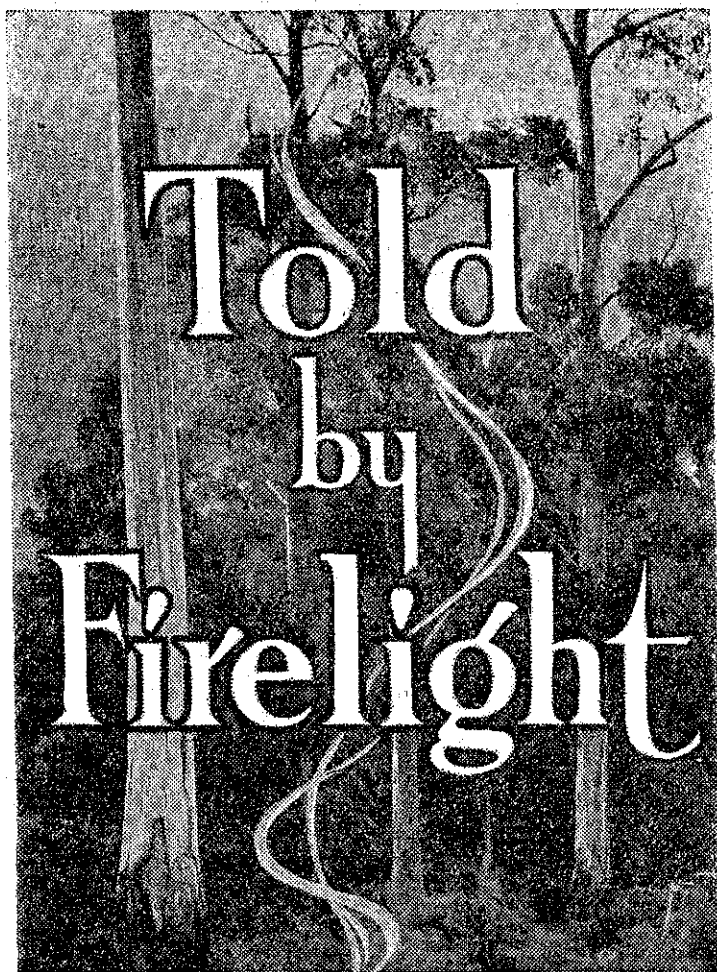
Perhaps the chief difference lay in the rate of transit. In the old days no one moved anywhere at a greater rate than twelve miles an hour. Beyond the railhead, the immense plains which were my home for many years, knew nothing of any conveyance swifter than a horse or a light buck-board buggy. In all that enormous stretch of country, I do not remember a single bridge or culvert, and yet every rainy season the rivers became torrents, and the black soil plains were sticky as a glue-pot—impassable for wheels, and difficult enough for horses. The only quick communication with the outside world was through the telegraph offices in the scattered little bush townships. Even the overseas mails arrived only once a month.

Roughly speaking, life in the bush was of three types:—

Firstly, on the inland plains large sheep stations, dust, drought, flood and rabbits—a hard life, varied only by the excitement of shearing time, and festivities of race weeks at the small towns; secondly, in the coastal ranges cattle stations, snug and even luxurious homesteads in valleys already broken to the plough; and thirdly, on the coast a zone of sugar plantations worked by Kanakas. Here life was very much like life in the West Indies.

But I must get back to the camp fire. One of its greatest charms was this, that round it you might meet almost anyone. Once I rode up to a homestead on a cattle station and over a cosy fire well on into the night, I found that the manager was the little boy to whom Charles Kingsley dedicated the best of all children's stories—"The Water Babies." With the help of much tobacco we conjured up the ghosts of many famous men known to me only by repute, but who to my host were the familiar friends of his boyhood.

Another time I was camped alone far out on the Diamanti Watershed and a ragged, rugged old man rode up with a black boy and two



There is only one place and time for spinning yarns, and that is round a bush camp-fire after the twilight has faded and before the moon has risen to dispel the mystery of the surrounding shadows. In this article, delivered as a talk from 3YA, Dr. G. M. L. Lester gives some of his reminiscences of the Queensland bush of fifty years ago, when nothing went faster than twelve miles an hour, when bridges and culverts were unknown, mails were delivered once a month, and the strictest rule of the bush was: "Never inquire of a man's past."

spare horses, and joined me beside my fire. We talked long into the night and, before we parted, I realised that I had been entertaining the only Australian millionaire of those days—Jimmy Tyssen. Then there was old P. —, a picturesque old scoundrel who dodged round the bush tuning pianos, fossicking for gold and doing odd jobs generally.

This is a story he told me of his former life—whether true or not I cannot say. Once when he had struck a patch on the goldfields, he determined to have a look at old England. When he landed he hunted up his eldest brother, who was a baronet and an Ecclesiastical Commissioner, and altogether a "big noise." He received a cold welcome. Being a spiteful old man he spied on the baronet and, finding a few things in his life which were not in keeping with the dignity of an Ecclesiastical Commissioner, he laid the matter before his brother with considerable emphasis. The result was that the following week he triumphantly returned to Queensland with a fat cheque and a first-class passage.

I could fill in my time with these queer birds of passage. The horse-breaker who stole my horses, and ended up in the Boer War, the only man in the English forces who was court-martialled and shot on the field of battle. French Peter, an escapee from Noumea, the best sailor I ever came across, who captured the gigantic crocodile which reposes in the Christchurch Museum.

The gaunt, wily, brother of Hicks Pasha, whose slaughter with all his column made history in one of our Egyptian campaigns. Most of these drifters talked willingly of their lives, but some were resolutely reticent, and as one of the most stringent rules of bush manners forbade inquiries into a man's past, they remained unknown even to their mates. One man I knew for years, but neither I nor anyone in the district knew his history or his name, so when he was drowned in a flooded creek I buried him above flood-mark and registered his burial in the name of Bristol Dick, the only name which he had used in Queensland.

**T**HE mention of his death calls up the memory of the forgotten graves of the bush—just four hardwood posts and a rail—some alone in the bush, some in little groups in the station gardens. Often enough they were little graves carefully tended, bearing witness to babies who had fled from the battle of the bush, even before they knew its hardships.

The one experience of my life which I think is absolutely unique was connected with a bush grave. I passed the night alongside the only Chinaman's grave in Queensland. Chinamen when they died in Queensland were sent to the coast, cremated, and their ashes shipped to China. One poor Chink, however, died far out on the plains, and as no one claimed him he

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