

Southern portion of Queensland showing surveyed runs, 1872

By:

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Black soil and 'rolling grass seas'

The quintessential Darling Downs landscape of the nineteenth century was characterised by black soil and 'rolling grass seas' which held the sheep, woolsheds and large pastoral stations of wealthy squatters. One of Queensland's most productive pastoral areas, it became celebrated in both art and literature.

The Darling Downs is complex and difficult to define and locate on a map, being between 130-250 km west of Brisbane. Ranging from 500 m to 650 m above sea level, it is a distinctive cool region of Queensland bounded in the north by the Bunya Mountains, in the east by the Great Dividing Range, in the south by the Granite Belt and Herries Range, and on the west by the Condamine River. Initially part of a vast, shallow inland sea, a series of volcanic eruptions over millions of years formed heavy clay sheets around Dalby and Chincilla, the red soils around Toowoomba, the stony clay soils near Stanthorpe, the heavy black soils of the extensive Condamine River flood plain and the distinctive round, flat-topped basalt cones – 'sugarloafs' – that stand as sentinels in the open, well-grassed plains. Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt described the region in a letter of 27 March 1844:

Ranges of middling height, now a chain of cones, now flat-topped mountains covered with brush ... accompany on each side the plains two to three miles broad, and many miles long. The soil is black ... the vegetation is quite different from ... the other side of the coast range; the grasses more various ... The creeks are deeply cut, with steep covered with reeds.

He described the Condamine alluvial plain thus: 'I crossed one of them twenty-five miles broad, and fifty miles long, a true savannah, in the centre of which I saw the sharp line of the horizon, as if I had been on an ocean'.

For thousands of years this upland landscape was home to perhaps 1500 members of the Keinjan, Giabal, Jarowair and Barunggam tribes, a subset of the Wacca Wacca language speakers. The Jarowair were custodians of the Bunya Mountains where, triennially, they invited indigenous peoples from southern Queensland and northern New South Wales to take part in a festival: feasting on the protein-rich bunya nuts, settling disputes, performing song-cycles and, most importantly, exchanging intelligence about the coming of the white men and their strange animals.

Jewel in the diadem of squatterdom

Although 'discovered' by Allan Cunningham in 1827, and named after Sir Ralph Darling, Governor of New South Wales (1825-31) the Downs was not settled by Europeans until 1840 but within two decades the region had become the 'jewel in the diadem of squatterdom' and the squatters the elite of the 'pure merinos'; pastoral villages dominated by comfortable houses and large woolsheds then dotted the landscape. In the next three decades, however, agricultural selection or family farming – especially attractive to German and Irish immigrants – would ineluctably challenge pastoralism despite dummyming, debt, drought and depression. It became commercially-viable on the eve of

World War I with the advent of refrigeration and a branch railway network that spread, web-like, into every little valley; the native grasses were now replaced by wheat and lucerne; the landscape was dotted with butter and cheese factories and the iconic Southern Cross windmill, manufactured in Toowoomba.

Garden of Queensland

By the end of the nineteenth century the region became known as 'The Garden of Queensland'. Pastoral villages were replaced by the large service towns of Warwick, Dalby, Pittsworth and, above all, Toowoomba which evolved as the regional capital – the 'Queenly City' or the 'Simla of Queensland'; summer home for the colony's governors.

Dairying dominated the Downs' economy between the world wars – in the 1930s there were about 6500 dairy farms with an average of 30 cows each – and the cream cheque saved many a farm and town in the Great Depression. However, wheat (and other cereal crops) also boomed, despite falling prices; broad-acre farming with large combine harvesters appeared in the landscape. Unfortunately also so did the intrusive prickly pear until eradicated by the Argentinean parasite *cactoblastis cactorum*. Government-sponsored soldier settlement schemes on marginal lands were mostly a disaster, except in the Granite Belt which diversified into fruit growing.

During World War II, the Downs landscape was dotted with military airfields, especially at Oakey, Cecil Plains and Leyburn the last of which was the training field for Z Force. Toowoomba – headquarters for General Lavarack – also became an 'R & R base' for American service personnel. A signal station at Cabarlah, a RAAF Stores Depot for Toowoomba and Oakey Army Aviation Field would remain as important post-war national defence installations and regional economic inputs.

Grand schemes

Post-war, dairying and wheat continued their domination, although large wheat fields were now varied by safflower, sunflower and sorghum. Sealed roads rendered the rail network superfluous; most tracks were pulled up. Rural electrification saw poles and wires strung across open plains. Economic forces mandated the replacement of small family farming with larger commercial farms; ring dams and concrete wheat silos dominated the scene while cotton grew on the Cecil Plains. By century's end rationalisation had completely gutted the regional dairying industry and globalization forced the closure of many associated factories. Moreover, the long century-end drought posed major challenges for local governments with dam levels falling alarmingly just as the north-western Downs landscape has seen the development of water-intensive coal-mining and coal-seam gas power generators.

Art of the Darling Downs region

In the mid-nineteenth century the Downs was visited by artists such as Conrad Martens, JG Sawkins and HG Lloyd who, mainly executing pictures for squatters, generally gave the landscape an English park-like appearance indicating the region's transformation from wilderness to civilisation under white tutelage. The quintessential Downs (farming) landscape was first captured in the water colours of Millmerran farmer Kenneth Macqueen (1897-1960) and then further illustrated in the works of Toowoomba artists Herb Carstens (1904-78), Don Featherstone (1902-84) and Ralph Weppner (1903-61). It has been reinterpreted by artists such as Maryika Welter.

Literature of the Darling Downs region

The Downs' most influential writer was public servant and farmer Arthur Hoey Davis (1868-1935) who as Steele Rudd produced the comic Dad & Dave stories encapsulating the tribulation and triumph of selectors from struggling with drought to entering politics. Transferred to film and radio, Dad & Dave became Australian icons. Another public servant, George Essex Evans (1863-1909) gained national prominence at the time of Federation for his poetry eulogising the 'women of the west' and the coming Commonwealth; he was a strong advocate for the region and founded the Austral Association for the advancement of science and the arts. Literary journalist David Rowbotham's (1924-) poetry celebrates the rural Downs as his 'spirit-place' and Jean Kent (1951-) elicits the appeal of regional identity, but national poet Bruce Dawe (1930-) offers a more acerbic view of provincial Toowoomba and novelist Andrew McGahan's *The white earth* (2004) exposes a darker side of regional life.

Sources and further reading

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