Pastoral Pioneers – life in a dry land

The 1870s ‘boom’ season that followed E. Warburton’s exploration of the north-eastern end of Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre in 1866 attracted pastoral pioneers to the Diamantina Channel Country and Georgina–Diamantina river system south of Birdsville. Grazing leases were taken up and Cowarie (1875), Kalamurina (1879), Clifton Hills (1876), Pandie Pandie (1876), Alton Downs (1876), Mona Downs (1938) and Mungeranie stations (1888) were established for sheep and wool.

Why sheep and not cattle?

“Initially, most pastoralists preferred to raise sheep rather than cattle because wool growing was more profitable on land that was cheap. Homesteads like Etadunna built large and impressive stone woolsheds. Unlike beef, wool did not deteriorate on the long wagon trip to Port Augusta and the much longer sea voyage to London. Cattle, however, were tougher and less labour-intensive than sheep, and they could defend themselves against dingoes. Eventually drought, rabbits, dingoes and The Great Depression all contributed to the amalgamation of small sheep properties and the shift from grazing sheep to cattle.” (Peter Bell)

Lush pastures after the ‘boom’

Channel Country is legendary cattle fattening country. Floodwaters meander their way across the braided channels of the Diamantina and Goyder Lagoon, and later recede into waterholes or dry out, leaving behind vast tracts of nardoo, native clover, lignum and grasses for cattle.

New ways to use the land

Oil and gas exploration followed pastoralism in the 1970s and 1980s. Gas and oil fields were established based at Moomba in the Cooper Basin. Conservation was represented by the establishment of the Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre National Park and the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve. The Australian Wildlife Conservancy took up the Kalamurina lease, establishing it as a major wildlife sanctuary.

Tourism

The romance of the Birdsville Track, Simpson Desert and Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre and the Channel Country, draw increasing numbers of tourists to the region.