

Introduction

It all began with the arrival of the first European settlers in 1788. The indigenous people, who had occupied the continent for at least 60 000 years, had come close to developing agriculture, but had not actually cultivated the soil or raised livestock. So the first settlers brought their agricultural technology with them, and one of the main aims of this book is to relate what those people did at home to what they did, or tried to do, in Australia. Many of the British and Irish practices were traditional ones with long histories and they were an invaluable part of the colonial inheritance.

But Australian agriculture is also of interest in its own right. It has been a major achievement for one of the driest parts of the world, with, ‘by far the oldest, most infertile, most nutrient-leached soils of any continent’ⁱ to be able to produce enough food and natural fibre to meet the needs of several times its own population. This book follows the history of each of the major commodities or groups of commodities to the end of the 20th century. The pace of development has varied greatly amongst them. Wool was the front runner in the 19th century while dairying grew rapidly during the first half of the 20th century. So too did grain growing, though even more after the Second World War (WWII). Other major exports—cotton, wine and even beef—are of relatively recent origin. In fact, much of the nation’s current capacity for food and fibre production has been created over the past 50 years. It has long since ceased being European (except in its distant origins) and become truly Australian. Even some of the sustainability issues, such as dryland salinity, are peculiarly our own.

The focus here is on the technologies that the farmers and graziers actually used rather than the state of scientific knowledge at the time. Wadham and Wood’s book *Land Utilization in Australia* was perhaps the first to deal with the reality rather than the theory of Australian agriculture.ⁱⁱ This book tries to do the same. It is not a history of agricultural science but of innovations in farming, which are influenced by a broader range of factors, not least the ingenuity of the farmers themselves. While every effort has been made to identify the sources of key inventions, the details of discovery have usually been omitted.

Despite its trials and tribulations, Australian agriculture has been a great success. Well then, why weren’t Australian farmers far more affluent at the end of the 20th century? The answer lies in the changing nature of traded goods and wealth. In 1876–80, food and natural fibre accounted for about 58 per cent of the value of world trade,ⁱⁱⁱ and Australians were amongst the wealthiest people in the world. Agricultural trade held up pretty well until just after WWII, when it still made up about 40 per cent of the total, but the figure has since fallen to around 10 per cent.^{iv} Australian farmers have felt the effects of this in a relentless cost/price squeeze; their costs being determined largely by the national economy, their prices by the world market. They have responded very positively, though by 1999–2000 they needed to