



Gorge Country muster

DOWN BARK HUT ROAD lives Les O'Neil, one of the last of the old-style cattlemen who still muster their cattle in the Gorge Country, camping out in the depths of the ranges using pack horses to carry their gear.

In the intervening years since the gorges were first occupied, roads have been put through elsewhere, fencing Acts proclaimed in parliament, and most of the tablelands cleared of their forests and planted down to introduced pasture species. But in the Gorge Country there are no minerals, no deep, fertile soils and little valuable timber. Moreover, the precipitous, rocky ranges discourage roadbuilding, and so horse country it has remained while motor transport has transformed the countryside everywhere else.

O'Neil inherited his 1,100 acre sheep station, Day's Mountain, from his father, who also ran fine-wool sheep. And his father before him was the original selector of the freehold tablelands block. Money

ebbs and flows with sheep, according to the vagaries of world markets and the fashions of Europe. So a smart stockman runs cattle as well, but not on his best country.

O'Neil, true to his breed, leases 15,000 acres of Gorge Country from the government to run a herd of 100 or so herefords. Cattle prices have not always been as good as they are now, and sheep fortunes have taken a tumble. When the New England district was settled, pioneering families, such as the Wrights from Wongwibinda, made famous by their poet daughter Judith, regarded the eastern slopes and ranges as the poorest country.

The leasehold block is called Rowleys Creek and in late Spring when the wattles have finished their flowering, O'Neil starts his cattle work. He dusts off the pack bags, britchin' and girths in an old shed at the back of the homestead on Day's Mountain, whistles up the dogs and catches his buckskin mount, a station horse called Echo.

The cows have calved and it's time to mark and brand them, keeping half a dozen bulls to service the herd.

The yearlings will be yarded and drove back up to Day's Mountain in a good season to be finished – the Gorge Country is not good for fattening, but is used for breeding cattle.

"I like runnin' cattle in the gorges because we don't have to worry about dingoes," O'Neil drawls. He has a proud way of setting his jaw, typical of the Australian stockman, his eyes on the imaginary horizon.

"Dingoes don't worry cattle like they do sheep." Wild dogs and pure-bred dingoes do cause inestimable losses to sheep on properties fronting the wild bush country.

"Then, there's the brumbies," he adds, referring to the wild horses running free in the Gorge Country. "We muster them from time to time, but they're no good as mounts, now. They're too in-bred."