

Chapter 1

Grain crops

The greatest challenge facing the settlers who arrived on the First Fleet in 1788 was to grow enough food for themselves. Their initial sowings on the sandstone soils in what is now the centre of Sydney were a disaster, so cropping was moved to more fertile land at the head of the harbour (Parramatta) and then to the even more productive Hawkesbury/Nepean River Valley.¹ But this took time, as did learning to farm in a new land. Supplies were slow to arrive from home and the infant settlement was often hungry in its first five years.²

The problem was that wheat did not grow very well in coastal New South Wales.³ Maize did better, but the colonists did not like eating grits and cornbread and persisted with wheat. While they were able to grow enough of it to meet their needs in good years from about 1795 onwards, they had to import or go short when harvests were poor. Supplies improved when Tasmania and then South Australia began to export, but New South Wales itself was not consistently self-sufficient in wheat until the end of the 19th century.

This chapter tells the story of how Australia developed grain growing and became one of the world's leading wheat exporters. But first, it is instructive to look at the food and farming practices that the British and Irish brought with them to Australia. These inherited practices were most influential during the first half-century of settlement. By the 1840s, the colonial farmers had begun to make their own inventions, such as the stripper-harvester, and to look to other new European-settled countries such as the United States for ideas rather than to Europe itself. There had, of course, been a lot of improvisation from the start, because conditions were so very different from those at home.

The colonial inheritance

Food preferences

At the time of settlement, many people in the British Isles still lived on the lesser grains, depending on incomes and relative prices,⁴ and there were distinct regional patterns of consumption too. Wheat was most important in the south and east of England, barley and oats in the north and west of England,⁵ Wales, Scotland and Ulster. Rye, the hardiest of all the cereals, had faded out of use during the 18th century; formerly it had been grown on the poorest soils and in the coldest parts of the kingdom.

In fact, Britain was in the process of switching to wheat. The equivalent of about 66 per cent of the population of England and Wales probably ate wheat in 1800, and 88 per cent in 1850. In Scotland, the percentage of wheat eaters rose from 10 to 44 per cent over this half