

## Australia's worst Christmas present

One old buck rabbit laughed himself silly at a joke of his own about that fence. He laughed so much he couldn't get away before I grabbed him. I could hardly eat him for laughing!

Anonymous Australian yarn about the failure of rabbit-proof fences

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries English sailing ships commonly carried rabbits as an extra source of meat. Although such shipboard fare was rarely in surplus, rabbits were sometimes released on islands as a surety for stranded mariners, or to supplement the diet of men put ashore for months or even years to exploit seals for fur or render whales for oil. Rabbits were also considered a normal part of farm livestock by early European colonists in Australia. For some, the rabbits were simply reminders of distant home.

The Henty brothers, who founded a colony at Portland, now an important port city in the Australian state of Victoria, were responsible for at least two attempts to introduce rabbits. When James Henty first sailed from England in 1829, 18 rabbits were included among his livestock but only one survived to reach the Swan River settlement in Western Australia. Later, on establishing the Portland settlement in 1834, a request was sent back to Tasmania on the supply boat *Thistle* to bring live rabbits with the next shipment of supplies. Rabbits were already established in Tasmania by that time and the request was probably fulfilled, but again with no apparent success (Bassett 1962).

Nevertheless, things took a different turn when wild rabbits arrived in the Port of Melbourne aboard the *Lightning* on Christmas Day 1859. On landing, they were taken through Geelong to Thomas Austin's property at Barwon Park in south-western Victoria, where they were carefully nurtured with the aim of breeding enough to hunt. The success of this project exceeded all expectations, and within a very short time over-abundant rabbits not only allowed good sport but were also spilling onto neighbouring properties and beyond. Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, took part in a shoot or *battue* at Barwon Park in 1867 and reportedly bagged 416 rabbits in less than 4 h (Fenner and Fantini 1999). That's well over a rabbit per minute, and the men who re-loaded his guns must have worked hard.

Thomas Austin could not have found a better place to start the rabbits off. Much of south-western Victoria comprises heavy basalt-clay soils not well suited for burrowing rabbits, but the Barwon River rises in the ancient sandstone of the Otway Ranges to the south and along its flood-plain are patches of light, river-borne sand. These supported natural woodland including sheoak trees and wattles, with patches of open grassland. The mild Mediterranean-like climate, with a prolonged growing season from autumn to late spring, as well as the easy burrowing for rabbits, proved an ideal initial combination. When Austin's cattle and sheep suppressed the acacia scrub and the tough summer-growing kangaroo grass, introduced winter-growing Mediterranean grasses and herbs took their place. These favoured rabbit breeding even more.