

1. The Establishment of Meat

Well before European settlement seafaring visitors to Australia were killing animals for food, these people would have come from as far afield as China and Japan as well as from the nearer Pacific islands and from the close neighbours directly across the Timor Sea. Later, European navigators and explorers would have landed in order to re-supply their ships with whatever plants and animals were available. Lieutenant James Cook and his compatriots feasted on all manner of Australian fauna as they mapped the coastline. As well as being a superlative botanist, Sir Joseph Banks was also a naturalist of a different order. His journal of the voyage of the *Endeavour* shows that he delighted in his discoveries of new species of fish, birds and mammals. While his observations of Australian native fauna in their natural state added considerably to zoological knowledge, Banks and the other naturalists did much of their research by eating them - classifying them, not just by type, but also by taste. For those surviving on ships' rations of hard biscuits and salted meat, Australia's exotic species must have seemed to them to be rare delicacies indeed.

In 1788, when the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove, its nine ships carried enough provisions for the new convicts and settlers aboard to survive for two years. Among the tons of provisions were cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, rabbits, goats and a good number of chickens, geese, turkeys and ducks. Also on board were 8,000 fishhooks, 14 fishing nets, 6 harpoons, whale line and butchers' knives. Australia was never then destined to be a new Garden of Eden either for the transported convicts or for the captive domesticated animals. It was intended to be an antipodean version of Britain, and therefore a meat-based diet was always planned for the new colony.

The impetus for establishing the predominant emphasis on meat in the Australian diet came from the British - not from those used to eating it, but rather from the poor who had previously rarely eaten it. Since the middle ages, Britons had associated meat eating with wealth and status. Meat, especially beef, was then the preserve of the wealthy. By the 18th Century, with land clearances and the enclosure of common land, often the only time the poor had access to meat was from poaching the animals, which were on their social superior's land. Considering that poaching was responsible for a large number of criminal cases, it is the case that some convicts were actually transported to Australia purely out of their desire for meat. In the little land that

was available to them the rural poor grew what they could, but the basic diet was often not much more than bread, oats and potatoes

Between 1830 and 1850, over two million people from Great Britain and Ireland emigrated to North America and Australia. The majority of these made this voyage unwillingly because the poverty in their homeland was unbearable and later because of famine, which reached its peak during the 'hungry 40s'. Tempting the hungry British to come to Australia was Caroline Chisholm (1808-1877), then popularly known as 'the emigrant's friend.' In 1847, Chisholm, whilst on a return visit to England to promote Australian settlement, published a pamphlet entitled *Comfort for the poor: meat three times a day!* This advised prospective migrants of the supposed benefits of emigrating to a country where meat was plentiful. For many of these - who had probably not had their fill of meat for years - the prospect of coming to Australia, a land where meat was both plentiful and cheap, was a dream come true. A vegetarian diet must have seemed then a poor substitute for a meat-based one, signifying both poverty and low social status. Ironically, during a tour of Australia in 1871 the British author, Anthony Trollope, recorded a discussion with a Townsville workman, who said, "If you knew what it was... to have to eat mutton three times a day, day after day, week after week, month after month, you would not come here and tell us that we ought to be contented with our condition."¹

Still, to most British immigrants the avid and conspicuous consumption of meat was a continuing sign of success in their new land. The new Australians continued to hold this view, eating meat at every opportunity - even after memories of the dietary deprivations of their native lands had faded. The essayist, Richard Twopenny, wrote in the early 1880s:

"Of course meat is the staple of Australian life. A working-man whose whole family did not eat meat three times a day would indeed be a phenomenon. High and low rich and poor, all eat meat to an incredible extent, even in the hottest weather."²

This was still the case in 1922 when the British writer, D. H. Lawrence, paid an extended visit to Australia where he wrote his novel, *Kangaroo*. In this semi-autobiographical book, his fictional wife declares soon after their arrival:

¹ Trollope, Anthony, *Australia*, edited by P.D. Edwards and R.B. Joyce, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1967, p.193

² Twopenny, Richard, *Town Life in Australia*, Ringwood, Vic., Penguin, 1973, p63-64

“The only thing that's really cheap," said Harriet, "is meat. That huge piece cost two shillings. There's nothing to do but to become savage and carnivorous - if you can.”

So attached to meat had the average Australian become by 1931 that during the great depression an attempt to deprive them of it actually caused a major disturbance, now known as the ‘Beef Riot’. Given the large numbers of unemployed at the time, as a cost saving measure, the South Australian government attempted to take beef off the unemployed’s dole ration. So incensed were the unemployed and their supporters that on January 9, 1931 shouting 'we want meat' a crowd numbering in the thousands, comprised of communists, trade unionists and the unemployed, descended on the Adelaide treasury building wherein was the State Premier. The crowd, baying as it were for blood, met a defending force of police, and a violent riot ensued which left a number of severely injured police and demonstrators. The government had offered mutton - a cheaper meat - as a replacement for beef, but after the riot it had to reconsider and so beef remained on the ration.