



*'Now the magical change has come!'*

above:  
John Flynn (1880–1951)  
*Drought Affected Trees on the  
Birdsville Mail Route* [between  
1912 and 1951]  
b&w photograph; 6.5 x 11.2 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24704518

below:  
Portrait of Dorothea Mackellar  
reproduced from *Australia  
Unlimited* by E.J. Brady  
(Melbourne: G. Robertson, c.1918)



## A DROUGHT BREAKS IN 1908

Ian Warden brings us the words of journalists who, when reporting the drought of 1908, fancied themselves as pastoral poets

*I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.*

...

*Core of my heart, my country!  
Her pitiless blue sky,  
When sick at heart, around us,  
We see the cattle die –  
But then the grey clouds gather,  
And we can bless again  
The drumming of an army,  
The steady, soaking rain.*

From Dorothea Mackellar's *My Country*

One hundred years ago in 1908, the very year in which Dorothea Mackellar's iconic, homesickness-inspired poem was first published (she'd begun it while in London in 1904), the poem's timeless Australian meteorological dramas were played out in her state of New South Wales. After many months of pitiless blue skies, the grey clouds gathered yet again and yet another heartbreaking drought was ended. And, as well as lots of the poem's 'steady soaking rain', there were too, hard on the heels of the drought, some of the poem's 'flooding rains'.

These occasions—the coming of rain and the ending of drought—are so quintessentially Australian, so commonplace but so poignant, that it's touching to examine a particular one in a little detail. The occasions have lots in common but each is unique, too. This writer has followed in the popular Sydney press of the time the last despairing days of the New South Wales drought that ended in 1908 and the first rejoicing days of deliverance from it. Some journalists, expressing their delight in the deluges, wrote in ways that support the

famous suspicion that all journalists are, in their hearts, repressed poets.

By January of 1908, the drought, sustained for three years in some places, had made things desperate in much of northern, western and southern New South Wales. Throughout a scorching January, the press reported any outdoor gathering, such as a much-reduced rural show or a struggling race meeting, as a plucky demonstration of human defiance in the face of daunting odds.

The Bong Bong Picnic Races near Moss Vale on 16 and 17 January attracted only 13 horses. The track, beneath its dust, was too dangerously hard for many to risk their steeds. The man from *The Town and Country Journal* reported:

The second day will long be remembered by those who attended the meeting. It must have been considerably over 100deg in the shade. What it was in the sun could be guessed at anything under 150deg.

And, in spite of the fact that there were so few horses and only five jockeys:

Some capital racing was witnessed ... Despite the heat and dust [everyone there] appeared to thoroughly enjoy themselves and were just as enthusiastic as if the field were of record numbers.

Press photos of the races, often between only two horses, show dust billowing from beneath the gallopers' hooves.

On January 15, the *Pastoral* page in *The Town and Country Journal* said that conditions, though distressing in lots of districts, were especially distressing along the South Coast where:

there is very little water even for domestic purposes, and in districts from Helensburgh to Nowra, dams, springs and creeks, never known to be waterless, are now dried up. Nothing short of water famine is feared unless rain soon falls.

'Very hot, dry weather prevails in many parts of the country districts', the *Pastoral* page grieved on January 22, its author writing hand-wringingly of how bush fires and 'the ravages of grasshoppers and rabbits' were adding to rural miseries. Conditions were awful everywhere, with crops 'withering up'.

Along the especially parched South Coast, dairy farmers were resorting to measures they'd not had to try for 40 years (like sinking casks in swamp beds to try to find water for stock). At Yass:

Continued dry weather has had the effect of giving the district a very parched appearance ... Creeks and water holes are fast drying up ... The outlook is very serious and stockowners will have a big struggle to keep their stock alive.

At Maitland:

The weather during the week has been of a most trying character, for the thermometer showed over 100deg on several occasions. Rain is again badly needed and the countryside wears a brown and bare appearance ... the millet and maize crops are burning up and the majority of them will fail unless rain comes soon.

Then, beginning in late January, grey clouds gathered above a wide selection of the state's desiccated places and then came, most musically for those blessed with iron roofs, Mackellar's 'drumming of an army' of falling raindrops.

below left:

*Finish of the Wingecarribbee Plate, Won by Mr W.E. White's Schooner* reproduced from *Town and Country Journal*, 22 January 1908 Newspapers and Microforms Collection, mfm NX 442

below right:

*Mr E.C. Ryrie's Amelia Winning the Grassfed Race from Mr H.C. Badgery's Hero, the Only Other Starter* reproduced from *Town and Country Journal*, 22 January 1908 Newspapers and Microforms Collection, mfm NX 442



below:  
Ralph Dunn & Co.  
*Portrait of V. Trumper*  
[between 1895 and 1915]  
sepia-toned postcard  
14.0 x 8.8 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an23505835

bottom:  
*A Wet Afternoon at the  
International Cricket Match*  
reproduced from *The Sydney  
Mail*, 26 February 1908  
(Sydney: John Fairfax and Sons,  
1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms  
Collection, NX 182



In a recent book about the 'corrugated brotherhood' of Australian blokes who love their sheds, Mark Thomson says that:

like the warbling of magpies in the morning or the screeching of galahs at dusk, the sound of rain on a corrugated-iron roof is part of Australia's audio landscape.

The joy, the rapture encouraged by these initial rains brought out the latent pastoral poet, the latent Mackellaresque qualities, in hitherto prosaic journalists. In an editorial 'The Blessed Rain' in the 5 February edition of *The Sydney Mail*, the writer, wishing that he had 'the sweet fancy and bewitching pen of the pastoral poet' to do the subject justice (and perhaps secretly persuading himself

that he did have those gifts), rhapsodised that, thanks to the blessed rain that had relieved the drought, 'One nearly hears the herbage sing its growing song of thankfulness to Nature for her beneficent showers in so many parts of this fair land'.

The *Pastoral* page of the same edition, after so many months of having only misery to report, began with the joyous overview that:

Beautiful, refreshing, and invigorating rains, proving the salvation of many districts which were stricken with drought, have fallen almost all over New South Wales.

It went on to give district reports full of remarks about

local 'splendid rain' and local jubilation among farmers and graziers.

After still more rain, and on February 26, probably the same author who fancied he'd been almost able to hear the herbage singing wrote in *The Sydney Mail* in an editorial 'The Rain':

How beautiful! But first, how full of awe, how significant of majesty! The massing of black clouds, the deepening of the shadows on the sloping hills, the silence of the honeyeater, the bell-bird and the thrush. Then flash of lightning, and roll of thunder, soon followed by the music of the rain. The lizard is under a stone, the ants are in their dormitories. The gum leaves glisten under their shower-bath, the moss at the foot of the tree becomes a bright green sponge. The creek gathers strength from a thousand rivulets. The dust is washed off the hanging clusters of grapes ... The tanks are filling and so are the hearts of the people; the whole thirsty expanse of garden and orchard drinks in the precious drops. The rain has come—the beauty of it!

These sorts of writers, carried away and with their prose turning purple at the pace at which hitherto beige New South Wales was turning green, were in no mood to mention any negative aspects of the deluges. But there were some. The Fifth Cricket Test between Australia and England at the Sydney Cricket Ground and beginning on Friday, February 21, took an absurd seven days to complete (Australia won by 49 runs) as the rain washed out session after session and disappointed thousands of fans. People who'd not needed their umbrellas for three years suddenly had to search for them to take them to the cricket where, forlornly,





they had to shelter under them in the hope that the rain would stop and they'd get a glimpse of the great Victor Trumper. Between torrents and abandoned sessions, he struck a magnificent 166 in the second-innings.

Then, in fulfilment of Mackellar's illustration of droughts being succeeded, ironically, by flooding rains, there was what *The Sydney Mail* called 'a great flood in the Hunter River' caused by 'the recent phenomenal rains'. The flooding, around Newcastle and Maitland, gave the press some exciting and novel vistas to photograph. Rescue boats plied Newcastle streets and the Newcastle Gasworks turned into an island in a 'vast sheet of water varying one to ten feet in depth'.

But to dwell on negatives would have been to seem ungrateful to God, the great 'Dispenser of the rain' as one newspaper called Him, as it thanked Him 'for the golden showers that have so changed the face of the earth during the last few days'.

'A little while ago', a still-euphoric writer, now utterly in touch with his inner pastoral poet, gushed in *The Sydney Mail* on March 4:

the shafts of sunlight were radiating pitilessly from the iron roofs of settlers' houses ... The paddocks were covered with dust. The cattle, wasted and tired, were objects of pity. The peach, the pear, the apple trees drooped, and from deep valleys rolled clouds of bush-fire smoke. Now the magical change has come! The fruit trees do not stand in dust, but in solid, warm, moist earth that feeds them and makes them strong. The blossom of the bloodwood is overhead, and suckers are thrown out in fantastic, incredible luxuriance from burnt

trunks and limbs that would not be suspected of harbouring one electron of life. The outlook across the plains, instead of being bathed in heat haze, is clear and clean to the horizon. In place of dry crackle and snap, the bush murmurs softly and sweetly. The wallaby leaps over rocks from whose crevices mosses and new ferns peep out ... soil, leaf, flower, creeper, are all better for the rain and so also are the humans. Australia is her true self this glorious March.

Her true self? Surely not. The writer was temporarily intoxicated by the rain. Australia's true self was to be better captured later that year by Mackellar's characterisation of it as a capricious country, 'wilful' one moment and 'lavish' the next. 'Her beauty and her terror/The wide brown land for me!', Mackellar was to exclaim, and the editorial writer, fancying he was describing Australia's true, beautiful self, was in no mood to anticipate the inevitable terror of the inevitable next drought.

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above:  
*Major Cracknell's (Mayor of West Maitland) Surrounded by Water (on the Right)* reproduced from *The Sydney Mail*, 4 March 1908 (Sydney: John Fairfax and Sons, 1908) Newspapers and Microforms Collection, NX 182

below:  
*Steel-Street, Newcastle* reproduced from *The Sydney Mail*, 4 March 1908 (Sydney: John Fairfax and Sons, 1908) Newspapers and Microforms Collection, NX 182

