

Samuel McCaughey: 'The King of Sheep'

Australia is the world's leading producer of wool. In 2004/2005 25% of global woolclip originated in Australia. A key figure in the development of this still important sector of the Australian economy was an Ulsterman who became the largest sheep farmer in Australia.

Samuel McCaughey was born at Tullyneuh, near Ballymena, on 30 June 1835. He was the son of Francis McCaughey, farmer and merchant, and his wife Eliza Wilson. He was one of the principal figures who bankrolled the UVF Larne gun-running of April 1914 and at the outbreak of the Great War he paid for the creation of an Australian air force, so he could be considered the father of the Royal Australian Air Force. He was an outstanding philanthropist.

The young McCaughey acquired a knowledge of accounting and office management in his father's linen business and worked on the farm. He was persuaded by his uncle, Charles Wilson, to seek his fortune in Australia and in April 1856 he reached Melbourne. To save money he walked 200 miles - stark evidence that you can take a man out of Ballymena but not Ballymena out the man - to the Wilson property near Horsham. McCaughey started as a general station hand but soon became overseer.

In 1860 McCaughey's relations helped him to purchase a third share of Coonong, 42,000 acres near Urana in the Riverina, in partnership with David Wilson and John Cochrane. Although they suffered setbacks (principally through lack of water), McCaughey remained optimistic and in 1864 became sole owner. In the 1860s he acquired Singorimba and Goolgumbra and by 1872 held 137,000 acres. In 1871 he visited his widowed mother in Ulster and in 1874 brought out his brother David to help manage his properties.

McCaughey founded his stud in 1860 by buying from James Cochrane of Widegawa old ewes descended from Tasmanian pure Saxon merinos. He later experimented with Silesian merinos from the flock of Prince Lichnowski and in 1866 with two Ercildoune rams from another uncle, Samuel Wilson. Between 1873 and 1875 McCaughey bought over 3,000 rams. To improve the quality of his herds, he spared no expense in fencing and subdividing his paddocks. By 1883 the Coonong stud was one of the best in the Riverina. In that year, anxious to increase the weight of his wool, he bought ten Californian merinos and was so satisfied with the results that he visited America in 1886 and bought 120 ewes and 92 of the finest rams in the state of Vermont; six months later he selected 310 more Vermonts. The

weight of the wool increased dramatically and for years the greasy, wrinkled Vermont sheep were invincible in shows. In 1879 only one of his stud rams had cut 16 lbs. of wool but by 1891 200 of them averaged 30 lbs. After severe losses in the 1902 drought McCaughey returned to Peppin bloodlines from Wanganella, but Australian sheep breeders have had great difficulty in eradicating the Vermont strain. For many years McCaughey was vice-president of the New South Wales Sheepbreeders' Association.

He pioneered the use of heavy machinery for ploughing and soil excavation in New South Wales. He acquired Coree in 1881 and Toorale and Dunlop, 2,500,000 acres on the Darling from Samuel Wilson. He lived at Coonong where in 1876 he had built a large homestead with a garden and lake. At various times he owned or had a share in twelve stations in New South Wales and three in Queensland with a total area of about 3,250,000 acres. From the mid-1880s Dunlop, Toorale and the Queensland stations were watered by artesian bores. In 1888 at Dunlop the shearing was done completely with machines for the first time in Australia.

One of the first to see the advantages of widespread irrigation, McCaughey brought out Irish labourers who did not mind wet and boggy conditions. In 1900 he bought North Yanco where he constructed a complex irrigation system with some 200 miles of channels and used two steam engines to pump water from the Murrumbidgee; his success persuaded the government to build the Burrinjuck dam which was completed in 1927. He built a magnificent mansion at North Yanco.

In 1899 he was appointed to the Legislative Council. He had no strong political leanings but his experience and knowledge were valued. He donated £10,000 to a fund for sending a bushmen's contingent to the Boer war. In 1905 he was knighted and visited Europe. He visited Louis Pasteur and tried to obtain an efficient means of exterminating rabbits, which had been foolishly introduced to Australia from Europe and proved to be a plague.

A great philanthropist, McCaughey was always ready to help people in trouble on the land. He contributed £10,000 to the Dreadnought Fund and another £10,000 to Dr Barnardo's Homes. During the First World War he contributed generously to the Red Cross and other war charities.

He died from heart failure on 25 July 1919 and was buried in the churchyard of St John's Presbyterian Church, Narrandera. He had never married and left an estate worth over £1,600,000.

Apart from bequests of £200,000 and all his motor vehicles to his brother John and legacies to his station managers and employees, he left £10,000 to increase the stipends of Presbyterian clergy, £20,000 to the Burnside Orphan Homes at Parramatta, £20,000 to Scots College in Sydney, £10,000 each to five other independent schools, £5000 to the Salvation Army and £5,000 each to seven hospitals. Half the residue of his estate went to the Universities of Sydney and Queensland. The other half went to the relief of members of the Australian Military and Naval Expeditionary Forces and their widows and children.