ART AND OCCUPATION

Tom Roberts, Shearing the Rams 1890

Jim Coffey, bearded ‘champion of the shed’ [1], back bent, muscles tensed, pipe strapped to his thigh, holds down a struggling ram with his powerful left arm while stripping a creamy white ‘long blow’ (full-length) fleece with a pair of ‘tongs’ (hand-shears). ‘Down the board’ [1] in line astern, Jim’s bearded mates shear the creatures’ necks, bellies and shoulders. The fleeces spill onto the rough wooden floors to be gathered by a barefoot lad, who strolls along carrying wool to store, past the scowling ‘roustabout’ (John Monahan) as he wrestles a large, handsome ram into position. Diffused sunlight bathes the scene through a series of openings on the right, where Frank Barnes, overseer and local landowner, sporting a pith helmet and white beard, squats down to supervise proceedings and enjoy a pipe. Further down the shed two shearers take a break: one greedily quenches his thirst, the other gazes out of the window as he oils his shears. The hatted ‘tarpot boy’ (9-year-old Susie Bourne, whose mother Isabella runs the kitchen) smiles out of the picture and stirs her pot with a large brush in readiness for any accidental animal nicks. Beyond her there’s a glimpse of the sunlit backyard through the shed’s rear entrance where a bell hangs to sound the start and end of work. Sturdy pine trunks support red rough-hewn roof timbers and a central waist-high wooden partition (displaying the daily tally) separates shearing from sorting. There’s a rhythm of hard, physical, masculine effort, a sense of harmony, teamwork and ‘mateship’ [2]. In the bottom, left hand corner is printed ‘TOM ROBERTS’ and the year 1890. The painting marks the centenary of Australia’s European settlement and celebrates the wool industry’s contribution to the nation’s wealth [3], capturing the dignity and nobility of rural labour and the heady spirit of prosperity. Susie, the only female in the painting, is the happy face of Australia’s future soon to disappear in economic depression [4] and a legendary shearers’ strike [2].

Roberts visited Brocklesby (a 60 000 acre sheep station 16 km NW of Corowa, New South Wales) for a
family wedding (1886). He returned late spring 1888, set himself up in the woolshed and made 70–80 preparatory sketches [2]. He paid the shearsers £12 each as models (×4 their average weekly wage) and Susie and her sister 6d to kick up dust. Roberts went back to the shed to paint the following spring eventually finishing the picture at his studio in May 1890. A local stock agent Edward Trenchard bought the painting for 350 guineas [5] and hung it in his Melbourne office.

Thomas William Roberts was born in Dorchester, England (1856), the eldest son of Richard Roberts, editor of the Dorset County Chronicle and his wife Matilda Agnes Cela [6]. After his father’s death (1869), the family emigrated to join relatives in Melbourne and by 1873, Roberts was winning prizes for his artwork at the East Collingwood School of Design. He left for London in 1881 to enrol at the Royal Academy and visited Spain, Italy and France. Returning to Melbourne in 1885, he took the lead in establishing a plein-air painting camp in the semi-rural outskirts of Melbourne—the beginning of the Heidelberg School of Australian Impressionism. ‘Hard times’ eventually drove him back to England (1903), where he eked out a modest living and enlisted as a medical orderly during WWI [7]. Back in Australia after the war, he and his wife Lillie settled in a small cottage in the Dandenongs, Victoria (1923). She died 4 years later but he re-married and continued to paint. In 1931, he had surgery for cancer, returned to his cottage and died. Twelve months later, the National Gallery of Victoria bought Shearing the Rams [6].

Although sheep were brought to Australia with the First Fleet (1788), fine wool merinos were originally imported some 40 years later. Today Australia farms >100 million sheep, equivalent to 9% of the global ovine population [8] each producing c. 4.5 kg wool. Bales weigh c. 195 kg and fetch up to $1500 AUD each [9]. Shearers’ numbers have dramatically reduced in recent time [10] as their work remains arduous, hazardous [11] and relatively poorly paid [12]. The ‘Lucky Country’ seems no longer able to ‘ride on the sheep’s back’ [4].

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References