

Dairy Cows and Dairy in Dutch-Australian Emigration Literature, 1945-1965

Introduction

Cheese that comes from the Netherlands is not always easy to recognise abroad. Around 1960 a market researcher in Australia wrote: "'Cheese' is a very ill-defined commodity since all imported cheeses and home-produced processed cheeses are lumped together with 'Australian cheddar-type' as one commodity in all official statistics".¹ It is typical of the way in which a Dutch lifestyle and its symbols, such as milk and cheese, can fade in a new environment, for example, that of an emigration country such as Australia. Similar developments certainly also occur in other countries that have experienced mass immigration over the past two centuries and seemed particularly suitable for farming, such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Argentina, and South Africa. But in this contribution, I will continue to focus on Australia, a country and a part of the world where the cultivation of sheep far surpassed that of cattle. Long after World War II, however, sheep were kept not so much for their milk as for their wool, a product of which Australia was one of the world's leading exporters.

[Image from Drane & Edwards 1961, between p. 158 and 159]

Emigrants interested in this kind of information could turn to an extensive corpus of publications especially tailored to them that accompanied their crossing and settlement, ranging from fiction, with or without artistic claims, to all kinds of business texts, such as journalistic travel books, geographical descriptions, and informational and propaganda material.² It was not uncommon for government agencies or private emigration institutions to have a hand in these publications, as government policy in the post-war decades was aimed at promoting emigration from the Netherlands in order to deal with the threat of overpopulation. I will also use such sources myself, to determine to what extent products that are closely associated with the image of the Netherlands and Dutch farmers, such as milk and cheese, could continue to play a role if farmers exchanged their country of origin for Australia. In this way, I attempt to determine what possibilities the emigration literature presented to farmers to transplant the familiar agricultural existence to Australia. To what extent did they actually succeed? And were they able to maintain their own way of life and way of thinking?

Vast Farmlands

Although Australia mainly owed its income to agriculture and livestock during the period under study, only a limited part of the country was suitable for this. In addition to huge numbers of sheep, around 1960 dairy and beef cows were mainly found in the more precipitation-rich, fertile coastal regions: eastern Queensland and New South Wales, Victoria, south-eastern South Australia, southwestern Western Australia, and the northern and eastern part of Tasmania. Further inland, in the drier areas, it was best to keep sheep, but cattle were kept here and there as well.

[Image from [Anonymous], 1949, p.81]

Sparsely populated Western Australia was used almost exclusively for extensive livestock farming. Around 1950 as a result of overgrazing, hundreds of thousands of hectares of natural grassland were in danger of desertifying in the near future. In the state's north, the Australian writer and diplomat Paul McGuire saw few opportunities for successful livestock farming: "For a profitable operation it is necessary to establish vast farms, ranging from a quarter to half a million hectares in size, but even then the inaccessibility and remoteness of the land would make it difficult to raise good quality livestock".³ The Northern Territory was equally inhospitable, but cattle ranching was "the only meaningful livelihood" there, according to McGuire.⁴ Taeke Cnossen, director of the Christian Emigration Central, and the novelist Marten Apperloo would confirm this a little later, aware of the animals' plight:

At best the land remains suitable for raising cattle for slaughter. The number of cattle is currently estimated at 1,000,000. But these animals don't have it good. Especially in the dry season, tens of thousands of animals die of hunger and thirst every year.⁵

To move the cattle herds over distances of hundreds of kilometres - from the cattle stations to a railway station, market, or the slaughterhouses at the ports - special corridors were often used which the drovers had to choose in such a way that there was sufficient water and food along the way for the animals to maintain their weight. These cattle routes could not be compared with Dutch country roads, according to the Stichting Landverhuizing Nederland, which did its best to illustrate such weeks or even months of cattle transport for compatriots: "Imagine a Dutch farmer who has to take his cattle to market in Paris or Rome!". The Australian drover could be compared to "the cowboy of a Wild West movie", except that instead of a lasso he "[has] an eight-meter long, short-handled whip, which he whips with a single crack around the feet of a bovine to bring it down."⁶ Not everyone was equipped for the rough life of the drover, thought J.J. van der Laan, press attaché at the Dutch embassy in Australia – a life "which certainly does not offer the average Dutch boy any attraction".⁷

A Hard and Lonely Life

Dutch emigration literature also drew a world of difference between Dutch and Australian livestock farming in many other respects, starting with the scale on which it was practiced. Small farms are quite exceptional, Van der Laan noted in 1950:

Climate and soil conditions make dairy farming in Australia a business completely different from that in the Netherlands. The pastures and food production are quite different, partly because the cattle spend summer and winter outside and therefore e.g. stable feeding is virtually non-existent, as is intensive fertilisation. Milking is almost exclusively done by machine, also because there is a great shortage of labour in the dairy business. Partly because of this, the entire company is much less intensive than in the Netherlands, and the question is whether intensification would make up for its costs in the foreseeable future. Here and there, however, small farms can be found on fertile alluvial strips along the rivers, which in some respects are somewhat reminiscent of the Netherlands.⁸

In Australia's dry, inhospitable outback, small-scale cattle ranches were not viable at all, British writer and journalist Colin MacInnes wrote in 1964. The companies that did exist were mostly owned by large meat exporters, and had lands of hundreds to thousands of square kilometers of land, area needed to feed the livestock. The farms were very far apart here, as were the roads and the railway stations. The cattle ranches therefore had simple runways for the transport of goods and people by air. "The houses are simple and functional," says MacInnes, "and life is hard and lonely, especially for the women."⁹

Here, too, extensive livestock farming was practiced on vast grazing lands. "However, that meadowland should not be seen as juicy Dutch meadows," warns Van der Laan, "but as vast natural plains, sandy soil, with all kinds of coarse, natural grasses, weeds, and shrubs, and trees here and there."¹⁰ Closer to the coastal areas, for example in Victoria, there was considerably more comfort. Here the livestock farms belonged to prosperous 'fat grazers', who could afford large houses, cars, and horses for their children.¹¹ These were often mixed dairy farms, which in turn required a fairly large area.¹²

[Image from MacInnes 1964, p. 53]

About the possibility for Dutch emigrants to get their hands on an agricultural enterprise, Melbourne professor of Dutch Augustin Lodewyckx was not optimistic: "[There] will be but a few who have the substantial capital of several thousand pounds required to buy such a company."¹³ Around 1950 this

must have also been the case for a livestock farm of a more modest size. "On a fairly well-developed 40-cow dairy farm, minimum requirements for dairy buildings, equipment, and subdivision fences are likely to cost anything from £2,000 to £4,000," estimated a contemporary Australian study.¹⁴ Indeed, these are amounts that far exceeded the budget of most Dutch emigrants, which is why they usually sought refuge as "shareholders" in a lease construction as a springboard to their own farm. The owner of an existing farm, after mediation by a Dutch emigration official in Australia, then placed his company at the disposal of an immigrant, with whom he shared the proceeds as an owner. According to the writer Anthonie van Kampen, it was a promising method to meet the typical Dutch need for their own company: "There are many Dutch people who have quickly achieved a certain form of wealth in this way."¹⁵

Nevertheless, it was not nearly as easy to build a future as an independent farmer as the emigration literature suggested. In 1947, for example, the youth novel *Hollandse jongens in Australië* (Dutch Boys in Australia) by Nico Molenkamp featured the Vos family, who came from a "keuter farm" near Rotterdam. After a year and a half of preparation and "with Dutch intransigence," the family started a large, self-built farm with 150 dairy cows in Australia:

The dairy facility was ready and waiting. The milk cans were sanded and stood neatly in a row. The cheese factory and the fine dairy establishment, where the hygienic children's food was to be prepared was ready.¹⁶

In the business, the older children worked enthusiastically:

Nicoline led the way in the cheese dairy and fine dairy department. The result of all efforts was beyond expectations. The milk, which the farmhands, five in number, brought in every morning proved to be of excellent quality. Flip, who was in charge of the economic management of the farm, did not have to make much effort to find buyers for the Dutch produce.¹⁷

The novel makes it seem as if the Vos family's Dutch manners are now also being adopted, even by the less civilised Australians: "The farmhands, five young fellows, were quite pleased with their Dutch Farmer. In the beginning, they still had a lot to learn from Dutch cleanliness. But Farmer Vos' kindness and tact had done wonders."¹⁸

The Largest Amount of European Cattle in the Tropics

But Molenkamp's book was fiction. In reality, Dutch farmers in Australia had to conform to the prevailing customs, starting with the scale on which livestock was kept. Although the number of cattle in Australia shortly after the war was disproportionate to the number of sheep – more than 100 million in 1949¹⁹ – by Dutch standards it was still a very substantial herd, one which also rapidly increased in size. The journalist P.E.H.M. Verberne stated that there were "about thirteen million animals as opposed to some 2.3 million in the Netherlands in 1948", and those 13 million "constitute the largest number of European cattle occurring in the tropics".²⁰ According to Lodewyckx, by 1950 there were already over 15 million, "say about four times as many as in the Benelux countries".²¹ At that time, a cattle herd in Australia averaged 120 head, but there were also exceptions of more than 500 head.²² Dairy cows were a minority in the Australian cattle population; Verberne put it at about a quarter.²³

This involved several breeds, mostly imported from England, which may have been less attractive to farmers from the Netherlands. For example, Cnossen and Apperloo allowed a migrant from Friesland, working on an Australian farm, to dream of 'the possibility, later, when he has started his own farm, to bring over more and better pedigree cattle'.²⁴ However, around 1950, importation from the Netherlands remained banned as a precaution against foot-and-mouth disease.²⁵ But among the cattle breeds that occur in Australia, the Friesians, a breed of Dutch origin, will probably also have seemed familiar to migrants from the Netherlands: black-and-white animals that thrived

best in lush pastures. The old Friesian breed, they wrote, supplied high-quality beef and was also the 'heaviest milk yielder' among the dairy cattle breeds.²⁶

[Image from Verberne 1950, p.101]

However, Verberne found the average milk yield per Australian cow to be on the low side: about 1575 litres per year compared to 3400 in the Netherlands. A limited part of the milk and cream from dairy farms in Australia was processed, factory or otherwise, into condensed milk, butter, and cheese. 'The Australian is a big milk drinker,' Verberne noted, and: 'The cheese consumption of the population amounts to about 2kg per capita per year'.²⁷ Incidentally, due to the influx of immigrants this consumption had increased since the war, according to contemporaneous Australian market research.²⁸ The same study showed that although these immigrants consumed just as much milk and margarine as Australians, they consumed more cream and less butter as a result of 'the differing national origins of the housewife and, or, her husband'.²⁹ At the same time, the annual meat consumption of one hundred kilograms of meat per capita is also considerable, which Van der Laan did not understand:

“[One] fact is that the quality of meat in Australia is lower than in other countries. It is really an exception if one gets a thoroughly tender steak or a tender roast beef.”³⁰

The Wonderful Qualities of the Dutch Farmer and Farm Worker

To what extent did the conditions in Australia enable Dutch immigrants to actually build up a livelihood as cattle and dairy farmers and yet, like the fictional family Vos, maintain the way of life to which they were accustomed in their native country? The latter will have proved difficult if only because Australian government policy was aimed at not allowing settlers to settle in close proximity to one another, as had happened in the United States and Canada. Instead, they should spread among the Australian population in order to adopt the Australian way of life as quickly as possible. Lodewyckx thought that this assimilation policy was unwise in view of Australia's need for a substantial increase in population. The Netherlands was one of the few countries in Northwest Europe with a birth surplus, partly thanks to a farming population full of children, he reasoned, and it was better not to disassemble it: 'Rather, these farmers should be encouraged to stay together to honour the manners and customs of the old fatherland and especially to give birth to large numbers of children'.³¹

It is uncertain whether the fertility of Dutch farmers indeed worked in their favour, but that in Australia they had an edge over their compatriots was not proclaimed only in Australia but also in the Netherlands. In 1954, Cnossen believed that Australia “wanted to have up to 20,000 Dutch people, especially young farmers”, in the following year.³² Such emigrants had a good chance of prosperity and happiness, as the journalist Mathieu Smedts, traveling in Australia that same year, suggested to his readers based on testimonies of several farmers from the Netherlands whom he had met in Australia. Most of them turned out to be enterprising go-getters.

Someone from Groningen had been able to buy a 150-hectare bit of woodland that he was clearing every weekend with his son to turn into grassland. 'They will have to work for a farmer for another three years and after that they will be independent.'³³ Having their own farm was the dream shared by such migrants, even if a few of them succumbed to it, such as the former support worker who had previously had to make do with unemployment relief and now, fearing new unemployment, forced his children to earn as much money as possible with an employer, without giving them a break every now and then. It would be counterproductive, Smedts expected.³⁴ He also made mention of what he considered the exceptional case of a 'failed farmer' who, although coming from a farming family, had felt little for the agricultural business and had not been up to the risks of the farm he had bought with forty hectares of grazing land.³⁵

[Image from Van der Laan 1950, p.20]

In paid employment or as a *'zetboer'* or share farmer, the chances seemed more real that a Dutch farmer could work towards running his own business in about five years. This is how Smedts became acquainted with the van den Broek family, from a *'keuter farm'* in North Brabant, and now worked in Victoria on a farm with four hundred hectares of land and two hundred cows. Son Harry, already farm manager there, said there was more demand among farmers in the area for farming families from the Netherlands than were coming forward: 'Around Clyde, everyone is convinced of the wonderful qualities of the Dutch farmer and farm worker'. They could look forward to a house of their own, a good income, and a car.³⁶ Even for the farmhand Henk Sinnema, originally a bookbinder by trade in Leeuwarden, these things were possible: with savings and a loan from the bank, he imagined buying his own cattle and leasing a farm. The Dikkenberg family from Veenendaal already owned such a herd in Koo-wee-rup, partly thanks to money brought in from the Netherlands.³⁷

Smedts also gave some examples of farmers who had meanwhile set up an independent enterprise. For example, there was a former miner from Sittard who had retrained himself as a farmer in Australia and, in his own words, had been able to borrow fl.24,000 from a bank on grounds of "character and abilities" in order to start a 100-hectare farm with a small herd of cattle, a debt he thought he could pay off in four years.³⁸ There was also the Frisian farmer Damstra, who had been able to establish a farm with 84 dairy cows and now earned almost twice as much as when he worked in the Netherlands for the Boerenbond. In Friesland, he and his wife had had to share a house for twelve years, while now they lived in their own small house with their child. 'It's a shed in the eyes of the average Dutch person, but for Damstra and his family, it is a palace', Smedts noted.³⁹ 'One can say without hesitation,' he concluded, 'that there is a great future for the Dutch farmer in Victoria and in the other states'.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, such migrants did not have to work nearly as hard as in the Netherlands: "'Everything goes by machine," they say'.⁴¹ That this had already befallen many Dutch farmers and cattle breeders in Australia at the time, was confirmed by Cnossen and Apperloo:

No township so small, no farm so deserted or one finds them there our compatriots. The muscular, sunburnt young fellow, driving the tractor somewhere deep inland and creating heavy brown clouds of dust, was walking behind the plough on the Groninger Hogeland. The farmhand, blinking against the sunlight of the bright South Australian sky, used to pull deep furrows through the heavy clay of the Haarlemmermeer.

But it wasn't all gold that glittered on the other side of the world. Australians, accustomed to the vastness of the countryside, looked down on the small scale and old-fashioned methods of farming in Northwest Europe, wrote McGuire.⁴² Partly because of this, it was implied, farming demanded major adaptation by the Dutch. Van der Laan can attest to this:

'A Dutch farmer who emigrates to Australia at first finds the dairy industry a strange business, but relatively soon he learns that there is more to be said for the methods and customs that exist here [in Australia] than he initially thought. And of course, this is the case not only in dairy, but in every field.'⁴³

For Dutch female farmers, this isolated farming business was also not easy in other respects, according to Smedts; "the women would feel lonely and cut off from the world".⁴⁴ According to Australian insights, however, they could make themselves useful on the farm in raising young cattle because, thanks to their feminine characteristics, they would be particularly good at handling the calves. And the enterprising wife of the village butcher Sipman, who had emigrated from the Netherlands, also combated loneliness in Tasmania by sharing the knowledge she brought with her from the Netherlands in English-language lectures for women's clubs. 'With her subject matter, she stays close to home,' noted travelogue writer Pieter Risseeuw,

Using drawings made by her daughter Agatha, a teen, she shows the Tasmanian women the difference between the Australian and Dutch ways of boning a cow (in 10

and 20 pieces respectively). [...] It is nice, says Ms Sipman, that the ladies don't even get angry during my explication.⁴⁵

She probably could not expect much more from her new compatriots.

The Ideal Emigration Country?

The limited response that Mrs. Sipman received is telling. Dutch people who wanted to farm in Australia could learn from the emigration literature that they would enter a world that had few similarities with the Netherlands. First, there was the unprecedented scale and mechanisation of Australia's extensive ranching, with sizeable herds populated by animals whose breeds were mostly unknown to newcomers, herded in the open or driven across endless plains. There was enough room for new cattle farmers there, so it was said, but then mainly in drier and remote regions. A Dutchman who wanted to settle there faced a tough life, not least because an emigrant usually did not have the financial means to immediately purchase his own farm. At best, he could work toward it, usually by starting small as a cattle herder or farmhand and then working his way up, for example, in a partnership with the owner of a cattle farm or by buying, cultivating, and farming land himself. To do so he had to take on substantial financial obligations, the repayment of which would take several years. And with all this, there was nothing left for this emigrant to do but to largely abandon the customs and ways of thinking that he had brought with him from the Netherlands.

[Image from McGuire 1950, p.96]

Only in the imagination of a novelist like Nico Molenkamp did the ideal emigration country Australia exist, where the population enthusiastically embraced Dutch culture, as he allowed the Vos family to experience. After the family had settled in the Australian countryside, they welcomed the local Australians in a 'real Dutch' way to a 'Dutch party,' including with a Dutch tricolour proudly waving in the yard and with Dutch children's songs.

Daughter Nicoline: 'It's just a pity that we don't have any Dutch traditional costumes.'
'Yes, of course, they would have loved that,' said Farmer Vos regretfully.

However, the table for lunch is set in a 'real Dutch way,' with 'real Dutch bread, white bread, wheat, and rye, with butter, different types of cheese, cream, eggs, all real Dutch products.'⁴⁶ They are great to the taste of the new compatriots: 'Mrs. Fox's solid sense of temperance was severely tested when the large stock of cheese, bread, and cream was attacked.'⁴⁷

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Endnotes

¹ Rutherford 1961, 70.

² See: Van Kalmthout 2019, and Van Kalmthout 2021.

³ McGuire 1950, 356-357.

⁴ McGuire 1950, 330.

⁵ Cnossen & Apperloo 1954, 118.

⁶ *Australië* 1949, 38-39. For a literary imagining of the drover's life see Klaas van der Geest's youth novel *Achter stampende hoeven. Tom Hoekstra als veedrijver in Australië*. Meppel: Roelofs van Goor, 1954 (reprinted as: *Stampende hoeven. Tom Hoekstra als veedrijver in Australië*. 's-Gravenhage: Kramers, 1961), esp. Chapters 9 and 10.

⁷ Van der Laan 1950, 82.

⁸ Van der Laan 1950, 79.

⁹ MacInnes et al. 1965, 38.

¹⁰ Van der Laan 1950, 80.

¹¹ MacInnes et al 1965, 41.

¹² Drane 1961, 85.

¹³ Lodewyckx 1963, 261-262.

¹⁴ Ashton & Laffan 1950, 415. The Australian pound was replaced by the Australian dollar in 1966, at a value equal to half of the pound.

¹⁵ Van Kampen 1959, 39.

¹⁶ Molenkamp 1947, 151 and 153.

¹⁷ Molenkamp 1947, 153.

¹⁸ Molenkamp 1947, 154.

¹⁹ *Australië* 1949, 36.

²⁰ Verberne 1950, 102-103. Van der Laan 1950, p.78, even mentions more than 'some 14,000,000 head of cattle'.

²¹ Lodewyckx 1963, 92.

²² Verberne 1950, 103.

²³ Verberne 1950, 104. Van der Laan 1950, p.87 deviates from this with 'nearly 5,000,000 for milk production and over 9,000,000 for meat production'. Incidentally, according to Ashton & Laffan 1950, p.4, in 1947/48 there were only 132,305 dairy cows.

²⁴ Cnossen & Apperloo 1954, 21.

²⁵ Van der Laan 1950, 81.

²⁶ Ashton & Laffan 1950, 78.

²⁷ Verberne 1950, 104-105.

²⁸ Rutherford 1961, 70.

²⁹ Rutherford 1961, 77.

³⁰ Van der Laan 1950, 80 and 82.

³¹ Lodewyckx 1963, 262-264. Quote on p.264.

³² Cnossen & Apperloo 1954, inside of outer jacket.

³³ Smedts 1955, 39-40.

³⁴ Smedts 1955, 40-41.

³⁵ Smedts 1955, 114-115.

³⁶ Smedts 1955, 113-114.

³⁷ Smedts 1955, 116-117.

³⁸ Smedts 1955, 39.

³⁹ Smedts 1955, 38.

⁴⁰ Smedts 1955, 114.

⁴¹ Smedts 1955, 117.

⁴² McGuire 1950, 319.

⁴³ Van der Laan 1950, 79.

⁴⁴ Smedts 1955, 40.

⁴⁵ Risseeuw 1965, 107.

⁴⁶ Molenkamp 1947, 155.

⁴⁷ Molenkamp 1947, 157.