

Culture Shocks

Culture Shocks represents a slightly embellished and mildly enriched record of my initial impressions of veterinary practice in Scone, NSW, Australia. It was quite an immersion shock therapy type of introduction having left NW Ireland on the last Thursday in September 1967 and commencing in Scone the first Tuesday in October 1967 after a prolonged migration flight via the USA and the wide Pacific Ocean.

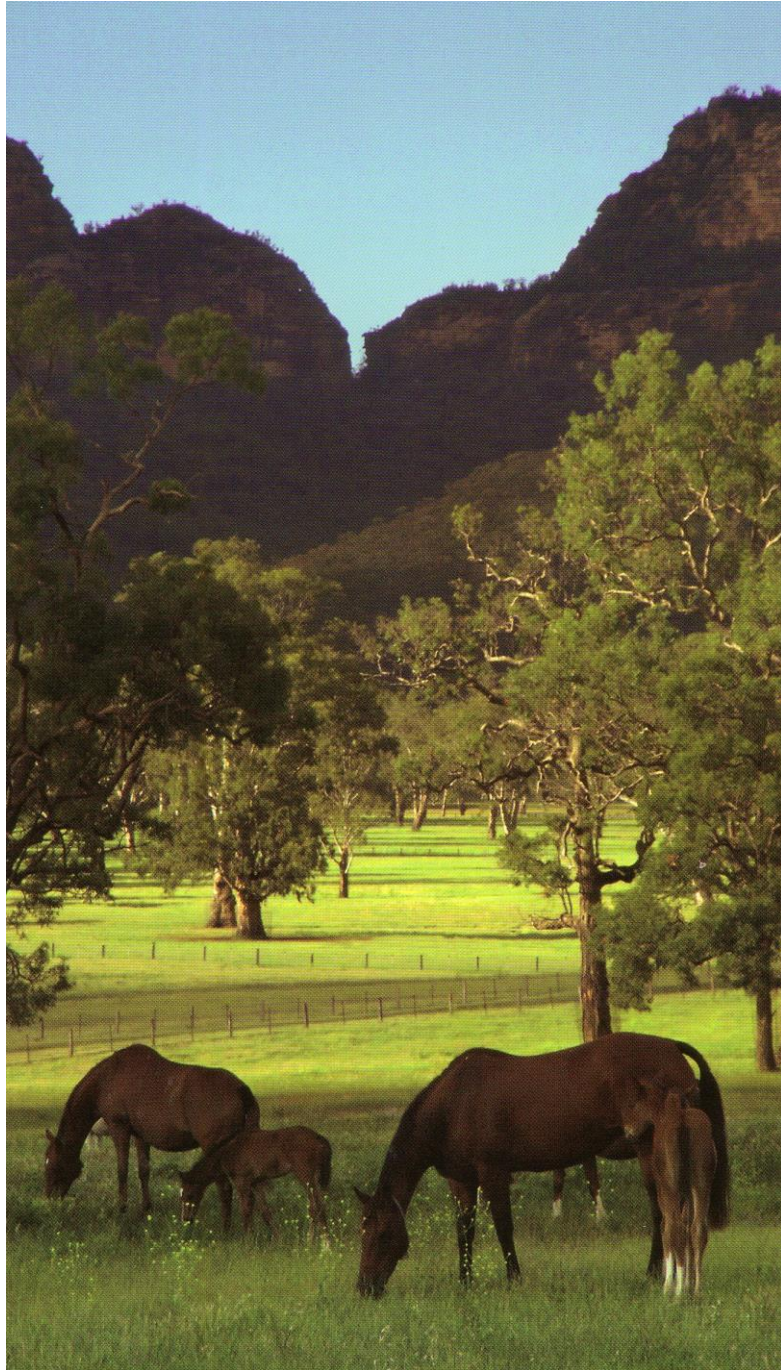
Culture Shock 1

I was reminded of my initial cultural expose on arriving alone in Australia from NW Ireland in the mid 1960's. In Donegal there was a 'large' herd of cows and represented the core family assets as well as comprising the total means of income provision. All siblings were 'over the water' earning pounds or dollars to further supplement the coffers. If one of the highly treasured animals even looked slightly off colour veterinary advice was sought and expected immediately! They watched them twenty four hours a day with the cows housed at night next to the family home! I remember one very urgent call at 2am because a recently calved cow was "shivering" and this in a Donegal December! All family members assembled with an eclectic selection of neighbours. Buckets of warm water with a profusion of soap and towels were always on hand! A drop of 'poteen' lubricated the process when you had firmly established trust.

Imagine my surprise and disorientation on receiving my very first call to a calving at a Kars Springs property only three quarters of an hour's drive from Scone towards Towarri Mountain. This was like halfway across Ireland! I imagined it to be an emergency and made appropriate preparation and haste! It was a time of drought (just another!) and cattle prices were in the nadir trough of the boom/bust cycle! Ernie Power was a soldier settler truly battling on his too small selection at Brawboy. I eventually found the farm only to be disappointed no-one was about! I managed to find a friendly neighbour able to reassure me after overcoming initial language barriers I had found the right place! After what seemed an inordinately long time a lone figure on horse-back eventually emerged from a brown cloud of dust in the long paddock. Ernie and steed were accompanied by a rather motley mob of 'superfine' Kelpies and Blue Heelers.

I will never forget the impact of the beautiful laconic gravelly drawl with a droll cultural cadence I cannot imitate: "Ah, you must be the vet! Wasn't expecting you today. She only started calving last Thursday.....!!!"

That Saturday night I received a call at 10pm while attending a case at Ameroo Santa Gertrudis Stud (I'd never heard of them before!) near Willowtree. There was a sick foal at Woodlands Stud, Denman. The boss was out to dinner! I went! In my resilient Holden 186 Station Wagon 'tank' with three forward column gears I traversed the 100 miles in 90 minutes! All the way across Ireland in my Mini Minor!



Unfamiliar territory in 1967.

Culture Shock 2

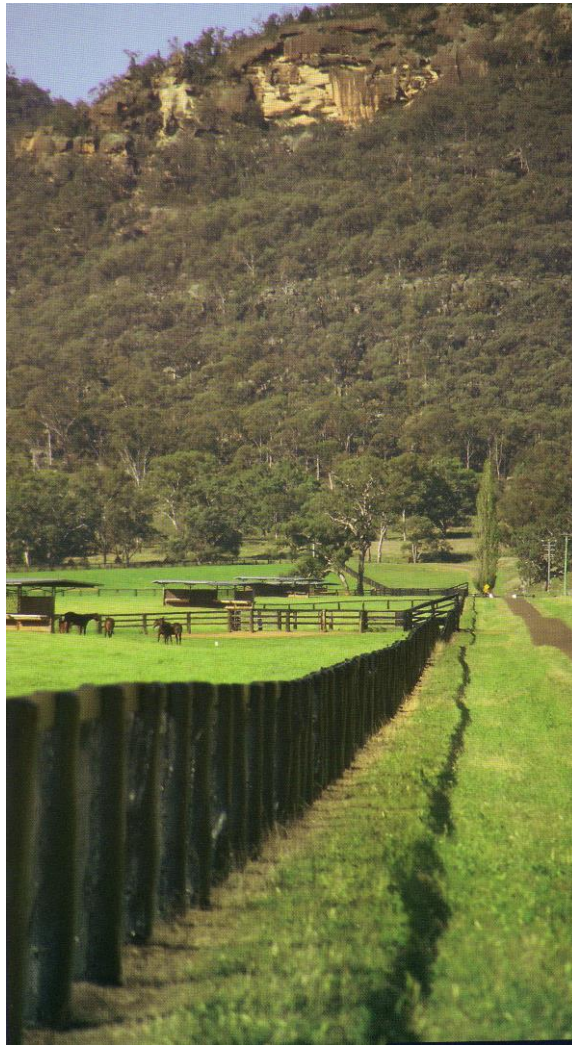
My most enduring rose coloured memories of my early life in Scone are centred round the very real privilege of providing a veterinary service to the unique and special stud farms in the Widden Valley. Only 1.5 hours' drive away this is the fabled 'Terrible Hollow' of Rolf Boldrewood and 'Robbery Under Arms' fame. Murray Bain used to refer to it as 'Peyton Valley' after Peyton Place the legendary American sitcom. There were so many episodes of extreme human melodrama some of it quite tragic!



'Terrible Hollow' is just over the hill.

As with all privilege comes responsibility. In those halcyon days of winding telephones, small rural exchanges with omni-informed telephone receptionists and shared party lines it was established practice to call at the Baerami Creek Store owned by Cliff Kemp. Cliff's father had reputedly regularly served Harry Readford *aka* Captain Starlight who resided in a nearby gully at Terrible Hollow. This is only a short cockatoo flight away from the Baerami Valley settled by Tom Hungerford's ancestors and still bearing a small side road with the appellant Hungerford's Lane. At Cliff's store you chatted, collected messages, delivered newspapers and could assuage the petroleum thirst of the very dry 186 Holden Chargers! If you missed Baerami Creek there was always Rodney Butcher at Baerami post office or indeed Kerrabee PO or Bylong Store. 'Bush telegraph' still works better than mobiles out here!

Part of the unwritten creed also included a veterinary service to the animals owned by the inhabitants of Baerami Creek "while you're passing through" (i.e. *Gratis!*) on your way to and from the Bylong and Widden Valleys. Cliff asked me to call and clean a heifer who still hadn't passed her afterbirth since disappearing into the scrub to calve "about two weeks ago"! Late on a very hot Saturday after a big day at Baramul and Oakleigh I agreed to make the call. Cliff had mustered the lean 'yellow' Hereford heifer into a very old post-and-rail iron bark round yard.



Spectacular scenery out Baerami and Widden way.

There was no race or forcing crush. I decided to do a full clinical examination! (Like bloody hell!) The heifer, totally unkempt and wild, would kill you if she could, racing around, snorting, bellowing and charging! Cliff was very old man. No help there! The solution was to neck-lasso from atop the safety of the high rail fence, choke down and secure with other ropes across the round yard attached to both hind and fore legs! The 'anaesthetic' (neck rope) could now be released. Now William you can perform a thorough clinical examination! I didn't! I went straight to the source of trouble, the RFM! You guessed it! She still hadn't calved! After 2 very hot hours and my remaining lubricant gel (no hot water on tap here – actually no water at all – Baerami Creek was dry!) I managed to extricate the desiccated remains of what might have been a very pretty white faced calf!

Cliff and I celebrated with a drop of rum and no water! Cliff kept a safe distance! I stank! Old Ben Barber of Baerami reckoned you went mad if you drank the water from Widden Creek. He stuck to rum. Who am I to doubt an expert? The heifer did not thank me at all! After release she would still have killed me if only I'd stayed in the yard! I left!

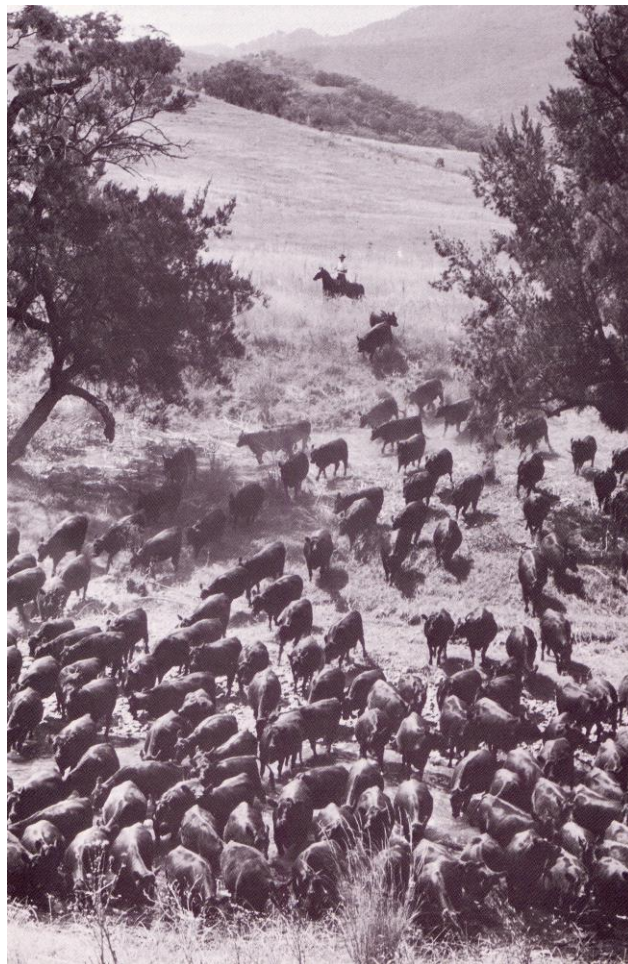
The happy post-script is the heifer survived and fattened. Cliff obtained a fair price for her at Denman cattle sales. Cliff was a very astute businessman. Forgetting whom he supplied with a 56lb bag of sugar once he put it on everyone's account! Sixteen paid without question! They breed them resilient, resourceful and tough out Baerami way, don't they Tom?



Valley of Champions.

Culture Shock 3

One of the very real privileges on coming to work at Scone was Belltrees. Belltrees was and is the ancestral home of the White family. The original pioneer James White came originally to Australia from Somerset in 1826 as custodian of 79 valuable French merino sheep destined for the Australian Agricultural (AA) Company. The AA Company was soon to begin its vast expansion throughout the colony of NSW from its base on the north shore of Port Stephens. In 1967 Michael and Judy were respectively patriarch and matriarch at Belltrees and parents of an immaculate family. Equally impressive was the home herd of magnificent Aberdeen Angus Cattle carefully selected for the very best breed traits over successive generations. Their acclimatised situation in Australia astounded me having been accustomed to the softer 'Border' variety of the farms in the Tweed Valley between Roxburghshire and my ancestral home in Northumberland.



Aberdeen Angus Cattle on Belltrees.
Courtesy of Judy White.

I remember in Donegal a farmer bursting into tears when a cow I was rushing to treat was dead on arrival from the peracute ravages of indigenous grass tetany! My first job at Belltrees was pregnancy testing “only” 285 heifers in the lower yards. A little later there were over 700 cows and calves mustered into the homestead yards for S19 vaccination of the junior female component. This was and is a magnificent sight with the exquisite expertise and precision of the Belltrees team of stockmen ensuring smooth flow and minimum fuss through the superb facilities. The very young Anto and Peter White were delegated to assist and learn the trade! A “crook” looking cow was brought to my attention. She was febrile and my initial diagnosis was PUO (pyrexia of unknown origin) possibly associated with chronic metritis. I suggested treatment. Michael was unimpressed! Far from breaking into tears his decision was to “take her up the gully and shoot her” as being biologically unfit to maintain her status in the Belltrees herd and possibly pass on an undesirable genetic weakness! I was momentarily stunned before acknowledging to myself the sound scientific wisdom of this peremptory decision. One glance at overseer Alec’s mutual contiguous approval sealed her fate! I had some philosophical readjustment to make and repositioning to assuage before moving on! Michael and Charles Darwin obviously saw eye-to-eye on this one arguably explaining the eclectic quality and high fecundity of the Belltrees herd? Back in the Borders the cow would at least have fed the local pack of hounds!



Running in the stock horses at Belltrees.
Laurence Le Guay, photograph courtesy of Judy White.

A little more pragmatic was one scion member of an illustrious grazing family on the Liverpool Plains. The family surname suggested an ethnicity closer to Zionism than Christianity and with proclivity for placing higher value on 'individual' assets.

The scenario at Western Willowtree was almost identical to that described above. This time the decision was made to administer antibiotics to the cow with PUO. A repeat dose was prescribed. Imagine my initial surprise some months later when our receptionist in Scone relayed a call from Fred at Willowtree for more of "the stuff that fattens cattle"! I had never considered Terramycin in that light but the results of therapy had been spectacular at least in Fred's eyes!

Culture Shock 4

I was riding with Murray at his behest determined to learn all I could and quick! I had never met Murray Bain but had seen him deliver paper at the BVA Congress in Edinburgh. It was with a mixture of trepidation, awe and reverence I ventured forth in my very new and pristine environment. I don't know what I expected but Scone looked to me like a Hollywood Western film set. The spectacular steep sandstone hills in the Widden Valley appeared to me to possibly harbour Geronimo and his braves! I had not yet discovered Captain Starlight! Inured to a class ridden culture which at least displayed a thin veneer of superficial respect for highly qualified professionals imagine my surprise on arrival at Baramul to find no obsequious welcoming party at the mare yards! I remained silent, made no remark and passed no judgment. Eventually there emerged on horseback two caricature baddies straight out of Warner Brothers. With at least three days' stubble and worn but clean 'uniform' the only missing apparel were the twin Colt 45's. They both dismounted and hitched their steeds to the rail. John A. went to the water tank for a drink. Legendary Star Kingdom Stud Groom Noel H. proceeded to the Doc's car, (a Merc) opened the door, helped himself to the daily paper and read the racing results. "You're late you (expletive deleted) old bastard" were the first dialectal words I heard spoken in the Valley! So much for professional reverence down under!

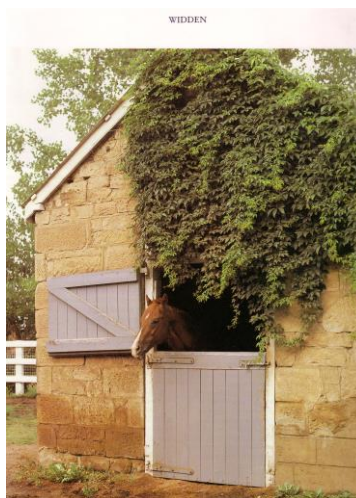


'Baddy' Noel Hennessy and Star Kingdom.
Photograph courtesy of *the Thoroughbred Press*.

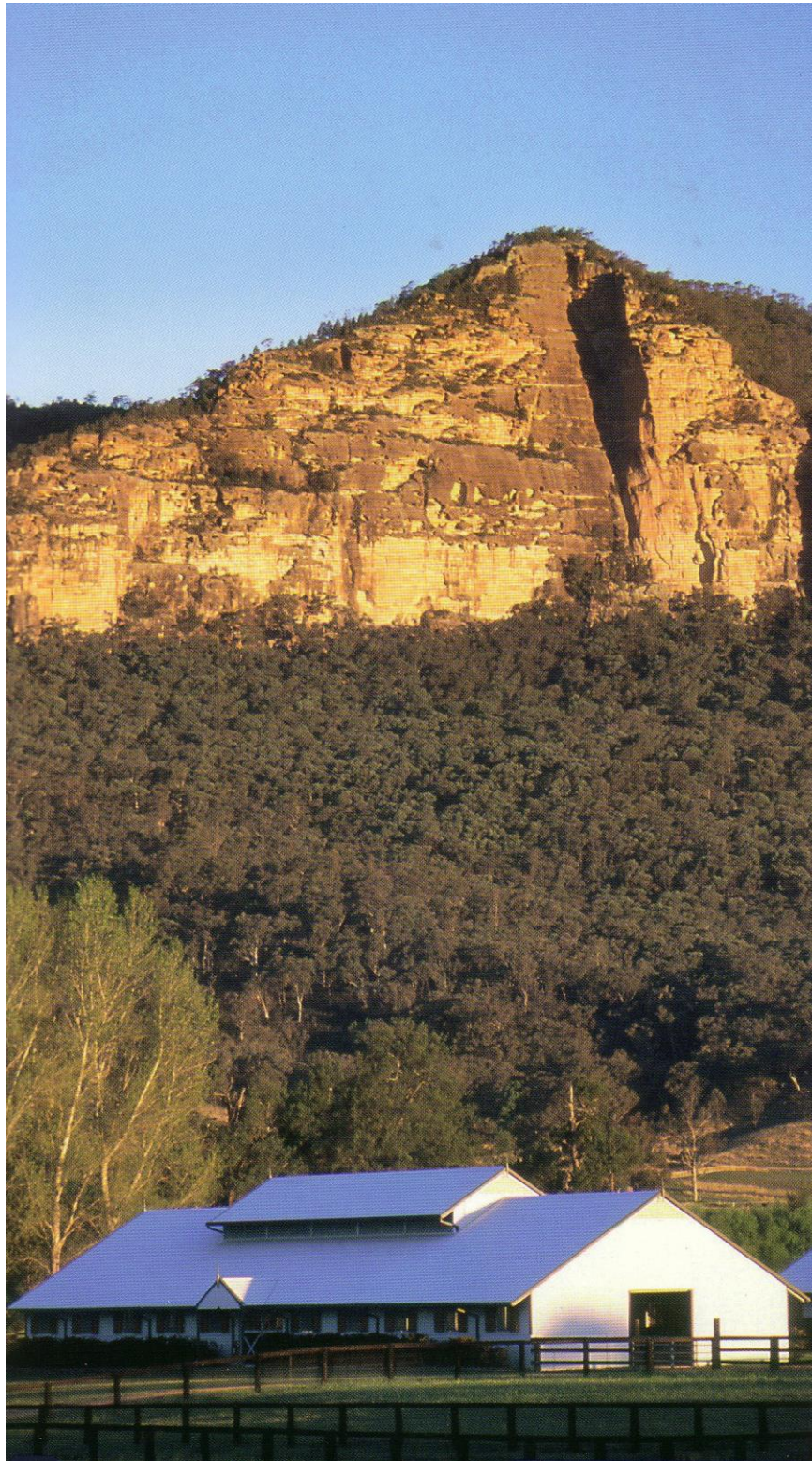
Noel and John were guilty of a little humorous deception at Murray's expense sometime earlier. Murray was meticulous in everything he did. His veterinary gear in his car was immaculate as were his sparkling white overalls, towels and most importantly record books in which he immediately wrote the results of every examination he ever made. (I counted >1 million examinations in the practice at one stage). Unpacking the car on arrival was an elaborate procedure and followed a very regular military pattern. The whole process took over 10 – 15 minutes. Murray was vain and proud and had attained very high army rank serving with HM forces in the Middle East and North Africa. On one occasion he was not surprised to find anyone at the Baramul yards and unpacked as usual. Still no one appeared. He read the paper. He checked his watch. He walked around. He checked his watch. He looked about. He checked his watch. At last he decided there must be some mistake so packed everything up again with the same exact precision as the unloading process. He was just about to drive away when two cheeky faces appeared above the old empty water tank by the cattle race! "G'day Doc, nice day?" may or may not have sounded sweet to his ears. I have no record of his response!

Noel was also the original author of the famous quotation of the relationship between veterinary income, 'bugs' and big time investment. With remarkable prescient percipience Murray had established the very first private diagnostic veterinary laboratory in the country. In 1965 Shona Murphy arrived to take up duties as resident bacteriologist and clinical pathologist in Scone. Very soon popular and scientific names of common equine pathogens became very familiar around the studs. *Beta-haemolytic Streptococcus* was conveniently and with very sound reason shortened to BHS. This prevented the embarrassment of 'literacy' exposure not least with the veterinarians.

Jim Capel from Barraba nearly choked on the telephone on receiving a report from us his mare had the long form version of the disease! I only just managed to calm him down and explain! The bull market corporate giant of Australia at the time was the 'Big Australian' Broken Hill Pty. Ltd. or BHP. It did not take the very droll Noel to cotton on that "Murray should rename BHS to BHP he's made so much money out of it!" As Murray said about someone else: "Cheeky bastard!"



‘Vain’ at Widden



Modern facilities in the Valley of Champions.

Culture Shock 5

The unique Australian accent and enunciation must have had their origins from the type of people with whom I had been used to dealing. The soft Donegal intonation, the harsher strident Tyrone argot and the rolling vowels of my native Northumbria all contributed to the unique antipodean pronunciation. Similarly the lowland Scots diction left its mark as did my favourite 'Geordie'. (It's always intrigued me how Burke and Wills may have communicated). I considered I had acquired a generally well-rounded expose to varying degrees of elocution in English. I had listened to wireless broadcasts of Test Cricket and compared the starkly contrasting tones of Alan McGilvray with the very 'beeb' renditions by Brian Johnston ('Jonners') and earthy doyen John Arlott. A Brisbane colleague was intrigued to discover I knew of Vulture Street just outside the 'Gabba'! As a very small boy I distinctly remember John Arlott: "and its Trueman running in from the Vulture Street end"! My father rather unsuccessfully tried to imitate the distinctive call of "No" in 'strine'! It sounded like a not too convincing nasal "now"! Ken Howard and 'Fag' completed my down under etymological education not long after arrival.

In the halcyon swinging sixties it was still *de rigueur* to listen to the races on a Saturday afternoon. Indeed there was little else to choose! Commercial radio was new to me with its tinny tunes and jingling advertisements. Ken Howard was the legend! I was transfixed by his accuracy and bemused by his speed at calling a race! It was a different story when I tried to follow the progress of my selection! With a degree of unfounded prudish intellectual snobbery I considered I had a smattering of French. I backed a horse called Arc En Ciel by Faux Tirage (NZ). The race was well and truly over before I recognized Arkenseel had indeed run a place and his sire was Forkstirrage! Ken Howard deferred to no one with his Darlington inspired brand of French pronunciation! I thought Arc En Ciel must have been scratched or left at the barrier!

'Fag' was another story altogether! A great bloke and one of my trusted and valued friends, he also "talked the talk" as he "read the chalk"! Literate written interpretation sometimes presented a problem especially with trans-Tasman names. Murray was always a stickler for exactitude in record keeping especially correct spelling. "Can You Eat a Pie" sounded a funny name for a horse in 'Fag-speak' – so much so I thought I should inquire further. I asked for the identification papers. 'Fag' was right! Kanhui Tae Pai must have been Maori for the same thing! "Tall Haemorrhoid" also stretched the limits of credibility and imagination! Taille Emeraude was a French bred mare at Holbrook and Alan Harris read it differently!