

Saltbush Bill

Banjo Paterson

Now this is the law of the Overland that all in the West obey,
A man must cover with travelling sheep a six-mile stage a day;
But this is the law which the drovers make, right easily understood,
They travel their stage where the grass is bad, but they camp where the grass is good;
They camp, and they ravage the squatter's grass till never a blade remains,
Then they drift away as the white clouds drift on the edge of the saltbush plains,
From camp to camp and from run to run they battle it hand to hand,
For a blade of grass and the right to pass on the track of the Overland.
For this is the law of the Great Stock Routes, 'tis written in white and black—
The man that goes with a travelling mob must keep to a half-mile track;
And the drovers keep to a half-mile track on the runs where the grass is dead,
But they spread their sheep on a well-grassed run till they go with a two-mile spread.
So the squatters hurry the drovers on from dawn till the fall of night,
And the squatters' dogs and the drovers' dogs get mixed in a deadly fight;
Yet the squatters' men, though they hunt the mob, are willing the peace to keep,
For the drovers learn how to use their hands when they go with the travelling sheep;
But this is the tale of a Jackaroo that came from a foreign strand,
And the fight that he fought with Saltbush Bill, the King of the Overland.

Now Saltbush Bill was a drover tough, as ever the country knew,
He had fought his way on the Great Stock Routes from the sea to the big Barcoo;
He could tell when he came to a friendly run that gave him a chance to spread,
And he knew where the hungry owners were that hurried his sheep ahead;
He was drifting down in the Eighty drought with a mob that could scarcely creep,
(When the kangaroos by the thousands starve, it is rough on the travelling sheep),
And he camped one night at the crossing-place on the edge of the Wilga run,
'We must manage a feed for them here,' he said, 'or the half of the mob are done!'
So he spread them out when they left the camp wherever they liked to go,
Till he grew aware of a Jackaroo with a station-hand in tow,
And they set to work on the straggling sheep, and with many a stockwhip crack
They forced them in where the grass was dead in the space of the half-mile track;
So William prayed that the hand of fate might suddenly strike him blue
But he'd get some grass for his starving sheep in the teeth of that Jackaroo.
So he turned and he cursed the Jackaroo, he cursed him alive or dead,
From the soles of his great unwieldy feet to the crown of his ugly head,
With an extra curse on the moke he rode and the cur at his heels that ran,
Till the Jackaroo from his horse got down and he went for the drover-man;
With the station-hand for his picker-up, though the sheep ran loose the while,
They battled it out on the saltbush plain in the regular prize-ring style.

Now, the new chum fought for his honour's sake and the pride of the English race,
But the drover fought for his daily bread with a smile on his bearded face;
So he shifted ground and he sparred for wind and he made it a lengthy mill,
And from time to time as his scouts came in they whispered to Saltbush Bill—
'We have spread the sheep with a two-mile spread, and the grass it is something grand,
You must stick to him, Bill, for another round for the pride of the Overland.'
The new chum made it a rushing fight, though never a blow got home,
Till the sun rode high in the cloudless sky and glared on the brick-red loam,
Till the sheep drew in to the shelter-trees and settled them down to rest,
Then the drover said he would fight no more and he gave his opponent best.

So the new chum rode to the homestead straight and he told them a story grand
Of the desperate fight that he fought that day with the King of the Overland.
And the tale went home to the Public Schools of the pluck of the English swell,
How the drover fought for his very life, but blood in the end must tell.
But the travelling sheep and the Wilga sheep were boxed on the Old Man Plain.
'twas a full week's work ere they drafted out and hunted them off again,
With a week's good grass in their wretched hides, with a curse and a stockwhip crack,
They hunted them off on the road once more to starve on the half-mile track.
And Saltbush Bill, on the Overland, will many a time recite
How the best day's work that ever he did was the day that he lost the fight.

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