

2 *Setting the scene: rural South Australia*

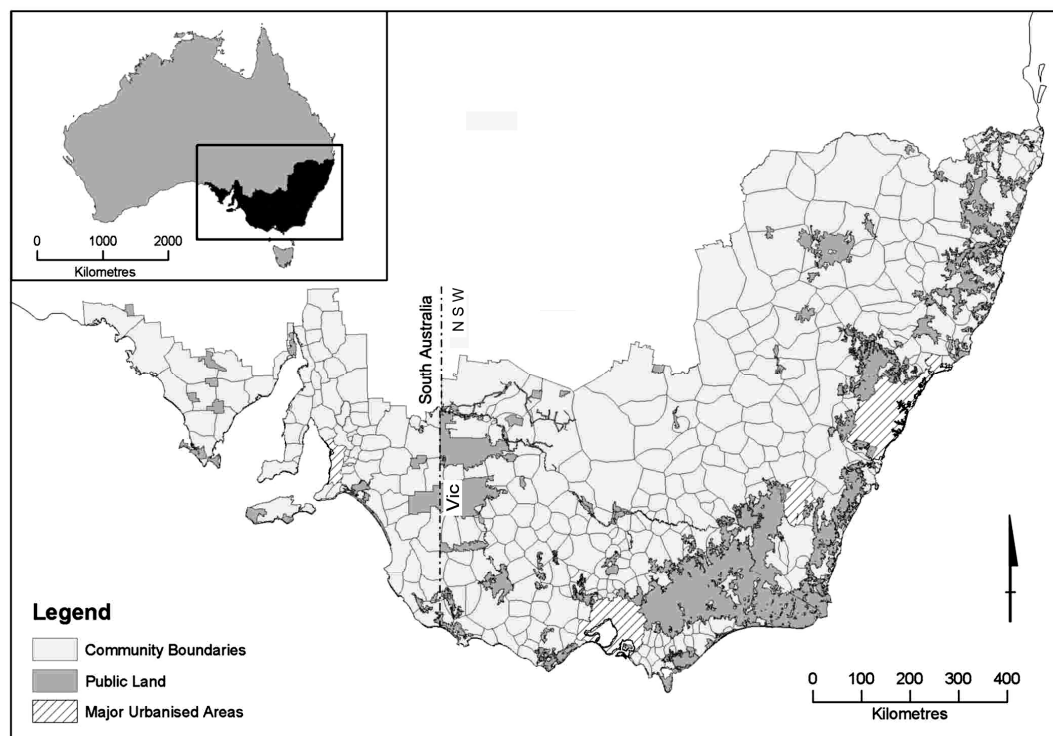
Every case study used to illustrate general processes is hedged about with its own contingencies of geographical setting and historical experience. As in all rural areas, the current social landscape of South Australia is strongly influenced by the past, and is far from uniform across the State. This chapter aims to give the reader unfamiliar with the region a basic mental picture of South Australia as it had evolved by the 1980s, at the commencement of the rather dramatic downturn whose impact is the main concern of the thesis. The study area is first situated in the context of the Australian space economy. Key environmental factors affecting the white colonisation process are then identified, and three major stages in the occupation of the settled areas up to the end of World War II are briefly outlined. Each of these three stages produced a distinctive social and cultural landscape, and the differences between these three are later shown to have had significant influence on the severity of the rural crisis of the 1980s. The final phase of closer settlement in the years of the postwar “long boom” are outlined, and the chapter concludes with an overview of the growth of the rural population, differentiating between the three landscape zones.

Size, density, metropolitan concentration and remoteness

For the convenience of the reader, a fold-out topographic map of South Australia is provided at p. 316, along with a map identifying commonly used regional names. With a total land area of some 984,000 Km², South Australia is the nation’s fourth largest State. However, by 1986 some 99% of the State’s 1.3 million population were concentrated in the “settled areas” – the contiguous section sufficiently closely settled to be incorporated into local government areas. Within the settled areas, which occupy just 15% of South Australia’s land area, population was again heavily concentrated into the metropolitan area and its immediate penumbral area. In 1986, the Adelaide urban area accounted for almost 69% of the settled areas’ 1,333,000 people.¹ Thus the study area combines an exceptionally unicentric, metropolitan-dominated space economy with rural population densities ranging from moderate (approx 59 persons per Km² in the irrigation areas and metropolitan periphery) to very low (0.13 in the far West Coast region). Although the incorporated area is but a small fraction of the total State, it nevertheless imposes considerable isolation, long internal travel distances and high transport costs on the rural population. The road distance from Adelaide to Ceduna (786 Km.) compares with the distance from Paris to Marseilles, or Copenhagen to Amsterdam. On a national scale, the position of the study area on the central part of Australia’s southern coastline belies its off-centre position in relation to the national population distribution, and to the termini of the international sea-routes to the continent. It occupies the far western end of south-eastern Australia’s fertile crescent, skirted by a very narrow transition belt between ‘the desert and the sown’. It thus lacks both the advantage of accessibility to the core of the national space economy, and the protection afforded by extreme remoteness from it (Figure 2.1).

¹ Statistics quoted in this paragraph are taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistics: South Australian Yearbook No. 21, 1986, and from the Australian Bureau of Statistics: Census 1986, Cat. No. 2466.0

Fig. 2.1 Rural South Australia in national and south-eastern Australian context.



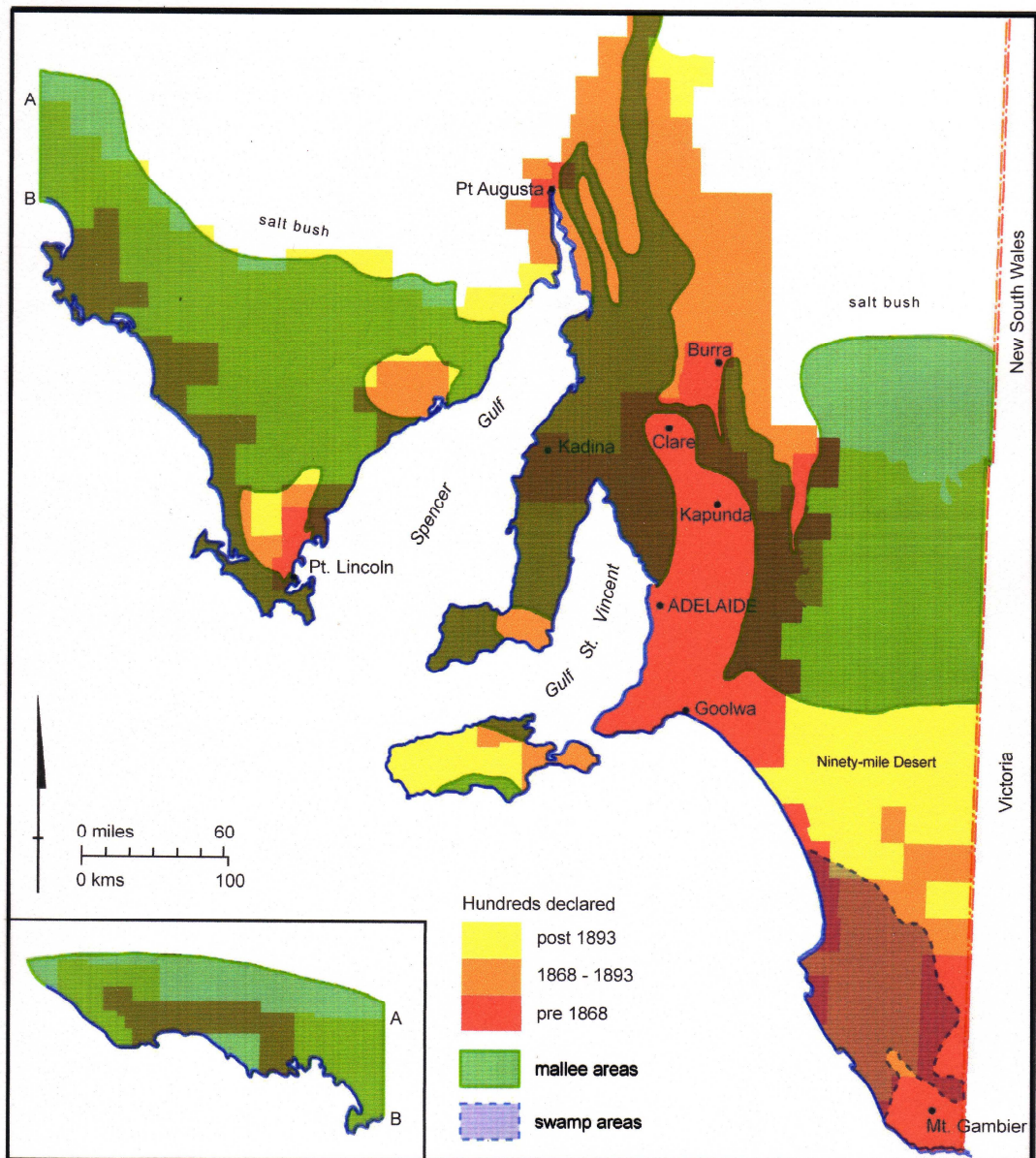
The polygons approximate to the social catchment areas of the main country towns.
Source: Smailes et al. 2005, p. 82.

Colonisation and the environment

Compared to the east coast of the continent, South Australia has very little surface water, few river estuaries and few natural, protected deep-water harbours. Prior to the foundation of the Province in 1836 the only resident Europeans were a handful of sealers, living on Kangaroo Island off the south coast. The high degree of centralisation of economic activity that existed in the State from the outset is partly explained by the island-like nature of the most favourable area for colonisation, elongated north-south along and flanking the Mount Lofty and Flinders Ranges. In this favoured zone, areas of park-like, relatively open savannah woodland were set among smaller areas of dense eucalypt forest in the higher rainfall ranges. This core area of settlement was supplemented by a smaller nucleus around Mount Gambier in the far south-east, and a lesser outpost round Port Lincoln on the west coast. The primary hindrance to rapid spread from these bases was the huge expanse of Mallee scrub, typically consisting of low slender trees 2-8 metres high, whose multiple stems emerge from a single tough ligno-tuber (Harris, 1986; Williams, 1974). As much of the Mallee country (Figure 2.2, overlay) lacks surface water, and the ligno-tubers rapidly produce new suckers after felling, clearing and root-grubbing was a major and costly task prior to the widespread adoption in the 1880s of new inventions superseding hand implements. The Mallee has had a major formative effect on both the cultural and the social landscape. A second, less extensive but very significant, natural obstacle was the series of old beach dune ridges separated by very flat,

elongated swampy and flood-prone depressions, running parallel to the coast in the south-east of the state and requiring major capital investment for their drainage. (Figure 2.2, overlay).

Fig. 2.2 Three major stages in the agricultural occupation of South Australia, by dates of proclamation of Hundreds, in relation to some major environmental barriers



Source: Source: Based on Williams 1969, pp. 8, 20, 34; Williams 1974, pp. 35, 46, 58.

Between the south-eastern nucleus and the southern fringes of the Mallee was a large belt of heathland developed on trace-element deficient soils forming the Ninety-Mile Desert, and north of the Mallee belt large expanses of saltbush, in some areas interspersed with open low woodland, stretched into the interior. The early settlers were at first unaware of the value of salt bush as stock feed, and their impressions of living on a virtual island were enhanced by the ring of huge salt lakes that surrounds

the north-trending prong of the Flinders Ranges, leading to the belief up to the late 1850s that these lakes formed a continuous horseshoe-shaped barrier to the interior (Minchin, 1964).

In a narrow belt of ‘Mediterranean’ winter-rain climate on the edge of the continent’s arid interior, the success of South Australian rural settlement has been strongly dictated by rainfall and drought. Experience was gained at a high price, both environmental and economic. As background to the forthcoming summary of the course of settlement, Table 2.1 provides an overview of the major droughts affecting South Australia up to the mid 1980s.

Table 2.1 Major droughts in South Australia, 1859-1982

| <i>Pastoral areas</i> | <i>Agricultural areas</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| | 1859-60 |
| 1863-67 | |
| | 1884-86 |
| 1896-98 | 1895-98 |
| 1901-03 | 1901-03 |
| 1913-16 | 1911-15 |
| 1926-30 | 1928-29 |
| 1939-40 | |
| 1943-45 | 1943-46 |
| 1959-62 | 1959 |
| | 1961 |
| 1965 | |
| | 1967 |
| | 1976-77 |
| 1982 | 1982 |

Source: Vamplew 1986, 86; based on Foley (1957) and Gibbs (1967)

Note: bold type indicates major droughts which affected both the pastoral and agricultural areas simultaneously.

The pastoral occupation

As in Australia generally, the high value and transportability of wool allowed pastoral stations on Crown lands to spread rapidly over the land, well in advance of farming. The original system of annual licences was replaced in 1851 by 14-year leases (Minchin 1964, 50-51). Due to the need for lines of communication with the capital and for movement of wool to the coast, pastoral settlement established many of the State’s major through routeways and some of the early outlying ports – notably Port Augusta at the head of Spencer Gulf (Figure 2.2). By 1890, pastoral leases covered practically the whole useable area of South Australia beyond the areas already sold for farming (Griffin and McCaskill 1986, 21).

Closer settlement

An essential feature of this particular “Province” of Australia is that, never having been a penal settlement or destination for convicts, it was planned and controlled from the beginning, to conform to Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s theory of colonisation – “with conscious purpose”, as Hutchings and Bunker (1986) aptly title their account of the planned settlement process. Although some of the original Wakefield principles were modified or abandoned by the 1870s (Meinig 1962, 56) throughout South Australia orderly survey preceded the opening and ‘alienation’² (sale) of land to freehold owners, and closer farming settlement spread across the landscape in more or less controlled phases. Following the English model, the “Province” was divided into Counties, and the Counties into Hundreds, which in South Australia consisted of blocks of territory of roughly 100 square miles. New Hundreds (each divided by the surveyors into roads, farming sections, reserves and townships) were proclaimed as required for new releases of farm land, so that the date of their proclamation gives a very rough indication of the spread of settlement (Figure 2.2). However, some Hundreds were surveyed well ahead of their actual occupation by farming pioneers. Heathcote (1986, 16) provides a succinct overview of the whole settlement process in map form. Hirst (1973) tells the story of the relations between Adelaide and the country, emphasising the centralising effects of the railway net, the land sales system, the development of the telegraph network, control of the policing and the legal system in moulding the Province into a sparsely peopled city-state. A concise overview of social and economic development is provided by Vamplew (1986), while Nance and Speight (Eds., 1986) review the transformation of the natural environment. Williams (1969, 1974, 1992) provides a full account of the evolution of the landscape.

In the discussion below (based on the work of Williams except where otherwise cited) seven stages recognised by Williams up to about 1947 are condensed into three phases, each of which generated a typical cultural and social landscape still clearly recognisable on the ground, and important in the context of the thesis. Each phase began with a spurt of new settlement and ended with a slow-down, punctuated by droughts and economic booms and slumps. Of the many factors of lasting importance in generating these landscapes, those singled out here are the changes over time in farming technology, in the cadastral survey that laid out the landscape, and in the development of local government.

The first three decades: 1836-1868

Though the colony was founded in 1836, delays in survey of the rural lands meant that farming first began in earnest in 1840, and was largely restricted in the first ten years to the open savannah woodlands of the Adelaide Plains, Willunga Basin, Southern Vales, and the flanks of the southern Mount Lofty ranges. These are now some of the most productive and intensively cultivated peri-urban landscapes in the State. The flow of immigrants in this earliest period included a substantial German component, dominantly religious refugees from Silesia and the Harz mountains, who have left a permanent cultural imprint on South Australia (Griffin and McCaskill

² The transfer of land by sale from the Crown to private ownership in fee simple, as opposed to leasehold, is termed ‘alienation’, while ‘resumption’ refers to transfer of land back from private ownership to the Crown.

1986, 1). Important copper discoveries at Kapunda in 1842 and Burra in 1845 gave the infant colony an extra sector to its economy.

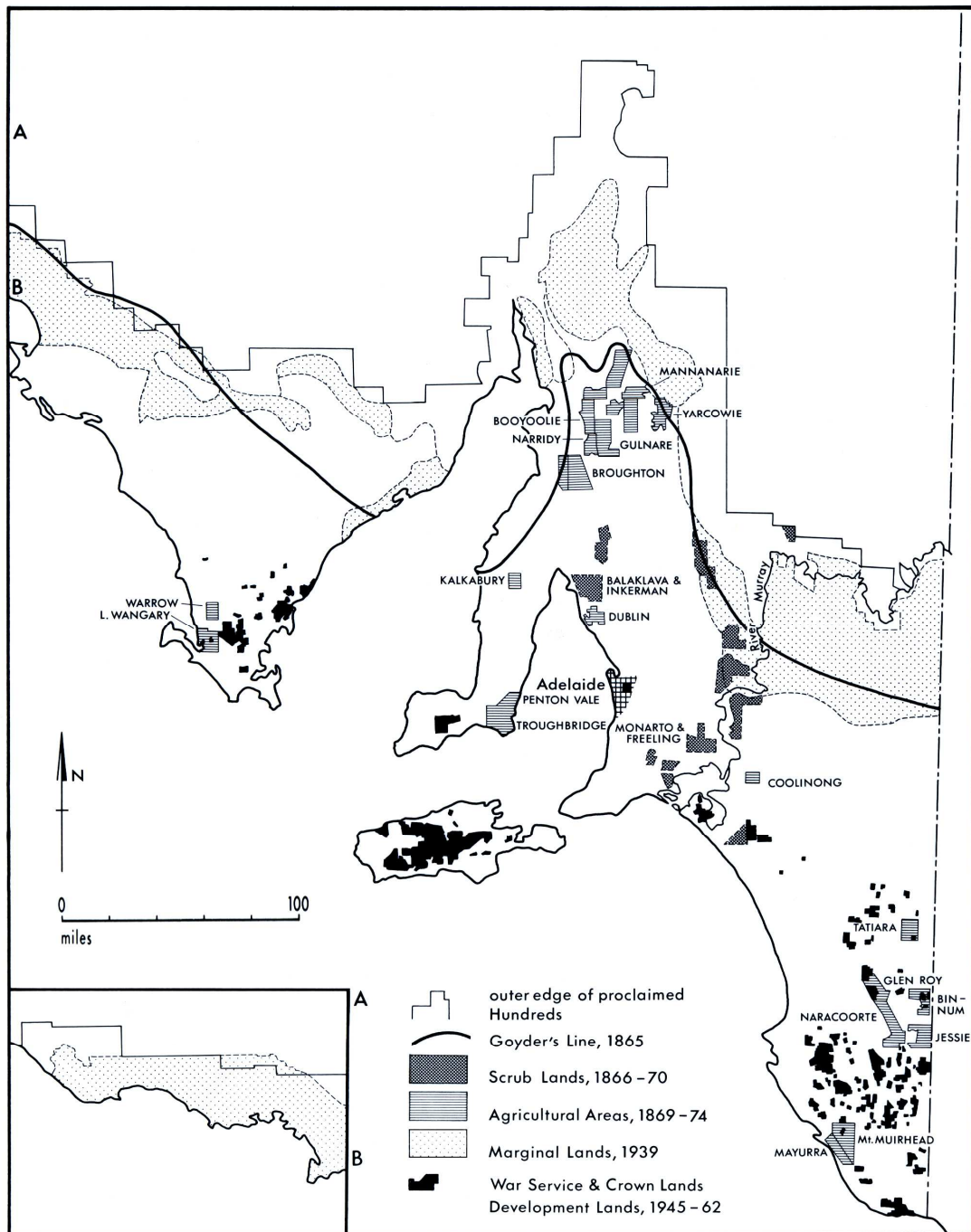
During the 1850s, settlement extended rapidly through the Barossa Valley and the central hill country towards Clare. Outlying nuclei started to develop in the most favoured peripheral locations, particularly around Mount Gambier and to a lesser extent Port Lincoln. (Figure 2.2). Assisted by the massive in-migration to Victoria and New South Wales following the Victorian gold discoveries in 1851, an expanding market for wheat developed. South Australia then led all the Australian colonies in the area under wheat cultivation, most of it still located in the well-watered former open woodland country in and around the Mt. Lofty Ranges. The huge expanse of Mallee country remained uncleared, though several Hundreds extending into it had been proclaimed in the northern Adelaide Plains. In the 1860s several new Hundreds were surveyed in the Mallee scrub of northern Yorke Peninsula following new and rich copper discoveries at Wallaroo (1859) and Moonta (1861). However the continuing difficulties of Mallee clearance concentrated attention on the so-called 'Scrub Lands' (Figure 2.3) where land was made available on particularly easy terms on the inner margins of the Mallee country.

Contributing strongly to the distinctiveness of the three zones depicted on Figure 2.2 was the evolution of the characteristic South Australian survey system, discussed in much detail by Williams (1974, 1992). In the old core zone, a number of special surveys were undertaken for wealthy companies or private enterprises, but the early survey system for general sales to the public began with a grid of square sections each of 80 acres with a rectangular pattern of roads at half-mile intervals almost irrespective of the topography. Although this rigid grid system was gradually relaxed in the 1850s and the size of individual sections increased, it produced an over-roaded landscape of many individual land titles, small paddocks expensive to fence, with many sections bought and laid out as townships by private individuals in addition to the official 'government' surveyed towns. Intended for the Wakefield ideal of colonisation by yeoman farmers, this framework superimposed on an attractive physical landscape later proved expensive to maintain in commercial farm enterprises but highly conducive to hobby farming, second homes and rural retreating in the late 20th century.

A further essential feature contributing to the social patterns of the study area is the role of local government, as part cause and part result of the formation of local communities. Local Government in South Australia began in Adelaide in 1840, but subsequently lapsed and was permanently re-instituted in 1852. Starting in 1853, rural Councils were rapidly established throughout the older settled areas, and by 1869 following some early amalgamations and transfers, eighty were in existence (Figure 2.4). The pattern of these early local government bodies in many ways gives a clearer indication of the spatial extent of effective, permanent occupation of the land in the old core zone of the State than does the extent of declared Hundreds shown in Figure 2.2; many of the Hundreds shown in the latter Figure, including those in northern Yorke Peninsula, had not been cleared and occupied by farmers.

As this first phase of settlement drew to a close in the 1860s, there was a pause in the northward expansion of farming settlement, as new Hundreds opened up around and north of Clare were mostly bought as freehold by the former pastoral leaseholders.

Fig. 2.3 Goyder's Line of 1865 in relation to aspects of later land settlement.

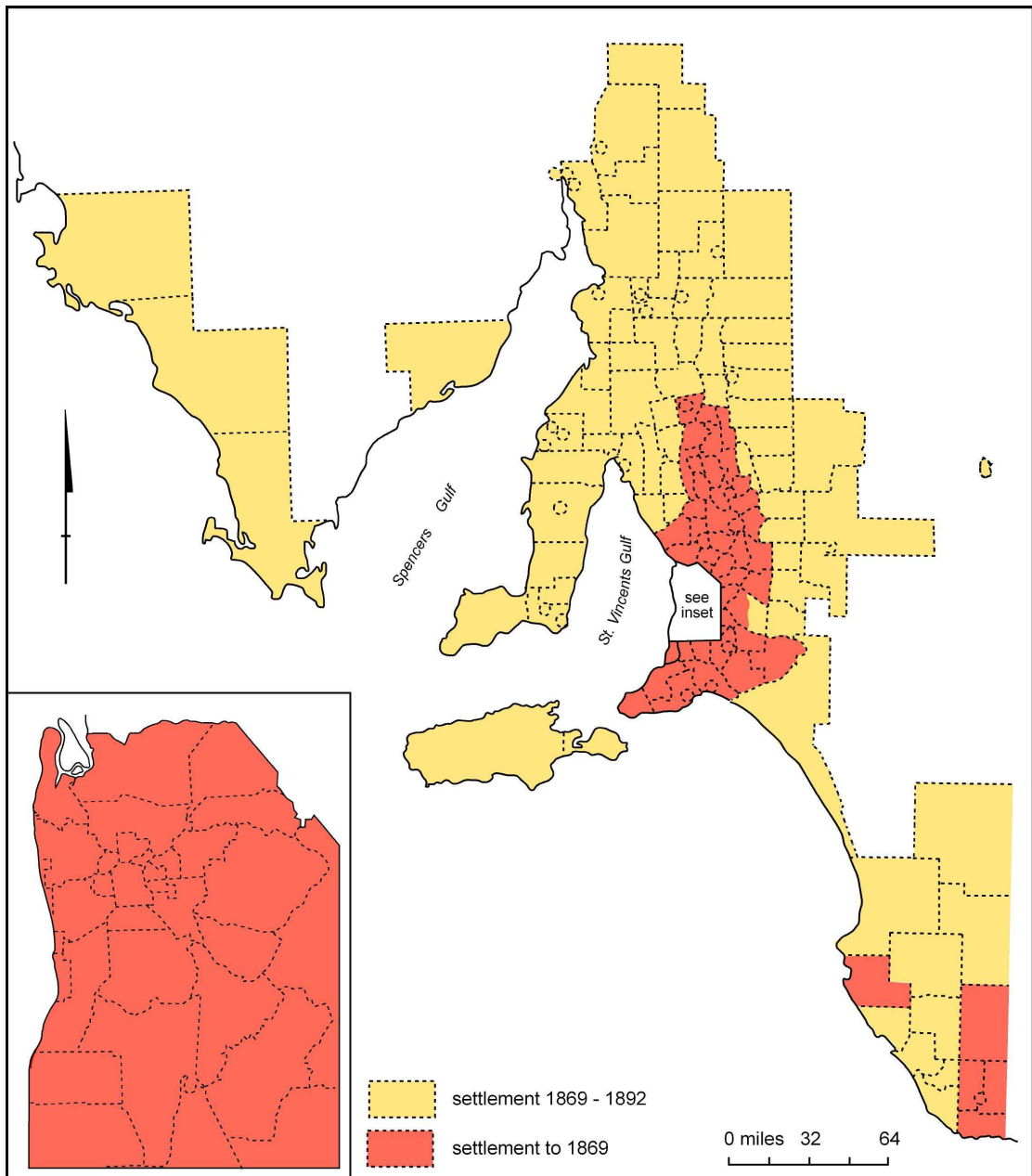


Source: Williams 1969, p. 23.

The most significant and long-lasting feature of this decade, following the severe drought of 1864/65, was the delineation in 1865 of the famous “Goyder’s Line” (Figure 2.3), north of which the Surveyor General, G.W. Goyder, regarded rainfall as being too unreliable for safe agriculture. Although marginal farming settlement subsequently extended well to its north, in an extensive review of its significance Heathcote (1981, 296) observes that the Line,

originally intended to demarcate the effect of a drought in 1865, eventually came to be accepted as a long-term ecological boundary and the limit of successful agricultural land use.

Fig. 2.4 South Australian local government areas by age of proclamation (boundaries as at 1921 Census)



Source: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1921 Census

The second phase of settlement: 1869-1892.

As with the Robertson Land Acts in New South Wales, the Strangways or Waste Lands Amendment Act of 1869 ushered in a new era of rapid survey and agricultural expansion into the northern wheatlands extending along the intermontane valleys of the Southern Flinders Ranges, as far north as the head of Spencer Gulf. Meinig

(1963) in his classic study of this expansion shows how the government's efficient land survey system outran its ability to provide rail and port facilities, and intense competition between rival fledgling towns created one among many possible urban and transport geographies in the Mid and Upper North. At the same time the inventions of first the scrub roller and then the stump-jump plough at last allowed the rapid clearance of those Mallee lands close enough to the coast to leave the farmer a profit margin after meeting the cost of transport to a market. Thus Yorke Peninsula and the northern Adelaide Plains were quickly colonised and cleared. A rash of small outports appeared around the coast of the narrow Yorke Peninsula, where wheat could reach the coast by dray without the need of a railway. Closer farming settlement in the South-East with its severe drainage problems, and the remote West Coast however lagged well behind the survey and proclamation of Hundreds.

The northward expansion of the wheat frontier in this phase of settlement was marked by the standardisation – one might almost say mass-production - of an idealised, planned cadastral landscape within each surveyed Hundred. Almost all Hundreds contained at least one surveyed town, laid out on the Adelaide model with a parkland belt around a central grid-pattern of streets. Immediately beyond the parklands, the survey provided a belt of small suburban lots intended for workmen to supplement their income from a small holding. Outside the towns the surveyors laid out a road system well adapted to the local topography and to any major routeways that traversed the Hundred. Between the roadways, farm sections were less rigidly rectangular shape, though their boundaries were mostly oriented to the cardinal points. Reserves were set aside for such purposes as timber, stone, water collection, travelling stock routes and so on. The farm sections were now of a larger and more realistic size, mostly in the range of 100 to 639 acres (640 acres = 1 sq. mile). From 1880, over half the sections were over 320 acres (Williams, 1974, 110). This survey system envisaged a landscape of towns spaced around ten miles apart, and though many never got off the ground, sufficient of them did so to produce a legacy of small, intensively competing townships with insufficient surrounding population to ensure lasting viability as community centres.

The new settlers of the expanding farm frontier quickly sought local self-government, and indeed an Act of 1887 required all of the State within the settled areas to be included in a local Council. Thus by 1892, the whole of settlement Zone 2 had local government, and by far the majority of the Councils so created maintained their boundaries for at least 40 years. This combination of a rapidly-created cadastral landscape of closely spaced towns with a deeply entrenched mosaic of small local Councils produced the highly fragmented social landscape of small communities still characteristic of South Australia (Figure 2.4). The pattern of Councils established by 1892 shown on Figure 2.4 however exaggerates the area which by then was effectively settled, as many of the outer ring of Council areas included large areas of still unoccupied land.

After the rapid expansion of the 1870s, as the second phase of settlement drew to a close, expansion was again checked by both severe droughts in the mid 1880s and the gradual exhaustion of the soils in the longer-settled areas. The over-optimistic drive of settlement into Hundreds declared by 1892 along the northern frontier on the flanks of the Flinders Ranges came to a halt (Figure 2.2). The general overview given in this Figure overstates the area of close settlement however; a more detailed representation

of land alienation in 1890 (Griffin and McCaskill 1986, 21), shows a relatively compact, contiguous settled area extending from the Fleurieu Peninsula to the Willochra Plain in the north, with two lesser outlying areas in the South-East and West Coast respectively – both of the latter having some wheat production, but continuing to depend much more heavily on pastoralism than agriculture. Hundreds had been proclaimed over the whole of the South-East by the end of this period, but pastoralists succeeded in securing freehold over substantial areas of their runs. Agricultural settlement was mainly concentrated in the drier southern and eastern areas along the Victorian border, and the limited areas of inter-dune swamps that had so far been drained (Williams, 1974).

The new northern frontier region of the 1870s and 1880s was unlike the older core in other ways, being settled not by new immigrants but largely by South Australians. Many had farming experience in the older core, and had already adapted considerably to the environment. Although their overconfidence and readiness to experiment led them to attempt to farm far beyond the safe limits of agriculture, they had produced a distinctive cultural landscape, mostly with stone-built houses and substantial public buildings. Meinig's conclusion is worth quoting:

... the evidence would certainly seem to confirm the South Australian frontier wheat farmer – and his companion, the country machinist – as uncommonly industrious, adaptable and inquisitive pioneers who rapidly developed a new and basically successful farming system to meet the peculiar challenges of new environmental and economic situations. The new seasonal rhythms of activity, new tillage techniques, new implements for clearing, cultivating and harvesting were all folk inventions. Working directly with the realities of local climates and soils, these pioneers, through trial and error, had either solved or at least made important progress toward solving most of the basic problems insofar as they could be met with the materials at hand. (Meinig 1962, 122).

Further progress in fitting the farming system to the environment however was to become increasingly dependent on scientific research, though still supplemented by local improvisation. The “experimentation” carried out in this period referred to by Williams (1969, 1974) included the beginnings of irrigation-based closer settlement in the Upper Murray, and the important discovery of the benefits of superphosphate, fallowing and the leguminous subterranean clover in maintaining and improving soil fertility. The benefits of these inventions did not begin to make a widespread difference in farming until close to the turn of the century, however.

The third phase: new settlement in the 20th Century

Serious agricultural depression continued in most of the 1890s, but with the turn of the century began a new drive to conquer the extensive Mallee lands within the 10” (250mm.) isohyet, but located too far from the sea to be exploited without a major investment in railways. The last two extensive areas to be cleared for farming were firstly the central and northern Eyre Peninsula, previously almost empty even of pastoral settlement compared with the more open woodland of the Gawler Ranges to its north (Smith 1992); and secondly, the Murray Mallee, stretching from the base of the Southern Mount Lofty ranges to the Victorian border (Figure 2.2 – overlay). In each area settlement went hand in hand with the construction of a network of narrow gauge railways, with surveyed town and rail siding sites at frequent intervals.

Notably, the main Eyre Peninsula line followed almost exactly along Goyder's Line for the northern half of its length, while about half of the newly opened Murray Mallee lay outside the Line. The penalty was quickly paid with many farmers facing ruin after severe droughts during the first World War (Williams 1974, 55).

In these 20th century-settled areas, the survey system again imposed a different and distinctive character to the evolving landscape. Conforming to a Government policy of having all farms within 15 miles of a railway, the coast or the Murray, railway construction here occurred along with settlement rather than being inserted later. Townships, much less extravagantly sized, were dominantly located at close intervals along the new rail lines. In a landscape planned for a much lower population density, fewer of them could aspire to real urban growth, and many never developed as anything more than rail sidings. The farm sections were much larger, dominantly more than 1280 acres (two square miles), conforming better to a reasonable living area, and the road pattern was correspondingly sparser and more functional, with many twists and turns to accommodate where necessary to the low dune and swale topography of the Mallee. Local government areas were correspondingly larger and more realistically adjusted to a lower population density, most of them having survived until at least the 1990s.

The occupation of the Murray Mallee and Eyre Peninsula, together with limited expansion in the drier areas of the South-east completed the primary European colonisation of South Australia. As Williams points out, the settled areas underwent only minor expansion after about 1920, mainly through the infilling of minor gaps. Thereafter, major landscape and social changes continued, but within roughly the same perimeter. The rural economy continued its roller-coaster ride at the mercy of the climatic and global economic cycles (or, perhaps more accurately, fluctuations). The major perturbations were the collapse of commodity prices during the great depression of the 1930s, which affected rural as much as urban areas; and the wartime disruption of World War II, accompanied in the mid-1940s by severe drought conditions and soil erosion. These problems produced a belated recognition of the marginality of the newly colonised Mallee lands close to or north of Goyder's Line, and of the need to adjust the original holding size to more realistic levels. The work of the Marginal Lands Commission between 1939 and 1947 oversaw the halving of the number of settlers in the defined marginal lands (Figure 2.3; Williams, 1976).

The “long boom”, 1947-74

A review of events affecting farming in South Australia specifically during the long boom is provided elsewhere (Smailes, 1979, 129-133). After the second World War, from a very low ebb in 1945 a period of post-war reconstruction, large scale immigration, industrial expansion behind substantial tariff barriers, and an emphasis on the maximisation of farm and mineral production as the major national export earners saw a period of general national prosperity, in which agriculture had a full and privileged share. Contributing factors were home market expansion through the immigration boom, record wool prices during the Korean War, rabbit control through myxomatosis, the pent-up demand for capital and consumer goods, very good seasonal conditions and many other factors. During this period, the final acts of closer settlement took place with the settlement of returned soldiers under the War

Service Land Settlement scheme (Figure 2.3), and the large-scale A.M.P. Coonalpyn Downs land reclamation scheme in the former Ninety-Mile Desert (Marshall 1972). Even the smaller rural communities and their service towns experienced a period of growth and prosperity. This began to falter with the drought of 1959.

During the 1960s farmers experienced a deterioration of the terms of trade, market saturation, falling prices and a cost-price squeeze resulting in the emergence of a low farm income problem. Average weekly farm incomes were over twice the national average weekly earnings in 1954/55, but despite sharp annual fluctuations by 1977/78 the long-term downtrend had brought them very close to parity. Leading the way, from its 1951 peak the wool industry suffered from falling profitability. Under the auction sales system it was also subject to much greater fluctuations than the partly protected wheat and barley markets, with the result that a major swing from sheep to cereal production took place across the national wheat-sheep belt. This in turn caused increasing difficulty in marketing the growing cereal – especially wheat – crop, with the depressing effect on the world wheat price of a huge United States stockpile in the background.

Increasing volatility marked the last years of the ‘long boom’, starting with one of the worst drought years recorded in the State in 1967/8, immediately followed by a bumper crop year in 1968/69 which flooded the wheat market and brought about the imposition of wheat quotas. Three years of quite severe rural crisis ensued, to be relieved by an unexpected but short-lived commodity boom from 1972 to 1974. The election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 saw both a sharp change in tariff protection policy and an end to the privileged status of farming; together with the Arab oil embargo and oil price shock of 1973/74, these events are commonly taken as a marker of the end of the Long Boom. However, ten more years were to pass before the onset of the major rural crisis considered in this thesis.

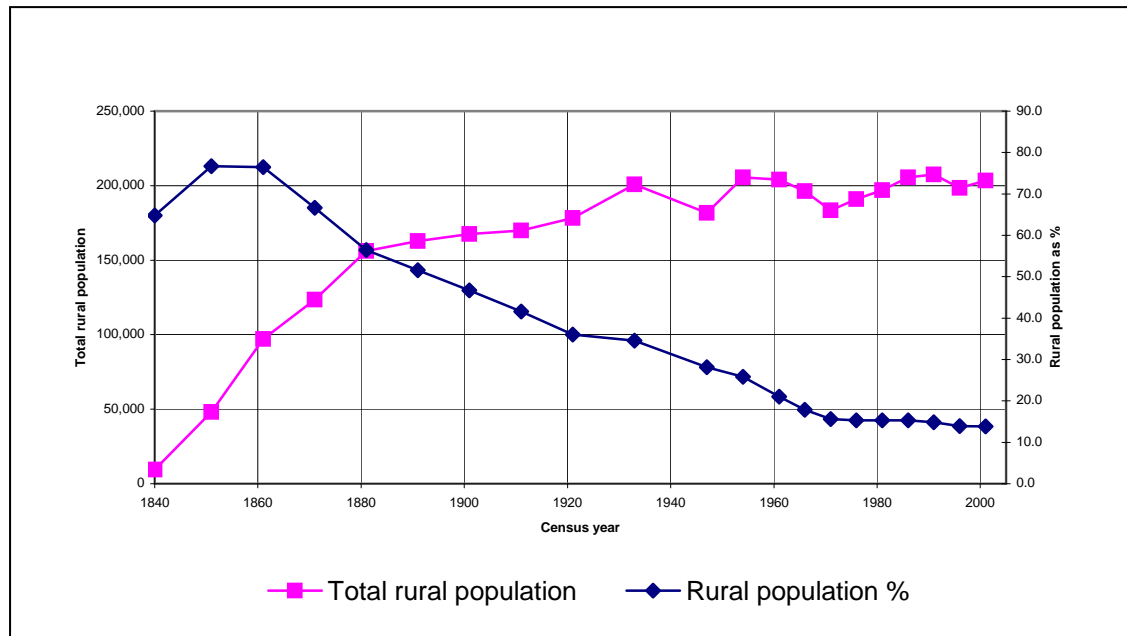
Rural population development

In aggregate, South Australia’s rural population (including towns of less than 1000 people, to allow long-term comparability) increased with every census from 1840 to 1933, probably reaching a maximum approaching 210,000 around 1929/30 before the onset of the Depression (Figure 2.4). It fell back in the late 1930s and World War II years to 181,000, to rise again during the post-war recovery to over 205,000 at the 1954 census. After that, mechanisation, the beginnings of consolidation and rationalisation saw a slow decline to 1971 as the long boom ebbed out. From then on, however, a revival of the aggregate figure reflects the national counter-urbanisation trend, with substantial increases in the most favoured areas masking decline in less scenic outlying districts. In percentage terms, the rural population accounted for nearly three quarters of the State total in 1861, but fell steadily with every census for a hundred years thereafter, until it began to stabilise at about 15% after 1971.

Comparison of the population development in the three landscape zones described above is not possible due to the crude nature of the County-based data, and the change in basic Census geography units after 1911 from Counties to local government areas. Estimates from the County data however suggest that at least up to 1911, over 60% of the non-metropolitan population was concentrated in the old early-settled core zone.

This core zone, moreover, rapidly developed a normal balance between the sexes, while the outer zones retained much higher masculinity ratios.

Fig. 2.5 Rural population change in South Australia, 1840-2001

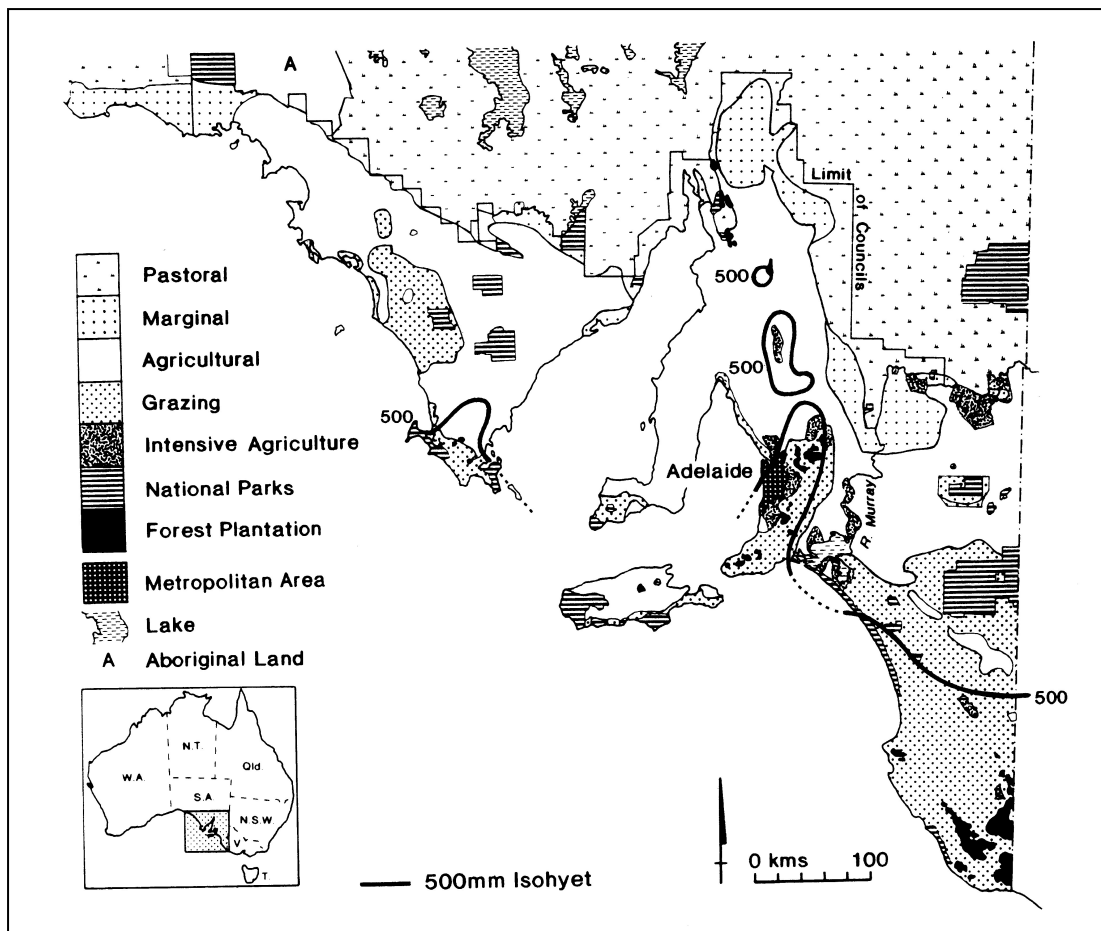


Note: "Rural" includes towns of less than 1000 people.

Source: Data 1840-1981: Bowie 1987, Appendix Table II; data 1986-2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Censuses of 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001.

To round off the picture of rural south Australia and its communities by the early 1980s, modest rounds of Council amalgamations had occurred in the early 1930s and 1970s, reducing the number of Councils from a peak of over 190 in 1930 (Matthews 1986, 17) to 125 at the 1986 Census. However, as in Western Australia, populations of typical rural Councils remained small (median 2200). Thus, combined with the unique survey system and the over-provision of potential towns, the rapid spread of settlement in the early, optimistic period of land clearance and settlement had left a stubborn legacy of social fragmentation into small and competing communities in the two older settlement zones. The third and most recent settlement zone had a more realistic cadastral and local government structure, but its communities were still numerically small due to their low population densities. In terms of land use, the old core zone lay mostly in the high-rainfall pastoral, or intensive agricultural, land use belt, with an extensive area of softwood plantation forests in the south-east, while the other two zones mostly occupied the wheat/sheep and marginal farming country, except where irrigation was possible along the Murray River (Figure 2.6). The national park on the S.A./Vic boundary indicates the remains of the former 90-Mile Desert, and the 500 mm. annual rainfall isohyet approximately separates the high-rainfall and low-rainfall pastoral areas.

Fig. 2.6 Major rural land use belts, South Australia



Source: Smailes 1997, 23. Based on Griffin and McCaskill, 1986

Summary: three eras, three landscapes

To summarise, then, the current cultural landscape of the study area was produced by three major expansionary waves of farming colonisation each developing a distinctive type of cultural landscape which continues to impact on present day rural society. These were:

1. occupation of the old core area of the State (with its two small outliers) in roughly the first thirty years, up to 1868, but mostly by about 1860;
2. the major expansion of the later 19th Century, following the Waste Lands Amendment Act of 1869, up to about 1893; and
3. the most recent expansion from the mid 1890s, (but mostly 20th century), lasting to the end of closer settlement in the 1960s but interrupted by several sharp downturns.

These are the three zones approximately delimited in Figure 2.2.

Interrupting and separating these three periods of expansion, by the early 1980s the South Australian rural economy had suffered from the following major setbacks, each seen at the time as assuming crisis-like proportions. Older farmers on the land at that

time (early 1980s) had lived through, and had vivid memories of, at least the last two and in many cases the last three of these setbacks.

1. The drought of the mid-1860s, which gave rise to the definition of Goyder's Line at the end of the first period of expansion.
2. The severe droughts of the mid-1880s, followed by agricultural depression of the 1890s, which led to retreat from the over-optimistic northern wheat frontier at the end of the second period of expansion.
3. Droughts again from 1911 to 1915, overlapping World War I
4. The commodity price collapse and economic depression of the 1930s
5. Drought and soil erosion in the early 1940s, leading to thinning out of farms in the newly colonised northern Mallee lands through the work of the Marginal Lands Commission of 1939-47
6. Crisis years of 1968/9 to early 1970s: collapse of the wheat and wool markets leading to the imposition of production quotas on wheat.

Thus, by the early 1980s, South Australian farmers and the rural communities that incorporated them were no strangers to adversity.