

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF THE EXPORT OF LIVE SHEEP FROM AUSTRALIA

#### The Early Carriage of Live Sheep by Ship

2.1 In the 1830s a domestic trade in live sheep between Tasmania and Victoria was established using a fleet of 15 to 20 small ships that carried loads of 300 to 1000 sheep. Average losses of about 15 per cent were incurred for the one-week voyage and 'for want of a proper supply of food and water, or from stormy weather whole shipments were sometimes almost entirely lost on the passage or shortly after landing'.<sup>1</sup> In addition it was common for wool break to occur with total loss of the clip. The export trade in primary products from the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century was dominated by wool, not sheep.

2.2 Live Sheep were first exported from Western Australia in 1845 and by 1895 one thousand sheep were being sold for slaughter in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

2.3 In 1926 the Commonwealth introduced the Navigation (Deck Cargo and Livestock) Regulations to regulate the export of livestock. These Regulations dealt with such things as provision of feed and water for the livestock, protection from weather, drainage and the construction and cleaning of pens and stalls. They remained largely unchanged until the introduction of the Marine Orders Part 43 (Cargo and Cargo Handling - Livestock) on 1 July 1983.

## The Origins of the Present Trade in Live Sheep

2.4 The modern live sheep export trade began in 1945-46 when more than 24 000 sheep were sent from Western Australia to Singapore.<sup>3</sup> Sheep were also exported to Christmas Island and Mauritius. In these early days of the trade, sheep were transported over shorter distances than at present, in ships that were converted temporarily for the voyage.

2.5 In 1952, the then Department of Shipping and Transport (DST) formed a Livestock Advisory Committee (LAC) to advise on livestock carrier requirements. It consisted of representatives from the Department of Commerce, livestock shipping companies and ship-fitting companies, under the chairmanship of an officer of the DST. It drew up a series of specifications, including pen construction and ventilation standards.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1960s, it determined stocking capacities and food and water allowances for sheep.<sup>5</sup>

2.6 The Middle East trade commenced in the early 1960s with the introduction of two small ships each having a capacity of about 6000 sheep. The sheep were loaded at Fremantle and Adelaide and unloaded mainly at ports in the Persian Gulf, principally in Kuwait.<sup>6</sup>

2.7 Prior to 1970 livestock were carried in small ships or as deck cargo. In 1970 the largest livestock carrier in operation was the 'Cormoran' with a capacity of 28 000 sheep. By the mid-1970s ships capable of carrying 50 000 sheep were coming into service.<sup>7</sup> These were mainly converted small oil tankers that had been redeployed after the 1973 oil crisis and the advent of the super tankers. Subsequently larger ships were converted to carry up to 125 000 sheep. The introduction of these new livestock carriers necessitated a review of existing specifications and the membership of the LAC was widened to

include representatives from the Animal Quarantine Division of the Department of Health, the Department of Primary Industry (DPI), State Departments of Agriculture and pastoralists.

### Opposition to the Trade

2.8 In the late 1970s, the trade was beset with industrial problems. The AMIEU, many members of which were being retrenched as a result of closures of abattoirs, blamed the expanding live sheep export trade for those closures. The Union maintained that the jobs of its members were being exported to the Middle East. Although the Union did not advocate the abolition of the trade, it wanted the Federal Government to institute a live-to-carcase ratio on exports. These industrial problems led to confrontations between producers and union pickets, who were preventing sheep from being loaded on to carriers.

2.9 At about the same time, the animal welfare movement also entered the debate, arguing that the trade should be abolished on animal welfare grounds. The 'Farid Fares' disaster gave impetus to the movement's campaign. This livestock carrier was on passage from Devonport to Bandar Khomeini with a cargo of 40 605 sheep. On 27 March 1980 it caught fire and sank south-west of Kangaroo Island in the Great Australian Bight with the loss of the entire cargo of sheep. The Federal Government responded to these criticisms by sending a veterinarian from the then Australian Bureau of Animal Health (ABAH) to the Middle East aboard a live sheep carrier to investigate the health, welfare and handling of the sheep at sea. After some delay, the veterinarian's report, entitled 'Sea Transport of Sheep', was released in March 1981.

2.10 Despite criticisms of the trade and the loss of the Iranian market of approximately two million sheep shortly after the beginning of the Iranian-Iraqi war, the trade expanded to the extent that in 1982-83, approximately seven million sheep were exported with a free on board (FOB) value of \$A190 million.

2.11 In December 1981, the Federal Minister for Primary Industry and the President of the ACTU reached agreement on the live sheep trade. First, it was agreed that a fund should be established to finance the promotion of carcass sheepmeat in the Middle East. This proposal was subject to considerable debate but never really attracted widespread industry support. Second, they agreed on a proposal for consideration of retraining and relocation schemes for meatworkers displaced by the trade. This eventually resulted in the 1982 Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) study, The Abattoir and Meat Processing Industry. Third, they agreed to send a special mission to the Middle East to study the live sheep trade.<sup>8</sup>

2.12 In March-April 1982, the Australian Sheep Meat Study Mission to the Middle East examined the demand for sheepmeat in the Middle East. The majority report concluded that there was no close substitute for freshly slaughtered or 'hot' meat among the indigenous Arab population. The dissenting report of the AMIEU members concluded that marketing initiatives by Australian exporters would expand the consumption of chilled and frozen mutton.

#### Recent Developments

2.13 In March 1983, a severe cold snap hit Victoria. Approximately 15 000 sheep died in the Portland feedlots as a result of cold, stress and exposure.<sup>9</sup> This event focussed the attention of animal welfare organisations and government authorities on the trade.

2.14 In July 1983, the Minister for Primary Industry addressed the wider issues of inadequate pre-conditioning and poor selection of export sheep and expressed concern at the level of mortalities:

'...the trade of exporting live sheep for slaughter is open to criticism. The current levels of mortalities cannot be explained, understood nor justified. The industry seems intent on ignoring these dying sheep and the pleas of the concerned public.'<sup>10</sup>

On 10 August 1983 the Minister announced the formation of the Australian Livestock Export Industry Advisory Committee (ALEIAC). It consisted of representatives from the Australian Livestock Exporters Association (ALEA), the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation (AMLC), the Sheepmeat Council of Australia, the Cattle Council, the then ABAH and two nominees of the Standing Committee on Agriculture. The ALEIAC called for research into the veterinary problems associated with the trade and arranged for Dr R. Brennan of the South Australian Department of Agriculture to do a study. He presented his report, 'Live Sheep Export Trade ; Current Knowledge and Deficiencies in Relation to Sheep Losses' in January 1984.

2.15 The ALEIAC considered the report, particularly the deficiencies in current knowledge of the trade. It recommended that priority be given to research in certain areas, such as the causes of mortality and weight loss, and made recommendations to the Australian Meat Research Committee (AMRC) for funding of research in Western Australia and Victoria.<sup>11</sup>