

# SHEEP'S BACK

**Subject Areas:** Australian Studies, History and Contemporary Society, investigating issues and concepts including national identity, economic change, advertising, land degradation will find Film Australia's *Sheep's Back* a stimulating source for discussion and further research.

**Levels:** Students of Years 10 – 12 SOSE

## Synopsis

*Sheep's Back* examines the demise of Australia's wool industry, and the disappearance of sheep as a national icon. It explores how wool and the people who grew it were entwined with the national identity, and how, by the 1950s wool was synonymous with the Australian way of life.

Yet, barely a decade later, Australia had turned to minerals for its economic future, and people in the bush found themselves dramatically out of step with their city counterparts.

**Executive Producer:** Sharon Connolly

**Producer:** Susan Ardill

**Director:** Peter Butt

**Duration:** 55 minutes

**Year of Production:** 1994

## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

Think and talk about some of the following issues and questions before watching the film, and then discuss the same issues after watching the film.

## LEGENDS AND MYTHS

- List some of the legends and myths that you know about the Australian character.
- Read Banjo Paterson's poem, 'Clancy of the Overflow'. What image of the Australian does it suggest? To what extent could this image be described as romantic?
- Read Russel Ward's description of the Australian image in 'The Australian Legend'. To what extent is that image similar to and/or different from Paterson's?
- What do you believe to be the image of the Australian character today?
- Where has this image come from?

## RURAL VS URBAN

- Does Australia have a rural ethos?
- If so, can you define it?
- How are urban Australians perceived to be different from rural Australians? Describe some of the characteristics they share, and some which are different.
- 'Australia rode to prosperity on the sheep's back'. Do you believe that Australia's prosperity relies on rural prosperity? Support your answer with evidence.

## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

### REASONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S DEVELOPMENT OF MERINO SHEEP

The Australian wool industry was based on the merino breed of sheep.

- What was important about merino wool?
- Why was it able to thrive in Australia?

### WOOL AS A SYMBOL

- Wool gave Australia one of the highest living standards in the world. In what ways were Australia's living standards measured at this time?
- How did Australia become wealthy at Britain's expense during World War 2?
- What explanations are given in the film for the collapse of the wool industry in the early 1990s?
- Why do you believe that empathy with the bush disappeared as the wool industry hit hard times?
- What reasons are suggested for why rural hardship stories get greater media coverage than do similar cases in the cities?

### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- What were the main environmental requirements of the Australian wool industry?
- In what way would these have caused conflict with Aboriginal people in early Australia?
- What impact did this have on the natural environment?
- What natural conditions in Australia threatened the success of the industry?

### POLITICAL AWARENESS

- Why was the Country Party formed?
- What was the major difference between the Country Party and other political parties at the time?

- The Country Party is now known as the National Party, and federally is in coalition with the Liberal Party. Do you believe it still has the same interest in the rural sector as when it was formed? Conduct some research on its policies and directions to inform your answer.
- What is it that farmers want from governments?
- Are city people sufficiently aware of and sympathetic to the plight of the farmers?

## ECONOMIC CHANGE

- Why did wool prices drop in the early 1970s?
- In the 1980s, Australia's financial system was deregulated as Australia became a modern economy. What does this mean?
- The future of the wool industry will look vastly different from that of the past. What understanding do farmers now have of how they need to change to meet the future confidently?

## THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING

- What are the images of Australians created by advertising companies?
- How do the creators of these images explain their continued appeal?
- What role do you believe advertising plays in the Australian image?
- A number of Australian products are cited as being specifically 'country oriented'. What are they?
- How relevant is a rural identity to Australian today?
- Do you believe that consumers today are more aware of 'relevance' and therefore won't accept images which aren't 'real'? Support your answer with current examples of advertising in the media.
- Why are no migrants represented in the rural advertising, despite the fact that there are migrants on the land?

## ANALYSING IMAGES

The film ends by saying that 'a legend can become paralysing', and that on the verge of a new century Australians are looking for new images of what it means to be Australian.

- What do you think are the images of Australians near the start of the new century?  
One of the interviews in the film is with the advertising agency, Mojo. Their business is to create images which will sell products, because people identify with the images and want to be part of what they project.
- Carry out a survey in your class of people's five favourite TV advertisements.
- Look at each of the advertisements, and try to identify what images are being presented. For example, a common image in modern advertisements is American street life. Another is the enjoyment of life by large groups of young,

vital people. Now discuss why the advertisers would think that those images are ones which will lead you to buy their product. Are these advertisements successful? What do they suggest about the image of young Australians today?

## IN SUMMARY

Legend has it that the struggle against the bush was what shaped the Australian character. It was believed that 'hardship builds character'; that the 'land moulded their characters' and that people were 'used to loneliness'. The reality of the Australian experience is not one of triumph, but of survival; that to be Australian is to be a battler.

- As a class, discuss these views, and use the writings of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson to help you explore these views of Australian rural existence.

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