

# Seed of 1788 became stewards of the land

But what has been learnt must be passed on, writes **Cameron Archer**.

HISTORY has proved that the First Fleet was a logistical and navigational success. Arthur Phillip led the 11 ships laden with cargo and convicts successfully to the east coast of the Australian continent, landing in Botany Bay in January 1788.

But Phillip brought with him little farming expertise to establish a self-sufficient colony. Planning the venture seems to have been left in the hands of bureaucrats and naval men with little understanding of food production. The cattle strayed and the crops perished. The colony nearly starved. Fortunately farming expertise arrived in the shape of entrepreneurial free settlers and others who learnt to farm. The drive and foresight of those pioneers created a nation that was largely dependent on agriculture.

The need for people to be trained in agriculture was identified, and agricultural colleges and faculties of agriculture in universities were established, starting from the 1880s and continuing through to the 1960s. Agricultural education was a core business of government and a priority for the nation.

In fact until the mid 20th century, most of Australia's exports came from primary products, much of it wool. And agricultural production still makes up a significant and enduring component of our export income. We produce enough food to feed many more people than our resident population. During the global financial crisis our agricultural production and farm sector never wavered.

I believe that since the 1980s we have taken our eye off the ball and more trendy movements have taken our focus. Agricultural education has languished. This has been due in part to complacency of the educators themselves. But agricultural industry and the rural community have also taken their future for granted. The result has been a significant drop in enrolments at agricultural colleges and universities and the closure of a number of colleges. Some agricultural colleges, once practical



**AGRICULTURE:** Modern methods allow Australians to live well but the skills must not be allowed to lapse.

and vocationally oriented, morphed into theory-based faculties of science in universities. From an agricultural education point of view, they are shadows of their former selves.

Throughout this time employment prospects for agriculturists have remained strong, but so has employment in many other areas. The career opportunities are broad and challenging but there have been structural changes that have made a career in professional agriculture less inviting.

Research now is based largely on short-term funding, and our cleverest people have to lurch from grant to grant – employed on a temporary basis that makes it difficult to get a home loan and see a clear future career. Perhaps it is no different from other areas of endeavour, but it makes a career in agricultural research less inviting than one in a profession where employment certainty is greater.

Agricultural science has been

challenged in the past two decades by the rise of the environmental movement. Much good has come from that, but some at senior levels within the profession have cavilled against these influences. This has not helped the cause.

The smart ones have moved with the times and their operations are exemplars of best practice. Now, good environmental stewardship is largely understood and seen in a positive light. The agricultural profession, be they advisers, researchers or farmers, need to be on the front foot and continue to move with the times.

Agriculture and food production continue to increase in sophistication. Primary industries have embraced the digital age and the lay person would be surprised at the technology brought to bear on food production and farming systems.

They are finely tuned and balanced, receiving a continual flow of sophisticated data. Strategic decisions are being made on a daily

basis using evidence from information systems.

The attention to quality and consistency of product has never been higher. Care of the environment and with the use of chemicals has never been greater. Safe work practices are a priority. And our competitiveness on the world market is stronger than ever.

Much of this has been achieved by an ageing professional workforce. There are fewer people coming through in their 20s and 30s with agricultural qualifications to take up the future challenges.

We need to invigorate our agricultural education, and fortunately this is starting to happen. It is long overdue.

Unless we do it we will be back to where Captain Phillip started.

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