

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Melbourne,

Victoria.

Dear Sir

I am writing to you regarding your recent production of "Outback House" which was to reflect on rural life in Australia in 1860.

I feel this is going to be a long letter, so I ask you to bear with me and I apologize for its length.

I realise to make such a program would have been a huge task, and with modern day restrictions to make it perfect would be impossible.

No doubt, the show would have received a good response from city folk who would make up the majority of your viewers. I did enjoy certain sections of the program (shearing the sheep) , and your selection of the shepherd (who rode the white pony bareback very well) and the cook (2nd) who both seemed to go a long way in keeping the show together. I also thought the costumes were excellent.

But I must say that I became concerned when I heard in the local media that some schools were so impressed by the program, that they, the schools were considering to use the production in their education program.

I don't wish this letter to sound like a complaint, but I would like you to listen to my concerns regarding the accuracy of the program.

Even though I am a 'townie' I come from a family that has resided in this rural area since 1850 and having lived with my grandparents and great grandparents for a time during my childhood I have what I believe to be a reasonable understanding of what rural life actually was like in the 1860's.

I have tried to list my concerns and group them as you can see in the following.

Firstly regarding the furnishings of the main house it was clear to see, some Edwardian furniture was used, this included the dining table, one of the mantle pieces and an Art Nouveau sideboard base, unloaded from the table top wagon in the first episode. Some other furnishings looked a bit like they were from the 1880's but you could get away with that.

Australian furniture from this time period was of a solid and simple construction and design and can still be sourced reasonably easily.

The iron beds used in the show also had timber boards used as bed supports, this is very wrong, iron beds were still a new invention at this time having been commercially manufactured since about 1855 and I think Peyton and Peyton may have been one of the main manufacturers at this time. Iron beds constructed up until the early 1900's had a hoop iron base support which was latticed together and held in place by the buttons found along the bed rails and on each of the bed ends, the bed at home I use is like this and is quite comfortable.

I believe I saw a wire bed base also in one episode, this type of bed base only began to appear after 1900.

The kitchen equipment was also of concern, for in this time period, copper and tin plate were the main materials used to make cooking ware. Cast iron boilers as used in your show to the best of my knowledge were not patented till the mid 1880's and the cast iron kettles and saucepans would have been no doubt patented about the same time. Regarding the use of copperware, as long as the inner parts of the cooking ware is tinned it is quite safe to use. I have a copper kettle in the kitchen that has been used by my family since before 1862.

The use of enamel ware also comes into question here for it wasn't until 1840 that the English began to experiment with enamelling and only in a small way (jewellery), in the last part of the 1800's cast iron ware began to have enamel lining such as saucepans and jam pans. Enamelled tin ware I believe didn't take off until about 1900. I was therefore amazed to see a WW11 blue enamel water canteen on the kitchen table in the first episode, if you were to use an army water canteen of the day it would be more than likely a 'Oliver patent' water canteen, I have one if you want to see it.

Cutlery was also a concern when I saw one the maids using a bone handled knife which had a curved back blade, they were straight back knives in the 1800's and through till I think about the 1920's. Also I am not sure about the forks and spoons in the show but by the mid 1800's fiddle back was used and not the old English style which only came back into fashion in the 1900's.

Regarding the drop-log construction of the main house, I was surprised to see the amount of daylight showing through between the wall-boards, the boards should be held together tight as each board had the one above it pushing down on it. I can only assume the boards have been either shaped very roughly or that they have been wrongly nailed into place and then shrunk as they became seasoned. No matter what the case may be, the problem needed to be rectified because by winter time the occupants would have near froze to death. The practice of saving every scrap of paper (inc. newspapers and packing paper) to be pasted over the walls would have been appropriate and such an activity in the show would I believe have added to the authenticity. Wall paper was also becoming fashionable by the 1860's. The problem with timber houses and wall paper is that the houses can tend to sway a bit in the wind, thus splitting the wall paper, so it becomes an annual activity to repaper.

The next subject I would like to speak of relates to the horses, I will admit I am not a brilliant horseman but coming from a family which has trained and ridden and raced horses for

more than 150 years and which has connections with the likes of Scobie Breasley, I have a knowledge of some of the old ways things are done. Women and young ladies of a position in the community did not ride astride, they rode sidesaddle or sat in the buggy. My great grandmother rode sidesaddle her whole life, and did so well into the twentieth century (as did her sisters) and it was said she could outride any man.

I noticed the BBC made the same mistake with allowing 'Lady Davenport' to ride astride in 'Regency House'. It would have been nice if someone had made a small attempt at showing the girls how to ride sidesaddle. The next issue involves the trimming of the horse's hooves, I was taught by my grandfather who was taught by his father and so on, the hoof was trimmed using a farriers (hoof) knife only, and the cutters your farrier used were not available in 1860. It is a difficult job and the knife needs to be razor sharp, I admit I use cutters myself to do my horse prior to shoeing, it is a lot easier. I think the cutters were invented by the Americans, but I don't know when, definitely after 1900.

When I was taught to ride, my one and only lesson involved my grandfather telling me only two things and that was to keep the girth tight and if I come off to get straight back on no matter what. Could you not have got the farrier fellow to get back on after his fall, or at least stage it to look that way? I know when I have taken the odd tumble, pride has always come before any aches or strains. A friend of mine, who was a drover came off his horse a few years ago after putting up with the pain for six days he eventually drove himself to town and hospital, he had a broken leg, the old school were made tough.

Finally regarding the riding ability of the cast it would have been good to see a rider able to get a horse into a gallop, they seemed to have trouble getting into a canter.

The next subject involves religion, a subject of great importance in the 1860's, which was not reflected on, in this program. When the clergyman offered communion the day after the wedding the squatter should have directed every man, woman and child to attend the service, that was the done thing in those days. Religion was important in my family it caused a convict revolt in 1845 on the family property, the Irish Catholic convicts employed didn't realise they were working for a Irish Protestant family until the Church of England minister arrived to christen the first born baby. Years later when the first born child married a Catholic girl, our line was disowned and this is felt to a degree to this day.

The absence of any fire-arms in the program was of concern, for in 1860's every man and his dog had a fire-arm and half the women too. These were the days when Bushrangers roamed the country side and white settlers were still having the odd conflict with the Aboriginal population. The occasional shooting of the odd kangaroo and half a dozen rabbits for a feed was not uncommon.

It would have been good to see a horse disappear overnight thanks to a passing traveller, these things did happen. I had to do so, some years back under the guidance of my grandfather, it was a black stallion. We owned half the horse, the other owner and the trainer, tried to put it over us, it was a matter of family honour and the law as it turned out

sided with us. Ben Hall I believe relieved some relatives (Barkers of Goulburn) of a few race horses in the 1860's.

The next subject which I know nothing about involves the sheep. I asked a sheep farmer about the wool press used in your show because I would have thought one of those big old pine ones you see about would have been more appropriate. He agreed with me and said that these iron presses didn't come on the scene until the 1930's and the one you used had an adaptation fitted which he thought only came into use in the 1960's.

My Aunt (whose father was a shearing contractor) was upset to see New Zealand shearers used she said it is still possible to get shearers in Australia to hand shear and that there is no way a team of shearers would have come across from New Zealand in 1860 to work.

One form of entertainment which I can't remember seeing in the show was the reciting of poems and verses. This pastime was always a big thing in my family especially after a few drinks. I recently was in contact with the Mitchell Library regarding one ballad which had been passed down through the family by word of mouth for over 100 years it turned out it was attributed to Harry 'Breaker' Morant and their version was only put into print in the 1940's from someone's recollection. The two versions varied a bit but by having the two it is possible now to construct the ballad as it was originally, over one hundred years ago.

Going back to the kitchen, and the menu, I question the diet of the employees, compared to that of the squatter's family. I was always led to believe the menu of the main house varied greatly to that which would be served up to the workers and their families. Mutton and damper and a cup of tea was the daily meals as I was told. The vegetable garden and its contents was for the main house only.

One of my great grandmothers who grew up on Cannally Station near Balranald told how her father (after speaking to a doctor) asked the boss (Mr Tyson) for some vegetables from the house garden for his children who were suffering from malnutrition. Mr Tyson said no, for he would have to give some then to everybody. Two girls and a boy in the family (as the family bible shows) died within a short time and the name Tyson is not spoken in any favourable way by us even today.

Regarding the Christmas pudding, I know they cooked the puddings as shown on the show using a basin (Queen Victoria pudding bowl), but we have ours done in the cloth each year as has been done by our family since I would think immigrating. My mother learnt it from her grandmother and so on., it would hang in the kitchen doorway for some weeks and it was always a subject of conversation when a visitor hit their head on it.

We could not understand the need for a lady visitor (from the neighbouring property) to instruct your cast that the vegetable garden needs to be watered, we assume this was a stunt for no one would be that foolish surely. Then when it came to watering the garden they had no idea how to water using a bucket.

I noticed a broad axe used in the show, it was a pity it was used for everything other than what it is intended, it's amazing they didn't lose a limb with it. Broad axes are not for

chopping they are used to square and levelling off timber, some training in its use and that of the adze would not have gone astray.

In regards to the fencing of the crop paddock it was clear the fellows had no idea what they were doing. I've used tomato stakes bigger than the strainer post they installed. In 1860 timber was everywhere and strainer posts were up to two foot across. The method of hitting in the intermediate posts used I think is an American idea we dig them in and always have.

Now in relation to the excessive use of fencing wire which in those days was blackiron wire and not galvanised wire, it was rare and expensive and would never be used to constantly tie up rails, posts etc.

Pegging of building frames was used and green hide was the other material used, and there are many stories and poems describing its use. The excessive use of milled timber was of concern also, was there a timber mill on the property? Brush fencing and hand split and shaped timbers would have been the order of the day.

Probably what seems to be of most concern to people I have spoken with, which was demonstrated throughout the series concerns the behavior and actions of the cast. The twentieth century attitude and 'it's only for three months' impression given didn't complement the production. The workers would not have been so chummy and sit around the main house as what happened here, they were the working class and the squatter's family were the middle class and they did not over step the mark, unless permitted by the squatter for special occasions.

If your people have disagreed with anything I have written I would be only too happy to speak to them, but as far as I know I am correct as can be.

It may seem I am writing to you in a negative manner, but that is not what I intend, it is important to know when mistakes or errors are made. Having a keen interest in Australian history, I like to see when an interpretation is made of a period in time, that it is done correctly, so as not to relay the wrong message and try to change history.

If you are wondering if I was one of those who applied for a position in the cast then the answer is yes, my family said I would not be happy doing so and they were right. Without a doubt had I been on the program I would have had a full time trying to make all these corrections (I said in the application I am one for doing things correctly and authentically).

If you decide to create any similar series in the future and if I can be assistance, then please do not hesitate to ask, I would prefer to work for nothing and see that history is kept true, than to do nothing at all.

I wish to thank you for reading my letter and if you have any concerns from this, please do not hesitate in contacting me.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Cooke