

# The Bullocky and the Drover

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WHEN BELLIGERENT OATHS rent the air and dust clouded among the trees, everyone knew Reggie Waggett and his ten-strong team of bullocks were plodding into town. His profane urging of his beasts preceded him. He had been brought before the magistrate and fined for offensive language, but that hadn't stopped him. His curses were a source of sordid fascination for the housewives on his route, who feigned shock and scurried indoors. They peeped from behind their curtains and continued to enjoy this one excitement of the day, ostensibly avoiding taint from Reggie's vulgarity.

'Gaddap Sampson, ya useless bloody article!' Reggie snapped the whip above the lead beast's head.

It was always the proud Sampson, the prize-winning lead bullock, who was the target of Reggie's wrath. But Sampson had adjusted to Reggie; stoically ignoring the insults until he knew a critical response was required. If Reggie had a heart, Old Madge, the leading partner to Sampson, was the one to soften it. He'd saved her as a sickly calf and he had a deep affection for her, not that anyone would ever witness.

Both Sampson and Old Madge, yoked together, led the team. Baldy and Pansy, competent animals, followed immediately behind. The four middle bullocks, Jasper and Fleur and Amos and Toby were solid, tractable workers, but did not have the disposition to lead. Bringing up the rear, Caesar and Hagar, older, heavier bullocks, were the polers; some newcomers (blow-ins!) called them wheelers. The poler beasts were closest to the dray and they were effective, living brakes. Their job was to slow the load on command.

Like most bullockies, Reggie was enormously proud of his team. He polished their yokes, which connected them in pairs, until the wood gleamed. He could afford to be choosy about jobs, for there was plenty of work but he carried anything with his team, moving houses, halls and schoolhouses. Bales of wool and hay towered atop the flat, box gum planks. The dray moved on massive wooden wheels encircled with iron. The traction and brakes were the living beasts. Reggie and his team were often called upon to haul the mighty eucalypt logs out of virgin bush, later to become bridges, or government buildings.

Reggie looked like Santa Claus in working clothes. When he was fresh from a bath, taken in a tub beside the open fire, his white hair shone and his weather-beaten face had a peachy glow. But Reggie despised sitting in the tub. In his view, baths were only for weddings and funerals. He threw a few handfuls of water from the tank over his face and bare chest on the days he was home and was satisfied. His grizzled beard and unkempt hair was the norm. He owned only two sets of clothes, those for said funerals and weddings and his working clothes. His loose trousers, once black, shone green with age. They had been his father's funeral-going pants. He held up his pants with binder twine, the sisal that bound hay into bales. A formless old jacket over a collarless, flannel undershirt completed his attire. His boots, scuffed and split, were laced with the ubiquitous twine.

Most good bullockies sported a resigned type of temperament, saving the strong language for the most perilous situations. At the right moment, a normally agreeable driver would explode into profanity. They usually addressed the beasts by name. The sudden shock of harsh commands set them straining into their yokes, pulling or holding in unison, to fetch their load through, be it up hill or down, through quagmire and swamp and over rocky terrain. Once the danger was resolved, the bullocky regained composure, reserving his store of cursing until the next difficult situation.

But not Reggie, swearing was how he talked, and everyone, from his saintly wife, his local Demons footy team, and the drovers, woodcutters and labourers in the pub, knew it. He frightened away every young offsider he employed. These lads learnt the trade by walking on the offside of the team. The lads knew rough lives and language well enough. But there was plenty of work for healthy young fellows and they soon left Reggie to join a more self-controlled master.

If Reggie could be outdone in the cursing stakes, it was only by Bob Harvey the drover.

Today the bullock team approached the Wimmera River Bridge from the south on Stawell Road.

A strong wind or the wake of a passing rowboat caused the bridge to creak and groan. To lighten the load of his team on the bridge, Reggie adjusted the harness, so that the four leaders stepped off the bridge before the dray rolled onto it.

The Wimmera River ran along the southern edge of town. Sawyer's Central Brickworks operated on the northern banks of the river to the right of the bridge and the agricultural showgrounds stretched down to the river on the left. Here the river was cleared of underwater debris and snags and was popular for fishing, swimming and boating. The dammed part of the river at the brickworks reeked muddy and rank, especially when they drew up the clay for the bricks. This process also caused frequent wakes against the fragile bridge. The clay pit sat by the river's edge and beside it an older abandoned pit was reborn as the municipal dump. A rotting stench overpowered the fragrance of the river eucalypts.

One Friday, Bob Harvey drove his flock of sheep along McPherson Street on the town's eastern boundary. There was a time when a drover or bullock teamster might use Firebrace Street—the main shopping street. But the likes of Bob and Reggie and their animals had long been diverted to the outskirts.

Bob was headed south to the lush long paddocks of the Western District but was about to corral the mob at the showgrounds while he had a rare day at home. He was in a hurry to reach the public bar before six o'clock closing, which would cause him to miss more than his fill of Ballarat Bitter. His wife, a teetotaller, made it difficult for Bob to stash sly grog anywhere at home, even in the stables.

From behind his flock, he didn't see the dust from Reggie's approaching bullock team, obscured as it was from the dust of his own animals and the rising curve of the bridge that he now approached. The sheep must have sensed something because they sent up a cacophonous bleating and stampeded to the cool water of the river. Bob didn't need to direct the dogs today. A frantic pair gained ground in front of the mob. They knew the sheep were supposed to enter the showgrounds and skilfully pressed them from the river's edge. But, habits of a working life had Bob cursing the frenzied dogs.

‘Git away back, ya mongrel bastards. I’ll put a bullet through all o’ ya!’

The dogs hesitated at Bob’s voice and it was this split second that the mob lunged forward onto the bridge. The front-runners of the flock came face to face with Reggie’s lead bullocks. Sampson and Old Madge creaked forward at Reggie’s direction and the sheep scattered over the bridge, beneath the bullocks’ bellies and around their legs. The feverish dogs barked hysterically, burrowing through the sheep to turn them back.

Then Bob sighted Reggie standing on the highpoint of the bridge. ‘Whaddaya doin’ here, ya silly old bastard! Ya said ya mangy beasts were carryin’ the Kellalac School to Dadswells Bridge today!’

‘Well, I’ve bloody well moved it already, can’t ya see, ya great galah, and I can’t back off this damned bridge, so you’ll have to get ya mongrel dogs workin’ properly wontja.’ Reggie, in prime position at the head of his leaders and also desperate to slake his thirst at the pub, was enraged.

The curses from the bridge caused the brickmakers on the riverbank to halt their tasks and inspect the situation. Entertainment was promised as Bob and Reggie continued to exchange expletives.

‘Yeah? Ya wanna step back here and talk to me straight, or are ya bloody yella?’ Bob said.

Reggie set his shoulders and nudged Sampson. The beast took his cue and led the team gently forward, creating uproar among the confused sheep beneath him and the bewildered, yapping dogs.

Bob rushed onto the bridge and waved his pole in Reggie’s face. ‘I’ve bloody had enough of you, you useless coot!’

‘Useless am I? Who’s always in the pub leavin’ ‘is poor wife to feed up ‘is animals and manage everything inside and out. No wonder she’s skinny!’

‘Damn your eyes! You leave Ida out of it. She’s nothing to do with you, mutt-head!’

‘Hah! D’ya think so? Maybe she’s more to do with me than ya know, you on the road all the time. Who does she turn to for a hand, ya pathetic mug?’ Reggie said.

Bob lost all thoughts of his flock and lunged at Reggie who barely had time to swing his whip before Bob cracked him on the head with his pole. The brick workers had stopped work entirely now and inched up the riverbank, the better to see the brawling duo. Reggie got a swing

of his whip and flicked Bob across the shoulders. A red bloom seeped through Bob's shirt. The enraged Bob lurched toward Reggie twirling his pole at an eye-popping rate.

'I'll get ya, ya bloody dog. Takin' a whip to a man, how low can you get?'

Reggie ducked the whirling pole and tore into Bob, fists flailing. George Sawyer, the head brickmaker, started taking bets. His brother, Tom, collected coins whilst George noted names.

The whole team of bullocks and dray had edged onto the bridge. A groan emanated from somewhere in the melee, followed by a long continuous moan, growing louder. A monumental crack exploded and ricocheted through the river gums.

'All bets off, boys. This is serious,' said George Sawyer. The brickmakers stuffed their coins back in their pockets and all eyes turned to the corner of the bridge that now kissed the water. The sheep skidded and tumbled, cloven hooves raking desperately at the shiny red-gum planks. Some escaped across the bridge fragment still holding the road and vanished down Stawell Road. Others, in the river, splashed or scraped uselessly at the slippery clay banks. George, Tom and their employees swung into action, the younger ones leapt into the river and wrestled most sheep to safety.

The bullocks jerked forward of their own accord and strained against the weight of the dray now threatening to follow the sheep into the drink. But they held their forward traction stoically and resolutely dragged that dray from the bridge, crushing several sheep in the process.

Tom Sawyer attended to the duelling duo, 'Awright boys, c'mon, break it up now. Look, Bob, your sheep are all over the place. See, they've headed off down O'Callaghan's Parade to Firebrace Street. Ya gotta fix up them dead 'uns too, git 'em off the bridge.' Tom put his arm around Bob's shoulders. Bob shrugged him off, 'Whaddaya think ya doing, Tom, ya bloody sissy! Always knew there was something funny about ya.'

'I was just trying to help you, Bob. Look, you're bleeding all over the place.'

Bob looked down at his blood-sodden shoulder and was shocked into reality. He whistled up the dogs still chasing sheep under the bullock team's legs. The dogs left their tasks to obey Bob's call and sat panting before him. 'Walk up, walk up now.' The dogs, shivering

from the rush of excitement, stepped gently toward the sheep. 'Come by, turn 'em 'round!' The dogs turned the remaining sheep into the pens in the showgrounds. Then Bob sprinted after the runaways, way ahead on O'Callaghan's Parade, the dogs panting alongside. Between gasps for breath he cursed Reggie, cursed the dogs and cursed the only bridge into and out of town.