

9. 1939-1946 John Gibbs – Director of the Department of Agriculture

On the completion of his tenure of office, as Director of Agriculture, John Gibbs wrote a substantial report on his activities during the six years he had worked in the Islands. The contents of the report make it quite clear that he was in support of Governor Cardinall's radical proposals. It is also clear that much of Cardinall's thinking and philosophy found practical expression in the work of the Colony's Director of Agriculture.

The Preface to Gibb's Report is revealing:

When considering this report I should like the reader to recall that in 1940, when I arrived in the Colony, there was less than two acres of ploughed land within a reasonable distance of Stanley ... Ploughing was such an innovation that numbers of the townspeople would stroll out to inspect the first areas that were ploughed, and there was a strong belief that cultivated land would disappear in a cloud of dust borne on the wind.

I venture to think that considerable improvement in the prosperity of the Colony is possible if some of the leads which have appeared as the result of this work are followed up and applied. But they represent ideas and practices new to the Colony, and as such must meet with a deprecatory criticism, especially from an industry notorious for its conservative obstinacy. It is well known that human nature prefers to first throw stones at those who provide advanced ideas, even though those same ideas become eventually incorporated in everyday life, and the Department of Agriculture has not escaped such treatment.¹

Much of Gibb's Report is concerned with outlining his efforts to respond to the Government appeal made in 1942 to supply the newly arrived Military Garrison with vegetables. The Government appealed to all gardeners, or owners of plots of land, to

¹ Gibbs, J; (1946) *Report of the Director of the Activities of the Department of Agriculture from 1937-1946*. Stanley: HMSO/Falkland Islands Government.

grow more vegetables, potatoes and rhubarb, and it agreed to purchase whatever was grown no matter how great the quantity produced. Large quantities of artificial fertiliser were purchased from Montevideo to assist with this programme.

Large areas of coastal areas (Rookery Bay to Cape Pembroke) were fenced and planted with native Tussac Grass, with mixed results. During 1940-1942 Tussac Grass was cut from better plantations for use as cattle or horse fodder, but with the increased provision of hay, the use of Tussac Grass decreased. However plantations of Tussac Grass continued to be used during the winter for grazing. Gibbs' Report details his oversight of the Government dairy herd of sixty cows.

Both Gibbs and Howell Evans ² (Government House Head Gardener) made monthly educational broadcasts on agricultural and horticultural subjects on the radio from 1945 onwards. Both men commended the planting of trees as shelterbelts for animals.

Gibbs' commented on the quality of the sheep in the Islands which revealed that not much had changed since the time of Munro, but that the cattle and sheep of the Islands seemed healthy enough. Gibbs wrote extensively on the importance of combining pasture sub-division with rotational grazing:

Greater benefit would accrue if sheep were grazed in larger mobs and rotated from paddock to paddock as the grazing was exhausted. Cattle should follow to eat the rank grasses left by the sheep. By this means there would be no need to burn the whitegrass, for if judiciously managed there would be no rank grass to carry a fire.³

Controlled over-grazing of this nature can only bring improvement to native pastures, chiefly through consolidation, removal of surplus growth, and the concentration of animal manure.⁴

² Evans, Howell, (2001) *The Falkland Islands I knew*; Oswestry; Anthony Nelson; p168.

³ Gibbs, J; (1946); op.cit.; p45.

⁴ *ibid.*; p46.

The work of Davies on grassland improvement is re-examined and applied to the Falklands Islands situation. The farming practices of Port Howard, Holmsted Blake, and the Falkland Islands Company are commended. Gibbs regarded Port Howard as one of the most progressive in the Islands where the importance of Munro's work had been recognised.

Gibbs reported that birds of prey continued to be destroyed; payment for the beaks of the Striated Caracara had been discontinued in 1931, 'on account of the reported rarity of Johnny Rooks'⁵ but that since 1937, 17,120 turkey vulture beaks had been purchased by the Department at a cost of £428. Reduction of the Upland Goose continued, and Gibbs agreed that they were particularly troublesome and destructive on newly sown pastures. On the other hand:

Their droppings must have high manurial value. Whether their depredations on native pastures are greater than the benefit they bring is a very debatable point, and one, which has not yet been demonstrated satisfactorily.⁶

Gibbs makes a number of observations about the rural economy of the Islands, which show his support for the vision of Governor Cardinall, but which also revealed his understanding of the difficulties of effecting change:

We cannot expect rapid changes [*i.e.* improvements to wages and living quarters] when only in 1940, the owners of one station were reported to have refused to provide water sanitation in a manager's quarters on the grounds that 'peat mould had been good enough for them'⁷

⁵ *ibid.*; p11. See also: CS343/30; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Government Notice No.54; 11 August 1930. The Government Naturalist had warned as early as 1922 (CS294/22; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1922) about the increasing rarity of the Johnny Rook. The destruction of birds of prey has continued intermittently throughout the history of the Colony. For example as late as 1966 permission was given to the Manager of Roy Cove Farm to use strychnine to poison birds preying on lambs. See: 0797/Y; Falkland Islands Government Archive; *Destruction of Birds of Prey*; Letter from Colonial Secretary to Manager, Roy Cove; 14 October 1966.

⁶ *ibid.*; p12.

⁷ *ibid.*; p127.

The report concluded with an appendix containing the script of a broadcast talk made by Gibbs on 14 April 1946. The talk contains one phrase which is remarkably prophetic:

I am not proposing any scheme of development. I am merely pointing out some of the potential sources of wealth which lie hidden under the self-sufficiency of the present system of sheep-ranching.⁸

The full implications of these words are only now being becoming understood and worked out.

The full version of the Gibb's Report was never published, but Governor Cardinall's successor - Sir Miles Clifford - printed a much-abridged version in 1947. Governor Clifford thought that 'there was much of value in the Report'⁹ but Clifford ensured that most of Gibb's more trenchant comments were not reproduced in the abridged version.

⁸ *ibid.*; p243.

⁹ Hand-written comments by Governor Sir Miles Clifford on a copy of the Gibbs Report, and now in the Government Archives in Stanley.