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REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION OF AGRICULTURE IN NEW SOUTH WALES.

(N.R. Wills).

The Agriculture Department, existing as it does to serve the needs of the farming community, early found it necessary to organise its territory into a variety of special-purpose administrative districts. The existing Department dates back to 1890, when it was created as a separate administrative arm of the N.S.W. Government. At the time it collected to itself functions hitherto performed by a miscellany of governmental agencies although its creation was due not so much to the insufficiency of the past, as to the needs of a rapid - if belated - expansion of agriculture in New South Wales. This State lagged behind South Australia and Victoria in the development of its agricultural industries and it was not until the nineties that wheat and other crop acreages began to expand - an expansion which ultimately carried New South Wales to first place in the Commonwealth.

The administrative authority of the new Department was of course Statewide. Since 1890 the present agricultural pattern of New South Wales has gradually come into existence and various well-defined crop and livestock belts appeared. Moreover, there is much to suggest that the present general pattern of agriculture in this State is a relatively permanent one, and that future developments will be in the direction of intensification, rather than an extension of the existing crop-livestock belts. Agriculture has come up against a permanent climatic barrier in western New South Wales, and expansion beyond this limit can only be brought about by intensive irrigation farming, a development which will in no way affect the agricultural patterns of eastern New South Wales.

The Agriculture Department is thus, in 1945, administering a territory which has reached agricultural maturity. In the past - particularly before 1930, when acreages were still expanding - existing agricultural belts might well have been regarded as nuclear, rather than fully developed patterns, but with a marked acreage stability over the last fifteen years, existing crop boundaries are coming to be regarded as relatively fixed and as expressions of deeper natural or geographical determinants.

In such circumstances, regional administration can now be carried out with the knowledge that existing crop-livestock distributions are not likely to change much in the near future - at least in New South Wales. Thus, in organising for the early resumption of normal conditions in country districts, (World War II having ended), plans for regional administration could be based on outlines which are now reasonably permanent. Conditions which favoured the 'Topsy-like' growths of the past, when every few years saw a new boundary established, a new area opened up and often a new administrative region proclaimed, are no longer in the ascendant.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS.

In the past, the conditions which brought about the growth of the Agriculture Department did not suggest the adoption of an "all-purpose" regional unit for agricultural administration. Expansion of the Department was "vertical" rather than "horizontal"; certain branches were called upon more heavily than others to assist sections of the rural community and accordingly expanded more rapidly. With special interests to serve, such branches evolved special ad hoc administrative districts carved out of the territory of the State. The location and size of these districts was decided by the senior officers of the branches concerned, having regard to the special administrative or quasi-administrative duties to be performed. To this extent, each district so designed had a functional basis and existing agricultural administration in this State is organised along functional, rather than regional lines.

Since various parts of the Department grew more rapidly than others, and at different times, some administrative districts appeared earlier than others. The wool industry, for instance, is venerable beside such recent developments as irrigation-horticulture; large-scale vegetable farming of modern development compared with cereal cropping. Different industries have made varying demands upon the Agricultural Authority at different times, with a resultant variable rate of growth within the Authority itself. Moreover, a vigorously developing commercial agriculture tends to stress individual industries, with a consequent reaction upon the structure of the administrative agency. As demands for assistance came to the Department, specialist officers were sent out and territories later assigned to them. At one period the Agriculture Department had no less than ten different quasi-administrative districts throughout New South Wales, each with its own distributional pattern of areas. With the reorganisation of the Department in 1940, however, this number was reduced to six (including Pasture Protection Board districts not shown on the accompanying diagram.)

The term "administrative district" has admittedly been used rather loosely in the foregoing remarks. A more accurate, if less succinct, description would have been "districts in which officers of the Central Authority carry out particular functions or administer legislation entrusted to the Central Authority by the State Parliament." On the whole, there is little devolution of administrative authority to extra-Departmental agencies in the various districts. District officers of the Department are directly responsible to their administrative and technical heads in Sydney; and while, in practice, a wide degree of discretion is often allowed "the man on the spot," the administrative structure nevertheless is centrally organised with parallel and unbroken lines of authority extending out from a common origin in the State capital.

GENESIS OF CENTRALISED ADMINISTRATION.

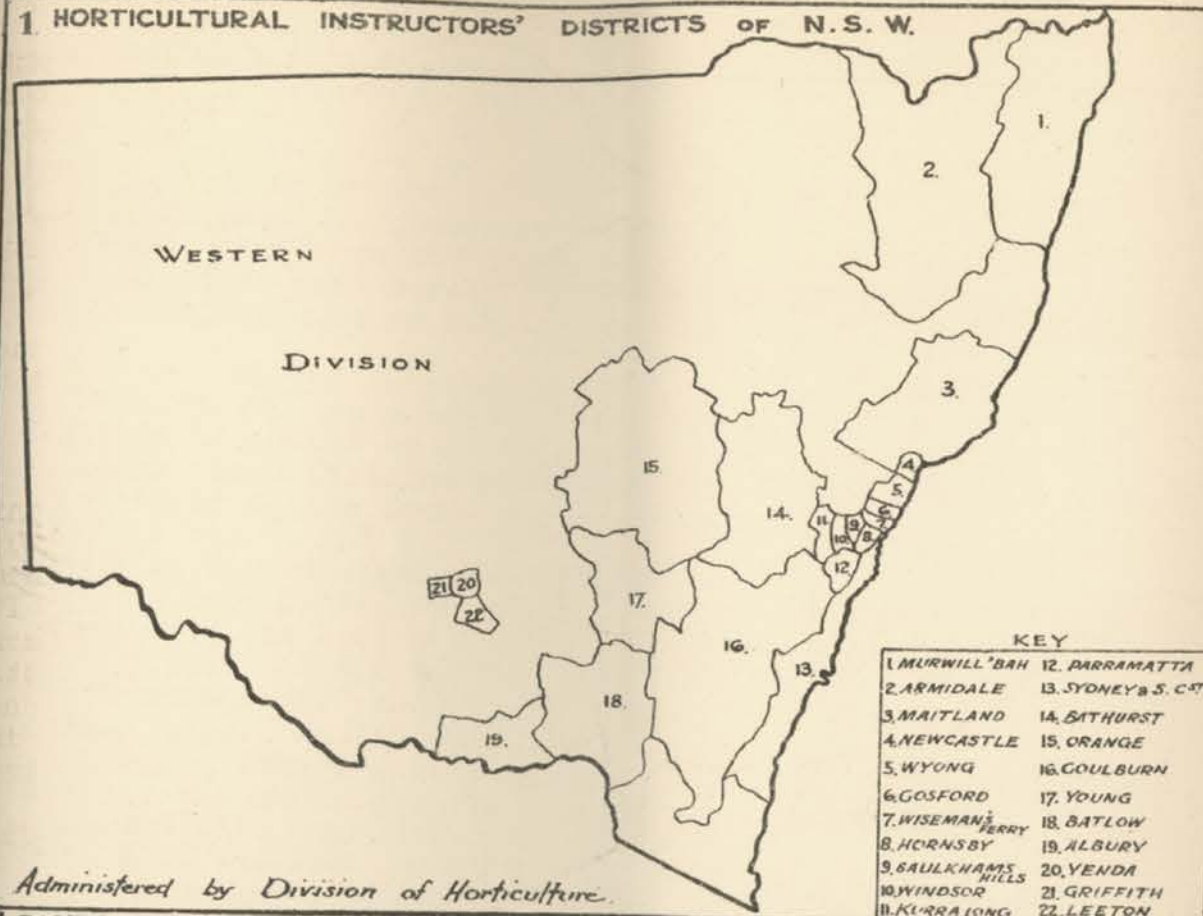
However, it must be kept in mind that administrative centralisation, which is a characteristic of government in New South Wales as well as the other States, had its genesis in these conditions unique to Australia, which determined the expansion of the colonies. From a very few coastal foci, such as Sydney and Melbourne, the settlement frontier gradually moved into the interior. Extensive sheep grazing was the only significant land-use before 1860 after which date agriculture began to appear in the better-watered areas of the eastern States. Public administration, so far as Australia was concerned, had its birth in the few key centres on the coast, and only gradually extended its influence in the wake of a thinly-spread settlement. If the administrative methods of a Central Government are a reflection of the resilience of local institutions, then the Australian States are exemplars of the theory - in reverse! From 1788 onwards, the only public institutions on the continent were, first, the colonial governors, and some sixty years later, the colonial governments. The era of pastoral expansion, which began after 1820, spread settlement too widely and too thinly to foster the development of a practical "moot consciousness" amongst the rural community. It thus fell, in the case of New South Wales, to the "Sydney" government to set up some sort of administrative structure in country districts, and to provide services which in England would have been the responsibility and the pride of vigorous local authorities. So emerged in Australia, and New South Wales in particular, the practice of centralised administration. It is our inheritance from an historically recent, though technologically remote past. Contemporary standards may find it obsolescent and out of step with current notions of executive speed but criticism of it should be tempered by an historical perspective, and an awareness of the peculiar conditions which have moulded Australian sociology.

The Department of Agriculture, as an executive arm of the State Government, conforms to the general pattern of centralised administration. But by investing many of its local field officers with wide discretionary powers, it has successfully broken through the outer defences of the system of which it is a part. Admittedly, it is still a long way from the "all-purpose" agricultural administrative region, and still further from regional agricultural administration; but the advantages which devolution brings have already impressed themselves upon the Department.

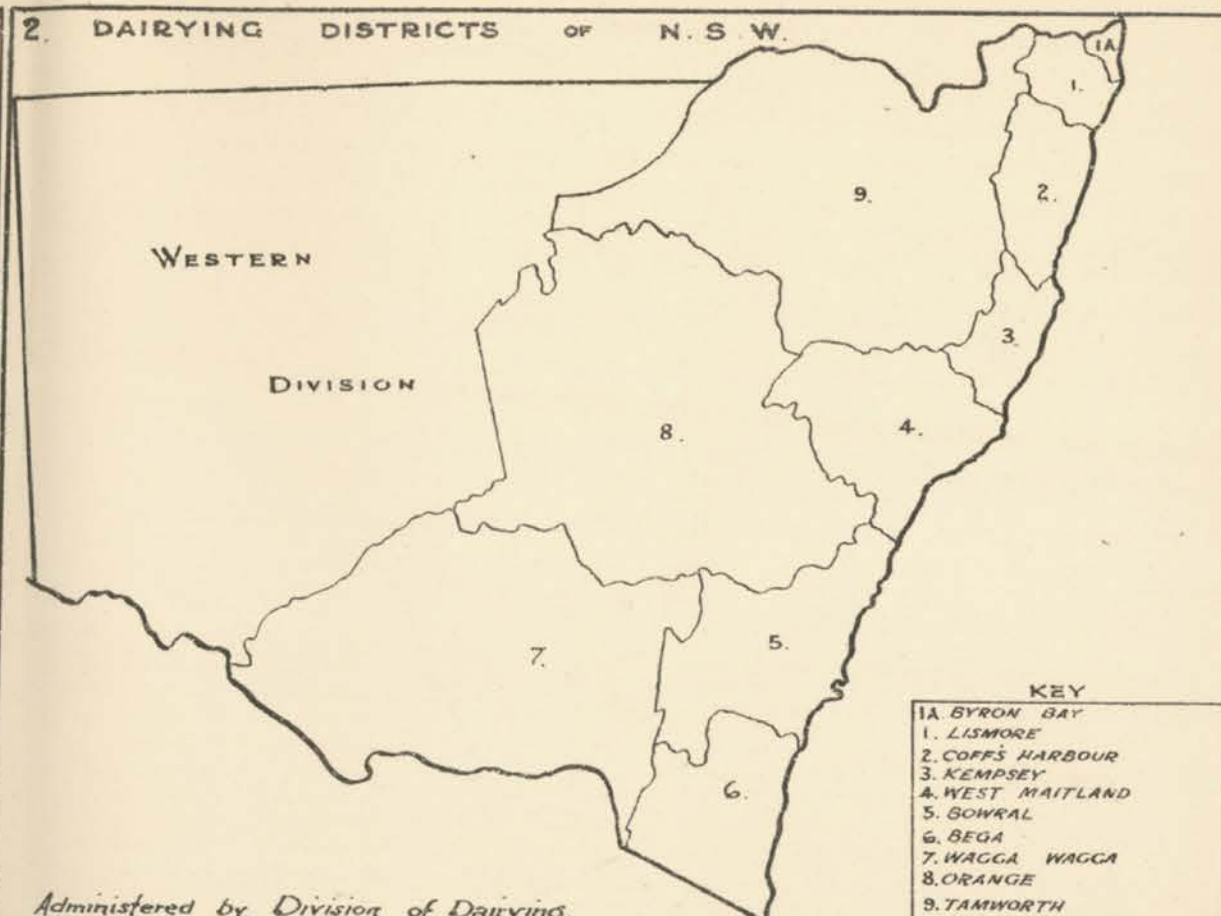
Present "Administrative Districts" of the Department.

Broadly, the rural administrative functions of the Department fall into two categories - inspectorial and instructional. The inspectorial function is concerned with maintaining minimum standards of efficiency in the various agricultural and livestock industries; authority to prohibit and prosecute is derived from a number of statutes administered by the various divisions of the

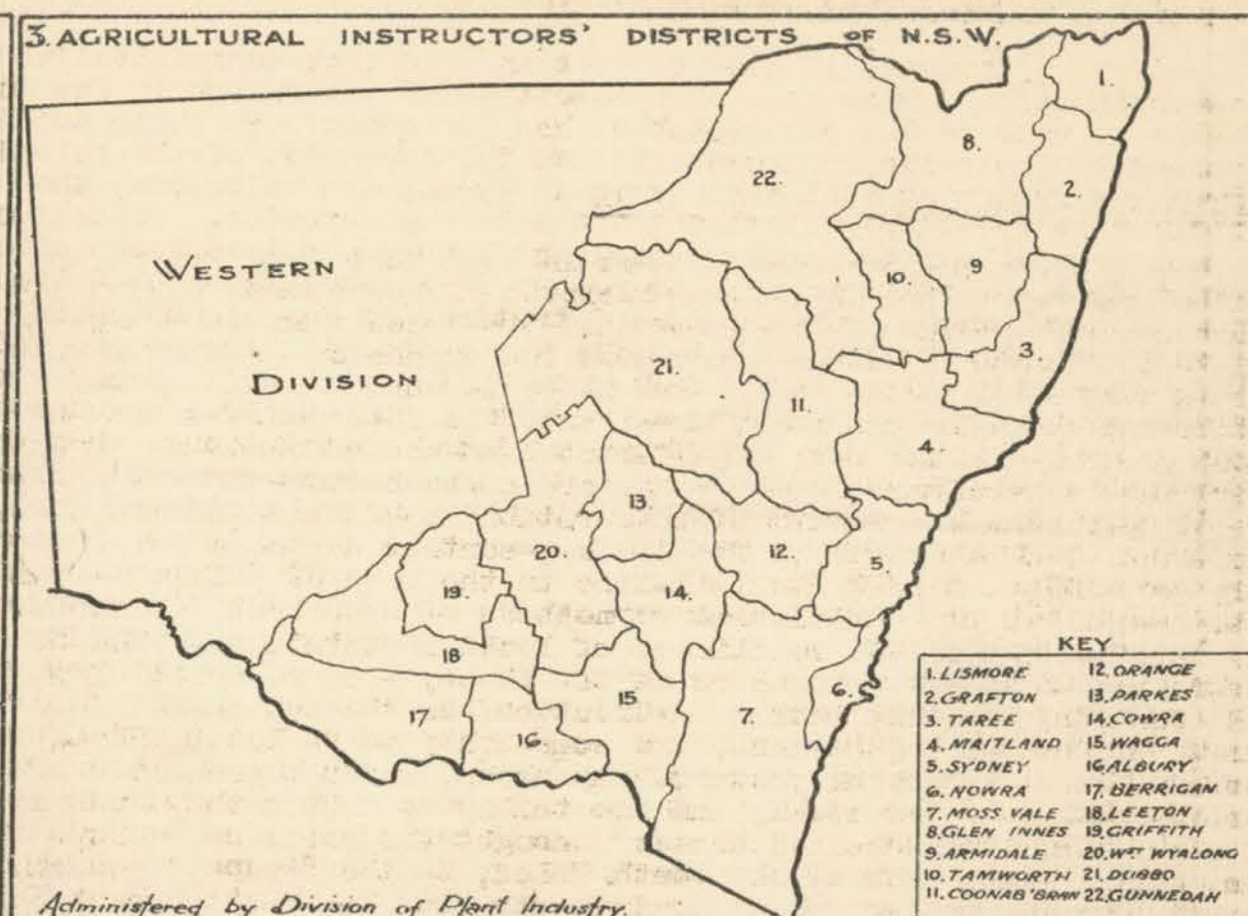
1. HORTICULTURAL INSTRUCTORS' DISTRICTS OF N.S.W.



2. DAIRYING DISTRICTS OF N.S.W.



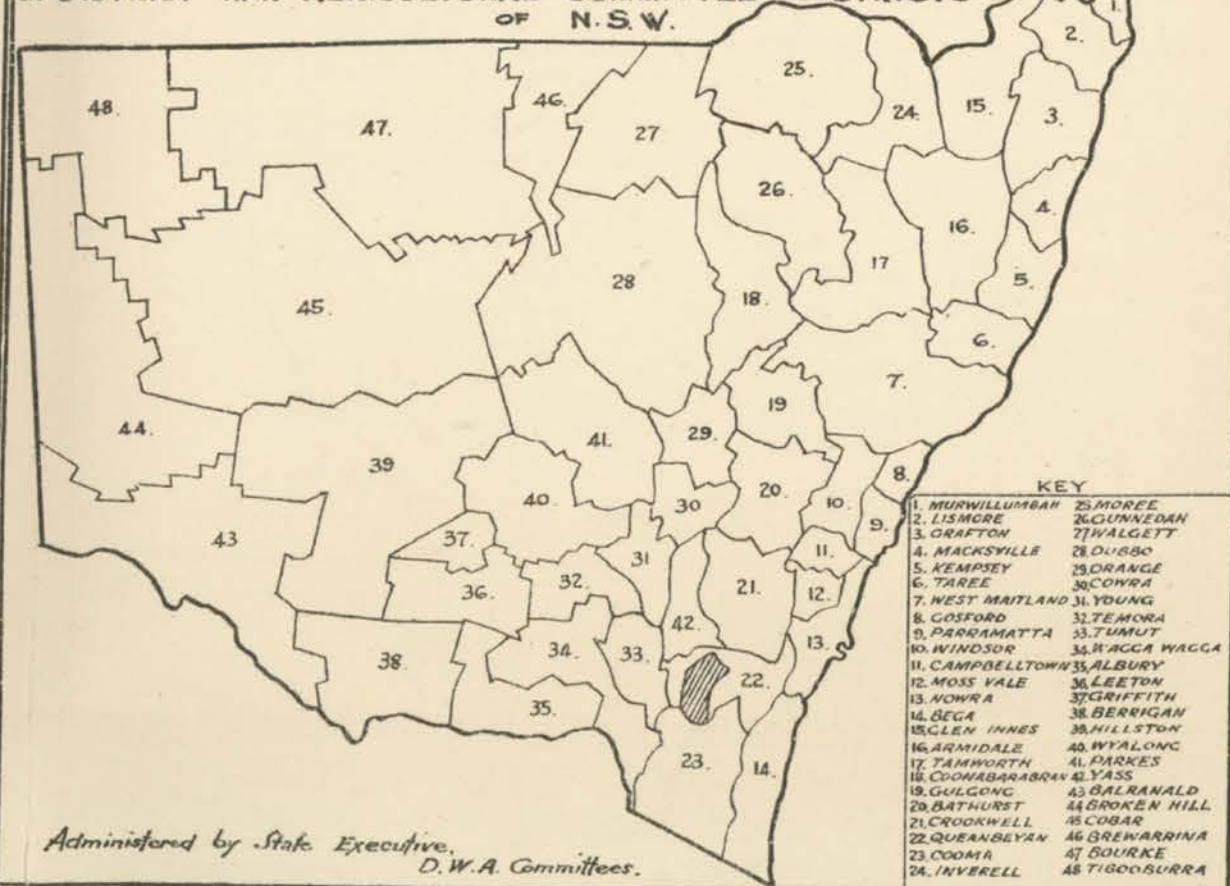
3. AGRICULTURAL INSTRUCTORS' DISTRICTS OF N.S.W.



4. DISTRICT VETERINARY OFFICERS' AREAS OF N.S.W.



5. DISTRICT WAR AGRICULTURAL COMMITTEE DISTRICTS OF N.S.W.



6. N.S.W. REGIONS FOR SURVEY AND PLANNING



Department. The inspectorial function exemplifies the principle of negative government, whereby it is the business of the State to decide what practices shall not be allowed. So far as the Department of Agriculture is concerned, positive administration is associated with its Statewide instructional activities. Extension work and voluntary assistance to the rural community; experimentation in the problems of developing better strains and varieties; ways of overcoming plant diseases and of maintaining soil fertility; means of evolving sounder economic policies for agriculture - all these are aspects of positive government with which the Department is vitally concerned. They are developments from and beyond the inspectorial function which aims merely at enforcing a minimum standard of efficiency, hygiene or honesty, as the case may be.

On the inspectorial side, three divisions of the Department are chiefly concerned*, each with responsibility for the administration of an Act or series of Acts relating to a particular industry. Each division so concerned has allocated certain sections of the State to its local inspectors and their staffs. The size of the districts is not fixed, having ebbed and flowed in the past, with changes in the strength of the local cadre. However, the general trend has been in the direction of a greater number of such districts - a trend which in some cases has been greatly speeded up during recent years. As the duties of inspectors increased in intensity a greater number were needed, and new districts were carved out of existing ones. In the case of the Dairies Supervision Act (1901) and the Dairying Industry Act (1915), administered by the Division of Dairying, the boundaries of local inspectorial districts were drawn to conform with aggregates of police patrols - an arrangement required by the Acts under which provision is made for the use of the local police in their administration. (See Diagram, Map 2.) Statutes relating to stock (1901) and stock disease control (1923), which are the responsibility of the Division of Animal Industry in the Department, are administered in regions based upon aggregates of Pastures Protection Board districts. (See Diagram, Map 4.) As with the police patrol, the Pastures Protection Board district is a statistical unit for certain purposes, so that both dairying districts and veterinary districts have, for many years, been able to use statistics to assist in the administration of local areas.

On the other hand, no precisely defined territories have been assigned to local officers administering the Plant Diseases Act (1924) - the responsibility of the Division of Horticulture. Some 22 inspectorial districts have been carved out of the State, boundaries having been determined largely by considerations of horticultural intensity and ease of communication. During the last few years an attempt has been made to use shire boundaries as lines of demarcation between one inspectorial district and another; the aim being to place all the districts on a general statistical basis. (See Diagram, Map 1.)

* Not including the Division of Marketing and Agricultural Economics, which administers the Marketing of Primary Products Act (1927-40).

Both dairying and veterinary districts are used for instructional as well as inspectorial purposes. In addition to Departmental inspectors, each district is staffed with experts qualified to instruct and assist farmers in more enlightened methods of management. In the case of horticulture, however, there are fewer instructors than inspectors, instructors administering aggregates of inspectorial districts.

On the instructional side, agricultural instructors' districts are perhaps the most interesting administrative districts of the Department. (See Diagram, Map 3.) The Division of Plant Industry has been responsible for the development of instructors' districts (formerly agrostologists' districts) of which there are at present 23. The number was considerably increased during the latter years of the war, the boundaries of each district being adjusted about the same time to conform with groups of shires. The agricultural instructor's district proved extremely useful for war-time local agricultural planning, although it was partly superseded by a smaller unit, the War Agricultural Committee District, after 1942. (See Diagram, Map 5.) While the shape of the 23 districts has been partly determined by short-term considerations, such as rail communications and officers available, they approximate more closely to the official regional sub-division of the State than other districts administered by the Divisions of the Department. It would not require over-much adjustment to bring their boundaries completely into line with the 17 regions adopted officially for survey and planning, upon which an "all-purpose" regional administration in this State may one day be based. (See Diagram, Map 6.)

Indeed, the Official Region offers many advantages for the further development of decentralised administration. It represents a sub-division of the State based upon a combination of geographical, economic, and resultant sociological considerations; its boundaries have taken into account existing realities and tendencies, as well as principles of natural sub-division. The Regions provide, for the first time, a potential administrative area having sufficient resources and geographical homogeneity to support a workable "all-purpose" administration. In their plans for the future, Administrators in New South Wales might well work towards a gradual adoption of the Official Region for most administrative purposes. By so doing, a vigorous regional consciousness might be built up, strengthened by the concentration of administrative personnel within a common boundary and operating from a common centre.