Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living

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Extract

— 1 —

THE BETTER FARMING TRAIN BRINGS SCIENCE TO THE MAN-ON-THE-LAND

1934

There are days of slow chugging through the wheat. I look out of the window at the engine as it rounds a bend. Living on a train is like living inside the body of a snake. We are always leaning into the curves, always looking forwards, or backwards, never around. Here we are arriving at some tiny siding, just a few neat-edged buildings and their sharp shadows. Here we are again, a few days later, pulling away, all of us craning out of the windows, gazing down the long canyon of railway line.

Sometimes a grateful farmer, or his son, will run a length beside us, waving his hat and grinning and calling out, 'Three cheers for the Better Farming Train,' as if we are going to war. In those few days at Balliang East, or Spargo Creek or Bendigo we make a place like somewhere else. Somewhere new.

The children say, 'Look, a circus, look at the tent, look at the animals.'

Time moves differently around us. Our lecturettes, illustrated with lantern slides, show the same farmer, time after time, about his chores. There he is, before breakfast, caring for his dairy herd in the wet hills of Mirboo North. A row of Eaglehawk graziers watch him closely and bray with disbelief at the lush green of the pasture, although the slide is in black and white.

'Again,' the men say. 'We want to see it again.'

We bring to each town new sizes and shapes and colours. Beasts broader than they are high, cows with giant dangling udders whose teats brush the ground like the fingers of a glove, fleece-laden sheep like walking muffs, wheat grown so high by colourless chemicals it reaches the waist of the tallest man. Our fruits and vegetables on display are large and smooth and perfectly formed. They gleam, inviting touch, and give off a sweet, waxy aroma.

The women's car is at the end. Fourteen cars of stock and science and produce and then us, a shiny afterthought: infant welfare, cookery and home sciences. My colleagues – Sister Crock, head of 'women's subjects', and Mary Maloney, lecturer in cooking – complain about our position. Or rather Sister Crock complains. She says it is a question of cinders, when the train turns a corner cinders blow

back through our windows into our kitchen, onto my dressmaking dummies, dressed and swaying.

Mary Maloney and I smirk. Because she raises this complaint in the Mallee where we chug along for days, as if drugged, pushing through the endless wheat. There are no corners, no hills, no ridges, no edges to anything. At the Minyip siding I notice that the men of the wheat districts are straight-backed and stiff-necked. Many seem dazed at the sight of us. They are men with no experience of corners.

The cinders are not the real reason Sister Crock complains. Being at the end means that when we have finished our lectures at one town and packed up to travel to the next, we must walk through all of the agricultural cars to the sitting car up front. Sister Crock says when a lady travels she must be seated. She says, 'Oh lordy, lordy,' clapping a white handkerchief to her nose in the pig car.

Each car is a tunnel of smell. The air moves in through open slats, across the beasts, across us walking up the aisles, and then mixes together behind the train into a heady, steamy cloud. Only the animals grazing in the paddocks as we pass can unmingle the odours and reply in loud yearning to a juicy cow or the sharp piss of a colt in his prime.

We jam Sister Crock between us. Mary is on shit alert. She says, 'Jump now, Sister,' as a huge Border Leicester ram aims a clod of pellets in front of us.

They fall like marbles and we hop about on our toes to avoid them. Sister Crock shakes her head. We have an effect on the animals. It's not just the shit, they moo and bah and grunt and bellow at us, even after we've gone, but perhaps a little more forlornly.

'We're starting them up,' Mary says, smiling at me. And we are. The cacophony of each car is dulled a little by the chorus of the one before.

The dairy car is next. Mary and I like to linger in dairy implements. She is a real farm girl, not like me. Sister Crock had her on recommendation – a nimble girl and a handy cook. Mary's father was reluctant to let her go and now he sends messages for her, they follow us down the stalls from dairy to dairy, on a milk cart, on a truck, refreshed at a tiny hotel and then spoken by an awkward man hoisting himself into our women's car.

'The Maloney girl,' he'll say. 'I have a message for the Maloney girl.' Mary dusts her hands or smooths down her apron as the man, always a similar looking sort of man, blushes. 'Your father, your father says keep well . . . and he loves you.'

Sometimes they leave off the last bit, the love refrain. And we know they had meant to say it, right up until they swung into the car and saw us, three women on a train full of animals, playing house.

Mary drinks in the dairy implements. She explains to me what she knows, the indoor stuff of cream

separators and churns and pats and butter-makers and thermometers and hygienic wraps. Mary's future is in cows. She is secretly engaged to George, the son of a neighbouring dairy farmer. She takes notes about herd testing.

'It's the way of the future,' she says. The future is all around us, in shiny Babcock testers, in huge signs where the luggage racks should be:

All the money in the bank comes from the soil
Cheap cows are costly cows
Grow two blades of grass where one grew before
Get rid of the old scrub bull

Sister Crock is restless, she hurries me and Mary along, her red midi cape flapping around her ample shoulders. The sitting car awaits. As head of women's subjects Sister Crock doesn't want to miss anything. We push on in single file through plant identification, tobacco, sheep diseases and honey.

Poultry is next. The poultry car is kept dark to reduce the anxiety of the birds. It is dimly studded with the beady eyes of hens, pullets, cocks and roosters. There is no air in poultry, just the acid stench of shit and another smell too: newness, birth, the unfurling and drying of feathers still sappy from the egg. Orange incubation lights sway over the chick cages like giant lampreys. Mr Ohno the Japanese

chicken-sexer is there, sitting on his haunches in the corner practising some leather craft. He jerks upright as we enter and then bobs down again in a deep bow. He is immaculate in pinstripe trousers, a long swallowtail jacket and a silk tie of the deepest scarlet. My eyes settle on his feet which are, as always, encased in white toe socks worn with heavy wooden clogs. Mr Ohno's smile is so broad it stretches the part in his brilliantined black hair. He nods formally at Sister Crock and Mary, but stands in front of me.

'Miss Jean. I show you, Miss Jean,' he says, taking my hands in his. Then he reaches quickly into one of the wire cages and pulls out a tiny chick.

'Feel he-yah,' he says. 'He-yah.' He guides my fingers over the warm pink rim of the chick's sex, searching for the spine. I think I feel something, the smallest knot of tissue, then Mary giggles and Sister Crock clears her throat noisily and it's gone.

Mr Ohno snatches the chick away triumphantly. 'Ees boy. You feel boy, Miss Jean!'

He bows again and returns the chick to its cage. Sister Crock tells him in her loud lecturing voice that we are not intending to stop, but are just passing through on our way to the sitting car. He nods at her and bows once more in front of me.

'What number are you, Miss Jean?'

I'm puzzled. I look at Mary for help and she answers for me.

'She twenty-three, Mr Ohno. Just the right age for a girl, don't you think?'

Mr Ohno smiles and nods some more. The skin around his eyes folds into tiny crinkles. I would like to touch them. Mr Ohno is the first Japanese I have ever met. He is small but there is something complete about him. He has been with us for two tours – nearly a whole year. He is a world-famous chicken-sexer. His record of five hundred white leghorns in forty-five minutes with ninety-nine percent accuracy and no deaths or injuries has never been bettered.

The soil and cropping wagon is a relief. It has been newly added to the train for our tour into the wheat-growing districts of Victoria. The wagon is glass-roofed – all sunlight and air and swaying plants, a greenhouse on rails. We walk down the aisle as if down the middle of a field parted by God. The wheat in the good field on the left is tall and vigorous, the stems reaching out to touch our skirts; on the right just a few dry sticks poke from the soil.

The soil is hungry for phosphate – use SUPER PHOSPHATE, says the sign. There can be no doubting the magic of it.

Mary Maloney explained super phosphate to me like this: 'It's an earth mineral, a powdered earth mineral, the best ever discovered, and it makes you light up.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well . . .' Mary's words were unsteady. 'I'm just

telling what I heard, not what I've seen, but when you touch it in the sack or on the ground it makes you glow like there's a light inside you. Dad heard of a bloke down at Drouin who spread it in the morning and woke up in the night with his hands all alight. They found him in the dam next morning, stiff with cold.'

Sister Crock said his death was clearly a case of poor farm hygiene. But I rolled the strange new word around on my tongue – super phosphate, super phosphate, super phosphate. If you drank the water from around the lit-up farmer, or perhaps just a little of the powder in a clean cup mixed with water, would you glow all over? If it lights up your body would it light up your mind?

Sister Crock slides the door of the sitting car. It is another tunnel of smell. The smell of men. We smile and nod our greetings and take our places on the plush leather seats. A dozen men sit smoking, cross-legged, some still in their white demonstrator's coats. The superintendent is working at his desk.

There are two types of men on the Better Farming Train – agricultural and railways. Each is then divided again. In railways there are stokers and drivers who we never see, guards and officials that we do. In agricultural there are stock hands, demonstrators and experts. Only the demonstrators and experts make it to the sitting car, except for Mr Ohno who prefers the company of his chickens, and the new soil and

cropping expert, who prefers the company of himself. The stock hands travel in the hay stall where they play serious card games on the uneven bales.

We have an effect on the men. But not like we have on the animals. The men shut down for a time when we arrive. Their talk drops to a murmur and they draw themselves in, hugging their arms to their bodies, closing off their smell.

'How are your numbers, Sister?' An innocent but foolish question from Mr Plattfuss.

Sister Crock takes a deep breath then she's off. Attendances for lecturettes at Marnoo, average weight of babies presented, numbers of primary and secondary school girls, quantities of pamphlets and recipes handed out. She quizzes a few of the lingerers after each lecturette and from this has compiled another set of statistics – *miles travelled & mode*. Sister Crock says we can judge the wealth and health of our country by the increasing number of motor cars. But when the heat is rising in our demonstration car the smell is still of warm pony and wet leather. Many children wear the stain of horse sweat between their thighs.

The sitting car rumbles again with discussion. Mary has joined the dairy demonstrators who are talking about mastitis. Mary and I have talked about mastitis late at night in our bunks – Mary hanging above me like the dairy angel, her voice muffled in the small space of our sleeping compartment.

'Dad can tell just by their faces. They'll be walking into the shed of a morning and he'll say, Mary take this one out, she's got sore . . .'

'Sore what? Come on, what did he say?'

Mary whispers, '*Titties*. I get a basin of warm water and Dettol and sit and massage her udder. Sometimes it's burning, so hot and swollen. I have to be very gentle, kneading like dough. I can tell if I am doing it the right way because she gives this special sort of grunt. Sometimes the kneading frees things up and a big spurt of first milk comes out, all over me.'

When Mary talks mastitis my chest buzzes. It is a surging feeling around my nipples. To quiet it I must lay my hands upon my breasts and think cool thoughts.

I notice, whilst Mary talks mastitis with the men in the sitting car, her own hand is flat upon her bodice, not cupping a breast but skirting her throat and down a little where the flesh softens and parts into two.

Mary says I will find love in the sitting car but I am not looking for it. I sit and sew while Mary and the men talk and Sister Crock calculates her statistics. Sewing looks industrious and involving but I can drill stitches while barely looking at my fingers. I sit and sew and listen. I am listening for something important, some piece of knowledge that will take hold of me, that will give me

the same certainty of purpose as the men I sit amongst.

I know I won't find knowledge in the women's car. I'm not fooled by Sister Crock's methods – we are merely playing at science, using its language to dress up the drudgery of women's lives. There was no certainty in the lives of the women who gathered in my aunt's front room for fittings and alterations and tea and endless stories of shameful births, wayward children and disappointment. Women's talk.

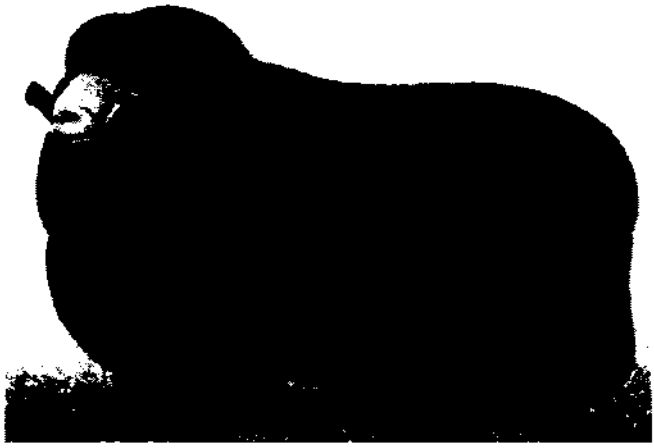
Progress is the word that dips and slides through the men's discussions in the sitting car. Men bring progress. They are so sure of progress they measure it constantly – number of acres cleared in a day, bushels of hay cut, pints of milk produced, acres of seed sown, tons of firewood cut. Men measure the activity of progress 'per man, per day'. Four acres of Mallee scrub can be cleared per man, per day. Although this seems to deny something that even I can see – that all men are different, that some light the way with their ideas and others are merely followers.

Take Mr Baker, sitting next to me on the banquette, with his thick orange whiskers sprouting at unruly angles. Mr Baker wants only to speak of pigs. He has on board some prime specimens, which he reminds us of often. His three breeds of pigs, pure Berkshire, middle Yorkshire and large Yorkshire, are the 'triumvirate of future quality'. He likes to muse on the numerous crossings and uncrossings that can

be achieved between the three breeds and predict what might be produced.

Mr Talbot, on my other side, talks sheep diseases. He is a little shy. Mary says this is not unusual for a sheep man. Mr Talbot has a long, thin face and soulful eyes. Sometimes I help him colour in his slides of the tissue diseases of sheep. He has a child's pencil case with a beautiful set of coloured pencils. I am to use natural colours, he says, lots of reds and pinks. Then I label the drawings in black ink and draw arrows to features of interest. I have coloured tuberculosis, actinomycosis, contagious pleuro-pneumonia, liver fluke and hydatids.

Then there's the superintendent, sitting stiffly at his desk drafting telegrams to the agriculture minister



describing our progress. Sometimes he will give us all an 'impromptu lecturette' on our roles as propagandists and the importance of agricultural education in the development of a truly modern society. Most of us have been on the train for several tours – a year or more – but we still listen politely.

Some of the men ask about my sewing. Mr Baker breaks off from pig talk and points at my lap.

'And what useful item are you making there, Miss Finnegan?'

I hold the lace netting out to him.

'Ah, a veil.' His whiskers dip and bob as he speaks. 'Do you have a sister getting married?'

'I have no sisters.'

Mary covers the marriage terrain for me as we lie on our bunks. It amuses her so I feign interest. Sister

Crock is already snoring loudly in the next compartment. Mary starts with the older, portly men and works down to the more likely. Many of them are damaged, either by the war or by work. Several have lost fingers. Mr Plattfuss has a glass eye. Mr Baker has a glass eye *and* an ugly dragging scar across his cheek where a sharp fencing wire has danced upon him. All of the older men, that is older than thirty, have sun-roughened skin and thinning hair. Mr Pettergree, the new soil and cropping expert, seems to be some sort of scientific recluse. He never comes to the sitting car and we have only seen him from a distance.

'And what think you of the Asiatic?' Mary asks me with mock formality.

I laugh, but the truth is I think of Mr Ohno a great deal. I imagine him standing in the poultry car taking off his jacket. He hands it to me so I can study its strange seams and creases. Then I can't help but lift it to my face.

Only one of the men is beautiful – Mr Kit Collins from horticulture. Mr Kit Collins has large green eyes and curly hair. He is an expert on the pruning and irrigation of fruit trees. On rest days when the men play cricket in a paddock next to the train, Mr Kit Collins always switches the ball for an orange, and the batsman always pretends he hasn't noticed until after the orange has been hit and flies mushily through the air.