

**A** FLOTILLA of small craft, some bearing weeping women, swarmed in farewell round the 600-ton barque Royal Tar as it sailed down Sydney Harbor bound for Paraguay on July 16, 1893.

In the Royal Tar were 250 Australians — shearers, small farmers, tradesmen, their wives and families — all hoping for a new challenging and prosperous life in a promised land far removed from the strikes, poverty, and unemployment in their own country.

Leading this band of pilgrims was a small, limping visionary named William Lane who dreamed of a "communal paradise purged of want, hate, greed and vice" in a New Australia.

It all turned out to be no more than a dream. A shortage of women and a yearning for liquor broke the Utopia and within 10 years many had returned to Australia.

The rest, also thoroughly disillusioned, became farmers and were slowly absorbed into the Paraguayan nation.

The idea of an Australian Utopia grew from the suffering of the great maritime and shearers' strikes when workers lost two million pounds in wages and unemployed queued outside soup kitchens in the major cities.

Despairing of seeing socialism in his time, the union leader and journalist William Lane, who took a leading part in the strikes, decided to set up a Utopia of his own.

Helped by a young bush teacher, poet, reformer and union pioneer Mary Cameron, later Dame Mary Gilmore, Lane formed the New Australia Colonisation Society.

Its headquarters were in Sydney and its aim was to establish a colony where land and industry would be owned in common and the proceeds equally divided.

The capital was 20,000 pounds made up of 10-pound shares on which Lane decreed that no dividend should ever be paid.

He also ruled that every member of the association must sell everything he owned and pay the money into a common pool, with a minimum subscription of 60 pounds. No cash should jingle in any pilgrim pocket.

This 60 pounds stipulation brought a jibe from the weekly journal, the Bulletin, that in such hard times the poor need not apply.

Lane also laid down the rules of conduct for his New Australia colonists. There would, he said, be complete equality of the sexes, communal raising of children and no official religion.

Despite these strictures more than 1000 applied, bringing more than 30,000 pounds in cash and promises into the communal coffers.

Lane first sought land in Australia and New Zealand. But the only offer he got was in the arid Wilcannia district of far western New South Wales.

He turned then to South America which was crying out for settlers and where rich fertile land could be had for the asking.

# The Utopia that failed

**IT WAS TO BE A COMMUNAL PARADISE PURGED OF WANT, HATE, GREED AND VICE, A LAND WHERE ALL MEN WOULD BE BROTHERS AND WHERE THERE WOULD BE NO RICH AND NO POOR. IT WAS A MAGNIFICENT VISION, BUT WILLIAM LANE'S "NEW AUSTRALIA" PROVED A DISMAL FAILURE.**



SOME of the migrants to "New Australia" on board the Royal Tar in Sydney Harbor.

Paraguay, roughly in the centre of the vast continent (Brazil alone is larger in area than Australia) promptly offered the Utopians 450,000 acres free of all control provided they obeyed the local laws.

Bushmen Lane sent to inspect the land reported that it was well watered and drought-free with soil so fertile that crops almost literally shot up.

That was enough for Lane and his society. He bought the barque Royal Tar for 1500 pounds and summoned his first 250 pilgrims, lodging them at Balmain, an inner Sydney waterfront suburb, while he fitted the old timber ship for its voyage round the Horn.

Meanwhile, a storm of criticism rose in Sydney with many describing Lane and his pilgrims as "stark mad". Wrote one critic: "I would rather see my daughter jump off North Head than have her join this party."

Lane ignored the jibes. He called a farewell mass meeting of sympathisers in the Domain, then boarded the Royal Tar with his 250 followers and weighed anchor for Paraguay.

Mary Cameron did not sail in the Royal Tar but stayed behind to help organise the follow-up parties.

As a precaution Lane had acquired dictatorial powers over the pilgrims by

getting the proxy votes of those forced by strife to wait for the next voyage.

The Royal Tar was only a few days out when, in a bid to stop flirtation, he exercised these powers by forbidding women to come on deck after nightfall.

Reminding him of his rule for equality of the sexes, some of the women rebelled and, after tearing down his order, stamped on it.

The narrow-minded little zealot was in strife again at Montevideo where some of the male pilgrims went ashore and got roaring drunk.

Lane was outraged, not only by the men's lapse from the pledge of total abstinence but because, instead of paying all their money into the communal fund as by contract bound, they had kept enough to go on such a disgraceful spree.

In the end he forgave them and they sailed 950 miles up the River Plate to Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay, thence by train to Cabellero, the nearest town to their "promised land."

The Paraguayans not only kept their promise but made the Australians' 450,000 acres a separate district free from government control with Lane as administrator and three leading pilgrims as magistrates.

The Government left them so much alone that Dame Mary Gilmore later reported "they had a revolution in Paraguay while we were there and we didn't hear of it for six weeks."

As it turned out, the pilgrims chose the wrong season to arrive so that torrential rain lashed them as they set out with bullock-wagon trains for the "promised land."

Rain ruined their food stocks and turned the steaming forest trails into quagmires. And to cross flooded rivers and swamps they lashed wagons to poles which rested on canoes. These were pulled by swimming bullocks.

Although the land was richly fertile they were soon in trouble. Drovers and shearers proved poor farmers. They could build bush shanties of timber and thatch but balked at adobe houses.

There was also much anxiety whether food stocks would last until the crops came up and some dissension over distribution.

Insects tormented them, including many species of mosquitoes, house flies, green, amber, red-eyed and blue-eyed flies, March flies and warble flies and one that specialised in walking on the eyeball. To these were added ants by the millions, cloth-eating crickets, centipedes, tarantulas, tree-climbing frogs, snakes and a flesh-burrowing grub that brought boils to the victim when the larvae hatched.

The land was so fertile, however, that the settlers were able to eat one type of bean within three weeks of sowing.

Soon the little village was surrounded by fields of maize, beans, sweet potatoes, tobacco, and sugar cane, and so much fruit that they fed it to the hogs. For a change of diet they often ate monkey meat.

But the unrelenting toil proved too much for some of the young men, who remained wifeless because of the shortage of women in the settlement.



WILLIAM Lane: He organised it all.

Three of these discontents wandered to a native village and got outrageously drunk. Promptly Lane expelled them and brought in the Paraguayan police to enforce his ruling.

Eighty-five immediately seceded. Some were repatriated to Australia where they denounced Lane's dictatorship, while those who stayed formed a breakaway colony.

Despite these reports of discord, the Royal Tar left Adelaide on December 31, 1893, with 250 more hopeful pilgrims.

Among them was James Murdoch, later to be a professor at Sydney University.

Murdoch left quicker than he arrived, declaring: "When the leader professed to be ordering his movements and policy by the instructions of a supernatural being, New Australia was no longer any place for James Murdoch."

At any rate, most of the newcomers resented Lane's stern administration and finally demanded his resignation.

Forced into a corner, William Lane appointed a board of management then himself left New Australia with 45 loyal supporters, known as the Saints.

He and his Saints wandered like Moses in the wilderness until, after making a camp by a river, they sent an appeal for more land to the Paraguayan Government.

The Government expressed surprise that the first land allocation was not sufficient for all needs, but still offered more land 12 miles from the river camp. It took Lane's exploration party 10 days to hack their way through to it.

To their dismay it consisted of wild, rugged country with sandy soil and no communication with towns or markets. It was also the haunt of jaguars, pumas, ocelots and tiger cats. They turned it down.

It was fortunate that just then David Russell Stevenson, cousin of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson and a member of the party, received a \$300 legacy from Scotland.

This he handed over as a deposit on 20,000 acres of rich land which the pilgrims called Cosme after the local river ford.

By then they were hard-pressed for supplies. They sold everything they had — watches, earrings, brooches, even wedding rings — and with the \$800 they raised bought food and seed to tide them over until they were self-supporting.

Building their first homes of saplings hewn from the forest and thatched with grass they planted tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, maize, coffee, grapes, peaches, oranges, lemons and vegetables of all descriptions.

However, for months their main diet was maize porridge, sweet potatoes and beans with a little monkey meat.

It was during this struggle for survival that Mary Cameron arrived and in Cosme married William Gilmore, son of a western Victorian pioneer. Their son was born there.

She taught the colony's children, edited the hand-written Cosme Evening News and supervised the library of 2000 books.

By sheer hard graft William Lane and his Saints won through while sticking doggedly to their original principles as a socialist communal settlement.

Officers were elected each year and everyone worked, except the children. Everything was held in common. Goods easily produced were issued free; those produced with difficulty were rationed.

Money from trade was equally divided, irrespective of age, sex, capacity or occupation and no religion divided the settlement which was strictly "dry."

For entertainment the Cosmeans had sports, dancing, concerts, plays and an occasional opera and oratorio.

As they prospered they built a mill to grind their flour for bread, a tannery, a sawmill, a cane mill and brick kilns.

They constructed two bridges over which they took their produce of timber and tobacco more easily to market, all the time steadily reducing daily working hours from 14 to seven, five days a week.

But in the end Cosme foundered for the same reason as the other settlements — men exceeded women by 25 to 10 in the small community.

Lane brought more families and single women from Britain but most of them were townfolk unsuited to life in the bush. Some of the old members left and the single men drifted away.

Lane finally admitted failure and left Cosme, bitter and disillusioned, for New Zealand in 1899.

There he became a leader writer on the Herald and gave all his savings to those seceders who demanded refunds of the original amounts they invested in his colony.

He came to Sydney to found the Worker newspaper but returned to New Zealand to edit the Herald. He was still paying off claims when he died on August 26, 1917.

The Gilmores returned to Australia in 1902 leaving a few to stay on until they, too, abandoned the Utopian idea, divided the land among themselves, and were slowly absorbed in the Paraguayan population.