

1939

VICTORIA

REPORT

OF THE

ROYAL COMMISSION

TO INQUIRE INTO

The Causes of and Measures Taken to Prevent the Bush
Fires of January, 1939, and to Protect
Life and Property

AND

The Measures to be Taken to Prevent Bush Fires
in Victoria and to Protect Life and Property
in the Event of Future Bush Fires

PRESENTED TO BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY'S COMMAND

To His Excellency The Right Honorable FREDERICK WOLLASTON MANN, *K.C.M.G.,
Lieutenant Governor of the State of Victoria and its Dependencies in the
Commonwealth of Australia. &c., &c., &c.*

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY :

INTRODUCTION-PART I.

In the State of Victoria, the month of January of the year 1939 came towards the end of a long drought which had been aggravated by a severe hot, dry summer season. For more than twenty years the State of Victoria had not seen its countryside and forests in such travail. Creeks and springs ceased to run. Water storages were depleted. Provincial towns were facing the probability of cessation of water supply. In Melbourne, more than a million inhabitants were subjected to restrictions upon the use of water. Throughout the countryside, the farmers were carting water, if such was available, for their stock and themselves. The rich plains, denied their beneficent rains, lay bare and baking; and the forests, from the foothills to the alpine heights, were tinder. The soft carpet of the forest floor was gone; the bone-dry litter crackled underfoot; dry heat and hot dry winds worked upon a land already dry, to suck from it the last, least drop of moisture. Men who had lived their lives in the bush went their ways in the shadow of dread expectancy. But though they felt the imminence of danger they could not tell that it was to be far greater than they could imagine. They had not lived long enough. The experience of the past could not guide them to an understanding of what might, and did, happen. And so it was that, when millions of acres of the forest were invaded by bushfires which were almost State-wide, there happened, because of great loss of life and property, the most disastrous forest calamity the State of Victoria has known.

These fires were lit by the hand of man.

Seventy-one lives were lost. Sixty-nine mills were burned. Millions of acres of fine forest, of almost incalculable value, were destroyed or badly damaged. Townships were obliterated in a few minutes. Mills, houses, bridges, tramways, machinery, were burned to the ground; men, cattle, horses, sheep, were devoured by the fires or asphyxiated by the scorching debilitated air. Generally, the numerous fires which during December, in many parts of Victoria, had been burning separately, as they do in any summer, either "under control" as it is falsely and dangerously called, or entirely untended, reached the climax of their intensity and joined forces in a devastating confluence of flame on Friday, the 13th of January.

On that day it appeared that the whole State was alight. At midday, in many places, it was dark as night. Men carrying hurricane lamps, worked to make safe their families and belongings. Travellers on the highways were trapped by fires or blazing fallen trees, and perished. Throughout the land there was daytime darkness. At one mill, desperate but futile efforts were made to clear of inflammable scrub the borders of the mill and mill settlement. All but one person, at that mill, were burned to death, many of them while trying to burrow to imagined safety in the sawdust heap. Horses were found, still harnessed, in their stalls, dead, their limbs fantastically contorted. The full story of the killing of this small community is one of unpreparedness because of apathy and ignorance and perhaps of something worse.

Steel girders and machinery were twisted by heat as if they had been of fine wire. Sleepers of heavy durable timber, set in the soil, their upper surfaces flush with the ground, were burnt through. Other heavy wood work disappeared, leaving no trace. Where the fire was most intense the soil was burnt and destroyed to such a depth that it may be many years before it shall have been restored by the slow chemistry of Nature. Acres upon acres of the soil itself can be retained only by the effort of man in a fight against natural erosive forces.

The speed of the fires was appalling. They leaped from mountain peak to mountain peak, or far out into the lower country, lighting the forests 6 or 7 miles in advance of the main fires. Blown by a wind of great force, they roared as they travelled. Balls of crackling fire sped at a great pace in advance of the fires, consuming with a roaring, explosive noise, all that they touched. Houses of brick were seen and heard to leap into a roar of flame before the fires had reached them. Some men of science hold the view that the fires generated and were preceded by inflammable gases which became alight. Great pieces of burning bark were carried by the wind to set in raging flame regions not yet reached by the flames. There had been no fires to equal these in destructiveness or intensity in the history of settlement in this State, except perhaps the fires of 1851, which, too, came at summer culmination of a long drought.

Some impression, then, of the unusual antecedents of the fires and of their extreme and unexpected severity may be gained. It will, it is hoped, be apparent that the experience of men. in Victoria was such as to leave them unprepared for disaster on such a scale. It is with such facts in mind and with the belief that the facile wisdom which comes after an event is not wisdom, but foolishness, that your Commissioner proceeds to report upon the matters into which to his great honour, he has been appointed by Royal Commission to inquire.