

ERNIE SLOW —

# Poet of the Mackenzie

Is there anybody in the Mackenzie Country who did not know Ernie Slow? His tragic death by suffocation when his cottage was burned, aroused widespread pity. But those who knew Ernie, would agree that he would have preferred a sudden death rather than linger on into a decrepit old-age, when someone else would have to care for him.

Ernie had always lived a life of self-reliance, and this independence was one of his marked characteristics. Almost all his life had been spent in the high-country. There was not a station-job that Ernie could not do. For years he was a "gun" shearer

## By WILLIAM VANCE

### Never an Unkind Word

The atmosphere of the Mackenzie gave to him a bigness and a dignity which he never lost, for there was nothing petty or mean about him. During all the years I knew him, I never heard him say a malicious or an unkind word. He had an undying love for children and made special efforts to please them. Numbers of grown-ups still remember the boats he made for them when they were children. His nature was also reflected in his gentleness to dogs and horses. With this went a certain aloofness which showed itself in his refusal to use nick-names or even to abbreviate names. For example, Mr Sullivan was known to all his friends as "Mick," but Ernie, although he counted him as a friend, always addressed him as "Michael."

And in his shearing days, he did not forget his fellow-workmen, for, when he made a visit to town, he would come back with a big pot of raspberry jam, and dump it on the shearers' dining table with these words: "General Godley used to say, 'Keep the jam up to the troops.'"

### Man of Individuality

This fondness for raspberry jam stayed with him. I can never forget my afternoon-tea sessions with Ernie in his corrugated iron hut when we ate bread and jam together, swilled down with black tea, while outside the Mackenzie sun soared up to a temperature of 92 degrees. Then it was that I learned a good deal of Mackenzie Country history, for Ernie could tell tales of every station. And he did not forget to speak in terms of respect about a family who had befriended him through three generations.

Ernie has gone, but in my memory at least, he will continue to

live, I can never forget his individuality, his courage, and his kindness.

### The Land He Loved

A man must know a place before he can faithfully write about it, and Ernie knew the land about which he wrote his poems. Many poems have been written about the Mackenzie Country, but, to my mind, no one has captured its atmosphere as Ernie has done.

Like the ballad-makers of old, who travelled from place to place, telling or singing their stories in poetic form, Ernie did not bother to write down his poems, but would recite them to an interested audience when the occasion arose, or if he was in the mood. I wrote down a number of them, and on the afternoon of his death, he called in to give me a copy of his latest poem.

Perhaps the best-known of his poems was "The Devil's Daughter," which shows Ernie's ability as a Ballad Maker.

The scene of the ballad takes place in the Sardine Hut, six feet by six feet, with a five-foot-high lean-to roof. Situated near the Fork River, it was a boundary-keeper's hut in the early days, and was so named because of its inability to accommodate all the musterers expected to stay there.

This corrugated-iron hut had a corrugated-iron door that moved with the wind. When a strong nor-wester blew up, the wire-handle of the door rubbed against the iron, making a screeching noise. Newcomers who did not know about this (and they were never told), were mystified by the eerie noise, so that the hut gained its reputation of being haunted.

This is the basis of Ernie's story, although, the rest of it, I understand, has some foundation on fact.

Here is the poem:



Ernie Slow

time in lonely huts, and this left its mark on his personality. Here it was that he absorbed the atmosphere of the Mackenzie. Every day he could

"See the vision splendid, and has been ringer of many Mackenzie shearing sheds. No rabbit-biter was better at his work than this man, and numbers of the steep hillside fences have been put there by Ernie. Even when he was a comparatively old man, he built the snow-line fence at Glentanner.

This kind of work meant that he had to spend a good deal of his Of the sunlit plain extended. And at night the wondrous beauty

Of the everlasting stars."