

# Now – and then!

■ By Ian M. Johnston



**For nigh on 30 years, readers of this and other magazines produced by Greenmount Press, have been required to tolerate my epistles relating to the history of farm tractors, plus the pioneering days of agriculture in Australia and perhaps too frequently, my somewhat egocentric personal memoirs.**

This very morning I sat down at my desk with the intention of tapping out yet another dissertation, which hopefully would attract the attention of at least a handful of readers. I was very conscious of the fact that I was cutting things a bit fine, which worried me because I have never yet failed to meet the editor's uncompromising deadline, the consequences of which would no doubt result in the failure to receive a bottle of his fine vintage wine at Christmas time.

But perhaps my tardiness may be excused when I point out that for the past 10 days I have been in a state of severe apprehension, owing to the horrific bush fires all around the Mid Coast of NSW and in particular our region of Rainbow Flat, situated south of Taree. At 10 pm a week or so ago, Margery and I were urged (indeed ordered) by the volunteer fire fighting guys, to immediately evacuate our modest property, as it was being surrounded by a raging windstorm driving an inferno of immense proportions.

**The instruction was brief – “Get the hell out of there”!**

Fortunately, as a result of our evacuation plan, a packed suitcase plus important documents were already in one of our vehicles, parked strategically at the top of our drive. So we abandoned ship – at the rate of knots!

All roads and highways were closed, apart from a portion of The Lakes Way, which enabled us to reach the sanctity of Forster/Tuncurry.

Being a popular seaside resort, there are numerous motels in the twin towns, but following an exhaustive run-around in

the dark of the evening, to our dismay – there were simply no vacancies. Folks from our threatened area, who were also forced to flee their properties, had arrived ahead of us.

But a charming elderly couple, with whom we had no prior acquaintance, discovered our plight and with a magnanimous display of kindness and generosity, insisted we spend the night in the comfort of their charming home.

The following morning, not wishing to impose further upon their hospitality, we obtained a vacancy in a motel, in which we were ensconced for a further several days. The road to our property was closed due to continuing fierce fires and dense smoke, plus the resultant fallen trees across the road.

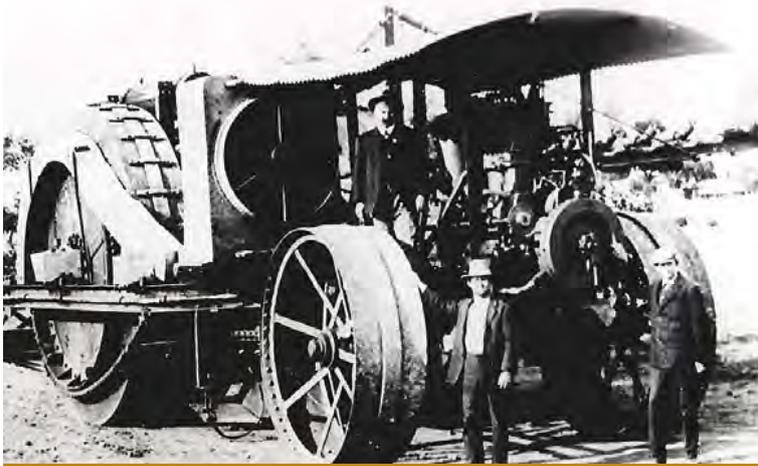
Entirely due to the efforts and professionalism of scores of absolutely magnificent volunteer firemen, our property remained untouched by the ferocious fires. Accordingly, our home, sheds and my archives crammed with irreplaceable historic tractor material, all survived intact. How can I ever thank these remarkable firemen?

Alas, there were many surrounding holdings that were either partially or totally ravaged!

I realise of course that our alarming experience was being replicated by thousands of country folk throughout many areas of NSW and Queensland.

I am also mortified by the consequences of the current appalling drought inflicting vast regions of Australia. A lady, who was our neighbour in the days we owned a western grazing and farming property out in the Walgett Shire, rang to inform me that no rain had fallen on their family acres for three years and the place has degenerated into resembling a giant dust bowl. Awful!

I note the media is currently reporting a considerable amount of altercation between political parties, each blaming the other for failing to prevent the bush fires. As I am certainly not a



The 1911 McDonald Castles. (Courtesy Neil McDonald)



Neil McDonald, son of A. H. McDonald, who founded the firm in 1903. Neil is at the controls of a 1936 McDonald TWB, powered by a single cylinder 2 stroke semi diesel 40 h.p. engine. (PHOTO: IMJ)



A 1916 McDonald EAA harvesting in Victoria. (Courtesy Neil McDonald)

political reporter (indeed am tasked solely to write about classic tractor matters) I shall control my emotions and refrain from expounding a political opinion – except to state the following. Decades ago, in my jackerooing days and later when I roamed the bush on a series of 1950s motor cycles picking up casual tractor driving work here and there, cattlemen were encouraged to graze their herds within the confines of National Parks and other forestation areas. As a result, the floors of the forests were

maintained relatively clear of the combustible undergrowth hazards we see today and which so often become the epicentre of the fires.

Vote seeking politicians were influenced by ‘alleged’ conservationists and proclaimed the closure of forests to cattle grazing! I shake my head!

But now back to business.

### The unique 1911 McDonald Castles

While we are accustomed to seeing some seriously big tractors out in the broad acre paddocks these days, consider the specifications of this 1911 machine.

- Length: 9.45 metres (31 feet).
- Width: 4.88 metres (16 feet).
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- Rear wheel diameter: 3.35 metres (11 feet).
- Front wheel diameter: 1.98 metres (6.5 feet).
- Weight: 20 tonnes (20 tons).

The design of this massive tractor incorporated a patented excavating plough, attached adjacent to each of the giant driving wheels. As the tractor slowly progressed along its course, the ploughs excavated irrigation channels. Simultaneously, as the wheels rotated, the excavated material was transported in buckets, which had been attached to the inside of the wheel rims, and raised aloft, then tipped onto an endless belt conveyor and finally dumped alongside to form the banks of the channel.

This simplistic concept was the brainchild of a brilliant inventor named Wesley Castles. Hitherto, irrigation channels had to be



1936 McDonald – possibly the very first to be fitted with pneumatic tyres. (Courtesy Neil McDonald)