SNIPPETS FOR LOCAL HISTORIANS:

3. — The Rabbit in Illawarra.

The humble rabbit came to Australia with the First Fleet, five of them. Yet it is generally acknowledged that the plague started in 1859 when twenty-four wild rabbits were imported and released at Thomas Austin's property, Barwon Park, near Geelong. Within three years they were a pest. Soon after their introduction a man was fined £10 at Colac for shooting one of John Robertson's precious rabbits. Within a few years the same Robertson spent £3000 in an attempt to eradicate them.

The story is told in the article on the rabbit in the Australian Encyclopaedia, though for historical purposes the note in the first edition is better than in the second. It seems strange, though, that the animal did not become a pest for over seventy years after its first introduction. Perhaps, as the article says, the reason is that the wild rabbit could adapt itself to the new country more easily than the domesticated animals. On the other hand, it is known that escaped rabbits bred in isolated colonies on the Australian mainland long before 1859, particularly in Tasmania, and also on certain islands off the coast of Australia. One such was Rabbit Island in Bass Strait.

But Illawarra had a Rabbit Island, too, and there seems to have been good reason for the name. It was used quite early, much earlier than the 1859 introduction would suggest. In the Sydney Morning Herald of 7 March 1843 there is a news item under the title "Illawarra" in the recurrent series under the quaint heading "News from the Interior," the interior including places such as Parramatta, Windsor and Illawarra. The local correspondent at the time was that verbose and irrepressible busybody, the so-called Doctor George Underwood Alley. He had submitted this paragraph: "The elite here are keeping up a succession of balls and picnics, one of the latter, a few days since, being of rather a novel description: it consisted of a numerous party of gentlemen, who visited the largest of the Five Islands to enjoy rabbit shooting; having a tent, they stayed all night, returning the following day, with a good stock of game, and well pleased with their bivouac."

So Rabbit Island (the Big Island of Admiralty and Military maps) was well stocked with the prolific mammals in 1843. But questions still arise: How did they get there? And when? And if they could proliferate on the island, a pretty bare place, why had they not done so in the far more fertile conditions of Illawarra proper?

—E.B.