OBITUARY:

Kenneth John Thomas

Events were to show that as our October Bulletin, with its expression of hope for Ken Thomas's recovery, was going to press, it was already too late; he died peacefully on 24 September, 1980.

Coming from an old Illawarra family, he closely followed their main interests in farming and the land. In the ripe eighty years of his life he gained enormous experience in that sphere; but there was more to him than that. From his family, from friends in all walks of life, from his own reading, he added to his deep knowledge of farming methods and practices, absorbing every aspect of bush lore and craftsmanship he encountered. What is more, he remembered it, and, above all, practised it. Consequently, he was an unsurpassed authority on colonial country-life. He never asserted his knowledge, for that was not his way at all; but whenever you wanted to learn something or clear a point in his field, he could be asked; and, quietly smiling, almost apologetically, you would get your answer, be the query on dairying, cheese-making, bullock-driving, ploughing, the management of cattle and horses, cottage life and furniture making, or the social life of old-time communities. Further, he knew allied trades, many of them now dying or dead, and could answer just as authoritatively on blacksmithing, wheelwrighting, timber-getting, shingle-splitting, bush carpentry, or saddlery. He never pretended to any bookish scholarship, but often could illustrate what he imparted by an apt quotation from Australian poets such as Kendall, Lawson, and Paterson. He could cure greenhide, plait a bullock whip, and tell you the favoured wood for the handle, or anything else for that matter. He could see, and understand, things in the bush and field that most people would miss. His knowledge seemed inexhaustible, embracing everything needed for the resourcefulness of settlers in an age long gone by. And he gave of it unsparingly.

So it was a lucky day indeed for our Society when, many years ago, he joined us, becoming a Councillor for quite a number of them. Not only did he give us access to the well of his knowledge, but he bent his considerable energies into putting ideas into practice. It was a privilege to work with him, to see him handle the bushman's
traditional tools such as the broad-axe, the mawl and wedges, the cross-cut saw, the auger and adze. Amazement grew on seeing the apparent ease with which, having shaped his often massive materials, he could move them into place, simply and effectively, with block and tackle. Thus it was that our blacksmith's shop came into being; and when that was done he could set it up as a going concern and work at forge and anvil as if that had been his livelihood. Our smithy and stockman's hut stand as memorials for him.

Add to all this a personality of outstanding gentleness and kindness, revealed uniformly in his Church and in the community at large, and you have a man who could be described aptly by only one word: he was lovable. From our Society's point of view he was an embodiment of all that was best and most useful in old colonial life, and we shall not see his like again. Our Society is immeasurably the richer for his example, his work, and his unrivalled knowledge.

—Edgar Beale.