

# Australia's original Demeter Farm (1934-1954)

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A self portrait of Ernesto Genoni (private collection).

Two members of Rudolf Steiner's Experimental Circle were the first to establish a Demeter Farm in Australia. In 1934 Ileen Macpherson (1898-1984) and Ernesto Genoni (1885-1964) founded their 'Demeter Biological Farm' on the Princes Highway in Dandenong, Victoria. They were guided by Steiner's book of his Agriculture Course (1924). They managed their 40 acre farm using biodynamic (BD) practices for the next two decades (Paull, 2014a).

Ernesto first met Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) at the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, in 1920. He spent 1924 studying with Steiner at the Goetheanum. In that year, he learned German, experimented with painting in the Anthroposophic style, and he was accepted into Steiner's First Class. This was the year of Steiner's Agriculture Course and Steiner's final year of public life (Paull, 2011a).

Ernesto migrated to Australia in 1926. He was the first Australian to join the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (in 1928). In his application he stated he would farm

at Dalmore (it is about 70 km south east of Melbourne). Ernesto's Dalmore Farm was a short-lived venture with his brother Fred Genoni. It came to an end when it was flooded out.

Ernesto embarked on a grand tour of biodynamics in Europe. "In 1930 I went to Dornach again to become acquainted with the B.D. farming" (Genoni, c.1955, p.21). Ernesto visited BD farms in Switzerland, Germany, Holland and England (Genoni, 1932). In his travels he met the European legends of BD including Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Erika Riese, Ernst Stegemann, Erhard Bartsch, Max Schwarz, and Carl Mirbt (Genoni, c.1955).

Ernesto (along with Anne Macky) had already founded an Anthroposophy study group in Melbourne (in 1928). It was at one of his lectures on Anthroposophy that Ileen met Ernesto. Ernesto was an Italian artist, he had trained at the Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan. He was handsome, dapper and somewhat other-worldly. "He was dark, with flashing eyes, hair swept back off his forehead, and an exotic look ... Ernesto was slender, serious, aesthetic and elegant. His voice was clipped, his sentences crisp and his manner refined" (Triaca, 1985, p.116). He was known in his family as 'the philosopher'.

Ileen's niece, Peggy Macpherson, recalled: "With Ileen and Ernesto, in the very beginning ... she was searching ... for something, she had lived in the country for all of her life and she was down here, had moved to Melbourne to live and spent her time going to lectures and everything that was on, and one day she was at a lecture ... at the Anthroposophical Society



A portrait of Ileen Macpherson by Ernesto Genoni (private collection).

and Aunt Ruby ... was searching and I can't remember the book, but there was a little book and I know 'love' was in the title. It was not an Anthroposophical book because she knew nothing about it, but Aunt Ruby said to her, knowing she was running around libraries and various things, 'If ever you come across this little book will you buy it for me?' So Ileen went into the Anthroposophical library after this lecture and there was a lady who started talking to her and Ileen asked her if she knew if this book was in the library, or where she could get it. And this happened to be Mrs Growcott who was leader of this little group ... and she said when she talked with Ileen for a while, 'Look, I think you'll find what you are looking for if you go to the small group and it was in Collins Street' ... and then she went and of course she found exactly what she was looking for ... a lot can be said about Mr Genoni ... he was there and the leader and the only man we had to sort of lean on for his knowledge (1992).

Ileen was immediately smitten with both the message as well as the messenger. She was from a NSW pastoralist farming background. She had excelled in all the sports offered at

Clyde School. Ileen was smart, articulate, attractive and well educated.

Love was blossoming between the pair. Ernesto took off for Western Australia. His brothers had farms in the wheat belt of SE WA. Back in Milan, Ernesto had had a brief marriage to an Austrian woman. It lasted less than 12 months, but no divorce was forthcoming. There was no divorce in Italy at the time (and not until 1970), and in England and Australia there was not any 'no-fault' divorce (as we now have in Australia, since 1975).

Ileen's Aunt Ruby who also joined the Experimental Circle, intervened. She phoned Ernesto in WA and "begged" him to return "for Ileen" who was "pining" for him. Ernesto returned. They would have married but there was never a divorce (Paull, 2017).

Ileen suggested that together they set up a farm along the lines proposed by Steiner in his Agriculture Course. "Ileen Macpherson accepted the impulse to assist in a venture for applying Bio-Dynamic methods and resolved with Ernesto Genoni to attempt a practical activity. A small farm was purchased on Princes Highway near Dandenong, approximately 18 miles from Melbourne, and a serious effort which lasted 18 years was attempted. It was worked as a small dairy farm, and the manure built into the compost in the Bio-Dynamic way. They made their own preparations and sprays and produced very good vegetables which were sold in the wholesale market in the city and also from a truck on the side of the road. Constant hard work and many grievous trials were endured by the pioneers who undertook the first Bio-Dynamic venture in Victoria" (Magill, 1975, p.7).

It was not all easy going. Ernesto recalled: "The crop paddock was plowed up and the first crop of peas without any manure was put in ... The miserable peas crop ... got stable manure wherever we could get it. The next 10 acres near the creek were bought and later

... 19 acres ... Fred [Genoni] comes to work ... Mr [Alfred] Meebold comes to stay for a fortnight at the farm ... The unhappy struggling for making a B.D farm. The sales of vegetables on the road” (c.1955, pp.23-4).

Ileen's health was faltering. Ernesto wrote: “Met with Lydia [in London] ... further attempt to get a divorce, but unsuccessful. Gone to Dornach and then to Milan ... The dark clouds of War are gathering over Europe ... I left for Australia in June or July 1939 ... At the farm I found things with Ileen not too good. World War II. We carried on the milk contract ... to March 1940. The last month Ileen carried on the milking by herself. But her legs began to give away ... Ileen is sent to hospital again but for a short time .... But gradually her legs are getting worse. She has to be taken to hospital but it was too late, she couldn't walk anymore ... Ileen at Epworth [Hospital] till September 1946. End of the War. Ileen returns to the farm where we live together. In 1952 we decide to build the new home in Namur St. In September 1953 Ileen came to the new house and in March 1954 the Farm is sold” (c.1955, pp.25-6).

Reflecting on two decades of biodynamic farming, Ernesto wrote: “My time was so taken up with the cares of the farm ... The next 21 years was almost like a spiritual *pralaya* for me ... When I was 70 years of age I felt guilty that I was not carrying on the spiritual work of Anthroposophy as I should and I said [to Ileen] ... ‘I am not going on anymore with the farm, you will have to sell it’ which she did” (Genoni, c.1970, p.9).

The name ‘Demeter’ has been associated with BD produce in Europe since 1927 (and so it predates the term biodynamic). After Ileen and Ernesto, others in Australia later also used the name ‘Demeter’ for their own biodynamic enterprises. Later again, the name ‘Demeter’ was appropriated in Australia, along with the European Demeter logo, by the Bio-Dynamic Research Institute (BDRI) which was registered in 1967 by Alex Podolinsky. The BDRI is not associated with the biodynamic certifying agency Demeter International (Paull, 2013).

Ileen and Ernesto pioneered biodynamic farming in Australia. They were the first to adopt the name ‘Demeter’ for an Australian BD enterprise. This was before the terms ‘biodynamic farming’ and ‘organic farming’ had any currency (which date from 1938 and 1940 respectively) (Paull, 2011b, 2014b). They worked their BD farm for two decades, despite the collapse of Ileen's health in the 1940s (due to pernicious anaemia). Nevertheless, they both lived long lives.

Ernesto taught Anthroposophy in both Melbourne and Adelaide. Ileen and her niece Peggy Macpherson (also a keen Anthroposophist) stayed at the Huon Valley home of Jean Hearn who founded Anthroposophy in Tasmania (Hearn, 2017). The land of Demeter Biological Farm is understood to have been incorporated into the Springvale Botanical Cemetery (Fiedler, 2015). The ashes of Ileen and Ernesto were each scattered at the Springvale Botanical Cemetery.

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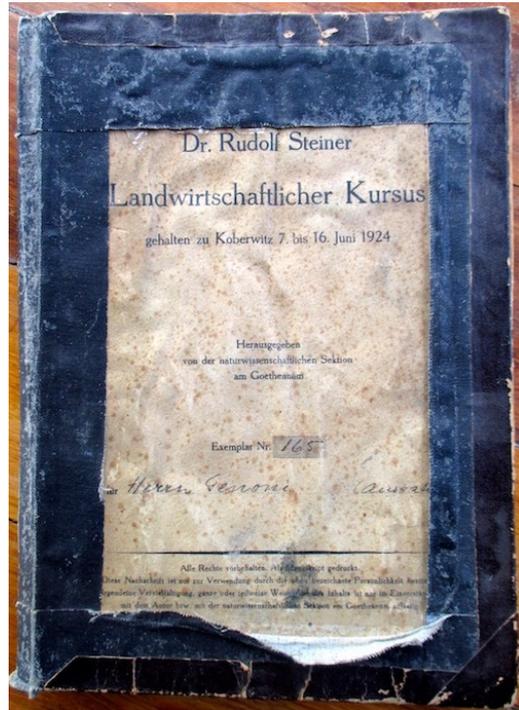
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Demeter, Greek Goddess of Agriculture, on left, (Persephone on right, Triptolemos centre), c.435 BC, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University (photo: J Paull). Demeter has long been used to denote BD produce.



Ernesto's well worn copy of the Agriculture Course (Michael Group).