

# Edith Macpherson Park: Testament to a Pioneering Biodynamic Farmer

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A public park is a fitting testament to a pioneer biodynamic and organic farmer. *Edith Macpherson Park* is a public park, located in Namur Street, Noble Park, a south-east suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia (Image 1). *Edith Macpherson Park* offers visitors a quiet, green, grassy, leafy refuge in suburban Melbourne. The park has a nicely appointed and maintained children's playground (Image 2), as well as a public barbeque.

Edith Ileen Macpherson (1898-1984) bequeathed the park land to the Dandenong City Council. In life, she was always known as 'Ileen', her middle name. Her modest weatherboard house had been purpose-designed and built to accommodate her own special needs. This disability-access house served her for three decades, but in her will she specified that it be razed to the ground leaving no trace (I. Macpherson, 1981) - and so it was. The playground of *Edith Macpherson Park* occupies the site of the demolished house.



*Image 1: Edith Macpherson Park (new signage installed in 2018) (Photo: J. Paull).*

Ileen Macpherson died a wealthy woman, aged 85 years. She led an abstemious life, half of it confined to a wheelchair. In her youth she was a sports champion and sports captain at school. In Melbourne, she discovered Anthroposophy, love, and Ernesto

Genoni (1885-1975). For a vibrant young woman it was then a catastrophe to be subsequently diagnosed with pernicious anaemia. Cherished hopes and plans for the future were dashed (Paull, 2017b).

The historical prognosis for pernicious anaemia was death, and sooner rather than later. The Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1934 was awarded for the successful treatment of pernicious anaemia (Holmgren, 1934). The treatment was a diet of raw liver. For years, why it worked was unknown, until finally the role of vitamin deficiency was identified.

For Ileen, due to a confluence of factors, including her strong will, the fact that formerly she was a fit young woman, the timeliness of the Nobel Prize winning medical breakthrough, and the love of a good man, meant that instead of death, she made a recovery of sorts, though she never walked again. Plans to visit the Goetheanum in Switzerland were abandoned, and plans to visit Milan, Italy, to meet Ernesto's family were permanently dashed.

A housekeeper recalls: "Her room was set up like a hospital ward and she stayed there most of the time during the day - emerging at night" (Briscoe, 2016a). "The house was built to accommodate her wheelchair. There were no cupboards around the kitchen sink, so she had access in her wheel chair ... She had a single iron bed. She could get in and out of her bed with a contraption like a hoist ... There were no armchairs or settees. In the hall there was a very large bookcase, glass fronted at the top and cupboards underneath. There were beautiful books in a beautiful piece of furniture. The rest of the furniture of the house was utilitarian ... She was quite strong in the upper body. ... like a mountain monkey, she whizzed herself around the house in her wheelchair ... She had about half a dozen different wheelchairs - all lined up against one of the walls, all old fashioned, very very old" (Briscoe, 2016b).



Image 2. The playground of Edith Macpherson Park is on the site of the original house (Photo: J. Paull).



*Image 3: Ileen Macpherson, portrait by Ernesto Genoni, late 1930s or early 1940s..*

As a fit your woman, before the tragedy of pernicious anaemia struck, her niece relates that Ileen “was searching ... for something, she had lived in the country for all of her life and she 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 and Aunt Ruby who lived out in the country too, was searching and ... there was a little book and I know love was in the title ... Aunt Ruby said to her... ‘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 ... 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 ... ‘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” (P. Macpherson, 1992).

Ernesto Genoni was described: “He was dark, with flashing eyes, hair swept back off his forehead and an erect exotic look... Ernesto was slender, serious, aesthetic and elegant. His voice was clipped, his sentences crisp and his manner refined. They called him ‘il filosofo’ the philosopher, but he was really an artist ... ‘Chemicals will kill the world,’ Ernesto would say, little realising that in sixty years his would no longer be a voice crying in the wilderness” (Triaca, 1985, p.11).

Ernesto recalled: “the Anthro meetings in Collins Street. There is where I met first Ileen and Mrs R Macpherson. The letter from Ileen and our first meeting in Dandenong and up to the corner of Heatherston Rd and Chandler Rd. Our meetings became more frequent” (Genoni, c.1955, p.23).

Ernesto was spooked by this new love interest (and he had a reason). Ernesto took off for Western Australia (WA). His brothers were farming in the wheat belt of WA and this is to where Ernesto made a hasty retreat. Ileen’s Aunt, Ruby Macpherson, took the initiative and phoned Ernesto in WA. Ruby told him that Ileen, was “pining for him” in

Melbourne, and she “begged” him to return - and he did just that (P. Macpherson, 2014).

Ernesto bore the impediment of a prior marriage. He married an Austrian woman, Lydia Hillbrand, in Milan in February 1923. It was a brief and childless marriage that was over before the year was out, but a divorce was never agreed (Paull, 2014).

Ernesto recalled: “the idea arose of starting a B.D farm with Ileen in Dandenong. My meetings with the Macpherson family ... Then the farm on the highway was bought. I started working there living in a tent ... On the 14 March 1935 Ileen came to live on the farm. Clearing the wilderness paddock ... The next 10 acres near the creek were bought and later ... 19 acres ... the cottage ... The unhappy struggling for making a B.D. farm” (Genoni, c.1955, pp.23-24). Ileen and Ernesto’s Demeter Farm operated for two decades (1934-1954) (Paull, 2017a). Ernesto and Ileen were both members of the Rudolf Steiner’s *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners* which was headquartered in Dornach, Switzerland.

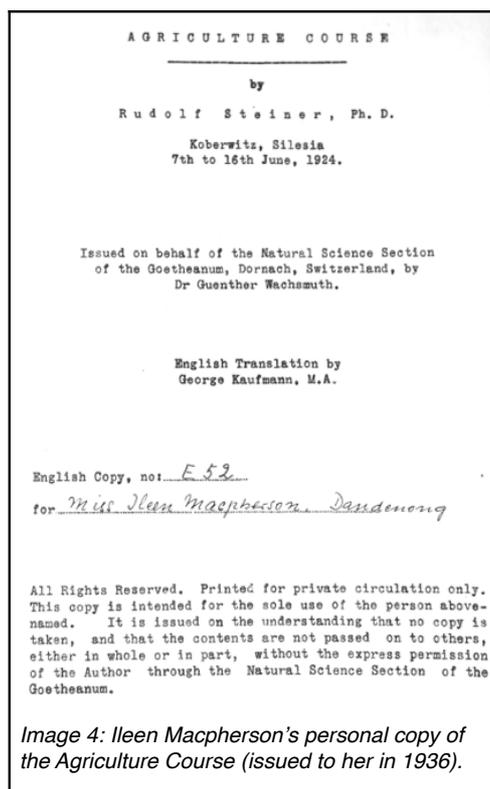
Ernesto recalled: “I am planning to go to Europe, but Ileen gets sick and is sent to the hospital in Brighton. Eventually she is returning home. Again in 1938 I am planning to go to Europe with the understanding that Ileen should follow ... Met with Lydia [in London] ... further attempt to get a divorce, but unsuccessful” (Genoni, c.1955).

“Ileen carried on the milking by herself. But her legs began to give away ... Mrs Macpherson brought for me the block in Namur St ... Ileen is sent to hospital again but for a short time. Then she comes home ... But gradually her legs are getting worse. She has to be taken to hospital but it was too late, she couldn’t walk anymore” (Genoni, c.1955). Demeter Farm was sold.

At Namur Street, a modest white-painted weatherboard house was built (c.1952), with Ileen’s special needs in mind, and sparsely furnished. Ernesto cared for Ileen, and managed a productive vegetable patch and a cow on their new plot. The land was about an acre and extends from Namur Street through to Marna Court. Ileen and Ernesto lived out their remaining years at Namur Street.

## Legacy

*Edith Macpherson Park* is a living legacy to an Australian pioneer of organic agriculture. There was no trace of signage when the author first visited this park. The recollection of long-time neighbours was that signage had been absent for a decade or several. After some prompting, the Council has installed new professional signage in 2018



which is most welcome. The park was gazetted as 'Edith Macpherson Park' (Sandy, 2018). This gives it status and protection as a 'park'.

Ileen Macpherson treasured her collection of Rudolf Steiner books. Her books were housed in a fine glass-fronted bookcase. Her home was otherwise spartan and lacking in fine furniture and comforts. Some of these books went to Victoria's Anthroposophical group, the Michael Group and can now be discovered in the library at Warranwood, Victoria. In life, Ileen was a frequent financial benefactor of the Michael Group.

A portrait of Ileen by her partner, Ernesto Genoni has survived (Image 3). Ileen's *Agriculture Course*, issued in typescript to her as an early member of Rudolf Steiner's *Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners* (ECAFG), has also survived (Image 4). Ileen joined ECAFG 1936 before the terms 'biodynamic' and 'organic' farming had been coined. Both her portrait and her *Agriculture Course* are in private hands.

*Edith Macpherson Park* is Ileen's enduring legacy. There were no children, she left no diaries, no letters. Ileen did leave a considerable bequest to the Anthroposophy Society in Dornach, Switzerland. Those funds were redirected, by her executor and niece, Peggy Macpherson, into the *Ileen Macpherson Trust* for use in Australia. By now, those funds have been whittled down to very little by trustees who it appears have concerned themselves with spending rather than investing.

### **Management Plan**

Four management considerations for the future management of *Edith Macpherson Park* are recommended:

Firstly, an imperative is to correct the name of the park from 'Edith Macpherson Park' to 'Ileen Macpherson Park'. The Park ought to bear the name which the donor bore all of her life - rather than a name by which she was never known, albeit that 'Edith Ileen Macpherson' appears on her birth certificate, death certificate, and her will. This simple name rectification would properly honour the life and generosity of the donor. The name correction would need to be accepted by the Office of Geographic Names.

Secondly, an organic and/or biodynamic management regime for the Park would be appropriate. Ileen Macpherson was a pioneer of organic and biodynamic farming in Victoria and Australia. She was a member of the world's first organic farming organisation (ECAFG). Ileen's vision of management without the use of toxic chemicals has been validated anew, for example, in the recent case of Monsanto being ordered to pay \$290 million to a groundsman who used the common weedkiller Roundup (i.e. glyphosate) and developed cancer (ABC News, 2018). This case should be a wake up call, to all Councils, that public parks ought to be managed on organic principles without the use of toxic chemicals and carcinogens (Lucadou-Wells, 2020). Ileen's park would be an excellent place to begin the transition to organic management practices, and it would create bragging rights for the Council.

Thirdly, reintroducing some edibility into the Park would be appropriate. Ernesto Genoni transformed the space into a food producing plot. The movement for edible public spaces is gaining momentum worldwide, for example Incredible Edible Todmorden in the UK (Paull, 2013). Some edibility would honour the past usage, and capture the

zeitgeist of the present time. Several fruit trees that require minimum attention - perhaps lemon and olive trees - could be a start.

Fourthly, an interpretive panel would add interest for visitors and locals, and would honour the donor. Adding a QR code that links to a narrative would be an option entailing minimal expense.

**Address of the Park:** Edith Macpherson Park, 17-19 Namur Street, Noble Park, Victoria, 3174, Australia (through to Marna Court).

### Acknowledgements

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