

# Dalmore Farm: Victoria's first biodynamic farming venture (1933-1934)

Dr John Paull  
University of Tasmania  
j.paull@utas.edu.au

Dalmore Farm (1933-1934) was Victoria's first biodynamic farming venture. A letter, written in Milan, Italy, in Italian in 1934 by Rosa Genoni (1867-1954) and recently recovered in a family archive, enables details of this venture to be finally revealed.

Rosa Genoni wrote to the Arena family, apparently with the view to encourage their migration to Australia. Rosa wrote of her youngest brother, Ernesto Genoni (1885-1975): "Now Ernesto ... is at Dalmore, a farm of my brother Marino (the father of the boy [Alfredo Genoni (1913-1999)] who was sent to us years ago from Australia and we sent him to Dornach where he stayed for two years, and two more to the school at Stuttgart) and in part by my brother Angelo, who asked Ernesto to go and organise the farm biologically" (R. Genoni, 1934, p.1). Note that the term 'biodynamic' was unknown to Rudolf Steiner (1865-1925) and was used from 1938 onwards (Paull, 2011).

Rosa related that: "Dalmore is a small centre of farmers. It is 40 kilometres from Melbourne. Due to the cost and the impossibility for Ernesto to return promptly from the [Anthroposophy] meetings, his brother Angelo expects to buy a small car soon, or, as they say there, a half truck [ute], which can also be used to transport small foodstuffs, so that going to Melbourne will be easy. In Dalmore there is a cinema, this would mean that there are enough people. I don't know for schools, if there are only the lower classes or not" (R. Genoni, 1934, p.1).

"Ernesto had a small wooden house built there for his use. It has only two rooms but it must be fairly comfortable, as Ernesto invited [Alfred] Meebold [1863-1952] to lodge with him for his



**Image 1. Dalmore Farm, c.1934. Ernesto Genoni (centre), Matilda Genoni (left), May Raymond (right).**

future visit for the Melbourne group” (R. Genoni, 1934, pp.1-2). It seems most likely that in Rosa’s letter to the Arena family she is passing on information that Ernesto, or another of the family in Australia, had written to her, but such a letter has not been located.

Rosa Genoni encouraged and facilitated the migration of her siblings to Australia. Only she remained in Milan. She never visited Australia. Rosa was a fashion designer, Anthroposophist and peace activist (Paull, 2018). Rosa envisioned Milan as a global centre of fashion to rival Paris. She was the eldest of eighteen Genoni siblings. Excepting only Rosa, all the Genoni siblings, who survived childhood, migrated to Australia, beginning with the eldest son Emilio Genoni (1870-1957) who arrived in Hobart in 1890 (Emilio Genoni, 1907), and culminating with the youngest sibling Ernesto Genoni who arrived in Melbourne in 1926 (Paull, 2014).

Ernesto Genoni had spent 1924 at the Goetheanum under the tutelage of Rudolf Steiner in both art and spiritual science (Paull, 2016). Ernesto recalled: “I continued the study of Anthroposophy for several years and in 1926 I again had the urge to return to Australia. I was then 42 years of age. I came to Melbourne where eventually I met Mrs [Anne] Macky [1887-1964] of the ‘New Conservatorium’ [of music] and together we started a little [Anthroposophy] group in Hope Street, South Yarra. After two or three years it culminated in forming the Michael Group. After many years of study in the Michael Group during which time I started in a small way to work a farm on Dr Steiner’s bio-dynamic methods in association with Fred Genoni” (Ernesto Genoni, c.1970, p.8).

Ernesto was the first Australian to join Rudolf Steiner’s Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (in 1928) (Paull, 2013). Ernesto subsequently embarked on an extensive study tour of Experimental Circle farms in Europe, visiting the leading practitioners of biodynamics: “In 1930 I went to Dornach again to become acquainted with the BD farming. [Ehrenfried] Pfeiffer ... [Erika] Riese ... Count Lerchenfeld ... [Ernst] Stegemann at Marienhöhe ... [Erhard] Bartsch near Berlin, [Max] Schwarz near Bremen ... London [Carl] Mirbt ... Pfeiffer farm at Rosendahl [Netherlands]. Stuttgart to take Fred back home. He goes for some time at that place [Auggen, Baden, Germany] where [Ernst] Jacoby was farming” (Ernesto Genoni, c.1955, pp. 21-22, Ernesto writes cryptically, the ellipses in the quote are his; data in square brackets are added by the present author).



**Image 2. Ernesto Genoni, self portrait, c.late 1930s.**

Rosa continued her account of Dalmore Farm: “The farm is only 80 acres. For

half of these Ernesto wanted to rest the soil in order to heal it of harmful herbs, with the methods indicated by Dr Steiner. Meanwhile he has taken for these 40 acres dairy cows that he has borrowed to make them graze and take their milk, but when the land has to be put back into cultivation, it will need more labour. For now, Ernesto has taken the farm in half with his nephew Fredi who has become a robust and hard-working young man who does the work of the land” (R. Genoni, 1934, p.2).

“Ernesto directs the works, tends to the cattle and the milking and making the butter, and he does the cooking for the two of them ... he goes to the [Anthroposophy] meetings in Melbourne it seems now twice a week” (R. Genoni, 1934, p.2).

“From time to time I receive a new enquiry from the farm, for the instructions of Doctor Steiner. A biological farm must have horses, cows, chickens etc, but also piglets, because each of them gives its own contribution, and the animals take advantage of the buttermilk left after making the butter instead of throwing it away” (R. Genoni, 1934, p.2).

”Ernesto ... a former artist who goes to the cattle market to buy and bargain or sell a cow or piglets!! ... in order to make the farm active and in the shortest time to implement it according to the teachings of Mr [Ernst] Stegemann where he worked in Germany for several months ... four years are needed to organise and activate a biological farm” (R. Genoni, 1934, p.2).

Rosa advised her correspondents: “In the case of migrating [to Australia], Arena and family could at first install themselves at Dalmore ... Arena could soon be used for both the biodynamic work and for collaborating in the meetings of the Melbourne Group, despite Mr [Alfred] Meebold’s having found Anthroposophy is a difficult job to do in cities like Melbourne, even if Ernesto seems to have awakened a real interest in the members and that the group gets involved” (R. Genoni, 1934, p.3).

The fate of the Dalmore Farm was settled by the floods of 1934 which extinguished the hopes for this first BD venture in Victoria. The December 1934 flood was the “largest flood on record (since 1863)” (WGCMA, 2016, p.10). It was a 1 in 200 year flood (0.5% AEP, annual exceedance probability). It was unlucky timing for the nascent biodynamic Dalmore Farm, since such a flood had not been seen before nor since.



**Image 3. Alfredo (Fred) Genoni, portrait by Ernesto Genoni, c.1920s.**

The warning signs of flood risk were, however, present from the outset of the enterprise. The Gippsland Times carried an account titled “In a Gippsland Flood” (An Old Gippslander, 1932). Newspapers reported flood events in June 1933 (Argus, 1933), August 1933 (Gippsland Times, 1933b) and December 1933 (Gippsland Times, 1933a). “Man is repairing the wreckage which Nature in her riotous gesture made of all his preparations to withstand her tempestuous moods ... it is too early to obtain an estimate of the damage caused by Monday night’s flood ... All the flood water had disappeared by Wednesday leaving a trail of havoc and desolation” (Gippsland Times, 1933a, p.6). The local newspaper reported: “the necessity of having a suitable boat available for rescue work during a flood ... that floods periodically occurred and a boat might be the means of saving lives” (Gippsland Times, 1934, p.7).

Dalmore (Da) soil geology is described as “recent lacustrine (lake or swamp) deposits” with the landform described as “lacustrine plain”, along with the warning that “Excessive surface water is often a problem during the wetter months” (Agriculture Victoria, 2019). Another report of the area states that: “Numerous small and medium-size towns have been established in the former swamp. The largest is Koo Wee Rup. Smaller places include ... Dalmore ... Potato growing has diversified into other vegetables as the fringe of Melbourne has come closer. By the 1930s Koo Wee Rup and Dalmore were major asparagus growing areas, and by the early 2000s the former swamp produced 95% of Australia’s asparagus” (Spearitt & Stell, 2015).

In the census of 2016, Dalmore is reported as having a population of 163, with a median age of 48 years (compared to 37 years for the state of Victoria). The “most common ancestries” were Australian (28%), English (27%) and Italian (15%). After ‘Australia’, ‘Italy’ was the most common country of birth of father (11%) and mother (10%). Italian (8%) was the top response for language spoken (other than English). Vegetable Growing (23%) was the top Industry of employment (ABS, 2018).



**Image 4. Ernesto Genoni’s newly built two room home at Dalmore Farm, c.1933.**

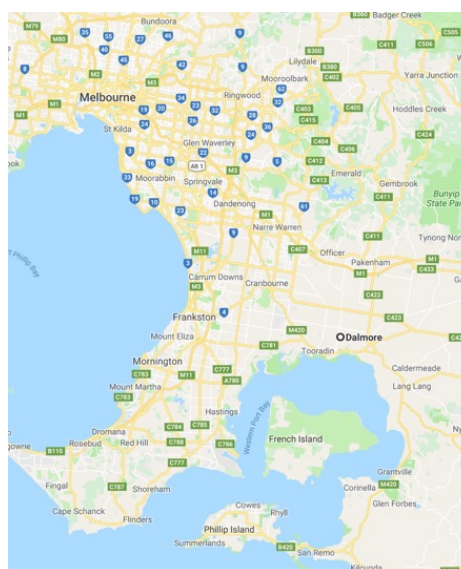
In one account, Ernesto summed up the Dalmore Farm venture succinctly: “Angelo from Melbourne offered me the Dalmore farm to manage. We built the little house. Fred associated with me, but for a short time. Started to go again to the Anthroposophy meetings in Collins Str. There is where I first met Ileen and Mrs R[uby] Macpherson. The letter from Ileen and our first meeting in Dandenong and up at the corner of Heatherton Rd & Chandler Rd. Our meetings became more frequent. The flood destroyed everything at the farm. Then the idea rose of starting a BD farm with Ileen in Dandenong. My meetings with the Macpherson family in Punt Rd. Then the farm was bought” (Ernesto Genoni, c.1955, pp.22-23).

In another account of Dalmore Farm, Ernesto recalled that: “Owing to two consecutive severe floods the attempt had to be abandoned. At the same time Miss Ileen Macpherson asked me if I would make another attempt at biodynamic farming on a block of land not far from Melbourne” (Ernesto Genoni, c.1970, p.9).

Ileen Macpherson and Ernesto Genoni subsequently established their biodynamic Demeter Farm (1934-1954) at Dandenong (Paull, 2017a, 2017b) and Fred Genoni went on to farm in his own right at Drouin, Victoria.

### Acknowledgements

This account is possible due to the kind assistance of many, including: Raffaella Podreider, Helen Genoni, Annita Sharpe, Len and Margaret Genoni, Pam Martin, Marg Garner, Peggy Macpherson, Uwe Werner, Peter Braithwaite, and Johannes Nilo of the Archives of the Goetheanum (Dokumentation am Goetheanum Bibliothek Kunstsammlung Archiv), Dornach. Rosa’s Dalmore Farm letter is written in Italian and the aid of translate.google.com and deepl.com are acknowledged for rendering the text into English. Some name spellings in original sources have been corrected for the present account.



**Image 5. Map showing Dalmore relative to Melbourne, Victoria.**

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