Thesis Title: an exegetical journey to the manuscript farmwoman

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Abstract

This thesis accompanies and is an exegesis of the poetry manuscript farmwoman, poetry that might be described as new writing. It describes the physical, intellectual and imaginative journey I have undertaken towards the creative work.

In following my journey, I examine the role that imagination plays in my poetry, curious as to whether or not poetry must be autobiographical. I observe what my contemporaries are writing about women in the bush, as well as the bush poetry being written by women living on the land.

Following an explicit insight into my own poetic development, I detail the results of my research into the contemporary movement of political activism by Australian women in agriculture. The end of this particular journey is the completion of the manuscript farmwoman.
This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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Date: 30.5.03

I acknowledge with thanks the University-funded mentorship of Canberra poet Geoff Page in the preparation of the manuscript farmwoman which accompanies this thesis.

MLA Style has been used for this essay, other than where citations would interrupt the flow of the hybrid genre.
an exegetical journey to the manuscript *farmwoman*

by way of introduction

I eat a lonely cloud

fishing the landscape for words

        distilling     driving     thinking

lonely thinking as my Troopie lumbers

sluggish across the country

as my body lumbers through the world

and my mind’s slow thoughts weave and duck

* * * * *

my thoughts weave and duck

        ideas jumble and jostle almost as

the trees transform with the changing soil

        from saltbush to mallee

mallee to gidgee     gidgee to paperbark

back to saltbush     balls of skeleton bluebush
tossing like my thoughts
tossing in the wind that blows
blows across the plains I have to cross
to get anywhere in this country from Adelaide

journeying roads that crisscross the continent
like the thoughts jostling in my mind
all my creativity interconnected
a whole and yet many parts
farmwoman to feminism poetry to language
working the land to crossing the country
all points from Adelaide

Adelaide a long journey to everywhere
Pinnaroo to Ouyen Alice Springs to Boulia
Myrtleford to Mallacoota Yass to Bundanoon
Tambourine Mountain to Border Ranges
Purrnulu to Nitmiluk and beyond into the *tjukurpa*
into the landscape into country
searching out the people who inhabit it

* * * * *
traveling alone across Australia
picking poems from the curve of a hill
evening light casts shadows long and low
bringing out the kangaroos and wallabies
to graze the roadsides green from runoff

**shadowlines**

the woman pauses
as the shadow lines elongate
across the winter-ravaged paddock
the sun a pale battery hen’s egg
nudging the horizon
backlighting the clump of scribbly gums
pasted as an afterthought
onto the arid landscape

she pauses
hand to her eyes
as she squints to catch
the last drops of daylight
then she flings her outback voice
to the shearing sheds to the rocky
backdrop to the homestead
calling her lightfoot children to their tea

* * * * *
time to camp before I catch some roadkill

my stomach recoils

find a wide barely-flowing river to camp by

there are not many Murray or Murrumbidgee

the Darling after rain

river catchments sieving Central Australia

the water thick the colour of latte

mud and salt in heavy suspension in no hurry to reach the sea

I’m in no hurry

conferences and gatherings far removed

from my lazy travels

* * * * *

academics have conferences scientists have symposia

farmwomen gather they’re not an audience

or a congregation not participants nor delegates

not spectators they gather at Gatherings

specifically for rural women

having a break from their menfolk who farm

these are women who farm women in agriculture

farmwomen are gathering
* * * * *

an academic conference

“Setting the Agenda for Rural Women - Research Directions” in Wagga Wagga

commonly known as wogga

is not a gathering of farmwomen

though a few have made it here mostly

the tertiary-educated at home on this

windy university campus named after

Charles Sturt yet another nineteenth century explorer

who ‘opened up’ this country and paved the way

for the agriculture which is under discussion

* * * * *

the conference is about rural women having slipped

off the agenda of governments

women only got onto the agenda at the end

of the twentieth century by dint of activism

by ordinary farmwomen and already

not ten years later
acknowledgement is waning

where to now?

the papers are erudite and pertinent

the workshops lively and topical

I give one myself

the farmwomen present might ask themselves

what's in it for us?

but researchers come away invigorated

focusing on 'positive action for women'

hurrying back to their various universities

and government departments and their

theoretical positions and grants

****

scientific symposia are funded

by multinational companies advocating

GM crops to use monopoly pesticides

or herbicides or by farmers’ federations

with an axe to grind or by bureaucracies

wanting to charge for the water

which falls on the farm from the sky

men's business
farmwomen are not welcome
but their discussions on internet forums
show a good grasp
of all the issues scientific social
and political if some of these women
were welcomed into symposia
farmers might have more say

* * * * *

Women on Farms Gatherings (WOFG)
Beechworth in winter Kyneton
in winter Yarram in winter usually winter
for the slack period with no harvest
usually cold shivering in student accommodation
faint whiff of old socks and banana skins
communal bathrooms community catering

why go?
writing poems about women
at the moment it’s women who live on farms
other times it’s women I love
women who interest me not many men
in my poems only when they impact on
women’s lives and their presence
is unavoidable for the meaning the direction drive

* * * * *

farmwomen don’t get time off
no annual leave like city women often
they work weekends as well except
for fundraising sausage sizzles
and footy matches endless footy
statewide Gatherings get them all together
leave the men just once a year
two whole days off farm for fun and learning
sharing some of their hopes and terrors
succession planning new hi tech
domestic violence youth suicide and
lack of leadership lack of education
serious laughter but thinking shared
is hurting halved

* * * * *
and stories

these women tell good yarns

ode to cows

cows - they’re women you know
they’ve got a gentle nature
generous to a fault
with milk / butter cream cheese
a violent kick
only when mistreated
indians and chiefs
like any ordered society
cogitative cudding implies
Cartesian selfhood
the tip of the tail
a feminine ringlet
they’re women you know

old (farmers) wives’ tales

i/
tall elegant and soignée in grey
her silver hair looped behind mother-of-pearl
filigree brooch at her silk scarf
squatocracy rounding her words
she tips back her head her mouth pursed
in consideration and says

*I may have stopped tugging tits
but I'm not too old to have
something to offer to my industry*

ii/

here is another
her voice all gravelly
from shouting across paddocks
curly hair crimped by never-ending sun
soft handspun jumper with pearls
at her neck and sensible shoes
on feet that have spent decades
in boots she edges forward
laughingly tells me

*a sheep will spend a lifetime
working out different ways to die!*

iii/

thirty-something short-haired
neat and slim and trim as any
woman addicted to the gym
country-check shirt tight jeans
high-heeled boots and magenta lips
her hands on her hips she says

*he said to me ‘are you just a farmer’s wife
or do you work’*
so I travel

I set up camp
under a river red gum
clear away long dry leaves and strips
of curling bark apologizing to the bugs
I don’t like sleeping on lumps

my arms don’t reach even a quarter way
round the trunk of this big gum
its branches too high I can hear
the white-browed honeyeater but see
only a buffgreen flitting persistent
call of the young demanding food
I put my own dinner to cook
while I quickly erect my tent
words roiling in my brain
can’t wait to eat must get to my laptop

five pelicans float by in the dusk
dancing a swanlike pavane
curtseying their fleshy bills first one then the second
the third then the fourth fifth first
rhythmic sifting of the still water
sound only of water dripping as they raise
their full bills to stretch and eat
I type and eat  eat and type
to the rhythm of their fishing
ready words dripping in cadence
I love the bush

I used to farm

farm language is companionably familiar
I still drive looking over my right shoulder
eyeing off my neighbours’ crops
a habitual needing to know
farm knowledge quite different from academic
bone deep knowing of changing seasons

how is it different?

farmwomen know as much about the land
as their men but are often unrecognized
know more about the world
than their men or see it differently
see it differently from researchers too
who might want to homogenise
homogenise? isn’t that milk?

one of the delightful things about homo sapiens is our difference not one of us quite like the next except maybe identical twins / fraternal often determined to prove their absolute unlikeness /

so when we label gay or Indigenous or farmer Muslim or teenager it’s like we see them all as one thing devoid of personality and interest like bananas or milk pasteurized and homogenized

farmwomen are prickly about homogeneity

********

farmwomen are prickly about feminism about the intellectualizing of issues which impact on them profoundly

I wrote a paper about farmwomen and the ‘f’ word feminism but it could just as well be fuck or funding or family farm one young woman heard the paper
and wept
through her tears she changed

I am a farmer!

women can be farmers too

* * * * *

I make this journey
to hear the voices of Australian

women on farms

farmwomen

my own contribution
to insert farmwomen

into contemporary Ozlit
part one: can the poet lie?

the role of (my) imagination in poetry

"—my poetry had nothing to do with tricking the reader— the tricks were made by
the reader him/herself. They did all the believing or non believing. They'd see what
they wanted to see."

John Kinsella, *Auto*, Western Australia and Cambridge, UK:

When I read out loud a poem about courage in the face of rural suicide and a
member of the audience comforts me for what she imagines is my
widowhood; or when I read a poem about cancer and am pitied for losing a
breast; or about a disabled child, or a lost lover or dreams or savings or
face...

Do I correct the misapprehension there and then? No, my husband did
not kick out the haybale no, I still have both my breasts no no etc.
Or do I accept it as a compliment that my imagination has enabled the
audience or reader to believe in the people in my poems?

What if I’m writing in the voice of someone really familiar, but not me; what
if I become the widow or the cancer victim or the farmwoman in my
imagination?

In the following poem “Pastorale”, the first line is a direct quote overheard at
a gathering of farmwomen. Like Elizabeth Jolley, and indeed, many many
writers, I eavesdrop quite shamelessly. I store away little vignettes and
storylines, and then let my pen create someone, somewhere, doing
something. It’s not lies exactly but it’s not truth either. It’s how it comes
out of my head. This, surely, is the nature of fiction; the nature of the
imagination.

**Pastorale**

*Thank goodness for breasts!*

She lays down the fencing pliers
out of reach of the toddler
hoiks up her shirt and feeds
her red-faced babe in the
sudden sucking silence
she contemplates the satisfactory gleam
of a new sheep fence.

Her new son’s soft wisps
of red-tinged hair lift gently
in the warm October breeze
eyes closed / his pleasure
joining hers / her carrot-topped
daughter at her feet
deeply immersed in a tumbling tower
of pebbles and mud.  12

I had to bottle-feed my babies, they were all bald when new-born and heavy
fencing pliers skun my knuckles and left me close to tears long before a
fence was up. This woman is not me!

Am I stealing the voices of Australian farmwomen and using them for my
own satisfaction? Well, I am giving them a voice which is not theirs
(except for direct quotations), because I am the poet and I am writing the
poetry. But given that the farmwomen in my poems are all created in my
head, I can only be appropriating the voices of imaginary women, not real
live everyday ordinary farmwomen.
Listen. I’m telling you stories.

aqua vita

On a shuddering indrawn breath
the old pump down by the dam
wheezes into action

As the muddy water is sucked
up the trembling metal pipe
up the steep bank of the dam
up and over the hillside
out through the standing army
of irrigation sprinklers

forcing water into roots
  green into leaves
  juicy flesh into berries
  cash into the bank

I give the pump
  a proprietorial pat
  on its heaving sides
  dip my fingers in the dam
  and flick a blessing

Walk away whistling

I have been a farmwoman. I have done some of the things that occupy the
women in my poems. I am not any of the women in my poems. Now I just
listen.
I'm not writing poems about farmwomen for my own enjoyment, although the work does give me pleasure; I'm writing them to bring something that the city reader or audience doesn't regularly think about, right up under their noses.

I want you to listen. I'm telling you stories.

I'm out of here,
the son sighs as the father's voice
rants on and up,
familiar dystopic sour temper.

Where's that bloody boy? fleeing,
wild hair, cringing pale eyes,
seeking a place of quietness,
freedom from shouting.

Get him to bring me that spanner!
I sent him for it bloody hours ago.
Sitting with his back to a gum tree
up the paddock, eyes tight shut, hunted.

The farmer's wife buffers for the son,
automatically calming
as she fetches the spanner, yet again
steers away the angry man.
The boy's heart hurts at the
beauty of the bush, the deep spicy
breath of eucalypt, lichen underfoot,
distant haze of hills,

the mud of the dam between his toes
when yabbying, the excitement
of rabbit shooting, insistent
tug of calf's tongue at his fingers,

wide-eyed fear for the favourite cat
as it grapples with a red-bellied black;
above all, sitting on this gentle hillside, grass
in mouth, planning life on the farm.

As boyhood moves into adolescence
he recognises their incompatibility,
angry farmer and dreamy son,
held only by thread of landlove.

Idles there beneath his tree,
willing his father to an apoplectic end,
yearning for the inheritance
he knows he must leave. 14

My poetry is not always about women, and not always about farms, but
frequently so. But young people on farms are nearly as invisible as women,
both in literature and in public life, unless they are developing as sporting
heroes, or daredevil buckjumpers, or tall poppies of some kind. “Farmer” equals grown man in the public eye, and the labour of women and children goes unremarked. But I am no longer young, so again the stories about youths in my poetry come from my imagination, as well as being informed by my own experiences as farm mother, and listening to women who are still mothering and still farming. This is not a real young man who is out of here, but a distillation of farm family life.

This does not make poetry “lies” if it is not autobiographical. My imagination enriches my poetry. Yes, I do take the voices of farmwomen; and no, I don’t take their voices: this paradox is quirky, stimulating and enriching.

Women in rural Australia are going to Landcare in the way they used to go to the Country Women’s Association (CWA) or Red Cross, and they are getting on to boards and running meetings and I want to tell stories to bring these achievements into the public domain. So my poems become brag files for women I’ve dreamt up, and at the same time they show off the feats of farmwomen who are achieving great heights.

Poetry can use stories from the imagination to wonderful effect, and these stories do not, by definition, need to be autobiographical, although of course they can be. They need to be believable.
Helen Garner, in her latest book *the feel of steel*, writes of a conversation with Western Australian writer Tim Winton about the Bible, where Tim says ‘How it works for me is that the stories work on me. That they seem true as stories and that I believe them ... Probably a matter of imagination, for what else is belief mostly built on.’

My poems, by and large, take the hardship of farm life head-on, without losing their humour. Country people have a great facility to laugh at themselves and their predicaments, but in a sense these are ‘in-house’ jokes and are not meant to offer city people the opportunity to mock. This poem of mine always produces roars of laughter:

**bulling**

The cow throws a startled groan  
over her shoulderblade  
The AI man reaches the metal probe  
far into her fiery insides  
rubbergloved hand playing  
across her twitching flank  
to find exactly the right spot  
   Frozen semen is shot  
Sex is over for another season  
   
I think to myself
How is his sex life this AI man?
I can't quite look him in the eye
as I write the cheque
The cow races down the paddock
bellowing for the existential bull
The AI man and I continue
our ordinary lives\(^6\)

Being the butt of derogatory 'cocky farmer', 'country bumpkin' jokes is uncomfortable for rural Australians, and widens the rural / urban divide. But gentle informed humour can soften the impact of drought and flooding, hard work for small return; nothing can ease the pain of having to give up farming after generations on the same farm, or the death of a child in a farm accident.

Farmwomen writing about themselves

My poetry of the everyday (and sometimes quite shocking) experiences of ordinary women on farms contrasts dramatically with the poetry that women in the bush are writing for themselves and each other; poetry which is rhyming and metred, in the true tradition of the ballad and which is blokey and tells yarns and raises a laugh; poetry which covers up the hardship with flippancy and self-deprecation, and which feeds into all of the myths of the
bush that city audiences tend to find tedious. Here is an example by Jan Lewis, a bush poet who lives in North East Victoria:

A Rural Woman and Her Mates

A rural woman and her mates should need no introduction but many myths about her could do with reconstruction. They don't all lean on rusty gates, they're as diverse as can be from farms all around the country or a house in town like me. Some are employed by bosses, or toil on family lands. Most volunteer their time as well with dedicated hands. Hands that do a hundred tasks without waiting to be trained, keeping their communities from collapsing with the strain. Her mates could be male or female, middle-aged or young-at-heart: she works best with their encouragement and each one plays a part. Although they're in a situation where many have no choice there is spirit and there's strength behind the rural woman's voice.  

Here is a ballad by South Australian songwriter Jeanette Wormald:

Mallee Bride

She came as a bride to the Mallee
Her dreams stretching far as a mile
Her newly wed husband beside her
They'd conquer all with their love and a smile
Mallee bride, Mallee bride
You can take anything in your stride
All the dreams and the doubts
Good years and droughts
Mallee bride, Mallee bride

They told her, life could be tough there
Crops didn’t always grow green
Wheat could wither and sheep die of thirst
The land and its promises obscene

There came to the land a recession
Rain didn’t fall down til June
Money got tighter, wool prices fell
But she refused to give in to all the gloom…

The years have passed, hard times are behind her
Golden hair is showing signs of grey
Son and daughters ready to take over
She’ll leave the farm, let them go their way

Mallee bride, Mallee bride  etc. 18
I can’t write bush poetry. The ballad is not my genre. Rhyme and meter
don’t produce that excitement, that buzz I get from tautly constructed,
punchy political free verse. Neither do I wish to gloss over the hard life nor
diminish the exuberant joy of landlove. But I acknowledge the pleasure
bush poetry gives to bush audiences. I’m sure there are many occasions
when they are in dire need of the safety valve of laughter, given to them by
bush yarns and ballads.

The manuscript farmwoman is the story of a woman, Molly, who has
lived all her life on farms in North East Victoria, and who is silent. The
poems are in the first person, so this silent woman is articulate only in the
text. Her story is entirely of my own invention but her farm setting is the
product of a combination of my own experience, my conversations with
contemporary women on farms, and also my imagination.

It is always my hope that the people I write about come alive on the page
and for the listener. If the audience believes in my farmwoman Molly,
perhaps for the first time they will experience life on the farm as it really is,
in its everyday ordinary extraordinariness.
part two: other poets on the journey

where are the farmwomen?

the search for farmwomen

in contemporary Australian poetry

arduous — an almost fruitless search

* * * * *

I have looked at the work of ten of the contemporary Australian poets most likely to be writing about farmwomen, because of the context of their poetry.

Going first to our nearly poet laureate, country boy poet, the ‘green man’ Les A Murray,20 I meander through forty years of vigorous and fresh language, much of it about rural Australia. Says Caribbean Nobel poet Derek Walcott in cover blurb mode:

there is no poetry in the English language now so rooted in its sacredness, so broad-leaved in its pleasures and yet so intimate and conversational 21
Murray gives us the paddocks of his childhood and country people reach-out-and-touchable:

Abandoned fruit trees, moss-tufted, spotted with dim lichen paints; the fruit trees of the Grandmothers, they stand along the creekbanks, in the old home paddocks, where the houses were, they are reached through bramble-grown front gates, they creak at dawn behind burnt skillions...
The trees are split and rotten-elbowed; they bear the old-fashioned summer fruits, the annual bygones: china pear, quince, persimmon...

What Murray does not give us, is women: no women.

Children, yes; grandmothers only to locate in time and space.

Amid all the hot drowsy beauty of the Australian rural landscape, there are shadows only of women in the mind of widowers. In a poem which catches the essence of Murray’s love of country, “Towards the Imminent Days”, an invisible woman (his Aunt?) serves “boiled things with butter”. The only females Murray gives his readers are cows:

Her Normandy bones
the nap of her Charolais colour
the ticks on her elder are such muscatels of good blood.
If I envy her one thing
it is her ease with this epoch.

A wagtail switching left-right, left-right on her rump. 25

and from the same suite of poems, "Walking to the Cattle Place:

Maudie Maudie
Shit-in-the-bail
Quince Quince
Blossom Daisy
shy Abigail shy Abigail
Primavera Primavera
Strawberry Strawberry
done with a two-stroke udd-
Horace Horace
dear
dear
Kaylen Kaylen little flies
Calico Calico please
Chloreen Chloreen spare Ananalia

and so on for fifty or more cows’ names, exquisitely carefully structured. 26

In “Farmer at Fifty” 27 the farmer sits with his dog looking at ‘his’ farm,
over ‘his’ paddocks and Murray peoples this landscape with cattle. The
woman who hung out the nappies (‘daily bunting on the line’), fed the dog /
farmer / children / and generally was an integral part of the farm, this woman
is not in Murray’s thoughts, and therefore unlikely to be in the mind of the
reader. And in Subhuman Redneck Poems, 28 the poetry collection for
which Murray won the T S Eliot prize, Britain’s premier poetry award, the
“toddler and wives are out beside the fence crying” in “The Rollover,”
such as their lack of involvement in the business of the farm. Australia’s
most renowned poet, self-styled boy from the bush, does nothing to raise the
profile of Australian farmwomen.

Robert Adamson is an Australian poet most associated with landscape, but
it is a landscape of ‘his’ river, the Hawkesbury, and although he evidently
enjoys the company of women, they only people his poetic language on the
outer reaches, certainly not as a working part of the world of fishermen, or as
the ‘we’ on some intellectual, romantic or fishing journey. Adamson’s
‘she’ is as likely to be a nightjar as a woman in the landscape.

Mark O’Connor is a poet of passion for the richness and diversity of the
Australian environment, which would be enough, one would imagine, to put
him offside with farmers, male or female, eternally suspicious of ‘greenies’.
‘She’ for O’Connor, is a giant clam, Tridacna maxima, or an Alpine
grasshopper or the sister of the moon.

I browse hopefully through the poetry of John Kinsella, an Australian poet
who spent at least part of his childhood on a farm in Western Australia. Even
when writing together with a woman, as in *Wheatlands* with Dorothy Hewett, Kinsella doesn't admit women into his poetic world, let alone agricultural women. His “Recalcitrant Daughter” has left the farm, doesn’t grow her own food nor keep animals; the widower’s daughter “glows like the best of crops of a fine year” but has no voice. Kinsella’s farms are for farmers, who are always men:

... dispossessed
the farmer moans — a sudden downpour
shaves his precious topsoil....
Night-seeding, the tractor’s floodlights
are blood-red and ovarian —
nurturing the cloddish soil, & always
the farmer working the wheel, hands
gnarled & frostbitten & large.

Canberra poet Geoff Page has women on his farms, but they are past tense women, such as the tragic made-one-mistake-and paid-for it-forever pastoralist’s wife Sally in *The Scarring*, efficient at wartime farming but ‘spayed’ like a bitch for a momentary lonely lapse. He sings the praises of countrywomen of true ‘grit’:
Grit

*A doxology*

I praise the country women
of my mother’s generation
who bred, brought up and boasted
six Australians each —
the nearest doctor fifty miles
on a road cut off by flood;
the women who by wordless men
were courted away from typewriters
and taught themselves to drive —
I praise their style
in the gravel corners.
I praise the snake they broke in two
and the switch of wire they kept in a cupboard.
I praise what they keep and what they lose —
The long road in to the abattoirs,
the stare which cures
A stockman of shooting swans.
I praise the prints, the wide straw brims
they wore out to the clothes line;
I praise each oily crow that watched them.
I praise the tilting weather —
the dry creeks and the steady floods
and the few good weeks between.

I praise each column in the ledger
they kept up late by mosquito and lamp-light;
the temerity of the banker
reining them in at last — or trying;
the machinations for chequered paddocks
swung on the children's names;
the companies just one step ahead;
the tax clerk, in his way, also.

... I praise also that moment
when they headed off in tears —
the car in a toolshed failing to start,
a bootful of fencewire.
I praise the forty years
when they did not. I praise
each day and evening of their lives —
that hard abundance year by year
mapped in a single word. 35

A paean of praise to country women, and I have included most of this
because it is the one contemporary Australian poem that I could find that
genuinely dwells upon the lives of farmwomen. But where are today's
women? Have they less grit today? Page’s mother is seen on a pre-marital hockey field, sooner than in the paddocks where the farmer, his father says “The eye of the master fattens the cattle” (my emphasis).

I wonder whether farmwomen are more visible in contemporary Australian women’s poetry. But they are even harder to find in women’s poetry, women writing of the everyday, the encounters, the hopes and fears, the romantic idylls or the bitter fruit of unrelationships. Jena Woodhouse briefly remembers her poultry farm childhood but the work of her mother is barely mentioned. Australia’s contemporary poetry scene is an urban scene, with bits of unpeopled bush in between. Lyn Marwood, a dairy farmer herself, situates her farmwoman in the home, being a wife: taking phone messages.

Dorothy Hewett’s rural memories are childhood ones also, and dwell lightly on adult experience. In her introduction to Wheatlands, Hewett remains haunted by the farm landscape of her childhood:

I ask myself now, did I ever really know this country? I saw my father, bleeding, stagger from the blacksmith’s shop to fall unconscious with one eye almost kicked out by a recalcitrant horse. I saw him come home with his waterbag empty from a day toiling in the paddocks in the blazing heat to lie out in the sleepout with a wracking headache. I saw the seams of dirt and marks of toil on his hands. I saw the dead sheep, freshly killed mutton,
hanging on the gallows of the stableyard, the beheaded chooks running in
bleeding circles round and round the woodheap. The dead rabbits were piled
up in furry heaps on the tray of the truck, the shorn sheep were let out into
the pens with their sides scored and bloody from the blades, but this was as
close as I ever came to death, or the sweat and brutality of
labour. 39

Did she not see her mother labouring also? In “Legend of the Green
Country” we have a rare glimpse of Hewett’s mother:

My mother...
Hated the farm, hated the line of wattles
Smudging the creek, kept her hands full of scones
Boiled the copper, washing out sins in creek water,
Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden... 40

In “Once I rode with Clancy... “ Hewett mentions the wives of dour Quaker
men, “women with hooked noses, baking bread, / Breeding, hymning,
sowing, fencing off the stony earth / That salts their bones for thanksgiving
when they’re dead.” 41 These are women who are married to farmers.
Hewett also has women who farm when their men die, though not giving any
sense to the reader that they do so out of any love of the land; simply that
there’s no one else to do the farming with the man gone. “My Aunt Alice...
/ went to feed the pigs each evening;” “Don / died in the iron lung / at forty
leaving Meg / with the farm to run;”  “Jim...coughed his lungs out / on the jarrah verandah / Jess carried on / with the three boys / she’d always liked outside work anyhow.” 42

So indeed, Hewett has women on her childhood farms, but they are not recognisable to today’s farmwomen; too much has changed.

There must be other contemporary women writing literary poetry about farmwomen! Why can’t I find them? Has the bush really gone right out of fashion, or contemporary thinking?

Back then to the male poets, one dead and one very young. Both have escaped the farm. Les Murray called Philip Hodgins a “master of rural writing...no one has bettered his observation of country life or his understanding of rural people.” 43 When writing gritty poetry about his own dying, one can quite appreciate the lack of women in Hodgins’ landscape, except as nurses. But in the farm poems, there’s “Woman with an axe” (about the pleasures of woodchopping, rather than about the woman); Hattie (who is Hodgins’ dog); and a Jillaroo driving home. 44 But Hodgins’ dry Australian idiom issues time and again from the mouth and brain of a rural man.
Brendan Ryan is a young Melbourne poet whose first collection was called Why I am not a farmer. Writing from a boyhood where he would “chase day old calves through driving rain / away from the pit of their mother’s eye, / and with a sledgehammer / draw blood from those underweight and unsaleable.” And where bushfire burnt cows “fall from the bulldozer’s bucket in clumps / ten at a time, sideways, headfirst thudding / into place amongst the flies.” Mum waits “by the fire for the appearance / of Cliff Portwood on the Mike Walsh Show.” Just when I decided Ryan would never mention a farmwoman, I found a very recent poem of his in Island, called “The Paddock with the Big Tree in it,” with a farm girl written out of the poet’s black vision of all things rural:

Like an anchor rattling overboard
she turns from her mother
heaving the morning into the spin dryer
and faces the paddocks.
The smell of mud is nesting in her head
the tractor thundering in the shed
is pulling her around.
She walks like a dancer seasoned by grief
through the cow shit on the driveway.
All sorrows are accepted
as she divides the fence wires
her pilgrim legs splayed between the paddocks
between someone buzzing the bone
and someone licking the spoon,
between the bed she warms with her sisters and the milking a girl should
never do.
She drags her rubber boots through capeweed
stands in drains to watch dirty water rise.
Like an echo she returns
to the trunk of a dead gum tree
rubbed smooth by cow’s necks.
She leans into wood
electrified as prayer.

I feel a need to redress the balance; to shine a light upon the invisibility of
farmwomen in contemporary Australian poetry.
part three: same journey, different road

why write poetry at all?

was it a mid life crisis

a middle class whim

or something to fill my time?

was it a serious career move

a change of scenery

augmentation of previous skills?

was I born to it

writing avidly in the style of Keats   say

or Elizabeth Barrett Browning even

from a bed of pain

from the age of five

from an obvious God-given gift?

none of these

*****
late in life
burnt out
bored with Her Majesty’s Treasury
done with nesting
the farm in ashes burnt out
on Ash Wednesday
one too many clients psychotherapised
I picked up a pen
tried short stories

Zoë Fairbairns
British novelist and visiting Writer in Residence
at Adelaide University in the ‘Nineties
ran a week-long workshop
helping us to capture the essence of time
space and place to be exact to the point
of experiencing the burst of acid flavour
in the mouth from 1950’s fruit Spangles
or the prickle around the knees
from the layers of net petticoat
flouncing up the full circle jive skirt
the stories I wrote were bleak and black

suicide in the bush

unhappy angry children being looked after

by unhappy angry grown ups

death of a hand reared calf

in the arms of an overworked farmer’s wife

an embittered cleric and his embattled wife

stories lifted just above a jeremiad

by black humour

a laughing at self and world

if there was an overall theme

it would have been escape

and the beginnings

of an awareness of feminism
a woman poet
came to the University
Diane Fahey invited interested writers
to eat lunch and think about poetry
sitting in a circle on institution chairs
her delicate myths were dissected
and enjoyed to the rhythmic
mastication of sandwiches and fruit
not needing much encouragement
but getting it anyway we wrote

the pen unasked
was beginning to pare away
to cut to the core of the matter
without losing the cadence
to find the essence of an idea
feminism

*****
A woman of few words and those usually pithy, I was hooked on poetry. I started by thinking: thinking often for days on end, frequently with no output at all. Then sequences would appear out of my head almost fully formed, needing, it seemed at that time, only paring back here and there before being ready to send off. When I look at some of those poems now, I cringe.

This was my first poem published, from a sequence entitled “The Thinker,” in the context of Rodin’s ponderous statue of that name; each poem in the sequence began with the line “I never thought…”

**The mother**

I never thought  
when my first child  
first opened her eyes and I  
looked deep into  
her unformed psyche,  
I never thought  
what it meant to be mother.

I knew  
about nappies and breast-feeding  
and sleepless nights,  
at least, I thought I did:  
there was plenty of time to think  
during pregnancy.
But I never thought
about pubescence
or addiction or intellectual
capacity or value systems
or sons-in-law or even
grandchildren.

When I gazed at this new baby
I never thought of the pain
of being cast in many roles,
of being cast
aside.

This early poem is clearly autobiographical. In that same skinny volume I
had a second poem which was not autobiographical at all; it was a farm
poem, the first farm poem I wrote. “How much courage?” was about a
farmer who hung himself in the hayshed. This was not a good beginning for
him but it was for me.

**How Much Courage?**

He gave no thought
to me and the kids
when he kicked out the hay bale
and hung himself so carelessly
in the shed last winter.
He gave no thought
to us having to do his work
as well as all of ours
to keep this farm running
as he would have liked.

He gave no thought
to how we would make ends meet
any easier without him
than with his years of
experience and strength.

He gave no thought
to teenage sons left hopelessly flailing
without role model
without guidance
without encouragement and pride.

He gave no thought
to two little girls
with no daddy to admire
and pet them but only
an exhausted mother for love.

I can see
how much courage it took
to kick away the hay bale.
If only he'd had the courage
to face the future with us.
That same poem first led me to question the role of imagination in poetry (see part one), when I was commiserated after a public reading on the sad loss of my husband. I confess to blushing in denial.

* * * * *

Nearing the end of the century and with the bit firmly clenched between my teeth to complete a Master of Arts, our Professor of Creative Writing is determined to get us writing novels. His resolve does not work for me. Let loose in the Barr Smith Library I devour Akhmatova and Robert Frost, Carlos Williams and Ashberry, Levertov and Simic and Marge Piercy, Emily Dickinson and Carol Ann Duffy.

Moving into the shelves filled with local Australian poetry I explore Judith Wright and Mary Gilmore — she of the wicked Dobell immortalisation — whose little poem “Never admit the pain” has kept me constant in my personal life:

Never admit the pain
Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
Complaint is cheap.
Cover thy wound, fold down
Its curtained place;
Silence is still a crown
Courage a grace. 51

I move onwards through the collections of Les Murray and Geoff Page and the madly hyperactive John Kinsella. All the while I’m writing fiction and non-fiction and completing a manuscript about the Adelaide Parklands that is more collage than anything else but I still manage to fit some poetry between the covers, such as this poem about the nineteenth century institutional buildings along North Terrace which were built upon Colonel Light’s dream of a sweeping parkland vista down to the river Torrens:

**Monuments to learning**

Squinting sunlight on hewn sandstone,
the eye follows angle to slate tile.
Nineteenth century stonemasons used

scaffolding to build monumental piles
(by legislative decree) to house
homesweet landscape oils framed in gilt,

stuffed kangaroos and whale skeletons,
bird’s eggs, butterflies and native spears,
the daily papers six months old from England.
Now crane-poured concrete back-fills
multi-storied centres of knowledge where
students learn the morphology of stone and slate,

the mathematics of angle and elevation,
architecture for the twenty first century
and the ethics of the bottom line. 

I continue publishing poems in journals and newspapers before graduating
Master of Arts in Creative Writing accompanied to the graduation ceremony
by Tom Shapcott in his doctoral robes resplendent no other word for it.

****

Let loose on an unsuspecting world, we few first graduates fluster various
publishers, both local and interstate, before settling each to find our own
niche. Immediately I return to the farm, a farm long sold, a life reluctantly
relinquished; a well of experience into which I continue to dip my bucket.

Naturally, as a woman poet I write mostly about farmwomen: I’ve been one.
They are almost invisible, in fact and on paper, and I begin to wish to stir the
pot of the urban / rural divide.
I heard about Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) from the Secretary of the Miscellaneous Workers Union in Western Australia, Helen Creed. She had met the then President of AWiA Cathy McGowan at a meeting in Perth, and was impressed by her vision for Australian farmwomen to have a voice in the public world of agropolitics.

Knowing my interest, she rang to tell me; and this from a unionist, rarely comfortable bedfellows with farmers, but this unionist married a farmer.

AWiA are pushing women’s issues, feminist issues — feminism dirtier than middenmuck in rural communities, communities conservative in the extreme, touted in the media and among urban communities as red-necked, xenophobic and deeply suspicious of change. Yet here are women from these very communities, not describing themselves as feminists (far from it) but nevertheless most definitely using a feminist agenda. Farmwomen lobbying in Canberra to raise their visibility in policy-making, wanting to change the culture that has men make decisions which impact on whole communities.

I pricked up my ears.
I joined AWiA, went to their national meetings, listened to their stories and admired their articulate and well-informed online discussions. I had found a grass roots organisation that would feed my own work.

I heard about rural women’s gatherings from PIRSA: in layman’s terms, South Australia’s agricultural department. In 1997 I went to a Rural Women’s Gathering in Kimba — Kimba’s claim to notoriety is that it is situated halfway across the continent. I was bowled over to hear farmwomen stand up and tell their own stories, poignant and from the heart, unembellished. I started recording their stories, first as vignettes and quotes, and then in poetry. These women’s stories are powerful politics, making the invisible seen and heard; but at Kimba, their voices were heard only by fellow women farmers, or women who identified with rural Australia, or the rural press and radio.

* * * * *

Since then I’ve been all over the country listening to hard working women at Gatherings, often their only time away from husband, family and farm for the whole year. Together with these women I’ve gone to workshops on pizza cooking and tole painting; internet networking, succession planning and yes life writing; picture framing and genealogy; massage, belly dancing and
glass blowing and all the while they laugh and they talk and they tell their stories.

They laugh and they weep and they tell their stories.

*****

They’ve got used to me. I never feel out of place. As an ex-farmer I’m welcomed; as a poet I’m exclaimed over but never mocked, not made to feel an outsider or worse still, someone watching them critically. They love my poetry, especially when it’s funny or political and hits the mark. I’m a hit at conference dinners. This is their favourite to date:

**Farmer’s wife**

The cows milked and the chooks shut up
The bread baked and the dishes done
The pickers’ pay packeted and the books up-to-date
The garden watered and fresh flowers in the house
Homework supervised and a square meal eaten
The tractor spares ordered and the vet assisted
at a post-mortem
on a hand-reared calf
a yearling that’s now a dead loss.

No need for Serapax or Mogadon or Valium
No need for Horlicks or Milo or hot milk
The farmer’s wife sleeps every night
the sleep of total exhaustion
She groans with relief
as her body unfolds
onto the mattress and
as he clambers on top of her
like the prize Poll Hereford bull
in the paddock
she is beyond caring.

She is rocked to sleep already thinking
of what tomorrow brings when the pickers arrive
at five.  

I have no desire to write bush poetry. Farmwomen love bush poetry. They have 'pop up poets' at Gatherings — country women like themselves, who write a bit in their spare time, sometimes get published in local papers, self-publish to an adoring, appreciative local audience. Rural women in the audience laugh until tears pour down their cheeks; they don't know where to put themselves, some rush to the loo to prevent accidents.

As I have commented before, I think bush poetry, rhythmic and rhyming, "boy stood on the burning deck" balladic in its cadence, can gloss over the hardship of life on the farm. There's nothing like a good laugh to ease the pain of reality: dirty unrelenting work, ill paid and unappreciated. There's
nothing like a good yarn to share the humour of the good life and the hard
times.

Maybe nobody ever taught country kids that poems don’t have to rhyme, just
sing; don’t have to be angst ridden; don’t have to be about that most private
of issues, love. Maybe the power of Country and Western music is
predominant in the country, the American droning of lurv and the lovelorn;
cowboy hats and spurs more comfortable than their primary school
memories of compulsory performance, daffodils and quinquiremes and the
language of ‘sloans’.

Collections of modern bush poetry — there are not many — feature boys’
yarns, bush tales of horses and pioneers, heroic cattlemen, drunk ringers and
mobs of gun shearers and readily available sheilas with big busts. A
Thousand Campfires, a recent bush poetry collection produced by the
Victorian Royal Agricultural Society, are not equal opportunity
campfires: no place for a woman. There are only twentyfive poems by
twelve women in this book of over four hundred pages, in spite of the fact
that women often win the major prizes at bush ballad competitions. I sent
two poems into the Spirit of the Outback poetry competition in 2000, a
competition that had asked for poems relating to women in the outback.
The judge’s comments came back:
A number of entries were in free verse, but most were traditional rhyming verse, arguably the most difficult form of poetry to write, as it involves tight rhyme and rhythm. 55

Women bush poets self publish, perform where they know they are appreciated and talk to their own. Jan Lewis performed at a Women on Farms Gathering in Beechworth in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains with her “Rural Woman and her Mates” (see above, page 24). The audience begged for more. The ‘pop up poet’ Terry Ackland over in country Western Australia publishes her poetry in rural journals and magazines. Here is an example; it is political in its own way, it is rhyming, and it is guaranteed to raise a laugh with a rural audience; most urban audiences would cringe:

A Wee Complaint

Our cemetery is neat and clean
Where plants and plastics bloom,
Odd trees are dotted ’round the scene
As shade for grief and tomb.

A fun’ral usually takes a while…
From church, slow crawl to grave.
The stand, the ponder. look and nod
Amid dead soul’s enclave.

Now those of you with bladders strong
Or knots you’ve tied so tight,
Can now relax, recall, renew…
Behold, death’s passage rite.

But when you glance around the throng
Take note of little signs...
The bulging eye, the tight-set mouth,
Red face. Weak bladder time.

Some legs are in macramé knots,
While others wriggle toes,
Some hands display white knuckle fear...
All aids to stop the flow.

Look for furtive glances ‘round...
The scanning to the trees...
And will one make it back to town?
One must not think of wees!

I, for one, have used my brain...
(Not bladder strength, take note)
I do not drink for hours before
So I will not get bloate.

Too many times I’ve eyed the trees...
For me they are too small.
One hundred years more growth they’ll need
To shield me from you all!

And when at last I have to leave,
When nature needs to work
I have a marathon to run...
The car’s way back o’ Bourke!

I’ll even volunteer my time...
Just show me all the gears.
I'll push back all that bush nearby...
A Car Park! Toilet! Cheers! 

ACKLAND and I are not writing in the same way nor for the same audience although ACKLAND's motives are as political as mine. Moora Shire in Western Australia has responded to her poem (in verse!) with the promise of a toilet at the cemetery when funds permit.

My poems may be appreciated by farmwomen but it's city audiences I'm out to engage. I have to tread warily: certain urban listeners groan aloud to hear the word country or farm; while others become dewy-eyed with the sentimental country myths of Slim Dusty et al. My farm poems contain no lurv but some sex, no rhyme but some rhythm, no yarns but good stories and plenty to think about:

consider this

Do they ever stop themselves short
these men in suits
seconded from this department and that
secure salary and superannuation
fleet car and a wife
to iron their handkerchiefs
Do they ever stop short and consider
those of us on the Board
dressed in our agri-politic best
the one-Fletcher-Jones-does-all suit
court shoes killing our feet
the polite intelligent expression
hiding our dismay at their ignorance
Do they ever consider
the pre-dawn goodbye kiss
four hour each way drive
in the old Ford station wagon
sky high fuel prices
school run reorganized
breakfast a cardboard two arches
they-didn’t-buy-their-beef-from-us
excuse for a hamburger

When they write policy
that has no impact on themselves
does it occur to them
having gone to the trouble to
get elected to this Board
to inform ourselves of all the issues
economic social and political
having gone to the trouble
to get here at all does it
occur to them we might want some input
might have some bright ideas
have something useful to contribute
other than to our own superannuation fund? 57
part four: farmwomen on the move

trying to understand
I’ve watched Australian farmwomen
for more than a decade now
but still I’m trying to understand
the essence of their love
for farming and the land

* * * * *

“I inherited my farm from my mother, who inherited it from hers,” says Jeanette Long, a thirty-something from the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia. “It’s unusual, but I had no brothers.”

Patrilineage, or the inheritance of land by the eldest son, still drives Australian farming, as it does in Britain, from where many of present day Australian farmers’ ancestors emigrated because they were second sons.
Shortall (1992) argues that patrilineage “powerfully reinforces the belief that male is tantamount to ‘farmer’ and that he has almost automatic right to the land.” And since early settlement, farmers’ wives, sisters and daughters have worked physically on their farms with no prospect of inheritance. Maybe their farmwork has been ignored for a historical reason: the early Colonial Office did not wish to give the impression ‘Back Home’ that women’s labour was essential to settlement, so mention of women’s work on farms was omitted from correspondence with the mother country. Nineteenth century Victorian Parliamentary Papers put it succinctly:

Census would no longer record farm wives as being engaged in agricultural pursuits because that would create the impression elsewhere, that women were in the habit of working in the fields, as they are in some of the older countries of the world, but certainly not in Australia.

Women’s (and children’s) on-farm work is still ignored in the 2002 census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In 1974 in Norway, inheritance laws were changed to allow daughters / sisters who wanted to farm, to inherit by mutual consent before sons / brothers who were not interested. After 1974, the eldest child could inherit, irrespective of gender. In 1987 the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture ran an awareness campaign to encourage girls to use this right of
succession, at the same time instructing farmers' organisations to have at least 40% women on their boards. Maybe it was this tentative step in Europe to move beyond patrilineal inheritance that stimulated the start of the women in agriculture movement in western countries in the 1990s. Whether it was this, or better opportunities for the education of women and girls in the seventies and eighties, or the rise of neo-liberalism, or globalization: by the end of the twentieth century, women on farms in Australia were becoming activists.

They had become activists, however, around more than just the issue of who should inherit the farm, or succession planning as it is referred to in present day agricultural terms. Once they got the bit between their teeth they became active about a whole myriad of issues affecting them and their families and communities; issues which, like the women themselves, had always been ignored by governments, policy makers and male dominated agricultural organisations.

The Country Women’s Association, bastion of twentieth century rural women’s affairs, drew attention in 1992 to the lack of recognition received by women for their significant contribution to Australian agriculture, in a report entitled Invisible Farmers. As its title suggests, this report covered visibility and recognition of rural women, but also participation in policy-
making, education and training, social justice and natural resource management, and networking.

Across the 1990s Australian farmwomen began to educate themselves. This does not mean to suggest that they were an ignorant lot, far from it — many had completed tertiary courses away at university or by distance education, and had taken up positions in their communities as teachers, nurses, physiotherapists, even GP’s, bringing in vital income to support the farm from their off-farm work. Many farms in Australia are kept afloat by the off-farm income of the ‘farmer’s wife’.

Farmwomen in Gippsland, Victoria, heard of an external course they could attend in Sale, run through the campus of the University of Melbourne. The course incorporated ideas relevant to them, such as getting to grips with the technology revolution, computers, email and the internet, farm book keeping, rural leadership. A small group of women became a larger group of women by word of mouth. Then they heard what was happening for farmwomen in North America, and they lobbied for the establishment of rural women’s networks within government departments of agriculture. This coincided with a powerful group of women winning positions within the bureaucracy — the so-called ‘femocrats’.
The Rural Women’s Network was born in Victoria in 1986, funded within the Department of Agriculture, and the journal network started. In 1994 the ABC held the first ABC Rural Woman of the Year Award (now taken up by the Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation (RIRDC); Northern Territory station owner Sara Henderson became a very high profile winner. A Rural Women’s Unit was set up in July 1995 within the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE).

Some of the States followed suit and women in these units began to produce networking journals, and to organize rural women’s Gatherings. There are seventy thousand farmwomen out there in rural Australia; the word spread rapidly and farmwomen were on the move. Once marginal, ‘women’s business’ was just beginning to be seen as central to the business of agriculture.

Several women’s organizations developed outside the traditional Country Women’s Association (CWA) and Women in Agriculture and Business (WAB); these new organisations were more about women in agriculture than about farmer’s wives; more about agribusiness than the proverbial pumpkin scones. Broadly speaking, the conservative ideology of the CWA served to support the existing patriarchal social structures, whereas the new organisations were pushing for change.
The Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women (FAAW) and Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) both developed in country Victoria, supported by the Rural Women’s Network. These few women took a gigantic step into the unknown in 1994, when they hosted in Melbourne the First International Women in Agriculture Conference, entitled Farming for our Future. Eight hundred and fifty women came from all over the world for several days of conference papers, seminars and workshops.

Many rural women describe this event as a watershed experience for them. North American women picked up the gauntlet and ran the Second Congress in 1998 in Washington, and several hundred women attended from Australia, on scholarships and industry bursaries, or self funding; the trade talks and networking were said to be phenomenal. A group of these Australian women traveled to Spain to assist Spanish farmwomen run the Third Congress in Madrid in 2002. The fourth will be in Africa in 2006.

Dr Margaret Alston, of the Centre for Social Rural Research at Charles Sturt University, convened a National Rural Women’s Forum in 1995, which identified broader issues within rural communities, rather than exclusively on farms. The stress in this forum was on the ‘empowerment’ of rural women, and the nominated priorities were:

- advancing women in decision making roles
- supporting women as managers of change in rural communities
developing a positive image for rural Australia
improving access to an integrated delivery of services to rural communities
improving access to telecommunications in rural Australia

In March 1997, the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management (SCARM) organized and sponsored a National Forum on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management. This forum brought together for the first time, rural women and the representatives of State and Territory and national policy makers, and industry and community representatives. Their brief was to “recognize and support the role of women who are involved in agriculture and resource management”.

In her welcome to the forum, Helen Board, the DPIE National Rural Women’s Coordinator said

Women are often described as resilient in times of crisis - sometimes as the “glue” which holds rural communities together as services are withdrawn. I constantly hear that women are the first to explore avenues for help and guidance when things get tough, and to help farming families to get a perspective on their lives – their work and family lives. Despite the role which they play, we rarely see this represented in the media or indeed in the
collection of data. It has been – in data terms – “invisible” – not worth counting.  

Out of this forum, a National Plan was developed by SCARM, called A VISION for change. The federal government ran a project in 1998 in line with the National Action Plan, the results of which are still being updated and published. The project was funded jointly by the DPIE and the Rural Industries Research and Development (RIRDC) and was called Missed Opportunities – harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture. The project aimed to define ‘the role which women play in the agricultural sectors and the skills and experiences they bring to this role’. In the wording of these aims, I find the faintly patronising suggestion that women are ‘playing roles’ rather than being taken seriously.

In line with the neo-liberal, economic rationalist programme of the current Coalition government, the project was really looking at the economic contribution of farmwomen to the agricultural sector. It came to the conclusion that farmwomen are contributing at least 48% to national farm income; group participants all agreed that farmwomen’s input in hours worked is at least equal to that of men, not including childcare and family commitments.
A group of participants from Milawa in NE Victoria discussed the issue of farm succession, commenting that

the real issue is the economic viability of the farm to support more than one generation...Linked with this is the frustration of being only one player in the decision-making process. Participants noted that for younger professional women working off-farm, this often meant they were marginalized in decision-making about the farm. One participant commented that the only way for her to remain "sane" in an inter-generational farm was to exclude herself from farm decision-making, although her off-farm income was contributing to farm upkeep.

Participants felt that generally, the economic input of women to the farm was neither acknowledged nor counted. "Women have gained the right to work longer hours!" * claimed one participant...Women staying in the industry are doing so out of a love of what they do and a desire for a secure base to raise a family and a “central focus in the life of the family”. 71

* This comment fed directly into my manuscript farmwoman. Young women whom I have spoken to at workshops worry constantly about their insecurity on the farm managed by their husband but directed and owned by their in-laws: what will happen to them if their husband is injured / killed / divorced? And mothers-in-law are similarly filled with angst: how can the farm remain viable if the daughter-in-law demands a settlement if the marriage breaks down?
Appendix B details the results of the ‘Day in the life’ diaries kept by farmwomen participants in the *Missed Opportunities* project. The project as a whole identified three common issues needing to be addressed: the male-oriented culture within the sector, with few women in leadership positions; women needing to shoulder the burden of family responsibilities and thus having neither time nor energy to take up leadership roles; and farmwomen’s lack of self-confidence in their ability to take on managerial or leadership roles.

Stage two of this project planned to put strategies in place to turn around these three issues. Membership of women’s agricultural organizations is still growing, and farmwomen continue to educate themselves and aspire to leadership roles. But already, farmwomen’s business has fallen off the mainstream political and bureaucratic agenda almost before it arrived; rural units are being dismantled and funding cut. Farmwomen are going to have to work harder than ever to maintain any visibility they have achieved.
Farmwomen and the ‘f’ word

When a woman stands up in front of any group and says “I am a farmer,” just what is she is asserting? Is she asserting she farms alone, or that she is a farmer’s wife with attitude? Certainly she is asserting a right to be noticed for all the work / brain-power / bookwork / child-rearing / community involvement / etc she does and always has done. But not just noticed. Taken as equal.

The invisibility of farmwomen in Australian literature has been mirrored in real life. The first and second wave of feminism came and went without creating any noticeable backwash on the farm and although the leaders of the new movement of women on the land would probably all have identified as feminists in the early 1990s there was, and still is considerable antagonism to feminism down on the farm. Why should this be?

This may be a matter of language. Farmwomen in Australia are interested and engaged in the issues of contemporary feminism, and yet they reject the word itself and its accompanying theory and jargon.
In the women in agriculture movement, women on farms want what earlier feminists fought so hard to gain: they want their input into agriculture viewed from a standpoint equal to that of men. They are not trying to wrest power from men: they are attempting to gain an equal footing, to be acknowledged as 'farmer' i.e. the person who knows how to grow what they grow on their land, and how to market it and deal with all the practical and business areas of agriculture in the twenty first century. And perhaps it can also be assumed that the farmwoman is the person who knows how to make policy (and carry it through) that deals fairly with all parties, and that takes into account and balances all aspects of farm, community and business life. She is also the person whose support for 'the farmer' — her wifework, housework etc — is taken for granted. So why do farmwomen resist the 'f' word, given that their aspirations are feminist aspirations?

Farmwomen's voices have been conspicuously missing in Australia until recently; they have also been inconspicuously missing. Few have particularly noticed their absence. This omission has only slowly been brought to light. Isolation plays its part. But in many cases, farmwomen are reluctant to be considered unfeminine, are concerned about ruffling male feathers, alarmed to hear the sound of their own voices raised in their own defence, raised in their own praise even. They are overtly reluctant to undermine the confidence of their men, confidence which crumbles easily when faced with drought, or bank repossession or depression, be it economic or spiritual;
without their men, there is no farm to be passionate about; farmwomen need to cosset their men. Also they are thoroughly suspicious of academic jargon.

I noticed it first in 2001, when I was sitting in an audience of farmwomen at a Women on Farms Gathering in Beechworth, NE Victoria. All around me women audibly and visibly bristled as Dr Margaret Alston, Associate Professor at the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, positioned the familiar issues of empowerment for these women firmly into feminist theory. The women squirmed and shuffled, muttered and disagreed and some even walked out. I wonder if Alston was aware of their discomfort.

Then the next year, in 2002, sitting among the same women listening to Rhonda Galbally, the contrast was stark. 72 Galbally addressed all the same issues in the same thorough way and the farmwomen were in complete agreement, happy that someone should so succinctly encapsulate the issues in their lives.

The difference? Galbally never once said the “f” word. She talked of women’s liberation, skating on thin ice, but no one turned a hair. Feminism and its impact on farmwomen’s lives was being discussed but it was never mentioned, and in a sense it’s almost as if a trick was being played upon
these women: a semantic sleight of hand. At this point I ask myself, what do farmwomen fear in the word ‘feminism’? Or is it just the jargon?

For many Australian farmwomen, and indeed Western farmwomen generally as sure as farmer equals man, feminism equals unfeminine. They fear social stigmatisation. Take for example the way in which country women are always impeccably dressed whenever they go into the public sphere, whether to the local post office, the school run or meetings or shopping: “Oh no! I would never wear my farm clothes beyond the gate!” said one farmwoman I asked about feeling feminine, “and anyway Doug (husband) wouldn’t let me.”

They also see feminism as an attack on their menfolk. They collude with the status quo because they see that to divide their husbands’ power would be to undermine the power of the farm and thereby risk the farm enterprise altogether; they would lose out just as much as their men. “We have to stand by our men; they own our livelihood, we depend on them!” says Eileen, 57, wheat and wool near Colac in Victoria. “I love my man, why would I want to undermine him?”: Sheena is a young thing fresh out of agricultural college, newly wed and yet to come up against the in-laws. “I don’t disagree: he’s the boss, after all!” insists quiet Lucinda from a saltbush block in South Australia.
Loss of their pivotal productive and reproductive role would lead to them being marginalized within their own rural communities; this is not something farmwomen are going to let happen. But by being so reluctant to be branded feminist, they are in danger of missing out on everything useful for them in feminist organisation and theory, as well as continuing to be inconspicuously missed.

I don’t think the average farmwoman in Australia understands, or even wants to understand any theoretical definition of feminism: she is using other images altogether.

What is feminism in the context of farming?

The Oxford English Dictionary entry for feminism is bleak, ordinary and predictable: “the qualities of women, and advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of equality of the sexes).”

American historian Linda Gordon defined feminism in the 1970s as “an analysis of women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it.” Dale Spender maintained in the 1980s that “[a world without feminism] is a world where belief in the inferiority of women is woven into the fabric of existence.”
Norwegian feminist literary critic Toril Moi argues that feminism is a political project dedicated to “the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” and can therefore be distinguished from ‘femaleness’ (biological) and ‘femininity’ (“a set of culturally defined characteristics”). 79

Julia Kristeva outlined European feminism as three distinct phases, starting with a demand for “equal access to the symbolic order”, moving to the rejection of “the male symbolic order in the name of difference” in order to achieve the rejection of “the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical”. 80

Berit Brandth, writing on gender identity in European family farming, notices a shift in feminist research in the late 1990s to questions of identity and she comments:

Women on farms have a great workload, a ‘double burden’, with little return. The survival of the farm is the prime interest of all the family members. This unites them against external threats be it natural, political or economic forces that might lead to farm crises. Women identify with the farm first and see other threats as more overriding than their own oppression as women. 81
Sarah Whatmore criticizes current feminist research for having little to say about (farm) women whose position can’t be understood through those of either housewife or labourer. 82

"Not me! I’m not a feminist"

As stated earlier, there are around seventy thousand farmwomen in Australia at present. 83 It is probable that only a very small minority of these women would define themselves as feminist. What is more, their definition of feminism would undoubtedly vary. I keep coming back to the reaction of most rural women, that feminism equals unfeminine. Which leads to the very consistent response from contemporary farmwomen, “Oh no! I’m not a feminist: I’m as liberated as I want to be”.

They will give me their own vivid examples of feminists: of the radical lesbian separatist, the crop-haired tattoo toting, fag end between the lips bullykyke, bra burning, ball breaking, man hating. Few have actually met any of these mythic women.

And word images are scarcely any better, as academic feminists have not always been careful to nurture the confidence of women in the bush. The academic language of feminism does not sit comfortably with women who
spend their entire lives in a highly practical world dominated by men. Although many farmwomen are university-educated, many farmwomen are not; many have not had the opportunity to complete secondary school and are suspicious of what they see as academic jargon.

But this does not mean that the majority of those seventy thousand farmwomen are content to be described as farmer’s wives, as passive support persons, as cooks, cleaners and schoolrun taxi-drivers. This does not mean farmwomen don’t want to fight for social change, for child care in the bush, for better education for their children, for care in their old age, for an input into agricultural policy, an input into rural social policy, an opportunity to be part of the ‘knowledge nation’ themselves. Not at all. It just means they are acutely uncomfortable with the idea of being labeled ‘feminist’.

So Galbally was speaking wisely, intentionally or otherwise, in avoiding the word.

Farmwomen are beginning to speak out, and the more of those seventy thousand that can be encouraged to become conspicuous the better. At the moment, perhaps a couple of thousand farmwomen across Australia are learning to lobby, to get onto boards, to understand trade and globalisation policy, to run meetings, to organize conferences and gatherings; to become leaders for social change in rural areas. Most of this learning is self funded,
as government promises of funding for rural women have quietly evaporated. With the marginalising of rural women's interests currently under way in government and farming organisations, the strength of those other sixty eight thousand will be useful when they are encouraged by their peers to speak out.

* * * * *

In spite of appalling telecommunications difficulties experienced in the bush, many farmwomen are the major computer users on the family farm. Their menfolk can cope with high tech machinery but usually leave the bookwork (and therefore the computer) to their wives. To overcome isolation, farmwomen can be encouraged to get onto the Internet, to join farm women's chat lists, and lobby and rally and, yes, gossip, in the middle of the night in front of their computers, and to learn from each other about equality of opportunity, and about how to work for change.

AWiA has a new National Learning Network which is encouraging farmwomen to get into industry-based reference groups and discuss industry issues and what to do about them, via email. Margaret Grace and June Lennie conducted an online discussion of feminism on the Queensland 'welink' list (short for women's electronic link), which had over 120 members by late 1998.
Many women who farm have not yet reached this level of engagement but they *are* getting there, and particularly the baby-boomers; the younger women can often be too busy educating themselves, having babies and establishing themselves and their husbands as people who count on the farm and in the community.

But those older women, in their forties and fifties particularly, have finished their schoolruns, are conversant with the running of the farm and the vagaries of their own industries, have re-skilled through TAFE courses or leadership courses, are chock-full of energy and have every right to be chosen to sit on boards, to have their know-how used in lobbying and to have all the expectations of a modern farmer.

Equality of opportunity and the chance to be heard — this is the catch cry of second wave feminism. If one is careful to identify equality of opportunity, without using the word feminism, many of the women on farms who are grouping and organizing and lobbying as various parts of the Women in Agriculture movement would agree this is what they are striving for. And others would come forward. But not only to have equal opportunity, because many would say they have that already on the farm (if not off it) but *acknowledgement* of that equality in the wider community.
What are farmwomen looking for?

To be treated as equal / to be acknowledged as having an equal amount of skill or knowledge / to not have stock and station agents ask to be put on to the boss / to organize a loan with the bank without the manager needing the man’s signature / to have automatic membership of the National Farmers’ Federation / to not be ignored or treated as an imbecile at board meetings (especially when one’s expertise is equal to or greater than that of anyone in the room) / to have the ear of the local or relevant member of Parliament / to be accepted as farmer.

Among farmwomen, ‘farm’ can mean anything from a vegetable-growing smallholding of a few acres to thousands of square kilometres or anywhere in between. It can mean fruit and vegetable growing, beef, sheep and wool, crocodile farming, grains and oilseeds of every description, aquaculture and fishing, vineyards, sugar cane: any growing and harvesting of primary resources animal, vegetable but not mineral. It can take place in pockets of semi-rural land near capital cities, on broadacre farms centred on regional towns or on remote cattle stations. One woman’s apology for farming “only 60 acres in retirement” is brushed away as unnecessary by another woman farming a station the size of France. Recently country areas have come to be classified ‘rural, regional or remote’ but the women living and working in
these areas don’t see the classification as one that sets them apart from each other, rather as a bureaucratic device for funding. And ‘rural, regional and remote’ gets more sympathy in Canberra (and hence more funds) than ‘the country’.

Can I foster their journey?

My poetry is about ‘rural, regional and remote’ Australia and some of those seventy thousand women who farm in those areas. It tries to evoke the lives and experiences of farm women in language that is not too academic, not too literary, not Wordsworthian but not Country and Western either, but strong, like these women; honest, more honest about pain and hardship than they might willingly be, and celebratory. I want the whole of Australia, urban and rural alike, to recognize seventy thousand conspicuous women on the land.
Notes

1 *tjukurpa* is the word that South Australian Indigenous people use for their law, or the ‘dreaming’ of their country.


3 See part four, 61: Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA), the movement.


6 See Appendix A, 92: AWiA Internet forum excerpts on GM cropping and the place of women in the National Farmers’ Federation.

7 These following four italic quotes are from farmwomen attending the Annual General Meeting of Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA), University of Melbourne, August 2002; used with their permission.

8 Tyndale, Ray R. “ode to cows.” Performed at the conference dinner, *Setting the Agenda for Rural Women: Research Directions*, Charles Sturt University, July 2002

9 Tyndale, Ray R. “old (farmer’s) wives tales.” Performed Charles Sturt University, July 2002.

10 See part four.


19 Tyndale, Ray R. *Farmwoman*. Unpublished manuscript.
So-called the ‘green man’ after a 1982 photo of that name by his wife Valerie; Murray is portrayed with his large trunk sticking out of the top of a lopped tree trunk, in a paddock. See Peter F. Alexander, Les Murray: A Life in Progress. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000: 298.


32 Hewett, Dorothy. Wheatlands: 72.


36 Page, Geoff. Cassandra Paddocks: 89.


41 Hewett & Kinsella: 35.

42 Hewett & Kinsella: 35 – 43.


44 Hodgins, Philip: 3, 14, and 24-5.


46 Ryan, Brendan. “Corrugated iron.”: 10.


Tyndale, Ray R. “consider this.” Performed, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, July 2002.

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70 Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation (RIRDC) and Department for Primary Industry & Energy (DPIE). Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of Women in Australian Agriculture. Canberra: RIRDC/DPIE, 1998.

71 Missed Opportunities: 77


75 A conversation with the Shepard family on their mixed sheep and grain farm outside Yass. Quoted with permission.

76 Names changed to protect identity.


Appendix A

Full analysis of "A Day in the Life" diaries

Nineteen completed responses were obtained in St George, and 18 in Milawa, with almost all respondents being married, on-farm women.

The tasks recorded were then classified by a member of the project team as shown in the Table below.

The times allocated for each respondent and their partner, were then entered in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Means and standard deviations were calculated using the Excel statistical facilities, and results within each category of activities were compared both between women and their partners, and between St George and Milawa respondents, using Student’s t-test for unpaired samples with equal variances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm work</th>
<th>Business development</th>
<th>Off-farm &amp; community work</th>
<th>Meals, home &amp; family care</th>
<th>Personal time</th>
<th>Sleep</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livestock care</td>
<td>Farm tourism</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Meals</td>
<td>Personal grooming</td>
<td></td>
<td>Any activity not classifiable into any of the specified categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ploughing/sowing/cultivating/harvesting</td>
<td>Research/information collection</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Meal preparation</td>
<td>Leisure time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery maintenance</td>
<td>Manufacturing/Value adding to farm produce</td>
<td>Government work</td>
<td>Housework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockwork/mustering</td>
<td>Developing new products</td>
<td>Community services</td>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Business management</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm errands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sale of produce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production for home consumption</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervision of farm workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooking for farm workers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table showing hours spent per day (Mean ± S.D.) in various activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>St George</th>
<th>Milawa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women (N=19)</td>
<td>Partners (N=18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm work</td>
<td>4.81 ± 3.06</td>
<td>10.47 ± 3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business development</td>
<td>0.65 ± 0.23</td>
<td>0.66 ± 0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-farm &amp; community</td>
<td>0.97 ± 2.33</td>
<td>0.19 ± 0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>7.08 ± 1.14</td>
<td>7.33 ± 1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal time</td>
<td>2.11 ± 1.98</td>
<td>2.12 ± 1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home &amp; family care</td>
<td>6.87 ± 2.79***</td>
<td>3.08 ± 1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21.89</td>
<td>23.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age (yes)</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variations from 24 hour total are accounted for in activities which could not be assigned to any of the categories chosen for analytical purposes.

*** Statistically significant at p<0.001
* Statistically significant at p<0.02

Discussion

As reflected in the large standard deviations (S.D. recorded as ± in Table above) for each of the values, there was considerable variability within each group, as to the times spent on various activities. However, despite this variability, women in both Milawa and St George spend significantly more of their time (p<0.001) on home and family care than do their male partners. Women who participated in the St George workshop spend, on average 6.87 hours, compared with 3.08 hours spent by their partners, while women in Milawa spend, on average, 6.47 hours compared with 2.68 hours per day spent by their partners.

While women in St George spend significantly less time (an average of 4.81 hours per day) in on-farm work than do their male partners (who spend an average 10.47 hours per day), the apparent difference in farm work time (an average 5.35 hours, compared with 3.88 hours) for men and women in Milawa is not significant.

The only other difference between times spent by women on various activities and time spent by their partners which reached statistical significance, was that comparing personal and leisure time for women and men at Milawa. There women had significantly less (p<0.02) personal and leisure time than do their partners. On average the personal and leisure time enjoyed by women participants at Milawa was 1.33 hours, compared with 2.79 hours for their partners.

Consistent with perceptions of the extensive pastoral industries predominant around St George, as compared with the more intensive and innovative gourmet food industries for which the Milawa district is being promoted, both men and women at Milawa spend more time (p<0.02) in business development activities than do their counterparts at St George. Women participants in Milawa spend an average 1.14 hours per day in business development activities and their partners average 1.89 hours per day.
compared with 0.05 hours per day spent by women in St George and 0.06 hours by their partners.

Also, perhaps reflecting the greater availability of off-farm and community sector access in the more densely settled north-eastern Victorian region, only three participants completing diaries at St George described themselves as working mainly off-farm, while seven of those completing diaries at Milawa described themselves in this way. This is reflected in the result that on average, both women and their partners spend more time \( (p<0.05) \) in off-farm and community work at Milawa than do those at St George. Women participants in Milawa spend an average 2.85 hours per day in off-farm and community activities and their partners spend an average 1.75 hours. This compares with an average 0.97 hours spent in off-farm and community activities by women in St George and an average 0.19 hours spent by their partners. This coincides with male partners at Milawa spending significantly less time on-farm (an average 5.35 hours per day) than do their male counterparts at St George, many of the latter working very long hours in their properties, such that the average time per day spent working on-farm by those men is 10.47 hours.

Although the diaries completed suggest that women are more often managing several tasks concurrently than are their male partners, there is no evidence in the analysis of results that they are getting fewer hours of sleep as a result of the long hours and multiple duties performed.

Although the results obtained provide a worthwhile snapshot of the distribution of work within farm families in both an extensive grazing community and in a more intensive food producing area, it should be noted that those participating in the workshops were generally middle-aged to older women working on farms. Those in the St George had an average age of 55.5 \( (\pm 3.1) \) years, while those at Milawa had an average age of 49.4 \( (\pm 10.3) \) years. Given that the workshops were held on a week day, it is probable that those committed to off-farm work found it more difficult to participate than did those working on farms. However, the extent of participation by on-farm and off-farm women again reflects the relative access to opportunities for off-farm work in the two locations.
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