

## BOOK REVIEW

**Jones, Rebecca (2010) *Green Harvest: A History of Organic Farming and Gardening in Australia*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.**

*Green Harvest* is an introduction to four Australian organic farmers and gardeners. Each example is framed within the context of an historical account which is itself subsumed within Jones' own "four key principles" of organics. At the outset, the author alerts us to her view that "History is both fact and fiction" (p.ix). It is a novel approach which will not appeal to all, and will be unsettling for some. The author states that: "Environmental history is the lens through which I have examined organic growers' changing ideas about health and environment" (p.ix).

The author claims that: "I have identified four key principles, each founded on organic farmers' and gardeners' belief in the dependence of health on the biophysical environment. These four principles are: soil, chemical-free growing, ecological wellbeing and back to the land" (p.xiv). In this five chapter book, these four "principles" provide the headings for the first four chapters, and each of these chapters carries a "case study", each of which is based on one or several interviews.

The first case study is an account of Harold White (1883-1971) a grazier from Guyra, northern NSW. White was involved with Australia's pioneering organic farming society, the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (1944-1955). Since he apparently did not forgo superphosphate entirely he would not qualify as certified organic today. In White's time there was no certification and Jones informs us that, as with the subjects of her Chapter 2 case study, "they sold their produce on the open market" (p.115). Jones' account relies on White's writings along with interviews with family members. This approach perhaps accounts for discrepancies such as, for example where Jones states that, from World War I, White "returned to Australia in 1919, now a colonel", whereas the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* states that he achieved the lesser rank of lieutenant-colonel, and some years after his return (Mitchell, 1990).

Chapter 2, presents the case study of the retired Tasmanian dairy farmers, Ray and Elma Mason. Ray describes a health scare "I was only thirty-eight. I had three days in intensive care. We had sick cows, a big mortgage and I was crook" (p.47-8). Jones states that "When Ray had recovered enough to return to work he decided he had to change both his farming practices and his diet" (p.48). The pair joined the Tasmanian Organic Farming and Gardening Society. They took the advice of South Australian organics advocate, Peter Bennett, and they switched from superphosphate to dolomite. The Masons also listened to Alex Podolinsky whom Jones describes as "one of Australia's first biodynamic farmers" (p.51).

Chapter 3 is the case study of a broadacre certified organic cereal and sheep farmer, Anthony Sheldon, working the semi-arid country of the Mallee, on the border of South Australia and Victoria near Pinnaroo. With a landscape of sand over clay, "Clover and medic, claims Sheldon, are the key to organic production on this farm" (p.72). He is reported as stating that: "The real winner with organics is that you are not using toxic inputs. That means it is safe for people who produce the food and no one in the production line gets exposed to anything that could be harmful" (p.72). Sheldon has planted over 25,000 trees in vegetation belts on what he described as previously "1280 acres ploughed in one big chunk ... a broadacre desert" (p.76). An account of Sheldon's transformation of his land was produced by the Museum of Victoria (Dale, 1996).

In Chapter 4, Jones states that "Back to the Landers came from the countercultural movement of the late 1960s and 1970s" in pursuit of "a self-sufficient rural idyll" (p.87). The Australian periodicals *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots*, founded in 1972 and 1973, supported these goals. Jones quotes from a 1973 issue of *Grass Roots*: "More people are concerned about the chemicals they consume with their food and the pollution all around them" (p.88). According to Jones, "Jackie French was a classic Back to the Lander" who has "created a contemporary version of organic self-sufficiency" (p.104). We are informed that French is the gardening editor of the Australian magazine *Women's Weekly*, that "she is flexible about the use of chemicals" and that "The word 'organic' is rarely mentioned" (p.111).

In the final chapter, 'Australian organic farming and gardening in the 2000s', Jones claims that "Among gardeners, organic methods have become an orthodoxy" (p.113). In this chapter, a convert to organic farming, Matthew Jamieson, shares his poignant perspective: "All my family have died of cancers. By the time I was 34 I was the oldest of my descent line. I grew up at the stage when everyone was spraying 245T and everyone in our rural community had stillborn babies" (p.119).

There is an odd disclaimer inserted somewhat incongruously within the final chapter: "There is currently no evidence confirming the presence or absence of health and environmental effects of genetically modified organisms" (p.120). This claim is reminiscent of other CSIRO publications, for example: "No adverse effects on human health and safety or the environment have been reported in connection with any of these [GMO] releases" (CSIRO, 2002, p.12). Despite public outrage, the CSIRO is a strong advocate of GMO food crops and this is controversial beyond the organics sector (e.g. Dean, 2011). The Australian organics pioneer and subject of Chapter 1, Harold White, complained that: "here in Australia, the universities and Departments of Agriculture have neglected it, while boosting fertilisers in season and out of season. Indeed, one professor suggested a campaign against the advocates of organic farming before a gathering of C.S.I.R.<sup>2</sup> people and was applauded" (White and Hicks, 1953, p.95). Health and environmental impacts of GMOs have been extensively documented, for example, by Jeffrey Smith (2003, 2007).

There are some serious omissions in this book for those seeking, what the subtitle appears to promise, namely, a history of organic farming and gardening in Australia. There is no mention of the biodynamic pioneers in Australia who, as early as the late 1920s, were members of the worldwide Agricultural Experimental Circle, founded at Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course at Koberwitz (Kobierzyce) in 1924 (Paull, 2011). The sole "Archival source" reported in *Green Harvest* is of a 1949 bread enquiry, while no reference is made to Australia's two organic association archives, that of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania (LSAT) held by the State Library of Tasmania and that of the Soil Association of South Australia (SASA) held in the State Library of South Australia (Paull, 2009a, 2009b). Material might usefully have been drawn from the history of the Organic Gardening and Farming Society of Tasmania written by Graeme Stevenson (2009). The mass-marketed and nationally distributed book *Organic Gardening* by Audrey Windram (1975) deserves a place in any history of organics in Australia, because of the book's precedence, and its probably unrivalled reach. The important milestone events of the founding of Australia's two main organics certifiers, Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA), and the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA) in the late 1980s warrant analysis. Australia and New Zealand's *Journal of Organic Systems* has been publishing since 2006, it is neither mentioned nor cited. The 15th IFOAM Organic World Congress held in Adelaide in 2005 brought together the world's leading organics scholars and advocates, it was the first time this triennial event had been held in the Southern hemisphere and is an organic milestone that belongs in any comprehensive history of organic agriculture in Australia. Besides Jones' four principles, it would be fair to cite the ten principles well articulated by the AOFGS organics pioneers in their statement of objectives (reproduced in Paull, 2008) and the four organics principles formulated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM, 2006).

Of the 160 countries that practice organic agriculture, Australia accounts for approximately one third of the world's total of certified organic agriculture hectares (Willer and Kilcher, 2011). It is an achievement that earns Australia some 'bragging rights' and a claim to an enduring interest in the history, as well as the present and future, of its organics sector. *Green Harvest* offers a modest contribution to the understanding of Australia's organics history.

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<sup>2</sup> Australia's CSIR was renamed CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) in 1949 (CSIRO, 2008).

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