## Working for the man

I hate my office desk. It's where I have to face the emails and phone calls that make it nearly impossible to write and think creatively. Amongst the clutter of junk emails and calls, there remains the occasional welcome contact that keeps me in hope each day when the phone rings or the email beeps. Amongst these I count the requests from rural and farm groups to share the details of my research. The phone will ring and on the other end of the line will be the secretary or president of the group who will introduce themselves and ask if I would be interested and available to visit them. Generally I say yes if the function is not too distant. I believe I can learn as much from these meetings as the group will learn from me. The Country Women's Association (CWA) takes a much more formal approach. They wrote to the Minister, my ultimate employer, asking if I would be available to speak at their Victorian conference. And so the request slowly wended its way through the organisation to me, via many desks and signatures. The style of the CWA approach fitted my image of an organisation with strong roots in the era of the written letter (rather than the email and SMS text); of an organisation that respected traditional protocols and abided by them. And, of course, I had to respond positively, as any public servant will to a request from his or her minister. The CWA knows how to get its way.

This was not my first contact with the CWA as I have vague memories of sitting behind a couch some forty-five years previously while my mother attended a CWA play rehearsal. I never saw the final production of 'The Mousetrap' but I am told the play was a great success for the now defunct Everard CWA branch. The play was a means to an end, *viz* building a supportive environment for farm women. Today I understand how important the CWA had been for my mother as she settled into that orcharding community. For her, I owed a special effort to the CWA so, rather than using one of my usual 'off-the-shelf' presentations, I embarked on some background research into the women in my family tree. Traditionally, the history of our family is told as a sequence of five generations of men who, in turn, occupied the family property, and for four of them, created and continued the traditions of the mountain cattlemen. It's an iconic story. It's also a perspective that encourages one to overlook the female side of the family farm. Gender

**My maternal ancestors—a serious bunch!**

researchers argue that the Australian farm sector has been very good at doing this[113] so, at fifty years of age I started looking at my own roots from a new perspective. I followed the story of the women who married the men who inherited the farm, by asking the women who remembered that history, and by delving into the history books. As you can see from the photograph, they could be a serious group of ladies. But they were serious with good reason. What I found there surprised me and helped me think differently about both the position of women in farming and that somewhat unfashionable organisation, the CWA.

## A matrimonial family tree

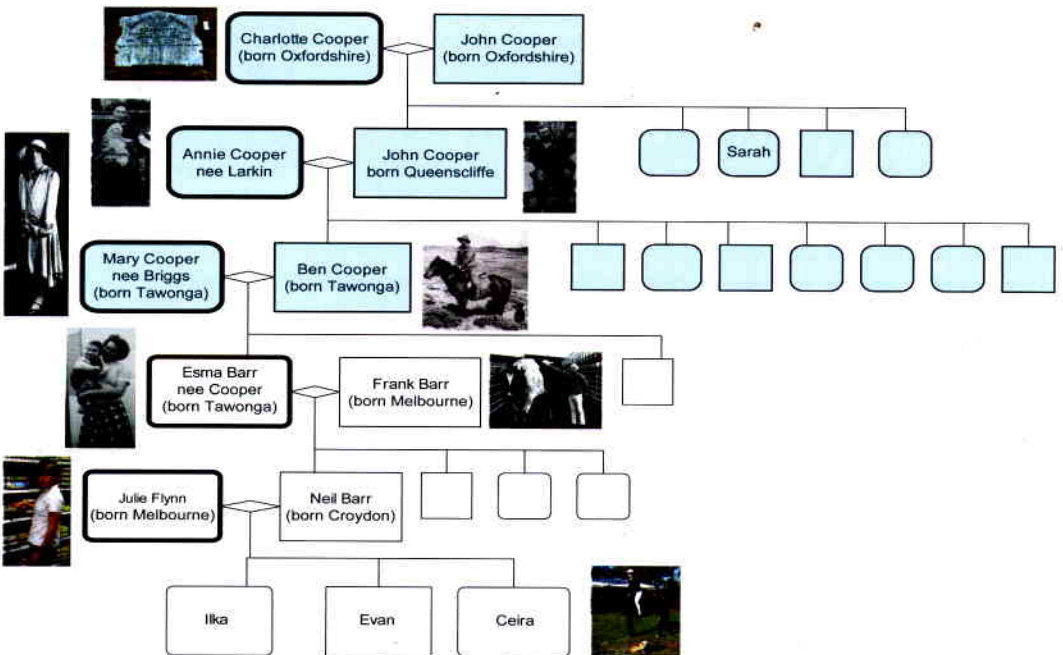


**Figure 14 A family tree of sorts.**

The story starts in England in 1826, when Charlotte was born—the daughter of a farm labourer in Oxfordshire. In her unmarried years she lived through politically and economically turbulent times. When she turned twenty in 1846, Europe had fallen into economic depression after a period of industrial expansion. This was exacerbated by the widespread failure of the potato crop. In Ireland a combination of famine and exploitative landowners was killing thousands of tenant farm families.

Across Europe, food prices were rising. In England these high prices were exacerbated by the Corn Laws, designed to protect the incomes of English wheat growers, often wealthy landowners, at the expense of other sectors of the economy and working-class consumers. Demands for political reform were in the air. England was in the throes of the Chartist movement, in which the working and merchant classes presented a series of petitions to Parliament demanding democratic reform. Despite three petitions, with up to a quarter of a million signatures, and some limited rioting, the movement achieved little. The propertied classes, which controlled Parliament,

refused to extend the right of labourers to vote. With the rejection of the last petition in 1848, the movement died. In the same year that the English Chartist movement fizzled, working class revolutions broke out in Germany, France, Austria and Italy, inspired by similar grievances. Each of these revolutions was eventually suppressed and the conservative forces had regained power across Europe by 1852. It was in this year, at the age of 26, that Charlotte married John Cooper, an Oxfordshire farm labourer. Within a year her first child was born.

The prospect for the young family was probably bleak. The English economic and political structures offered little prospect of advancement for those not born into property. In the midst of this turmoil and injustice, gold was discovered in California, and then Australia. The gold rushes promised a future prosperity outside the rigid class systems of Europe. In 1853 Charlotte, John and their one-year-old child were amongst the thousands who took the arduous sea voyage across the world to pursue that promise. The Coopers disembarked in Geelong to an echo of the turmoil of the European Revolutions, and the Eureka Stockade was being built in Ballarat. While many new arrivals travelled in search of golden riches, Charlotte and John were seeking a new settled life. They didn't make their way to the goldfields as that trip was for men unencumbered by women and children. The Coopers settled in nearby Queenscliff. With labourers scarce, John quickly found work as a lime burner, and later as a seaman on a service between New Zealand and Australia, whilst Charlotte raised a growing family.

Charlotte had only nine years in Australia as she died in Queenscliff, aged thirty-seven, of an ailment described by the local medical man as 'colonial fever'. Colonial fever was probably what we now call typhoid fever; an infectious disease spread by poor sanitation. Charlotte left a husband and five children aged between one and thirteen. When the Selection Acts passed Parliament, Charlotte's husband took his chance to claim some land for his family. Unlike his father, grandfather and great grandfather and countless ancestors before, he had a chance to become a man of property. John migrated to a mountain valley in north east Victoria. He took with him two sons and a troubled teenage daughter. John left Charlotte in a grave in the Queenscliffe cemetery. Many years later he left money in his will to pay for her gravestone. The headstone has recently been restored.

**Annie Larkin and family—the ill-fated second Charlotte is central, Leo in Annie's arms, and Ben is on the left in a dress.**

John Cooper also left two daughters behind in Queenscliff. One was aged seventeen. She stayed to make her own life and also to look after her four-year-old sister. The troubled fourteen-year-old, Sarah, travelled to the valley with her father. We have no photographs of Sarah but we do know she had two children in her twenties, and that the father of both children was unknown (or at least not publicly acknowledged). She was written out of the family history, not even acknowledged by some relatives. As a teenager Sarah had lost her mother, was uprooted from Queenscliffe and moved to a valley with only three other families for neighbours. It was surely a lonely existence. The family survived by raising beef cattle, and growing potatoes to sell to the mining settlements of Beechworth and Yackandandah. Sarah was probably expected to remain unmarried and care for her father in his old age. Maybe she rebelled against this. Sarah eventually married at the age of sixty after her father had died, to the man who she then worked for as a 'housekeeper'. This was an 'occupation' she apparently held in a number of residences over much of her life. I'd like to think that she had finally found love and stability. Sarah was rarely acknowledged by the family. Her children were accepted into the extended family on the understanding their parentage was never discussed.

Charlotte's eldest son was named after his father. This second John farmed the family property and also worked as a contract chaffcutter, travelling the region during the hay and chaff season. We believe that son John met Annie Larkin on one of these trips, and eventually brought her home to the valley as his wife. Annie raised eight of her own children. While raising the children, Annie also milked the cows in the dairy and raised the pigs. Here was a woman ahead of her time, managing the farm and its finances while her husband worked off-farm as a carter taking stores between the valley and the nearest railhead. Shopping was a rare experience. Most food was delivered from the local general store on weekly order for staples such as flour, sugar and tea, supplemented by visits from the travelling tinkers. The only meat, fruit and vegetables available were those grown on the farm, or bartered from neighbouring farms.

Unlike her mother-in-law, Annie was blessed with a long life, but it was not a life without tragedy. She gave birth to eight children. Her eldest daughter was named Charlotte in honour of the mother-in-law Annie never knew. This second Charlotte died in childbirth, leaving Annie with a motherless grandchild. The wife of Annie's second son, Leo, walked out of her marriage and the valley, never to return. She left two young children behind. It was Annie Larkin who took on the role of raising these three motherless grandchildren into her seventies. She was a nurturer till the day she died.

Mary Briggs was born in the valley to a farming family. She chose to marry an older man, Ben Cooper, one of Annie Larkin's children. He was later to become an icon of the mountain cattlemen, missing only one High Plains muster between 1916 and his death in 1975. There is a story or two behind that record. One story is of a strategy to resist the pressure to enlist in the First World War. The families of the valley learnt early of the reality behind the recruitment propaganda. One prominent family lost both sons within a year of their enthusiastic early recruitment. Ben was twenty when the conscription debate raged. He had started his own farm business and by 1916 was taking cattle onto the high plains. The isolation and the occupation provided some protection from the social pressure to enlist and a potential release from the possibility of conscription.

The other story behind Ben's enthusiasm for the cattle muster is of a condition of the marriage that encouraged long trips away. The day of Mary's and Ben's marriage was 6 December 1930.

The timing was not propitious. This was the year when the Great Depression hit rural Australia. Mary and Ben raised their family through the Depression years. But unlike Charlotte with five children, or Annie Larkin with eight, Mary and Ben only had two children. They were a typical Depression era family. There would have been much 'sleeping on the porch' for Ben.

The domestic life of Mary was initially much like that of her mother-in-law. Her daily tasks included milking the ten-cow dairy herd and feeding the pigs. Money was always short so most of the household food was produced on the farm. Staples such as tea and flour were delivered from the local store and bread arrived via the mailbox three times a week. There were only occasional trips to Bright or Yackandandah.

Mary was an innovator, and her chance to broaden her horizons came after the Second World War as she became the first person in the family to gain a driving licence and own a car, whilst husband Ben remained happily and stubbornly on horseback to the end of his days. Her VW beetle was lovingly maintained until her final years. The car meant Mary was able to shop for food rather than relying on deliveries, tinkers or sending her husband on a two-day horse journey, and she was able to venture forth and visit the local towns. In her twilight years Mary suffered from Alzheimer's, and the subterfuge of purposely disabling her car was a trauma for the rest of the family.

Ben's and Mary's personal life is intriguing. Similar to his two brothers, my grandfather had a reputation for never having raised his voice in anger throughout his life. Also like his brothers, Ben married a personality opposite—Mary had a reputation for tempestuousness. Family folklore has it that this explains Ben's attendance record at the annual High Plains muster. Every year he had a month away from home to look forward to some relief. And then he purchased a property 20 kilometres down the valley, one day's ride from home. He built a hut there, and this gave him some more reason to be away from home—a day's ride there, a couple of days of work, a day riding back. Why get your driving licence?

**Mary and Ben on their wedding day.**

Maybe Mary had a reason for her tempestuousness. Fate dealt her a difficult hand. It fell to her to nurse her sister, Liz, the youngest daughter in the family. Liz had a tremor in her hand from an early age. This tremor worsened in her prime years when her thyroid was removed. Today the treatment of an underactive thyroid is a matter of taking a few tablets. Such treatments were not known in the valley. Liz stoically accepted her lot. I am told they never sought medical advice, even in later years when a drug solution was available. Soon after her own children left home, Mary found herself nursing her younger sister until Liz died in the 1970s. My mother tells me that Mary was probably the least temperamentally suited carer she knew.

My mother, Esma, left school early, as everyone did then, and though I am sure there was great potential, education beyond Merit Certificate (Year 8) was unavailable. She left the valley in 1952 when she married a painter who came to work for a short period while the Kiewa Hydro Scheme was being built. She may have left the valley, but farming hadn't left my mother. She and my father, Frank, both shared a desire to farm. They dreamed of the life of the small, independent, self-started family farmer, and their dream started with the house on the hill. They had moved into an established orcharding community less than 30 kilometres from Melbourne. Their early married life involved a series of unsuccessful schemes that were intended to change my father's career from tradesman to farmer.

My grandfather tried to buy a farm in the mountain valley for them, but the transaction fell foul of family politics. Given what subsequently happened to the dairy and beef industries when Britain entered the Common Market, this failed transaction was in fact a favour to my parents, and to me. My parents then unsuccessfully applied for a farm in the Heytesbury Closer Settlement Scheme. I experienced the wettest and muddiest day of my life on a visit with my parents, so I was glad when that idea failed. Then there was the small pear orchard in northern Victoria, and the Campaspe West Irrigation Scheme. All came to nothing.

Eventually they planted an orchard on their block of land on the outskirts of Melbourne, but it was never quite big enough for my father to give up the trade. He painted houses most of the year while Esma stayed at home and raised the family. Then for three frantic months of harvest each year, they both worked long hours picking, packing and marketing peaches. My parents felt they were never fully accepted by the established orchardists. They were 'blow-ins', not real local farmers. The friends my mother found in the district were other women who had likewise moved into the district as part of their own marriage migration. Looking back, my mother thinks it significant that none of the women living on orchards were born in the district. The daughters of the local orchardists rarely married another orchardist's son; perhaps they knew too well the life of the 'orchardist's wife' and were not willing to walk in their own mothers' footsteps.

My mother did eventually become a beef producer in the mountain valley where she was born. After my grandparents' deaths, she became the first woman in the family line to inherit farmland. The process of gaining that inheritance reflected a deeper cultural struggle. The tradition had been that farmland passed to the sons, and daughters married other farmers' sons. In retirement, my parents now farm the block of land that was my grandfather's occasional refuge.

In her life my mother experienced the rise of the supermarkets, both as a consumer and as a supplier. Early in her marriage she shopped at a local shopping strip. With only a motorbike and then a car to share, shopping was a full-day bus trip, or later a Saturday morning excursion. Meat came from the butcher, fruit from the fruit shop, bulk foods from the grocer. The latter was

the 'Preservation' store, where bulk honey, rice, oats and many other commodities could be purchased by filling containers one brought to the store. When supermarkets began stocking fruit and vegetables, she refused to buy them because of the poor quality. Later, she refused to buy supermarket fresh produce because of the supermarket treatment of their own farm business.

**Mother and son, 1955.**

## Common threads

My own partner, the purchaser of those eggs mentioned earlier, did not marry a farmer, or marry into farming. In choosing me, she chose the first in five generations of the family whose life would not revolve directly around farming or dreams of farming. She and her generation are also quite different from the women who came before her in the family history. Her generation was the first to expect to follow their educational aspirations through to tertiary studies. They were the first to expect to have a career as an end in itself, rather than as a means of passing time until marriage. And despite her distaste for shopping, she is part of the first generation that has grown up with the supermarket as an integral part of life.

If my partner had instead married a farmer, she would have lived a farming role quite different from that of previous generations of farming women. Today's farm women often work in non-farm jobs. They have access to transport. They are active partners in the farm business. They generally expect to share in farm inheritance. But one underlying matter is little changed. Despite the massive changes that have followed the feminism of the sixties and seventies, and the lifestyle implications of the contraceptive pill, farming has not been feminised. Women are still entering farming through marriage. It's not the love of the farm, but the love of the man that generally makes a farming woman.

## Women in farming, women in work

In the 1970s I spent a fortnight interviewing farmers in an isolated mountain community over on the other side of the Great Dividing Range from where my mother was born. Amongst many memorable experiences, including a hastily arranged dance for the young local men to meet the visiting female researchers, the highlight was meeting a seventy-year-old woman who managed a farm. In the shearers' quarters out the back lived her 'farm boy', a retired forestry worker also in his seventies, who was the farm help. This arrangement was quite exceptional in this community, where farming was seen as a man's business, and where unmarried