

# Weir Valley Farm, Mundaring, Western Australia: land in transition

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## **Introduction**

On the wall at the white weatherboard farmhouse there is a painting of an old man in a raincoat walking down a line of pear trees. He is carrying a bucket. It is spring and the blossom is white on the pear trees. He is in the orchard gathering wild asparagus. Above the orchard, but you cannot see it in this picture, is a high forested hill. The Aboriginal people named this hill Mundaring, meaning 'high place on a high place'. They pronounced it MUNdaring, with the stress on the MUN. Legend has that it was an important meeting place (Elliot 1983, p. 114).

Today the town of Mundaring, situated in the Darling Range, is a thriving community, forty kilometres from Perth on the Great Eastern Highway. It is known for its high rainfall and frosty winter nights. The farm which gave the town its name is a commercial orchard a few kilometres away. Few people passing on the road to the nearby Mundaring Weir on the Helena River realise its historical significance. They are keener to hear about C. Y. O'Connor and his Goldfields Water Supply Scheme, but more of that later. It is enough to say that the farm, the town and the famous 1890s scheme that was to pipe water the 525 km to the Eastern Goldfields are all connected.

The old man in the painting is my father. He bought the farm

in 1975–76. The painting is by my mother, an established Western Australian artist. There are many of her paintings on the farmhouse walls. There is a certain ambience about the farm even when it is busy in the fruit-picking season with tractors chugging, cherry pickers trundling down rows of trees, and busy packers sorting fruit in the big shed. Ruby blood plums, and Bartlett and Packham pears are sold and exported. The ambience takes you back to an earlier era. There is a serenity conveyed by the surrounding jarrah forest (*Eucalyptus marginata*). In the spring a wealth of colourful wildflowers and unique orchids are scattered in the forest understorey, kangaroos come down into the orchard, and red-tailed black cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*) screech overhead.

Not much is known about the Noongar people in this region. In fact, a newly-published report on the Noongar people's successful title claim over this south-west area does not mention the district at all (Host and Owen 2009). A little is known from writers such as the colony's first advocate-general, George Fletcher Moore, who compiled a dictionary



**Figure 1:** Aerial photograph of Weir Valley Farm, August 2009, showing water tanks for Mundaring pipe line to Kalgoorlie (upper right), farm and orchards (lower centre), and surrounding forest.

of aboriginal words in which he wrote that ‘mundak’ meant the bush, the wild country, the woods (Moore 1884, 57).

It is also known that the aboriginal people moved between the coastal plains and into the forest at certain times of the year and their tracks across the Darling escarpment were used by the early settlers to get beyond the hills to the fertile lands of the Avon Valley. The Noongar left little proof of their visits, although my sister Fiona and a soil analyst friend have found arrowhead flints on the Mundaring hill. Also, local knowledge claims that there is evidence of aboriginal occupation in the forest below the Mundaring Weir (Jordan 2010).

## **Timber**

The first European to ascend the Darling Escarpment was nineteen-year-old explorer Ensign Dale in October 1829. He named the Helena River after his sister Helen (Elliot 1983, p. 5). Dale was an intrepid young man and over the next two years he made several expeditions into the Darling Range and discovered the richly pastured lands beyond. Others following discovered that the forested hills of the hardwood Jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) and other eucalypts such as the wandoo (*Eucalyptus redunca*) and marri (*Eucalyptus calophylla*) were of incomparable value. A lucrative timber export trade in jarrah sleepers and paving blocks to London was established in Western Australia by the 1870s. Sleeper cutters roamed the forested hills of the Darling Range in pairs, and other men dug sawpits to cut and prepare lengths of timber to order. Their pits can still be found in the forest.

By the 1870s there was an increasing overseas demand for Australian hardwoods as the British empire expanded with harbour and railway building in its many possessions. The Colony’s Governor granted large timber concessions to establish bigger jarrah sawmills to meet the demand. Licences were also granted and royalties charged for cutting on a smaller scale. Sawyers Valley, about a kilometre east over the hill from the farm, was a busy saw milling centre. Between the 1880s and early 1900s there were about 27 small to medium-sized saw mills in the area (Heberle 1997). Sawyers Valley was a rowdy, tough drinking settlement famous for its publican, Lot Leather, a one time convict who was allegedly transported for killing his sweetheart’s lover (Elliot 1983, pp. 101–102). Alexander Forrest, astute Perth businessman and brother

of the State Premier of Western Australia Sir John Forrest (1890–1902), was a partner in several of these timber mills (Elliot 1983, pp. 104–105).

The jarrah trees were incredibly large, but not many are left today. Of the few remaining big tress, one of my favourites is the The Queen Jarrah, hidden away very near to present day Sawyers Valley. At first, timber was carted out by horse and dray, but in the 1880s the Eastern Railway was built through the Darling Escarpment to Sawyers Valley and across to Lion Mill. This was a large sawmill built to supply sleepers to continue the railway on to the inland settlers and ultimately to the Eastern Goldfields. This railway made it viable to take up land in our valley. Growers had a means of getting their produce to the Perth markets.



**Figure 2:** Tony Munday, a friend of the author, in front of the Queen Jarrah

## Fruit

In 1878, a well-known Perth wine merchant, Peter Gugeri, became the first owner of the land which is now our farm. He called the property St Bernards. Gugeri came to Western Australia in 1871 from London. Previously he had been a viticulturist in Italy. His wine business was in Hay Street, Perth. He was a justice of the Peace, a Perth City Councillor and a founder of the Royal Perth Yacht Club. By 1882 he had cleared part of his grant and established a vineyard with many varieties of grapes. His property's railway outlet on the Great Eastern Railway was known as Gugeri's Siding. In the early 1890s there were exceptional frosts in the valley and a crash in the local economy. The vineyard became unprofitable and Gugeri sold out (Elliot 1983, p. 113).

The next owners were the Jacoby family, who originally came from South Australia. They bought the property in 1893. Daniel Jacoby was a publican in Perth. He set up his three sons Mathieson Harry, Frederick William and Ted Jacoby on the vineyard. Frederick and Ted later moved to other properties in the area. Mathieson was twenty-four years old when he became farm manager. It was his decision to use the aboriginal name, Mundaring, for the vineyard, but with the stress on the -daring. Gugeri's Siding became the Mundaring Siding (Elliot 1983, p. 114). Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, Hermitage and Burgundy grapes were grown. The farm cellars stored 3,000 gallons of wine, and in Perth the family stored 5,000 gallons. In December 1897 the Jacoby family turned the vineyard into a limited liability company with Mathieson as managing director. Mathieson had planted 1,500 apple trees, and intended expanding further (*Western Mail*, 24 December 1897, p. 4).

Mathieson could see great opportunities for exporting the fruit. The decision to form a company also may have come about because earlier in 1897 he had lost an eye in a blasting accident on the farm. The local press reported:

On Monday last it appears that blasting operations were being carried on in the vineyard. A charge of dynamite had been laid and a fairly long fuse was attached and ignited. As the fuse appeared to burn rather slowly Mr Jacoby put his head out from the shelter of the shed to see how the match was burning. Just at that instant the dynamite exploded and a piece of wood that was thrown up by it struck Mr Jacoby full in the face.



**Figure 3:** Mathieson Harry Jacoby, an early owner of Weir Valley Farm  
 Source: Phillips 2004

His right eye was destroyed and his nose broken (*West Australian*, 14 Oct. 1897, p. 5).

It could not have spoiled his looks because on 7 January 1899 Mathieson married Mary Augusta Maude Cresswell at St Georges Cathedral, Perth. She came to live on the property and they soon had four children—three boys and a girl. From then on, Mathieson and his wife were leaders in the local community (Tie 2000, p. 40). The Mundaring Vineyard Siding was moved further south along the railway, and in May 1898 settled land around the siding was proclaimed a township. Jacoby was on a local progress association and the children attended the newly-built school (Elliot 1983, p. 115).

## Water for Gold

The area became a busy centre of interest and discussion to all Western Australians. Indeed, Mundaring was in the news nationally and internationally. This all had to do with gold, which in 1893 was discovered at Kalgoorlie. The rush was on to one of the richest finds in the world. People flocked there from interstate and overseas and the once shanty town grew at an alarming rate in a wilderness that lacked one important thing—water. The townspeople who relied on condensed water for all their needs felt that the State Government, led by the one time popular explorer but now somewhat corpulent state premier Sir John Forrest, did not have their interests at heart. To maintain his political position, Forrest had to do something. Someone came up with the idea that the Helena River near our farm should be dammed, a major weir created, and water piped the 525 km to Kalgoorlie. The colony's chief engineer C. Y. O'Connor and his staff worked hard on estimates and surveys. In September 1895 the parliament of Western

Australia agreed to the scheme. The site chosen for the Mundaring Weir, as it was to be called, was a steep rocky gully on the Helena River about six kilometres south of the farm. Work began in 1897. A spur line to carry men and materials was built from the new Mundaring township past the vineyard to the weir (Mills 1989, p. 258; Elliot 1983, pp. 133–136).

It was at this stage that the Noongar people were said to have placed a curse on the unfortunate O'Connor for destroying their native environment. At about the same time a vicious attack was launched on him by the local *Sunday Times*. Various journalists and politicians criticised O'Connor's staff and his personal integrity. He was a proud man and it all got too much for him. On 10 March 1902 he wrote a suicide note and left it on his desk. His little daughter Bridget, who generally rode with him every morning, was sick. He mounted his favourite horse, rode to the beach near his home at Fremantle, rode out into the Indian Ocean, and shot himself.

Water eventually spouted out of the pipeline at Kalgoorlie on Saturday 24 January 1903. The temperature that day at Kalgoorlie was 113°F (Evans 2001, p. 240). Many of the rejoicing crowd were probably unaware of the tragedy behind this amazing accomplishment, although Sir John Forrest paid tribute to 'the great builder of this work' (Taumann 1978, p. 255).

Meanwhile Mathieson Jacoby was elected to the state Legislative Assembly from 1901 until 1905, and again from 1908 until 1911. He was a strong critic of Federation and foretold the slump in his wine-growing enterprise because of interstate competition. He encouraged similar affected growers to change and enter the apple export trade. This trade became highly efficient, gaining better prices than interstate competitors. As a politician, Mathieson impressed on growers the necessity for a strong Federal Primary Producers' Party—a forerunner of today's National Party. He encouraged an immigration policy to bring Southern European families to Australia to work on the land. In his short life he organised the Producers Co-operative, the West Australian Fruit Growers Association, and the Farmers and Settlers Association (Phillips 2004, pp. 112–116; Black and Bolton 1990, p. 105). He also owned and edited a journal, the *Producers Review*.

Mathieson Jacoby died of heart disease at the age of forty-six years. His wife Mary and young family were left with unexpectedly heavy debts and had to sell and leave the farm (Tie 2000, p. 41). After Jacoby's

death, the farm continued quietly as an apple and pear orchard. It no longer had a fiery prominent owner to push the needs of other growers, but there are legends about the property. Some say that the Forrest family had a hunting lodge on the property and certainly at the far end of the pear orchard is one old gnarled apple tree more than a hundred years old and still bearing fruit. It is fondly called 'Lordy's Tree' by locals after Western Australia's John Forrest, the first Australian-born parliamentarian to become an English lord. Various owners came and went and changed the orchard landscape as well as its name. Ironically, it became Weir Valley Farm.

## **Forestry**

Scientific forester Charles Lane Poole became Western Australian Conservator of Forests in 1916, and quickly formulated the *Forests Act 1918*. He wanted the newly designated forests to be managed by trained foresters. He planned to establish Working Circles within the forest where his foresters would select and regenerate certain areas. His first choice for such a circle in 1921 was a large area of the Darling Range from Mundaring in the north to Boddington in the south. The forest around our farm was included. This was probably because the farm was in a water catchment area, and as the weir was built a good deal of the nearby jarrah forest was ringbarked to create run off for the weir. This was strongly criticised at the time by local settlers including Jacoby. Lane Poole planned to fell the ringbarked trees for firewood to fire the pumping station at the weir, and then either regenerate the natural forest or establish pine plantations (Stoate 1926).

Unfortunately, Lane Poole's arrogant manner meant that he fell out with the Western Australian Government. To carry out his plans he wished to terminate large saw milling leases belonging to the powerful English company, Millars. The Government feared that this would upset loans that they were seeking on the London market. There was an uproar in the timber world and Lane Poole resigned. His successor, the urbane and more diplomatic Kim Kessell, sought to carry out Lane Poole's plans, but at the same time appease the large saw millers. In 1926 he achieved this with his Working Plan No. 1, the Mundaring Working Circle. Kessell was far sighted. He very soon established a forestry headquarters at the Mundaring Weir, fire watch towers covering most

of the working circle at Gungin Gully and Mount Dale, fire brigades made up of forestry staff, and crews to attend to regenerating the forest on his principles. Fruit growers and farmers in our area could now feel much safer from the terrible bush fires that were a dreaded part of every summer as their flames lit up the skies in brilliant yellows and reds.

The farm slumbered on over the years. Asparagus grew by the stream and legend has it that this was taken to Royal Perth Hospital where a prominent urologist used it for his kidney patients—to what effect is not known. In later years the farm became known as the best pear orchard in the state. The apples, except for Lordy's tree, were long gone, their only reminder being a small group of pine trees grown to experiment with the use of pine instead of the heavier jarrah for fruit boxes. There is still the site of a small box mill on the farm. My father bought the farm in two sections, the first in 1975 and the other in 1976. He was nostalgic for the days of his youth when the family had a hills farm, and went there each year to pick the fruit and make jam. The way he told the story you could smell that lovely aroma of warm sugary fruit as the jam was stirred.



**Figure 4:** The main house



**Figure 5:** Plum orchard

## **Water Treatment Plant**

My sister, Fiona, became responsible for running the orchard. All went well until about 2000 when rumours spread around Mundaring that the West Australian Water Corporation intended building a water treatment plant for the weir on the original Noongar Mundaring hill above our farm. The pipeline to Kalgoorlie passed along this hill and there were already large water storage tanks for the pipeline on the site. It had become known as Tank Hill. Originally the Water Corporation planned to locate the treatment plant at the weir, but behind the scenes the National Trust and other influential bodies stopped it. This prompted the Water Corporation to decide on the Tank Hill site.

There was a need for the plant. The Helena River catchment flow had by now halved due to climate change. A decision was made to augment the weir supply by pumping artesian water from the faraway Gngangara Mound near the coast north of Perth. The water quality of the Helena River had declined substantially over the years and the chlorine dosage had to be increased. It was recognised that a new treatment plant with large filtration beds was required to deal with the organic contamination building up in the weir. A plant would allow the chlorine dosage to be reduced, and the water quality to be brought up to an acceptable standard for the increasing population supplied by the pipeline.

There were many concerns for the Sawyers Valley township and our neighbouring orchardists. For our farm, in particular, the construction of a treatment plant on Mundaring Hill would affect the whole rural environment with blasting within a kilometre of the back boundary, and erosive runoff which could make the land salty and spread dieback disease in the forest nearby, not to mention bright lights throughout the day and night and the threat of an escape of chlorine into the atmosphere. All this was presented to the Water Corporation and it was thought that it had accepted the community concerns and would look elsewhere. Peace reigned.

Then in 2003 the whole matter came up again. It was disclosed that even our farm on its original grants was a possible site. Anxious letters and submissions were written and taken to the various State Parliament ministers and the Water Corporation (Jordan 2003). Some long-standing landowners sold up to the Corporation rather than have the angst of seeing their farms spoiled by an industrial site nearby. The Water Corporation did an about turn and called for Community Consultation. For two years it supervised convened groups which met in the local Mundaring Hall to air their concerns for native title, historical values, environmental upheaval and its meaning for the local flora and fauna, and of course there was a certain amount of 'not in my backyard' attitude. In 2007 it was finally decided that the water treatment plant would be situated on land once belonging to Kessell's forestry headquarters.

My sister has fought long and hard for the decision to build the water treatment plant on this site. To watch her handle a pear or plum so carefully, as she looks at it in the early morning, one knows how much the orchard means to her. She feels that she is the custodian as the aboriginal people were before her. We hope that they would approve in this day and age.



**Figure 6:** Fiona Jordan, manager of Weir Valley Farm, and sister of the author.

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