



# Ernesto Genoni: Australia's pioneer of biodynamic agriculture

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*He was dark, with flashing eyes, hair swept back off his forehead and an erect exotic look. If his brothers were jovial, easy going and inclined to be portly, Ernesto was slender, serious, aesthetic and elegant. His voice was clipped, his sentences crisp and his manner refined. They called him 'il filosofo' the philosopher, but he was really an artist ... 'Chemicals will kill the world,' Ernesto would say, little realising that in sixty years his would no longer be a voice crying in the wilderness (Maria Triaca, 1985, p.116).*

## Abstract

Ernesto Genoni (1885-1975) pioneered biodynamic agriculture in Australia. In 1928 he was the first of (ultimately) twelve Australians to join Rudolf Steiner's Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG) which was based at the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland. Ernesto trained as an artist for five years at Milan's prestigious Brera Academy. He visited his brothers in Australia, broad-acre immigrant farmers in Western Australia, in 1912 and 1914 and during these visits he worked on their, and other's, farms. In 1916 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and served as a stretcher bearer on the battlefields of the Somme, France, before being conscripted into the Italian Army and serving jail-time in Italy as a draft resister and conscientious objector. Ernesto joined the Anthroposophical Society in Milan in 1919. He first met Rudolf Steiner in 1920 at the Goetheanum, the Anthroposophy headquarters in Switzerland. Ernesto left the Goetheanum in 1924 when Steiner retired from public life. He migrated to Australia in 1926 with aspirations for establishing a career as an artist in Australia. Instead, having arrived in Australia, he was again drawn into farm management and agricultural work. Ernesto was a champion for biodynamic agriculture, Anthroposophy, and the Austrian New Age philosopher, Rudolf Steiner - causes to which he devoted the rest of his life. In 1928 he initiated the first Anthroposophy meetings in Melbourne. In 1930 Ernesto made a grand tour of biodynamic enterprises in Europe and met the leading biodynamics advocates and practitioners of the day in Germany, Switzerland and England, including Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Erika Riese, Ernst Stegemann, and Carl Mirbt. In 1935 Ernesto and his partner, Ileen Macpherson, who was also an anthroposophist and a member of the ECAFG, began their biodynamic farm called Demeter Biological Farm in Dandenong, Victoria. Ernesto was a founder of the Anthroposophical Society Victoria Michael Group in 1932, and he became its leader in 1962.

**Keywords:** Biodynamics, biodynamic farming, organic agriculture, organic farming, Anthroposophy, Milan, WWI, Somme, Pozières, Dornach, Goetheanum, Broomehill, Broome Hill, Western Australia, Demeter, Rudolf Steiner, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Ernst Stegemann, Ruby Macpherson.

## 1 Introduction

Ernesto Genoni (1885-1975) was a man torn between two worlds. In Italy he was an artist (Fig.1), in Australia he was a farmer. In Europe he was a married man, in Australia he was a de facto partner. In Italy there was his sister Rosa, old enough to be his mother and for whom he was the “favourite”, in Australia there were “the brothers” who had preceded him and created their own Little Italy in the wheat belt of Western Australia with their homesteads, including “Etna” and “Sorrento”, and their successful broad-acre farms (Genoni, c.1955). In Australia, Ernesto volunteered in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in World War I (WWI) “to serve in the medical corps”, but, as an Australian stretcher-bearer on the killing fields of the Somme he was conscripted into the Italian Army, quite possibly saving his life but leading to multiple prison terms in Italian jails as a draft resister and a conscientious objector.

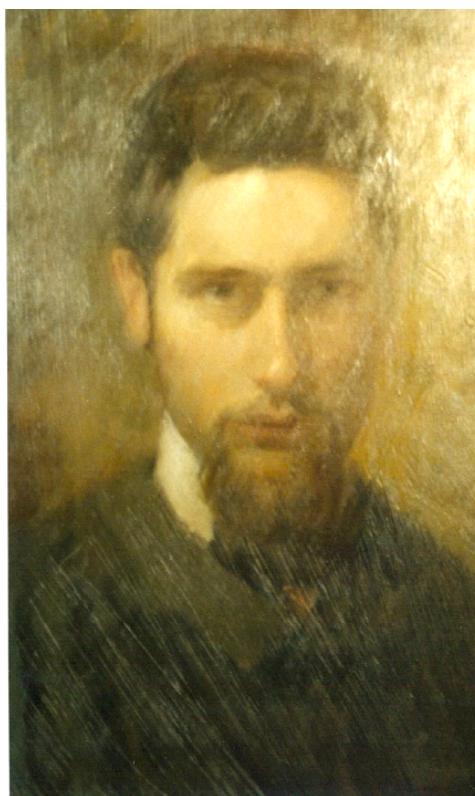


Figure 1. Ernesto Genoni, self portrait, circa 1920-1926.

Ernesto brought biodynamic agriculture and Anthroposophy to Australia in the 1920s. He was the first Australian member of Rudolf Steiner’s Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG) whose *raison d’être* was to put to the test the “hints” given in 1924 by Rudolf Steiner at his Agriculture Course presented at Koberwitz (now Kobjerzyce). Ernesto met Rudolf Steiner, and leading anthroposophists Elizabeth Vreede (mathematician), and Edith Maryon (sculptor) at the Goetheanum at Dornach, Switzerland in 1920. He spent much of 1924 at the Goetheanum, painting and studying, until September 1924 when Steiner withdrew from public life due to ill health. Ernesto migrated to Australia in 1926 announcing plans for exhibiting his art. He left Australia in 1930 for a six-month grand tour of biodynamic endeavours in Europe, visiting the leading advocates and practitioners of biodynamics of the day, including Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and Ernst Stegemann. It was the last time he would depart Australia as an “Italian”. In 1932 he applied to be a naturalized Australian and thereby cemented his commitment to the New World while maintaining his links to the Old.

Ernesto’s commitment to biodynamics and Anthroposophy were lifelong. He practiced biodynamics in Western Australia and in Victoria. With his partner, Ileen Macpherson (1899-1984), he established the first “Demeter” farm in Australia. He was a founder of the Anthroposophical Society Victoria, aka the Michael Group, and in his twilight years he was its leader. This is his story.

## 2 Methods

The present account draws on primary sources including archival material (held in Switzerland and Australia) and a handwritten autobiographical manuscript memoir by the

subject, supplemented by published material. Sources drawn on for the present account include the Secretariat of the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, the Archives of the Goetheanum (Dokumentation am Goetheanum Bibliothek Kunstsammlung Archiv), the Australian National Archives, Canberra, the Italian Historical Society (CO.AS.IT), Carlton, Victoria, Australian newspapers, a published account of the extended family, and the Library, Archives and members of the Anthroposophical Society in Australia Victorian Branch, the Michael Group.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Italy

*Our situation was destitute ... the money lender, after some time, refused to give us bread, as did the owner of the delicatessen .... because our debt was too high (Genoni, c.1955, p.3).*

Ernesto Genoni was born at Tirano, 170 km north east of Milan, on 21 September 1885 (Italian Embassy, 1916). A timeline with some milestones of his life is presented in Table 1. Ernesto was reportedly one of 18 children, of whom eleven survived into adulthood with Ernesto being the youngest of those (Triaca, 1985). With the exception of the eldest sister, Rosa Genoni, all of the surviving Genoni siblings migrated to Australia, starting with the departure of Emilio, at the age of 17, with Ernesto recording in his memoir: “The departure of Emilio for Australia in the first year of school” (Genoni, c.1955, p.1). As we shall see, Ernesto was a somewhat hesitant migrant and he was the final of the siblings to migrate.

In a family memoir, Maria Triaca wrote that “a steady exodus of people from our region began in the 1890s” (1985, p.5). The reasons appear to be at least twofold, privation and conscription. As a unified country, Italy was then a relatively young country with the Kingdom of Italy being proclaimed in 1861 (Nicolle, 2003). At the outbreak of World War 1 (WWI) “Italy remained an overwhelmingly agricultural country, and over three-quarters of the rural population were landless peasants” (Nicolle, 2003, p.3). Nevertheless Italy harboured imperial aspirations and at the end of the nineteenth century, and following the lead of other European powers, embarked on a series of military misadventures of land-grabbing in Africa, collectively described as “The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912” (Pakenham, 1992). Italy supported its military adventurism by conscripting its young men. This was the immediate cause of Emilio’s departure for Australia, alone and at the age of 17 years (C. Negri, 1984).

Subsequently, each brother, migrated to Australia as they became of conscriptionable age. According to a daughter, Emilio “made a promise to his father that he’d bring out all his brothers and sisters, so therefore he promised he would send so much every three months home, and that is what he did, and he brought them out one by one” (C. Negri, 1984, p.3). The youngest brother, Ernesto was the exception to this pattern. One of Emilio’s daughters stated in an interview, many years after the events, that for her father Emilio “military service was coming up ... He was reaching the age of eighteen and he was anti-war, so he decided that he would ... leave Italy. And his father ... said to him ‘I don’t know what you are going to do ... you have to have money’. So he borrowed and the fare cost thirteen pounds and I think he borrowed about twenty pounds. He had to go to England to pick up the boat” (E. Negri, 1984, p.1). According to her account “His father

had a shop [in Milan], where they used to make shoes for the elite ... he used to employ five to seven men" (E. Negri, 1984, p.2), however Ernesto's account paints a far less rosy picture.

Having arrived in Australia, the teenage Emilio initially worked for a German bootmaker in Collins Street, Melbourne, before heading west where, after a short stint in Kalgoorlie, "Dad went down to Broomehill and he was able to get a job putting down the railway line, the Great Southern Railway line from Perth" (E. Negri, 1984, p.4). "While he was there going through Broomehill he happened to see some land and that's when he bought his first property which he called 'Milan Place'" (E. Negri, 1984, p.5). This was the beginning of a Little Italy in the south west corner of Western Australia in the wheat belt and to where, over time, further Genoni brothers and sisters migrated and set up homesteads and broadacre farms. These Australian developments occurred during the childhood of Ernesto Genoni which was spent in Italy and which was, by his own account, one of privation.

Ernesto's memoir begins in "1889 or 1890" where he describes himself as "a sickly little boy" and he recalls "the anxious search for the beret with the pom pom in the middle that I had lost" (Genoni, c.1955, p.1). Of his time at the kindergarten in Tirano he writes of "the painful chilblains on the hands" (p.1). He goes to stay with his grandmother in Grosio and in the first grade he remembers "the piece of wood that we had to take to school each morning to keep the fire going in the stove" (p.1). At kindergarten he recalls "the cherries shared out among the children" (p.1), his "affectionate grandma", and "the roasted chestnuts that she would give to us in bed in the morning" (p.2).

"October 1892 we departed from Grosio with mum and [brother] Achille ... Grandma accompanied us to the end of the road past the church. The affectionate goodbye ... we were never again to see her in this life" (Genoni, c.1955, p.2). Ernesto writes of the "intense morning coldness" and of Milan as "the beginning of my long period of sadness and nostalgia" (p.3). At school there was "the young assistant who detested us", he remembers that "the Milanese youngsters detested us and mocked us" and that these were "sad days for the two country children" (p.3).

Ernesto describes the financial position of the family as "destitute" and their dwelling as "the tight hovel" (Genoni, c.1955, p.3). He mentions his ongoing anaemia during his teenage years and his unrequited love: "the vision of the girl at the water pump. My infatuation lasted several years without me ever having the courage to divulge my feelings" (Genoni, c.1955, p.8).

Ernesto studied art at Milan's Brera (Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera; Brera Academy of Fine Art) for five years (1906-1910) (Genoni, c.1955). Ernesto says he was "always the favourite brother of Rosa" (p.5). Rosa was the eldest of the siblings and the 'matriarch' of the family, she forged a successful career and life in Italy as a fashion designer (R. Genoni, 1924), as the wife of a leading Milan lawyer, and as a "socialist" (E. Negri, 1984, p.6) and a peace activist (WILPF, 1921). Rosa supported the migration of the siblings, and she kept in regular contact, however she herself never visited Australia. When Ernesto first departed for Australia in 1911, Rosa was the final remaining of the Genoni siblings in Italy.

**Table1: Timeline for Ernesto Genoni.**

Date	Event
21 September 1885	Born at Tirano, Italy (Italian Embassy, 1916).
c.1890	Ernesto's eldest brother, Emilio, leaves for Australia (Genoni, c.1955).
October 1902	German Section of the Theosophical Society founded, with Dr Rudolf Steiner as General Secretary (Wachsmuth, 1989).
1906-1910	Studies art at Brera Academy, Milan, for 5 years (Genoni, c.1955).
1908	"I first became interested in spirituality" (Genoni, c.1955, p.10).
New Years Eve 1911/1912	Arrives at Fremantle, Western Australia (his first time in Australia); "I find life glorious" (Genoni, c.1955, p.10).
January 1913	German Section is expelled from the Theosophical Society. The Anthroposophical Society is constituted in February 1913 with Rudolf Steiner as Honorary President. Assets and most members of the German Section transfer to the new society. (Easton, 1980, Lissau,2005).
1913	Returns to Italy; "the most awful time of my life" (Genoni, c.1955, p.11).
1914	Returns to Australia (Genoni, c.1955).
28 July 1914	Outbreak of World War I (WWI).
25 February 1916	Enlists as a volunteer in the Australian Imperial Force at Blackboy Hill, WA; Religion: Theosophy; "I enlisted in order to serve in the medical corps" (AIF, 1916a; Genoni, c.1955, p.13).
17 April 1916	Embarked from Fremantle, WA, on the 'Aeneas' troop carrier (AIF, 1917).
7 June -14 June 1916	Embarked for Alexandria, Egypt, on the 'Ionian', to join the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), disembarked Marseille, France (AIF, 1916b).
19 August 1916	Joined the 16th Battalion from the 17th Reinforcements, France (AIF, 1917).
26 August 1916	"Taken on strength of 16th Battalion A.I.F, France" (BEF, 1916).
29 August 1916	Italy declares war on Germany (Bean, 1929).
18 October 1916	Discharged from the AIF "In order to join the Italian Army" (He was conscripted) (AIF, 1916f).
19 October 1916	Reported to the Italian Embassy, London (AIF, 1916h).
1916	"Refusal to repeat the giuramento formula. Sent to prison" near Verona and then training in the medical corps (Genoni, c.1955, p.16).
11 November 1918	Armistice, end of WWI.
March 1919	Finally discharged from the Italian Army (Genoni, c.1955, p.18).
1919	Introduced to Anthroposophy by his sister Rosa Genoni in Milan (Genoni, c.1955, p.18).
1920	First visit to the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland (Genoni, c.1955, p.19).
c.1920 -1924	"The sad marriage" to Lydia Hillbrand (Genoni, 1932b; c.1955, p.19).
1924	At the Goetheanum, Dornach, from the beginning of the year until after Steiner is taken ill in September (Genoni, c.1955, p.20)
31 May 1926	Arrived in Fremantle, WA, on the 'Città di Genova' from Genova, Italy (Genoni, 1932b).
c.1926 -1928	2 years living at Hawthorn, Victoria (Genoni, 1932b).
1928	Started regular Anthroposophy meeting in Melbourne with Mrs Anne Macky (Genoni, c.1955, p.21)

Date	Event
1928	Joined the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG) nominating Dalmore Farm, Victoria as the experimental site; the first Australian member of the ECAFG (Paull, 2013).
c.1929 -1933	At Etna, Emilio's farm, WA, with many visits to Melbourne (Genoni, 1932b; c. 1955; Macpherson, c.1990).
19 May 1930 - 19 November 1930	"Agricultural studies: Biodynamics trip to Europe; visited Switzerland, Germany & England (Genoni, 1932b).
2 March 1932	Application for Australian Naturalization. His occupation was farmer, he was employed by Emilio Genoni at 'Etna', Certificate received 11 August (Genoni, 1932a; 1932b).
1932	Ernesto is a founding member of the Anthroposophical Society Victoria Michael Group (Macpherson, c.1990).
c.1933	Melbourne, Victoria; "I first met Ileen [Macpherson] and Mrs [Ruby] Macpherson" (Genoni, c.1955, p.23).
1935	'Demeter Biological Farm' a biodynamic farm in Dandenong of Ernesto Genoni and Ileen Macpherson, the name "registered in 1935" (Macpherson, c.1990, p.1).
14 March 1935	"Ileen comes to live at the farm", Victoria (Genoni, c.1955, p.23).
1939	Final visit to Dornach (Genoni, c.1955).
1952	Ernesto & Ileen, "we decide to build a house in Namur St. [Noble Park, Victoria]" (Genoni, c.1955, p.26).
1962	Ernesto becomes the leader of the Anthroposophical Society Victoria, the Michael Group (Macpherson, c.1990).
11 February 1975	Dies, Melbourne, Australia; aged 89 years (Sekretariat, 1924-1975).

### 3.2 Little Italy in Western Australia

*Australia!! ... I find life glorious! (Genoni, c.1955, p.10).*

Ernesto arrived at Fremantle, Western Australia (WA) on New Year's Eve 1911/12 (Genoni, c.1955). He had left a European winter and arrived in the middle of an Australian summer. He writes: "Australia!! The great joy of having my name called from the crowd while waiting to disembark from the 'Austerlitz'. We talked all night with the brothers in Rina's house" (p.10). The brothers had broadacre farms at Broome Hill (it is now Broomehill), 304 km from Perth ([www.googlemaps.com](http://www.googlemaps.com)) (Fig. 2).

Ernesto records: "Some painting but soon I am fully into farming at Etna", Emilio's farm (Genoni, c.1955, p.10). He writes cryptically of "Spiritualism ... the idea of the colony suggested by Rosa. Morris surprises me in seeing how seriously he takes up the ideas of spiritualism" (pp.10-11).

Maria Triaca describes the Little Italy that the Genoni brothers had created in the wheat belt of WA and that Ernesto was now stepping into:

"The Genoni brothers - Angelo, Maurice, Achille, Charlie, Jack and Emil - were an extraordinary, if not eccentric bunch. They arrived in the West in dribs and drabs in the 1890s just as the gold rush was beginning. After a stint in the mines they turned to clearing land in the south-west. They were pioneers who lived first in tents, then slab huts and farmhouses on their own properties. Ernesto, the artist and youngest of the family, who had a predilection for spiritualism and organic farming, had not yet arrived in Australia. The

brothers' farms were all within a few miles of each other, roughly in a straight line between the towns of Flat Rocks and Borderdale ... Italian names prevailed when the brothers selected their properties which bore titles like Sorrento, Etna and Belvedere" (Triaca, 1985, p. 89).



Figure 2. Broomehill, wheat belt of WA (photo: J.Paull, 2014).

"Sorrento, Angelo's property, was the showplace of the district. It was a sprawling brick place with all the trappings of a Victorian townhouse - ceiling roses, cornices, Persian rugs and a cellar off the kitchen" (p.89)

"Angelo was famous for his wines from Broomehill to Tambellup. He spent hours in the vineyard behind the house, pruning and spraying the grapes. The cellar was full of his homemade wine, but he also made grappa - highly illegal - in a still ... Every agent or wool buyer who visited Sorrento was offered a glass of the virulent clear spirit" (p.90).

"The garden at Sorrento was just as grand as the house. Standing in the centre was a fountain ... this was Angelo's way a creating a little bit of Italy in the middle of Australia ... Out the back was the vineyard, rows and rows of grapevines, pear trees and apples, figs and lemons. Nothing was left to chance. With the pigs, geese and ducks, we could have been totally self-sufficient My new brother-in-law was a mixture of Australian outback toughness and European civility and extravagance. With no farming background - he worked in a wine shop before coming to Australia - he had developed a successful farm running a thousand sheep. He mustered on horseback, cleared mallet thickets, classed wool, was at home on a jinker and became an expert rifle shot ... My sister [from Italy] walked into this environment and felt happier than ever before. She became the perfect farmer's wife" (pp.90-91).

"Part of her luggage included a collection of seeds, and within months of their arrival, the vegetable garden at Sorrento was crammed with vegetables none of us had seen since leaving home: zucchini, endive, chicory and flat-leaved parsley" (pp.98-99).

"Angelo was a voracious reader ... Although brought up a Catholic, conventional religion held nothing for him and he had long discarded it, but he was very interested in philosophy and later turned to spiritualism and anthroposophy as a follower of Rudolf Steiner" (p.91).

At this time of his life Ernesto was a dapper young Italian artist, a city boy with five years of training at Milan's Brera Academy. The opportunities in the bush were for farming, for hard physical labour. If there were opportunities for plying his trade as an artist they might have been found in the cities, in Perth or Melbourne for example, but Ernesto does not appear to have seriously explored such options. The brothers had forged their new lives in their adopted country; from teenage migrants they were now men of the land, who had spent their whole adult life in the Australian 'bush' and under the Aussie sun. Ernesto would certainly have been the odd man out, and he was restless. He writes: "About April 1913 I go with Angelo to Victoria. Angelo marries Matilde. Philip L'Hardy wants to settle me on the land on the Kowerup [Koo Wee Rup, WA] farm. I refuse the offer and after a few weeks ... I return to Italy by the English boat" (Genoni, c.1955, p.11).

### 3.3 Return to Italy

*Back in Italy. I am 28 and indeed I am going through the most awful time in my life (Genoni, c.1955, p.11).*

The decision to return to Italy in 1913 quickly turns sour for Ernesto. He writes that: “at last I decide to return to Australia” (p.11).

Ernesto’s situation had been different from that of his siblings. The brothers had left Italy to avoid Italy’s conscription, and both brothers and sisters alike had migrated to a new land to forge a new life. They had done just that, and by all accounts remarkably successfully. There was little or nothing for them in Italy, they had left as 17 year olds, or thereabouts, and while they were creating their happy ‘Little Italy’, they were, by now, more Australian than Italian, their business interests were in Australia, the skill sets acquired were those of the Australian bush, their adult life was all Australian, their children were Australian, and their futures were Australian. Ernesto and the brothers were siblings but the passage of time and their divergent experiences meant that Ernesto was an Italian while the brothers were now Australian, albeit of Italian heritage.

In contrast to his siblings, Ernesto seems to have visited Australia on a mission of reconnaissance rather than as a decisive emigration. The skills he brought were Italian skills, and the adult life experience that he brought was that of Italian big-city. There were the New World opportunities of Australia, but in stark competition were the Old World nostalgia and the familiarity of Italy. For Ernesto it was an unsettling dichotomy, which by a combination of circumstances and luck, good and bad, took more than a decade to resolve.

### 3.4 Return to Australia & enlistment

*Every young man was then enlisting so I thought to enlist too (Genoni, c.1955, p.12).*

Ernesto writes: “1914! After a month or two I am working at Etna the World War One starts” (Genoni, c.1955, p.11). It is no easy life: “after clearing 5 acres at Punchmarup I take up a contract to cut and burn down 50 acres by myself. The life in the bush camped in a tent. The hard work of cutting the green plants at the level of the ground. Toward the end Morris comes to help me” (p.11).

This was followed by more land clearing until “one morning the wind blew away the tent” (Genoni, c.1955, p.12). Ernesto “left the brothers” and “at Brunswick. There I got work at Mr Smith digging potatoes. At first I was lodging at the hotel but then I got a tent and was camping in the bush” (p.12). Having finished the potatoes, Mr Smith “got me a job at the local State farm as a driver with 2 horses and a lorry carting maize to make insilage” (p.12). There was work but Ernesto remained restless. “Life was too easy and without any interest. Xmas 1915! What a poor Xmas! Alone in the bush with a sore finger” (p.12).

At this point Ernesto made a fateful decision that shaped his next decade - a decision laced with some irony given that his brothers had migrated to Australia to avoid conscription in Italy and that his sister Rosa was a leading peace activist in Italy. Ernesto writes: “At new year day 1916 I went to Bunbury to enlist with the purpose of serving in the medical corps. Fifteen days after I was at the Blackboy camp near Perth. It was not



an easy life at first. Sleeping on a bare floor ... And all that swearing!" (Genoni, c.1955, p. 12).

On his enlistment papers, Ernesto had his age as "30 years 4 months", his place of birth as "Tirano, Italy", his marital status as single, his occupation as "Labourer", his next of kin as "Emil Genoni, Broome Hill, WA", his height as "5 foot 8 inches", his weight as "15" stone, his complexion as "Dark", his eyes and hair as "Brown", "Yes" that he was prepared to "undergo inoculation against small pox and enteric fever", and his "Religious Denomination" as "Theosophy" (Genoni, 1916). Thirty percent of enlistees had their occupation recorded as "Labourer" (Scott, 1936), theosophists would have been rare.

Ernesto was an unlikely volunteer for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) of World War 1 (1914-1918). He was Italian, an artist, and a theosophist. He was the youngest sibling in a pacifist family of which his older brothers had each progressively migrated to Australia before they turned eighteen - to avoid being conscripted into the Italian army (Triaca, 1985) which was fighting Italy's ill-conceived nineteenth century colonial expansionist wars in Africa (including in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somaliland) (Nicolle, 2003).

The AIF training for war was brief: "After few weeks we were sent to continue instruction at Bunbury to be returned again from there to Blackboy waiting to be sent overseas. I mentioned to the sergeant how I enlisted in order to serve in the medical corp and not as a fighter. I was told that I was a cold footed and I was left behind when my company left for Europe. Few weeks after I left with another contingent. I was mess orderly and I liked it" (Genoni, c.1955, p.13). Ernesto embarked on the troop ship HMAT Aeneas leaving Fremantle on 17 April 1916 (AIF, 1916d).

These fresh unbloodied troops were sent to France via "Egypt. Suez ... The flies! The sand storm ... we embarked at Alexandria and disembarked at Marseille. From here to Étampes [a base camp outside of Paris] by train ... I was made cook's helper in the kitchen. The drilling with straw bags and bayonets. The oral instructions by that red faced Sergeant Major!" (Genoni, c.1955, p.13).

### **3.5 The Somme WW1 AIF**

*Then we were sent to the Somme ... Pozières ... The sergeant calls for volunteer stretcher bearers. I came forward ... the first vision of dead bodies. My inner trust of Christ as Lord even of the shells! (Genoni, c.1955, p.14).*

In 1916 there was no more dangerous place in the world to be than "the Western Front" in general, and Pozières in particular (Charlton, 1986). The first Australian to enlist in WWI in the AIF is buried at Pozières (Crawley, 2014). And Pozières was to be the first engagement for Ernesto, and the AIF's 4th Australian Division, 16th Battalion.

Once at the front line, Ernesto volunteered as a stretcher bearer and was at immediately in the midst of the bloody maelstrom. The Somme was, and remains, the most lethal battlefield in which Australian troops have ever engaged. The scene at Pozières was described as "Dead and wounded lay everywhere, some killed on their stretchers, with the stretcher bearers lying dead beside them" (Bean, 1929, p.709).

According to Charles Bean, Australia's official war historian:

"In the first AIF everyone had looked on the work of stretcher-bearers as rather suitable for men who, for some reason, disliked more than most the prospect of killing others ... I dare say that in the long run a good many of those who did become stretcher-bearers ... did volunteer for it because they were that kind of man, who deep in their hearts preferred being killed to killing" (Bean, 1947, p.116).

"Until the First Battle of the Somme many battalions had used their bandsmen as stretcher-bearers. After that battle this system generally was abandoned. For one thing, after such battles the band was too badly needed for cheering up the troops! A battle like Pozières sometimes made a clean sweep of the regimental bearers. Also, on its side, the work of the bearers was too important to be left to unselected men; they were now specially selected 'for their physique and guts'" (p.118).

"They needed to ... stand up to a trial like that of Pozières ... a reeking desert of bombarded shell craters, the stretcher-bearers and runners were the only ones who were regularly expected to move through barrages which ... cut off the front line from the rear. Most men who went through the battle will recall the little parties of four or five men who would come, erect, winding their way across that wilderness, amid the shell bursts, with the leader holding a stick with a white rag - the handiest substitute for a red cross flag. That flag would usually prevent the German snipers from shooting, but nothing could stop the barrages ... 'It's no good dropping the stretcher now - if we're going to be hit we shall be hit, walking or crouching!' So they went proudly erect at Pozières, Passchendaele and Messines, too, throughout the war ... The stretcher-bearers won ... the highest place in the estimate of all their comrades" (p.118).

"For men thrown into the fighting at Pozières the experience was simply hell ... Stretcher-bearers worked to exhaustion, usually exposed to fire, carrying men to the aid posts close behind the front line. Sergeant Albert Coates recorded: 'Many men buried and torn to pieces by high explosive. For a mile behind the trenches it is a perfect hell of shell fire. Terrible sights. The stretcher-bearers are having a terrible time, some blown to pieces together with their living freight'" (Burness, 2006).



Figure 3. Australian stretcher bearers on the Somme (Will Dyson, 1917, Australian War Memorial Canberra, public

Ernesto wrote of: "The front line dug-out. The soldier with the shattered foot crawling in. My dwindling strength. Three days after we were sent back into the rear. My failing in going back to the dug-out to bring in some of the wounded there remained for long as an inner reproach" (Genoni, c.1955, p.14).

Of WWI stretcher-bearers "many companies had every stretcher-bearer killed or wounded. Wherever a wounded man was seen... these men made their way, whatever the danger ... every man watched and respected them" (Bean, 1947, p.117). Australian war artist, Will Dyson commented: "These men are not heroes from choice - they are heroes because someone has got to be heroic" (Dyson, 1918, p.38) (Fig.3).

Writing on the battlefield, Lieutenant J.A. Raws described the grim situation: "We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless ... I have a dead man's helmet, another dead man's gas protector, a dead man's bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men's blood, and partly splattered with a comrade's brains" (Bean, 1929, p.661). Both Raws and his brother were killed soon after on the battlefields of the Somme (Bean, 1947).

The Battle of the Somme was "the bloodiest fighting of the entire war ... a merciless war of attrition ... The tit-for-tat artillery bombardments reduced town, countryside and soldiers to piles of pulverized waste" (Lindsay, 2011, p.101).

"After few days we were sent into Belgium. Ypres. The life in those dug-outs along the canal, the huge rats. The horrible experience of the barrage. Another great failing of mine when I was called to take away a dying man in the trenches ... then another occasion I saw one of the stretcher-bearers hit and fall. I gathered my courage and went out. The whistling of bullets around me told me soon that I was the target of German snipers" (Genoni, c.1955, pp.14-15).

A memorial plaque on a French town hall pays tribute: "In 1916 the Australian Army entered the Western Front with a force of 180,000 men, three times the number that served in Gallipoli in 1915. 46,000 of the 60,000 killed in the War died on the Western Front. From a population of just 4.5 million people, 313,000 volunteered to serve during the War. 65% of those became casualties" (Lindsay, 2011, p.111).

"Back again in the second line and again in the front line. The barrage with trench mortar. The dying wounded in the front line during the barrage. My conduct was not brilliant. The night in the dug out. The nightmare" (Genoni, c.1955, p.15). Ernesto's nightmare came to an abrupt and wholly unexpected end.

Italy declared war on Germany on 28 August 1916 (Bean, 1929) (although Italy had entered WWI on 23 May 1915 against the Austro-Hungarian Empire). On 1 September 1916, the Italian Embassy in London wrote to the British War Office: "I am directed by H. E. the Italian Ambassador to ask for the discharge of Pte. Ernesto Genoni No. 5362 now serving with the 16th Battalion, 4th A.D.B.D. Australian Expeditionary Force, who is an Italian subject and whose class has been called up for service" (Italian Embassy, 1916, p. 1). The request was forwarded by the AIF's Lieutenant C.R.E. Jennings to AIF administration "for any action you may deem necessary please" (Jennings, 1916)

Italy's request reached Ernesto at the battlefield. "The corporal Cook one morning calls me and tells me that I am to go to London for discharge from the Australian Army. At first I thought it was a joke, but before evening I was on my way to London" (Genoni, c.1955, p. 15). "At the request of the War Office you are being transferred to A.I.F. Administrative Headquarters, London, for discharge in order to allow you to join the Italian Army. You will proceed to Popperinghe and catch the 6.28 train on the morning of the 16th inst., and should report to the A.I.F Headquarters in London on the following day" (AIF, 1916g).

Ernesto was discharged from the AIF in London on 18 October 1916 "in consequence of joining the Italian Army" (Butler, 1916, p.1). The pro forma Proceedings of Discharge stated that the discharge was "to join the Italian Army" and incorrectly stated that "such discharge having been granted to me in England at my own request". His Certificate of Character on discharge reported his "conduct and character" as "very good" (AIF, 1916c)

His discharge papers record his service as “237 days” and required him to relinquish his right to repatriation to Australia with the form stating that “I have no further claim on the Commonwealth Government for or in respect of a free passage from England to Australia now or at any time hereafter and do hereby release the Commonwealth Government from all further claims and demands of any kind whatsoever except as regards any Pension to which I may be legally entitled under the War Pensions Act” (AIF, 1916e, p.2) Ernesto nominated the address of his “intended place of residence” as “Via Cramer 6, Milano, Italy” which was the address of the peace organisations Comitato Pro Umanità (Podreider, 2011) and the Italian branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, 1921) in which organisations Ernesto’s sister, Rosa Genoni, was prominent.

Being conscripted into the Italian Army unexpectedly plucked Ernesto from the “hell” of the killing fields of the Western Front. “For his service with the Australian Imperial Force Private Genoni is entitled to the British War and Victory medals ... His present address (if he survives) is unknown” (AIF, 1921).

### 3.6 Italian Army

*... the Colonel told me that I must have some good saint in Paradise looking after me. ‘Yes’ I said ‘I believe so’ (Genoni, c.1955, p.16).*

A handwritten note in Ernesto’s Australian war service records states that: “This man joined the Italian Red Cross not the Italian Army” (AIF, 1924). What is certainly true is that Ernesto was conscripted into the Italian Army, that the AIF facilitated this, that Ernesto voluntarily joined the AIF, but there was nothing voluntary about his conscription into the Italian Army.

Ernesto’s time in the Italian Army, from 1916 until he was finally demobilized (demobbed) in March 1919 was a difficult time for him as he resisted (successfully but at personal cost) being “an Italian infantry soldier” and the bureaucracy struggled (mostly unsuccessfully) to cope with the concepts of ‘conscientious objection’ and ‘non-combatant duties’ (Genoni, c.1955). The right to conscientious objection was not recognised by Italian authorities until 1972 (Biesemans, 2014).

Ernesto’s Italian military experience was punctuated with imprisonment, trials, and service in the medical corps and a military hospital. The clash of cultures surfaced immediately with “The refusal to repeat the giuramento formula [the oath]. Sent to prison. Called by the company captain to explain and then sent to another prison. He told me that I was to be sent to Verona in the medical corps for instruction and then to go to the front” (Genoni, c.1955, p.16).

Ernesto served in the Military Hospital at Verona and he reports that “eventually I was transferred permanently there” (Genoni, c.1955, p.16). Sister Rosa visited her brother in Verona. He writes of “Her letter relating to rumours of peace. I read the letter loudly ... an officer took the letter from me ... I was sent to prison ... chained I was sent to the fort prison on the hill near Verona waiting for the trial ... Then the trial at the Military Tribunal. I got three months which I had already done waiting for the case” (p.17).

In “Spring 1918”, Ernesto wrote “How tired of such a life ... my conversation about spiritual things” (Genoni, c.1955, p.17). Some optimism which creeps into his account is

tinged with the reality of disease sweeping Europe: “Autumn 1918! The 14 points of Wilson. I believed at the time that a new era was to enter into the World. The raging influenza” (p.17).

To the end, the relationship between Ernesto and the Italian military was uneasy, at best it seems to have been an uneasy truce with their pacifist conscript. “I was sent to South Italy to accompany a convalescent soldier at his home. In returning instead of stopping at Verona I went to Milan where I found Rosa and others of the family sick with influenza. I stayed for few days to nurse them. Then went back to Verona to be sent to prison for being absent without leave for weeks” (Genoni, c.1955, pp.17-18).

“November 1918 Peace! But they kept me till the following March 1919. They discharged me without giving me il pacco di congedo on account of my bad record! But at last I was a free civilian once more” (Genoni, c.1955, p.18).

### **3.7 Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy**

*Dornach ... I was trying to paint in the anthroposophic way. Again at bottom I was not happy with my painting. I was admitted to the Class. My gradual understanding of the German language at the lectures (Genoni, c.1955, pp.19-20).*

Ernesto's discharge from the AIF in 1916 extinguished his right to free repatriation to Australia, and he did not return to Australia until 1926. The post war years in Europe for Ernesto (1919-1926) witnessed his introduction to and engagement with Anthroposophy, with its spiritual guru, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), and with the Goetheanum, the headquarters of Anthroposophy at Dornach, Switzerland.

Ernesto was introduced to Anthroposophy in Milan by his sister Rosa, shortly after his discharge from the Italian Army and he joined the Milan branch of the Anthroposophical Society (Sekretariat, 1924-1975). “Rosa tells me of Anthroposophy ... Signorina Schwarz was inviting Rosa to an Anthroposophy reading in the afternoon. She could not go but asked me if I would like to go. So I went (with Fanny [Rosa's daughter] I think) to the first Anthroposophy meeting. For nearly 18 months I went regularly to the weekly Anthroposophy readings. Meanwhile I took up again painting” (Genoni, c.1955, p.18).

The Anthroposophical Society was constituted on 2 February 1913 (Lissau, 2005) by Dr Rudolf Steiner, and it grew out of the Theosophical Society which had been founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and was then headed by Annie Besant (1847-1933). Steiner was the inaugural General Secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society which was founded in October 1902 (Wachsmuth, 1989). This position gave Steiner leadership of the Society in Germany, Switzerland and Austria-Hungary (Easton, 1980). In this role Steiner lectured and published extensively (e.g Steiner, 1910, 1911). A philosophical falling out between Steiner and the Theosophical Society leadership, based in Adyar, Chennai (then Madras), India, culminated in the expulsion of the German Section from the Theosophical Society in January 1913 (Easton, 1980). The Anthroposophical Society was founded in the wake of this expulsion with Steiner as Honorary President, the assets of the defunct Section were transferred to the new entity (Easton, 1980). At the time there were over 2500 members of the German Section and most moved their affiliation across to the new society (Easton, 1980). Steiner subsequently refounded the Society as the General Anthroposophical Society on 24

December 1923 (Steiner, 1923). Both Theosophy and Anthroposophy are non-religious groups offering similar but different spiritual esoteric philosophies. Both movements are in the perennialist/traditionalist school of philosophy (Huxley, 1946) which was also championed by Lord Northbourne (1896-1982), the biodynamic farmer who coined the term 'organic farming' (Paull, 2014a).

Rudolf Steiner was a polymath who has been described as "one of the greatest men of the twentieth century" (Wilson, 1985, p.170) and "one of the most influential - yet also controversial - reformers of the 20th century" (Vegesack & Kries, 2010, p.16). Steiner was prolific, he delivered more than 5,000 lectures (Stewart, 2012) and is the author of more than 300 books (Turgeniev, 2003). In person, he was charismatic, and as a speaker, mesmerizing. He spoke extemporaneously, he "used no notes at all" (Sunday School Chronicle, 1922). His writing has been described as "impenetrable" (Lachman, 2007, p. 114) but in person "he possessed the qualities of expositor and preacher to a matchless degree ... Dr Steiner ... soon holds his listeners under the spell of his power" (Hare, 1922, p.219). Steiner left some listeners "deeply impressed" and others "frankly perplexed" (Manchester Guardian, 1922). Worldwide practical movements have grown out of Steiner's New Age philosophies including Waldorf education and biodynamic agriculture.

When Ernesto left Australia in 1916, he stated his religion as "Theosophist". A decade later when he returned to Australia he was an Anthroposophist. It was a journey fostered by Rosa and entrenched by visits to Dornach, meeting Steiner, and attending Steiner's lectures. Anthroposophy was to become a lifelong *raison d'être* for Ernesto.

"In 1920 ... I went to Dornach. What a strange impression I received from the first view of the Goetheanum building ... the short conversation with Fräulein [Elizabeth] Vreede [1879-1943] ... chilly! ... the meeting with the Doctor [Rudolf Steiner] ... the bewildering impression of the interior of the Goetheanum. I could not enter in such saturated life of the spirit and after a few days I left ... the reproach from Miss [Edith] Maryon [1872-1924]. In the following years it was a painful search to find my way in life" (Genoni, c.1955, p. 19).

The Goetheanum building (pronounced girty-arn-um) takes its name from the German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) who has been characterized as a "universal genius" (Viëtor, 1950, p.3). Steiner had spent years editing Goethe's scientific works for publication and was "the leading expert on Goethe's scientific writings" (Hemleben, 1963, p.46). At the time of the split with the Theosophical Society, money had already been collected and a building designed by Steiner, primarily as a theatrical space. The Munich authorities denied planning permission for the new construction which Steiner described as embodying "a new conception of architecture" (Steiner, 1914, p.27). The denial of planning permission coincided with a lecture tour to Switzerland by Steiner. He was offered vacant land on a hillside overlooking the Swiss village of Dornach on the outskirts of Basel. The outcome of this generosity was that the Goetheanum was built on the Dornach land and became the headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society (Easton, 1980).

It was this first Goetheanum building that had such an impact on Ernesto in 1920. Easton (1980, p.273) writes that "by 1920 the building was by no means finished ... Nevertheless

by 1920 the exterior of the Goetheanum was finished, and the stage was usable, even though the seats in the auditorium were not yet in place". The first Goetheanum was a multi-domed construction of timber with a slate roof. It burnt to the ground on New Year's Eve 1922/23 (Lissau, 2005). Steiner designed the second Goetheanum as a bold manifestation of Anthroposophic architecture and, with a thought to flammability, this second reincarnation was in reinforced concrete. It is this second Goetheanum that present visitors can marvel at as an architectural masterpiece, and that Ernesto would have visited on his later trips to Dornach.

Ernesto married but it was not a happy match. "Lidia ... the sad marriage. ... Right through they were sad years ... Lydia left at the beginning of 1924. Soon after I went to Dornach" (Ernesto uses both spellings, Lidia and Lydia) (Genoni, c.1955, p.19). Lydia Hillbrand was born in Wells, Austria, she was 14 years younger than Ernesto, they had no children together, and he reported her living in London when he later applied for Australian naturalization (Genoni, 1932b).

Ernesto was at this stage associating with Alfred Meebold (1863-1952), anthroposophist and author (e.g. 1937, 1940), and this friendship was later maintained by Meebold's visits to him in Australia - in both WA and Victoria.

At Dornach, Ernesto was painting, attending anthroposophy lectures, and trying to master German. Steiner's lectures were in German, and Dornach is in the German-speaking region of Switzerland.

In June 1924 Steiner travelled to Koberwitz (then Germany, now Kobierzyce, Poland) and presented the eight lectures of the Agriculture Course (Steiner, 1924a, 1924c). It was the only time he presented an agriculture course. There were 111 attendees from six countries, Germany (N=61), Poland (N=30), Austria (N=9), Switzerland (N=7), France (N=2), Sweden (N=2), with none were from Italy (Paull, 2011a), and although it seems that Ernesto was at the Goetheanum at this time (Genoni, c.1955) he did not travel to attend the Koberwitz course.

Ernesto reports that "Rosa and Fanny went to England to the anthroposophy gathering at Torquay [England]" (Genoni, c.1955, p.20). It was Steiner's final trip to Britain and he sought to entrench his Waldorf education in the Anglo-world (Merry, 1924; Steiner, 1924b, 1924d).

Ernesto writes cryptically of "the big Michael painting" and he states that "In September of that year [1924] the Doctor became ill. I returned to Milan" (Genoni, c.1955, p.20). Steiner withdrew from public life on 28 September confined to his sick bed, and he died 30 March 1925 (Collison, 1925).

"In Spring 1925 Caldera came to see me and persuade me to return to Australia with him. The funny assessment of the Taxation officer ... at the date I would have to pay I was on the sea on the way to Australia" (Genoni, c.1955, pp.20-21). Ernesto was now aged 40, and although his vocational training was in art, he was nevertheless somewhat unsettled and ambivalent about his art. He was leaving behind a post-war Europe of mixed experiences, where a lowlight was "the sad marriage", and a highlight was Steiner's Anthroposophy which nourished his spiritual cravings.

### 3.8 Migration to Australia

*Mr Genoni will proceed to Melbourne, where he will open a studio and hold an exhibition of his work (The Australasian, 1926, p.47).*

Ernesto arrived in Australia, for the third time, in 1926, and this time it could be fairly characterized as an emigration. He had been in Europe for a decade, firstly on the Western Front as a stretcher-bearer with the AIF, then in prison and the medical corps with the Italian Army, he had an estranged wife who refused him a divorce, he had discovered Anthroposophy under the tutelage of Rudolf Steiner, and he had tried his hand as an anthro-artist, painting in the anthroposophic style.

He brought to Australia an exhibition of his art works and this was announced in the Australian press in Perth (The West Australian, 1926), Adelaide (The Advertiser, 1926) and Melbourne (The Australasian, 1926). A Melbourne newspaper reported that: "After remaining in Western Australia for about a month, Mr Genoni will proceed to Melbourne, where he will open a studio and hold an exhibition of his work. He has made arrangements for a group of Italian artists to forward samples of their work periodically for exhibition in Australian cities" (The Australasian, 1926, p.47). The account reported that after serving in the AIF and the Italian army: "He then settled in Italy and took up his former profession as an artist" (The Australasian, 1926, p.47).

It seems that Ernesto's Plan A, the art exhibition, never materialized, nor a studio, nor the importation of contemporary Italian art works. They receive no mention at all in Ernesto's memoirs. The art certainly arrived and there are art works by Ernesto in Western Australia and Victoria, and Peggy Macpherson remembers there being many paintings in his (later) Melbourne residence shared with his partner Ileen (Macpherson, 2014).



Figure 4. Oil painting by Ernesto Genoni (undated).

A handful of oil paintings have been sighted by the author and on that basis it can be said that some of the art is signed "E. Genoni" and some others are unsigned (Fig.4). It seems that the art arrived as flat canvasses - which would be a sensible choice for the convenience and cost of transport - and that it was (or some of it was) stretched and framed in Western Australia (on the basis that at least one stretcher is

labelled with the Australian branding "Cooee". Known art includes portraits, Italianesque landscapes and a still life.

There are at least four reasons, that can be speculated, as to why the exhibition never eventuated. Firstly, Ernesto arrived at the onset of a recession (in Australia and elsewhere) just before the Great Depression (Crabbe, 1989), businesses and farms were



struggling to survive, and the discretionary spend was probably at its low point for the twentieth century. England was the major destination for Australian agricultural exports. Prices were deflating, and agricultural wages in England had fallen by 33% from 1920 to 1926 (Ernle, 1927). Secondly, Australia had been bloodied in a hard and bitter WWI, had lost much of the flower of its youth to Euro-bullets and Euro-politics, and now, in the 1920s and 1930s, the esteem that the old-world had perhaps enjoyed pre-WWI was now somewhat tarnished. Australians were jaded with Europe, the experience of WWI had been bitter and devastating for Australia. Thirdly, in the interbellum years (from the end of WWI to the outbreak of WWII) Australian art was itself coming of age, and to the fore, European-trained artists and home-grown artists had, after some mis-steps, learned to capture the light, the landscape, and the eucalypts of the new continent. As Australian artist Lloyd Rees observed "After the war [WWI] there was an amazing spirit abroad in Sydney - a triumphant feeling. There was an uprising of intense Australianism, which was not confined to the painters but spread to the writers as well" (Rees, 1985, p.112). Fourthly, there was Ernesto himself. He was always a modest and self effacing man, a thinker, a philosopher, and, yes, an artist, but never a salesman, a marketer, a self-promoter, nor an entrepreneur, such latter skills would have proven useful, and perhaps even essential, for a successful art career.

The first stop in Australia for Ernesto was Emilio's farm, Etna, in WA. As Triaca tells it: "Then came anthroposophy, the philosophy of the Austrian, Rudolf Steiner. It arrived at the Genoni's through their youngest brother, Ernesto ... For the Genoni's anthroposophy was like a religion with its own shrine - the Goetheanum in Switzerland - and its own holy books - the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Ernesto became the master's disciple, his brothers the willing students. They would have study evenings up at Etna where they read aloud Rudolf Steiner's published works on subjects as diverse as spiritualism, the education of children and physiology and therapeutics ... Part of it was natural healing and organic farming" (Triaca, 1985, p.116).

In 1927, Ernesto travelled to Melbourne, then "went to Dalmore [70 km south east of Melbourne] at the time Morris and the other Italians took up the Makillic farm (Genoni, c. 1955, p.21). Farm work was interspersed with art: "I was doing some fotography [sic] for the Sicilians. Vacarri's pastel portrait" (p.21).

In terms of leaving his mark in Australia - and in terms of Anthroposophy and biodynamic agriculture - 1928 was a key year for Ernesto. He writes that "In 1928(?) I discovered Mrs Macky at the New Conservatorium [of Music]. We started some Anthroposophy meetings in Hope Street at Mrs Hawkins' house" (Genoni, c.1955, p.21). This laid the foundations for the Anthroposophy Society in Australia, Victoria, aka the Michael Group (Macpherson, c.1990) which exists to the present. Anne Macky was a music composer who had, on a visit to Britain in 1922, seen an advertisement for Steiner's Education Conference at Oxford University (Paull, 2011c) and on the basis of the flyer had attended the Conference (Bak, 1996).

In 1932, Ernesto was a cofounder, in Melbourne, of the Anthroposophy Society in Australia, Victoria, Michael Group, and he was active in it for the next four decades, that is the rest of his life. He was from 1962 the leader of the Michael Group (Macpherson, c. 1990).

### 3.9 The Agriculture Course, The Experimental Circle, and the European Grand Tour of Biodynamics

*In 1930 I went to Dornach again to become acquainted with the B.D. farming (Genoni, c.1955, p.21).*

In 1928 Ernesto applied to join the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG). He was the first Australian to join the Experimental Circle (Paull, 2013). By the time of the Agriculture Course (June 1924) Rudolf Steiner was mortally ill, and he probably knew it. He warned the attendees of the Course that they should take all he said as “hints”, that they should put everything to the test, and when everything was tested it should be presented to the world (1924a; 1924e, p.10). The Experimental Circle was Steiner’s vehicle intended to achieve this outcome, and over time the Circle attracted members from Europe, Africa, the Americas and Australasia. When Ernesto joined the Circle these were still ‘early days’, the term ‘biodynamic’ had not been coined, and it was not until Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer’s 1938 book *Biodynamic Farming and Gardening* that there was a ‘coming out’ of biodynamics as a named and differentiated agriculture offering global antidote to chemical agriculture (Paull, 2011b; Pfeiffer, 1938).



Figure 5. Rudolf Steiner’s Agriculture Course (in German) #165 issued to Ernesto Genoni; inscribed “Herrn Genoni (Australia)”.

Ernesto’s memoir states that “in 1929 I received the Agriculture Course from Dornach” (Genoni, c.1955, p.21). His copy of the Agriculture Course was in German, he applied for membership of the Experimental Circle in 1928 nominating that experimental work would be carried out at Dalmore Farm in Victoria. At this time, the transcript of the Agriculture Course was only issued to members of the ECAFG and each copy was numbered. Ernesto’s copy of the Agriculture Course is inscribed as #165, and it survives to this day with Ernesto’s makeshift reinforced bindings along with his pencilled annotations (Fig.5). The first English edition of the Agriculture Course did not appear until 1929, and all subsequent Australian members of the Experimental Circle - including his brother Emilio - received typescript English language versions of the Course (and the numbers are prefaced with an ‘E’) (Paull, 2013).

Ernesto embarked on a grand tour of biodynamics in Europe in 1930 - Switzerland (14 June -15 July), Germany (15 July - 12 September), England (13 September - 1 October). He declared in his naturalization paperwork that the object of the journey was “Agricultural studies” (Genoni, 1932b, p.1).

Ernesto states that: “In 1930 I went to Dornach again to become acquainted with the B.D. farming” (Genoni, c.1955, p.21). What follows in his memoir is a Who’s Who of the

leading practitioners and advocates of biodynamics in Europe at the time: “[Ehrenfried] Pfeiffer ... [Erika] Riese ... Count Lerchenfeld ... [Ernst] Stegemann at Marienhöhe ... [Erhard] Barch near Berlin ... [Max] Schwarz near Bremen ... London with [Carl] Mirbt ... Return to the continent via Holland, [Ehrenfried] Pfeiffer Farm at Rosendale ... Then Dornach and then Marseilles where we [Ernesto & Fred] embark on the Ville d’Amiens for Australia” (pp.21-22).

It seems likely that on such a seriously and thoughtfully constructed study tour that Ernesto would have documented and recorded his experience - given that he had been a tertiary student for five years, that he later wrote a memoir, and that the objective of this study tour was educational, and was to capture for himself and his New World colleagues the practices and the lessons learned in Europe for anthroposophic farming. Anthroposophic farming was later called ‘biodynamic farming’ and ‘biodynamics’, thereby satisfying Steiner’s injunction to decouple the practices from Anthroposophy and to let his new agriculture stand on its own merits. Travel notebook/s of Ernesto have not been uncovered by the present author, but if they existed, they were likely valued by Ernesto and we could be optimistic that they may still surface.

Ernesto’s 1932 Application for Naturalization followed close on the heels of his return from the BD trip to Europe. His reason for applying for naturalization is stated as “Permanent residence and desires full citizenship” and the application stated that he was in good health (Nuschell, 1932).

“Back to Etna with Fred. He soon proceeds for Victoria while I remain at Etna till the beginning of 1933” (Genoni, c.1955, p.22). Australia, and the world, or at least Australia’s major agricultural trading partners, were still in the midst of the Depression and this hit Australian farmers hard. Ernesto reported a second visit by Alfred Meebold, anthroposophist and biodynamicist. Ernesto writes of “The attempt to do BD. We bought cows and sent cream to the Butter Factory - rearing pigs with wheat and skimmed milk. Made insilage ... during winter was fed to the sheep. We grew blue peas and lupins” (p. 22).

However: “The Bank closed in and the farm got near bankruptcy” (Genoni, c.1955, p.22). This was the end of Ernesto’s Western Australia adventures. He writes that “Angelo from Melbourne offered me the Dalmore farm to manage. Went to Victoria once more and started at Dalmore. We build the little house” (p.23).

At this stage Ernesto is in his late forties. “Started to go again to the Anthroposophy meetings in Collins Street. This is where I met first Ileen and Mrs R[uby] Macpherson. The letter from Ileen and our first meeting in Dandenong ... Our meetings then become more frequent” (Genoni, c.1955, p.23).

At this point meteorology intervenes. “The flood destroyed everything at the [Dalmore] farm. Then the idea arose of starting a B.D. farm with Ileen in Dandenong. My meetings with the Macpherson Family in Punt Road. - Then the farm on the highway was bought. I started working there living in a tent and boarding with Mrs Armor” (p.23).

In his memoirs Ernesto only states one date with precision. He writes that “On the 14 March 1935 Ileen came to live at the farm” (Genoni, c.1955, p.23). He is aged 49. He reports that “The crop paddock was plowed up and the first crop of peas without any

manure was put in ... The miserable peas crop ... got stable manure wherever we could get it. The next 10 acres near the creek were bought and later Mr Mehan 19 acres ... Fred comes to work ... Mr Meebold comes to stay for a fortnight at the farm ... The unhappy struggling for making a B.D farm. The sales of vegetables on the road” (pp. 23-24).

Always the restless soul, Ernesto records that “I am planning to go to Europe, but Ileen gets sick and is sent to hospital in Brighton. Eventually she is returning home. Again in 1938 I am planning to go to Europe with the understanding that Ileen should follow” (Genoni, c.1955, p.24). He leaves alone on a German freighter “with only one other traveller. A poor trip!” (p.25). Perhaps the goal of the trip was to seek a divorce, in any event he records that “Met again Lydia .... a further attempt to get a divorce, but unsuccessful. Gone to Dornach ... the dark clouds of war are gathering over Europe ... I left for Australia in June or July 1939” (p.25). This was Ernesto's final trip to Europe.

When he returned from Europe: “At the farm I found things with Ileen not too good ... World War II. We carried on the milk contract ... up to March 1940 ... Ileen carried on the milking ... but her legs begin to give away” (Genoni, c.1955, p.25).

“Mrs Macpherson bought for me the block in Namur Street ... Ileen is sent to hospital again ... But gradually her legs are getting worse. She had to be taken to hospital but it was too late; she could not walk anymore” (Genoni, c.1955, pp.25-26).

From hospital “Ileen returns to the farm where we live together. In 1952 we decide to build the new house in Namur St. In September 1953 Ileen comes to the new home and in March 1954 the farm is sold” (Genoni, c.1955, p.26). Ernesto is by now aged 69 years. Ileen was by this time wheelchair bound and Ernesto was her carer (Macpherson, 2014). The records of the Anthroposophy Society at Dornach have Ernesto's address as 17 Namur St, Noble Park, Victoria from December 1954 through to his death in 1975 (Sekretariat, 1924-1975).

The final paragraph in Ernesto's memoir is “From the beginning of 1952 we have the monthly study of the Leading Thoughts at the central Group, while since 1944 we have meetings in Avoca St and Sandringham and then at Kooyong Rd” (p.26).

## **4 Conclusion**

Ernesto Genoni was a modest man, a restless soul, a seeker, an artist, a WWI volunteer, a conscientious objector, a theosophist, a pioneering anthroposophist in Australia, the pioneering biodynamic farmer in Australia, a man of unrealized dreams, and a devoted partner of Ileen Macpherson. He lived through the tumultuous times of WWI, the Great Depression, and WWII. This is the first account of his life other than an account of his Somme experience and a conference presentation earlier this year and (Paull, 2014b, 2014c). A future account of his life may benefit from some further discovery of letters and correspondence, notes, artworks, and photographs, and perhaps, as well, the memoirs of others, at least some of which may have survived the ravages of time and loss of provenance and which were not available for the present account.

There are many ‘what ifs’ that arise from the present account. Ernesto was known in the family as “the artist” (E. Negri, 1984, p.5; Triaca, 1985, p.89) and he had five years art training at the prestigious Brera Academy in Milan. Yet when he volunteered in the AIF he

had his occupation as “labourer” (AIF, 1916a, p.1) - if he had been more forthright might he have been a Australian war artist? Decades later when he applied for naturalization he had his occupation as “farmer” (Genoni, 1932b, p.1). Ernesto was always somewhat ambivalent about his art. When he returned to Australia from Europe after a decade away, he announced a forthcoming art exhibition. This plan was scuppered by some combination of Ernesto’s own reticence, the economic recession and the onset of the Great Depression, and perhaps the lack of sibling support whose skills were agricultural. It is unclear if Ernesto ever made that challenging transition from Euro-style artist to Australian artist - a path travelled with some success by, for example, British trained artist John Glover (Hansen, 2003), German trained artist Eugene von Guérard (Pullin, 2011), and mastered by Australian-trained artist Hans Heysen (Hylton & Neylon, 2004).

In 1926 Ernesto was announcing a planned exhibition of his art so it is quite possible, perhaps likely, that a distributed exhibition of his works still exists. There are at least works known (to the author) to exist in Victoria and Western Australia, and there is the prospect of the survival of some works in Italy and perhaps Switzerland. Perhaps at some future time Ernesto’s 1926-planned exhibition can materialize?

What if Ernesto had emigrated to Australia at some time other than in the midst of a recession? Would his planned art exhibition had been realized, would there have been a future as an artist?

What if his estranged wife, Lydia, had agreed to a divorce instead of refusing? Divorce was forbidden to Catholics which may account for her refusal. Australia’s current no-fault divorce following twelve months separation was not introduced until The Family Law Act of 1975. Would Ernesto have married Ileen? Started a family?

What if the AIF had not turned Ernesto over to the Italians? Had turned a blind eye to the request for the handover? The handover was ethically rather dubious given that Ernesto had volunteered for the AIF whereas the Italians were conscripting him off the battlefields of France. Australians were antagonistic to the idea of conscription, voting against it in two WWI referenda (Scott, 1936). Or what if the cogs of the Italian, British and Australian bureaucracy had not turned so fast, so accurately and so efficiently? The upside of the Italian conscription was that Ernesto survived the war, he was evacuated from the most dangerous killing fields of WWI, and his life expectancy was restored from the abbreviated life expectancy of a stretcher-bearer on the Somme.

What if Ernesto had written - of course perhaps he did - accounts of his time at the Goetheanum with Rudolf Steiner (1920-1924), and of his grand tour of biodynamics in Europe in 1930? Triaca has written that: “In those days we used postcards all the time” (1985, p.79), and this leaves open some hope that caches of correspondence between Ernesto and his family, Ileen, Meebold, and other associates may have survived.

For the time being, the present account reports what is known of the life of Ernesto Genoni, former theosophist and pioneering anthroposophist, who in 1928 brought biodynamics to Australia and co-founded the Anthroposophy Society in Victoria. It was a life of adventure and misadventure, of trailblazing, of struggle, of disappointment, and of spiritual reflection.

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