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## Australia's first woman organic farmer discovered in Switzerland: The story of Ileen Macpherson

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*John Paull is an academic with a research focus on organic agriculture. In this guest blog post John Paull charts his research into the genesis of the Australian organics movement, and his discovery of a wonderful story the story of Ileen Macpherson, an*

*Australian pioneer of organics.*



A portrait of Ileen Macpherson by Ernesto Genon (private collection) Image supplied by John Paul.

On a hunch I travelled from Oxford to the Swiss village of Dornach. Could it be that there were Australians who joined the world's earliest organic agriculture research organisation back in the 1920s or 1930s? Then I had never heard of Ileen Macpherson.

I discovered in the archives of the Goetheanum that twelve Australians had joined Rudolf Steiner's Experimental Circle. This is the story of one of those pioneers of organic farming Ileen Macpherson (1898

1984).

Ileen Macpherson was the daughter of a farming family. They farmed large pastoral properties in the south of New South Wales (NSW); Paika Station (250 000 acres) and later Goonambil Station in the Murrumbidgee Valley.

These Macpherson holdings were about equidistant from the three major capital cities of Sydney Adelaide and Melbourne. Ileen was sent to Clyde School in Melbourne. It was a newish boarding school for girls located in St Kilda a beach side suburb of Melbourne. It has been described by a past principal as “stylish” “expensive” and with “an incredibly high standard”. A good part of its clientele were the girls of well off pastoralist families.



Ileen Macpherson hockey team Clyde School Archives Image supplied by John Paul.



Ileen Macpherson school photo 1913 (private collection) Image supplied by John Paul.

Ileen flourished at Clyde. Her nickname was 'Ikey'. She excelled in all the sports the school offered including athletics, basketball, tennis and hockey as well as dancing. She represented Clyde in inter school competitions. One account of her competitive spirit exhibited at an inter school sports competition appeared in the school magazine: "Could anything surpass the grim determination writ upon every feature of Ikey Macpherson". In her final years she was a prefect and she won the prize for 'best all round sport'. The school record gives no inkling of how her life would unfold.

In Melbourne in the early 1930s the fate of Ileen and Ernesto Genoni collided. Ileen had followed her curiosity and found herself attending a university lecture on Anthroposophy by Ernesto. Ernesto was an Italian artist. A contemporary account states: "He was dark with flashing eyes, hair swept back off his forehead and an exotic look."

Ileen became infatuated with Ernesto and smitten with this new spiritual philosophy of Anthroposophy that he was teaching. Ernesto had spent a year studying with Rudolf Steiner, the founder of biodynamics, at the Goetheanum, the headquarters of Anthroposophy at Dornach in

Switzerland. Ileen and Ernesto soon became intertwined and Ileen proposed that they work collaboratively to put to the test Rudolf Steiner's agricultural ideas that he had espoused in 1924 at Koberwitz. Together they founded 'Demeter Biological Farm' in 1934 in Dandenong on the Princes Highway to do just that.

Ernesto had already joined Steiner's Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners based in Switzerland. So he had a copy of Steiner's "hints" for a new world agriculture eschewing synthetic fertilisers and chemicals. Ernesto's copy of Steiner's 'The Agriculture Course' was in German. And now Ileen joined the Experimental Circle and received from Switzerland her own copy of 'The Agriculture Course' in English. The applications of both Ileen and Ernesto to join the Experimental Circle are still held in the archives in Switzerland.



The Goetheanum in Switzerland and where Ileen founded the Experimental Circle. Sadly illness prevented Ileen from travelling to the Goetheanum. Image supplied by John Paul.

Demeter Farm in Dandenong was Australia's first biodynamic farm and thereby also first organic farm (although the terms 'biodynamic' and 'organic' emerged later in 1938 and 1940 respectively).

Together Ileen and Ernesto farmed their 40 acres. It was worked as a small dairy farm and the manure built into the compost in the Biodynamic way. They made their own preparations and sprays and produced very good vegetables which were sold in the wholesale market in the city and also from a truck on the side of the road. Ileen played an important role in all of the farm activities from research to application of biodynamic techniques to gardening to milking cows.

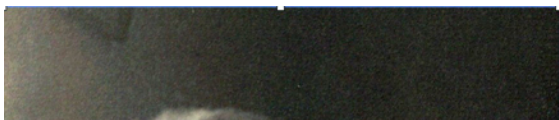
Ileen and Ernesto lived together at Demeter Farm. They hosted visiting Anthroposophists including Dr Alfred Meebold who travelled from Europe. Ernesto continued to teach Anthroposophy in the Collins Street rooms of the Michael Group which he had co founded.

The couple planned trips to Europe.

But Ileen never met Ernesto's sister Rosa in Milan and she never got to visit the Goetheanum in Switzerland. In 1939 she was not well enough to travel. She got only as far as New Zealand.

When Ernesto returned from Europe just before the outbreak of WW2 he wrote: "At the farm I found things with Ileen not too good. The last month Ileen carried on the milking by herself but her legs began to give way." Ileen was always a determined woman and she was managing the milking but she was struggling to walk. She was carrying a burden of illness which was not yet recognised or understood.

Ileen was eventually diagnosed with pernicious anaemia "pernicious" meaning deadly. Historically the prognosis for Ileen's affliction was death often in a matter of months. Doctors Whipple Minot and Murphy had recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine for discovering a cure injections of raw liver juice. It seems that Ileen spent several years in the Epworth Hospital undergoing this new treatment. She survived but she had lost the use of her legs and she would never walk again.





Ileen Macpherson in later life (private collection) Image supplied by John Paul .

Ileen spent the next forty years wheelchair bound. The farm fell to Ernesto as well as caring for Ileen. This eventually became too much and they sold Demeter Farm in 1954. Their adventures in biodynamic and organic farming with Demeter Farm had spanned twenty years.

Ileen never did make the pilgrimage to Anthroposophy headquarters in Dornach but she retained her dedication to the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner throughout her life. And she treasured her collection of books by Steiner. Despite the medical catastrophe of the pernicious anaemia diagnosis Ileen lived a long life. She passed away aged 85 years



and had lived a longer life than any of her parents and her five siblings. Perhaps Ileen was sustained by that 'grim determination' she had practiced as a young athlete by her long standing faith in the spiritual teachings of Rudolf Steiner by the good care of the Epworth medical team by the loving care of Ernesto and perhaps by half a century of consuming a biodynamic/organic diet.

"Constant hard work and many grievous trials were endured by the pioneers who undertook the first Bio Dynamic venture in Victoria". Ileen left her house and land to the Dandenong Council for a park. The Ileen Macpherson Park can be visited at 17 19 Namur St Noble Park Victoria..



The Ileen Macpherson Park in Noble Park  
Image supplied by John Paul .

The Invisible Farmer Project aims to make the invisible visible. Here we

scratch off some of the invisibility that has settled on an Australian pioneer of organic agriculture. Beginning more than eight decades ago Ileen Macpherson with her Demeter Farm and her partner Ernesto Genoni blazed a trail for the development of biodynamics and organics.

Australia is now a world leader in organic farming. Australian organics has been growing at 16% annually for the past two decades. And Australia now accounts for a massive 45% of the world's certified organic agriculture hectares. But in the beginning were just a few pioneers so nearly invisible now who took the vision of an Austrian philosopher to heart and set out to make it real.

## **Acknowledgments:**

Thank you to: the Archives of the Goetheanum Dornach Switzerland; the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology University of Oxford; the Michael Group Melbourne; Annita Sharpe; Margaret Garner; and Pam Martin.

## **Want to know more?**

- Check out: "Ileen Macpherson: Life and tragedy of a pioneer of

biodynamic farming at Demeter Farm and a benefactor of Anthroposophy in Australia”: <http://orgprints.org/31230/1/JO415.pdf>

- Check out Ileen’s partner: “Ernesto Genoni: Australia’s pioneer of biodynamic agriculture”: <http://www.academia.edu/9144789/>

- A list of the twelve Australians who joined the Experimental Circle appears in: “A history of the organic agriculture movement in Australia”: <http://www.academia.edu/9144875/>

- For Australia’s place in the world of organic agriculture check out: “Atlas of Organics: Four maps of the world of organic agriculture”: <http://www.academia.edu/25648267>

- About Dr John Paull’s research: <http://utas.academia.edu/JohnPaull>

## Invisible Farmer Project



## About the Invisible Farmer Project

Invisible Farmer is the largest ever study of Australian women on the land. This three year project is funded by the Australian Research Council and involves a nation wide partnership between rural communities academics government and cultural organisations. To learn more about the project please follow the below links:



[Partners and](#)



[Academic and](#)



[Significance of](#)



[Guiding](#)

## Supporting Organisations

The Invisible Farmer Project involves industry collaboration between a group of official partners that work across a range of fields and disciplines. In addition the Invisible Farmer is also supported by a wide range of small and large organisations. We are continuing to seek additional support so if your organisation is interested in becoming an official supporter please get in touch.

## Community Outcomes

The Invisible Farmer project team is made up of experts in the fields of social work women's history cultural informatics museum practice and public policy. Over the three years of the project a variety of research and community outcomes will be created.

## the Invisible Farmer Project

Why is the Invisible Farmer Project important? What does it mean to be an Invisible Farmer and how can you get involved in helping to facilitate change?

## Principles

Our project is underpinned by a series of guiding principles that have been developed around four major themes sustainability connectivity community and capability. By following these principles we aim to honour the contributions and leadership of farm women of the past in the present and into the future.



## Key Partners:



## Key Funding:



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Research Council**

## Supporting Organisations:

**Agriculture Victoria**

**Australian Women in Agriculture**

**CWA of Victoria Inc**

**History South Australia**

**History Council of Victoria**

**Museums Australia (Victoria)**

**National Rural Women's Coalition Ltd**

**The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria**

**Victorian Women's Trust**

**Women's Industry Network Seafood Community**

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Blog:  
<http://invisiblefarmer.net.au/blog/2017/8/1/australias-first-woman-organic-farmer-discovered-in-switzerland-the-story-of-ileen-macpherson>  
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