

CHAPTER 4

Making the political personal: Gender and sustainable lifestyles in 1970s Australia

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By 1973 two periodicals, *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots*, were addressing an imagined community of Australians who were seeking to establish 'sustainable' lifestyles, in what seemed to many to be an increasingly commodified world, by moving 'back to the land'. These two journals offered their readers encouragement and practical advice on ways to adopt systems of food and energy production, shelter and entertainment that were small scale, locally made and simple to understand and use. The gender implications that went with these systems were seldom articulated but were nonetheless ubiquitous and powerful.

The urge to go 'back to the land' was not limited to Australia nor to the decade of the 1970s; rather it was a transnational movement with roots deep into the Romantic movement and resistance to the Industrial Revolution. Industrialisation overwhelmingly drove people off the land and into rapidly growing urban areas, but the ideal of rural virtue continued and by the mid-twentieth century had shaped the back-to-the-land movement that flourished in the post-World War Two era.

In the United States, Helen and Scott Nearing left New York City in 1932 and took up an abandoned farm in Vermont seeking, as they wrote, 'a simple, satisfying life on the land, to be devoted to mutual aid and harmlessness, with an ample margin of leisure in which to do personally constructive and creative work'. Years later, they described their objectives

as economic, hygienic and both social and ethical.¹ Their 1954 book *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* was republished in 1970 and became something of a Bible to Americans seeking to follow their example.

In the United Kingdom, Sally and John Seymour played a somewhat similar role, setting up a farm on rented land in Suffolk and famously driving a horse cart rather than a car. Their 1973 book titled *Farming and Self-Sufficiency: Independence on a 5-acre Farm* sold strongly and their farm, like that of the Nearings, attracted numerous casual visitors seeking guidance and encouragement. One of the Seymour's children later recalled that 'one woman turned up who had left her husband and children after reading the book. She wanted to help out and live in our stable. My parents let her but later my mother persuaded her to go back and sort herself out'.²

There does not appear to have been any such dominant figures, or defining books, in Australia during this period, but two new magazines appeared to champion both back-to-the-land and self-sufficiency. Both followed the lead of the American journal *Mother Earth News*, started by John and Jane Shuttleworth in 1970 with a budget of \$1,500 and published from their home. It has been described as embracing 'the revived interest in the back-to-the-land movement at the beginning of the 1970s', concentrating on 'do-it-yourself and how-to articles'.³ When the magazine accepted an article by the Australian Keith Vincent Smith, he reported that the success gave him and his wife Irene 'the ambition to produce EARTH GARDEN', a journal 'concerned with the back-to-the-land movement, surviving in the city, living in the country, organic gardening, food and diet, living more with less, and the inner changes which follow when you are in tune with Nature'.

Keith had been a journalist and Irene a schoolteacher living in Sydney. They had thought about living in the country and finally decided, as they said, to leave their jobs, get married, buy a Morris van and take a trip 'right around Australia'. It was when they reached Melbourne that they

1 Helen and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (New York: Schocken, 1970 [1954]), vii.

2 Clare Bates, 'What Happened to the Self-Sufficient People of the 1970s?', *BBC Magazine*, 12 April 2016, accessed January 2019, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35945417.

3 'Mother Earth News', Wikipedia, accessed January 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Earth_News.

learned that *Mother Earth News* had accepted Keith's manuscript, and it was there that their trip ended and they learned 'the intricacies of putting together a Web offset publication'. They got out their first issue of *Earth Garden* in 1972 with articles on a kibbutz, on a Chinese commune, one on encouraging earthworms, and one on Chinese cooking, among other topics.⁴ They travelled widely across the country interviewing people who had made the move to the land, but according to one critic they tended to 'hide the harsh, unpleasant, drudgery side of rural life'.⁵

The following year David and Meg Miller introduced their new magazine *Grass Roots*, which they called 'the only complete subsistence course in Australia'. The editors wrote that 'today everyone is looking for an alternative to the life that big business forces on us' but, they added, 'when we first moved out of the city there was no-one to show the way and help us through our many mistakes'.⁶ Over the next few issues, articles, many of them unsigned, covered 'Ropes and Stuff', 'It's Fun to Dye', 'You Don't Buy a Flute', 'Homespun Slippers', 'How to Shoe a Horse', 'Mud and Mud Bricks' and various aspects of solar power. The same analyst who criticised *Earth Garden* maintained that *Grass Roots* was more practical and realistic, perhaps because the editors were themselves trying to create 'a community in the bush'.⁷

Both magazines sought their audiences among the estimated 60,000 Australians who were 'alternative lifestyle participants' and 95,000 others who intended to become such. The differences in content and readership of the two magazines, however, was striking. Comparisons made in the 1980s found that while *Earth Garden* had a readership that was 68 per cent male, the comparable figure for *Grass Roots* was only 51 per cent. At the same time, 42 per cent of the content of *Grass Roots* was written by women and only 28 per cent by men (the other 30 per cent were not identified). The letters to the editor, a critical part of the content, were twice as often sent in by women as by men. While in all alternative lifestyle magazines 'nuclear family values are generally assumed and rarely are more radical family structures discussed', this was particularly true of *Grass Roots*. It was noted that the magazine did not 'devote much attention to feminist issues'

4 *Earth Garden*, no. 1 (1972): 42, 3.

5 Peter H. Cock, 'Australia's Alternative Media', *Media Information Australia*, no. 6 (1977): 7.

6 'Reading Between the Lines', *Grass Roots*, no. 1 (April–June 1973): 2.

7 Cock, 'Australia's Alternative Media': 8.

because ‘it has developed a section of the market in Australia that is not feminist’. Feminism was ‘not a typical theme of alternative lifestyles and is [a] subject rarely discussed by any journal’.⁸

While the gender implications of changing lifestyles were seldom referred to, and even less often analysed, both *Grass Roots* and *Earth Garden* published articles in which back-to-the-landers described their experiences and both carried letters to the editors. Many of these are suggestive of the kinds of people to make the move to the country, their reasons for the move, and what they encountered there. It is also from these that attitudes toward gender relations, and by implication feminism in general, can be discovered.

Eleanor, who lived ‘as self-sufficiently as possible on ten acres of land in a pretty bush setting’ with her husband and five children, described a fairly traditional division of labour. She reported that they rose at 6.30am and ‘while my husband is milking the cow, I cut him a substantial lunch, fill a thermos with tea and prepare his breakfast’. He had a job off the farm because, as Eleanor explained, ‘money being a necessary evil, we must have an outside income, and whereas I enjoy being on my own, my husband needs company so his work has a three-fold purpose’. For the gardening, she wrote, ‘my husband and I have a system, which works well ... He does all the digging and preparing of beds and I take over from there’. Finally, she admits that ‘my husband proves most helpful in our efficiency program as he is handy with most jobs’.⁹

A similar story was told by Walter Abetz, who was a radio technician for the Tasmanian Hydro Electric Commission. He and his family had migrated from Stuttgart, Germany, in 1961, and had been most recently living in a new subdivision close to Hobart. It was his dream, however, to have 100 or 200 acres of bush upon which he could not only live but roam. When he proposed such a move, ‘Mum started grinning. She asked “who would take the children to school and Uni and so on. I mumbled something like Won’t have time, that’s Mum’s business, better get your driving license”’. One of the children mentioned the need to also get to ‘our youth activities at church’, and Mum ‘said loud and clearly: “I’ve told you already I’m too old to get a licence. Forget about that”’.

8 Frank Vanclay and Bill Metcalf, ‘Alternative Lifestyle Magazines: An Analysis of Readers’, *Media Information Australia*, no. 36 (1985): 49, 50; Bill Metcalf and Frank Vanclay, ‘Alternative Lifestyle Magazines: What’s in Them’, *Media Information Australia*, no. 33 (August 1984): 51, 52.

9 Eleanor Hatswell, ‘Living Self Sufficiently—Country Style’, *Grass Roots*, no. 16 (Spring–Summer 1978): 48–49.

They moved instead to a 9-acre property closer to the city, bought a cow and began to farm on a small scale. Each had their special chores, with the youngest child, 15-year-old Eric (in 2017 a federal senator from Tasmania), looking after a dozen geese, two dozen ducks and the care of an Anglo-Nubian billy buck as well as his apparent favourite, 'a neutered buck called Amos'. And then, Walter wrote, 'there is the most important person—Mum ... who runs the whole show. I mean it ... She is flat out during the week, and only Sunday, which we observe, is her rest day'.¹⁰

Letters to the editors were numerous, briefer and more varied. A few were from single men, such as Neal who described himself as:

... a 19-year-old nature conscious city dweller wishing to seek board on a farm in the New England district. I am poor and cannot afford to buy land, so am asking around about work in return for rent. I know quite a bit about farming as I went to Agriculture School, but I have not been able to put this knowledge into practice. I have my own goats and a hive of bees. I am desperate to get out of Sydney.¹¹

Mike, who already had a farm, wrote that he was '29 years old and seeking a lady interested in farming and self-sufficiency and also another couple to share the land on a profit sharing basis'.¹²

Women comprised a larger group of letter writers. Jennie, who was a member of Truth and Liberation Concern (a Christian community in Victoria), wrote that 'with three small children under four I do very little apart from necessities but hope some time to be producing more than children'.¹³ Gudrun wrote:

I am a deserted wife with a 16-month-old boy and have lived in Cairns and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville at Pondicherry in India. I am prepared to go into the country again if there is the possibility of either joining a group with similar interests or otherwise forming a new group.¹⁴

10 Walter Abetz, 'Just Nine Acres', *Earth Garden*, no. 5 (1973): 10–11.

11 *Earth Garden*, no. 20 (October–December 1977): 54.

12 *Grass Roots*, no. 16 (Spring–Summer 1978): 5.

13 *Grass Roots*, no. 16 (Spring–Summer 1978): 4.

14 *Earth Garden*, no. 7 (December 1973): 4.

Leslie and Debbie wrote that ‘we are two “fresh out of school” chickees, and were wondering if you knew of any places where fruit-pickers-farmhands are needed (we will work at anything so long as it is out of the city). We are in dire need of money so we can keep our dream of getting our own farm alive’.¹⁵ Donna explained, ‘I am a reader of *Earth Garden* and would love to know anybody in the Geelong-Ballarat area willing to take me on to help on the farm. I would work for a very small wage, or food and shelter. Please write soon, I’m dying to get away’.¹⁶

Margo explained that ‘I’m looking for a community, living naturally, I don’t care where, who would let me learn in return for whatever I can do for them. Can anyone help me out of the unhappy city? I’m 18 and know nearly nothing about living self-sufficiently, but I really want to know, because if it’s natural, it’s got to be right’.¹⁷ Linda said:

I am a vegetarian girl, 21, and I left my home in the U.S.A. three years ago to find a simpler way of existence. I’ve been travelling through New Zealand and Australia; working, learning from people, experiencing their lifestyles and growing. Now I am looking for a place to live in the way I love most ... I can milk cows, weed gardens and, on a good day, even hammer a nail straight.¹⁸

Jane said she was ‘a mother with two small children (was brought up on organically run small-holdings in England) and I’m looking for other people (with children?) to join me in buying land’.¹⁹ Wendy announced, ‘I am an honest, clean, happy female, with three school-aged children. I have savings and a weekly income from a pension and would very much like to share a co-op, preferably in WA’.²⁰

Heterosexual couples were numerous among the writers of letters to the editors. Muriel and Malcom explained that ‘after a six month working holiday in UK with our four children, we came back to Australia even more determined to realise our long cherished ambition to live more naturally and to try to be as self-sufficient as possible’.²¹ Paul and Janet

15 *Earth Garden*, no. 3 (1972): 57.

16 *Earth Garden*, no. 22/23 (June–August 1978): 139.

17 *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 26.

18 *Earth Garden*, no 25 (Summer 1978/79): 276.

19 *Earth Garden*, no. 13 (November 1975): 51.

20 *Earth Garden*, no. 18 (April–June 1977): 29.

21 *Earth Garden*, no. 9 (June 1974): 55.

declared themselves ‘a young Christian couple with two boys ... [who] desire to join a community who praise Our Lord Jesus Christ anywhere near the coast of Australia.’²² Bill and Vanessa were ‘two teachers from East Gippsland, Victoria, who want to start a self-sufficient farming community’. Also they were ‘vegetarians and study Yoga and meditation under the guidance of Self Realization Fellowship’.²³ John and Ailene wrote that they were ‘an American couple with a two year old girl who are interested in emigration to Australia and also in the idea of a back-to-the-land community. We have no farming skills, but would be willing to learn. My husband is an ex-international ping-pong star, and is presently writing a book’.²⁴

A fourth category of writers was composed of groups already formed or planning to do so. Brian and Jan announced that they were ‘buying 200–300 acres on the north west of N.S.W. and wish to contact children whose parents are interested in self-sufficiency and progressive education. The aim would be to have our own dwelling in a community and form our own school and craft workshop’.²⁵ Jack and Shirley announced that their ‘vegetarian land co-op [was] urgently seeking new members, particularly people with young kids, with a real interest in alternative forms of education. We’ve got 100 acres in southern NSW’.²⁶

In 1975, *Earth Garden* carried a notice:

Amazon Acres is a Women’s farm, 280 miles north of Sydney ... It is a place where women can realize their full potential and grow ... We haven’t finished paying the farm off yet and we would like new women to join the collective. We’d love to hear from women with skills—especially technical and building—but any skill at all will be useful.

22 *Earth Garden*, no. 25 (Summer 1978/79): 276.

23 *Earth Garden*, no. 7 (December 1973): 4.

24 *Grass Roots*, no. 16 (Spring–Summer 1978): 5.

25 *Grass Roots*, no. 16 (Spring–Summer 1978): 4.

26 *Earth Garden*, no. 22/23 (June–August 1978): 139.

Amazon Acres was, from its establishment, a major lesbian gathering place.²⁷ Three years later a notice appeared:

three or four of us wish to form a collective to set up a Resource Centre for Women to gain survival skills, herbs, massage etc. Living on Supporting Mother Pension means we are able to move out if we can set up a network to do so autonomously. Also we're interested in alternative schooling. The land needs to be within reasonable access to a station, three or four hours from Sydney or a large town. If you welcome new energies on your land, please contact us. Interested in buying a share of communal land and hearing from other interested women.²⁸

The personal situations and aspirations described by most of these letters to the editors are powerfully redolent of gender structures at work, but drew no comment until 1976 when the ninth issue of *Grass Roots* carried a call for a combined conference/festival titled Alternative Australia, to be convened by Gough Whitlam's Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Jim Cairns. Citing the need for 'radical change in contemporary, industrial society', he called for 'presentations by alternative groups interested in community living, organic foods, herbs, personal growth and other alternative activities', as well as 'the needs of workers, students, ethnic communities, feminists and sexual reformers'.²⁹ The Confest, held during December along the banks of the Cotter River just outside Canberra, was considered a great success with perhaps as many as 15,000 people attending. Workshops were held on a wide range of subjects, and *Grass Roots* reported that there were people sitting 'quietly under pyramids and people dancing in concentric circles and people making children's toys out of grass and people learning to juggle three oranges without dropping more than two and people being massaged' and people 'discussing alternative rural communities'.³⁰ The event was also covered by the *Canberra Times*, but no mention was made of any discussions of feminism or other women's issues.

27 *Earth Garden*, no. 12 (July 1975): 19. See also Sand Hall, ed., *Amazon Acres, You Beauty: Stories of Women's Lands, Australia* (Wollongong: Shell Publishing, 2016); and Rebecca Jennings, 'Creating Feminist Culture: Australian Rural Lesbian-Separatist Communities in the 1970s and 1980s', *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 2 (2018): 88–111, doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2018.0015. See also Judith Ion, 'Degrees of Separation: Lesbian Separatists Communities in Northern New South Wales, 1974–95', *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*, ed. Jill Julius Matthews (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 97–113.

28 *Earth Garden*, no. 24 (September–November 1978): 56.

29 *Grass Roots*, no. 9 (1977): 40.

30 Bob Willis, 'Down to Earth at Cotter', *Grass Roots*, no. 10 (1977): 12.

The next year the second Confest was held at Bredbo, not far from the Cotter. Friends of the Earth erected a large marquee, which was the site for workshops, ‘many of which were on alternative technology’. There was also a ‘mud brick baking machine and an attempt to build a mudbrick house’.³¹ This time the *Canberra Times* reporter, besides being impressed with the ‘beautiful women with no clothes on’, discovered a ‘feminist tent, and outside it was a sign that assured us that “Lesbians are everywhere”’.³²

Earth Garden first explicitly took notice of gender issues that same year. No. 20 carried a request from a male student from Tasmania:

I do hope you can help me. In doing a major in psychology I have become interest in the stress factor in marriage (and any other permanent relationship) and also in the family unit itself. In particular, I am attempting to evaluate the effects of alternative lifestyles (those which are supposedly set aside from the stress of ‘ordinary’ society) on the marriage relationship and the family as a unit.³³

Response to this request was not recorded, but contrary to any expectations based on readership and content, it was *Grass Roots* that first produced what the editor called a ‘woman-powered’ issue. Previous issues had been the joint effort of both Irene and Keith Smith, with Keith doing the editing and some of the writing and Irene the design, layout and paste-up. For this issue, however, Irene, as she proudly wrote, ‘ended up doing the lot’. She spent three months as she searched for material:

I rang, interviewed and talked to many people. Stories began to arrive, which then needed reading, sorting and editing. Then came filling in the gaps and reading and writing more letters ... The response from women has been fantastic ... [There is,] most important of all, the feminist/women’s view told through interviews, shared experiences and a listing of groups and contacts.³⁴

31 Peter White, ‘The Bredbo Confest’, *Grass Roots*, no. 14 (Autumn 1978): 10.

32 *Canberra Times*, 27 December 1977.

33 *Earth Garden*, no. 20 (October–December 1977): 20.

34 *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 2.



Figure 4.1: Changing Roles.

Source: *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 34.

The responses covered a range of advice and admonition. One reader described what she called ‘The Group’, a circle of her friends who met once a week to offer each other support and do some ‘consciousness raising’. The author expressed delight that another group had also started up and that ‘a number of our husbands have joined together to form a “men’s group”’ as well. All the women in the group were professionals, such as teachers and social workers, but any relation they may have had to the back-to-the-land movement was not made clear.³⁵

35 Sue Brown, ‘The Group’, *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 48–49.

Another author addressed back-to-the-land women more specifically. Describing ‘Changing Roles’, she warned that ‘this is a little tirade about self-sufficiency-and-equality-and male/female-roles-and-facing-adventure-head-on’. She continued:

unless she’s careful, a woman can find herself living a sort of extension of city life, while her man has to change his lifestyle far more drastically, learning new skills, taking on responsibilities and possibly undertaking all those extra jobs that aren’t even considered in a nice settled urban existence ... The typical mistakes of the beginner include an automatic job-division. Because she had most concern with cooking, cleaning and provisioning in the city, then these mostly became her province. In the changed circumstances, the jobs extend to include an interest in gardening, bottling, preserving, animal-tending, spinning and weaving, needlework, perhaps leatherwork, pursuits agricultural and, indeed, any others that can be seen as an extension of ‘womanly pursuits’.

On the other hand:

regardless of his previous experience, a man is expected and expects to be able to understand the intricacies of pumping and lighting systems. Nobody is surprised if he decides to become his own mechanic, or teach himself how to grade or plough with his brand-new tractor. Nobody raises their hands in amazement if he can handle a hammer, saw or axe—people expect it of him ... If **he** can start from scratch at new and unfamiliar things, why not **she**? Quite often it’s because she shares the world-in-general’s attitude that such things are outside the female province.³⁶

Another author asserted that ‘the question: *Who is responsible for filling the wood box?* has caused more domestic strife in country homes than any other single point of domestic contention ... The answer to the question,’ she continued, ‘should be *the cook*. Personally, I’d as soon let some sulky man brush my teeth for me as expect him to chop the wood that makes his meals. Only the person who is going to *use* the fire knows what sort of heat is required.’ She then followed with a detailed description of what she called ‘Axewomanship’, laying out the types of wood and tools required to do an informed and effective job of cooking.³⁷ For her, chopping wood was an example of what the author of ‘Changing Roles’ called ‘an extension of womanly pursuits’.

36 Lesley Zolin, ‘Changing Roles’, *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 34–35. Emphasis in original.

37 Di Mercer, ‘Axewomanship: The Gentle Art of Woodchopping’, *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 12–13.



Figure 4.2: The Gentle Art of Woodchopping.

Source: *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 12.

A more comprehensive critique was offered in a letter drawing attention to the fact that ‘even amongst a group of people who have embraced some radical ideas, the human potential of women is being neglected ... again’. She winced, she wrote, ‘at some of the articles and interviews in *EG* and at an attitude that seems to be between the lines’ that ‘what men do is more highly valued, by both men and women, just because the men are doing it’. She warned that ‘we must not think that earth gardeners have escaped the all-pervasive sex role conditioning and subtle assumptions, for example, that women have to be kept ignorant about mechanical things’. She concluded, ‘I strongly suggest to readers who have not done so, that they read some women’s liberation books on sexism. Getting together in groups to talk about it should be valuable too’.³⁸ Two years later, Robin Duke, the writer of the letter, was one of the founders of Plum Farm Women’s Land, a lesbian rural retreat near Adelaide.³⁹

38 *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 45.

39 ‘Robin, Eagle (1951-)', Trove, National Library of Australia, trove.nla.gov.au/people/551695?c=people; *The Rough Guide to Gay & Lesbian Australia*, ed. Neal Drinnan (London: Rough Guides, 2001), 213.

The writer of a second long letter in that number of *Earth Garden* identified herself as:

a gardener who uses compost and TLC instead of superphosphate and DDT. I am a spinner, a cook, a vegetarian, a herb grower, a bit of a carpenter and a lesbian. OK, be honest now—how many of you inwardly cringed at that last word? Is sexuality, and women's sexuality in particular, a taboo topic in the back-to-the-land movement ...?

In her opinion:

the 'straight' ideal of a quiet, gentle, sweet, beautiful, young, long-haired, floral-smelling 'lady', who must combine being a far-out cook with being a far-out lay, is far more prevalent in the counterculture (or whatever you want to call it) than the rest of society, where there is some evidence it may be just starting to break down.

'Well, let me inform you', she insisted, 'that women are over half the world's population (and probably over half of the back-to-the-landers) and women who love women are everywhere!'⁴⁰

In light of the few studies of the back-to-the-landers of the 1970s in Australia, it is helpful to look at other sites of this transnational movement to try to gain some more general insight into what gender rules applied. Technology appears to have been one important area where gendered assumptions from the larger culture were carried over into countercultural situations. During the 1970s what was often called 'appropriate' or sometimes 'alternative' technology was urged as an option for both urban and rural locations. Hand tools, bicycles, wind mills and solar installations were all available for study and recommended for use by both men and women, but anecdotal evidence suggests 'appropriate' technologies were largely the preserve of the 'appropriate' (male) gender. A 1980 cartoon from Great Britain titled 'Alice's Alternative Adventures with AT Man' described Alice's hope that AT Man would liberate her from her dominating husband and three demanding children. Fleeing to a communal home, she asks AT Man whether they are headed for 'some kind of place in the country'. He replies 'nothing as bourgeois as that ... it's a squat on the Edgware Road'. At the squat, it seems, all the men are writing books and giving lectures on political alternatives—

40 *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 45.

one man is too busy writing a book on 'Alternative Parenthood—The Male Role in Childcare' to actually do any and another believes that 'this housework thing just isn't my trip—it's all a bourgeois fetish anyway'. In the last panel, Alice is shown doing the dishes for all the five men and 14 children of the commune, as she muses that 'what we need are some alternative Alternatives'.⁴¹

In 1978, a group of women associated with the National Center for Appropriate Technology, located in the American farming state of Montana, published a manifesto titled *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Due: Women and Appropriate Technology*. One of the authors, Judy Smith, explained that 'women can and must take some control over the technology confronting them in their daily lives'. In turning to the movement for appropriate technology, she and her colleagues found 'a great deal of discussion of voluntary simplicity'. 'We also found', she continued, 'that the people who espoused those ideas and who led the movement were men, making decisions based on the same old values.' She concluded:

Thus one of the basic problems we face in the appropriate technology and alternative energy movements is that adherents still reflect the value system we live in: men have the technical skills and make the technical decisions, their interests are self-assessed as more important.⁴²

Smith singled out one bright spot: 'a new element has appeared within the women's movement: a growing number of small groups interested in country living ... In these group settings women are learning self-reliance and skills from other women, in an environment far different in focus and tone than that of other back-to-the-land groups'. A cluster of such groups around the small coastal town of Albion, in northern California, even produced a journal called *Country Women*, and in 1976 published a book—*Country Women: A Handbook for the New Farmer*. That the feminists of Albion were not typical is suggested by the Berkeley journalist Kate Coleman who, in 1978, visited some of the groups and found the women there quite unlike those in the back-to-the-land movement that she had previously observed. While 'the women I knew [before]', she wrote,

41 Jo Nesbitt, 'Alice's Alternative Adventures with Atman', in Jo Nesbitt, Lesley Ruda, Liz Mackie and Christine Roche, *Sourcream* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1980), 20–23.

42 Judy Smith, 'Women and Appropriate Technology: A Feminist Assessment', *The Technological Woman: Interfacing with Tomorrow*, ed. Jan Zimmerman (New York: Praeger, 1983), 65, 66.

‘were reverting to the Stone Age’, some of the Albion women were forming a carpentry collective, an act that she found ‘politically significant as well as practical: it is the working manifestation of these women’s feminism’.⁴³ Many of the Albion groups were lesbian separatist, and women in these, not surprisingly, seemed to have the best luck learning and sharing new ‘technological’ skills. Historian Rebecca Jennings has found that attitudes toward some ‘patriarchal’ technologies seem to have varied from country to country, but that ‘the idea of self-sufficiency from the patriarchy was fundamental to all the women’s lands so they aimed to acquire skills to carry out all necessary tasks themselves’.⁴⁴

Beginning in the early 1980s, two Canadian sociologists interviewed over 2,000 ‘back-to-the-landers’ attempting to ‘explore female independence and sense of fulfilment within a movement that attempts to recapture part of an idyllic past while still captive to modern notions of gender equity and deference’. Their conclusion was that although there was ‘a clear division of labor along gender lines’, this did not ‘effect satisfaction with partner or other quality of life factors ... particularly [among] females’. The women, they report:

seek their own liberation from the constraints of the modern family by going back to pre-modern family forms. Working in partnership with their husbands and children to produce a substantial part of what their families consume, back-to-the-land women believe they can have a greater sense of freedom and find more fulfilment than if they were to pursue their own professional careers.

They admitted, however, that ‘women were twice as likely as men to report dissatisfaction with the way particular farmstead tasks were divided up, and close to a third of women survey respondents were dissatisfied with having to do most of the house cleaning’.⁴⁵ However, writing specifically about Australia, Amanda McLeod has asserted flatly that domestic

43 Kate Coleman, ‘Country Women: The Feminists of Albion Ridge’, *Mother Jones* 3, no. 3 (1978): 23, 32. See also Desmond A. Jolly, ed., *Outstanding in Their Fields: California’s Women Farmers* (Davis: UC Small Farm Center, 2005).

44 Correspondence to the author, quoted by permission.

45 Jeffrey C. Jacob and Merlin B. Brinkerhoff, ‘Planetary Sustainability and Sustaining Family Relationships: Family Division of Labor and the Possibility of Female Liberation in the Back-to-the-Land Movement of the Late Twentieth [Century]’, Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, 12–18 August 1997, pp. 1, 6, 8. See also Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 212.

‘gendered divisions were not applicable to self-sufficiency in the 1970s’. In her opinion, ‘there was simply too much to do on a self-sufficient smallholding’.⁴⁶

For some proponents, the apparent regressive nature of the back-to-the-land movement was what was attractive about it. By 1961 there was in the United States a Christian Homesteading Movement that, though small, characterised the tendency. ‘Women wearing anything but knee-length skirts and dresses are not allowed to visit [their community]. Women in shorts or pants’ were advised ‘to go home and get dressed properly’.⁴⁷ In 2015 an essay in *The Catholic Gentleman* titled ‘In Praise of Catholic Homesteading’, began:

When the Papacy is vacant the whole Church looks longingly for a puff of smoke from a little chimney—the household of the Church feels lonely without Papa. When it comes we rejoice, because our father has come home. When I see puffs of smoke from little homesteads in the countryside I feel the same—a father has come home to be with his family by living together on the land.⁴⁸

If the movement was predominantly masculine in the United States and Australia, it was also overwhelmingly white. There were rare exceptions, however. In the United States, historian Russell Rickford has shown that ‘the “land question” was a major concern for African American theorists and activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s’. One attempt to establish ‘a territorial base for the construction of an autonomous black community’ was the work of The Republic of New Africa which advertised:

COME TO THE LAND. Can you teach [/] man a saw [/] build a generator [/] tend an infirmary [/] drive a tractor [/] finish concrete [/] lay pipe [/] run a press [/] tailor a dashiki [/] shoot a gun? You can help make Black people’s most important dream—our most important necessity—a reality by serving in Mississippi as we build a model community.⁴⁹

46 Amanda McLeod, ‘Self-Sufficiency in a “Time of Plenty”: Mass Consumerism and Freedom in 1970s Australia’, *History Australia* 14, no. 3 (September 2017): 411, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2017.1358096.

47 Hal Smith, ‘The Christian Homesteading Movement’, *Mother Earth News* (March/April 1971).

48 Jason Craig, ‘In Praise of Catholic Homesteading’, *The Catholic Gentleman*, 30 January 2015.

49 Russell Rickford, ‘“We Can’t Grow Food on All This Concrete”: The Land Question, Agrarianism, and Black Nationalist Thought in the Late 1960s and 1970s’, *Journal of American History* 103, no. 4 (2017): 956 and journal cover.

In Australia, an Aboriginal homelands movement began in the late 1960s when outstations were established on traditional lands. In the 1970s the Whitlam Labor Government established the Woodward Royal Commission whose work led to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. By 2014, outstations (with fewer than 50 inhabitants) contained some 22,000 people and homeland communities with fewer than 100 inhabitants contained another 100,000. The need of these scattered communities for water, sanitation, energy and other infrastructures led, in 1980, to the establishment in Alice Springs of the Centre for Appropriate Technology, the leading Australian manifestation of what was itself a transnational movement.⁵⁰

Given the transnational nature, at least in Anglophone countries, of both gender expectations and the back-to-the-land movement itself, it would be surprising if there were not parallels between their interactions in Australia, Great Britain and the United States. In Australia, the periodicals *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots*, founded respectively in 1972 and 1973, gave moral and practical support to the imagined community of back-to-the-landers. In the United States, *Mother Earth News*, first published in 1970, later claimed that the ‘tens of thousands of young adults and other adventurous souls’ who made up the American back-to-the-landers ‘were the core readers of Mother Earth News and the impetus for its creation’.⁵¹ In the United States and Great Britain the philosophies and experience of Helen and Scott Nearing and John and Sally Seymour were emulated by thousands who sought self-sufficiency. In America the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968) reached a broad and enthusiastic audience, while the *Country Women: A Handbook for New Farmers* (1976) addressed and appealed to a specific female audience. In Australia, Irene Smith, coeditor of *Earth Garden*, expressed the hope in 1978 that her special issue on women would lead to the creation of ‘a useful book’.⁵²

In all three countries, men were seen as dominating the self-sufficiency movement and the closely related movements to go back-to-the-land and for the adoption of alternative technologies. Among Australian alternative lifestyle magazines, it is not surprising that the hyper-masculine *Australasian Survivor*, with an 85 per cent male readership, had by far

50 Alan Mayne, *Alternative Interventions: Aboriginal Homelands, Outback Australia and the Centre for Appropriate Technology* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2014), 11.

51 Heidi Hunt, ‘What is Homesteading?’, www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/what-is-homesteading/ (page discontinued; accessed 15 November 2016).

52 *Earth Garden*, no. 21 (January–March 1978): 2.

the greatest interest in alternative technologies.⁵³ And in all three, it was control of the relevant technologies that was seen as the mechanism for this dominance. At the same time, it was the role of women that appeared most concerning and the most commented upon. Besides being seen as not interested in or capable with technology, women were also expected to fulfil traditional gender roles even in their new circumstances. Tracey Deutsch has surveyed the contemporary convergence of local foods, history and women's work. 'Gender and gendered histories,' she writes, 'are at the center of these local food movements. Calls for a return to eating foods from within one's region are premised on histories of women and their cooking.'⁵⁴

The contemporary resonance of the dilemmas faced by Australian women in the back-to-the-land movement is striking. Writing in 2015, three American scholars asserted that '[i]n an era of climate change linked to industrialized foods and disease epidemics caused by the modern Western diet, kitchen work has acquired political importance. Daily cooking must be understood as public, as well as private'. Four decades after many women moved back to the land in part to improve their health through growing and eating organic foods that they had raised themselves, the authors of this study found that 'feminists who cook with local foods are only beginning to ideologically integrate feminism and sustainable food cooking'.⁵⁵

In 2009 Morgan Wills, who operated a studio/shop in Ballarat, used her blog to celebrate *Grass Roots* magazine. She first read it when she was about 15, she wrote; and when she was 19:

I took myself off with my dreadlocked surfer dude boyfriend to live down near Warrnambool for a year. Thirty km from the nearest shop—we lived very simply in a small house on 5 acres of bush land with no electricity or running water ... We ate eggs from the chooks and veggies from the garden and made all our own bread.

53 Vanclay and Metcalf, 'Alternative Lifestyle Magazines', 50, 52.

54 Tracey Deutsch, 'Memories of Mothers in the Kitchen: Local Foods, History, and Women's Work', *Radical History Review*, no. 110 (Spring 2011): 167, doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2010-032.

55 Holly A. Stovall, Lori Baker-Sperry and Judith M. Dallinger, 'A New Discourse on the Kitchen: Feminism and Environmental Education', *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 31, no. 1 (2015): 110, doi.org/10.1017/ae.2015.11.

She expressed ‘fond memories’ of her experience, but also revealed that she had ‘lived in the city ever since and have often thought of a move back to a lovely country town. I don’t think [however] I would choose to live without running water and electricity again (especially not with children)’.⁵⁶

Along with growing and preparing food, parenting was another of the major expectations faced by women who sought the advantages of self-sufficiency back on the land. For one thing, as Alice discovered when she joined a commune with AT Man, her own three children could suddenly expand to 14. For another, as Wills realised, raising children in isolation and without the modern technologies of electricity and running water was particularly challenging. Isobelle Barrett Meyering addressed the issues in a 2013 article, “‘There Must Be a Better Way’: Motherhood and the Dilemmas of Feminist Lifestyle Change’. The subject, she wrote, ‘is necessarily transnational reflecting the influence of British and North American feminism in Australia, as well as the fact that feminist motherhood presented similar dilemmas in each context’. She pointed out that in the mid-1970s the search for ‘new and positive lifestyles’ controversially could lead to the prioritising of ‘personal’ over ‘structural’ solutions. Moving back to the land was certainly ‘personal’, but its connection to ‘structural’ was neither inevitable nor always even recognised.⁵⁷ As Beryl Donaldson observed at the time, ‘the counter culture is essentially a male creation, in which the sexual inequalities of the dominant culture are maintained—albeit in hip form’. Finally, she warned, ‘unless a more equitable division of labour is worked out, the women in these communes are likely to spend more time doing “housework” than the average suburban housewife’.⁵⁸

For a large number of Australians in the 1970s, political commitment to issues of apparently out of control technology, of urbanisation, of commodification and of general erosion of the quality of life led to an attempt to find personal escape in an imagined self-sufficiency back on the land. While such a move represented a dramatic break with the material circumstances of their previous lives, it was not always so obvious

56 Morgan Wills, ‘Grass Roots Magazine’, 21 September 2009, accessed 30 October 2016, morganwills.blogspot.com/2009/09/grass-roots-magazine.html (page discontinued).

57 Isobelle Barratt Meyering, “‘There Must Be a Better Way’: Motherhood and the Dilemmas of Feminist Lifestyle Change’, *Outskirts* 28 (May 2013): 1, www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-28/isobelle-barrett-meyering.

58 Beryl Donaldson, ‘Women’s Place in the Counter Culture’, in *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society*, ed. Jan Mercer (Penguin Books: Ringwood, 1975), 427, 433.

that the opportunity presented itself for an equally dramatic discarding of conventional gender expectations. While a feminist critique of the experience was slow in coming, and to some extent muted by a nostalgic aura of primitive masculine authority, the stark reality of life on the land, often cut off from modern amenities, could hardly escape the notice of female participants. Having made the political personal, they were confronted with the need to then make the personal political.

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