

# The Soil Association and Australia: From *Mother Earth* to Eve Balfour

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**Abstract:** *From its inception the Soil Association was linked with emerging organic thinking in Australia and New Zealand. When the Association was formed in 1946 two of its founder members were residents of Australia and New Zealand, there were already three like minded associations in the region, and the first issue of 'Mother Earth' included three articles from antipodean sources. Given this influence it is perhaps no surprise that in the late fifties the Association's founder, Eve Balfour, spent a year visiting Australia and New Zealand – arriving an ambassador of the Soil Association, and leaving an ambassador for Australia.*

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Eve Balfour wrote effusively of Australia. Her Antipodean trip was a year of sunshine, big skies, and generous hospitality. She described Australia as “a very remarkable country” where “we had been so happy” (1961, p.856). She departed Britain on 1 November 1958 and returned on 1 November 1959.

As an eco-tourist and ambassador of the Soil Association (SA), Eve Balfour was shuttled, scheduled, feted, housed and fed by local members. She wrote that: “I have come to love this country very deeply indeed” (1962, p.55). Having arrived as an ambassador for the SA, she returned as an ambassador for Australia: “I shall try to be a worthy ambassador, and of all things that I most wish for it is that I shall one day return” (p.55). Balfour had imagined a book of the trip but that never materialised, instead, her adventures appeared in *Mother Earth* serialised across twelve issues.

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At the time of the founding of the SA, in May 1946, there were already at least three like-minded associations in Australia and New Zealand (Paull, 2009). So, there is no great surprise to find that an Australian farmer, Henry Shoobridge, and a New Zealand dentist, Dr. Guy Chapman, were founder members of the Soil Association.

The first issue of the SA's journal, *Mother Earth*, included an article from Tasmania, 'Farmers and the future' by Shoobridge (1946), and two from New Zealand's *Compost Magazine* (1946a, 1946b). The second issue of *Mother Earth* included an article from South Australia, 'Soil, Food and Life' by Professor Stanton Hicks who was described as "Professor of Human Physiology in the University of Adelaide and Director of Army Catering in the Australian Military Forces" (1946, p.13). By the time of Balfour's visit, there were 119 SA members in Australia, and 63 in New Zealand (SA, 1957).

Eve Balfour travelled with Kathleen Canley, she recorded the visit with her pen and her camera, and her accounts are illustrated with her own photographs. There was no budget for food or accommodation, but there was the objective to meet the local members, and it was they who provisioned the tour. There were SA members in all states of Australia and in the course of the year Balfour visited all six states. The two most populous, New South Wales (N=41 members) and Victoria (N=41), together accounted for two thirds of members. The remaining members were from South Australia (N=13), Queensland (N=12), Tasmania (N=7) and, the largest state with the smallest membership, Western Australia (N=5) (SA, 1957).

In rural New South Wales (NSW), Balfour stayed with grazier Colonel Harold White on his 5200 acre (2100 hectare) property near Guyra in the New England Highlands. Balfour described him as "one of the great Australian pioneers of conservation farming" and "one of our earliest Soil Association members" (1960, p.409). She commented that: "He is not a 100% organic farmer in the purist's sense of the word, but the whole of his thinking and policy is organic" (p.409). White had a long association with the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (AOFGS) which was based in Sydney; it was founded in October 1944 and was the world's first association to title itself as 'organic'. As soon as WWII paper restrictions were lifted the AOFGS published the *Organic Farming Digest* (1946-1955). White

was one of its most prolific contributors, authoring twenty articles (Paull, 2008). The AOFGS published a comprehensive set of ten organic farming principles. The AOFGS was wound up in 1955, but White continued to champion the cause through the press and radio. Balfour gave talks at two schools in Armidale: “Both schools are members of the Soil Association as a result of Colonel White’s interest in them” (p.406).

On the outskirts of Sydney, Balfour stayed with farmer and engineer P. A. Yeomans. He was a manufacturer of proprietary chisel ploughs from 1952, initially to a US design. He privately published *The Keyline Plan* in 1954 advocating a method of contour ploughing and water management using his ploughs. Balfour was impressed, and in her travels she championed Yeoman’s Keyline concept as a contribution to ‘conservation farming’. Yeomans does not appear in the SA membership list of 1957, and he was never a contributor to either the *Organic Farming Digest* or *Mother Earth*. His Yeoman Keyline Ploughs are still on the market.

In Victoria, Balfour delivered an address to a monthly meeting of the Victorian Compost Society (VCS) (1959e). The VCS was founded in October 1945 and was the second society ever to affiliate with the SA.

In South Australia, Balfour stayed with the Hicks family. Professor Stanton Hicks was a member, a contributor to both *Mother Earth* and the *Organic Farming Digest*. He added scholarly ‘weight’ to a SA that generally exhibited aristocratic titles more visibly than academic credentials. Hicks’ 1950 talk ‘Soil, Food, Health and Common Sense’ at Kingsway Hall, London, was sponsored by the SA and published as a SA promotional pamphlet. With NSW grazier Harold White, Hicks co-authored *Life from the Soil* in 1953.

In Tasmania, Balfour met Henry Shoobridge. She described him as “President of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania [LSAT] and our oldest Tasmanian member ... It was a great event meeting him at long last” (1959d, p.702). Shoobridge was, at the time, aged 84 years. The LSAT was founded in Hobart in August 1946. Innovations of LSAT included pioneering junior memberships and recruiting government departments and NGOs onto its Council (Paull, 2009). It was Shoobridge who first proposed the idea of society affiliations to the

SA. In 1947 affiliation was a novel idea for the infant SA but a policy was promptly formulated and the LSAT was duly accepted as the SA's first affiliated association. Shoobridge wrote enthusiastically to urge the other Antipodean societies to follow the Tasmanian lead. By the time of Balfour's tour there were six affiliated associations: three of these were prompted by Shoobridge: the LSAT, the VCS and the New Zealand Organic Compost Society (NZOCS); the other three affiliates were from Argentina, South Africa and Sweden (SA, 1957).

Balfour stayed with the Alliston family at Three Hummock Island, a speck off the north-west tip of Tasmania. She recounted that: "they spent a weekend at Haughley right at the beginning off the Soil Association. They were in fact our first Australian members" (1959d, p.704). This claim is muddled since the Allistons were British and did not migrate to Australia until, or after, 1949.

In New Zealand Balfour reported: "Some authorities have gone so far as to urge that a topdressing of superphosphate mixed with D.D.T. be made compulsory throughout New Zealand. This is indeed a deplorable thought" (1959a, p.183). She wrote of her pleasure at meeting Dr. Guy Chapman "justly famous for being one of the earliest pioneers for better health in school children through better nutrition" (1959b, p.283) which she had reported in *The Living Soil* (1943). Of the NZ Governor-General, Viscount Cobham, she reported that he was the patron of the NZOCS and "he never misses an opportunity to be outspoken in public on this theme" (1959b, p.285).

Balfour spent Christmas in Queensland at Alice Berry's 40,000 acre sheep station near Charleville, central Queensland. She reported on the drought, the heat, and related that "The pigs and kangaroo had reached pest proportions and constant war was waged on them" (1959c, pp.584-585).

Australians had joined the Agricultural Experimental Circle of the Anthroposophical Society as early as 1929. Balfour visited Alex Podolinsky ('Pottalinski' in her account) at Wandin, Victoria. She wrote of "a most remarkable small farm ... I don't think there are very many Bio-Dynamic farms in Australia, but I have never seen a more convincing demonstration of what this, or indeed any other, system of organic farming can achieve" (1959e, p.47). In NSW she visited "Mr.

W. Williams who has a very remarkable Bio-Dynamic demonstration garden, where ... he grows all the herbs required for the various B.D. preparations ... and he is the principal supplier for B.D. farmers and gardeners throughout the whole of Australia and New Zealand” (1960, p.397).

Western Australia was the final leg of the grand Antipodean tour. As with visitors before and after, including the present author, Balfour marvelled at “the state’s astonishing variety of native flora ... all are beautiful and their profusion has to be seen to be believed. I can only say that they alone are worth the 12,000 miles journey to Australia” (1961, p.835). She visited farms and delivered a lecture on the Haughley Experiment at the University “at the invitation of Dr. Drover, Senior Lecturer in Soil Science” (Balfour, 1961, p.856).

The SA President, Lord Bradford (1960, p.1) welcomed Balfour back to Britain: “We have felt a sense of debt to these two Dominions ever since our Inaugural Meeting in June 1945, when we had messages of good will from both of them ... No one else, perhaps, is able to visit every member in the country in this way, but it may be one of the best services we can render to our members in any country; it increases our membership there, and helps to give them the feeling of belonging together as nothing else can”. Balfour reported that she had recruited 100 new members at a membership fee of £3.00 each.

Australia was no stranger to the idea of organic agriculture at the time of Eve Balfour’s visit - but she delivered a national organics portrait, something that, at the time, the country itself could not deliver. The national association, the AOFGS, had been wound up, the LSAT was close to demise, and the VCA had a limited regional reach. Balfour’s account appeared during the interregnum between the decline of the first wave of organics advocacy and the rise of the second wave which would include the Soil Association of South Australia and the Organic Gardening and Farming Society of Tasmania. Australia now leads the world with 12 million certified organic agricultural hectares which is 32% of the world’s total (Willer & Kilcher, 2011) and the SA link continues with, currently, 362 Australian members.

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