

1. Australian adventures in Earth repair

We depend on the trees and animals

We depend on the earth

We live in all things

All things live in us.

Stephanie Kaza, Green Gulch Farm

I was born just before the age of massive increase in the speed of extraction and use of resources. In 1953 I was a ten year-old returning from burying myself in the warm sands of the quiet beaches of the Swan River; walking home in bare feet on hot asphalt, swinging my towel, smelling the boronia and lingering.

Later, in Sydney I was running around the harbour, listening to tugboats hooting in the fog at Cremorne and Neutral Bay. I swam at Northbridge and went home to Castlecrag through the bush, stopping to lie like a lizard on warm sandstone rocks. There was always a flowering wattle to smell.

Earth, through the rocks, textures, plants, and scents had claimed me as it had others.

In the early years of the 20th century in Australia there emerged a few 'bioneers' passionate about a restorative relationship with unlikely landscapes. And during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s they were still largely unknown and yet deeply engaged in what they recognised as damaged landscapes. They probably did not know of each other's work yet I would inherit their pioneering endeavours.

In Broken Hill, Bertie Morris saw the inter-relationships among plants, wind and water and how together they protected and tied firmly the Earth's skin, the soil.

A silver mining industry had begun in the desert at Broken Hill. Among its new residents in 1890, 14 year-old Albert 'Bertie' Morris was deeply marked by watching the drifting sands and dust storms move into the city. He watched his father build a big stone wall to keep out the sand. Within a short time the sand came to the top of the wall.

Later he saw how further 'development' of the Silver City stripped the surrounding hills for mine props, fuel for cooking, heating, smelting, and buildings, leaving its hills denuded. The sand rolled in and dust storms increased. Bertie became convinced that only restoration of the original vegetation could hold down the profligate sands and prevent them from enveloping the city. Initially, his ideas were discounted.

In 1909 he married Quaker Margaret Sayce, and later became a Quaker himself. He developed the idea of a green belt around the city that, he asserted, would not only help but wholly remove the problem. Assisted by Edwin Ashby, a leading South Australian Quaker botanist¹, he experimented for many years with plants for dry areas.

Today, a collar of green encircles Broken Hill. His success and vision travelled. Israelis and Americans came to see the results and his methods were copied in other countries. The methods he advocated are among those recommended as best practice in land restoration.

The outback called me and in 1959 I left Sydney to follow my dream to live on an outback cattle station and it was at Gordon Downs Station, on the edge of the Tanami Desert, that I became dimly aware of a remarkable woman living in Alice Springs.

A **Tasmanian Quaker, Olive Muriel Pink**, born in 1884, was an anthropologist and botanic artist who fell in love with the native plants around Alice Springs.² An agitating and passionate advocate for improved Aboriginal rights in the 1930s and 1940s she campaigned forcefully for them and was critical of missionaries, government officials and pastoralists.

After 36 years living in the Tanami desert she began work on a plant reserve in Alice Springs and in 1956 she and her Warlpiri assistant gardeners established public gardens for the appreciation of central desert indigenous plants. Having no money she grew her own fruit and flowers, exhibited her artwork and refused the Old Age Pension.

In the Australian Arid Region Flora Reserve she gave each plant a name and if a person was out of favour the plant was not watered. She helped begin Yuendumu Aboriginal Art Outstation community. She received Quaker support in 1942³ and lived in her garden in a galvanised shed until she died in 1975 aged 91.

She needed tenacity to act against prevailing opinions on Aboriginal rights and the value of desert plants. She held close ties to Quakers all her life and is buried in the Quaker section of the Alice Springs cemetery.

While she was planting her Reserve, I was in the Kimberleys where station managers scornful of their bush heritage were pouring bore water onto exotic plants to make the homesteads 'beautiful' and change the local habitat to make it fit to grow plants from other cultures and climates.

In 1988 I visited the Olive Pink Australian Arid Region Reserve and was in awe of her struggle and vision in protecting the thorny, dull grey and glaucous greens expressing the shy exquisite nature of arid land plants⁴ that I loved greatly.

Red Mitchell, an American Quaker, who migrated to Australia and joined the Blue Mountains Local Meeting, was a silviculture graduate. During the Second World War he was interned as a conscientious objector and worked in the National Park in Hawaii. Long before Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, he wrote about a meeting he attended where it was intended to introduce new insecticides into the environment.⁵ On 14th October 1944, he wrote in a letter that should have aroused alarm:

I stood up for the insects. I defended them. I told of the wondrous beauty of even the least of God's creatures. Now man proposed to destroy them – some species to extinction, perhaps all. None of the experts spoke to me after that, perhaps I should have sat silent, looking wise ...

And then in the 1960s and 1970s along the Sydney foreshore within sound and sight of the Harbour Bridge, two sisters walked through the bushland each day. **Joan and Eileen Bradley**⁶, systematic observers of the natural environment, studied the habits of three families of the Superb Fairy Wren. When numbers fell dramatically in 1966, Joan alerted the press that minute doses of organochlorines over long periods caused sterility in small birds. They also developed the principles and practices that would become 'bush regeneration'. By 1975 this had gained the support of the National Trust and conservation associations and is now an Australian applied science vocation.⁷ Variations of the Bradley method have been adopted around the world.

Meanwhile in the 1970s I was intellectually blundering around, gaining more academic knowledge in Europe and then being largely ineffective in Lesotho. But another concept was being developed which would change my life and give me a vocation.

In the 1970s, two ecologists at the University of Tasmania, **Bill Mollison** and **David Holmgren**, were working on an Earth-friendly innovation – permaculture – whose importance in Earth restoration I discuss later. They had seen the ravages of clearfell forestry, and soil, water and species loss. They had seen towns and cities fouled by coal polluting industries. They drew on many threads from society and the environment to develop a fabric of ethics, principles and strategies for Earth restoration and longterm sustainability.

The restorative methods of Bertie Morris, Olive Pink and the Bradley sisters were gentle and patient. They paced restoration to the seasons and allowed the land to dictate its rate of recovery. They worked with Earth and her time. This was revolutionary but they probably did not realise how critical intact, permanent natural systems and biodiversity are for climate stability. Mollison and Holmgren did know, and consciously created repair principles.

These Australian ‘bioneers’ spiritual insights saw and respected all ecological interactions. They became convinced that Earth, if permitted, can heal herself. Pleasing to Quaker beliefs is that they acted on their insights. They would provide my vocation and the vehicle for Quaker concern.

But in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th century, bush poets wrote about rural conditions and the pioneer spirit of rural men, women, and animals. It was a case of battling the bush, subduing and transforming it into images of European landscape. Their attitudes reflected a masculine and adversarial God who would send a drought or flood to correct the sinners who then went to church to repent. They had a conflicted relationship with Australia, regarding it as harsh. They blamed the land for droughts and floods, not inappropriate farming methods and ill-adapted crops from Europe.

Examples of working with the Earth were rare and by the second half of the 20th century most Australians were no longer earning their living in intimacy with the land which fed them and were distant from such practices.

Chapter 1 notes

1 Edwin Ashby 1861-1941 was a South Australian botanist and Quaker. He was also a collector of birds, butterflies, shells, chitons (recent and ancient fossils). The best of these were donated to the SA Museum. He became fascinated by Australian native flora and opened a native plant nursery in the 1930s to preserve wildlife. His property ‘Wittunga’ was given to the Botanical Gardens in Adelaide. His daughter Alison was a distinguished collector and painter of Australian Flora. Bib.ID 1567-745 State Library.

2 A town in the centre of Australia, often called the Red Heart for its arid climate and extremes of weather. It was for many years seen as inhospitable. Today it lives on fossil water and imports everything.

3 <http://www.opbg.com.au/2010/about-miss-pink/>

4 1st June 2010, ABC Radio National dedicated one hour to Olive Pink and her achievements.

5 Private email from Elizabeth Mitchell, 4th June 2010, Red Mitchell’s unpublished diary. Red Mitchell became an Australian and member of Blue Mountains Local Meeting

6 adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130275b.htm

7 I belong to two bushcare groups in the Blue Mountains where we have 64 groups of happy regenerators.