

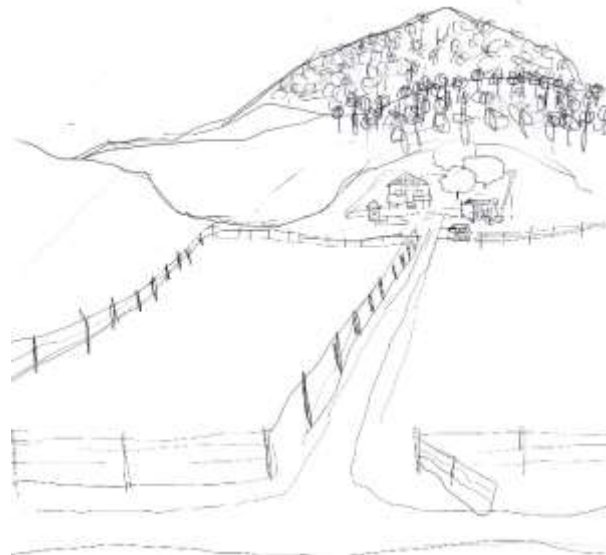


Chapter 7

Idealism vs Materialism (Ropeley)

It was a good thing for Michelle and I to move away from the city and our activities in Red Hill and New Farm. It was a chance to establish our partnership in a new territory, rather than one of us moving to the other's community involvements. Moving to a rural area was also a great chance to further develop our self-sufficiency knowledge and ideals. We had looked at some localities up the coast but took up an offer from my sister Sue and brother-in-law David to share their property at Ropeley. They had recently moved up from Sydney and purchased 160 acres, 20 kilometres south of Gatton.

It was a lovely old farm. The second last place on Hogars Rd, a dirt road about a kilometre from the bitumen and Ropeley primary school. The primary school was a one teacher school with about 20 children attending. The other community building was a Lutheran church closer to Gatton. There was no shops or other community spaces. After entering the gate to our property, there were two old grassy lucerne paddocks on either side of the track that lead up to a small worker cottage. The cottage was situated just on the beginning of a steep rise to the top of a ridge which was covered by brigalow and soft wood scrub. The scrub covered about a third of the property. The steep slopes were covered in lantana which also covered about a third of the property.



Three beautiful big Moreton Bay figs surrounded and dwarfed the house. There was also a couple of old timber slab sheds nearby. The conditions were fairly primitive, there was no electricity and the toilet was a hole in the ground away from the house. There was a small rain water tank, an old gas fridge and a very





old small wood stove. All the walls in the house had been removed by a previous owner to make one big room and there was no internal lining. Sue and David had made a camp style shower at the back steps. It was just perfect, Michelle and I loved it. Both of us had been moved by the bumper sticker, “live simply so all can simply live”. We were now in a good place to embrace a simple lifestyle.



While moving away from our life in the city, this was still a familiar locality for me, with so many of my cousins and relatives living in the Lockyer Valley. For Michelle, living in a rural area and country life was a very new, exciting and somewhat daunting experience. After a short honeymoon camping on Moreton Island, we moved to Ropeley. Sue and David organized to be elsewhere for our first week to let us settle in. There was no street lighting and the stars at night were amazing. It was incredibly quiet with no background traffic noise. Capitalism and the modern world seemed a long way away.

One night during that first week, we were sitting at the table reading between two kerosene lights, when we began to hear a bit of clanging noise and then some yelling. Our hearts began to race. Immediately thinking the worst about our new neighbours, I peered out the front to see a lot of people with torches approaching. I was already fearing greatly for our safety, when two loud gun shots rang out. Rocks started to land on the tin roof and the mob began to whooping and screaming. The end was nigh.

Moving to the front of the house to meet our fate, I recognize my cousin Paul with the gun and then slowly I could see all my other relatives. We had been “tin canned”, a custom to welcome newlyweds to the area. They brought a great feast of food and drinks and a party followed. This early experience captured the strong community and supportive base of our rural communities and my family. We were made to feel immediately very welcome and supported, despite being city slickers.





The Place

The Lockyer Valley west of Brisbane is famous for its very fertile black soil flats which produces vegetables, lucerne and other products which are transported all around Australia. Ropeley is a small area just 20 kilometres south of the main town of Gatton. It is on slightly higher, sandier country. It was one of the first areas settled and farmed by Europeans in the Lockyer, beginning around 1850s, as they began to push away and kill the local Aboriginal people.

Before Europeans, the Ropeley area was covered in soft wood scrub, a dry rainforest which was easily cleared to reveal a fertile sandy soil. 150 years ago this land was easily worked with a horse. The richer newcomers moved in on this sort of land, while the poorer newcomers had to settle on the more difficult black soil flats. This black soil was very sticky and heavy and extremely difficult to cultivate with horse drawn ploughs. On the black soil, the eucalypts were huge but there was good grasslands for cattle. I know now that these grass lands were developed by Aboriginal people over thousands of years of fire stick farming and very considered care of the country.

With the advent of tractors the black soil flats were now the prized land because of its great fertility and good underground water. The sandy soft wood scrub country, was now heavily eroded after clearing and the fertility depleted after a hundred years of European farming. When Michelle and I moved to Ropeley it had become a poor area with poorer farmers. Most residents of the area were not living off the land, but instead relying on other employment. Where income was being made from the land it was from beef cattle and not from fruit trees or crops. Ropeley was well known for being a dry place. Not only was it hard to build dams because of unsuitable clays, there was a saying in the valley that “when it rained for 40 days and 40 nights Ropeley got 5 points!!!”

Living at Red Hill I was a couple of kilometres from Parliament House, the centre of political power and we were keen to thumb our noses at the powerful elite. At Ropeley we seemed so far removed from its influence. No one really cared what we did way out there. In Brisbane there was a constant background drone of traffic, the hum of capitalism, and in the inner city, new giant sky scrapers seemed to emerge overnight. At Ropeley we could hear a visitor’s car coming five





minutes before they arrived. If the wind was in the right direction we could see and hear the neighbour's screen door banging shut from about 800 meters away.

Driving from Ropeley to Gatton felt like travelling forward in time. Not much had changed with houses in the Ropeley area over the previous 50 years. We would drive past mostly old homes till we got off the sandy country, and on to the black soil flats where massive changes had occurred. Here there were huge tractors, irrigators and other machinery in operation. These rich farmers had huge new metal sheds. For the most part, the homes were still older, as farmers generally reinvested their wealth in to their farm rather than their own accommodation. In the city, the size of your house was a status symbol. Here the size of your shed was more for display. Entering Gatton there were lots of advertising signs and big agricultural supplies shops. The centre of town was a thriving and fairly stable commercial area with lots of shops which had existed for a long time (often with the same owners) and which supplied just about everything anyone could need. Driving on to Brisbane was like a further move in to the future with constant change, development and expansion.

On the drive in to Gatton, everyone would acknowledge you and do the one fingered wave as you drove past, as it was assumed you must be a local and known to them. In Gatton you could see and hear people catching up with relatives and neighbours and friends, engaging in long conversations. In Brisbane city, generally people had their heads down with no acknowledgement of the people walking past. In Brisbane Michelle and I had worked trying to resurrect neighbourhood connections. In Ropeley and Gatton the sense of community was already very strong.

Community

Michelle and I had both been working in the inner city to strengthen community and to build neighbourhood ties. Economic development had disrupted these ties, as people were increasingly traveling longer distances to work and shifting localities more regularly. It created a churn of people moving in and out of neighbourhoods with a drift of the young and rich to the more trendy inner city to be closer to the centres of power and economic development. This had the consequence of driving up house prices and rents, forcing the poor out to the outer





suburbs. This instability meant people were much less likely to invest in relationships with their neighbours. We saw developing neighbourhood ties as a way of challenging and resisting this economic development. The more people were connected the more they would be able to resist challenges from the powerful centre.



We moved to Ropeley still holding on to this community idealism, but at Ropeley everyone already knew each other. There was incredible stability with families often staying in the one location for generations. So people not only knew each other they knew the history of their neighbour's families and who was connected to who. In meeting someone for the first time they would want to know where you lived and who you were related to. Having most of my aunts and uncles and cousins living in the Lockyer Valley it was easy for long term residents of the area to work out how I was connected. Locals effectively carried a very complex network map in their heads. This map also enabled them to also know which families got along with others and which families were feuding. When meeting someone new, if your extended families did not get along it would be very unlikely that you would invest in getting to know this person. Conversely, if the families were good friends then this would help to cement the new relationship. Once locals knew I was connected to the Suttons and the Philips it was like they already had a connection with me and that they knew what I would be like. Prediction from breeding stock in a rural area is an acquired skill. In the inner city people tended to go to funerals only if they knew the deceased directly, but here in the Lockyer people would attend funerals if they were just a friend of one of the relatives. Funerals were a way to catch up with neighbours and friends.

The strength of the local community was amazing for us and such a strong contrast to the inner city. However these ties were definitely no brake on





capitalist economic development. Quite the reverse. In this very tight knit community, there was an extremely right wing culture with enormous support for Joh Bejelki Peterson. Today the area is a strong hold for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. In the Gatton area there has always been a strong allegiance to a very conservative Christian culture. Churches like the Lutherans and Apostolic were and are very strong and members of these congregations would be very keen to support each other in business. Local farmers did not identify with the worker's party as they had tended to do a generation before. They now saw themselves as bosses employing others and running a business. The farm workers were not unionized and often had long standing and supportive relationships with a particular farmer and hoped one day to also own their own farm. Everyone was a potential capitalist.

Tight knit communities may be good at resisting directions from outside, but they are also good at encouraging conformity to certain ideas. If you did not share a love of Joh and other right wing ideas you stood out and the group, as a whole could put pressure on you to change your ideas or leave the community. Fortunately my extended family networks were not that rigid and they would tolerate our idealistic left wing ideas (knowing that our ideas would have little impact in the local community). We discovered 'community' is not necessarily a radicalizing force, it could equally be a powerful conservative force.

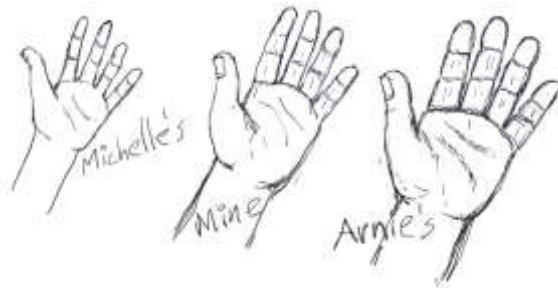
Tight knit communities are also very good at excluding and demonizing others like new city slickers, or people from a different culture or race. The fear of strangers and racist views can be reinforced and acted upon in a very closed community. The Gatton people had a certain style of dress and look reflecting their predominance of British and German descendants. Anyone with a dark skin or a different style of dress would stand out and be noticed and quickly identified as an outsider, a stranger. There was an immediate defensiveness. I walked in to the Tent Hill pub one day which was a small drinking establishment where a handful of regulars would meet each afternoon. It was about 10 kilometres from Gatton servicing the immediate farming area. As I walked in I could feel 10 sets of eye bearing down on me. There was no welcome, including from the bar keeper, just a protective suspicion. For a black international African student at the Gatton Agricultural College this reaction you could expect would be multiplied tenfold, and explained why such students stayed on campus rarely ventured to the township.





Despite these strong boundaries and potential internal feuds within the community, all locals were also connected through the land and they were there to help each other in times of fire, drought and flood. In the city people may not be racist, but alienation from their neighbours means they may not offer any help in a crisis. In the country, the land connects people and old wounds and racism could be set aside to help people near them. With the threat of fire particularly, you needed to know your neighbours and be ready to assist for their sake but also to protect your own place. In relation to the outer world, locals were proud of this strong community feel and support. Over time they would also begin to accept people from very different cultures once they got to know them a bit and felt they also would help others in a crisis. My grandmother had strong racist beliefs about people of colour but she would shop regularly each week to support the Indian shopkeepers in Grantham and enjoy a long chat with them.

We were very lucky to have Arnie Shultz as an immediate neighbour. He had lived in the Ropeley area his whole life and was incredibly generous with his time often helping us with harvesting our lucerne and sharing his knowledge. My brother-in-law David joked that Arnie was fluent in the ‘Ropeley dialect’ which was a strange mixture of an ‘ocker’ and German accents and where every sixth word (literally and without exaggeration) was a 4 letter swear word. Arnie was a well-built tall man with hands as huge as dinner plates and the thickest, most calloused muscular fingers I have ever seen, shaped by years of hard physical work. It helped that we were connected to well established farming families in the valley that he knew, but I think he was a very kind and friendly person who would have helped us anyway. I admired his strong connection to the land and the mountain behind us in particular. We wanted to make sure we would also look after the land.



I met some other locals by joining a local cricket team. This was good fun but it did not take long to work out that everyone was a friend or connected to my cousins, mostly all farmers in the area. I later joined a soccer team which was a very different network of people not connected to the old local families. These men were newer to the area, who had moved in to cheaper rentals. Some were





students at the college, some unemployed, others worked in the meat works or other businesses in the area.

Building a house and settling

To stay at Ropeley Michelle and I needed a structure to live in to allow Sue and David back into the existing house. My Aunt Shirley said we could have an old grain shed they no longer needed. The shed had once been workers' accommodation, with two small rooms, a veranda and a 'lean to' roof at the back over a dirt floor. As we pulled it apart we realized it had been moved before as the boards were numbered. Having been a grain shed for decades the two rooms were covered, several feet thick, in old hessian grain bags. We were a bit aghast that under each bag was a thousand cockroaches. So there was just layers and layers of cockroaches seen scurrying as we emptied the shed. It was like a high rise apartment block for cockies. As we pulled it apart we sanded each board to remove the build-up of cockroach grime. Having been involved in pulling down a much bigger house with the workers co-op, I felt confident to pull this shed apart and that we could simply reverse the process and reassemble the building.

Many friends and relatives from Brisbane would come up to camp and help with the construction over the next few months. It was great to have a big team of people helping particularly with the basic framework and stumps, but for the most part it involved Michelle and I chipping away at slowly getting all the weatherboards attached and the floor





down. I loved this house, I felt very connected to it. It was small rustic but very comfortable for us. The wind would whistle through and it could be very cold. Aunty Kay felt sorry for us and knitted some balaclavas to sleep in during the winter months. Occasionally, in a big wind, I would worry if it would stay on the stumps. I would also worry from time to time that the council might arrive to tell us to take it down as we never sought any building permission.

To free up the main house for Sue and David when they returned from Sydney, we moved on to the veranda of the new house while we finished putting down the floor inside our house. I added a loft where we put our bed and glass in the top triangle of the side walls which provided a terrific view from the bed across the valley west to the ranges. The lean-to area became a bathroom and kitchen with a concrete floor. Two corrugated water tanks provided more water and an outdoor shower. An old slow combustion stove also provided hot water. Luxury.

A radio kept us in contact with the outside world and broader political events, but we did feel a very long way from these things and other developments happening in the big city. It was as if we had gone back in time. We were living a very simple lifestyle consuming few resources and recycling and reusing everything. While the self-sufficiency goal, was much harder than we thought, we were very comfortable, and felt a congruence with our ideals. We felt very connected to the property, in particular to the soft wood scrub and the Brigalow forest that made up half the property. Sitting on the veranda we had a view for 30 kilometres to the west. We could sit and watch the amazing storms and their light shows as they rolled in from the west. It would also be very disappointing when we watched the rain go either side of us. We would be so excited when it did rain, to get a bit more moisture on our land and in our tanks. We were now so much more aware of the weather and its vagaries, our utter dependence on nature, and our complete lack of control over it.

Self sufficiency

Michelle and I had moved from being urban perma-culturalists, to explore self-sufficiency in the country. I think in the back of our minds we thought, arrogantly, that we could bring our organic/permaculture ideas to this place and transform the land and maybe have an impact on the more traditional ways all my





relatives and neighbours farmed. We were quickly disabused of this plan, it was like taking 'coal to Newcastle'. The reverse was the case, we had so much to learn from my relatives and the locals about self-sufficiency and more importantly from the land itself.

I had imagined Ropeley would be like my Thomas Street backyard multiplied twenty times as we now had a huge area to cultivate. We began by doing what was done at Thomas Street, mulching and planting. Fairly quickly we acquired a dairy cow. Sue and David had already got some chooks. We also had 2 donkeys (that were originally pets of Sue's and my parents in Sydney). Later we got geese, a sheep, an angora goat, 2 horses and 8 beef cows and a bull.

When we arrived everywhere was green and lush. After a few months the realities of this land soon hit us as it became very dry. We only had a small tank for water which was our drinking water and so my expansionist plans were put on hold and we had to wait for rain to plant fruit trees and then hope there would be good follow up rain. 80 years earlier the Hogar family with 7 children were living and surviving on this property, with pigs, dairy cows and small crops. Why could we not do so? It highlighted how limited my permaculture knowledge was and that there was a whole store of more basic farming information that was needed to make things work. Thomas St had town water and in its backyard we could grow more vegetables and fruit than we could on 160 acres of dry country. We learnt water is the key, something my county cousins had always known.

We needed to build a dam, but unfortunately the area had a reputation for permeable clays that would not hold water. We tried in any case and built a big dam near the house. It looked good and the skilled dozer driver did his best. The dam was well placed and filled up with water after a couple of days of rain. The full dam looked beautiful and so full of promise. The next day it was half empty and on the second day it was completely empty. A large hole had formed at the bottom of the dam and all the water disappeared underground. I had expected the wall to maybe break but instead the water dispersed like down a plug hole never to be seen again. There was no water evident in front of the dam. We did our best to repair the hole and the dam would work at a lower level but would not hold enough to satisfy the original plans.





Before moving to Ropeley I read a book about the Keyline system which was mentioned in the permaculture books. The book was about improving the fertility of the farm by increasing water retention, avoiding water runoff and keeping the water in dams and in the soil. It provided me a structure to plan and shape the entire property. The keylines involve deep ripping the soil almost following the contour lines but on a downward gradient so that water is channelled from the gullies out to the ridges. I imagined rows of trees 40 metres apart following the 'keylines' around the ridges. Reality came quickly again to sort out these plans. The land was far too steep to develop the key lines by deep ripping with a tractor, as was done in the book. Also, the soil did not hold water so the dam part of the plan was not possible. Not wanting to give up I dug by hand. After several weeks of digging we planted trees in a trial area after it had rained. Unfortunately 4 years later the trees that survived were actually half the size they were when they went in. There was just not enough natural rain fall for them to thrive. Another plan derailed.

The Keyline system I think is still a good one and many of the principles are applicable to a wide variety of situations but it showed me that you cannot just take what worked in one place and apply it the same way in another. Systems need to be adapted to each new situation. But even more so, we really needed to learn what was possible from the land. The Aboriginal custodians had done just this for tens of thousands of years but I was unaware of this wisdom. Like other Europeans before me I tried to make the country adapt to my own plans and previous experience. I tried to dominate the land. The poor eroded soil that we had purchased was a consequence of this orientation. In a little over a hundred years, a fertile soft wood scrub became a lantana covered eroded pasture. After clearing of the scrub it has been estimated that several feet of top soil from the Ropeley area had been washed way. What further damage could we inflict in another 100 years?

It now seemed growing cattle would be easier and more viable than trees and vegies. We would concentrate vegies and fruit trees in the house yard. Fortunately all my relatives had cattle and they were able to assist. We purchased 8 cows and a bull. The cattle were beautiful animals and I enjoyed their presence. They had problems from time to time such as disease and birthing problems and we were probably a bit slow preventing problems with our inexperience. It was very sad looking after sick cows and trying to get them back on their feet after a





bad birth. One cow spent several weeks in a sling in the shed trying to get her leg strength back. But we ultimately failed to get her back on her feet and the vet had to be called to put her down. The hard realities of trying to live off the land were becoming clearer.

Michelle liked horse riding and when we went to buy a horse they also offered us a very old stock horse for free. I had never ridden but I learnt (so I thought) to ride bare back to round up the cattle. I later realised this old horse was really taking me to round up the cattle. One day riding up a steep hill I slid off the back of the horse unintentionally and it hurt him. He never forgot this and he would pig root and carry on for minutes often succeeding in throwing me off. Every time I tried to ride him it would be the same routine. The old adage of always jumping back on the horse was in my mind. Michelle could jump on with no trouble, but not me. After a couple of months I gave up riding him. I soon learned that my grandfather's technique of a loud call and feeding grain or lucerne at the same time would teach the cattle to come to the call. Instead of chasing them, they would now come to me. So much easier. My mustering days were short lived.

Farm labouring

From the outset we had been doing a bit of farm labouring for income, helping my cousin John and my uncle Robin when they needs an extra hand. As the difficulty of growing food at Ropeley became apparent we realized we would need to do more of this work to keep us going financially. While not making any income out of the Ropeley property, we still loved this land and our focus shifted to trying to remove the invasive lantana and plant native timber trees that could handle the lower rainfall. We wanted to repair and extend our native forest.

Michelle and I for income began to do more work for Cousin John, picking broccoli and baling up Lucerne and for Uncle Robin, picking tomatoes, watermelons, and oranges. We both really enjoyed this work. Michelle took a while to adjust to the 5am winter starts, but both these relatives were fun to work with. While we all worked hard, both Robin and John enjoyed a joke. We were also very well fed. Often we started very early doing a couple of hours work before breakfast. There would be a big cooked breakfast, more work, morning tea





with biscuits or cake, more work, a cooked lunch with desert and another cuppa, then more work, afternoon tea with more cake or jam sandwiches before more work. If we were working a real long day to bring the harvest in, we would stay on for a cooked dinner and dessert and then some supper after a few hours work in the evening to finish the day off. At Robin's and John's we would often start at 5 am and finish at 9pm and then return to do the same the next day.

At Uncle Robin's farm, Grandma and Robin's wife kay would prepare all the food and then would also help out in the field and in the packing shed at night. Bev would play a similar role at John's. This reflected the gender roles of the times. Despite their long hours of toil by the women, everyone referred to the farm work as John's or Robin's, (maybe as they were in charge). If it was a social visit it would become Robin and Kay's or John and Bev's.

Robin was a keen cricketer and with his teenage sons we sometimes had a quick game of cricket at lunch. These cricket skills would also be needed in the paddock. When it would get near the end of a picking session a rotting orange or tomato would often come whistling past my head. Robin (nowhere to be seen) would then unleash another intentional near miss. I would then return fire, and it would on for young and old. Orange fights were the best, as a rotting orange disintegrated on impact without hurting too much and they did not have the same acidic stench of rotten tomatoes. John on the other hand would love a game of pool at lunch and would have ongoing battles with Michelle who was a sharp shooter. We felt very relaxed working on both farms and a part of the family in both these places. It was also nice to indulge in some creature comforts. They both had electricity and we could watch TV. While proud of our simple lifestyle, we also greatly enjoyed these occasional indulgences.

Working for them was a good way to get to know the other local farm labourers they employed. Working hard was also a good way to be accepted by the other locals. It became apparent that slow and lazy workers were not really tolerated by the farmers or the other farm labourers. There was a strong culture of working hard without being pushed by the bosses. I noticed when Robin and John were not around, no one slackened off. There seemed to be pride in being strong, fit and a fast worker. It was not like being a slave. The workers could see that Robin and John's families were living in similar accommodation to them and that everyone was in it together to survive financially. It was not easy to trying to





make a living off the land as a farmer and farm labourers knew they had to work hard to keep the Farm productive. It was hard but ‘good’ work. It felt basic and real, an essential service for everyone. We all need food.

Back to Uni

After finishing my honours program, the idea of doing a PhD was always in the back of my mind. While my honours thesis had focused on social network theory, I had also got interested in the methodology of theory development. I was keen to find a way of doing academic research that was consistent with my nonviolent Gandhian interests. My poor reading ability meant I had read very little since finishing the honours, and I was missing some intellectual challenge. I realized I may need some academic structure to keep reading and thinking.

I enrolled in a PhD and got a Commonwealth scholarship. This was an amazing thing for both Michelle and I. For Social workers in the field, going on to a scholarship would involve a big drop in income. For farm labourers like us, we suddenly had more money from the scholarship than what we both earned working long farm labouring hours. Michelle was now able to stay home and work on the Ropeley property, something she really enjoyed. She loved the peace and quiet of our place. This was lucky, as I would head off with our (only) car 3 or 4 days a week, 20 kilometres in to Gatton to catch the train and bus to Uni. (leaving Michelle with no transport).

Michelle had transformed from the city girl who knew very little about the country to feeling confident to look after everything herself. David and Sue had returned to Sydney at this point to finish their Uni courses. Michelle spent her days gardening, making new garden beds, collecting wood for the stove, milking the house cow and looking after the other animals. For a while it got very dry and we ran out of dam water. Consequently Michelle would ride her horse, to herd the cows down the dirt road a kilometre to a waterhole near the primary school so they could get a good long drink for the day and have a nice pick of grass along the way. Michelle really enjoyed this task, embraced the self-sufficient lifestyle.



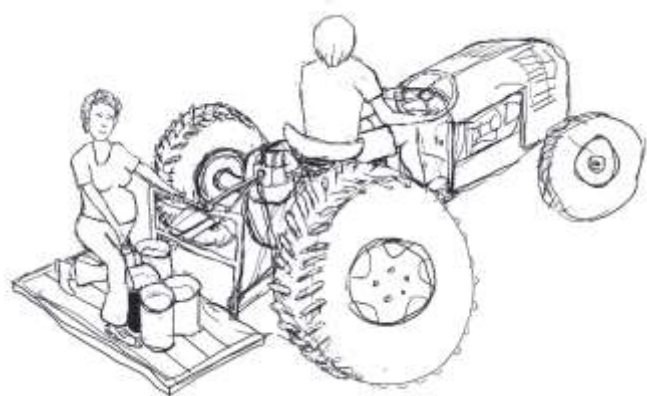


Now back at Uni, I was approached by a social work student to supervise her 3rd year placement at the Gatton hospital. This was something I enjoyed doing particularly as Nola was a self-starter and very competent. She was a mature aged student with a couple of young children. As a result of the placement we became friends. Later Michelle and I would baby sit for her and her husband Len (who was a lecture at the Ag College). We would look forward to playing with their children, Geoff and Michael and we could also have a long hot shower as they were on town water rather than tank water. Luxury. Nola was also a good link for us to some of the newer residents to the area and we got to know their friends Laurie and Trisha, Bernie and Ngarie and their children very well. We are still all good friends, although Michelle and I are very poor at maintaining contact. Interestingly none of these folk still live in the area while almost all my relatives are still there.

Our first child

We were both fairly keen to start a family, but things were not easy initially. Michelle had two miscarriages and some complications with one requiring a blood Transfusion¹. It was an anxious time as you start to wonder whether things will ever work out and that maybe we would never have kids. Fortunately the 3rd pregnancy went well.

One day when Michelle was just a bit over 8 months pregnant I planted some trees on the back fence of the property. I wanted to water them in and cajoled Michelle into standing on the carryall behind the tractor so the water containers would not fall over.² It was a very bumpy steep ride over the hill to the back of our property. The next day Michelle's waters broke and Matt arrived three weeks early. I still feel very guilty



¹ This was just before the AIDs disease hit the headlines with a lot of fear and paranoia. We both had a bit of an anxious time having to be tested and anxiously waiting many days for the all clear.

² I think I had a stereotype hippy image about birth and childhood arising from an idea that peasant women gave birth in the fields and then went back to work.





about how silly and careless I had been. The birth was not straight forward and after many hours of labour Matt was born by caesarean. He needed to be in a humidity crib for several days. It was an anxious time till I knew that everything was OK. It was an exciting and joyous time when we were able to take him home.

Michelle and I in keeping with our ideology of self-sufficiency and simplicity were very keen on breast feeding. Michelle had some trouble with her breast milk getting properly started, but she persisted. After a couple of months Matt began express a lot of discomfort and we thought he had gripe, something the young doctor in Gatton agreed with when we took him for a check-up. We used herbal treatments to soothe him, but it was a stressful time, with Matt crying a lot. My grandma had suggested things were not right and we should go back to the doctor. After a few weeks of more discomfort and worry, we returned to the doctor who still thought all was good but to be sure gave us a referral to a paediatrician in Toowoomba. The paediatrician looked Matt for about 2 minutes, and then told us he was starving. He would need to be bottle fed straight away. This did not fit with our “natural nursing mothers” ideology but as soon as we gave Matt a bottle his discomfort stopped immediately. He now looked so content and he began to thrive. As with my approach to the land, imposing an ideology on particular situations does not always work well. We felt a bit looked down upon by others in the breast feeding fraternity, but it was actually a bonus for me as I could now be part of the feeding routine and enjoy this closeness with my son.

At Uni I was concerned with abstract thought and philosophy, Matt played a very constructive role keeping me grounded and in touch with reality. It is hard to think of Marx and Hegel when you are changing a poohy nappy.

With Matt’s arrival on 29th December 1986, my whole outlook started changing. I was very anxious about his safety. While the house Michelle and I built was safe for us, I began to have uncertainties around Matt. Had I put the glass in the high triangle correctly? Could it fall out? Could the house blow off the stumps in a big wind? My protective instincts were now very engaged. Partly as a result of wanting a safer place for Matt, and for a few other reasons we decided when Matt was about 9 months to move into Gatton. I think at about this point The Red Hill Housing Co-op purchased 19 Thomas St from us (it became the first





house in this new co-op). This meant we had some money and we purchased a nice old Queenslander in Gatton.

Insights from this period

Thomas Street was full of ideology, and plans were made with like-minded people, to change the world. Idealism was easy in Thomas St as I was surrounded by other idealists, all affirming each other. Our beliefs were self-confirming as any challenges or failures that we encountered were not seen as a challenge to our idealism but rather an indication that we need to try even harder and be more idealistic.

Ropeley forced me to let go of ideologies and to deal with more of the reality of situations and to learn and work with people who were very different to me. It challenged my idealism. By this I don't mean my wish for a better world, but I am referring to the philosophy of Idealism which refers to the notion that ideas themselves can change things, that change happens in response to a new idea. Ropeley challenged this. I could see how the realities of the land and the weather dictated things and how these things have fashioned communities and lifestyles. Perhaps it was the material realities that created ideas. The ecological realities of the land resisted my permaculture "good life" ideals. Had I looked to the material history of the area I would have realized I was making many errors. I would have listened to the land like the original custodians had done for thousands of years and worked out ways to live with the land rather than trying to dominate it.

While I sought to impose my ideals on the land there was already a working example of the sort of social change I was seeking. Aboriginal people had a harmonious, self-sufficient lifestyle where there was little hierarchy. The decision making was done in a very flat structure where all Elders were honoured and listened to. It was the land that was supreme and not the people and certainly not the individual. The law came from the land. Ideas arose from the land not the other way around. Aboriginal people survived and thrived in this country learning to live with the ecology. They created grass lands on the black soil flats through fire stick farming and cared for large areas of grain and root crops being careful not to over harvest so that crops could self-perpetuate. They left the soft





wood scrub and Brigalow on the steeper country avoiding erosion and maintaining habitat for other animals. These were the original permaculturalists.

My European idealist mind-set encouraged me to think I was above nature and that I could change and control it to fit with my own wishes and desires. It is a very difficult realization, but I can see how my own 'idealistic way of thinking' is and has been a big part of the problem. This very same sense of superiority and right to impose, provided a rationale for my ancestors to see Aboriginal people as inferior savages, as part of nature (flora and fauna) and that they could be used or dispensed with like any other aspect of nature. Looked at in this way my idealism is a very dangerous style of thinking indeed.



In my social work training I learnt the value of listening to people, not taking over and imposing ideas but working with and supporting their ideas for change. I embraced this perspective but then in practice I actually did the opposite in most situations. I thought of myself as a smart person that could understand things and solve problems and while holding back from time to time, in reflection I can see that a lot of my practice and social change efforts have really been about subtly trying to convince others of the value of my ideas. I was imposing, not listening. I have come to realize the value of Aboriginal ways of thinking but unfortunately I am still like I was in the Ropeley days, caught up in the value of my own ideas (this is why you are now reading these words).





Karl Marx was a ‘materialist’ rather than an ‘idealist’ who saw a certain inevitability in history. He believed the process of industrialization and capitalism would increase inequalities and controls on workers and that they would eventually rise up taking over the means of production and installing a communist system where everyone via the State owned the factories and other businesses. It was not that he thought his ideas would encourage this revolution, he saw it as an inevitable historical material process. His theory of revolution can be traced back to an earlier conservative philosopher, Hegel, who discussed the master/slave relationship and argued that while the slave could learn from the master, the master would not learn from the slave seeing them as inferior. As a result the slave would always be in the ascendancy. Those that fail to listen will fail and those that listen and learn will grow and prosper.

While there have been numerous Marxist revolutions around the globe, few have provided a utopian example to encourage others to follow and currently capitalism seems to be still winning the day. However his orientation I think still has much to offer and I wonder what sense he would have made of today’s world. In his time the world was seen as a supply of endless resources. Economic development was very desirable to supply people with more things, it was just a case of who owned and controlled these things. However what if he had extended his thinking to include an ecological understanding and realized the limits to economic development and the fragility of the whole ecology which sustains all life? With ecology in mind, it is not just capitalism that is a problem, it is actually limitless economic development which has now clearly begun to threaten human existence. A communist state (however ideal) can still be focused on material wealth and ignore ecological realities such as our changing climate. The slaves need not just to gain control of the means of production, they need to transform the means, into an economically sustainable decarbonized system.

The material realities of climate change will bring about massive changes to our world. Perhaps in 20 years we will have become more like a “Mad Max’ dystopian society, perhaps private enterprise will have given way to a planned economy where people are forced to behave in environmentally sensitive ways. Perhaps China will be running the whole show. Perhaps there will be a more anarchistic move back to small self-sufficient communities. Perhaps Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing will be the new model. Each option suggests





Capitalism will have had its day. The master failed to learn from the slaves. This is not what I think will occur, in fact the opposite is occurring.

The master now is learning so much from the slave that they know the slave better than the slaves know themselves. Through the internet, social media and the power of computers the capitalist elites now have so much information about the slaves they can manipulate their desires to further entrench their position. Rupert Murdoch has been able to use his media empire and the knowledge of what effects people's thinking, to encourage a climate change denialism with politicians and the working poor. This denialism has meant a failure in Australia to take the issue seriously. It has allowed wealthy coal miners to continue to look after their own self-interest at the expense of future generations.

Just at a time when people need to be looking out and appreciating their environment, increasingly everyone has their heads gazing down into their devices, where information they receive is manipulated by algorithms, and the self-interest of large multinational digital companies. The scale and power of these digital companies is too much for many countries to resist and their globalized presence and power keeps strengthening. Their focus is not on the good of the world but rather self-interest.

While the reality of climate change will force changes to our world, I do not see any 'material' inevitability to positive social change, there are many possible futures. Ideas can change the material world and the material world changes our ideas. They are locked in a circular creative process with many potential possibilities. Those in power have a great deal of control over our ideas and behaviours but resistance is possible. We need to recognize the ideas and behaviours expected by those with power and the impact on us and to fashion our own ideas and create our own material reality that offer a better future example or model. To deal with climate change we need to become more self-sufficient, consume less, learning from the land, and not imposing our ideas on it. We could have stronger, more supportive, mutual and equal communities, where we could still have the odd rotten tomato or orange fight. This would be luxury.

I do not think there are historical inevitabilities. Materialist thinking misses the power of thinking itself. Ideas however are also not enough to change the world. It will be up to us to begin to create the sort of world we want. We have to make





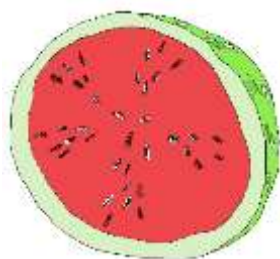
ideals a material reality. It's not idealism vs materialism. We need an idealistic materialism. It's not going to happen by luck or by benevolent design by the wealthy elites. It will be up to us.

Conclusion

My experience at Ropeley questioned the notion that ideas can change things. My various ideals kept running in to the hard reality of the area. However at this time my idealism was still strong, in fact I doubled down on these tendencies enrolling in a PhD with the clear goal that I could change the world by coming up with a nonviolent approach to research, a new epistemology. I still believed ideas could create change, just simply because they were 'good' ideas. Some part of me knew however that all ideals would be pointless unless they became material realities, but I was not very grounded, still listening to ideas rather than learning from the land around me and the material history of that place and the people who came before.

Working for my relatives and through experience on our farm I began to learn more of the skills of self-sufficiency and about the difficulties involved. I learnt more about community and more about family becoming a husband to Michelle and a parent to Matt. All these things made me more grounded and connected to the country and the place. I was now more in touch with the material realities of life.

Now a parent I became very concerned about Matt's safety. This concern was also generalized for me to the whole of society. Matt's bumpy arrival affirmed my desires to make the world a better safer place for him to grow up. Everyone needs to be safe. I needed to get involved in challenging and changing dangerous ideas and material practices. For me the main dangers were a product of greed, Capitalism and economic growth.



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