

What if Australia had been settled by the Finns, not the Poms?

Jim Robinson

With a fertile imagination, it is interesting to ponder what Australia would be like now, had our continent been settled during the wave of European colonisation 200-300 years ago by a people coming from a forestry culture such as in Finland, rather than a farming-agrarian culture such as Britain.

One could realistically guess that:

- the majority of the country would be still covered by native vegetation;
- sizeable portions of this native vegetation, in areas considered 'non-commercial' for forestry, would be owned by farm foresters and primarily managed for commercial purposes on often long rotations with sustainability certification. (There would hopefully also be a comprehensive system of 'unmanaged' national parks);
- there would be recognition both by rural landholders and urban people in Australian cities and globally of the qualities of the wide range of native Australian hardwood (not just the Ash Eucalypts) and softwood timbers including species from arid/semi-arid areas;
- we would have well established global markets for timber and non-timber products from our native species including those from arid and semi-arid areas and we would be earning billions of our export dollars from these products (as well as from the Ash Eucalypts);
- many of these products would be of extremely high value, produced in the regions in vertically integrated industries, from arid to semi-arid areas on 40-80 year rotations (shorter than the timber rotations operated currently in many areas of Scandinavia) with saw-logs any sections of timber more than ten centimetres in diameter;
- there would be a general recognition of the economic and other values of all our native vegetation - no wasteful 'just a bit of bloody scrub' attitude;
- as landholders, we would see ourselves as foresters, maybe doing a bit of farming, and much of our time and energy every year would be invested in managing our forests to produce premium products;
- there would be a network of regional training organisations offering courses in forest silviculture and forest ecology and a broad understanding of these sciences, including within local government;
- populations would be dispersed throughout the country as many more people would grow up in the bush (the regional industries would be there to support them) and knowledge of the bush would be widely passed on in situ from one generation to the next;
- there would be wood processing businesses and shops in every town and city in every state with high-value native timber products, particularly craftwood and furniture for sale;
- there would be no foreseeable threat to our future livelihoods from degradation such as Salinity;
- Aboriginal peoples with their vast knowledge of uses of our native species, would be key partners in these forestry industries;
- we would be the major exploiters of our natural resources for commercial purposes, not other countries*;
- the last thing that Queenslanders would consider doing would be widespread land clearing, wind-rowing and burning of native vegetation. Why would they, when they could be making millions of dollars from large areas of certified sustainably managed native woodlands and forests for well-established local and overseas markets?

None of these hypotheses dismiss the enormous contribution agriculture has, and is still making, to our economy; nor that of the 'industrial' forestry sector. The point of this exercise is to give us some vision of where we may want to go with farm forestry - the development of an Australian farm forestry culture.

The Kiwis are developing theirs, based on plantations. In the last 40 years, many farmers from the New Zealand Farm Forestry Association have become at least part-time foresters with some now fulltime, with hardly a livestock animal to be seen on their properties. These 'farmers' now contribute somewhere in the vicinity of 25% of the NZ timber resource, mainly producing clearwood pine but also clearwood cypress. (Much of this was recently imported into Australia to service the pre-GST building boom!)

Australia certainly has come a long way in developing a farm forestry culture in the last 20 years. In Victoria, we had the development of the Landcare-Farm Tree Groups in the early 1980s. This was followed by wide range of NRE initiatives including farm forestry extension staff and the development of the Agroforestry Networks. There were a host of field days, demo and species trialling sites and tours like Agroforestry Action '93. There was the great work of farm forestry pioneers such as Rod Bird, the Crawfords, Fentons, Stewarts, Dumaresqs, Ian Elder, David Rush and others. Other innovations have included the establishment of the Australian Forest Growers and Tree Farmer Awards as well as the development of portable sawmilling and kiln drying technologies. The last few years have also seen the development of a couple of Cooperatives and the excellent Master Tree Grower courses. All of these have contributed to development of an industry that is being seen as an increasingly viable alternative to traditional forms of agriculture.

More and more, landholders are investing a few weeks of their time every year in managing their plantations to produce 'good' forestry trees. Some have reported the enormous enjoyment they are getting from learning about farm forestry, with one farmer saying, 'It does get in your system, once you get involved in farm forestry. Everywhere you drive, you think, 'Geez, if only they had form pruned those trees with large branches double leaders; if only they had thinned those skinny little runts!'

A strong forestry culture includes more than saw-logs. When Rowan Reid came back from North America, he showed a few slides that included the extraction of maple syrup from forests in Canada. The recognition of, and development of, markets for a range of non-timber products is also part of that farm forestry culture: the full harvest of foods, medicines, flowers, timber and fibres from the forest.

Of course, Australia was originally settled by a people with a forestry culture as much as 60 000 years ago. Our Aboriginal peoples did harvest the bush for timber and non-timber products and the forests and woodlands sustained them over that massive period of time.

So, forget the Finns who did all their seafaring in the Viking days - our journey of cultural change is really just returning a bit of our Aboriginal heritage to our British farming-agrarian one.

*It's worth repeating here an item by Julian Cribb in Beef Improvement News a few years ago:

- Israel and Holland are the world's largest producers of Australian native wildflowers;
- The world's largest Eucalypt farmers are Brazil and China;
- Portugal is the world's largest producer of Eucalyptus oil;
- The Chileans are selling us Blue Gum described as 'Chilean Oak';
- The Finns are selling gum trees to Africa;
- Thailand is farming barramundi, mud crabs and tiger prawns; and
- Africa, Israel and America are the biggest growers of our desert shrubs.

A couple of other examples in recent years are:

- the Israeli selection of a Bluebush (*Mairiana* sp.) as a flora 'filler' that is marketed world-wide;
- the South Africans selling of Black Wattle tannins to Australia and woodchips to the Japanese; and
- the Kiwis are marketing Waratahs (NSW floral emblem) as Kiwi Roses. (Remember the Kiwi Fruit used to be called the Chinese Gooseberry!)

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