Exploring Migrant's Contributions to Agriculture: The Story of Of Italians in the Sunraysia Region

Tess Spaven

University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/thss

Recommended Citation
Spaven, Tess, Exploring Migrant's Contributions to Agriculture: The Story of Of Italians in the Sunraysia Region, Bachelor of Science (Honours) (Dean's Scholar), Geography and Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong, 2016.
http://ro.uow.edu.au/thss/12

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Exploring Migrant's Contributions to Agriculture: The Story of Of Italians in the Sunraysia Region

Abstract
Geographical research on human-environment relations has paid minimal attention to cultural diversity, particularly in Australia. Yet migrants make up a large proportion of the Australian population, including in some rural and regional areas. The aim of this thesis is to understand the processes by which migrants negotiate their histories – in particular agricultural knowledges, skills and practices developed in countries of origin – in their post-migration location. It does so through the case of Italian migrants and their descendants in the Sunraysia Region. Employing a mixed methods approach, empirical data was sourced through semistructured interviews and farm/garden tours. In seeking to explain Italians’ considerable influence over agricultural practices in the Sunraysia Region, the research participants emphasised perceived Italian cultural attributes: a strong work ethic, a family orientation and inventiveness. However, taking a political ecology approach, this thesis concludes that the role of cultural attributes needs to be understood alongside structural forces and environmental factors that have shaped farming practices in the Sunraysia Region, and Italian farming identities, over the period of a century. While this thesis focuses specifically on Italian farmers, it prompts reflection on the barriers and opportunities that confront new arrivals to the region, and which may inhibit their capacities to introduce their own diverse agricultural knowledges and practices in the present day.

Degree Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Bachelor of Science (Honours) (Dean's Scholar)

Department
Geography and Sustainable Communities

Advisor(s)
Dr Natasha Klocker, Professor Gordon Waitt, Dr Olivia Dun

Keywords
Migrants, agriculture, landscape, ethnic diversity, environment, SGSC

This thesis is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/ths/12
EXPLORING MIGRANTS’ CONTRIBUTIONS TO AGRICULTURE: THE STORY OF ITALIANS IN THE SUNRAYSIA REGION

TESS SPAVEN

NOVEMBER 2016

A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirement of the Honours Degree of Bachelor of Science (Honours) (Dean’s Scholar) in the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities November 2016.
Geographical research on human-environment relations has paid minimal attention to cultural diversity, particularly in Australia. Yet migrants make up a large proportion of the Australian population, including in some rural and regional areas. The aim of this thesis is to understand the processes by which migrants negotiate their histories — in particular agricultural knowledges, skills and practices developed in countries of origin — in their post-migration location. It does so through the case of Italian migrants and their descendants in the Sunraysia Region. Employing a mixed methods approach, empirical data was sourced through semi-structured interviews and farm/garden tours. In seeking to explain Italians’ considerable influence over agricultural practices in the Sunraysia Region, the research participants emphasised perceived Italian cultural attributes: a strong work ethic, a family orientation and inventiveness. However, taking a political ecology approach, this thesis concludes that the role of cultural attributes needs to be understood alongside structural forces and environmental factors that have shaped farming practices in the Sunraysia Region, and Italian farming identities, over the period of a century. While this thesis focuses specifically on Italian farmers, it prompts reflection on the barriers and opportunities that confront new arrivals to the region, and which may inhibit their capacities to introduce their own diverse agricultural knowledges and practices in the present day.
Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Natascha Klocker, Gordon Waitt and Olivia Dun who have provided endless encouragement, motivation, patience and guidance. Over the past year I have been continuously inspired by your knowledge and passion. The year has been quite a journey both academically and personally and I feel privileged to have had such an amazing support team.

Secondly I would like to thank the 33 participants who were a part of this project. Thank you for your time, hospitality and for giving me an insight into country life. Meeting with each of you and sharing your stories came to be what made me most excited about this research.

Thirdly I would like to thank Tom Bambrick and Evan Curtis, my fellow Honours students. Thank you for the motivation and for being there at the difficult times to share a coffee and piece of cake with.

I would also like to thank the students and staff that make up the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities. In particular I would like to thank Elyse Stanes for gearing me up for my field work and for helping to make it a smooth ride.

Last but not least I would like to express special appreciation for my family and friends who have supported, encouraged and cheered me on over the past year.
FIGURES, BOXES & TABLES

LIST OF BOXES

Box 2.1: Market deregulation in the Sunraysia Region  
Box 3.1: Excerpt from postionality statement  
Box 3.2: Field diary excerpts  
Box 7.1: Changing positionality

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Map of study area, the Sunraysia Region  
Figure 2.1: Schema of Political Ecology Framework  
Figure 3.1: Interview with Stefano de Pieri at Mildura Brewery June 2016  
Figure 5.1: Tassone Rotary Weeder demonstration at Mildura Field Days 1967  
Figure 5.2: A vine is trained with ties to grow along the vertical trellis  
Figure 5.3: ‘T’ Trellising  
Figure 5.4: Trellised fig trees with netting  
Figure 5.5: Grapevine Raincoats

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Table grape and dried fruit production in the Sunraysia  
Table 3.1: Attributes of research participants
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT**

III

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

IV

**LIST OF BOXES**

V

**LIST OF FIGURES**

V

**LIST OF TABLES**

V

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

4

1.1 RESEARCH IMPETUS

4

1.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

6

1.3 THE SUNRAYSDA REGION: AUSTRALIA’S FIRST IRRIGATED AGRICULTURAL SETTLEMENT

7

1.4 THE SUNRAYSDA REGION: POPULATION AND MIGRATION

10

1.5 THESIS OUTLINE

13

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

15

2.1 INTRODUCTION

15

2.2 MIGRANTS AND AGRICULTURE

15

2.3 NEOLIBERAL REFORMS AND THE GLOBALISATION OF AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE

19

2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

23

2.5 CONCLUSION

28

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

29

3.1 INTRODUCTION

30

3.2 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

30

3.3 POSITIONALITY, REFLEXIVITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

31

3.3.1 POSITIONALITY

31

3.3.2 REFLEXIVE THINKING

33

3.3.3 CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

34

3.4 RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

35

3.4.1 SELECTION CRITERIA

35

3.4.2 RECRUITMENT METHODS

38

3.5 PROJECT DESIGN

39

3.5.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN AND RIGOUR

39

3.5.2 DATA COLLECTION

39

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

43

3.7 LIMITATIONS

44

3.8 CONCLUSION

45
CHAPTER 4: ITALIAN MIGRATION, CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES AND FARMING PRACTICES 47

4.1 INTRODUCTION 47
4.2 NARRATIVES OF ITALIAN FAMILY MIGRATION: AUSTRALIA AS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY 47
4.3 ESTABLISHING FARMS IN THE SUNRAYSIA REGION 51
4.4 THE TRANSFER OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES FROM ITALY TO THE SUNRAYSIA 57
4.4.1 PRUNING 58
4.4.2 GRAFTING 61
4.4.3 BUILDING THE SOIL 63
4.5 CONCLUSION 64

CHAPTER 5: AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION IN THE SUNRAYSIA REGION: ITALIAN CULTURE AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY 67

5.1 INTRODUCTION 67
5.2 CULTURAL DRIVERS OF CROP DIVERSIFICATION AND INNOVATION 67
5.3 THE TASSONE WEEDER 76
5.4 TRELLISING 78
5.5. PLASTIC ‘RAINCOATS’ FOR GRAPEVINES 84
5.6 CONCLUSION 87

CHAPTER 6: FAMILY FARMERS TO FAMILY FARM ENTREPRENEURS 89

6.1 INTRODUCTION 89
6.2 CHANGING AGRICULTURAL POLICIES: NEO-LIBERALISATION AND THE GLOBALISATION OF AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE 90
6.3 CHANGING AGRICULTURAL MARKETS: FROM DRIED GRAPES TO TABLE GRAPES 90
6.4 A CHANGING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT 97
6.5 CHANGING AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AND FARMING IDENTITIES 101

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION 107

7.1 CHANGING POSITIONALITY 107
7.2 REVISING THE RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS: KEY FINDINGS 108
7.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS 113

REFERENCES 115

APPENDIX A: NEWSPAPER EXCERPTS 125
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET 126
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM 128
APPENDIX D: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 132
APPENDIX E: MAP OF PARTICIPANTS’ ITALIAN HERITAGE ORIGINS 134
APPENDIX F: EMAILS SENT TO RELEVANT ORGANISATIONS 135
APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 136
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

© Photo by: Tess Spaven
1.1 Research impetus

Human-environment relations are a key focus of geographical research. However, the environmental knowledges and skills that migrants bring with them – from their countries of origin, to their new homes – have received little attention. Klocker and Head (2013) drew attention to this gap. They noted that diverse environmental knowledges ought to be better understood, and that migrants and ethnic minorities may provide a valuable resource for responding to existing and future environmental challenges. This is particularly important in the Australian context, given that migrants make up a large proportion of the nation’s population. At the time of the 2011 Census, around one-quarter of Australians were overseas-born, and a further one-quarter had at least one overseas-born parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011).

The Honours project reported upon in this thesis is embedded in a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project ‘Sustainability and climate change adaptation: unlocking the potential of ethnic diversity’ (DP140101165 Klocker, Head, Waitt & Goodall). Using a combination of qualitative and historical research methodologies, the broader ARC project seeks to provide a platform from which ethnically diverse knowledges and practices – in urban, peri-urban and rural Australia – can be acknowledged in environmental debates. The Sunraysia Region was chosen as a key rural study area for the broader project, and provided the fieldwork location for this Honours project.

The Sunraysia Region, located on the Murray River spanning the border of New South Wales and Victoria, encompasses the rural city of Mildura and the town of Robinvale plus their surrounds. It has a sizeable migrant presence: one third of horticulturists speak a language
other than English at home (Missingham, Dibjen & Cocklin 2006). Migrants have played, and continue to play, an important role in the region’s agricultural sector. Established, long-term migrants and their descendants (including Italians) have become farm owners, and much of the contemporary labour force is comprised of more recent migrants (including from Vietnam and the Pacific Islands) and seasonal workers. Migration to the Sunraysia Region is encouraged by Federal Government policies. For example, the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme provides a permanent visa pathway for skilled migrants looking to work in regional or low population growth areas of Australia (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016). The Seasonal Worker Programme seeks to address seasonal labour shortages in Australia’s horticultural sector – including on the Sunraysia Region’s almond farms - by bringing workers from ten Pacific Island countries to live and work in Australia for six months per year (Department of Employment 2016; Victoria State Government 2016).

Over the past decade, regional Australia has also become a site for refugee resettlement, and Mildura is a participating location (AMES 2016; Carrington & Marshall 2008). In 2011, 19.3 per cent of Mildura Rural City’s residents were overseas-born (Mildura Rural City Council/Northern Mallee Community Partnership 2013).

Italian migrants, in particular, have been integral to this region. Historical documents record initial Italian settlement stories from the beginning of the 1920s (Moran & Mallman 2015; Dadswell 1980). Despite early reports of tensions between British settlers and the ‘new’ arrivals, Italians remained in the Sunraysia Region and began the process of creating farms and new homes (King 2003; Parsons 1990). At the time of the 2011 Census, individuals of Italian ancestry comprised 5.5 per cent of the population of Mildura Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3), and 12.9 per cent of the population of Robinvale SA2 (ABS 2013a; ABS 2013b). Italians have been identified as the largest group of horticulturalists (from non-English
speaking backgrounds) in the region (Missingham, Dibjen & Cocklin 2004). While historians and social scientists have begun to trace the journeys and settlement patterns of Italians in the Sunraysia Region, their focus has largely been on understanding historical events, social cohesion and multiculturalism (Moran & Mallman 2015; Parsons 1990; Heritage Victoria 2011; Carrington & Marshall 2008). Existing research has paid little attention to the environmental knowledges of Italian migrants, and how these have come to shape farming practices in the region.

1.2 Aim and objectives
The aim of this project was to understand the processes by which migrants negotiate their histories – in particular, agricultural knowledges, skills and practices developed in countries of origin – in their post-migration location; through the case of Italians in the Sunraysia Region. Thus, the project sought to explore how Italian migrants and their descendants have become key participants within the agricultural sector in the Sunraysia Region. In order to respond to this over-arching aim, the thesis was framed around three key research questions:

1. What types of environmental and agricultural knowledges, skills and practices did Italians bring with them from their home country?
2. How were these ‘cultural practices’ transferred into the Australian context, and with what effect?
3. What role have non-human elements and market forces played in shaping Italians’ involvement in agriculture in the Sunraysia, and consequently, Italian farmer identity?

In responding to these research questions, this thesis seeks to understand the role of culture in shaping migrants’ agricultural knowledges and practices in a post-migration context. However, the thesis also acknowledges the important role of structural factors – including
shifting market forces and the corporatisation of Australian agriculture – which have caused fundamental shifts in farming practices over the period of Italian presence in the Sunraysia Region. Equally, this thesis also foregrounds the role of non-human elements in these shifts, specifically the unique environment of the Sunraysia Region and the commercial crops themselves. The story that emerges is thus one of intersections, of culture, market forces, technologies, soil, a river, rainfall and grapes (among other things). These factors have come together to shape and shift agricultural practices in the region, and indeed, Italian farmers’ identities, over time. While this thesis focuses specifically on Italian farmers, it prompts reflection on the barriers and opportunities that confront new arrivals to the region, and which may inhibit their capacities to introduce their own diverse agricultural knowledges and practices in the present day.

The remainder of this chapter sets the foundations for this thesis. Section 1.3 provides important background information about the Sunraysia Region, with a specific focus on its climate and irrigation history. Section 1.4 provides an overview of migration to the Sunraysia Region, with a focus on historical accounts of Italian migration and settlement. Throughout this chapter, and the remainder of the thesis, the term ‘migrant’ is used to refer to first-generation migrants (i.e. overseas born persons). The phrase ‘of migrant backgrounds’ is used to refer to subsequent migrant generations. Section 1.5 provides an outline of the remainder of the thesis.

1.3 The Sunraysia Region: Australia’s first irrigated agricultural settlement
The ‘Sunraysia’ is an ill-defined geographical region. In Figure 1.1, it incorporates the irrigated sections and their surrounds (shaded in green) of the Mildura and Wentworth Local Government Areas (LGAs); Robinvale, in the Swan Hill Rural City Council LGA; and Euston, in Balranald LGA. In essence, the Sunraysia Region is situated on the banks of the
Murray River, on the border of south-western NSW and north-western Victoria, Australia not too far from South Australia.

The Sunraysia Region produces almost all of Australia’s dried vine fruits (98%) and table grapes (75%), as well as a significant proportion of Australian citrus (24%), pistachios (28%), almonds (68%) and olive oil (45%) (Department of Environment Land Water and Planning 2016; Mildura Development Corporation 2014). Recent decades have also seen the commercialisation of market garden production in the region with the region’s vegetable growers producing 13 per cent of Australia’s carrots, alongside zucchini and squash (8%), pumpkins (5%) and asparagus (9%) (Mildura Development Corporation 2014).

Source: adapted from Chapman (2000; 23)

Figure 1.1: Map of study area, the Sunraysia Region
Mildura Rural City is the region’s major centre, with a population of 50,979 (SA3) in 2011 (ABS 2011). The region is classified as having a semi-arid climate, similar to that of southern Italy or Greece (Bureau of Meteorology 2016; Connell 2014). Annual evaporation levels are seven times higher than the annual average rainfall of just 331mm (Kiem et al. 2010). Accordingly, vast irrigation infrastructure (dependent upon the Murray River) underpins the region’s horticultural viability.

During the late 1800s, droughts encouraged investment in irrigated agriculture in Victoria (Kiem et al. 2010), and led to Mildura becoming Australia’s first irrigation settlement. In 1884, Alfred Deakin was appointed Chairman of Victoria’s Royal Commission on Water Supply and Irrigation (he became Prime Minister in 1909). Deakin travelled to Italy, Egypt, the USA and parts of South Asia, to study their irrigation systems. A meeting with the Chaffey brothers in California was particularly influential (National Museum of Australia 2016). The Chaffey brothers had established an ‘irrigation colony’ on the banks of the arid Cucamonga plains in California, close to Los Angeles. Deakin sought to implement something similar in Australia. In 1886, George and William Chaffey deemed the area around Mildura to be suitable (The Chaffey Trail Mildura 2015). By the mid-1890s, the region had its first ‘irrigated’ harvests of raisins, apricots, peaches and citrus (National Museum Australia 2016; Australian Dried Fruits Association 1936). After the establishment of the First Mildura Irrigation Trust in December of 1895, and the completion of a railway line linking Mildura and Melbourne in 1903, the region became Australia’s first successful example of a large-scale irrigation scheme (See Appendix A for archival material).

Irrigated horticulture underpins the economy of the Sunraysia Region to the present day. However, the ‘Millennium Drought’ (1995-2009), which saw a prolonged period of dry
conditions across the Murray-Darling Basin, raised questions over its long-term viability (Head et al. 2014). The drought coincided with changing economic structures, as Australia opened its borders to overseas agricultural imports and the dried fruit industry was deregulated (Gange 2007). Low commodity prices (especially for wine grapes) – paired with the effects of the drought – posed serious economic, social and environmental challenges (Kiem et al. 2010). Under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, requirements to balance ‘environmental flows’ and ‘other water uses’ (including for agriculture), forced farmers to navigate a deregulated water system characterised by: decreased water allocations, unbundled land and water rights, and tradeable water. The Federal Government ran a ‘small block’ (<40 hectares) irrigator exit package from 2008-09 (Kiem et al. 2010). Farmers could continue living in the family home, but received one-off grants of $150,000 to exit production (i.e. cease irrigation) and $30,000 for removal of permanent plantings and irrigation infrastructure. A key condition was that no irrigated farming activity take place on the land for five years post-exit (Kiem et al. 2010). The result was that large areas of land were left ‘dead, bare or barren’ (Kiem et al. 2010:64). By 2008-09, 26 per cent of irrigated cropland area (primarily wine grapes) across Robinvale, Mildura, and neighbouring Red Cliffs and Merbein, were left deliberately without irrigation (Mallee Catchment Management Authority 2009).

1.4 The Sunraysia Region: population and migration
Between 1891 and 1933 Mildura’s population increased from 1,243 to 6,617. Population growth was facilitated by a cooperative Commonwealth/State government soldier settler scheme, which offered new irrigated blocks to returned soldiers in the 1920s, following World War I (WWI) (Parsons 1990; Powell 1978). Many of these ‘blockies’\(^1\) settled around

\(^1\)The term Blockie is still used by local residents to describe someone who owns a small acreage of farmland within the irrigation districts around the Murray River.
Mildura, Merbein and Red Cliffs (State Library Victoria 2016). Farms were allocated primarily to returning Anglo-Australian soldiers. Frank Dalla Santa, who migrated from Italy in 1910, was an exception. Frank returned to Italy to fight on the allied side during WWI. On returning to Australia, he was the first and only Italian to be granted a block under the soldier settlement scheme in Red Cliffs (Wright 1995). Robinvale was established as an irrigated settlement in 1922. However, soldier settlement farms were not commissioned and sold in Robinvale until 1947 (post-WWII).

The soldier settler blocks were around 15 to 20 acres in size. Dried fruits and citrus were the dominant crops (Lake 1987). Unsurprisingly, many soldiers who had no prior farming experience faced great difficulties. Additionally, the physical and mental horrors of war deeply affected many returned soldiers, and rates of suicide and block abandonment were high (Dadswell 1980; Powell 1978). As some soldier settlers abandoned their blocks, they became available for purchase – including by Italian families who had begun to settle in the region. Records show that three Italian families had settled on soldier settler blocks around Red Cliffs by 1930, and two families from Venice lived close by, in Mildura and Wentworth (Dadswell 1980).

Immigration has long been used by Australian governments to expand the national population and manage labour to promote economic development (Phillips & Klapdor 2010). During the 1920s, the Joint Commonwealth and State Schemes and the Empire Settlement Act provided assisted passage for many Europeans: 221,000 arrived in Australia between 1921 and 1929 (Langfield 1999). However, Italians began to arrive long before this time. Many were initially lured to Victoria by the 1850s gold rush (Museum Victoria 2015). Italians continued to settle
in Victoria in the early years of the 20th Century, to escape economic hardship in their homeland. They first began to arrive in the Sunraysia Region, in numbers, during the 1920s (Moran & Mallman 2015). However, the largest ‘wave’ of Italian immigrants arrived in Australia (and the Sunraysia Region) from the late 1940s until the 1970s (King & O’Conner 2003). Around 60 per cent were from the south of Italy (Cosmini-Rose & O’Conner 2008).

In 1947, 40 per cent of Victoria’s Italian community lived outside of Melbourne in places like Shepparton, Wangaratta, Mildura and Swan Hill (Jupp 2001). Historians have forwarded two key explanations for Italian migrants’ settlement in rural localities (Missingham, Dibjen & Cocklin 2006; Collins et al. 1995; Price 1963). First, the migrants sought cultural continuity with their homelands, and were familiar with an agricultural way of life. Many of the Italians who settled around Mildura came from agricultural backgrounds (King & O’Conner 2003; Heslop 1997). Second, racism constrained the migrants’ economic and social opportunities (Missingham, Dibjen & Cocklin 2006). Rural land ownership offered the opportunity of becoming one’s own ‘boss’, enabling migrants to minimise experiences of racism found in other sectors (Missingham, Dibjen & Cocklin 2006; King & O’Conner 2003; Price 1963; Collins et al. 1995).

Once a number of Italians had settled in regional Australia, chain migration commenced. As shown in Chapter 4 of this thesis, this played a significant role in the economic success of Italian migrants in the Sunraysia Region (see also Misingham et al. 2006).
1.5 Thesis outline

The following six chapters of this thesis are structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of existing academic literature on migrants’ involvement in agriculture, and also of the broader structural shifts that have characterised the commercialisation and neoliberalisation of Australian agriculture in recent decades. The chapter concludes by detailing the conceptual lens adopted throughout this thesis – political ecology. Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of the qualitative research methods used in the study. Chapters 4 to 6 outline the empirical findings of the research project. Chapter 4 foregrounds the impact of Italian cultural attributes (as understood by the interviewees) on agriculture in the Sunraysia Region. It responds to the first two research questions (as outlined in section 1.2). Chapter 5 explores the influence of non-human factors (e.g. the environment and the crops themselves) on Italian farmers’ post-migration practices. It responds to the third research question. Chapter 6 also responds to the third research question. It considers how broad structural changes and market forces have altered Italians’ involvement in agriculture in the Sunraysia Region over time, with implications for farmers’ identities.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

© Photo by: Tess Spaven
2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the two major bodies of literature that have informed this thesis: i) literature on migrants and agriculture and ii) literature on the structural forces impacting Australian agriculture. Building on work by Klocker and Head (2013), Section 2.2 shows that the environmental contributions of migrants, including their agricultural skills and capacities, have been under-researched. Section 2.3 provides important insights into neoliberal trade and agricultural policy reforms and their effects on farm businesses and farmer identity. While I commenced this project with an expectation that Italian culture would be core to the experiences of Italian migrants in the Sunraysia Region, the interview narratives presented by the research participants drew attention to a range of other factors at play, both environmental and structural. The third section of this chapter provides an overview of the conceptual framework that was used to draw these threads together – political ecology.

2.2 Migrants and agriculture

Migrants are a major source of agricultural labour in many countries, including Australia, fuelled in part by an ageing farm workforce and out-migration from regional areas (Argent & Tonts 2015; Dufty-Jones 2014; Hugo 2004, 2001). In Australia, a number of immigration schemes and dedicated visas seek to address labour shortages, especially in the horticultural sector (see Section 1.1). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an overview of these schemes which have emerged over the past two decades (instead see Golebiowska, Elnasri & Withers 2016) the important point is that migrants (both permanent and temporary) are a significant component of Australia’s agricultural workforce. These recent policy directions have prompted scholarly attention in Australia (Argent & Tonts 2015; Underhill & Rimmer 2015; Tan & Lester 2012; Hay & Howes 2012; Maclellan & Mares 2006). These Australian studies exist alongside a more sizeable body of work from the USA, focused on

Research on migrants’ experiences of agricultural work has emphasised health considerations, for instance the effects of pesticides and farming chemicals on migrant workers’ health, as well as the physical and mental health of migrants working in hazardous conditions with limited access to health services (Suratman et al. 2016; Reid et al. 2014; Xiang et al. 2014; Barnes 2013; Galarneau, 2013; Kelly et al. 2012; Menjiver & Abrego 2012; Arcury & Quandt 2007). Other studies have drawn attention to human rights violations experienced by seasonal and permanent migrant farm workers, xenophobia and labour exploitation (Zhang et al. 2014; Holmes, 2013; Menjivar & Abrego 2012; Ullman, 2011; Quesada, Hart & Bourgois 2011). These studies are important. They have contributed to a deeper understanding of migrants’ working conditions in the agricultural sector. Yet, despite the fact that many migrant workers themselves come from agricultural backgrounds in their countries of origin (Holmes 2013), there has been little mention of the agricultural knowledges and skills that they bring with them. This gap in the literature reflects the immigration schemes that bring migrant workers to horticultural regions of the Minority World; migrant workers have been framed as a source of ‘unskilled labour’, which can be put to use for ‘unskilled tasks’ – such as picking and pruning (Holmes 2013).

A few studies have begun to address the gap in knowledge regarding migrants’ potentially valuable contributions in agricultural settings (Verinis 2015; Minkoff-Zern 2012; King & O’Conner 2003). Minkoff-Zern’s (2012) ethnographic research in Northern California found that migrant farmworkers lack access to spaces in which their agricultural skills and nutritional knowledge could be showcased, and that racialised assumptions of their lack of
education and knowledge are prevalent in the wider community. Minkoff-Zern (2012) concluded that migrant farmworkers need access to community gardens – outside of the farms where they are employed as labourers – so that they can demonstrate their environmental knowledge. This is an important step. However, Minkoff-Zern (2012) did not consider how migrants’ agricultural knowledges and skills could influence practices in the broader agricultural sector.

Studies that examine the agricultural knowledges and practices of permanently settled migrant communities (rather than seasonal migrant workers, as in Minkoff-Zern’s case) are also scarce. A recent study of internal migration in Ghana found that migrant farmers possessed knowledge that could help farmers in their destination locations adapt to looming environmental changes (Isaac et al. 2014). While the study did not involve international migrants, it nonetheless pointed to the value of mobile agricultural knowledge. Because ‘the boundaries of the environmental and social space of migrant farmers are much larger’ they provide ‘a more expansive toolbox’ for innovation (Isaac et al. 2014: 55). Meanwhile, Cabannes and Raposo (2013) highlighted the unique farming practices of Cape Verdean migrants in Lisbon, Portugal. They emphasised the skills and knowledge that these migrants brought from their home country (skills in soil reclamation, soil conservation techniques, knowledge of alternate crops) and how this helped them to transform steep barren lands rejected by local farmers, into productive peri-urban farms. Similarly Tsuzuku (2013) found that farmers of Japanese descent, now in British Colombia (Canada) have incorporated both crops and farming practices from Japan into their food practices post-migration. Closer to home, Ben-Moshe et al. (2005) described the introduction of plant grafting techniques by Albanian migrants living in Shepparton (Victoria) that reduce the time required for fruit trees to mature.
An additional body of literature that provides important insights for the present study focuses on African Americans’ involvements in agriculture. While African Americans are generally not considered migrants (in a contemporary sense), such literature provides evidence of how ethnic minority knowledges and practices can become embedded in agricultural contexts. Most significant here is work by Judith Carney and Carolyn Finney. Carney’s (2002) work on the history of rice production in Carolina challenges conventional histories by showing that African knowledge of rice cultivation (brought to the USA during the slave trade) preceded that from Asia. Carney’s (2002) work seeks to undermine racialised notions of cultural inferiority/superiority that inform the common assumption that technological advancements in agriculture could not possibly have come from African roots. Finney (2014), meanwhile, has focused on African Americans’ participation in decision-making processes around environmental issues. Finney (2014) observed that African American environmental knowledges are too readily dismissed. This is particularly the case in rural areas, where imaginaries of rural whiteness are persistent (see also Cloke 2006). She questioned how knowledge is produced and the processes that determine whose knowledge ‘counts’. Likewise, Klocker and Head (2013) argued that ethnic minorities and migrants’ environmental knowledges are rarely valued in an Australian context.

Agriculture is an ‘eminently social activity’ that has ‘characteristic manners of production expressed by the culture carrying it out’ (Casanova-Pérez et al. 2016: 848). Thus farming styles and cultural norms differ (Davis & Carter 2014: 345; Saltzman, Head & Stenseke 2001). However, migrants’ unique agricultural knowledges and skills have received little scholarly attention. The processes by which migrants’ agricultural knowledges and practices are transformed to suit their new environments and context are also poorly understood – as is
the potential for migrants’ practices to more broadly influence farming practices in their new homes. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that ‘culture’ is not the sole determinant of migrants’ agricultural practices. A range of contextual – structural, technological and environmental factors – also come into play. These factors influence how migrants’ knowledges and skills are adapted in their new home. The following section focuses on broad structural processes, including neoliberal agricultural reforms, which have profoundly altered Australian agriculture over recent decades.

2.3 Neoliberal reforms and the globalisation of Australian agriculture

Australian agriculture has experienced substantial changes over the past few decades. Farms have become fewer in number and larger in size, and two-thirds of production is now exported (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012; Productivity Commission 2005). Three key structural factors have underpinned the neoliberalisation of Australian agriculture: the commercialisation of agriculture, industry deregulation and an increasingly globalised food system. The dried fruits industry in the Sunraysia Region provides an important example of these trends (see Box 2.1, for a case study).

Geographers have explored how globalisation has shaped and reshaped rural landscapes. Woods (2007: 487) described globalisation as ‘a dynamic and multifaceted process of integration and interconnectivity…facilitating the global circulation of people, commodities, ideas and representations’. In rural contexts, globalisation has involved the incorporation of farms into a global agri-food system, free-trade agreements and neoliberal policy reforms, including, industry deregulation and the dismantling of government protections (Woods 2007; Collits 2014). The implications of these processes have been uneven. Restructuring has brought new energy to some rural areas and industries, by opening up global networks and
profitable trading partnerships. However, exposure to global market forces has also contributed to the destruction of many family farms, as is discussed in Box 2.1 and Chapter 6.

**Box 2.1: Market deregulation in the Sunraysia Region**

The Australian Dried Fruits Association (ADFA) was formalised in 1907 when the Mildura Fruit Growers’ Association merged with the Renmark Raisin Trust. ADFA’s objective was to ‘protect growers by regulating prices, setting standard terms and conditions of sale and promoting exports’ (Dried Fruits Australia 2016). In 1910, Australian dried fruit prices on export markets were favourable due to low production in other countries. However, in 1923 prices fell and ADFA came to play an important role. It made representations to the Commonwealth Government that led to a system of preference for Australian dried fruit within the British Commonwealth (Chapman 2000). These arrangements guaranteed average returns, with the Federal Government underwriting export receipts and domestic price settings. With these protections in place, dried fruits were the principal industry in the Sunraysia Region until the early 1980s.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in response to growing evidence of production inefficiencies and costs to taxpayers and domestic consumers, the Federal Government initiated agricultural policy reform (Banks 2004). A number of key protections were dismantled including; the Dried Vine Fruits Equalisation Act 1978 (which equalised returns to growers regardless of the market and price for which their individual fruit was sold); the Dried Sultana Production Underwriting Act 1982 (which underwrote the production of sultanas); and Regulations under the Australian Horticultural Corporation Act 1987 (which restricted the export of dried vine fruit).

These neoliberal agricultural reforms had dire repercussions for the dried fruits industry in the Sunraysia Region. Between 1984 and 1999 the number of dried fruit growers in the region fell from 2,003 to 1,400 (Chapman 2000). The decline of the dried fruits industry prompted diversification into wine grapes and fresh fruits (table grapes). By 1997, the Sunraysia Region was the largest white wine grape producer in Australia at the same time, it became Australia’s leading table grape producing region. While the table grape industry prospered into the early 2000s, wine grape prices declined steadily from 2003 onwards, as commercial wineries squeezed the prices received by growers. In 2005, a senate inquiry uncovered exploitative behaviour by commercial wine companies including ‘blacklisting’ (whereby commercial wineries refused to re-contract growers who disputed grape supply agreements), and ‘coercive commercial behaviour’ (with wineries pressuring growers into highly unfavourable contracts; see Murray Valley Winegrowers Inc. (2010). Downward pressure on wine grape prices also occurred due to a glut on the international market (Kiem et al. 2010). These commercial pressures coincided with the Millennium Drought, prompting numerous growers to exit the industry (described in Section 1.3). Many of the Italian farmers interviewed in this study were affected by these processes – as discussed in particular in
Chapter 6.

The Sunraysia Region’s table grape producers have fared reasonably well over this period. In 2005, the industry experienced a downturn. However, growers were able to find new overseas markets – resulting in increased production and profits. While the Sunraysia Region continues to produce the bulk of Australia’s dried fruits (98%), table grapes take up a larger share of the region’s irrigated farmland (Table 1.1). In 2012, the region produced 75 per cent of Australia’s table grapes.

Table 2.1: Table grape and dried fruit production in the Sunraysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hectares grown</th>
<th>Volume (Tonnes)</th>
<th>% of Australian Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table Grapes</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>92,500</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dried Fruits</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3,575</td>
<td>13,525</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mildura Development Corporation 2014

Australian farmers have been profoundly affected by the globalisation and commercialisation of the agri-food system. They have been challenged by:

- the intensification in the volume of international trade in agricultural commodities;
- the stretching of agricultural commodity chains and supply networks over longer distances;
- the creation of new relations and connections as new technologies are introduced, new corporate actors established and new markets opened up; and
- the severing of older relations as production networks are restructured, for example through the closure of regional food processing plants (Woods 2014:34).

The flow-on effects in the Australian agricultural sector have been multiple. Historically, farming in Australia was a family enterprise: 94 per cent of farms were family owned and operated in 1997 (Wright & Kaine 1997). Since that time, the number of farming families in Australia has decreased steadily, with growing corporate and global involvement in agriculture, and increasing farm sizes. Several studies have charted the configuration of
global value chains for agricultural commodities; the vertical and horizontal integration of transnational agribusiness; and, the articulation of a neoliberal ‘food regime’ that promotes deregulation and market liberalisation (Cheshire & Woods 2013).

The neoliberalisation of Australian agriculture has fundamentally changed what farmers do. Farms have had to increase in size and become highly specialised, in order to be commercially viable. This shift has seen a change from family farming (at which the Italians excelled – as discussed in Chapter 4), to family farm entrepreneurialism (Pritchard et al. 2007). What was once a career defined by manual labour and comprehensive knowledge of crops and local markets, has been replaced by the predominantly office-based demands of running a large farm businesses (Dyer 2014). The literature points to the emergence of a highly educated, ‘globally engaged’ farm businessperson, specialising in the mass production of a few (or even one) key agricultural products (Cheshire & Woods 2013; Kingwell 2011; Bryant 1999). Many farmers today have invested heavily in land, buildings and machinery (McKenzie 2016; Kingwell 2011) – they have been forced to get big or get out. However, they are far from independent. Large food-processing companies and supermarket chains have come to dictate the prices that growers receive, and the variety, size, and colour of their products (Richards et al. 2012). The implications of these shifts, for the Italian farmers involved in this study – both practically, and in terms of their farming identities – are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

The insights provided by these bodies of work are important for this thesis because they show how broader neoliberal economic policies have shaped farming practices – altering the requisite skills needed to be a farmer, as well as the types of crops being planted. However, Cheshire and Woods (2013: 232) have critiqued a lack of scholarly attention on the agency of
individual farmers as actors in their own right, ‘negotiating their own pathways through the shifting landscape of transnational business opportunities and challenges’. This includes a lack of focus on cultural factors, which affect how farmers respond to broader neoliberal processes. Equally, environmental factors have been sidelined in these accounts. Yet the example of the Millennium Drought shows that it was the interaction between environmental factors and broader structural forces that forced some farmers to exit the industry. Finally, the agency of the crops themselves has also been overlooked in existing accounts of the neoliberalisation of agriculture – despite the fact that ‘the global market’ demands particular attributes: for instance light coloured dried fruits, and large, firm, unblemished table grapes.

Section 2.4 introduces the conceptual framework that has been adopted in this thesis, in an attempt to bring these diverse threads together, and to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Building on the work of Robbins (2007, 2011), a political ecology framework provides a conceptual lens to help understand Italians’ engagement with agriculture in the Sunraysia Region. It provides a mechanism for acknowledging the influence of overarching structural forces (political and market driven) and environmental factors (non-human actors) alongside cultural knowledge. It provides scope to take cultural values into account, whilst eschewing a culturally deterministic approach.

Political ecology responds to apolitical approaches that have understood humans’ relationships with their environments as being driven solely by human intentions (Robbins 2007, 2011). From an apolitical perspective, agriculture is understood as a form of human-environment interaction that is characterised by:
an inclination to think about human actions, whether those of individuals or companies, as *sovereign* relative to the influence of nonhuman actors, objects, and animals...there is a tendency in apolitical thinking to consider people – human beings – as the sole sovereign actors in creating and maintaining the world around them (Robbins 2007: 4).

A political ecology approach, by way of contrast, acknowledges the roles played by diverse actors, across a variety of scales. In the case of Italian migrants in the Sunraysia Region, it demands a focus on factors other than culture. Political ecology makes a case that people’s interactions with their environments at the local level (for instance, on their farms, or in their backyards), are profoundly shaped by global forces and systems (Robbins 2011). Thus, agricultural practices in the Sunraysia Region are shaped by structural factors that operate across a range of scales – for instance, overarching market pressures (such as the demand for Australian produce overseas), paired with Federal Government decisions around the deregulation of primary industries and water – and have resulted in a changing agricultural landscape and altered farming practices (see Section 2.3). Equally, a political ecology approach demands attentiveness to the role of non-humans (‘the environment’ – soil, water, rainfall, climate; and the crops themselves). This is not to suggest that human actions and intentions, and cultures are unimportant. However, they can only provide partial insights into agricultural practices, and the ways in which they have changed over time.

Robbins’ approach to political ecology underscores that people’s relationships with their environments not only influence their practices, but also how they see themselves:
Political ecological research...explores the way that people’s behaviours and livelihoods (their actions) within ecologies influence what they think about the environment (their ideas), which in turn influences who they think they are (their identities)...it [also] investigates how actions, ideas and identities are entwined with the necessities and complexities of power (Robbins 2011:216).

Much of what contributes to a person’s identity can be found in the everyday materials that surround them. Thus Robbins (2011: 224) has argued for acknowledgement of the:

fundamental ways that abstract human experiences and social processes like identity, ethnicity, and political agency are grounded in the most common material things, like trees, fertilisers, or drinking water; people make an identity as they make a living (emphasis added).

Employing a political ecology approach in an agricultural context, clarifies the material and discursive role of non-human elements and their effects on farming identities.

When I commenced this project I anticipated that cultural factors – particular Italian ways of \textit{doing} agriculture – would comprehensively explain Italian migrants’ apparent success in the Sunraysia Region. However, interviews with Italian migrants and their descendants exposed the particular ways in which their livelihoods, as migrant farmers, have influenced – \textit{and been influenced by} – diverse factors, not just Italian cultural attributes. The purpose of this thesis thus shifted to explore Italian migrants’ tangible practices of \textit{doing} agriculture in the Sunraysia Region, and how these practices have been shaped by a combination of cultural, environmental and structural forces. These have interacted to produce particular ways of
doing agriculture, and to shift understandings of what it means to be an Italian farmer in the Sunraysia Region. This requires an inversion of the type of thinking that has characterised much of the literature outlined in this chapter:

[People’s beliefs and attitudes do not lead to new environmental actions, behaviours or rule systems; instead, new environmental actions, behaviours or rule systems lead to new kinds of people (Robbins 2011: 216).

In contrast to Robbins, the literature discussed in Section 2.3 has focused on market-forces and neoliberal policy settings, and how these have impacted agriculture. A political ecology perspective would ask how the demands of particular crops themselves have ‘coerced’ agri-businesses, supermarkets, individual farmers (and other key players in the horticultural sector) to act in particular ways – to introduce particular technologies or innovations, for instance. Of course a grape will deteriorate more quickly if it is not refrigerated, a zucchini will rot if it is rained upon at the wrong time. Particular technologies and practices have been developed to respond to these problems – to respond to the demands made (on humans) by the crops themselves. As noted by Robbins (2011: 234), political ecology prompts:

…a simultaneous view of non-human agency, which stresses the ‘stubbornness’ and intractability of certain properties of non-human things, which impinge on, and limit, the power and influence of human actions or institutions…it is…the very limits of the accumulation of capital and power set by non-human actors themselves that lead to economic and institutional change and the innovations that seek to overcome these limits…
Figure 2.1 borrows from Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013), to explain how a political ecology framework has been applied in this thesis. The figure depicts (using circles) the intersection of forces, cultural, market and non-human coinciding at different scales (depicted by the squares). These intersections have shaped what it means to be an Italian farmer in the Sunraysia Region. In this depiction it is important to remember that these components need to be understood as informing and defining agricultural practices and identities simultaneously, rather than separately.

**Q - How have Italian migrants and their descendants become key participants’ within the agricultural sector in the Sunraysia Region?**

![Figure 2.1: Schema of Political Ecology Framework](image)

The results chapters of this thesis broadly map onto this model. Chapter 4 provides insights into the interviewees’ perceptions of how their Italian-ness has shaped their agricultural
practices in the Sunraysia Region. Chapter 5 considers how the demands made by non-humans (rain, water, drought, grapes) led to the introduction of particular innovations (which in turn, solidified the Italian farmers’ perceptions of their innate Italian inventiveness). Finally, Chapter 6 builds on the material presented in Box 2.1, to explore how market demands and changes in the agricultural policy context have shifted farming identities and practices in the region.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review presented in this thesis has revealed a gap in knowledge relating to the knowledges and skills that migrant farmworkers – and farmers who have migrated permanently – bring with them to their post-migration contexts. This thesis seeks to respond to this gap, through a focus on Italian migrants in the Sunraysia Region. The second section provided important insights into neoliberal trade and agricultural policy reforms that have characterised Australian agriculture in recent decades, and incorporated a detailed discussion of how these processes have affected grape farmers in the Sunraysia Region. This body of literature has offered fewer insights into the role of cultural and environmental changes that have coincided with – and shaped – these broad economic and political processes. A political ecology framework was identified as an appropriate conceptual framework for this thesis, because it provides a mechanism for acknowledging that Italian farming activities and identities in the Sunraysia Region have shaped, and been shaped by, a confluence of culturally specific attributes and agricultural knowledges developed pre-migration, alongside economic and political structures, and non-human actors.
3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an explanation of the research methods that were adopted in this project to explore the emergence of Italian migrants’ as key participants in the Sunraysia Region’s agricultural sector. The chapter is divided into the following sections: ethical considerations; positionality, reflexivity and cross-cultural research; recruitment, project design, data analysis and limitations.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Ethics procedures are important in all social science research as they set boundaries to ensure the safety of the researcher and research participants. Separate ethics approval was not required for this project as it was covered through the approvals (UOW HE14/457 and HE14/477) already obtained for the broader ARC-funded project. Key considerations included cultural sensitivity and participants’ privacy and confidentiality through their informed consent. A formal risk assessment and fieldwork communications plan were also completed before fieldwork commenced. The Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent form are included as Appendices B and C. Further discussion of consent, privacy and confidentiality, burden of time, transparency and verification can be found in Appendix D.

While ethics guidelines are an important part of conducting research, ethical research practice goes well beyond ethics committee approvals (Dowling 2010). Conduct of ethical research requires that the researcher be aware of the unique relationships that form between themselves, participants, organisations and places (Dowling 2010). There are a number of tools that qualitative researchers use to ensure ongoing ethical conduct. The following section addresses these.
3.3 Positionality, reflexivity and cross-cultural research

A researcher’s own positionality (that is, how they are embedded within uneven social relationships of age, sex, gender, nationality, background and class) has a bearing on the research process (Anderson 1999). The acknowledgement and critical exploration of researcher positionality is important, because it plays a vital role in shaping the research project and its outcomes (Mansvelt & Berg 2010; Baxter & Eyles 1997; Haraway 1991). A positionality statement was developed at the beginning of this project and critical reflexive thinking was applied throughout via a field diary.

3.3.1 Positionality

An ‘insider’ is someone who is similar to the research subjects in many respects, while an ‘outsider’ differs substantially from their informants (Dowling 2010; Mullings 1999). I was a cultural ‘insider’ to the project, due to my own Italian heritage. However, I was simultaneously an ‘outsider’, because I am not from Mildura and have no experience of agriculture. By keeping a record of my own reflections throughout each phase of this project, I was forced to keep in mind that neither myself, nor my interactions with the research participants, remained unchanged over the duration of the research process (Mansvelt & Berg 2010). Box 3.1 illustrates how I understood my positionality prior to the commencement of the fieldwork.
Box 3.1 Excerpt from positionality statement

I cannot claim to know the ins and outs of being an Italian in the Sunraysia as I have no prior exposure or experience in Australian agriculture. What I do have, however, is the benefit of sharing some understanding of Italians’ cultural history in Australia, as I am myself of Italian heritage.

I have grown up with a Nonna and Nonno (grandmother and grandfather). My Nonna was born in Italy and migrated to Australia with her family in 1929. She had a very tough upbringing as the eldest and only daughter of three, in a family that was experiencing a new environment. I heard stories about how her family had worked the land back in Valli del Pasubio (Vicenza), a small rural village in the mountains. I also heard about how, on arriving in Australia and settling at Port Kembla, the family continued these food growing practices while running a boarding house that offered single Italian men, many of whom worked at the steelworks, a bed and meals. I remember her telling stories about foraging for blackberries and mushrooms and collecting shells to make shell grit for the family’s chooks, milking the cows and turning the soil in the terraced veggie patch. Being from the north of Italy, my Nonna never practiced those things seen to be ‘culturally Italian’, like the tomato sauce and salami-making days, but I was introduced to these ‘family bonding sessions’ when I met my partner whose parents are Italian at the age of 16. I have been part of what might be seen as a ‘traditional Italian family’. One that has a strong family focus, that practices traditions related to food, family and religion, and which is patriarchal in its day-to-day functioning.

Farming, on the other hand, is foreign to me. I have learnt about the globalised food system and it’s challenges during my undergraduate studies at the University of Wollongong and I have watched documentaries about the western food system, which has exposed me to particular ideas about commercialised farming, however in terms of a practical sense, I have only ventured onto one local dairy farm. I have never spent prolonged periods of time on farms, among farming people or in rural areas of Australia. The idea of working with people involved within the agricultural sector has influenced me to think about my own practices in relation to food, what I look for when shopping, what I have growing in my own backyard and how my practices and knowledge have been shaped by my environment and the people who exist within it. I am excited at the prospect of being on farms and learning more about the processes by which our food comes to be on our table. I think it will be a big eye opener.
3.3.2 Reflexive thinking

Critical reflexive practice helps to situate new knowledge and provides a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of the researcher’s own assumptions, actions, beliefs and values, on a research project – as it unfolds (Waitt 2010; Valentine 2005). Relevant practices incorporated in this project included a research diary and ‘every day talk’ with fellow researchers, friends and family members (see Box 3.2). The concept of ‘kitchen table reflexivity’, involving both formal and informal conversations around the research topic, allowed me to more critically interrogate my identity and hence positionality within the research project (Kohl & McCutcheon 2015).

Box 3.2 Field diary excerpts

17/5/2016
Conversation with Matt at Clove Café
This morning at the café I had a very interesting conversation with Matt, a man in his early 40s, of Anglo heritage, who has been born and raised in the Sunraysia. He was telling me that his father used to work as the middleman in negotiations with farmers and the packing sheds. He spoke about the interactions between his father and the very strongly represented Italian farming families with a sense of nostalgia and fondness. Specifically, Matt remembered going along with his father to some of the Italian farmers’ homes and always leaving with a bag full of goodies. His father would often help the migrants, who didn’t speak or write in English, fill in their forms. The gifting of produce as a means of payment or to show their gratitude is something I have understood for a good part of my life and could very strongly relate to. I started to think about my own experiences with Italian families and it is very much a rarity to visit an older Italian family and leave their homes empty handed. Whether it be some produce from their gardens, tomatoes, herbs, broccoli or a jar of passata, some homemade biscotti or a string of salami, my hands are often carrying something more than what they had when they entered. It was at this point that I thought about the homes I had visited thus far [during my fieldwork] and recalled all of the goods I had been sent away with. I decided it would be a good idea to start photographing the items.

20/6/2016
Conversation with Olivia at Pizza Café
I spoke with Olivia this evening [researcher on the ARC DP project, and co-supervisor] about the difference in pressure that is placed on Italian children, by their parents. We discussed the
cultural differences that exist between those Italian families and our own. The expectation that children will go straight into a stable career and begin the ‘stepping stone’ lifestyle of always bettering what they have (whether that be their car, home, or number of farming acres) is definitely a cultural trait. I have seen this through relationships within my personal life in Wollongong and it appears to be the same in the Sunraysia. This ‘stepping stone’ evaluation method seems to be used as a means of measuring how well a person is doing, which reflects both strongly on the individual themselves and on their families – which in turn impacts on their ‘status’ within the broader Italian community. I asked a participant (in a conversation that we had outside of the recorded interview) to explain this sequence of events to me. He spoke about his son at the age of 17 looking up to his older cousin and the processes by which he bought his first car. His initial car cost him a few grand and from there he worked hard to pay it off and bought his second car at the age of 18, which cost him that bit more. His goal by the age of 22 was to have the same car that his cousin was driving, and that was around the 30 thousand dollar mark. This is something that is probably common in many cultures within Australia, but I think there is something that exists beyond the simplicity of ‘stepping stones’ for the Italians in particular. A sense of pressure and obligation to go down that road. The fact that Italians are the largest group of home owners in Australia lends support to this idea.

I said, to the researcher participant, ‘So what would happen if someone chose to buy that first car, saved the money they would spend on the second and went travelling for one year?’ The response was, ‘Well they would be wasting money wouldn’t they, they would be seen to be wasting money’. This rang true with what I have personally witnessed having been in a relationship with a southern Italian boy for eleven years. This made me think to myself that perhaps I am more of an insider within this community than an outsider.

3.3.3 Cross-cultural research

Cross-cultural research is not limited to differences in cultural backgrounds, but more broadly encompasses the idea that researchers in the field are thinking about other people’s constructions of place (Howitt & Stevens 2010). The participants who were involved in this project were either born in Italy or were of Italian background and had a connection to agriculture in some capacity. The majority had origins in rural villages/townships in Calabria, Southern Italy (See Appendix E). A smaller number came from more Central and Northern regions such as Treviso, Pescara and Naples (See Appendix E). Despite also having an Italian background, I was aware that participants may bring up culturally specific information with
which I was not familiar. Also, participants often assumed that because I had Italian heritage I also spoke the language. Effective communication is essential in all research. However, cross-cultural research can raise more moments where precaution is needed (Hurn & Tomalin 2013). For example, on a number of occasions I had to clarify both the meaning and spelling of certain words or phrases with participants. This was not limited to Italian words, but also agricultural jargon. It was important to be alert to misunderstandings – and to be unafraid to ask for clarification. Failure to do so may have resulted in time wasted and an incorrect representation of the research participants’ meanings.

3.4 Recruitment of participants

Thirty-three participants were involved in this project (see Table 3.1). In total, 23 interviews were conducted (17 included one interviewee, and six included multiple members of the same family). Two additional interviews conducted by other researchers involved in the broader ARC DP project, were also added to the dataset (denoted by * in Table 3.1). While this thesis draws on the interviewees’ stories and explanations to explore certain aspects of Italian history and present day practices within the Sunraysia Region, it is not intended to be representative of all Italians in the region.

3.4.1 Selection criteria

Study participants were chosen via a criterion sampling strategy based on a number of attributes (Bradshaw & Stratford 2010). The participants needed to: (i) be born in Italy or have Italian ancestry (See Appendix E for map of Italian heritage); (ii) live in the Sunraysia Region and (iii) have some kind of connection to agriculture (e.g. operating existing farms, involvement in fruit/vegetable export, or be a retired farmer). The participants had to speak
English, or be accompanied by an English-speaking family member, due to the prohibitive costs of interpretation.
Table 3.1: Attributes of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Generation born</th>
<th>Area of Italy</th>
<th>Decade of family's arrival in the Sunraysia</th>
<th>Location of interview</th>
<th>Connection to farming in the Sunraysia Past to present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alessandro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>3rd Australian</td>
<td>Fratellini/Aeolian Islands</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Wine grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Piati</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Nichols Point</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes, Wine Grapes, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2nd Australian</td>
<td>Messingnadi</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Piminorro</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Irymple</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruno</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Irymple</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camilla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2nd Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruit, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celestina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Piminorro</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Wine Grapes, Dried Fruits, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2nd Australian</td>
<td>Aeolian Islands</td>
<td>-late 1800s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2nd Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domenico</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Messingnadi</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don C.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Basilica</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Beronga</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Wine Grapes, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Messingnadi</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Dried Fruits, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donny</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Messindo</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Robinville</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drusolina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Natile</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Irymple</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Pescara</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Irymple</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Natile</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelsonima</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Benestare</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Beronga</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Calabria</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Beronga</td>
<td>Transport of produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe S.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Gol Gol</td>
<td>Vegetables, Citrus, Fruit Trees, Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Fratellini</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruit, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry C.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Calabria</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry S.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Gol Gol</td>
<td>Vegetables, Citrus, Fruit Trees, Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Angio Australian Rome</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Red Cliffs</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2nd Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1935s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Santa Nicola</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Gol Gol</td>
<td>Vegetables, Citrus, Fruit Trees, Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary C.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Calabria</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Robinvale</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes, Vegetables, Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary P.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Moolecho</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Merbein</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Citrus, Fruit Trees, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Moolecho</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Merbein</td>
<td>Table Grapes, Citrus, Fruit Trees, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Phil</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Southern Italy</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Hattah</td>
<td>Vegetables, Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philomena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Calabria</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Beronga</td>
<td>Transport of produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Caulonia</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruit, Table Grapes, Fruit Trees, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefano</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>migrant</td>
<td>Treviso</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>Dried Fruit, Table Grapes, Vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Natalie Veco</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Cardross</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Cos</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1st Australian</td>
<td>Southern Italy</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Merbein</td>
<td>Dried Fruits, Table Grapes, Wine Grapes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Additional interviews added to the data set  **Mary is the widow of an early Italian migrant
3.4.2 Recruitment methods

Recruitment commenced by sending emails to organisations recommended by a local Wollongong migration association – these included: Public Records Victoria, Mildura Genealogy Society, Mildura Historical Society, The Alfred Deakin Centre (Mildura Library and Visitor Information Centre) and Robinvale Rural Life Museum. I also sent emails (see Appendix F) to Italian community groups and organisations in the Sunraysia Region including: the DaVinci Club, the Dante Alighieri Society, the Italian Senior Citizens Club, the Mildura Pigeon Club, the Sacred Heart Catholic Church and the Irymple Bocci Club.

I was fortunate to spend three separate stretches of time in Mildura: an initial visit of one week in March 2016, an uninterrupted five week period over the months of April-May 2016, and a short follow-up stay of three nights in June 2016. This extensive field presence assisted greatly with participant recruitment. During my initial visit to Mildura, I interviewed a member of the Mildura Club DaVinci (a social club for the Italian community, first developed in 1958) who had responded to my email. Prior to the scheduled interview time I met with the participant for coffee to discuss the project in more detail. Eight other participants were recruited in a similar way – via an initial meeting before a scheduled interview. These initial meetings allowed for the establishment of rapport, which made the interview process more relaxed.

These early connections provided an opportunity for snowball sampling (Bradshaw & Stratford 2010) when I returned to Mildura in May 2016. In this type of sampling, participants identify other people with similarities that may be of interest to the researcher. Members of Mildura’s Italian community were very supportive of this project and assisted greatly with recruitment. While this method provided ease of recruitment, it also raised some
challenges. When multiple members of nuclear and extended families were interviewed separately, stories were repeated. In other cases, some interviewees left out stories because they assumed that I had already heard them.

By spending five uninterrupted weeks in Mildura, I was able to build relationships with key members of the region’s Italian community. This also enabled flexibility while carrying out fieldwork and created occasions for opportunistic recruitment (Bradshaw & Stratford 2010). For instance, I was able to recruit one participant while doing my shopping in the local IGA supermarket. I also took up volunteer work at a local café, and on two occasions I was able to recruit participants with whom I had interacted in store.

3.5 Project design

3.5.1 Qualitative research design and rigour

Imperative to the dependability of any research project is careful design and rigour (Bradshaw & Stratford 2010), which is underpinned by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To achieve the overall aims set out by this project, a combination of historical/archival and qualitative research was chosen as the most suitable approach. The triangulation of these research methodologies helped to maximise understanding of the project aim and questions, and to ensure rigour (Bradshaw and Stratford 2010; Stake 1995).

3.5.2 Data collection

i. Archival research

In his Foreword to Historical Geography, Sauer (1941:13) noted that ‘the first step in reconstructing the past stages of a cultural area is mastery of its written documents’. Archival
research provided important background context for this project. It involved tracing the initial movements, settlement and cultural practices/traditions of the Italian community in the Sunraysia Region. Historical documents, archives and newspaper articles were located at local libraries; the Alfred Deakin Centre and Red Cliffs library. Initially, the database Trove was used to locate newspaper articles relevant to the research topic. The search terms ‘Mildura’ OR ‘Robinvale’ paired with Italian* were used to locate relevant articles and the search was further narrowed down to newspapers located in Victoria. Most of the relevant articles pertaining to early Italian settlers in the region were located in the Mildura Cultivator, a local newspaper in print from 1888-1920.

Time was set aside during fieldwork for archival research at local libraries in the Sunraysia Region. The Deakin Centre held archived copies of the Sunraysia Daily newspaper. I spent a total of eight days reviewing these. The process was time consuming because all files were held on microfiche reels. A directory of names (which recorded the name of every person mentioned in the Sunraysia Daily from its first issue until the time of digitisation) was used to locate specific articles that related to Italians. I traced Italian names in the directory and located articles that were documented beside the name in the Sunraysia Daily archives. These were coded, in the archives, under B (Birth), D (Death), M (Marriage) and A (Article). The primary purpose of the archival search was to find articles that gave evidence of Italians’ contributions to agriculture in the region. Few articles addressed this theme. However, one key article was uncovered that gave strong evidence reinforcing interview narratives presented in Chapter 4. The results of the search enabled a deeper understanding of Italian contributions and influence within the Sunraysia Region over the past century.
ii. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to access real world experiences, actions, memories and meanings (Dunn 2010), to generate a deeper understanding of migrants’ agricultural practices within the Sunraysia Region (See Figure 3.1). A guide with broad themes and prompts was utilised (see Appendix G). Techniques from oral history guided the first block of questions in the interview schedule. The semi-structured interview style facilitated fluid conversations between interviewees and myself. This approach gave interviewees freedom to construct their own accounts of experiences through personal stories, and the power to steer discussions in multiple directions opening up possibilities of acquiring richer stories and more layers of knowledge (Dunn 2010; Valentine 2005).

Historical documentation (gathered through archival research) helped to tell part of the story. However, the ‘eyewitness accounts’ gathered through interviews increased my overall understanding of the research topic by providing more specific details and alternative opinions of how events and situations had unfolded (George & Stratford 2010).

The interview schedule contained five broad sections that addressed the research aim and questions:

• *Migration experiences*: this section asked questions about how long participants’ families had been in the Sunraysia Region, the conditions under which they left Italy, physical experiences of the journey to Australia, and the hopes and expectations they had at the time of their arrival.

• *Setting up life in the Sunraysia*: this section sought to develop insights into life as an Italian in the Sunraysia during the ‘early days’. Participants were also asked to reflect on changes in the region over time.
• *Farming in the Sunraysia*: participants were asked how they were involved in agriculture in the Sunraysia Region today (or previously), the types of crops they had growing on their farms and in their backyards, how they acquired their land and their thoughts about the contributions that Italians have made to agriculture in the region.

• *Understandings of agriculture and horticulture*: this section explored what agriculture and nature meant to each participant. It enquired about perceived differences between Italian and other farming styles, and explored how agriculture has changed in the Sunraysia Region over time.

• *New understandings*: this section focused on the contemporary context and probed into participants’ experiences and interactions with newer migrants to the region.

Source: Photo taken by Olivia Dun June 2016

Figure 3.1: Interview with Stefano de Pieri at Mildura Brewery June 2016
iii. Farm/garden tours

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if there were any places (their gardens or farms) that they would like show me. However, only four interviews led to a tour. Time restrictions made garden/farm tours difficult for many participants, who could only commit to doing an interview in the evening once the sun had gone down. Others had moved off their farms onto smaller properties closer to town. One tour occurred on a working farm and another three occurred in backyard vegetable gardens. The farm and garden tours allowed for a different dynamic of discussion – and enabled interviewees to engage more directly with specific objects in the farm/garden (e.g. plants, machinery, tools and so on). Farm/garden tours were audio-recorded and photographs were taken throughout.

3.6 Data analysis

Interviews and farm tours were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using a combination of content and discourse analysis. This dual approach improved rigour throughout the process of identifying themes (Welsh 2002). Both manual and computer based (NVivo) coding methods were used. The use of NVivo software helped to interrogate aspects of the data set, by pulling together sections of the interviews that related to specific areas. ‘Parent Nodes’ were formed (for example ‘Innovations’) and ‘Child Nodes’ (for example, ‘grape covers’ and ‘trellising techniques’). However, the broader themes – and evidence of changing practices, identities and land uses over time – emerged in a more fluid way when analysing interviews individually. Archival materials were analysed thematically and patterns of meaning were derived from the type of article, its emotive tone, and the stories being told. Following the identification of key themes, discourse analysis aided in identifying the sets of ideas that helped to inform the participants’ worldviews (Waitt 2010).
3.7 Limitations

This research project brought with it many challenges. The sheer volume of archived newspaper articles made for a time consuming affair. It was not possible within the available timeframe to explore every lead. Similarly, the scope of the interview schedule produced a large body of rich material and it was not possible to include it all. Choosing the narratives best suited to the project’s aim and research questions was a taxing exercise.

A key challenge was moving beyond the common Italian ‘cultural script’ of stereotypical cultural attributes – like work ethic and a strong family-orientation. Participants were quick to jump to discussing such cultural attributes when asked about their agricultural practices. While these are undeniably one part of the story, it took prompting and encouragement to move the conversation beyond a culturally deterministic explanation of the Italians’ story in the Sunraysia Region. The interview schedule included a number of prompts that encouraged participants to discuss particular materials (or non-human elements) – like tools, technologies, soil, grapes or rainfall. It was only through these prompts that the research was able to bring to light tangible farming practices and techniques. In keeping with a political ecology framework, non-humans can be seen to have exercised agency in the interview process. By directing the participants’ focus to tangible objects or materials, it was possible to move beyond common (and arguably stereotypical) notions of Italian-ness.

Finally, it is important to note that this thesis is only able to reflect on Italians’ perceptions of their contributions to agriculture in the Sunraysia Region. It was not possible, within the timeframe of an Honours thesis, to incorporate the perspectives of the region’s broader farming community. However, the broader ARC project in which this project was embedded,
involves a range of stakeholders and ethnic groups. This thesis will provide important insights about Italian farmers that feed into the broader project outcomes.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed overview and evaluation of the methods employed for this research project. This project utilised qualitative methodologies to explore the story of Italians in the Sunraysia Region. Primary empirical data was collected, analysed and collated alongside secondary data drawn from archival material. The findings from this analysis are discussed in Chapters 4 to 6.
4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to document how Italian migrants were able to establish themselves as farmers in the Sunraysia Region, over the past century. It addresses the first two research questions that ask: what types of environmental and agricultural knowledges, skills and practices did Italians bring with them from their home country? How, and with what effect, were these transferred into the Australian context? The chapter contains three sections. The first discusses the reasons why the research participants and/or their families left Italy, and their motivations for settling in the Sunraysia Region. The second section discusses the contextual factors and processes that enabled early Italian migrants to become farmers in the Sunraysia Region. The third section addresses the tangible agricultural practices that Italian migrants brought with them from Italy, into the Australian context.

4.2 Narratives of Italian family migration: Australia as a land of opportunity

Poverty was the key catalyst for Italian migration to Australia. The flow of Italian migrants began in the late 1800s and continued into the decades that followed WWII. The Unification of Italy in 1871 saw the breakdown of a feudal system that had existed since the Middle Ages, particularly in the southern agricultural regions (Federico 2006). Before Unification, most land remained the property of the King, religious bodies and aristocrats. Common people often worked the land but did not have property rights (Federico 2006). The dissolution of the feudal system in the decades following Unification and subsequent redistribution of land did not result in farm workers taking ownership of the properties on which they had worked. Tariff policies, output and price controls, import restrictions and obligatory stockpiling were introduced with the aim of improving conditions in agricultural areas of Italy (Cohen 1979). While these policies were advantageous for farmers in northern and central Italy, who specialised in large scale grain farming, for smaller vegetable and fruit
growers in the South they had the opposite effect (Federico 2006). These farmers struggled to ‘get ahead’ as they continued, despite these reforms, to compete with larger scale operations.

Studies on Italian-Australian immigration underscore Italian migrants’ desire for self-sufficiency through independent ownership of land. This aspiration has been attributed to family histories of exploitation at the hands of large land-owners in Italy (Cosmini-Rose & O’Conner 2008). Italians were lured to Australia by the late 1800s gold rushes (Museum of Victoria 2016) and continued to arrive in small numbers into the early 1900s. By 1911, the Australian Census recorded 6,719 persons born in Italy (ABS 1911). This number steadily rose in the years leading up to 1925, at least in part due to quotas restricting Italian immigration into the USA (Office of the Historian- Bureau of Public Affairs 2016). The 1925 Immigration Act subsequently limited arrivals from selected countries to Australia, Italy included. However, by that stage many Italians had already settled in Australia – the 1933 Census counted 26,756 persons born in Italy, nearly a fourfold increase in the two decades since 1911 (ABS 1911; ABS 1933).

The Great Depression (1929 to late 1930s) severely affected economic activity in Italy and unemployment was high (Zamagni 1993). Participants explained that their families had fled the poverty of rural Italy:

[They left Italy to] get a better quality of life and to feed his [Donny’s father’s] family because they starved over there. They were peasants, poor buggers, they were just working for other people and getting nowhere, right? (Donny)
[They left] cause there was no work in Italy, so they [Mary’s mother and father] had to [leave], you know (Mary).

One Italian migrant interviewed in the present study, Celestina, wrote about the desperation experienced by farmers in Italy during the 1920s in her book *The Calabrian Dilemma*:

> The Great Depression was taking a grip throughout Italy. People in the villages were feeling the impact. Many went out into the fields seeking different edible grasses to survive on. Most of the weeds when cooked and dressed with a little oil and garlic were delicious. They would cook these up with olive oil and garlic (Mammone 1994: 20).

Another significant wave of Italian migration to Australia occurred post-WWII, especially from 1950 to 1975 (Cosmini-Rose & O’Conner 2008). Around 170,000 Italians arrived during this time period, bringing their total number to 289,476 by 1971 (ABS 1954; ABS 1971). The majority (60%) came from the south of Italy (Cosmini-Rose & O’Conner 2008).

All of the research participants narrated stories about their families’ pre-migration involvement in agriculture. Some had been subsistence farmers, while others were renters or share farmers and sold the produce. Celestina explained that subsistence agriculture was common in Italy at the time:

> In Italy, I mean, ah, in the small villages everyone had a plot, a plot of land and…they grew – that’s what they lived on…you virtually lived on what you could grow on your plot of land.
Other participants’ family members had worked as farm labourers in Italy. This work was described as being arduous and poorly paid:

[Y]ou know what they used to do? Even in dad’s time you would be hired out by your family or your – and your father would be there too, but to hoe. There was no tractor or anything, so the land had to be hoed and these dirty big hoes like that and they’d be in rows with a bloke watching them, and they’d be hoeing for about – oh, a few shillings a day and that was from sun up to the sun down (Don M.)

Migration to Australia was described as an opportunity to escape. The migrants’ familiarity with manual, land-based work, pre-migration, was a recurring theme. Familiarity with grapevines was a key factor that drew Italians to the Sunraysia Region in particular. Anthony explained that his grandparents moved to the region to ‘own their own vineyard that was their goal, no doubt’. While Donald noted:

They [his grandparents] heard about Mildura and grapes and that, it really got them going, they wanted to come up and have a look so me grandfather and me dad come up here for picking and they never went back [to Gippsland].

Land ownership possibilities in the Sunraysia Region also encouraged Italians to settle in the region – they were just ‘eager to survive and set root for their family’ (Stefano). In stark contrast to the rural poverty from which they had fled, land ownership offered a vision of a stable future, and an opportunity to further their families’ prospects in a sector to which they already felt a strong connection. Jim noted that his father:
Wouldn't want to go and work in a factory…he only worked for a very short time in Tassie [in the tin mines]…he wanted to be on the land; and, mum knew nothing but work on the land.

Involvement in agriculture post-migration enabled the migrants to hold onto valued food and family cuisine traditions – passata, wine and salami making, and vegetable preserving – that had been core to their existence in Italy. In family narratives, the Sunraysia Region was positioned as a rural idyll. For example, Don noted that his ‘Grandpop loved it here for the plentiful of what he had for his belly’.

Over time, chain migration became an important factor drawing additional Italians to the region (Cohen 1979). Earlier arrivals sponsored the migration of additional family members and acquaintances from their home villages, enabled by Australian immigration policies in place at the time. Jim’s father (Guisepppe) was a central figure, ‘Once a few settled in here – like, Dad brought his family out, then he brought a lot of Italians, he endorsed their coming to Australia’. This is a familiar theme in much of the literature on Italian migration to other regions including in South Australia and abroad, in the USA and Argentina (King & O’Connor 2003; Bailey 1999; Dadswell 1980). Guisepppe’s funeral notice described him as a pioneer of the district, highly regarded by a wide cross section of the community. Jim attributed his father’s status to the helping hand that he lent many fellow Italians.

4.3 Establishing farms in the Sunraysia Region

Early Italian migrants in the 1920s and 30s were highly mobile and adaptable – they moved throughout Australia in response to changing employment opportunities. Mining, land
clearing, factory work and farm labour were common starting points for many of the research participants’ families, prior to their settlement in the Sunraysia Region. Two themes emerged in working life narratives ‘manual labour’ and ‘long hours’. Jim’s father, who arrived in the Sunraysia Region in the 1920s, worked for the shire clearing trees and shrubs to make way for new roads, to save enough capital to buy a small dairy farm and to pay for his wife and two daughters to join him in Australia.

Over time, many Italian migrants obtained sufficient capital to purchase their own farms. Acquiring land in the Sunraysia Region was made easier due to the number of soldier settlers (see Section 1.4) who sold their properties early on. Indeed, 30-49 per cent of soldier settler blocks were abandoned in the years leading up to 1927 (Powell 1978). Those Italians who were able to purchase properties, in turn, loaned money to others who were just starting out:

[B]ecause there was already some wealthy Italian people here that would loan the money to the families and they would pay back the family instead of the bank. So they’d go to the bank and pay their property for them and then they pay that particular family the money for the properties (Anthony).

Jim noted the significance of a ‘man’s word’ amongst the early Italian arrivals in the 1920s and 1930s:

They were all very good friends [the Italians]… They sort of helped one another… and he [Jim’s father] helped bring a lot of not only relations out of Italy…he also financially helped them…you couldn't do it today, you'd probably lose your money,
but…in them days…if you gave a man your word, it was honoured, you know. You never sort of tried to cheat someone.

The farming past was narrated as a time of trust – a trust that was often lamented as being absent in the present. Established migrants also helped newcomers to cope with language barriers. Those who spoke English well could more easily navigate the banking system.

Italians who purchased their own farms also employed other Italians, enabling the latter to begin to save capital to eventually purchase their own blocks: ‘Like we brought men out and then they bought their own farms after us, you know…[t]hey worked for us then they bought their own farms’ (Mary). The Italian farmers also looked to the future, purchasing additional land to accommodate their growing families:

There are a lot of wealthy Italians in the region through their hard work, and of course one of the most successful things about Italian[s] is the strength of their family…And a lot of famil[ies], they worked first, second and third generation and they all work together and they bought one farm, and then they bought the next one and they bought the neighbour (Don C).

Italian families would pay above market prices if it meant they could secure some land:

But the migrant is willing to work longer hours for less return than the Australian. On the question of price everyone I sought with any knowledge of the industry agreed that the newcomers were paying inflated prices for their land. Twelve thousand
pounds for a block worth ten thousand pounds was an example quoted (An echo of Calabria 1966).

[T]hey paid whatever was required for them to get into, onto the land and then they worked it as a family unit and when one was paid off they bought the next one (Frank).

The Italian family is important when thinking about relations of production. The ‘success’ of the first-generation migrants in the Sunraysia Region relied upon the collective organisation of unpaid labour. The research participants spoke in detail about the ways in which their families had worked collectively as a subsistence agricultural unit in Italy, and how this practice continued post-migration. They saw this collective practice as borne out of necessity; and as a ‘cultural attribute’, which distinguished them from the Anglo-Australian farming community:

[W]e tried to help each other, to help the man of the house, the family to go forward because we couldn’t afford to employ somebody to do that, so everything [was] done by the family…even the kids as they could, you know …Now most of the Australians never did that, you know (Anna).

And of course…the mother and the children, they all had to put in a hand and help…Yeah, even the children, little children, they’d be out there pulling out vines or picking peas or whatever (Celestina).
Working as a family unit was only one tier of collective labour. The Italians commonly helped out fellow Italian ‘blockies’. This practice was understood by Anthony as one of the main contributing factors to their success:

Yeah [they] used to help one another out, and that’s the gist of the Italian people here, that’s why people here were afraid of them because they were a force because they would work together and they would basically do everything together…It’s a huge thing, I think one of the reasons why the Italians have been so successful is they’ve stuck together…

Jim spoke strongly about the commitment to lending a hand to other Italians in need:

Back in them days…they'd all help one another, you know. If someone was behind in their pruning or something…it would be nothing for a couple of families to come across and give them a hand, because that's how they operated…

Italian farmers also shared equipment as a means of reducing overhead costs: ‘if there was someone who needed…equipment…they would come and borrow your tractor or borrow pieces of equipment…it was basically what you did’ (Frank).

Just as family farming practices were transferred from Italy to Australia, so too were share farming practices2, which had been common in rural Italy. Donny’s father was a sharefarmer prior to migration, ‘he was working for an owner, like a share farmer, they give him so much

---

2Share farming is a system of farming by which a farmer makes use of agricultural assets, such as land that they do not own, for a percentage of the profits. Many Italian migrants were involved in this type of farming in the Sunraysia Region during the 1940s and 1950s.
per cent [of the profits]…that's how it was done there’. Share farming continued post-migration. Many of the research participants explained that they or their family members had worked on blocks that did not belong to them. These were owned either by other Italians or members of the Anglo-Australian farming community:

[U]m if you owned a farm and you don’t want to work it, me and Mario [his brother] would come up to you and say, “Right we will give you half the profit and we’ll work it…whatever [profit] we get we split in half” (Joe S.).

For some, share farming facilitated land ownership in Sunraysia:

[D]ad got to see this old Aussie and he wanted to go share farming with him…a couple of months into the farming bit he said, “Larry do you want it? I want to sell, because my wife wants to go and live in Mildura, you want to buy my property Larry?” that was my father’s name. Dad said, “I can’t afford it, I can’t afford it but I’d love to buy it” he [the owner] said, “Nah don’t worry” he said “I’ll give it to you on terms” on vendor’s terms, “I’ll sign it over to you, you pay me when you can” so that’s how. You know the Aussies, everyone trusted each other in those days it’s not like now (Joe).

Land ownership in the Sunraysia Region enabled the Italian migrants to establish themselves as a community and to embed their food and family culture into the landscape. Italians initially secured land and livelihoods through a mixture of economic circumstance, availability of land, ideas of family and sharing practices (financial, equipment and labour). This formed the foundation for the acquisition of more farmland that helped to provide
security for the subsequent generation. Through this process, Italians became key landholders in the region. For some families, this transformation has been remarkable. Don M’s father worked for just a few shillings a day in rural Italy, and now Don M. and his brother ‘have probably 1000 acres of table grapes’ between them.

Alongside the cultural practices outlined in this section (especially family farming and share farming practices), the Italian migrants also brought agricultural techniques with them to the Sunraysia Region. The following section discusses these practices in greater detail.

4.4 The transfer of agricultural practices from Italy to the Sunraysia

When Italian migrants began arriving in steady numbers in the early 1900s, horticulture was already well-established in the Sunraysia Region. At that time, farms were predominantly focused on dried fruits (see Sections 1.4 and Box 2.1). While the Italian migrants had experience working with grapevines (for the purposes of wine-making), they were not familiar with dried fruits. They had to connect with the broader Anglo-Australian farming community in order to become engaged in the dried fruit industry. The established system dictated the types of crops that were to be grown; the ways in which these crops were processed once picked; and, who they were sold to. This process was difficult due to language barriers, discrimination and the physical labour that was required in setting up and running a block. Once they were able to integrate their own farms into established systems and structures, opportunities arose for the Italian migrants to instigate change. In time, the Italians influenced major changes within the Sunraysia Region’s horticultural sector. This included, for instance, their leadership in instigating a shift from dried fruits to wine and table grapes, as explained by Frank:
[W]ell I think the Italians, the Italians have taken it to a new level because when you go back and have a look…it was basically the Italian…the migrants that moved to wineries initially because they saw the opportunities…it was part of their culture, and certainly with table grapes if you look at the district probably 80 per cent of the total grape growers are Italian…the English have sort of stuck to the, dried fruit and also wineries, so today it’s that third generation of Italians that are the bulk of the table grape growers, certainly in the Mildura area.

This narrative ties in with understandings of migration and social capital. Many established farmers have ‘strong cultural links’ to particular crops and these attachments can block change (Brown, Bridel & Crimp 2016: 137). Migration can act as a ‘circuit breaker for ‘group think’”, which can limit the way societies do things (Jensen 2014: 240).

Several of the interviewees explained that prior farming competencies (developed in Italy) proved invaluable in supporting the agricultural success of the migrants – helping them, over time, to gain respect from the established farming community. Interviews and archival material emphasised the Italians’ particular skills in pruning, grafting and ‘building the soil’. It was difficult to encourage the participants to speak about these seemingly ‘mundane’ practices, and to break away from the familiar script of Italian ‘cultural attributes’. However, once prompted to do so, they were able to provide rich and insightful accounts of the migrants’ tangible farming practices.

4.4.1 Pruning

Italian migrants to the Sunraysia Region were often highly skilled in working with vines, and brought extensive knowledge of pruning with them from Italy. Cos described his father and
uncle’s experiences when they first pruned their block in 1952. The excerpt below shows that the migrants were able to demonstrate their skills to the surrounding farming community, through their success on their own blocks. Ultimately, their expertise was sought after by their Anglo-Australian neighbours:

The very first year that my dad and my uncle pruned, the [Anglo-Australian] neighbour went over because they could hear, all they could hear is hack, hack, hack, you know, as in an axe striking a vine, and they’re saying, “What, have you guys lost your marbles?”…He [Dad] said, “Well, it’s dead wood. Dead wood’s no good. We’ll make way for some new wood.” So they had…their own sharp little axes, which they brought with them from the Old Country, and they were masters with axes… they were very accurate with their axe strokes. So yeah, so it was a matter of they did know what they were doing, they knew how to culture a tree, a vine, reshape it, what have you, and from then on you know, production would rise and did rise…the first thing was to get the vine healthy again, get rid of all the rubbish and stuff, and then you would have a better production, you know…after a couple of years…they [the Anglo-Australian neighbours]…seen the results of the cleaning up…they seen the results of the new vegetative growth…they asked them [Cos’s Dad and uncle] to go and clean up their property. So obviously it must have been a tick in the box to say, “Oh, these guys aren’t as silly as they look” (Cos).

This story of knowledge transfer does not exist in isolation. A letter published in the *Mildura Cultivator* in February 1920 described an early Italian migrant who had given an orchard of orange trees new life by pruning their root systems:
Mrs Darchy, of Cureton-avenue, told me a very interesting little story of some orange trees...during a chat the other day. The trees, she says, must have been fully thirty years old and they were not doing well. The gardener in charge of them had to go away and recommended an Italian as the person to temporarily fill his place. Almost immediately Mrs Darchy noticed the Italian opening up the roots of these trees and cutting away masses of congested fibrous roots. She thought he would kill the trees, but he smiled and explained that it was a common practice in Italy. Mr Darchy said that as the trees were doing no good the Italian might as well have his way. Everybody but the Italian was surprised at the wonderful new kick-off in the trees. They broke out later into beautiful foliage and fruiting. Later Mrs Darchy tried the same thing on an old apple tree, with like result (Mildura Cultivator 1920, p. 4).

Pruning is a common practice among vine and fruit-tree growers, but is less commonly used for other crops. However, pruning was also used by Italian vegetable and other fruit (i.e. non-fruit-tree) growers in the Sunraysia Region to increase productivity. Joe S. described a method developed and employed by Italians who grew capsicums on a commercial scale in the early 1950s:

Like the capsicums...most people grow one crop with one plant of capsicums right, my father had the glass houses and he wasn’t the first to do it, he learnt off cousins but the Italian community done this...somebody noticed that the plants do shoot even before they were pruned they were shooting again...somebody thought well look there’s a unique opportunity where we can get this to work if we cut the heads off the old ones and we get new ones they’re actually going to flower and give us another crop.
The Italian migrants’ knowledge of pruning (willingly shared with other Italian growers) contributed to their ability to establish themselves economically and socially within the region. The success of their pruning techniques – by their own accounts – showed the broader community what they were capable of and helped to establish rapport. Similar to pruning, certain grafting techniques were also used by the Italian migrants.

4.4.2 Grafting

Grafting has a longstanding history throughout Italy. Ancient Roman scholars, in particular Marcus Porcius Cato and Marcus Terrentius Varro, wrote in great detail about grafting, as a common agricultural exercise that took place as early as the 5th Century BCE\(^3\) (Mudge et al. 2009). Varro addressed the issue of stock compatibility more than 2000 years ago, noting ‘you cannot, for instance, graft a pear on an oak, even though you can on an apple’ (cited in Mudge et al. 2009: 455). He also indicated that a scion or shoot of a tree, of better type, should be grafted onto a lesser one (referred to as approach grafting). Grafting knowledge had been in circulation in Italy for at least two millennia before the arrival of Italians in Australia. Don M. explained that grafting was a technique that was brought to the Sunraysia Region by the Italian migrants:

They [the Anglo-Australian farmers] never grafted here. In Italy you have to graft them [grapevines] because there’s phylloxera\(^4\), where domestic vines can’t grow. So you plant a wild one that doesn’t get affected, and then you graft it…and we do the same here now because the graft is stronger…we call them bull vines now.

\(^3\) Before Common Era.

\(^4\)Phylloxera is an aphid-like insect that feeds exclusively on grapevines. The Sunraysia Region exists within the Victorian and New South Wales phylloxera exclusion zone (Vinehealth Australia 2015).
As Don M. noted, grafting was a necessary skill in Italy due to the prevalence of vine disease. Grafting was used on both a commercial scale and in the home gardens of many Italians in the Sunraysia Region. In some cases, the Italian migrants incorporated native Australian plants into their grafting practices. Bruno spoke about grafting his Italian eggplants onto a wild plant that belongs to the eggplant family. When we were looking at the root section of the plant he explained:

Bruno: This is the wild one, now you can see it, see the spikes?...It’s the same family as the eggplant, but it’s wild.

Interviewer: And what do you mean...like a wild eggplant?

Bruno: Yeah, same family though...But it doesn’t make the fruit, it makes seeds but not fruit...So then...I graft it [the Italian eggplant], I cut it there and I put another piece of the other one there, inside...and tie it with a proper tape, and it will keep growing because the sap goes into it...It’s like an operation.

The reason for grafting, Bruno explained, was that the hardiness of the Australian native allowed the plant to last longer, increasing production: ‘Using that, is cause you can get fruit off it for about three to four years, and if you cover it in the winter time, you may get five years out of it’. If Bruno was to plant his Italian eggplant straight into the dry, sandy soils found in the Sunraysia Region, ‘they die, after one year, finito!’
4.4.3 Building the soil

As noted in Chapter 2, few studies have documented the agricultural expertise brought by migrants to their new homelands. An exception is Cabannes and Raposo’s (2013) study of Cape Verdean migrants in Portugal. The authors reported on the ‘richness and wealth of techniques practiced in Lisbon by Cape Verdean communities in order to produce food on left-over spaces and urban voids’ (Cabannes & Raposo 2013: 245, 246). The migrants’ knowledge of growing food on steep slopes of volcanic ash had been acquired in their country of origin but proved helpful in optimising the use of available land post-migration. Similarly, Italian migrants’ deep understanding of cultivation techniques and soil enabled them to increase grape productivity in the Sunraysia Region.

Soil was discussed in a number of interviews. When Don C. was asked about agricultural practices that had come from Italy with first-generation migrants, he immediately began to discuss soil: ‘A lot of Italians, they had the skills of building the soil with the right sort of texture for putting the crops in it and that takes a bit of skill…they would achieve this magnificent sort of soil that anything would grow in’.

A common and necessary practice on farms, to provide nutrients that enrich the soil for the following harvest, is the sowing of cover crops (Department of Primary Industry 2007). Cover crops are sown, grown and most commonly turned back into the earth following the harvest of the mainstay crop. Generally, the types of plants used for cover crops in the Sunraysia Region (before the Italians’ arrival) were wild peas, cereals such as rye, and legumes like the bur clover. These practices were detailed in a number of archived Mildura Cultivator newspaper articles under titles such as ‘Improving Orchard Soils’ (Mildura Cultivator 1908 p. 4, 1914, p. 6). However, the Italians noticed a unique opportunity to plant
something that would be both enriching to the soil and produce a cash crop when the vine harvests concluded each season. Their knowledge of the soil, paired with their drive to succeed, produced an outcome by which alternating rows of fruit and vegetable bearing crops were planted down the middle of the grapevines:

You know the Australians would have put in cover crops…whereas the Italians would put in the cash crop instead of the cover crop…in every second row …I don’t think it was happening before-hand [pre-Italian settlement] because I certainly, going onto other farms that were not Italian, that’s not how they did things, you know they certainly didn’t have tomatoes or broad beans down the middle of the vines…(Sam).

Australians don’t even – they wouldn’t – they don’t – well, today life’s changed so much but it was the Italians. They plant anything, zucchinis, pumpkins, everything, in between the – the [vine] rows of the block (Celestina).

Beneficial to the soil and the next season’s harvest, as well as economically advantageous, this way of planting helped Italians to feed their families and provided them with extra capital.

4.5 Conclusion
This chapter has shown how Italian cultural attributes and agricultural practices – alongside timely opportunities (such as the sale of soldier settler blocks) – enabled migrants to purchase farms in the Sunraysia Region, and to demonstrate their knowledge to the broader farming community. Access to farmland was embedded in modes and relations of production of family and share farming. Many first-generation migrants were from rural backgrounds. Here
it has been shown that the retention of certain cultural and agricultural practices, combined with an innovativeness to adapting these to Australian soils and plants, allowed the Italians to prosper, despite hardships in this new location. For the purposes of this thesis it has been important to understand how environmental histories – in this case, pre-migration agricultural practices and skills – help to shape what people do. The historical cultural practices and agricultural techniques that were brought with Italians from Italy however, did not operate in isolation. The following chapter discusses how environmental factors shaped Italians’ involvement within agriculture in the Sunraysia Region. Using a political ecology framework, it explains how a confluence of cultural factors and pre-migration knowledges (as outlined in this chapter) – alongside non-human agency– created the conditions for important agricultural innovations.
CHAPTER FIVE

AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION IN THE SUNRAYSIA REGION: ITALIAN CULTURE AND NON HUMAN AGENCY

© Photo by: Tess Spaven
5.1 Introduction
This chapter considers agricultural innovations in the Sunraysia Region over the past century. Participants involved in this study highlighted a number of innovations that were introduced by Italian migrants and their descendants over this time period – including technologies, changes in crops choices and farming practices and ideas. Narratives from the interviews positioned innovation as an inherent Italian cultural attribute. However, a political ecology lens challenges this dominant shared understanding amongst the research participants. Innovation is instead seen to arise out of a confluence of human agency (including cultural attributes), structural forces (such as commodity markets and agricultural policies), and environmental forces (including the demands made on humans by the crops themselves). All three elements are important in understanding agricultural innovation in the Sunraysia Region. This chapter focuses in detail on the intersection of culture and environment. The influence of structural forces is addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

This chapter is comprised of three sections. Section 5.2 focuses on the theme of ‘Italianness’ as a driver of innovation in the Sunraysia Region. Sections 5.3 and 5.4 explore how both technological and methodological innovations developed by the Italians in the Sunraysia Region came about through the intersection of cultural and environmental forces.

5.2 Cultural drivers of crop diversification and innovation
The interviewees attributed the changes brought by Italians to the Sunraysia Region to cultural tastes and perceived cultural attributes – especially their work ethic and a perceived inventiveness.
i. Cultural tastes

The environmental history of certain plant species in the Sunraysia Region (such as capsicums, figs and eggplants) is closely aligned with Italian migration. Many participants told of Italians bringing seeds, rootlings and buds with them from Italy, often in ways that avoided the surveillance of customs officials. Domenico spoke about seeds being hidden ‘under their tongue, or wrapped in a handkerchief’. Donald explained that his ancestors would ‘bring a little stick with a couple of buds on them and wrap them up and keep them moist, and when they got over here they’d…graft that bud’. The desire for culturally specific plants has been noted in literature that looks into backyard gardening practices (Mirmohamadi 2003; Head, Muir & Hampel 2004). Culturally important crops and foods help migrants to maintain cultural traditions, affirm group identity and overcome a sense of isolation (Grigsby-Toussaint et al. 2010; Migration Heritage Centre 2010). In the Sunraysia Region, vegetables and fruits from Italy helped to create a familiar environment for the migrants, ensuring that culturally important foods were available. Seeds of selected species have even been passed down through the generations as prized possessions. These plants hold memories and connections to the past and to Southern Italy:

We’ve also got beans, Italian beans that mum over the years has sort of gathered, it’s a bit like a borlotti bean, it is a large white one, that mum has always kept the seed so we have got that seed (Frank).

While some of the fruits and vegetables preferred by the Italian migrants already existed in the Sunraysia Region prior to their arrival, such as tomatoes, new varieties from Italy diversified the range:
[E]very now and then…someone would come out and have a watermelon seed or a cantaloupe…or tomato seed, but they [those crops] were here, but…they had their own varieties from over there [Italy]…and they’d smuggle them in (Domenico).

[S]omebody would write a telegram or a letter and say, "Next time Joe Blow comes out, can you make sure he brings Grandma tomato seeds because the ones here are no good" (Stefano).

Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region also grew some of their traditional foods on a commercial scale. Those who went into vegetable production transformed the region’s ‘traditional’ crop varieties to those that suited their personal diets. Potatoes, carrots and broccoli were replaced with capsicums, eggplants, chillies, beans and garlic:

I would say that everybody sneak a bit of their own sort of recipes and eventually, you know, it become commercial crops… eggplant, for instance…there weren't too many eggplant in Australia in the early days, but the Italian sort of brought the seeds and then from that seed come other seeds and then it becomes a commercial entity (Don C.)

Joe S. explained that capsicums were not commonly grown in the region ‘until the Italian community come’. He continued:

[T]hey brought their culture. When dad first come to Australia you know food was very basic…you didn’t have the diversity that you have now…In those days you

5 Stefano de Pieri is an Italian born, Australian ‘Cook’, known for his ABC TV series A Gondola on the Murray and Stefanos Cooking Paradiso, link to website: http://www.stefano.com.au
know you had meat and potatoes so that was it, you know the capsicums, we used to grow capsicums but we could sell bugger all in the market because the Australian community didn’t know about them at all, they didn’t know what they were…And now…it’s complete opposite…Everyone wants the capsicums….

Joe S. asserted that Italians transformed the dominant diet of British settler Australians. Meanwhile Stefano spoke of the rising demand created by Italian migration to Australian cities, particularly Melbourne throughout the 1950s to 1970s. He noted that Mildura’s Italian farmers ‘planted zucchinis or capsicums or eggplant… it fed other Italians in the cities’. In addition to distinctive cultural tastes, the research participants noted that Italians’ agricultural contributions to the Sunraysia Region came about through hard work and inventiveness – which they viewed as innately Italian cultural attributes.

*ii. Hard work*

Chapter 4 discussed the Italian migrants’ propensity to work as a family. Life experiences in rural Italy, and the unsettling process of migration, were also said to have instilled a strong work ethic and drive for success. The interviewees used these perceived cultural attributes to distinguish Italians from British-settler farmers. Phil commented, ‘our DNA, our makeup…is to strive for the best all the time’, and Anna asserted that Italians were more determined than other farmers in the region – ‘[m]ore determined to do it well and do it better’. A ‘strong work ethic’ was identified as the key cultural trait required for farming:

> Look, the skill you need first of all is hard work. You've got to be prepared to work hard. And then you've got to have a certain amount of knowledge…to grow whatever crop you put in (Don C.).
Tony also emphasised the importance of ‘hard work’, explaining that farming ‘wasn’t an eight to five job, there was dark till morning or during the night’. He asserted that the Italian migrants’ work ethic and drive for financial security distinguished them from other farmers in the region, ‘Without being discriminative, yes, I reckon they – they [the Italians] would put in 100 per cent, 110 per cent. They always wanted to be better at it’. Like Tony, Jim identified the Italian migrants’ work ethic as a point of differentiation from the Anglo-Australian farming community:

[All they [the Italians] knew is how to work and work hard and… I'm not degrading the Australians…but the Italians, you know, you look out and they're working, and there's no one working on the [Anglo-Australian] next door neighbour's because – they just had a different attitude….

Mary, an Anglo-Australian woman who married an Italian migrant made a similar distinction:

[The Italians really worked hard, they made much better blockies than the Australians. The Australians were brought up in, more or less, a wealthy country whereas they [the Italians] came from the dregs and…it was born into them to work hard and they did.

Many early Italian migrants in the Sunraysia Region worked on other people’s properties through the day, and their own at night. When asked how the Italians were able to purchase property Cos responded:
[B]y working two or three jobs, by having your own farm and pruning other people’s farms…[my father-in-law] he’d be pruning in the moonlight…like during the day he’d prune people’s farms, and then at night he would endeavour to prune most of his; hopefully it was a nice, bright night. And that’s no joke. And many, many people that migrated, of the Italian background, did that.

A strong work ethic was not only a cultural attribute that participants associated with Italian men. As discussed in Chapter 4, farming was a family enterprise. Thus, in addition to her domestic workload, Frank’s mother worked on the grapevines, ‘mum, during the day would do the pulling out and tying down, rolling the canes on and then dad got back and pruned’. A number of female interviewees noted that Italian women were also employed externally, on Anglo-Australian farms and in packing sheds as paid labour. Italian women were sought out due to their work ethic and precision: ‘Actually a lot of the Australian people…they always wanted us to work for them because we were doing a better job’ (Anna).

Italian migrant women did not adhere to the dominant gender roles of the ‘farm wife’. Anna explained:

Once, it was funny…we were going to work and there was this family that we were passing [by]. The wife was sitting on the porch with a book, reading a book and the husband and the father of the husband, an older man, he would have been 70, 80 ‘cause he looked old to me at the time… they were boxing, putting…the dried grapes into the boxes…and the wife was sitting on the porch reading a book… I thought,
“Why isn’t she there to help them out?”… I just couldn’t believe that. It’s still in my head.

For Italian women, working on the farm as a family unit had been common in Italy, out of necessity during times of hardship. Italian women often remained in Italy for very long periods of time (up to 12 years for some participants’ mothers), while their husbands started the family’s migration journey. In their husbands’ absence, they took responsibility for working the family plot with their children’s help. They acquired knowledge and experience on the land, which proved useful once they arrived in the Sunraysia Region.

iii. Italian inventiveness

While the cultural attribute of ‘hard work’ was associated with early Italian migrants, an innate innovative capacity was associated with their descendants:

[T]he younger ones, the second generation had much more progressive ideas and some of them have gone ahead and really made very big blocks, made big names of themselves and they’re running the district now, they’re leading the way generally (Mary).

Where our fathers were the workers and the work horses, the younger guys that have come in like myself…were more thinkers…I think it’s definitely driven from our heritage, no doubt, yes no doubt about that. We’ve always been people that are probably…looking to make more money and do it easier…(Anthony).
Phil reflected on how Italian inventiveness has helped farmers to balance hard work against a cultural predilection for the ‘good life’:

I think…working hard, but also too working smarter…See Italians can be also… quite lazy…we work, but we enjoy life as well. So there’s got to be a balance, so if there’s something you can do to make your work easier, so you can enjoy life a little bit more, you’ll invent it and you’ll use it to cut your work down… So we’re quite inventive bunch.

Participants recounted many stories about the ways in which Italians changed farming practices in the Sunraysia Region. These stories often focused on Italians as problem solvers:

I invented a lot of things that simplified hard work, you know, just little things… a lot of it [innovation] would have been, I think, started by the Italians… it would be part of what they [other Italians would, you know, see as being a problem or hard work that they'd sort of – you know [try to fix it], I used to do a lot of inventing and designing myself. I would look at something and say it's got to be a better way of, you know, doing that…I invented the Mac Rotary Weeder, which I patented throughout the world, and it was a hydraulic weeder that won a five-star award in France (Jim).

Tinkering was described as common practice amongst Italian men:

[M]y dad brought practically the first carrot harvester in Australia…he was picking carrots by hand and he said, “Geez there’s got to be a better way than this”. And that’s when he found a carrot harvester and it didn't quite work, so he got it and he modified
it to work… and that’s what we just do all the time. We modify, tinker, just fine tune, all the time. *It's just in our nature*…we probably don’t know any different…it's probably in our heritage…(Phil, emphasis added).

Italian men, by their own accounts, were responsible for several technological innovations that changed grape farming practices in the Sunraysia Region. The interviewees explained that the implements designed and marketed by the Italian farmers reduced the amount of manual labour required. These included the Hydraulic Rack Shaker patented by Dominic Gauro in 1986, which was attached to the front of the tractor and used to shake the dried grapes from their stems; this had previously been done by hand. Another was the Cane Stripper that is described by Hesco (the company responsible for its manufacture) as ‘originally designed for the dried fruit industry to strip canes…[but now] one of the most useful, cost effective, labour saving machines available to the fresh fruit grower’. However – from a political ecology perspective – this implement, along with others, was developed in response to the ways in which plants go about their business, growing in certain places and in certain ways. The following section describes some of the technological innovations developed by Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region in greater detail. It seeks to move beyond a purely cultural explanation for these innovations, by considering how non-humans created demand for innovations. Paul Robbins (2011: 13) argued, ‘we might think of the lawn as not simply an ecological product of human action…Instead it is an environmental actor that forces behaviours, adaptations and adjustments.’ The following sections view the Sunraysia’s grapevines and fig trees through this lens.
5.3 The Tassone Weeder

The removal of weeds from the base of the grapevines is necessary to promote vine growth, because weeds compete with vines for water and nutrients, and thus affect their vigour. Under-vine weeding has long been practised in the Sunraysia Region, as shown in an article written in the *Renmark Pioneer* newspaper in 1911:

> Mildura has never as a settlement looked better than at present. The winter watering spurred growers on with their work, and as a general rule orchards and vineyards are wonderfully clean. Everywhere green manure has been sown in the centre of the rows a strip each 'side of the vines has been kept well cultivated, and *the land under the trellises is clean and free from weeds* (*Renmark Pioneer* 1911, p. 6, emphasis added).

There is no indication that this practice was introduced by Italian farmers. However, Frank Tassone, an Italian farmer, has been credited with revolutionising weeding practices in the Sunraysia Region. Prior to the invention of the Tassone Rotary Weeder (see Figure 5.1), farmers had to manually manoeuvre a large plough connected to the back of a tractor in and out of the grapevine roots – up and down each row of vines. This was a two person job – one person drove the tractor and the other walked behind, guiding the plough. The Tassone Weeder turned this into a one person job:

> I think [in] the mid-60s that the Tassone Weeder was then developed by a local gentleman Frank Tassone…that did away with the silly plough and the need for someone to drive that and so a change in the way that…we work (Frank)
He [Frank Tassone]…made easy work for a lot of Italians with that little machine, it’s simple, only a ram pushes it out towards inside the vine, and they let go of the pressure and it comes back, the spring pulls it back too (Bruno).

Drusolina explained that this invention was also taken up by other farmers in the region: ‘The Tassone Weeder see, the Italians did that… then…everybody bought that see’. Celestina commented:

[Frank Tassone] was my first cousin…and he was very successful, he went all around the world selling his patent to other countries…and in those days it was revolutionary really because before…you had to do it by hand…[the Tassone Weeder] was automatic, so you didn’t have to…pull this heavy plough by hand. You sat on your tractor and you just pressed a lever…he had a very mechanical mind.
While the interviewees in this study attributed technological innovations to cultural attributes possessed by Italian farmers, a political ecology approach demands attentiveness to a broader array of actors. In the book *Lawn People*, Paul Robbins (2007) highlighted the agency of non-humans, in his case, turf grass – which prompts suburban Americans to act in particular ways, as *lawn people*. That is, as people ‘who participate in intensive lawn care practices’ (Robbins 2007; 96). Robbins’ (2007) central argument is that non-humans compel humans to adjust to their demands, and to act in certain ways. In the case of ‘lawn people’, ‘the lawn absolutely requires certain repeated patterns of homeowner labour and the application of key inputs’ (Robbins 2007: 96, 99).

Applied to the case of horticulture in the Sunraysia Region, Robbins’ approach to political ecology draws attention to the ways in which innovations in farming practices stem, in part, from the plants’ (crops and weeds) influence over farmers. Innovation is thus a collaborative process, involving human and non-human actors. The ‘Italian inventiveness’ heralded by the interviewees in this study, was made necessary by the demands of the grapevines for clear roots; the structure of the grapevines (which makes it difficult to correctly manoeuvre a traditional tractor and plough); and the persistence of weeds. The interviews also contained other examples which, when viewed through a political ecology lens, reveal how the demands of non-human actors prompt innovation. These are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

**5.4 Trellising**

Trellising refers to the practice of controlling the growth of a plant by securing it to a stable structure, such as a trellis, see Figure 5.2. This section explores how grapes, grapevines and
fig trees can be identified as actors in trellising practices, and thus, as co-participants in Italian farmers’ innovations in the Sunraysia Region.

Source: McCubbin 2001

Figure 5.2: A vine is trained with ties to grow along the vertical trellis

i. Grapes

The process of growing a grapevine or fruit tree commercially is not simple. A wide range of techniques are used by commercial farmers to ensure the highest quantities and quality of their produce. Vines and trees grow in particular ways, which, in some instances, make hard work of harvesting and of promoting high volumes of fruit growth. They are also susceptible to disease, pests and weather conditions (all of which can also be understood as having agency in the process of agricultural innovation). The use of a trellis when growing grapevines is of utmost importance because it supports the weight of the fruit and spreads the grape canopy ensuring sunlight penetrates to all parts of the plant for effective photosynthesis (Tatura 1997). If a vine was left to grow un-trellised, the fruits would ripen at different times because leaf coverage creates distinctive micro-climates. This would be far from ideal for
commercial farmers. A trellis also aids in the fruit’s development and ripening, and promotes good air circulation. This is essential for reducing the incidence of diseases, which may harm the maturing fruit.

The research participants explained that Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region introduced new ways of rigging up trellises, to make full use of the sun’s potential. Cos’ father was one of the initial farmers in the region to convert to a ‘T’ trellis system (see Figure 5.3)

Cos: his [Cos’ father’s] trellising system instead of only one wire, vertical, one above another [see Figure 5.2] – he knocked in a horizontal T which…was 10 inches wide, say, and he put a wire on the left and a wire on the right, and therefore you could roll canes on the left and canes on the right, instead of just rolling one way or the other…

Interviewer: And how was it before, say?

Cos: Well, vertical… your top wire…overshades your bottom one, so now the fancy works we’ve got, the photosynthesis and all that can’t happen as good on the bottom wire so your productivity and your buds don’t initiate as good as what they would if they were exposed to a bit more sunlight…

Interviewer: Were other people doing that here?

Cos: Well, not just him, you know, but yeah, most of them [the Italians] sort of started looking at that sort of thing and yeah, they adopted the old T trellis and with a vengeance.
The role of the grapevine, in setting farmers about certain ‘tasks that keep them busy throughout the growing season’ can be seen in the examples above (Robbins 2011: 13). A picture starts to emerge according to which farming innovations are ‘not the result of free decisions’, but are shaped by ‘a wider context of pressures and coercions’ – including non-human ones (Robbins 2007: 6).

**ii. Figs**

Interviewees reported that Italian farmers were the first in the region to apply trellising techniques to fig trees (see figure 5.4). Brothers, Joe S. and Mario, and Joe’s son, Larry S., spoke in depth about the methods they have employed to control the growth of their commercial fig trees:

[T]he figs we grow them differently, we’ve got them under cover as you can see, all under cover for bird protection and wind protection and…we’ve got them on a trellis,
we don’t grow a tree…we’ve got four wires and we wrap on the cordons on the wire and then they shoot from those cordons for easy picking, that’s why we done it, like a vine (Larry S.).

Source: Photo taken by Tess Spaven during farm tour at Sim Fresh, 18 May 2016

**Figure 5.4: Trellised fig trees with netting**

The family believes that theirs is the only farm in Australia that uses this method. Mario commented, ‘I don’t think anyone grows figs like this in Australia’, and Joe S., ‘I can guarantee you no one does’.

The idea for trellising fig trees came about when Joe S., Mario and Larry S. were creating a specific type of netting to protect commercial fig trees from changing weather conditions and from potential bird damage: ‘because…you’ve got poles every row…that hold the netting
up…and the poles were already there [for the netting] so it was just logic to put wires through
and trellis…’ (Mario). When asked where the idea came from, Larry S. and Mario responded:

Mario: [Y]ou can control the growth [with a trellis] and that’s the whole idea
to control the growth because…figs, if you let them go they can go for
a hundred years…you know, 100 feet it’s like an avocado tree [if] you
don’t prune it…she’s just going to take off… the idea of the trellis is to
keep it at a level –

Larry S.: Where they don’t need ladders to pick…Because as soon as you need
ladders to pick it’s too expensive to pick.

Mario: It’s easy to maintain it’s easy, easier for harvesting you know the girls
[fruit pickers] just have to go with a –

Interviewer: I was going to say are they all picked by hand?

Mario: Yep, they don’t have to climb up it’s just…maintenance, just to keep it
at a level where he can maintain it and easy…for picking.

Larry S.: Picking’s the main thing…because the cost is in picking…

This trellising innovation has brought financial benefits for the family, ‘I have got to tell you
the truth it’s been a big winner…And we’ve made good money, we’ve made real good
money’ (Joe S.).

In this example, the tendency of figs to be eaten by birds and damaged by wind and hail
prompted the introduction of netting, as a form of protection. The fig tree’s propensity to
grow in a particular way – tall and with a spreading canopy – placed particular demands upon
human workers, requiring them to use ladders to pick the fruit, a time consuming and costly
exercise. These factors combined with a highly competitive, neoliberal agricultural context, to prompt Mario, Joe and Larry to find an innovative (money-saving) solution in the form of trellising. As the grapes demanded innovation, so too have the figs in this example – spurred on by the pressure to reduce labour costs.

5.5. Plastic ‘raincoats’ for grapevines
This section discusses another key innovation that has been attributed to Italians in the Sunraysia Region – grapevine ‘raincoats’ (Figure 5.3). A plastic cover is extended over rows of relatively mature grapes, to protect them against rain damage. This practice also raises the air temperature beneath the plastic surface, inducing earlier harvesting.

Source: Photo taken by Olivia Dun in 2015 for the ARC Discovery Project 140101165

Figure 5.5: Grapevine Raincoats

This innovation has enabled farmers to protect their crops from weather conditions that would otherwise ‘destroy’ the commercial value of the harvest. It is now so widespread that,
prior to the annual table grape harvest, the region’s farms are covered in swathes of white plastic. Anna explained:

[T]hey had to develop something because of the table grapes if the rain comes and it’s mature, when it’s really ready for sale the rain will spoil it, so they invented the plastic covers to put on top.

However, because table grapes are perishable, they are at risk of literally ‘cooking’ under the plastic covers in the Sunraysia Region’s intense summer heat. Anthony spoke about the trial and error period of finding the right type of cover that would protect the fruit and not cause it to ‘cook’ under the shelter:

[T]here must have been thousands and thousands of different materials used in a space of about five years, they were getting shipped from China from everywhere, Russia. And people were trying different clear shade cloths to plastic ones to biodegradable…until they come up with this cover they’ve got now and that seems to be working. It can rain three or four inches and [you can] still pick your fruit.

Following Robbins (2011), in this example, a range of non-human elements (grapes, rain and the sun’s intense heat) can be seen to have ‘coerced’ farmers in the Sunraysia Region to develop a particular innovation (the plastic grapevine ‘raincoat’). Of course, the Italian farmers who introduced the plastic raincoats played an important role in this process, but political ecology demands recognition of the other forces that have influenced their actions.
In addition to the plastic raincoats, table grapes have placed particular demands on farmers – due to the fact that they are a key international export crop for the Sunraysia Region. Table grapes are intended for consumption while they still have particular material qualities understood as ‘fresh’ (the right texture, taste, sight and smell). In conjunction with the international nature of the region’s consumer market, the perishability of table grapes raises challenges for growers. For instance, when grapes are picked from the vine they need to be chilled as soon as possible, in order to prevent continued ripening off the vine – a particular issue in the Sunraysia Region as the grape harvest takes place during summer and autumn. New skills, knowledges and innovations have been required to pick, pack, store and transport the region’s table grapes:

I mean it was just heaps, like just mind blowing how much information, how much work was involved into actually growing the grapes for the table. We had to work out the temperatures the grapes had to be held at and had to work out how long the fruit would last for (Anthony).

The agency of the fruit is captured in this quotation; how table grapes not only grow and fruit, but also ripen, perish and decay – even after they are off the vine – are influential in the process of innovation. But this example also underscores the important role of structural forces – particularly the outward orientation of the region’s farms to international markets – alongside the inventiveness of individual farmers. This is given greater consideration in Chapter 6.
5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the role of culture – alongside the agency of the Sunraysia Region’s climate, and the demands of its crops – in helping to shape Italian farmers’ innovations. Section 5.1 foregrounded the participants’ explanations of how culture underpinned Italian farmers’ crop choices and agricultural innovations. However, Sections 5.2 and 5.3 showed how non-humans can be identified as co-participants, which ‘coerced’ or demanded particular innovations. A political ecology lens thus allows for a more rounded explanation of ‘innovation’, as emanating from a collection of forces: cultural, environmental and structural.

While this chapter briefly mentioned some of the overarching structural forces that have contributed to agricultural innovations in the Sunraysia Region, Chapter 6 discusses these in more detail. In particular, Chapter 6 discusses the role that market processes and economic structures have played in the shift from dried fruits to wine and table grapes. Working through the case of the Millennium Drought, it also considers how environmental forces prompted structural changes (in water governance) that have profoundly altered farming practices in the region. In outlining these changes, it assesses how Italian farming identities have been shaped and altered over time.
6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research participants’ experiences of the structural shifts that have occurred in Australian agriculture over the last few decades, which have resulted in a change from small-scale family farms to large-scale family farm enterprises. It explores the effects of environmental changes and overlapping structural changes (in water governance, agricultural policy settings and market forces) on Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region. Participants discussed how structural forces (deregulation, free trade and globalisation) contributed to the decline of the dried fruits industry. But these forces have, in turn, presented opportunities – especially for the table grape sector, through closer market integration with Asia. They also discussed the Millennium Drought, which led to profound changes in irrigation infrastructure and farming practices, as well as water governance. At the same time, cultural attributes retained a central position in their narratives. Here participants emphasised cultural attributes that provided Italian farmers with a competitive advantage, such that they were leaders in the shift from dried fruits to wine and table grapes. The research participants also told of the economic hardship that many farmers had faced (due to the drought and market pressures), set alongside an ageing farm ownership structure and succession challenges. A political ecology perspective is ideal for exploring this confluence of factors, and how they have shaped what types of grapes are grown in the Sunraysia Region, and how. In turn, and following Robbins’ (2011:224) assertion that ‘people make an identity as they make a living’, this chapter also considers how these factors have shaped and reshaped what it means to be an Italian farmer in the Sunraysia Region – reconfiguring or reinforcing particular attributes of Italian farming identities.
6.2 Changing agricultural policies: neo-liberalisation and the globalisation of Australian agriculture

As discussed in Chapter 2, vast changes to Australia’s agricultural sector began to occur around the 1980s. Key factors driving the changes were ‘globalisation, trade liberalisation, changing consumer taste, technological advances and innovation and environmental constraints’ (Productivity Commission 2005; 1). The cost-price squeeze and ongoing expansion of economies of scale impacted on both the number and sizes of farms across Australia, including within the Sunraysia Region (Argent & Tonts 2015). Since the 1980s, farmers have been progressively enmeshed in global circuits of capital, trade and investment. Additionally, longstanding patterns of out-migration from rural Australia have brought new forms of global engagement with a steady increase in international labour migrants. Migrants are increasingly becoming Australia’s rural farm labour force.

Agriculture has historically played an important role in Australia’s economy. In the first half of the 20th Century it accounted for one quarter of the economy’s GDP output, but by 2005 it accounted for less than five per cent (Productivity Commission 2005). These changes have impacted farming families and rural communities as a whole. For those who have remained on the land, economic viability has necessitated vast adjustments to the farm business, and to everyday life on the farm. The following section considers how these changes have played out in the Sunraysia Region – most evidently through a shift from dried fruits to table grapes.

6.3 Changing agricultural markets: from dried grapes to table grapes

Fresh fruits (citrus, stone fruit and grapes) had been grown by Anglo-Australian and English settlers when Mildura irrigation settlement was first established in the late 1800s. However, a lack of adequate infrastructure to transport fresh produce to Melbourne markets, unsuitable
tree varieties, and problems with irrigation channels and salt seepage resulted in a rapid switch to dried fruits (ADFA 1976). When Italian farmers first arrived in the Sunraysia Region in the 1920s, dried fruits were the dominant crop. The industry was heavily controlled by the Australian Dried Fruits Association (ADFA), which was responsible for recommending farm inputs, marketing the dried fruits, controlling exports and regulating payments to farmers based on produce quality (Gange 2007; see Box 2.1). As a result, ‘the [the dried fruit growers] weren’t really in control of their money. You were growing it as – really as a subcontract grower’ (Michael). Being locked into contracts, with no way of improving their farm income (unless more land was acquired), was a key catalyst for many Italian farmers to create their own ventures on the side. When opportunities arose outside of the dried fruit industry, many Italians jumped on board because ‘Nobody got rich on dried fruit’ (Celestina). Dried fruits involved ‘a lot of work but not enough money’ (Drusolina), and many Italian farmers saw improved opportunities in both the wine and table grape industries.

According to the interviewees, Italians were instrumental in establishing the Sunraysia Region’s table grape industry, and in its subsequent successes: ‘The Italians were a good stronghold of it…if you look in the table grapes industry today the majority are of European descent…mostly Italians’ (Frank). Italian migrants were described by research participants as being more knowledgeable about fresh fruit than the Anglo-Australian farmers:

They [the Anglo-Australians] couldn’t make a living out of the grapes unless they dried it ‘cause they didn’t understand how to do the fresh fruit bit, so, you know, the Italians knew more about the fresh fruit than the drying and the drying just collapsed (Mary C.).
The transition into wine and table grapes occurred irregularly. Some farmers transitioned their blocks completely. For others, the transition was slower and mixed cropping was common.

When asked about the beginnings of the table grape industry in the Sunraysia Region Anthony explained:

> It come about through people from Melbourne basically coming up here [late 1960s] wanting fresh fruit, they wanted table grapes and we started off just sending down natural sultanas … before they’re dried on the rack, they’re actually fresh.

Market demand for ‘freshly picked’ rather than dried fruits was integral to the emergence of table grapes in the Sunraysia Region. Demand from Melbourne enabled crop diversification amongst some Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region a decade or two before the deregulation and decline of the dried fruit industry in the 1980s:

> My father was very keen on selling his own produce he didn’t like being owned by…things like the ADFA, where…you got whatever was given to you, so he… actually started going to the market in the 60s…we actually owned our own stand in the Victoria Market, and…[in 1969] he bought his own truck and started taking his own produce to the market…and not only table grape[s] but he would also deal in watermelons, rockmelons and whatever was in season… (Frank).
Due to their connections in Melbourne, Italian farmers were relatively well-positioned coming into the 1980s when the government reduced tariffs on imported dried fruit, as part of the broader neoliberal trends in Australian agriculture discussed in Section 6.2.

Several participants spoke with considerable passion about deregulation, overseas dried fruit imports, and their impact on growers in the Sunraysia Region:

[O]nce they dropped [import] tariffs and all that bullshit that’s ruined the country…it was cheaper [to import]… and they still do it. They bring it [dried fruit] in from Israel, all those Arab countries. They all grow dried fruit…so there’s very few dried fruit growers now, and the ones that are here that stuck it out and still do it – and I don’t know how they survive (Donny).

Many of the research participants provided structural explanations for the decline of the dried fruits industry in the Sunraysia Region. Yet, as noted above, some Italian farmers started the shift to wine and table grapes well before deregulation (due to their dissatisfaction with the controls exerted by ADFA):

[W]ell I think the Italians, the Italians have taken it [agriculture in the Sunraysia] to a new level because when you go back and have a look it, it was basically the Italians…the migrants that moved to wineries initially because they saw the opportunities, you know they sort of, it was part of their culture (Frank).

Italian wine grape knowledge (as discussed in Chapter 4) was integral to the process of restructuring. The shift away from dried fruits also resonates with the information presented
in Chapter 5, which explained how Italian farmers’ innovations were linked to a desire to ‘enjoy life’, by reducing their workload wherever possible. Cos explained that ‘every man and his dog…got into wine grapes’ because ‘it was nowhere near as laborious as drying grapes, growing grapes for dried fruit’.

The wine grape industry has since experienced its own decline. As discussed in further detail in Section 6.4, the Millennium Drought coupled with a glut of wine grapes on the international market saw many farmers in the Sunraysia Region exit farming entirely – including some of the interviewees in this study. The unethical practices of large commercial wineries (which controlled most of the wine producing contracts in the Sunraysia Region) also played a role in decreasing the viability of small acreages. As discussed in Box 2.1, these structural forces were subject to a Senate Inquiry in 2005. Participants’ comments underscored the mental health and social implications of these structural forces:

[A]fter the dried fruit has been dying out then the [commercially-owned] wineries came in, the wankers, and they used up all the old Italians to establish themselves and then the stupid government gave them enough rope to make their own vineyards, two and three thousand acres and then they dropped off all the old Italian people and Greeks and said, “We do not want your grapes anymore”, and two or three [wine grape farmers] shot themselves because they couldn’t do anything else (Bruno).

They [small farms] have been squeezed…in the early days [the returns] were fantastic for Chardonnay…all the wineries [said], “Yes, plant Chardonnay”. So the blockies all planted Chardonnay and then there was a glut and…the wineries got their own properties and…then take yours at a lower price (Larry).
The process of corporatisation in the wine grape sector played out unevenly, resulting in a decline in the number of small-scale, family owned, wine grape farms in the Sunraysia Region. As noted by Daniella, ‘you either had to get bigger or you had to get out’. Demands to increase productivity resulted not only in growing farm sizes, but also increased chemical use, greater crop specialisation, further mechanisation and the increased use of seasonal and migrant labour for fruit picking – as families were no longer able to manage the workload as a family unit. Drusolina’s reflections drew attention to the uneven implications of these structural processes – depending on farm size:

[I]t’s like this…the Sunraysia it’s like a supermarket…You live if you’ve got a big properties…a small farmer that’s got a small bit of land, they’re better off just to close up and go because they can’t get a living out of it…It’s like…a corner shop. A corner shop years ago, they used to make money, they used to sell the paper, the bread, you go there and get something. They had to close it because what happens, supermarkets come in and that’s the same with the land. If you want to stay on the land you gotta go big or get out (emphasis added).

In the participants’ accounts, structural forces played a key role in the exit of smaller growers. But for some Italian farmers, like Domenico, globalisation brought export opportunities and substantial profits:

Yes, I was one of the lucky ones…and I'll tell you what I did, I was the one who started export for grapes into Singapore, I was one of the first ones…And it's grown
from there. Then we've opened up Indonesia, we've opened up Korea, we've opened up Japan, we've got China…it just carries on (Domenico).

Access to Asian table grape markets in particular was identified as a key opportunity by several of the younger interviewees. This is in part due to its geographical proximity (Horticulture Industry Network 2012). However, just as participants identified Italian cultural attributes as being important to their early successes in the Sunraysia Region (as discussed in Chapter 4), some participants’ argued that Italian cultural attributes underpinned their contemporary successes on international table grape markets. Michael felt that cultural similarities between Italians and Asians enhanced access to the Chinese market:

[I]t’s all about interaction and business, collaboration and stuff… when Italians [go] into the market…the Asian background is very similar to Italian, it’s family orientated….their beliefs and approach are very similar…I think that’s one of the big things that we [Italians] have an advantage… because you understand their culture, you understand what they’re doing.

This section has shown that structural forces (especially industry deregulation) and cultural factors (including links to markets in Melbourne, a desire for the ‘good life’ and perceived cultural similarities with Asia) were used by the research participants to explain why Italian farmers had been able to lead the shift from dried fruits, to wine and table grapes in the Sunraysia Region. However, non-human agency should not be overlooked. Several interviewees spoke of being at the mercy of the market, and climate conditions overseas:
[W]e’re in competition with Chile and other South American countries. Americans have gone there and planted vast acres of Red Globe [grapes]…and it’s only when they have a bad season that we do well. So, this year it’s been really good here with good prices and grapes have moved, because I think Chile got frosted or something like that. So, you pray for bad weather in Chile (Don M.).

The next section focuses in greater detail on the agency of the physical environment, in the process of agricultural restructuring, and in changing everyday life on the farm.

6.4 A changing physical environment
The Millennium Drought, and associated changes in water governance, cannot be overlooked in the financial collapse of many farms in the Sunraysia Region:

We went through some drought years a few years back from 2000 until 2008 and that was very tough…because we got a limitation for how much water we could use. You had a limitation to how many crops you could water (Don C.).

The drought, which impacted south-eastern Australia from 1995 to 2009 (Head et al. 2014) was both, a ‘rainfall drought’ and ‘irrigation drought”. For the Sunraysia Region, the irrigation drought was ‘unchartered territory’– and deeply unsettled ingrained expectations of permanent irrigation supply. Restricted access to water generated a great deal of anguish in the Sunraysia Region (Kiem et al 2010). The research participants’ comments spoke to the active participation of non-human forces (the absence of water, and the specific needs of perennial plantings – like grapevines) in the events that followed the drought.

“The term ‘irrigation drought’ refers to restrictions on irrigated water use that were brought on by drought conditions and reduced run-off in the upper Murray Darling Basin. This led to a government decision to divert water from irrigation to environmental flows due to the devastating ecological impacts of the drought (Kiem et al. 2010).
As explained in Chapter 1, the Federal Government offered farm exit packages to ensure that water could be redirected to meet environmental needs. By 2008-09, 26 per cent of irrigated cropland area across Robinvale, Mildura and nearby towns, Red Cliffs and Merbein, were left deliberately without irrigation (Mallee Catchment Management Authority 2009). Domenico reflected:

[T]hey [the government] changed the water in 2007, 2008, the water [restrictions] came in with unbundling…it decimated a lot of farmers…We lost a lot of our farmers in 2007 and 2008.

A key condition of the exit grants was that no irrigated farming activity could occur on the land for five years post-exit (Kiem et al. 2010). Many blocks were left to go dry. Some participants spoke of the sadness that overwhelms them when driving past these blocks. This sense of loss was often strongest amongst those who saw themselves (and their families) as having been instrumental in establishing the Sunraysia Region’s grape industry:

Cause Mildura was regarded as the oasis because it was so beautiful and so green and now you’ll get a green block and then you’ll get [another] one that’s mourning. The vines look as though they’re mourning, they’re dead…And it does really – it – it penetrates (Celestina).

Those farmers who remained on the land faced a new water governance regime, under which water became a tradeable commodity, alongside expectations to implement new, more water

---

7‘Unbundling’ refers to a major Victorian water entitlement reform that involved separating traditional entitlement of water rights into separate licenses, disconnected from the land (Victorian Water Register 2016).
efficient irrigation infrastructure. Flood/furrow irrigation had been the norm before the
drought. However, during and after the drought the Federal Government provided grants to
support the transition to computerised drip-fed irrigation systems (Department of Agriculture
and Water Resources 2016). Drip irrigation systems are the new norm on grape farms
throughout the Sunraysia Region, and fertilisers are now also pumped through the drip
system – presenting a fundamental shift in traditional practices (discussed in Chapter 4) of
manual labour and cover crops. Sam reflected:

[E]very block [used to] have small channels that’s how it would flow through, then it
went to pipelines…you would turn it on and it would just flood the whole…whereas
now, everything’s going to drip irrigation so…it’s almost impossible to put a cover
crop in or a vegie crop in the middle of [a] row because there is no infrastructure to be
able to water it…because of that…people have moved away from being able to do
cover crops or cash crops because…you can’t do it…and it’s probably gone that one
step further, most people have fertigation systems now…it pumps it [fertiliser]
through your drip system…So you don’t really get…the broad organic matter or even
nutrients throughout the soil there, they concentrate at the, at the base of the plants.

Thus environmental factors (exemplified through the case of the Millennium Drought),
prompted changes in water governance (the unbundling of water from land, and the
introduction of tradeable water rights) – which have led to fundamental changes to farming
practices in the Sunraysia Region. In addition to overseeing computerised irrigation systems,
farmers now spend much of their time examining water prices and upstream rainfall patterns
on their computers:
[T]here's a lot of people that are sitting say in ⁸Collins Street in Melbourne…and they might have…1000, 2000 megs [megalitres] of water and the water is a commodity, it's money, it's all for the money now…But really what's a Collins Street ‘farmer’ need that much water when I am desperate for water? So then I've got [to] buy it off him as temporary trade water…So you could own water and not have any land which is wrong (Domenico).

Yet, once again, cultural factors came to the fore in interview accounts, alongside these overarching environmental and structural pressures. Some farmers who survived the drought felt that traditional Italian family farming practices (as discussed in Chapter 4), underpinned their resilience:

You know on the farm you have a lot of ups and downs, you have your good years and your bad years and there was a bad run with the drought with the water and then they made you buy, pay for water…but everyone has stuck it out because you have got the family there…no one’s left and taken off everyone’s fought the ups and downs and stayed on (Maria).

Notwithstanding the profound changes and pressures outlined in this chapter, many Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region have continued to make a living and to do well. Confronted by a neoliberal and globalised food system, and profound environmental challenges, Italian farmers have reinvented themselves. The following section considers how changing farming practices, in the Sunraysia Region, relate to Italian farmers’ understanding of themselves.

---

⁸Collins St is a major street in Melbourne’s city centre. It has long been the financial heart of Melbourne and is home to various banks and insurance companies.
6.5 Changing agricultural practices and farming identities

Following Robbins (2011: 224), this final section seeks to engage with the question: how do contemporary Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region ‘make an identity as they make a living’? In what material (non-human) things are their identities grounded? Participants reported that the ‘materials’ necessary to be a farmer have changed noticeably over the last few decades to include spreadsheets, computers and drip-irrigation systems:

Joseph: Like you get my father to be on the land nowadays would be too much — he’d do it but he’d have to have somebody doing paperwork.

Cherryn: …like Joe has to do [a] spray diary on the computer.


Cherryn: Yes. The watering system has to be done through the computer. Yes, it's all — you need to know — you need to have a bit of nous, I think.

Several participants also spoke of the extra inputs that were now necessary for their crops to meet the ‘quality standards’ set by industry regulators and supermarkets. The pressure on farmers stemming from the characteristics of the crops themselves and influenced by structural forces that require the farmers to meet very specific guidelines (e.g. the shape, colour and size of a table grape), has meant an increase in external inputs (including chemicals such as gibberellic acid which increases the size of table grapes). Anna described her recent venture in farming broad beans and the changes she encountered:

Now we planted a bit of broad beans about four years ago…I got a shock ‘cause…the people in the markets, the agents they wanted us to pack it in boxes and make
sure…the broad beans all looks the same length, nicely packed one after the other to look beautiful on the top…But it took ages and…we had to wash it before you send it because again to look perfect on the box. Years ago you didn’t have to do that. Put it in hessian bags, off to the market. Now they too fussy.

A clear and important distinction was apparent in how the crops themselves ‘appeared’ in interviews with older generation Italian migrants (many of whom were no longer farming at the time of interview), and the younger, commercial farmers interviewed. The older farmers spoke about emotional and physical attachment to their crops:

I used to train those little vines up to the wire you know and I used to do everything by hand (Drusolina).

But when I saw how the [wine harvesting] machine used to rip the vines to shreds, [I said] “You’re not coming in my vineyard anymore”, only one year I gave it to them [the commercial winery] (Bruno).

First-generation Italian farmers, through their labour came to know crops as family. For example, those who had exited the industry (because of the Millennium Drought and related exit packages) spoke about their grief when sighting dead grapevines or barren blocks:

They [the family who bought Drusolina’s block] couldn’t live on the block, they weren’t making money so what they started doing was pulling out the posts [that had held the grapevines]…now you go there it’s just a dead block, it’s like a cemetery there, there’s nothing there I mean I drive through there and I cry… it’s just worse
than a cemetery, [in] a cemetery you might find a few flowers but there it’s just nothing…(Drusolina).

The materials (grapes, furrows and ploughs) that grounded the identity of first-generation Italian farmers no longer have the same significance. Current commercial growers appear to know their crops more through spreadsheets, water costs and supermarket demands, than through hands-on engagement. In some interviews, the plants themselves were scarcely mentioned – the physicality of farming was absent. There often appeared to be minimal emotional attachment to the crops being grown, they were understood as commodities that could be readily replaced according to market demands:

[W]e had citrus, the money died in citrus... just went flat, so we said stuff it and it’s not worth doing. Don’t care how pretty they look, let them go. So, then we pulled them out, started growing a few watermelons (Michael).

Participants portrayed themselves less as ‘farmers’ and more as ‘business managers’:

[M]y role...is looking after the...transport...a little bit in the...packing shed...a little bit into sales...I look after the production...like [on the] farm...I manage our manager down there I suppose...everything else that comes with that, being a boss I suppose (Phil, emphasis added).

Contemporary Italian farming identity in the Sunraysia Region takes expression in office spaces and meeting rooms rather than between the grapevine rows, among the crops and the soil. Their tools are computers and smartphones, not hoes and axes.
Yet some cultural practices have persisted – family involvement on Italian farms in the Sunraysia Region remains integral. However, family members’ roles have shifted significantly – from a source of manual labour (such as pruning and weeding), to office-based work. Joe S. explained how his family members share the administrative, logistical and managerial aspects of the family farm business:

…my daughter… all the finances she runs…it’s all a family affair, they all work…my daughter she does all my export…he [Larry] does all of Coles, my son does all of the domestic marketing, my son-in-law does all of the dispatch here… our wives do the supervising, my brother Tony looks after all the growers…(Joe S.).

What it means to be an Italian farmer in the Sunraysia Region has shifted – but family farming practices remain core.

6.6 Conclusion

The changing nature of what it means to be a farmer was a theme that ran through many of the participants’ narratives. Social, economic, political and environmental upheavals have created challenges, but have also provided opportunities to reconfigure or reinforce particular aspects of Italian farming identities. Over their time in the Sunraysia Region, Italian farmers have experienced a shift from land-based manual work as a family unit (as explained in Chapters 4 and 5), to an increasingly mechanised, computer-based approach. They have also experienced pressure to ‘get big or get out’. Many of the farmers who were interviewed now spend more time doing office-based work than ‘hands-on’ agricultural work. They monitor upstream rainfall, water prices and commodity prices on their computers – and allocate
irrigation water to their vines through computerised drip-fed irrigation systems. For many interviewees, these shifts are associated with changing identities, and with considerable nostalgia for practices that were central to Italian farming identities in earlier days. Some of the interviewees are maintaining their cultural identities through a continuation of certain traditional practices (such as salami-making) as a family unit, while simultaneously operating their farms within the constraints of the dominant productivist and neoliberal agricultural system. Italian farming identities are likely to shift further in the future, with climate change projections for the Sunraysia Region being indicative of a drying and warming trend. This may see increasing pressure put on one factor that has remained a constant presence on most Italian farms in the Sunraysia Region over the past century – the grape vine itself. Over coming decades, perennial plants – such as grapevines – may need to give way to annual crops that can be left unwatered during dry years (Connor et al. 2012; Kiem & Austin 2013). However, this possibility was not discussed by the interviewees.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

© Photo by: Tess Spaven
The overarching aim of this thesis was to understand the processes by which migrants negotiate their histories – in particular, agricultural knowledges, skills and practices developed in countries of origin – in their post-migration location; through the case of Italians in the Sunraysia Region. This chapter explains how the thesis responded to this overarching aim, and to the more specific research questions. It makes a case that culture operates alongside environmental and structural forces to inform agricultural practices over time, with implications for agricultural landscapes and farming identities. This chapter begins by revisiting the researcher’s positionality. It then summarises the key research findings and discusses these in relation to the research aim and questions. Finally, it outlines the key limitations of the research project and future research possibilities.

7.1 Changing Positionality

Following Mansvelt and Berg (2010) it is important to acknowledge how a researcher’s positionality shifts throughout the research process. Reflections were documented in a research diary prior to the commencement of fieldwork (Box 3.1), during, and after fieldwork (Box 7.1).

Box 7.1 Changing Positionality

This research project has challenged me to think about my own cultural background and the role that it plays in my life. Often I attribute certain behaviors or practices of my own to my cultural heritage. This project has changed the way that I perceive ‘Italian-ness’ and has led to a stronger recognition that many other factors also play a role in the successes of Italian migrants in Australia. Prior to the research I shared similar thoughts to the interviewees about inventiveness being an Italian cultural attribute, an innate characteristic. However on reflection I can appreciate the agency of the things around us. It’s not the case that one factor holds more power than the other but that through a mish-mashing of these factors new practices form, and
innovation can result.

Being out and about on farms in the Sunraysia compelled me to rethink my assumptions about ‘modern day farmers’. Before arriving in the Sunraysia, I was of the impression that manual labour continued to be the dominant feature of farming life in today’s world. The tours of commercial farms that I participated in during this project really opened my eyes to the technological advancements (assembly lines, machinery, chemical inputs) and behind-the-scenes office work that is necessary and takes up a good proportion of farmers’ time today. I found myself questioning the demands that farmers now face from consumers and supermarket chains. I have questioned my own expectations regarding the fresh produce that I buy from the shops – that my capsicums be firm and my grapes crunchy. Beyond this, this project compelled me to consider the ways in which our fruit and vegetables also place demands on our farmers, in a reciprocal relationship, something I had not considered prior.

While I have firsthand experience with family members who arrived in Australia, as migrants to create a new life, before the commencement of this project I had not considered this in a rural/agricultural context. It’s common to hear that Australia was built on its migrant populations. However, I was unaware of the extent to which migrants have come to shape rural areas in Australia. Before commencing this project, migrant’ environmental knowledge was something I had never considered. This project has shown me that the knowledge, skills and practices of migrants, when operating in conjunction with structural and non-human forces, have tangible outcomes. They change landscapes and change identities.

7.2 Revisiting the research aim and questions: key findings

This section first considers how this thesis responded to the specific research questions (as outlined in Section 1.2). It then reflects on the thesis’ contributions in regards to the overarching aim that guided the research project.

First: What types of environmental and agricultural knowledges, skills and practices did Italians bring with them from their home country? And second: How were these ‘cultural practices’ transferred into the Australian context?

Chapters 4 and 5 responded to these questions. Chapter 4 showed that Italian migrants were drawn to the Sunraysia Region because of its climatic similarities to the Mediterranean and
because it provided a space where they were able to overcome adversity by entering into a sector that was familiar to them. The knowledge and skills, and experience with grapevines, that Italian migrants brought with them were particularly important. Knowledge of soils, grafting and pruning techniques were transferred into the Australian context by the migrants, contributing to their success in the Sunraysia Region.

Chapter 4 also showed that the retention of certain cultural practices – working as a family unit, and share farming – helped the Italian migrants to establish themselves as farm owners in the Sunraysia Region. The participants saw their collective farming practice as being borne out of necessity and as a ‘cultural attribute’, which distinguished them from the Anglo-Australian farming community. However, acquiring land was made easier due to the economic conditions of the time and the departure of many soldier settlers from their blocks. The results presented in this thesis showed that land ownership was crucial to the transfer of the migrants’ agricultural knowledges and skills to the broader population. After witnessing the Italian migrants’ successes on their own properties, neighbouring (Anglo-Australian) farmers, often adopted the same practices.

Chapter 5 showed that, in addition to knowledge and skills, the migrants transported seeds and buds. In an effort to satisfy their own cultural tastes (and those of Melbourne’s growing Italian population), eggplants, capsicums and chillies from Italy were transformed into successful commercial commodities, changing the market garden landscape. In addition, Chapter 5 explored how the research participants attributed Italian migrants’ success in the Sunraysia Region to particular cultural attributes – particularly their work ethic, and a perceived innate Italian inventiveness.
Third: What role have non-human elements and market forces played in shaping Italians’ involvement in agriculture in the Sunraysia Region, and consequently, Italian farmer identity?

A key theme that ran throughout Chapter 4 was the importance of culture in shaping early Italian farming practices. Participants’ narratives spoke to the agency of culture in explaining Italians’ progress in the Sunraysia Region, with little explicit recognition of other factors. Chapter 5 sought to disrupt this narrative, using a political ecology lens. The agency of non-human actors was brought to the fore. Chapter 5 explained how Italian migrants’ innovations in the Sunraysia Region (such as the Tassone weeder, grapevine raincoats and T-trellising systems) came about in response to particular non-human demands (made by grapevines, fig trees, weeds and rainfall). In this respect, they can be seen as a collaborative achievement.

Chapter 6 focused in greater detail on structural forces, documenting the changing nature of Australian agriculture coming into the 1980s – as experienced by the research participants. Globalisation, deregulation, consumer demands and changing markets created a shift in the types of farms and industries that were viable in the Sunraysia Region. When reflecting on these structural changes, the interviewees again argued that Italian cultural attributes helped some farms to survive and flourish. Thus, early efforts to tap into consumer markets in Melbourne (where they had existing connections), and dissatisfaction with the constraints imposed by the Australian Dried Fruits Association, prompted some Italian farmers to take early steps – well before the demise of the dried fruits industry – to enter into wine and table grape markets. The Italian farmers’ role in leading this shift was also attributed to their desire for the ‘good life’, and to avoid the hard work associated with producing dried fruits. In addition, Italian cultural attributes were identified as bearing strong similarities to Asian
cultural values. Thus some participants perceived that Italian farmers have a competitive advantage in the contemporary market, which is characterised by growing consumer demand in Asia for Australian table grapes. In the participants’ own accounts, the structural forces that have impacted on the Sunraysia Region’s farms over recent decades need to be understood through their intersection with cultural factors.

While the participants did not use the language of political ecology, they understood that everyday life on the farm has changed due to the interplay of non-human, structural and cultural forces. This was evident, in particular, in their discussions of the Millennium Drought – which struck at the same time as farmers were grappling with the profound structural changes outlined above. Chapter 6 discussed how this major environmental challenge was a catalyst for upgrades to irrigation systems and to changed water governance regimes. This confluence of factors – structural and environmental – dramatically changed the feasibility of small-scale family farming in the Sunraysia Region. Those who were not able to ‘get big’ were forced to ‘get out’. Those Italian farmers who remained on their properties and who ventured into large-scale production – many of whom were second or third generation migrants – have become very different types of farmers to their parents and grandparents.

While the Italian participants who have successfully transitioned into large-scale commercial farming enterprises still work alongside family members, they often work together in the farm office while seasonal workers tend to the orchards, vegetable garden beds and grapevines. Yet, for these research participants, perceived Italian cultural traits – work ethic and a family-orientation – are still considered crucial to success. However, the nature of the work being done is different.
In the ‘early days’ (as was shown in Chapter 4), farmers were intimately involved in handling their grapevines as part and parcel of everyday life – and the older generations of Italian farmers interviewed (many of whom were no longer farming) spoke about their crops as family. In the present day, water and fertilisers are delivered through a computerised system, and seasonal workers – rather than family members – do the bulk of the picking and pruning.

This has in many ways removed farmers from their intimate understandings and physical and emotional connection to plants, soils and vines. Second and third generation farmers spoke about their crops in terms of market viability and physical properties linked to profitability. But at the same time, and perhaps more than ever, the physical attributes of the crops themselves are paramount. Grapes that are the wrong size or too squishy, and boxes of produce that do not meet the supermarkets’ standards of presentation, are readily rejected. Thus at a time when being a farmer involves less hands-on engagement with the crops themselves, a farm’s economic survival depends (perhaps more than ever) on the precise physical dimensions and properties of its produce).

For those farming commercially, an increasing disconnect from the land may have cultural, structural and environmental implications. Culturally, it may lead to a loss of the practical knowledge and skill base that has defined them for a century, structurally it may have implications for the long term viability of the land (especially if the goal is to make a maximum profit within a short to mid-term period) and environmentally, it might mean missing early warning signals (plant stress, environmental degradation) in the landscape at a time when – given climate change projections for the Sunraysia Region – farmers need to be paying attention most.
7.3 Limitations and future research directions

This project sought to explore how the intersection of structural forces, non-human elements and cultural attributes have shaped migrants’ interactions with their post-migration environments. It has responded to a key gap in the literature around migrants’ potential to contribute agricultural knowledge and skills in their new country of residence. The results presented in this thesis provide a starting point, but further research is necessary – including research with more recently arrived migrants and migrants of different ethnicities.

A key limitation of this thesis was that it did not engage with Anglo-Australian farmers, who could have provided a different perspective on the processes by which Italian migrants established themselves in the Sunraysia Region. This was not possible due to the time constraints of an Honours thesis. However, the broader ARC project in which this project was embedded has collected such information. It will be important to analyse the results presented in this thesis alongside the findings of the broader research project, in order to provide a more rounded insight into migration and agriculture in the Sunraysia Region.

This thesis has shown that migrants can be viewed as an important resource, for their capacity to introduce new agricultural knowledges, techniques and technologies in their post-migration contexts. However, the opportunities available to the Italians involved in this study were very unique to the time in which they migrated, and the place in which they settled. Newer arrivals – especially those who have come from the Majority (developing) World, and/or who have been resettled as refugees – face significant barriers in terms of demonstrating their skills and knowledges, due to issues of land affordability. The structural and environmental context of the Sunraysia Region today is markedly different to that
experienced by Italian migrants over the past century. While this thesis focused specifically on Italian farmers in the Sunraysia Region, it prompts reflection on the barriers and opportunities that face newer arrivals to horticultural regions in diverse parts of the Minority (developed) World in the present day.
REFERENCES


Australian Bureau of Statistics 1911, Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 1911 Part II Birthplaces, cat 2112.0, ABS, Canberra.


Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013a, Quickstats population Mildura (SA2), ABS, Canberra.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013b, Quickstats population Robinvale (SA3), ABS, Canberra.


Australian Dried Fruits Association 1976, Chaffey’s Kingdom: The Sunraysia Story, Macmillan (for the Australian Dried Fruits Association), Melbourne, Australia.


Chapman, L 2000, Restructuring Sunraysia’ s Horticultural Industries - Evaluation of the Kickstart Sunraysia Rural Partnership Program, SunRISE 21 Inc.


Golebiowska, K, Elnasri, A & Withers, G 2016, ‘Responding to negative public attitudes towards immigration through analysis and policy: Regional and unemployment dimensions’, *Australian Geographer*.


Holmes, S.M., 2013, *Fresh fruit, broken bodies: Migrant farmworkers in the United States*, University of California Press, USA.


McCubbin 2001, Month by month gardening in Florida, image, Cool Springs Press, USA.


Moran, A & Mallman, M 2015, Understanding social cohesion in Shepparton and Mildura: Literature review, Department of Social Enquiry, La Trobe University.


Robbins, P 2007, *Lawn people: How grasses, weeds, and chemicals make us who we are*, Temple University Press, USA.


Appendix A: Newspaper excerpts

Article titled ‘The irrigation settlement at Mildura’ demonstrated the build up of attention that the irrigation settlement was receiving not only in terms of productivity but predictions of a future cosmopolitan community:

“The name of Mildura, the scene of the interesting experiment in irrigation which is being carried on by the Chaffey Brothers on the Victorian bank of the River Murray, is destined to become known through-out the English speaking world. From an ordinary sheep run, where men in food seasons have made fortunes, and others in bad seasons have lost all they possessed, Mildura is being transformed into a busy and highly productive settlement, whose name and fame are being spread abroad in England, in the States of America, and on the Continent of Europe. Already emigrants have been attracted from these countries, and with its admixture of all creeds and nationalities, Mildura should become a thoroughly cosmopolitan community.”

(Argus, 1888, p.8)

Article titled ‘Successful Irrigation Colonies’ highlights the commercial implications of irrigation on the township of Mildura:

“At a time when so much attention is being paid to the question of profitable agricultural settlement it is interesting to turn to the latest reports of the progress of the irrigation colonies of Messrs. Chaffey Bros., at Mildura and Renmark. From the account given by the special reporter of the South Australian Register of a recent visit paid by the Agricultural Bureau to those settlements we take the following:

Mildura four years ago was a houseless sheepwalk. Today it is a settlement numbering 3000 people, and is rapidly growing. It is dotted with picturesque homesteads, covered with flourishing orchards and vineyards, and is the site of the most gigantic system of irrigation in Australia. On all hands there is an air of prosperity that tells of a great future. Houses of pise’, pug, and adobe have in the town given way to pretty villas of wood or brick, and were the manufactured article readily obtained many more houses would be built of it.”

(Brisbane Courier, 1891, p.7)
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEWEES

TITLE: Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong and University of Melbourne. The purpose of the research is to better understand the diverse ways migrants understand and engage with Australian environments. It is based on an understanding that migrants bring unique environmental understandings with them from their countries of origin, and that these have received little research attention. We are interested in better understanding how these diverse sets of knowledge and unique skills shape people’s interactions with environments in the Sunraysia horticultural region.

INVESTIGATORS
Dr Olivia Dun (lead-investigator), Faculty of Social Sciences, (02) 4221 3876 or 0475 200 889; odun@uow.edu.au
Dr Natascha Klocker (lead investigator), Faculty of Social Sciences, (02) 4298 1331; natascha@uow.edu.au
Professor Lesley Head (lead investigator), University of Melbourne; lesley.head@unimelb.edu.au
Professor Gordon Waitt (co-investigator), Faculty of Social Sciences, (02) 4221 3684; gwaitt@uow.edu.au
Tess Spaven (student investigator), Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, 0475 200 889

WHAT WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO: We are seeking your involvement in a research interview of around one hour in duration. You have been selected because you are a representative of a relevant community organisation, government department, business or community group in the Sunraysia region. We would like to discuss your knowledge of the engagement of diverse ethnic and cultural groups in this region’s horticultural and environmental activities. The purpose of this interview is for us to:

1. develop an improved insight into the migration history and context of the Sunraysia region;
2. gain an understanding of the large-scale/formal agricultural practices and small-scale/informal growing activities undertaken in the Sunraysia region, and the involvement of different ethnic groups in these activities; and
3. obtain insights into existing environmental pressures and concerns in the broader Sunraysia region, particularly as they relate to the presence of diverse ethnic communities and horticulture.

If you agree to be interviewed, we would like to discuss the above-mentioned topics with you. The ‘Consent Form for Interviewees’ accompanying this document contains more precise details about what you would be agreeing to if you are interviewed for this project.

If you agree to participate in the study, please contact Ms Olivia Dun via phone or email (contact details above) and provide a suggestion for a suitable time and convenient venue for an interview. We will request your permission to audio-record the interview. Prior to the interview you will be asked to complete and sign a consent form.

Nothing more than the interview is required from you. However, if you have time to show us some relevant locations in the Sunraysia region to see some examples of horticulture, farms, community gardens, market gardens or other relevant sites/activities, the investigators would more than welcome the opportunity to visit such locations with you to solidify our understanding. If you are interested in showing the investigators a particular location, please indicate this to Ms Olivia Dun so that she can make the necessary logistical arrangements. Alternatively, you can raise any suggestions about possible sites during the actual interview. When visiting such locations, we may request your permission to note down our observations, film, make audio recordings and/or take photographs.

Through our interviews with representatives of relevant community organisations, government departments, businesses or community groups (such as yourself), we hope to gather information to help us shape subsequent stages of our research project. We will return to the region throughout 2015 to interview individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who are involved in horticultural or environmental activities.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS: Apart from the time taken to participate in this research, we can foresee no inconvenience for you. We anticipate that each interview will be around one hour in duration. We will tailor your involvement to suit your availability and needs, and you will not be pressured to participate in more activities than you feel comfortable with.
Participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate and you can withdraw from the research at any time. You may halt your participation at any time during the interview and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. You can also withdraw any data you have provided for up to two months following the completion of your participation. If you decide not to participate, this will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong.

Any information that you provide will be treated confidentially. You will be able to choose whether you would prefer to be referred to by your real name or a pseudonym (false name) in published materials. As much as possible, through the way we present and discuss research results, confidentiality will be maintained in any publications or other communication (for example conference presentations or blog posts) arising from the research. You will never be personally identified as the source of information such as quotes or opinions, unless you specifically indicate in the ‘Consent Form for Interviewees’ that you are willing to be identified. However, if you are a representative of a unique organisation/group in the Sunraysia region, you may still be identifiable to others from your comments, even with the use of a pseudonym.

If you would like to see a copy of the interview transcript following your interview, please contact Ms Olivia Dun within four weeks of being interviewed. Once you receive a copy of the transcript, you will have an additional four week period to review the transcript and return it to the investigators indicating any particular omissions, clarifications or amendments that should be made. This same process applies to any other types of data (such as photos, video footage, diagram drawings and maps) captured during the interview process.

**FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH:** This study is funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project Grant (DP140101165). The research will be used to better understand the diverse ways migrants in Australia understand and engage with Australian environments and horticultural activities. It will be published in academic journal articles, books, conference papers, web-based written pieces about the project, and a PhD thesis. The findings may also be discussed in media interviews. Recorded interview materials may also be used to produce an audio or video documentary to raise awareness of the unique experiences of migrants in Australian environments. As indicated in the consent form, audio and video-recorded materials will only be reproduced with agreement.

At the community level, numerous ethnic groups have made the Sunraysia Region their home. Through this project, we hope to give these groups an opportunity to express their connections to the region and its landscapes, as well as their horticultural and environmental knowledge and skills. For local organisations and government departments, an improved capacity to engage with ethnically diverse communities – on environmental issues and in relation to horticultural practices – will be a likely outcome of this project.

**RETENTION OF INTERVIEW RECORDS AND DATA:** In accordance with the law, all data that we obtain from you will be stored for a minimum of five years in locked filing cabinets in the lead investigators’ offices at the University of Wollongong (in Building 41), and on password protected computers. After this time, the data may be archived by the lead investigators in a locked filing cabinet within the secure Human Geography archive room (also in Building 41). With approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, the data may continue to be used by the researchers after the five year period in related research and publications.

**ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS:** This study has been reviewed by the Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted you can contact the UOW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au. If you have any questions about the study, please contact one of the lead investigators, Dr Natascha Klocker, Professor Lesley Head or Ms Olivia Dun. Thank you for your interest in this study.

Natascha Klocker
Lesley Head
Olivia Dun
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWEES

RESEARCH TITLE: Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism

RESEARCHERS: Dr Olivia Dun, Dr Natascha Klocker, Professor Gordon Waitt, and Ms Tess Spaven (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong); Prof. Lesley Head (School of Geography, University of Melbourne)

I have been given information about the project ‘Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism’. I have discussed the research project with at least one of the above-mentioned researchers, who are conducting this research as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project Grant (DP140101165) and PhD thesis in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include the time taken to participate in interviews. I understand that my participation in additional research activities (visiting relevant locations in the Sunraysia region to show the researchers examples of various horticultural or environmental activities) is optional. A separate consent form will be provided for those activities. If multiple interviews occur, consent will be reconfirmed before each interview. I have had an opportunity to ask the researchers any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. If I decide not to participate or withdraw my consent, this will not affect my relationship with the University of Wollongong. I also understand that I can withdraw any data that I have contributed to the project up until two months after my participation has been completed.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact:
Ms Olivia Dun on (02) 4221 4134 or 0475 200 889 or odun@uow.edu.au; or
Dr Natascha Klocker on (02) 4298 1331 or natascha@uow.edu.au

If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 3386 or rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

☐ Participate in an interview as an individual
☐ Have an audio-recording of the interview made for the purposes of transcription
☐ My real/given name  ☐ A pseudonym (false name)

In published materials relating to this research, I would like to be referred to by (please tick one):

☐ My real/given name  ☐ A pseudonym (false name)

Where relevant, in published materials relating to this research, I would like my organisation/business/department to be referred to by (please tick one):

☐ Its real/given name  ☐ A pseudonym (false name)

I consent for the data collected from my participation to be used for academic journal articles, books, conferences, and web-based written pieces about the project, as well as a PhD thesis. I also consent for the data collected to be used when communicating research outcomes to the media. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected in all publications and media activities associated with this research where I have specified I do not wish to be identified.

I would like to be provided with a full transcript of my interview for approval (please tick one): ☐ Yes  ☐ No

Signed: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

Name (please print): __________________________________________

Consent form for Interviewees, 8.3.2016
Additional consent for audio documentary

I agree that parts of my recorded interview may be used for an audio documentary, to be broadcast and/or podcast online or via radio. I understand that I will be notified of any such use. I will be given a CD copy of the original, unedited interview for reference and personal use. I will also be given an opportunity to approve the components of my interview being used for this purpose prior to any broadcast. Please tick and sign below:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Signed: Date:
........................................................................... /....../......
Name (please print):
...........................................................................

Consent form for Interviewees, 8.3.2016
CONSENT FORM FOR ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

RESEARCH TITLE: Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism

RESEARCHER/S: Dr Olivia Dun, Dr Natascha Klocker, Professor Gordon Waitt and Ms Tess Spaven (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong); Prof. Lesley Head (School of Geography, University of Melbourne)

I have been given information about the project ‘Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism’. I have discussed the research project with at least one of the above-mentioned researchers, who are conducting this research as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project Grant (DP140101165) and PhD thesis in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include the time taken to participate in one or more of the following additional research activities: taking the researchers to view, photograph and/or film significant environmental or horticultural locations/activities in the Sunraysia region. I understand that my participation in these activities is optional and have had an opportunity to ask the researchers any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the University of Wollongong. I also understand that I can withdraw any data that I have contributed to the project up until two months after my participation has been completed.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact:
Ms Olivia Dun on (02) 4221 4134 or 0475 200 889 or odun@uow.edu.au; or
Dr Natascha Klocker on (02) 4298 1331 or natascha@uow.edu.au

If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 3386 or
rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent (please tick all that apply):
☐ to take the researchers to visit a location in the Sunraysia region, and have the authority to give the researchers access to the location.

I am also indicating my consent for the researchers to conduct the following activities at the location (please tick all that apply):
☐ take photographs of the location/activity
☐ take photographs of me
☐ take video footage of the location/activity
☐ take video footage of me

I understand that the researchers will not take photographs/video footage of individuals other than myself.

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for academic journal articles, books and conferences, and web-based written pieces about the project, as well as a PhD thesis. I also understand that the data collected may be used when communicating research outcomes to the media. I consent for the data I provide to be used in these ways. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected in all publications and media activities associated with this research where I have specified I do not wish to be identified.

Consent form additional activities, 8.3.2016
I understand that where photographs or video footage of myself are used for the above purposes, I will be contacted and given an opportunity to consent to the use of those particular images prior to their publication or broadcast, including the option for the use of that photo/footage but to consent to my face being obscured.

Signed: 

.................................................................

Date:

.................................................................

Name (please print):

.................................................................
Appendix D: Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Prior to the commencement of any research activities participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet that outlined the project aims and objectives along with associated risks (see Appendix B). Written consent was obtained in most cases, through the signing of a Participant Consent form (see Appendix C). In one instance this was not possible as the interview was conducted by telephone. In this case, verbal consent was obtained and recorded at the beginning of the interview. All of the participants were adults, fluent in spoken English and were able to make an informed decision about their participation.

Privacy and confidentiality

The Italian community in Mildura is close knit and in a number of instances participants were related. As such, participant confidentiality was particularly important. I was cautious not to talk about past interviewees in subsequent interviews to ensure confidentiality. The Consent Form provided participants with the option of remaining anonymous in research outputs (by using a pseudonym). However, most participants indicated a preference to be referred to using their given first name. Where participants worked for or owned a business or organisation, the Consent Form also asked whether they consented to that name being used in published works where relevant. A separate Consent Form was used for farm/garden tours, during which both audio recordings and photos were obtained by the researcher. The Consent Form gave participants an opportunity to indicate whether images of them, and/or of their farm/garden, could be used in research outputs, and if they wished for their face to be obscured.

The participants’ details, along with the research data, were kept securely on a password protected computer. A back-up hard drive that was kept in a securely locked drawer at the main researcher’s home was also used. All of the data files were additionally uploaded to a UOW share drive that was only accessible to the principal researchers associated with this research and the broader ARC project of which it is part.

Burden of time

As participants were asked to be involved in more than one research activity (i.e. research interviews and farm/garden tours), the burden of time was an important consideration. In order to minimise this, the fieldwork was undertaken over a five-week period during which the researcher relocated to Mildura. This gave the participants and researcher more flexibility to organise a convenient time for
interviews and farm/garden tours. The option to cease the interview at any stage or have a break during the interview process was highlighted at the beginning of each sitting. Participants were also informed that participating in an interview did not oblige them to participate in a farm or garden tour.

**Transparency and verification**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were given the option of having their transcript returned so that they could make amendments if needed. The large majority of participants identified that they would like their transcript returned and were given a four-week period from the point of receiving the transcript to identify any material that they would like removed from the transcript.
Appendix E: Map of participants’ Italian heritage origins (indicated by yellow stars)

Source: Google Maps 2016.
Appendix F: Emails sent to relevant organisations

Hello my name is Tess Spaven,

I am a student from the University of Wollongong and have recently begun my honours research year. I will be required to write a thesis that is based on my own research findings. I have joined a project that is funded by the Australian Research Council titled ‘Exploring culturally diverse perspectives on Australian environments and environmentalism’:


My particular topic area is focused on Italians within the Sunraysia Region. I will be looking at the initial arrival of Italians into the Sunraysia Region, how the wider community perceived them and how they managed to integrate themselves into both the wider community and agricultural sector. There will be a focus on the types of environmental knowledges and skills that were bought over with them from Italy. I am hoping to do some interviews with Italian farm owners within the region.

I am currently in Mildura and will be staying until the 21st March. This is my initial visit and so my main focus will be exploring the area, learning about the Italian community and hopefully making some contacts for future visits. I will be returning in mid-April and will stay then for an extended period of time.

I am unsure if you will be able to help me in any way but am grateful for any information, advice or the contact details of somebody that you think might be able to assist.

Warm Regards

Tess Spaven
Appendix G: Interview Schedule

This interview is likely to take, up to two hours of your time, so can I ask if you would please let me know if you would like to have a break in the middle or if it’s best if we have two meetings?

The interview today is going to be broken up into 5 different themes:

(1) Migration Experiences, (2) Setting up life in the Sunraysia, (3) Farming in the Sunraysia, (4) Understandings of agriculture/horticulture, (5) New Understandings.

Migration Experiences

1. How long have you/has your family been in Australia? (If born in Australia, explore migration history of parents/grandparents etc).
2. From which area of Italy are you/your grandparents/parents from? (prompt: was that a rural farming area or a township/city)
3. Can you tell me about why you/your grandparents/parents decided to leave Italy?
4. Can you tell me about why you/they decided to move to Australia in particular?
5. Can you tell me about the experience of moving here to Australia (i.e. the physical journey – how you/your parents/grandparents came here)?
6. What were your/your parents/grandparents hopes and expectations regarding your/the move to Australia?

Setting up life in the Sunraysia Region? Creating Communities?

7. What brought you/your family to the Sunraysia region? (prompts: what were your first impressions?, early experiences?)
8. What did you/your family hope to do in the Sunraysia region to make a living?
9. Can you think of the main differences between when you first arrived in the area to now? (prompts: town? Population? The environment?)

OR: Have you heard your parents/grandparents speak about what Mildura was like when they first arrived and how (if) it’s changed over time?

(prompts: what was different about the town? Population? The environment?)
10. Can you tell me the story of what it was like to be an Italian in the area when you/your family first arrived? (Either from personal experience or from what you have gleaned from your parents/grandparents stories?) Prompts:
   a) Do you think Italians were treated differently at that time compared to other cultural groups? How so? (e.g. Anglo-Australians, Turkish, Greeks etc.)
   b) What were the interactions like between you and the broader farming community? Can you give an example of a positive experience you had? Was there anything negative?
   c) Did you feel that the broader farming community was accepting of Italians as newcomers to the region?
   d) Has that acceptance changed over time? How so? And why?

11. How do you describe you/your family’s cultural identity now?

   (prompts: is being Italian something to be celebrated now? Do you think that this has always been the case or have there been periods of time that differed?)

Farming in the Sunraysia

12. How are you/your family involved in agriculture in the Sunraysia, today?

13. How did you/your family end up in agriculture? What was the pathway to getting where you are now?

14. What types of crops do you have growing on your farm? How has this changed over time (and why)? (Prompt: how do you make decisions about what to grow?)

15. Do you know much of the history of the piece of land before you/your family came to be the owner/s?

16. Can you tell me the story of how you/ your family came about acquiring land in this particular area?

17. And so how much of your farm area is used for commercial growing? Self-sustenance growing/backyard fruit and veg?

   (Prompts:
   - What are the differences when growing in the backyard as opposed to commercially?
   - Different techniques?
   - Different vegetables/fruit/herbs?
   - Different feelings/emotions?)

18. What would you say are the main contributions that Italians have made to agriculture in the Sunraysia? We have been hearing stories about inventions with machinery and different pruning methods, are there any stories from your family?
(Prompt as to whether the broader farming community started doing things differently because of the Italians).

19. Do you think that Italians are now valued within this community? What do you think has allowed that to happen?

Understandings of agriculture/horticulture

20. What does the term ‘agriculture’ mean to you?

21. Did you/your family learn to farm in Italy? What/how did you/they learn there?

22. How does the,
   • Climate
   • Weather
   • Soil here differ from the part of Italy that your family is from?

23. Are there particular objects or tools used for farming or food processing that were brought out from Italy (by Italians in the Sunraysia) that helped with the initial set up?

24. Are there particular farming skills methods or practices that were brought out from Italy by Italians to the Sunraysia?
   (Prompt, were there particular plantings or seeds?)

25. Are there any differences in the way that Italians farm?

26. Have any of the Italian ways of doing things on the farm been adopted by others in the farming community?

27. What practices/crops/tools stayed the same post-migration? What changed, and why?

28. How did you/your family decide which crops to grow here, in the Sunraysia?

29. *Who did you/your family, learn from as you adjusted to farming in this new environment?

30. Was it hard to continue traditions and practices that were central to the way of life in Italy? (Prompts: Homemade machinery?)

31. How has agriculture in the Sunraysia changed over the time that you/your family have been here? How have your own farming methods changed over the time that you’ve been here? (prompts: different crops, new methods, innovation, water and environmental changes, commercial involvement big farms as opposed to small blocks, increased participation of migrant workers?) What are the repercussions with technological advancements and farming work becoming less manual? Has anything been lost?
32. What are some of the differences across generations of Italian farming families (e.g. the way young people do things today, compared to parents/grandparents)?

33. How do you think your farming methods/crops might need to change in the future? (Prompt here around environmental change?)

New Understandings

34. Do you have many people – who aren’t family members – working on your farm right now?

35. Do you know whether they have come from farming backgrounds themselves?

36. What are their cultural backgrounds?

37. Have they spoken to you about the differences between farming in Australia and farming in their countries of origin?

38. Have you noticed any interesting ideas about farming, or farming techniques that farm workers from other countries have brought with them to the Sunraysia – just like the Italians did in the past?

39. Have many recent migrants to this area been able to get farms of their own?

   If no – what do you think might be stopping them?

I’m just going to give you a moment to reflect on all the things we have spoken about and then I will ask if you can pick out anything that you think is particularly significant.

Is there anything you’d like to add/do you have any questions?