

John Sweeney and the Making of an Australian Farming Landscape

A micro-level study of Baulkamaugh and Katunga, 1877-1955

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'John Sweeney and the Making of an Australian Farming Landscape: A micro-level study of Baulkamaugh and Katunga, 1877-1955', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 10, 2011. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Charles Fahey.

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Abstract

This paper examines settlement patterns and landscape changes in the parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga on the northern plains of Victoria. The memoir of one settler, John Sweeney, provides a first-hand account of the problems faced by selectors under the *Land Act 1869*, and a general picture of environmental changes is drawn from the selection files of his neighbours. Sweeney also provides a rare personal insight into how settlers learnt to farm on the northern plains in the late nineteenth century. The paper argues that farmers in Baulkamaugh and Katunga had developed a stable system of broad-acre farming by the first decade of the twentieth century. Parish-level statistics show that this system survived into the middle of the twentieth century and was only dismantled by government plans to introduce irrigated agriculture in the 1950s.

Introduction: Land Settlement Records

Since the publication of JM Powell's seminal study of land selection, *The public lands of Australia Felix*, the vast archive of selection files created under the *Land Selection Act 1869* has been a major source for the study of the evolution of the Victorian rural landscape. Powell himself suggested important ways in which these files could be analysed. Using the Section 19 application forms, he studied the migration paths of settlers taking up land in the Wimmera. He was able to demonstrate statistically that many settlers brought to the Wimmera experience in farming in southern Victoria and in the adjoining colony of South Australia. Powell also made important use of the Section 20 Lease Application Schedule to analyse the improvements selectors made to their blocks in the initial three-year licence period. Most importantly he was able to show, through a micro-study of the parish of Kewell East, the sorting out of selectors under the rigours of settlement. From the files, he could identify 187 settlers resident in the parish in the years 1876-79, of whom only 107 received a Crown grant. Using the detail of a small-area study he plotted the strategies – notably family group selection – adopted by settlers to acquire more than the statutory 320 acres permitted under the Act. He was also able to identify four land-holders – including a former pastoralist – who acquired extensive land holdings.[1]

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Unlike historians in the United States or Canada, the historian of European settlement in Victoria does not have manuscript agricultural census returns that followed farms and small areas over the long-term.[4] However, there are sources that can be used to explore agriculture beyond the first years of selection and on a micro-level. Charles Fahey in his study of selectors in northern Victoria turned to probate records and analysed farming fortunes at several points – 1879-81, 1889-91 and 1899-1901 – during and after the selection process. He was able to show that the wealth of probated farmers increased dramatically between the late 1870s and the early twentieth century.[5] Yet the great limitation of probate records is that they capture the farmer at only one point in time: death. In a recent study of the movement of the farming frontier from southern Victoria, Charles Fahey also demonstrated that we are able to learn much about farming practices from the journals and ledgers kept by selectors and that rate books can be used to plot changing land-owning patterns.[6] Although journals were only kept by a minority of settlers the practice of individual record-keeping was surprisingly widespread. While rate books are limited in the information they record – most critically land ownership and its value – they have the advantage of being able to track the fortunes of individuals at regular points in time. Finally, from the early twentieth century we have the annual agricultural census that broke data down into small areas – sub-sections of parishes – which permits us to gain a detailed insight into farming practices from 1907 to 1955.[7]

This paper will employ official records – land files, rate books and parish statistics – to present a micro-study of two parishes on the northern plains settled by selectors in the late 1870s: Baulkamaugh and Katunga. It will also use the journal of one perceptive settler from this region, John Sweeney. The paper will analyse the way in which the selectors cleared the native vegetation of the plains in the 1870s and developed a stable and profitable system of agriculture that endured from the late nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century. In recounting this narrative, the paper asks a number of key questions. First, what was the impact of clearing on the native vegetation of the northern plains and how successful were settlers in meeting the conditions of the 1869 Land Act? The second, and perhaps the more original question is to ask what happened to selectors after they received their Crown grant. The paper argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries land ownership was fluid and farms often changed hands. But this was not necessarily a sign that the

agricultural economy was failing. While farmers came and went, a viable system of broad-acre agriculture was established and the number of ratepayers in Baulkamaugh-Katunga remained steady between 1878 and 1911. Farmers left the land for a variety of reasons, and leaving the land did not necessarily imply failure. Indeed, a turnover of holdings can be seen as a sign that the system was working: there was a demand for land.[8]

One of the great qualities of land files is that their correspondence introduces us to the words of the settlers. Yet these letters were written to make a case for the non-payment of rents: they were reacting to the demands of the bureaucracy. Journals kept by farmers such as John Sweeney can illustrate that settlers did not just react to conditions imposed on them but used their own initiative to adopt technology and develop new systems of agriculture. Finally, the paper seeks to extend the narrative of settlement and agricultural change beyond the first years of settlement, and employs the parish-level returns to show how the parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga were farmed from the early to the mid-twentieth century.

John Sweeney and the Parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga

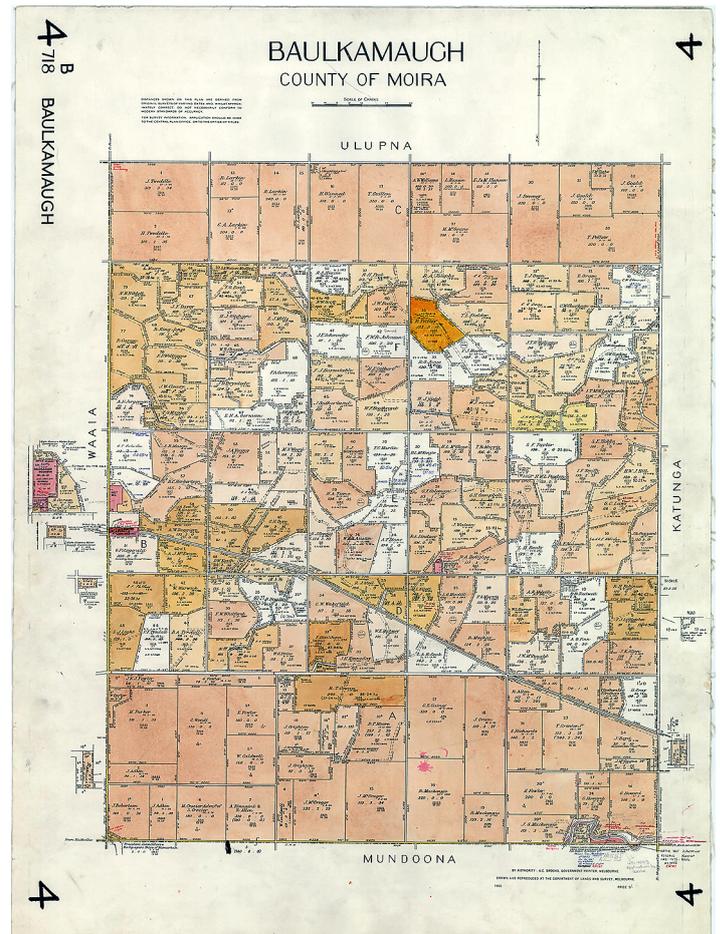
Born in Cork in 1850, John Sweeney grew up in the Victorian goldmining town of Castlemaine. His parents, Denis and Mary, migrated from Ireland to South Australia in 1852 and moved internally to the Victorian goldfields in 1856. Sweeney's father worked as a miner and, on completing school in 1865, John followed his father into the mines. By the 1860s Castlemaine's gold mines were in decline, however, and unemployment and under-employment were constant companions of mine workers.[9] Sweeney commenced his mining career, like most young men, labouring about the mines. From feeding quartz-crushing batteries for a year he was promoted to engine driving, a job he held for seven years. 'Knocked off' when the claim was not paying, Sweeney then turned to railway navvying. While labouring on a job in Portland in 1877, he read in a local newspaper that land was to be opened for selection in the parish of Baulkamaugh, north of Shepparton. Sweeney decided to throw in his job and try his hand as a selector, and in March he pegged out 320 acres or 130 hectares under the terms of the *Land Act 1869*. Over the next thirty years John Sweeney transformed his open woodland selection into a prosperous farm.[10]



John Sweeney. Image courtesy of Numurkah Historical Society.

The parishes of Katunga and Baulkamaugh are located in the County of Moira, part of the great Northern Plains of Victoria and part of the extensive south-eastern Australian region of red-brown soils characterised by a vegetation of eucalypt woodlands and grasslands. Annual rainfall is in the range 300 to 500 mm. Europeans first settled the northern plains in the 1840s, and the area that was to become the parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga was part of the Strathmerton or Ulupna run. Just prior to the Orders in Council of 1847, the Strathmerton run was part of the vast empire of Benjamin Boyd. The run was subdivided into East and West Strathmerton in 1861, and in 1877, when John Sweeney entered the Goulburn Valley, it was under the control of the Trustee and Agency Company of Australia Ltd. Taking up his selection in September 1877, Sweeney wrote that 'there was not the least sign of grass as the squatters over stocked with sheep, so as to frighten the people from selecting'.^[11] It was more likely that the run had been badly managed and eventually fell into the hands of the mortgagor, the Trustee and

Agency Company. Plans of neighbouring parishes, prepared for the *Amending Land Act 1865*, suggest a mosaic pattern of vegetation with eucalypt forests interspersed with open plains, probably created by centuries of burning by indigenous owners. In many parishes smaller belts of buloke trees were found.^[12]



Parish plan for Baulkamaugh, showing the disposition of land in 1962, which illustrates the way the broad acre farms of Sweeney and his generation was transformed by irrigation. PROV, VPRS 16171/P1 Regional Land Office Parish and Township Plans Digitised Reference Set, Plans A-BI, Baulkamaugh Parish Plan, Imperial measure 2092.

Turning Bush into Farms

In his report for 1872, the Lands Officer at Echuca wrote:

With the Land Act 1869 a great improvement in the seasons took place, the rainfall increased, the grass became abundant, steady and increasing settlement took place, which has now amounted to a rush, and the cry is still they come.[13]

This rush lasted well into the late 1870s, with the majority of licences in Baulkamaugh and Katunga taken up between 1877 and 1881. In the first years of the 1869 Land Act settlers moved into the southern parishes of the Goulburn Valley and spread out onto the plains of the Campaspe River from established centres such as Echuca. By the second half of the decade settlers had moved north of Shepparton.

On his application form, John Sweeney ignored his recent work as a railway labourer and testified that he was a miner from Castlemaine.[14] One of the ideological underpinnings of the Land Acts was that the public lands of the colony should be wrested from squatting monopolists and made available to men of limited means. As either a miner or a labourer, Sweeney was clearly from the group the legislators hoped would take up land, and so were the majority of his neighbours. Unskilled rural workers – labourers, agricultural labourers, sawyers and carters – completed two-fifths of the surviving application forms. Miners signed a little less than five per cent of application forms, and skilled tradesmen – blacksmiths, carpenters and wheelwrights – signed a further seven per cent. Only one in ten came from white collar or business backgrounds – millers, grain buyers and storekeepers. Critically for the success of farming in the region, over a third of selectors signed their applications as farmers, and many of the agricultural labourers also had farming experience.

The settlers of Baulkamaugh and Katunga were part of a massive push from farming regions south of the Great Dividing Range and the goldfields and almost half (47 per cent) were from these two regions. However, many had also come immediately from northern parishes settled under the 1869 Land Act. Here they worked briefly as agricultural labourers for selectors, or for their own families, before taking their own chances at settlement. The critical point was that settlers were not totally unacquainted with colonial conditions and with farming as a way of life. Less than two per cent were from Melbourne.

In southern districts of Victoria and particularly in the Western District, pastoral tenants acquired extensive freehold estates through competitive auctions during the 1850s and 1860s. When Land Acts were introduced in the early 1860s they ruthlessly exploited loopholes in the legislation and employed agents or ‘dummies’ to select on their behalf. The 1869 Land Act attempted to avoid this by imposing heavy improvement and residency conditions on settlers, but permitted them to purchase properties on time payment. For the first three years of settlement selectors held the land as licensees and paid an annual rent of 2 shillings per acre. After three years they could pay the balance of 14 shillings per acre or continue to pay off the land for seven years at the rate of 2 shillings per acre.

During the licence period settlers were legally obliged to enclose their property with a boundary fence, cultivate ten per cent of the holding, build a permanent house and generally make improvements to the extent of £1 per acre. They were also expected to live on site. Although the logic of these regulations committed squatters to enormous costs if they planned to acquire thousands of acres, it also placed substantial burdens on men and women with fewer resources who had selected up to the maximum limit of 320 acres. The system was carefully monitored by bureaucrats located in Melbourne and regional land offices and by the regular inspection of mounted Crown Lands bailiffs.

The amount of work demanded by the 1869 Land Act depended upon the location of settlement. In the great forests of Gippsland, settlers taking up 320 acres virtually committed themselves to a generation of clearing. On the Wimmera plains open grasslands were encountered and clearing costs were low.[15] The box woodlands were in between these extremes, but as John Sweeney and his neighbours quickly discovered the Land Act placed enormous burdens on settlers.

Under the stringent financial terms of the Act settlers were committed to commercial agriculture; subsistence was not an option. From the beginning of the licence period, annual rents had to be paid and improvements made, and the latter, in turn, were crucial for the growing of commercial crops that would pay rents and finance improvements. Experience of farming small blocks in southern districts impressed on settlers the need for selecting the maximum area set by the Act. Selectors were also acutely aware of the values of family resources and labour. Among the selectors in Baulkamaugh-Katunga the median area pegged out was 320 acres (130 ha) and, using surnames as a guide and information in files, four out of ten selectors had kin on blocks in the neighbourhood.

Often the smaller blocks were part of a family selection, and families selected as groups to obtain more than the maximum holding. Kinship ties extended beyond those holding selection blocks. John Sweeney worked his block with the aid of his brother, Patrick, for over twenty years before the latter purchased his own block from an original selector. Nine months after taking up the first block, the two brothers were joined by their unmarried sister, Annie, in January 1878 and their mother, Mary, in April.[16]

Perhaps the most pressing task facing the selector was clearing. Initially timber was ring-barked and in the first years, according to Sweeney, only the small timber was grubbed out, 'so all the big timber was left in all the crop paddocks and it used to be no end of trouble ... and there were no seed sowers or reaper or binder in those days' (p. [1]). As settlers mechanised their farming practices, the larger timber stumps were grubbed out, leaving gaunt and leafless ring-barked trees that disfigured the northern landscape well into the late nineteenth century. In his first year on the plains Sweeney cultivated 12 acres (4.9 ha), and in the following three years 11, 15 and 22 acres, or a total of 60 acres (25 ha). Over the two parishes the average brought under the plough in the three years of the lease period was 54 acres (22 ha). This was the most intensive period of clearing. A generation later the typical Baulkamaugh-Katunga farm had only half of its area in crop or in fallow, the remainder being still native pasture.

Fencing placed a huge burden on the northern woodlands. Where timber was plentiful it made good economic sense to use this 'free' material for timbering. When John Sweeney fell behind in his rent in March 1879, a mounted constable was despatched by the local Lands Board to assess his improvements. In the space of two years he had erected 792 metres of log fences and 1663 metres of chock and log fences. For the former he probably just piled up cleared timber along the fence line. The chock and log fence was more substantial and was built by resting logs on transversely placed blocks, or chocks. These structures had to withstand livestock and could be over a metre high. Such a fence might require three chocks and three logs. In March 1879 a further 300 chocks and logs had been cut awaiting erection. When he finally secured his lease three years later, John Sweeney had completed over 5500 metres of fencing erected from local bush materials. The mosaic pattern of woodland and open plain imposed two different regimes of fence building. Where the land was more open, selectors had to resort to post and wire fences, which were less

timber-intensive. However, all used some bush fencing and for the 116 files examined for Baulkamaugh and Katunga the median length of bush fencing was 2772 metres. In total, at a minimum estimate, they constructed over 360,000 metres of fencing. When we extrapolate from these two parishes to the hundreds of parishes on the northern plains we can begin to visualise the staggering scale of timber use. Timber was also used for buildings, and the log cabin was a distinctive feature of the plains. In his application for a lease, John Sweeney testified that he had constructed a log dwelling with an iron roof and a log barn, log kitchen and log stable, all with bark roofs.



A remnant chock and log fence in 1992. Photograph by Peter Russell in the author's possession.

During the first three years as a licence holder, selectors were under considerable pressure to meet the costs of farm establishment. At the same time, as licence holders, they were merely Crown tenants, with little security of tenure and unable to secure loans with banks. For this reason it made sense to use local materials to reduce expenses, such as fencing, and it helped to come to the selection with a nest egg of savings. Having worked as a labourer before selecting, John Sweeney probably had few reserves, and in his memoirs he wrote that he was reluctant to borrow (p. 2). In contrast, one-third of applicants for licences claimed to be farmers and many of these may have sold out before moving north and brought capital for improvements with them. Overall the Baulkamaugh and Katunga selectors more than met the requirement of £1 per acre imposed by the Land Act and completed improvements to the value of £2 10s per acre.

Planting his first crop of 14 acres in the season of 1877-78, Sweeney enjoyed land that had never been cultivated before, and returns from the small area planted, at 22 bushels per acre, were high. Getting this bumper return to market, however, was difficult. Most Victorian settlement preceded the construction of railways and John Sweeney in Baulkamaugh faced a forty-five mile drive to the nearest station. By the time of his second crop, the railway had been extended to Shepparton and the round trip now took only two days, including a 'camp one night on the road' (p. [1]). Over the next three years the railway came progressively closer and eventually the railway siding was only two and a half miles from the Sweeney farm. More critical was the change from wet to dry seasons, and Sweeney quickly faced the perennial problem of Australian farmers – the extreme variability of the climate.

The first settlers on the northern plains came in an abnormally wet year, and so the lush conditions deceived many. The 1878-79 season turned disastrously dry, and rust broke out in wheat crops across the northern plains. John Sweeney spoke for many of his neighbours when he wrote to the Lands Department in October that

before my crop got the rust it looked as fine a crop as there was in the district but through the rust and the hot winds it very more than paid its own expenses and now I expect to be able to pay one half year's rent and if I can I will pay it within this month October and the remainder I will pay at once after harvest.[17]

The following year, 1879, did not live up to his expectations. '[We] had only 25 acres of crop as it was an awful dry year, and it only yielded 95 bags of wheat' (p. [1]). In the next season, to make up for these losses he planted 70 acres of wheat but the early promise of a heavy crop turned to disappointment when smut reduced the yield. At times during these dry years feed became so scarce that Sweeney reported that many of his neighbours resorted to feeding their horses on the hay used to roof barns (p. [1]).

Learning to Farm on the Plains

John Sweeney struggled during the dry years of the late 1870s, and in these years many of his neighbours sold out. Of the 116 selection files examined for the parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga, 57 of the original settlers sold out before they received a Crown grant. However, to read this turnover as a failure of the Land Act in Baulkamaugh-Katunga would be a mistake. Firstly, unlike some parts of the Western District under

earlier Land Acts, the former pastoral tenant did not maintain control of the land. Secondly, while original settlers may have sold out, they often sold out to neighbours who were in the process of working out a farm size and farming methods that would provide a liveable farm on the northern plains. Newcomers also moved into the parishes and purchased blocks from selectors and thus avoided much of the labour of clearing.

In response to the dry years of the late 1870s and early 1880s, John Sweeney and his brother made immediate efforts to secure water. Here their mining experience proved valuable. John wrote that they 'sunk a well 108 ft. [36 metres] in 1880'; his brother 'done all the sinking and slabbing', while John 'pulled up the stuff' and trimmed the well with timber. Although the water was 'sweet' it was good for cattle (p. 2). In addition they dug a very good dam that 'would stand the year all right' and for domestic supplies they erected a brick well nine feet deep and twelve foot six inches across (2.7 m by 3.8 m). Although Sweeney felt assured that there was 'no fear of that going dry', the great Federation Drought at the turn of the century would test his optimism.

In the early 1860s, and even well into the twentieth century, legislators had planned for a densely populated countryside with self-sufficient yeoman farmers.[18] After more than a decade of experimentation settlers abandoned such dreams and by the 1880s consciously engaged with a new form of agriculture based on broad acres, cash crops and mechanisation. Sweeney and his neighbours in Baulkamaugh-Katunga took part in this agricultural revolution.

As early as 1882 Sweeney realised that the key to reducing labour costs was mechanisation. In the 1870s Victorian farmers in the central counties of Victoria harvested crops with primitive reaping machines, which required labour for binding, stooking and carting the crop. After the harvest the farmer had to employ a travelling thrashing machine and a team of labourers. As the agricultural frontier moved north across the divide, farmers in this drier climate found they could adopt the South Australian stripper. The stripper literally stripped the heads off the ripe grain, and the crop was then either winnowed by hand or by a horse-works attached to the winnower.

corr no 3745
no 19

Boulkamaugh June 11th 1880

To Secretary of Lands
Melbourne

Sir

I received your Letter of the 9th April asking me to state particularly where I resided during the currency of my License explaining at the same time what I meant by the neighbourhood of my selection.

I answered your Letter at once and explained the above fully.

But have not as yet received an answer and I am very anxious to hear

I remain your most obedient servant
John Sweeney

Letter from John Sweeney to the Secretary of Lands Melbourne, dated 11 June 1880. PROV, VPRS 626/PO Land Selection Files, Unit 423, Item 3745.

Sweeney observed that had it not been for strippers and winnowers, which came into general use around 1882, farming 'would not be made to pay, as for one thing, there [were] not sufficient men to bind the crops at any price and then when the men knew they were so scarce, they would do just as they liked' (pp. [1]-2). Although the stripper was ideal for wheat that matured in mid-summer, settlers continued to use the reaper for the earlier harvested oats and barley. Sweeney purchased his first imported reaper and binder in the mid-1880s. This did away with the labour required to bind the crop.[19]

By the 1890s Sweeney, like many plains farmers, was also increasingly conscious of the importance of fallowing and tillage. In the first years on their selections farmers enjoyed good returns from soils that had never been cultivated. By the late 1880s, however, yields declined and fallowing became critical. Fallowing increased the amount of nitrogen available to the crop, and regular tilling of the fallow fields killed weeds and preserved moisture. In his memoir Sweeney commented on the need to fallow and discussed what he considered were the best methods of doing this. An inventory of his farm compiled around 1893 also shows a range of both tillage and harvesting machinery, including: 2 double furrow ploughs, two scarifiers, 2 sets of harrows, a seed-sower, a stripper and winnower, and a reaper and binder (p. 3). Sweeney was also keen to experiment with new seed varieties provided by the government through its agricultural college at Dookie. When his brother, Pat, purchased an additional 147 acres in 1893 they were better placed to employ these new, broad-acre technologies. Like their neighbours, the Sweeneys also diversified and ran livestock. The 1893 inventory of Sweeney's estate lists 20 cows and calves and one bull, while there were seven horses to drive machinery. Throughout the two parishes, cattle and sheep grazed on native pastures (p. 3).

From the early 1890s through until the early twentieth century, plains farmers experienced a number of bad years culminating in the great Federation Drought of 1901-02. Sweeney's memoir chronicles the difficulties of these years but it also shows that during many of the bad years the new technology permitted crops to be harvested. In 1893 Sweeney recorded a splendid result from his crops: from forty acres of barley he harvested eight bags per acre (1411 bushels) and from 110 acres of wheat 760 bags (3260 bushels). The total crop was sold for £648 (over six times the wage of a Melbourne labourer) (p. 4). But in the following years his memoir was littered with complaints about the weather. He recalled 1894 as the worst year since he came north; 1897 was a 'terrible bad year all round' (p. 5), and 1898 'another verry bad year for yeald and prices' (p. 6). At the end of the 1901-02 harvest he wrote: 'I hope I will never see another one like it' (p. 10). Throughout these dry years Sweeney continued to purchase new machinery and experiment with seed varieties. In 1899 he purchased a second stripper and a new winnower, and in 1901 he purchased a McCormick reaper and binder imported from the United States. And despite the dry conditions most years gave some crop. Even in 1901-02, a year he never wished to see again, 200 acres produced 1523 bushels of wheat and 15 tons of hay (p. 10).

When the drought broke, the experiments with broad-acre farming and labour-saving machinery permitted farmers to take advantage of the improved seasons and plant record areas of crops. On 26 April 1902, Sweeney jubilantly wrote that after the drought broke there was 'grand rain. The ground soaked it all up, none lying on the top' (p. 12). Though the horses were in bad condition from the drought, John and his brother sowed 316 acres, a larger than normal area of crop. And after seven years of dry weather, he once again sowed his home garden with vegetables – '400 cabbages and some turnups and beet and potatoes' – and, with a return of confidence, cattle were 'dearer than ever I saw them' (p. 14). His optimism was not misplaced and the harvest produced 1365 bags of wheat (5856 bushels) and 300 bags of barley. The following season was also wet. In October 1904 the 'crops and grasses [were] growing wonderfull quick' and he had never seen such a 'quick growth' (p. 15).

Sweeney had suffered a serious bout of chest inflammation in 1895, and in 1906 he was in poor health. He had married Ella Thompson in 1891 and his family had grown to seven children with the birth of twins in 1902. To support his family he believed that a minimum of 640 acres was required in the Goulburn Valley, and in February 1906, after twenty-nine years of farming, he sold out at £8 per acre (as he had no debts he cleared over £2500) and retired to Castlemaine. His brother sold his 150 acres for £6 10s per acre.[20]

High land prices were undoubtedly encouraged by good seasons after the Federation Drought; the position of plains farmers was also strengthened by further technological change and farming innovation. Sweeney was a rapid adopter of new technology and he was a strong proponent of both the stripper and the reaper binder. In the early twentieth century the new combine harvester, that both stripped and winnowed the crop, offered further labour-saving advantages over the stripper. The use of superphosphate, applied to the crop with American seed drill, also became common in the first decade of the twentieth century, and resulted in further improvements in crop yields. By the early twentieth century the broad-acre farmer also combined cropping with the raising of livestock.[21]



Indenture certificate dated 1885 for John Sweeney's land selection 'containing three hundred and twenty acres more or less being allotment thirty of section C in the Parish of Baulkamaugh, County of Moira.' PROV, VPRS 626/P0 Land Selection Files, Unit 423, Item 3745.

A Stable System of Farming

Land holdings from the nineteenth century can be measured at the parish level through rate books and from the early twentieth century through sub-parish level statistics. These do not quite measure the same thing. Farms were often worked as one but were rated in several parcels and, as a consequence, rate books give smaller average land holdings than the parish statistics. Looking first at the evidence from rate books, the number of occupiers remained remarkably stable from the pioneering period through to the early twentieth century, and the size of land holdings also rose little above the maximum legislated under the 1869 Land Act (Table 1). On the other hand there was a large turnover of ratepayers (Table 2). However, when we look at the parish level agricultural statistics this churning of individuals masks a stable system of agriculture that persisted during the first half of the twentieth century.

Year	Average holding (acres)	Median Holding (acres)	Number rated
1878	278	320	142
1895	323	320	146
1911	338	320	140

Table 1. Land Holders in the Parishes of Baulkamaugh and Katunga

Source: PROV, VA 3922, VPRS 7238/P1 Rate Books Echuca Shire, Unit 1 and VA 4080, VPRS 11438/P1 Rate Records Numurkah Shire, Units 1 and 13.

	1878-95	1895-1911
Left	64.8%	56.4%
Remained on the land between the two dates	35.2	43.6
Number	142	146

Table 2. Farm Turnover in Baulkamaugh and Katunga

Source: PROV, VPRS 7238/P1, Unit 1 and VPRS 11438/P1, Units 1 and 13.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century a generation of experimentation and change had resulted in a stable system of mixed farming. The majority of the 98 farms in Baulkamaugh-Katunga in 1911-12 were principally engaged in cropping, 15 were dairy farms and 10 principally grazed sheep or cattle. Most farms undoubtedly earned income from each of these areas. In all, these 98 farms employed 160 men and 124 women. [22] Although the parish statistics do not permit us to measure distribution of land holdings, the average farm, at 431 acres, exceeded the level set under the 1869 Land Act. The average farmer by the standards of his colleagues in the Wimmera or the Mallee cropped a small area, only 116 acres of wheat in 1911, and ran smaller flocks of sheep, about 68 per farm, but had twice the Wimmera's level of dairy and other cattle. [23] Livestock was grazed on native pasture, which in 1911 still comprised over half of each farm. At the same time the new methods of cropping were followed. Each farm had on average 79 acres of fallow and the new harvester was found on over 80 per cent of properties. This system of agriculture, which evolved over a generation of pioneering, proved to be durable and persisted well into the middle of the twentieth century (Table 3). The landscape of the 1940s was little different from that of the early twentieth century and would have been recognisable to John Sweeney.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate that, by using a variety of micro-level records, both official archives and the personal papers of settlers themselves, the story of free selection can be extended beyond the initial years of settlement. In Baulkamaugh-Katunga settlers were resourceful and adaptable and they were part of a much wider story that saw the fashioning of a uniquely Australian system of broad-acre agriculture at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet despite this achievement, well into the

twentieth century Victorian legislators still favoured a landscape of small farms. In the case of Baulkamaugh and Katunga the state government used its powers to compulsorily acquire broad-acre farms, and in the 1950s properties were subdivided and offered to soldier settlers as irrigation blocks (Table 3). A system of farming based on cheap water and more intensive dairying was seen as superior to broad acres. [24] Throughout the 1950s, new settlers transformed the landscape moulded by John Sweeney and his free selector neighbours, and wheat farms were replaced by dairy farms. Now, after a decade of drought and the drive for a more market-based method of pricing irrigated water, irrigation has become a hotly debated issue of public policy in Australia. However much of this debate lacks historical context. In *Thirsty country*, Åsa Wahlquist sums up the history of selectors in Victoria by stating:

While many managed to make a living in the wet years of the early 1870s, by the end of the drier 1880s only one in ten of the original selectors remained. The solution, they decided, was to irrigate. [25]

The historian turning to both the public and private records left by settlers can show that the story was much more complex than this. For many selectors irrigation was not seen as the solution, and in areas that are now largely irrigated there was a long and successful history of dry-land farming. Native timbers were cleared to provide broad-acre crop land, settlers experimented with labour-saving machinery, they developed methods of managing their soils, and they grazed livestock on native pasture. This was a significant achievement.

	1911-12	1921-22	1931-32	1941-42	1950-51	1955-56
Average acres per farm	431	467	490	470	247	170
Farms number	98	106	99	106	133	242
Acres cultivated with cereals per farm	124	145	144	161	49	11.5
Acres wheat per farm	116	135	120	139	36	9
Acres oats per farm	8	9	24	24	4	3
Bags of wheat per farm	398	846	678	986	272	48
Acres fallow per farm	79	107	97	58	25	0.7
Acres native pasture per farm	229	214	249	250	144	74
Acres of sown pasture per farm					26	49
Horses per farm	12	11	9	8	2	1
Milch cows per farm	8	6	5	5	11	24
Total cattle per farm	20	20	19	13	14	40
Sheep & lambs per farm	68	117	155	164	138	94
Wool libs per farm	330	679	1144	1110	1184	707
Acres of crop land with superphosphate per farm	23	134	124	105	36	8
Cwt superphosphate crops	9.3	60	73	na	26	6.4
Acres of pasture top dressed with superphosphate per farm					33	50
Cwt of superphosphate for pasture					47	114
% with harvester	85	na	29	na	na	na
% with header			47	na	na	10
% with stripper	20	na	0	na	na	na
% with reaper binder	72	na	56	na	na	na
% with cream separator	70	na	72	na	na	
% with tractor			2	na	40	75
% with milking machine					37	199
labour male	160	156	143	na	150	263
labour female	124	121	na	na	13	7
bushels wheat/acre	11	20	18	23	24	24

Table 3. Farming in Baulkamaugh and Katunga

Source: National Archives of Australia, Series MP570, Boxes 7, 21, 35, 49, 66 and 74. Note 1911-12 was a dry year and the crop yield was below the long-term average. From 1911 there were 3 bushels of wheat to a bag.

Endnotes

[1] JM Powell, *The public lands of Australia Felix: settlement and land appraisal in Victoria 1834-191 with special reference to the Western Plains*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1970, see especially pp. 251-2 and Fig. 39.

[2] SM Legg, 'Arcadia or abandonment: the evolution of the rural landscape in South Gippsland – 1870 to 1947', unpublished Masters thesis, Monash University, 1984. See Table 4.8 between pp. 219 and 220 for a summary of his results.

[3] J McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak, 1878-1880: the geographical dimensions of social banditry*, Melbourne University Press, 1979, see especially pp. 24-47.

[4] For the value of individual agricultural census forms for the United States see G Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: agriculture and environment*, Texas A & M University Press, College Station, 2005, especially pp. 208-12 for case studies of farms in Kansas.

[5] C Fahey, 'The wealth of farmers: a Victorian regional study, 1879-1901', *Australian historical studies*, vol. 21, no. 82, April 1884, pp. 29-51.

[6] Rate books list the owner and occupier of each rated property, the occupation of the occupier, the acreage of agricultural land, and its value expressed as net annual value. These were updated annually and they are extant for many Victorian municipal areas. PROV holds a rich collection of these and some remain in local government offices. For a study using rate books see C Fahey, 'Moving north: technological change, land holding and the development of agriculture in northern Victoria, 1870-1914', in A Mayne (ed.), *Beyond the black stump: histories of outback Australia*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2008. For a study using farming journals see C Fahey, 'Two model farmers: Ann and Joseph Day of Murchison', *Victorian historical journal*, vol. 71, no. 2, September 2000, pp. 102-23.

[7] The manuscript parish-level statistics are found in National Archives of Australia Series MP570. These are a largely untapped source on land use in the first half of the twentieth century. They were used by Stephen Legg in his study of Gippsland.

[8] In her recent study of the northern plains, Robyn Ballinger has evocatively examined a number of selection files to show the problems of applying the yeoman ideal to this semi-arid region. This approach can show the inherent inadequacies of land legislation but it cannot show how settlers may have adapted farming methods to suit this environment. Moreover, a simple drop in the number of residents in northern shires tells us little about the farming that emerged in the years after initial settlement. A decline in population could be due to a number of factors. And while she is correct in pointing out the decline in soil fertility by the early 1880s, this was arrested and reversed in the 1890s and 1900s. See R Ballinger, 'Landscapes of abundance and scarcity on the northern plains of Victoria', *Provenance*, no. 7, 2008.

[9] For the demography of the goldfields see C Fahey, 'Peopling the Victorian goldfields: from boom to bust, 1851-1901', *Australian economic history review*, vol. 50, no. 2, July 2010, pp. 148-61, special issue as *A world in search of gold*, guest editors K Reeves, L Frost and C Fahey.

[10] For a brief overview of selection and agricultural change in Victoria see T Dingle, *The Victorians: settling*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1984, chapters 4 and 9.

[11] 'John Sweeney's Diary', typescript, 16 pages, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 6668, p.

[1] The memoir appears to be extracts from a diary that is not extant. Further page numbers will be given in the text. Quotations preserve the original spellings.

[12] R Spreadborough and H Anderson, *Victorian squatters*, Red Rooster Press, Ascot Vale, 1983, p. 70.

[13] 'Report of the proceedings taken under the provisions of the Land Act 1869, during the year ending 31st December 1872', *Victorian parliamentary papers*, Session 1873, vol. 3, no. 87, p. 14.

[14] PROV, VA 538 Department of Crown Lands and Survey, VPRS 626/P0 Land Selection Files by Land District, Sections 19 and 20 Land Act 1869, Unit 423, File 3745, John Sweeney. The following survey is based on an examination of all the extant files from the parishes of Katunga and Baulkamaugh.

[15] See C Fahey, 'The free selector's landscape: moulding the Victorian farming districts, 1870-1915', *Studies in the history of gardens and designed landscapes*, vol. 31, no. 2, April-June 2011.

[16] 'John Sweeney's Diary', p. [1].

[17] PROV, VPRS 626/P0, Unit 423, File 3745.

[18] For the persistence of the yeoman dream see M Lake, *The limits of hope: soldier settlement in Victoria 1915-1938*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 12-13.

[19] For the changes in farming technology, see Fahey, 'Moving north'.

[20] John Sweeney died in 1912 and left an estate valued at £1824. PROV, VPRS 28/P3 Probate and Administration Files, Unit 313, File 126/308.

[21] For these developments see L Frost, 'The Correll family and technological change in Australian agriculture', *Agricultural history*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2001, pp. 217-43.

[22] The parish statistics divided farms into these three categories. The 1911-12 returns are exceptional in that they appear to list women on farms as workers.

[23] In the Horsham district in 1911-12 the average area sown to wheat was 174 acres and farmers ran 232 sheep and lambs.

[24] The classic critique of this policy is BR Davidson, *Australia wet or dry: the physical and economic limits to the expansion of irrigation*, Melbourne University Press, 1969.

[25] Å Wahlquist, *Thirsty country: options for Australia*, Jacana Books, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008, p. 114.