Chapter Six

Wimmera Selections

> We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilized man … [a garden of] Eden … certain to become, at no distant date, of vast importance to a new people.
>
> Thomas Mitchell, 1836.

> … we struck into Sir T. Mitchell's outward track and followed it to the Wimmera, but our expectations of the country to be found there formed from his description, were not realized. A series of dry seasons had altered the face of the country, and the fertile region which had presented itself to his delighted gaze had been converted into an arid waste, destitute of either grass or water.
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> Alfred Taddy Thompson, 1841.

The semi-arid plains of Victoria's Wimmera district—stretching westward from the Avoca River and Lalbert Creek and bounded in the south by the Grampians and in the north by the Murray River—were first traversed by the British explorer Thomas Mitchell and his party in the winter of 1836. They crossed the land when, following unseasonable rains, the rivers and creeks were full and fast-flowing, and the grasses green and lush. 'The richness of the soil and the verdure near the river as well as the natural beauty of the scenery', Mitchell wrote in his diary on reaching the banks of the Wimmera River in July 1836, 'could scarcely be surpassed in any country' (Mitchell, 1839: 183). Mitchell's assessment of the region, however, was an unduly rosy one, influenced both by the weather conditions prevailing at the time of his journey and a tendency to see the Australian landscape through European eyes. As the squatters who moved into the area eight years later discovered, the reality was that both the grazing and farming potential of the Wimmera varied enormously across its scrubby plains, as did the weather and supply of water especially beyond the major rivers. In time the Wimmera would, as Mitchell forecast, become part of Australia's wheat belt but there would need to be a good deal of hard work, experimentation and good fortune before this would be so.

Although the region harboured some 69 sheep runs, the Wimmera was not as well favoured by the squatting classes as other areas in the colony. Not only was the supply of grass and water uncertain, in the early days the squatters and their shepherds were confronted by Aboriginal tribes who were said to be 'exceedingly numerous and troublesome', driving large numbers of sheep into their camps in the Grampians where they would break the unfortunate animals' legs to ensure a ready supply of fresh meat (Palmer, 1999: 55). As Barry Thompson (1999) relates, the continuing friction between blacks and whites in the area was such that, in May 1845, a number of local squatters requested Victoria's Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe to send 'a strong detachment of the native police to repair without delay to the lower part of the River Wimmera, and remain during the winter'. The troops were duly despatched and, in July the same year, their leader, a Captain Dana, informed La Trobe that local aborigines were using Mount Arapiles as a base from which to launch attacks against squatters and settlers in the Horsham and Dimboola districts.

The theft of some further sheep from a station near the mount precipitated the 'inevitable clash' between the natives and the police. 'Finding my party in some danger', Dana later reported, 'I ordered the men to fire, when three of the natives fell, and some were wounded'. Yanem Goona, the 'ringleader of the natives' was badly wounded and taken prisoner. 'He was tried in Melbourne', Thompson continues, 'before a Judge Therry who described him as "without education, intelligence, or knowledge of society, and devoid of everything connected with civilization"'. Therry sentenced the leader of the tribe, whose forbears had lived and hunted in the lands surrounding Mount Arapiles for centuries, to be transported across the sea to Van Diemen's Land (Thompson, 1999: 2-3). During this time stations in the central and northern parts of the Wimmera were also forced to hire extra shepherds and boundary riders to prevent their sheep being stolen by aborigines who, following the disappearance of their native game, 'developed quite a liking for mutton chops'. Again

> As the boundary riders retaliated against these killings, bad feelings against the aborigines grew and the late Mrs Jane Cook (a daughter of the boundary rider John Shepherd) remembers the Richardson and Morton plains aborigines being rounded up and taken to the Ebernezer Mission at Antwerp (Campbell, 1997: 8-9).

The boundary rider mentioned, John Shepherd, was born in the mill town of Buckfastleigh on the edge of the Dartmoor forest in Devon in 1842. When he was ten years old he emigrated from

England to Australia with his parents, Edward Shepherd and Fanny Chaffe, and five siblings. They landed at Geelong and went immediately to live and work on the Rich Avon sheep station located along the banks of the Richardson River. While working as a shepherd there, John married an Irish woman Johanna Mulchay at Cope Cope in 1862. The couple lived initially in St Arnaud before moving to Donald in 1869 where John worked on Samuel Craig's run at Bald Hills (Corack). In 1872 John selected land in the same district. Two of John and Fanny Shepherd's daughters would later marry the sons of their neighbours at Corack, William and Eliza Free.

During the 1860s many of the original runs in the Wimmera were either sub-divided or their leases sold. Because the land was relatively poor, and improvements to it expensive, few of the squatters there took advantage of the provisions of the early land acts to purchase large tracts of land. Their runs therefore were much more susceptible to the pressures of selection and, as a consequence, by 1880 only 23 of the original 69 runs remained in operation. The leases to many of these were no longer owned by individual squatters and their families, furthermore, but had been acquired by banks or pastoral companies. Although the act providing for land selection before survey in Victoria came into effect in February 1870, the number of people choosing land in the Wimmera remained small until the mid-1870s. By then word had spread, via separate surveys by Victoria's Surveyor-General and Inspector of Crown Lands, of the district's plentiful land, abundant wheat crops and apparently bountiful soils. The reports neglected to note that the high wheat yields were due, in part, to unseasonable rainfalls and, in part, to the fact that the first settlers, like the squatters before them, had been able to choose the best of the available land. When the normally dry weather conditions returned in 1876, those who had settled in semi-arid areas well removed from permanent water supplies would struggle unless they could find means of increasing either their capital or their land holdings.

But these were matters for the future and, while the good conditions continued, large numbers of new selectors travelled in their wagons and drays into the area. They included established farmers from South Australia and Victoria's Western District where, by 1878, only a 'mere 5,000 acres taken under the 1869 Act remained in the hands of the original inhabitants' (Powell, 1970: 176). With them were miners and artisans, like Henry Hickmott, who used the capital obtained from selling their small goldfield

allotments to settle on larger and, hopefully, more viable farms, in Henry's case at Wooroonooke, then known as Watson's Lakes, near the town of East Charlton. As the decade ended most of the land made available to the east of the Wimmera River had been taken up and new selectors were pushing further northward and westward. These included William Free who, in July 1878, took up land at Corack to the north of the township of Donald.

Most of those who selected land had little capital behind them. What money they did have was spent on a horse and dray, tents to live in until a rough house was built and, if they could afford them, a plough and a few sheep or cows. Many travelled great distances to take up the land they had earlier pegged out, submitted their applications and survey money to the Land Office at St Arnaud, and then waited, sometimes for months, until they were issued with a licence of occupation. They then loaded their wagons with all manner of tools, kitchen utensils, furniture, bedding and clothes, purchased sufficient provisions to see them through their first few months, and set off. For most the journey involved trekking along rough bush tracks, if they existed, and through pristine forests. Extended families or people from the same neighbourhood would often travel together in small, creaking convoys of wagons and drays, their sheep and other animals spread out before them. Thus the St Arnaud *Mercury* reported in March 1870 that 'sixteen South Australian families have passed through Naracoorte on their way to Victoria in search of land and 17 more are within one or two days' journey of them and bound for the same place' (cited in Falla, 2000: 97). But most new settlers and their families travelled alone, camping out on the way, and adjusting to the cries of the wild dogs and other animals that prowled about them during the night.

Establishing farms in the area would be no easy matter. The 1869 Land Act required the selector to live on and fence his allotment and to cultivate at least a third of it within the first three years of occupation. The selector was also required to 'pay an annual rental of two shillings per acre which, after three years, entitled him to a lease, and at the end of a ten year period, or full payment of £1 per acre, the issue of a Crown Grant' (Falla 1992). Much of the country being settled was heavily timbered and, as the Cornishman James Lander who settled on land near Mount Jeffcott recounted, 'infested with kangaroos [and] dingos and over-run by squatters' sheep'. These had to be driven off and the timber cleared by chopping down the smaller trees and ring-barking the remainder. Tree roots were dug out using picks and shovels although those

settlers who had them used bullock teams or soil grubbers which were also known as 'forest devils' (Campbell, 1997: 9).

Once an area was cleared the settler would dig an earth dam (known colloquially as a 'tank') into which water after rain could run, erect fences to keep out the kangaroos and other marauders, and plant his or her first crops. In his first year Lander 'got in 20 acres of wheat … and after saving my seed for the next year and a bit of hay, had twenty bags to cart to Ballarat for sale'. He received the pleasing sum of four shillings per bushel and 'got a load of potatoes to sell on my way home' ('The Pioneering Life of James Lander', p.3). One of William Free's future neighbours at Corack, Richard Reilly who had selected land there in 1874, cleared seven acres in his first year and also sowed it with wheat. By the end of the following year he had cultivated another four and a half acres, and the year after that 'a further 19 acres sown to oats, barley and peas'. Reilly's and the other settlers' first crops were sown by hand, the seed 'covered by harrowing or in some cases dragging branches of trees'. The crops were also harvested by hand, using simple reaping hooks or scythes (Campbell, 1997: 11).

When these essential tasks were well advanced, the settler could begin constructing a more permanent home to replace the tents and makeshift shelters he and his family were living in. These were usually bark huts of the kind built by the squatters and their shepherds during Victoria's early pastoral age. In places where there was a scarcity of timber, the houses were made of mud bricks built over a frame of wooden poles. Their roofs were thatched with grass and, if more than one room were needed,

> …they would be partitioned off with bag and bark walls on which pictures from illustrated magazines or often simply newsprint was pasted to give some sort of finish. Beds were simple "poles laid side by side on cross-pieces supported by stakes driven into the ground, with straw mattresses and some worn-out bed-clothes". There might be packing cases used as wardrobes and a dressing table. Kerosene tins cut lengthwise or across were put to all manner of uses. Cups and plates were often of tin. These were the bare essentials of a selector's hut, but a family might have its own small treasures—an extra table, a rocking chair, and a woman's most cherished possession, a Singer or Wilcox and Gibb sewing machine (Kiddle, 1963: 419).

The success of the selectors depended on a range of factors that extended beyond their undoubted capacity to work hard. These included adequate rainfall, a familiarity with basic farming techniques and the ability to apply these to the local conditions,

and access to capital and labour, where those like William Free who had large families old enough to work enjoyed a decided advantage. Luck and timing also played their part. The relatively good seasons that occurred before 1876 enabled many of the early settlers to pay off their debts and purchase their land before the harder times arrived. This was certainly so in the case of John Shepherd who eventually expanded his holdings beyond his initial 320-acre allotment and died, in Corack in 1918, a relatively rich man, leaving his wife and daughters property worth over £63,700 as well as £61,475 in cash (*Donald Times*, 26 April 1918). Many of those who came later to the district, by contrast, found it harder to meet their commitments and were forced to borrow money at 10 per cent interest from storekeepers, merchants and other money-lenders. As the hard times continued, their debts mounted to the extent that by June 1878 'about one third of the selectors who had received their Crown grants had parted with their land'. The overall arrears in the selectors' rents 'totalled £192,000, or more than a quarter of the whole revenue derived from the lands of the Colony at that time' (Powell, 1970: 180-1).

Probably the greatest handicap facing most settlers was the restriction of allotments offered under the Act to no more than 320 acres. Such an area may have been sufficient in places where the soil was of good quality, but if not carefully managed, the marginal lands of the Wimmera were quickly exhausted by continuous cropping. This problem was exacerbated by the settlers' lack of farming experience and expertise, high rail and freight costs, and an inability to supplement their farm incomes through other means. These and other problems facing the original settlers were documented by a Royal Commission that was appointed in 1878 to inquire into the Progress of the 1869 Land Act (*Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1879-80). The Commission's findings together with growing political pressure applied by such selectors' organizations as the Avon Farmers' Association, caused the Victorian Government to halve the annual rents that had to be paid by settlers, and double the period in which to affect the improvements required under the Act. At the instigation of the Legislative Council, and in opposition to the views of certain city-based members of the Assembly, the Act was also amended to allow settlers to acquire non-resident licences which enabled them to leave their farms, where necessary, to work for the squatters or an emerging class of substantive agricultural land-holders, the 'boss-cockies' (Powell, 1970: 178).

Whether eventually successful or not, the lives of the early settlers were both hard and heartbreaking, rendered more difficult still by a range of natural and man-made hazards. These were well described by Margaret Kiddle as follows:

> Selectors even more than squatters suffered the ravages of scab and 'ther ploorer' (pleuro-pneumonia) for they lacked the resources to battle with them. Their crops were afflicted with grub and blight; their wheat smitten by rust. When conditions seemed to be improving they were eaten out by recurring hordes of caterpillars. Rabbits, like poverty, were always at their doors. If the squatters suffered from the pest, the sufferings of the selectors were a thousand times worse. The rabbits ate the best grasses and left the weeds, they devoured the crops, dug up the potatoes and ring-barked the fruit trees. It was impossible for the selector to put aside fodder in the flush season to be used in the winter, for the marauding army ate everything in sight (Kiddle, 1963: 421).

Such trials resulted in many of the original settlers being foreclosed on by storekeepers or money-lenders, or being forced to sell their land or leases either to neighbours or newcomers. Others hung on tenaciously managing to eke out a precarious, and often squalid, existence. Adults and children alike slaved long hours for little return. In their spare time they worked for the squatters or other landowners while simultaneously, in many cases, stealing or 'duffing' their sheep and cattle. Some, like Ned Kelly and his followers, turned to more violent pastimes which were followed with great interest and anticipation by their less adventurous counterparts. Altogether they formed an underclass of poor and tenanted farmers who, until the turn of the century, informed the settler stereotype that was held by squatters, townspeople and bushmen alike: 'ignorant of farming, lazy at their work, and, because they lived from hand to mouth, "the worst taskmasters and the poorest payers"' (Waterhouse, 2000: 217).

Such 'bush barbarians' or 'stringy-bark cockatoos', as they were derided, were even the subject of a song that was sung at the time in bush pubs and sheering sheds. It told of the experience of a 'broken-hearted miner' who had the misfortune to work for a 'stringy-bark cockatoo'. Although undoubtedly exaggerated for effect—to provide, as the editor of the anthology of bush songs Banjo Patterson put it, 'a splendid hit at the new squireens'—the words of the song also provided an indication of the kind of life that was endured by the poorer selectors and their families:

> For dinner we had goanna hash, we thought it mighty hard;
> They wouldn't give us butter, so we forced down bread and lard,

Quandong duff, paddymelon pie, and wallaby Irish stew
We used to eat while reaping for the stringy-bark cockatoo.

When we started to cut the rust and smut was just beginning to shed,
And all we had to sleep on was a dog and sheepskin bed.
The bugs and fleas tormented me, they made me scratch and screw;
I lost my rest while reaping for the stringy-bark cockatoo.

At night when work was over I'd nurse the youngest child,
And when I'd say a joking word, the mother would laugh and smile.
The old cocky, he grew jealous, and he thumped me black and blue,
And he drove me off without a rap—the stringy-bark cockatoo.

(Patterson, 1932: 82-5).

While many selectors failed many also, slowly but surely, succeeded. They were aided by the appearance of mechanical stripping, reaping and mowing machines, more suitable ploughs and fencing materials, and a torrent of farming advice propagated in the pages of the ever-expanding rural press. Over time their crop yields and living standards gradually improved. Tents and bark huts were replaced by weatherboard or brick houses with wooden floors and ceilings, glass windows and galvanised iron roofs. Windmills and corrugated iron water tanks stood nearby. Homes were encircled by fenced-in gardens filled with flowers, vegetables and fruit trees. Grape or passion-fruit vines trailed along covered verandas. Trees formed windbreaks or lined dusty driveways. And carts and drays were complemented by handsome buggies in which the settlers would drive fortnightly into town to meet up with friends and acquaintances and collect their mail and supplies.

As life on the selections became more settled and predictable, following a regular cycle of ploughing, sowing, planting, top-dressing and harvesting, parents began turning their attention to their children's education. In 1898 the Free brothers together with a number of other farmers from Talgitcha (Lalbert East) wrote to the Victorian Department of Education asking it to establish a school to support the thirty-five children who by then were living there. 'In our beautiful land', the letter entreated, 'there are children within two miles of the site…who are thirteen years of age and are only in the first class…They have to drive nine miles to the present school [at Towaninnie] which takes a horse and trap which their parents are not able to afford'. Are we, the letter concluded, 'going to allow those children to grow up in such ignorance…will they not [later] hold the Education Department responsible' for their plight? Asked to investigate the matter, the

regional inspector of schools reported that 'the parents have suffered during the past bad seasons. They express their willingness to cart and re-erect an unused building if one can be sent to Quambatook railway station but they cannot afford to erect a building themselves. If there is a suitable small building vacant I recommend that their offer be accepted' (cited in Power and Power, …: 297-300).

It was, and an unlined wooden building, measuring 30 feet by fifteen feet by ten feet was supplied and erected the following year on land made available by a William Hosking. The Talgitcha Primary School was officially opened on 21 November 1899 with its teacher, John Grant, in charge. By 1907 the small schoolhouse had been lined, a fireplace added and sundry teaching aids acquired. These included: a teacher's desk and stool, five children's desks and two forms, 20 inkwells, three maps (of Victoria, Australia and the World) and a number of readers and instruction manuals. The reading material was itself instructive, comprising in addition to the normal books of tables and readers in English and arithmetic, Broadribb's Manual of Health and Temperance, Balfour Stewart's Physics Primer, Parke's Personal Care of Health, Blackies' Animal Physiology and, to provide perhaps a better appreciation of the multicoloured map of the world, an imperial history and pamplettes on infantry and military drill (Power and Power, 1983: 299).

Education was not restricted to the children alone. In line with the expectations of the time, many adults among the settlers were also keen to advance their knowledge and practical expertise. Many took advantage of the lending libraries and reading rooms contained in the Mechanics Institutes, Schools of Art and other public amenities being built in the Wimmera and Mallee townships. Or, like Fanny and Johanna Free, they attended Mutual Improvement Societies organised by such teachers as Frances Lee (nee Elliott). Lee taught at Lalbert East between 1902 and 1906 and was much impressed by the children and their mothers – 'cheerful and intelligent women, happy with their families…[with] a good knowledge of politics and other national interests'. She sponsored discussions and debates at the local Sunday School on such subjects and questions as 'Town versus Country Life', 'Free Trade and Protection', and 'Is man the architect of his own life or the victim of circumstances?' (Power and Power, 1983: 304 and 307).

Before attending their school classes, the settlers' children would usually spend time collecting firewood, grubbing or fencing, or

accompanying their fathers or older siblings as they checked and reset the string of rabbit traps laid at the entrances of the burrows that dotted the properties. In the evenings, their chores completed, they would hunt opossums, go bird-nesting or, as recounted by P. J. O'Donohue whose father selected land at Swanwater in 1873, join their parents in sitting

> …around reading—if not books, then the local newspapers and the *Weekly Times* or *Australasian*. I don't think we used to get the Melbourne daily papers. Sometimes we played cards or went to a neighbour's place; the linoleums would be rolled back and we would dance on the floorboards to the concertina or violin (cited in Palmer, 1999: 240-1).

The Hickmott and Free children, like those of O'Donohue, Lander and the other settlers, were also expected when they were old enough to take over some of their parents' farming and household duties. In the case of the Hickmotts, whose daughters had all died at relatively young ages, this support was provided mainly to Henry. Unlike Eliza Free who was able, for a time at least, to be advised by her mother on such matters as cooking and child-raising, Harriet Hickmott could only seek advice or assistance from acquaintances—women on farms at the time had few close friends beyond family members—or such household texts as …. She had alone to carry the burden of caring for and nurturing her growing children while simultaneously tending the family's garden and domestic animals. This was usually done while still breast-feeding her last child or while she was pregnant with her next one. For in line with the frontier norm, Harriet and Eliza continued to bear children until they were 38 and 41 years old respectively. Eliza's last child, Oswald Ernest Free, was born at the same time as her third grandchild.

Like all pioneer families the Frees and Hickmotts had not only to deal with frequent births but deaths as well, losing at early ages five of their combined 25 children, and regularly attending the funerals, and occasional wakes, of friends and relatives across the district. Like many in those days, they dealt with their losses by taking comfort in the belief they would all be reunited in Heaven. Where the deceased was a child or a close relative, they would name their next born in honour of them. In later years the women in the area took on the added responsibility of building and nurturing their local communities. Some idea of what these extra duties involved, and how they were viewed by such rural chroniclers as the editor of the *Donald Times*, can be obtained from the obituary of William and Eliza Free's second daughter, Alice

Martha McCallum. Alice was born in Raglan in 1866. At the age of 20, she married Edward Angus McCallum, the son of another pioneering family, gave birth to eight children while helping her husband run the family farm, 'Balnekiel', at Corack, and died and was buried in the adjoining township of Birchip in 1949. After providing a brief summary of Alice's long life, the paper reported with evident approval that:

> Mrs McCallum had always been of a quiet, gentle and loving disposition and had earned the respect and esteem of all those who knew her. She had always been interested in church work and was a foundation member of the Birchip Presbyterian Woman's Missionary Union. She was also a valued member of the Guild and during World War I was vice-president of the Red Cross in her district. She was also a member of the CWA [Country Woman's Association] at Watchem and in her younger days found time to exhibit cookery with success at many shows. Her Christianity was demonstrated in many ways, and particularly in her practical charity to all in need. (*Donald Times*, 29 July 1949).

We can see from this that society in the Wimmera, as elsewhere across rural Australia, was structured and conceived of in accordance with the expectations of Victorian England. As Kerrie-Elizabeth Allen (19..: 32) later aptly put it, women's rightful place was seen to be 'at the heart of the family and the centre of the community'. Thus women supported, bred and nurtured while the men laboured on their farms and ran the district's affairs through such assumed positions of authority as shire councillor, church and parish elder, and president of various lodges, agricultural and other associations, and sporting bodies. Whether male or female, though, the immigrant settlers continued to look to, and be guided by, their social and educational 'betters'. The deferential attitudes they had learned at home remained strongly ingrained and they generally followed the opinions, values and example of their local preacher, newspaper editor and squatter who:

> Though he was no longer the local MP and his property and his next clip were already the property of the bank or the pastoral company…still acted as magistrate or justice of the peace. He was more likely to be the patron than the president of the local race or show committee. His home was expected to be a superior centre of civilization and culture (Kingston, 1988: 265).

Unless they contained large enclaves of miners or other non-agricultural labourers, most rural communities tended to be politically, socially and sexually conservative, provincially inclined, and generally respectful and respectable. They believed

in salvation and God's will, could be very generous to those among them who had fallen on hard times, but were often disapproving of any who 'failed to help themselves', or displayed unwarranted frivolity, indulgence or independence of mind. Although they enjoyed family and church gatherings, watching and playing sport, and dancing under the right circumstances, they could also be priggish and perversely self-denying. The adults among the immigrant settlers remained connected imaginatively as well as sentimentally to their places of origin and sought, through various ways and means, to replicate their former 'homes' in Australia. In these ways they served generally to reinforce rather than challenge or alter the colony's prevailing pro-English and pro-imperial values and culture.

The settlers' children, by contrast, were tied less to the places of their parents' imaginations and more to the land on which they lived, played and worked. As Margaret Kiddle enthused, this resulted in them, when young, being generally less inhibited and more carefree and high-spirited than probably their parents were at the same age.

> They took joy in the things beloved by all Australian children. They might have to help milk cows and tend other stock, but in spring in open country they watched for the first blue orchids and in sheltered places sought greenhoods. They climbed hollow trees to find parrots' nests and made the young their pets. There were times when they could fish the creeks for yabbies and on summer evenings sit, bare toes in the water, listening to the croak of frogs and the shrilling of crickets. They could hunt wallabies, 'possums and bears, and make rugs from their skins as the aborigines had done. They trapped rabbits and tiger cats. These rough-haired, brown-legged children made the country there own and were themselves part of it (Kiddle, 1963: 428).

As they grew older and more confident, they were less deferential to the district's authority figures, more inclined to challenge their parents, and more disposed towards skylarking and mischief-making or what the more censorious in the community decried as larrikinism. They were more likely than their parents to identify with the images and ethos of Australia and Australians being advanced by the '*Bulletin* school' and its urban radicals. This was even though, as will be described in more detail in the following chapter, this alternative vision of Australian nationalism excluded, in its original formulation certainly, Australia's immigrant settlers and their experiences. Like the evangelists, however, some nationalist commentators suggested that the roles of settler women like Harriet Hickmott and Eliza Free should represent the ideal

towards which all women in Australia should aspire. This was even though, as Beverley Kingston (1988: 145) later argued, 'like so many of the images by which the standard of the times were set, it belonged to a past age, to a lost world, [that had been] temporally and accidentally created during the pioneer phase of Australia's history'.

The influx of new settlers had a dramatic effect on the Wimmera landscape. As one observer of the area around Yawong Hill noted in 1874, the plains that a short time earlier 'had all the appearance of the wilderness' are 'now studded with neat and pretty cottages and prosperous farms. Roads where a few years ago you would occasionally meet a swagman toiling along under his bedding, or the lonely stockman, are now alive with vehicles of every description' (cited in Palmer, 1999: 234). All across the region bush townships were constructed or rejuvenated with newly-built shops and churches, schools and parks, and to the regret of the evangelists among the selectors, hotels and billiard rooms. One such town was East Charlton to which Henry and Harriet Hickmott and their family moved in 1872 and where they purchased a house and adjoining block of land on which Henry established a brickworks. The couple brought with them six sons, ranging in age from six to 24 years, and were accompanied by one of Henry's daughters from his first marriage, Emma Mitchell, and her husband who had also selected land in the area (Henry's other married daughters, Eliza Osborne and Rebecca Smith, settled respectively on farms at Amherst and Lalbert). The family left behind four other children, three of whom had died as infants and were buried at Clunes. The fourth, the couple's beloved daughter Elizabeth Jane, had died in hospital in St Arnaud in 1875.

As Grace Cadzow details in her book *Charlton and the Vale of the Avoca*, although Europeans had lived in the Charlton area since 1844, the number there remained small until the rush of settlers in the early 1870s. By 1875 most of the land that had been made available for selection around Charlton had been taken up and the area was thriving. 'Huts and cottages were built using local timber, paddocks were fenced and the roads were busy with wagons and bullock drays. The newcomers arriving during a period of good years, found abundant pastures and the country seemed a veritable paradise'. This was certainly the view of the correspondent to the St Arnaud *Mercury* who visited the area in October 1874 and informed his readers that: '[e]veryone travelling along the Avoca River is surprised at the altered appearance of East Charlton. It is now rapidly becoming a place of note: new

stores, hotels and private houses are going up everywhere. Numbers on the river can remember when it could only boast a mere calico shanty' (cited in Palmer, 1999: 242). At this time there were altogether some 2000 people in the area with 300 of these living in the township itself. This contained, in addition to Henry's brickyard, four churches, a flour mill and a general store that described itself as 'the emporium of the north'. Following petitions from the locals, a school—State School No 1480—was opened on 14 January 1875. This was, the *East Charlton Tribune* recounted a few years later, a pretty ordinary 'edifice' which 'the meanest Chinese hut in the colony surpassed…both in symmetry and comfort'. Nonetheless, within this initial timber and bark construction, which measured a mere 14 feet by 10 feet, some 42 children began their lessons, including a number of Hickmotts and their cousins.

As elsewhere across the Wimmera, the good times did not last and the settlers around Charlton were soon confronted by the droughts, dust storms and rabbit plagues that would test the patience of the newcomers and make it hard for many to fulfil their lease requirements. A further problem facing the early denizens of Charlton was obtaining a reliable water supply. In the drought years, the river would dry up, water had to be carted from surrounding rivers and lakes, and families would have to do their washing at such communal washing points as the 'Sheep Wash Dam'. The hardships facing Henry and his family were compounded on 14 February 1877 when Harriet and her 19-year old son, Samuel, were struck by lightning at their home in East Charlton and killed instantly. They had been visiting the family's selection at Wooroonooke and arrived home just as a severe thunderstorm burst over the town. Rushing in out of the rain, Samuel and his mother had just stepped through the front door when the lightning struck. The *St Arnaud Mercury* reported what then happened:

> Mrs Hickmott was thrown several yards out of the building, the apparel around her chest and shoulders being set ablaze, and her face much disfigured by the electric current, which appears to have struck her on the head and travelled down her right side. Her son Samuel was smitten on the right shoulder the current passing diagonally across his body until it came to his heart, his clothing being burnt even to the undershirt. Another son, named James, who was indoors at the time, was struck on the left forearm and hip, and for a time was paralysed, but has since recovered. A man who was also in the house at the time was rendered insensible for several minutes, and when he returned to consciousness, found Mrs Hickmott and Samuel dead, and their clothes burning.

The following year, Henry's son-in-law, Richard Mitchell, had his hand caught in a stripping machine while helping harvest Henry's crop at Wooroonooke. He was taken to the St Arnaud Hospital where, unfortunately, he had to have the hand amputated. The *East Charlton Tribune* reported, on 30 November 1878, with some understatement, that although very weak, Richard was improving slowly and 'no serious symptoms have presented themselves'. Despite his handicap, Richard eventually succeeded as a farmer and lived to the ripe age of 92 years. He and Emma had eight children most of whom settled in the area. The same week his son-in-law was hospitalised, Henry attended the farewell for his good friend, neighbour and proprietor of the local sawmill William Nalder. This was held at Yates' Hotel at West Charlton where 'about 40 persons sat down to a sumptuous repast'. Following the speeches, 'the room was cleared for dancing which was kept up until an early hour in the morning'. It is possible that Henry was accompanied by the widow Margaret Ann Kaye, who he married three months later at a Mr Burton's at Wooroonooke. The wedding certificate showed that Henry was then aged 53 years and had 15 children only eight of whom were still living. He and Margaret, together with Henry's older children, may also have gone to see Madame Sibley, the 'renowned phrenologist and mesmerist', who visited East Charlton in January 1879 and greatly entertained her audiences in the Globe assembly rooms. They almost certainly would have joined the crowd of onlookers who applauded 'the antics of the lords of the soil' in a grand corroboree held in the square adjacent to the East Charlton Hotel on 22 March of the same year.

William Free and his sons, meanwhile, were working their selections at Corack. The family's connections with the community were expanding as William and Eliza's children married and began their own lives and families. Their daughters Phoebe Ann and Alice Martha, married respectively John Thomas Gilchrist and Edward Angus McCallum, the sons of two of the first families to select land at Corack. William Free jnr married Margaret Barbour on 7 February 1883. His brother Alfred married Emma Tissot in 1890 before, like many others at the time, moving to Western Australia to prospect for gold. There, following Emma's death in 1917, he married Eunice Schmidtt. In a double wedding held at Corack East on 6 April 1891, Samuel and his brother James Free married two sisters Fanny and Johanna Shepherd.

By his sixty-first birthday William could look back over his life with some satisfaction. The poor and uneducated man who had emigrated from Cambridgeshire to Victoria in 1853 and worked as a shepherd at Mount Hesse and Buangor now had sheep and a property of his own. He had survived the rigours and trials of the early settlement era and was now a successful and well-respected farmer and member of the district's pioneering fraternity. A number of his children were also on farms in the region and had provided he and Eliza with grandchildren who would, in time, extend his and his family's legacy. He still had eight children living at home, but the eldest of these now relieved their father of much of the daily grind of managing a Wimmera block. Probably for the first time in his life, he had time aplenty to tend his horses, meet up with old friends and acquaintances, and go to the local football or race meets. In spite of these achievements William felt dispirited and unsettled. He had been generally unwell for the past two years and had recently begun experiencing cramping pains that worried him but about which he declined to see a doctor. As his family later recalled, he had grown quiet and withdrawn and seemed to prefer to get out of the house and off by himself.

On the morning of 2 June 1890 he arose early as usual and put on a clean shirt that Eliza had left out for him. He walked about the kitchen, pulled on a coat to ward off the winter's cold and damp air and left the house. At breakfast Eliza said to her son Ernest how is it your father is not in and told him to go and call him. The boy returned saying he could not see him. A second son, James, said he is likely gone down to the stack for a sheaf of hay for his horse. After finishing his breakfast James 'went out and looked towards the stack and could not see him. I then went to the paddock and got my horse. I met my brother Alfred when I came back and asked him if father had gone up to my brother William's place'. Alfred replied 'no I have not seen him for the morning'. James then rode down to the sheep paddock as he

> thought he may have gone down there and not seeing him there I went to the hay stack where it was customery [sic] for him to go for horse feed and to feed some of the horses. As I approached the stack I saw his coat hanging on the fence. I got off my horse and looked round and saw a sheaf of hay near the edge of the tank which was close by and next saw a red shirt floating on the water. A rope was attached to the sheaf of hay. I got hold of the roap [sic] and pulled it a shore and found it was tied round my father's neck. I brought him to the bank and found him quite dead. I then got on my horse and galloped home and told my mother and brothers.

The family reported the drowning to the police and Mounted Constable Ryan rode out to the farm to investigate. His report, subsequently read out to the inquest held into William's death, read as follows:

> …a man named William Free aged about sixty seven [later changed to sixty one] was found drowned in a dam in one of his own paddocks about half a mile from his residence. The deceased complained of being ill for the last couple of days but got up this morning apparently alright he fed some horses that were in the stable near the house and was seen by his son (James) about 7.30AM going in the direction of a haystack where there were some more horses to be fed. About an hour after the son had occasion to go to the haystack and on seeing a coat and boots close to the tank he went to look and saw his father in the water. He pulled him out and found life quite extinct he used all the usual means to restore animation but of no avail. I visited the place this afternoon examined the body there were no external marks of violence. I had it removed to his late residence awaiting enquiry I don't think there are any suspicious circumstances in the case the people are respectable and I believe it to be a case of suicide.

Constable Ryan's view was supported by both the local newspaper and the investing magistrate, J. P. Meyer who, in the early days and to the consternation of the local squatters, had run a store and grog shanty at the Richardson River near the Banyenong run. William's death was, of course, the talk of the neighbourhood, both mystifying and alarming its pious and church-going residents. His death certificate indicates he was buried at the Corack cemetery which lay in the wheat fields some four miles from the township (and where some believe William and Eliza's son Alexander was buried some twenty years before). There is no tombstone to mark his grave, however, suggesting he may have been laid to rest outside the boundaries of the consecrated area. *** add something about the place of suicide in such communities ***

The shame and hurt surrounding their father's death may have also been instrumental in the decision of William and Eliza's sons, William, James and Samuel and their wives and families, to sever their ties with Corack and move onto farms near the Hickmott's at Lalbert, some fifty mile north of Corack. William's farm was sold to a neighbour and Eliza and the younger Free children moved to the adjoining township of Watchem where, on 7 November 1894, Eliza married William Bruce. She died in Watchem on 1 Jan 1925, aged 86 years and was said to be buried alongside William Free at Corack. Like many who countenanced death in those days, she would have expected to join those members of her family who had

already ‘crossed the divide’. While less certain of its prospects, she would probably have hoped also again to see William in order, at least, to ask him why he had done what he did.