

SAOA Historical Series No 24

Walter J Harvey Part I

As usual with John Sutton's country correspondents, we learn just a little of Walter J Harvey's life and personality from the interplay with Sutton about the birds and, in this case, the mammals of his district. From a careful scrutiny of the thirty-three letters from Harvey to Sutton in the SAOA's collection we know that Harvey was a young man attempting to make a go of a sheep and cropping property at Coombe, at least for part of the time aided by a younger brother (aged 18 in 1928). Although the letters begin in 1928, Walter arrived in the district about 1922 and stayed there certainly until 1933 but by 1935 was living at Riversource Farm at Waterloo. He grew up at Salisbury where his parents lived at least through to 1932, as he made several trips home and on occasions his father came out to Coombe to help with the shearing. There is mention of another younger brother (his youngest brother) who stayed on the farm in his holidays.

A perusal of the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages held by the State Library of South Australia shows that Walter James Harvey was born at Salisbury on 6 October 1906 to Alfred James and Edith May (nee Cleland). We also learn that Walter James (aged 30) married Millicent Lucy Roberts (aged 28) at St Augustine's Church in Unley on 19 August 1937. So Walter would have been about 18 when he went to Coombe, presumably to a property purchased by his father Alfred. Further research in the State Library indicates that Alfred and Edith had two more sons – Cleland Ross born in February 1909 at Salisbury and John Neville Cleland born in June 1914 at Prospect.

According to the first article published under Harvey's name in the *SAOrnithologist*, Coombe is 142 miles (about 230 kilometres) south-east of Adelaide on the main railway line to Victoria between Keith and Tintinara. We know from this article that the terrestrial

birds were all recorded within six miles of Coombe but we do not find out the name of the farm nor in which direction it was from Coombe. Ms Audrey Tucker of the Tintinara Historical Society kindly made available to me a Coombe History prepared for the Bicentennial Celebrations and I found out that Walter Harvey lived on the property that is now called Florando, approximately 1.5 km south-west of Coombe. Current maps show a number of buildings at Florando but we do not know how many of these were present in the 1920s. Given Florando's location it is likely that the railway line formed the north-eastern boundary of the Harvey property.

Piecing together information from the Coombe History and a published history of the Tintinara district (Nicholls 2006) it seems that the Harveys owned Section 48, which later became Florando. The Moeller family took up Sections 47 and 48 (5756 acres) in February 1938 and built two houses, one on each section. Stan Moeller kept Section 47 (Keitaro) when his brother, Rex, sold Section 48 (Florando) to the Saint family in 1944. There is a reference in the Coombe History to W.J. Harvey taking up the property in about 1912 but that it was managed by Phil Fulwood. Although Mr Harvey senior may have purchased the land in 1912, Walter James was only six years old then and we have the evidence of the letters that he arrived in about 1922. It is possible that the farm was managed by Phil Fulwood after Walter's departure. There is mention of a Fulwood family living at Tintinara from 1921, and later purchasing Sections in the Kumorne area, but no reference to a Phil Fulwood.

The County that Coombe falls in – County Cardwell – was proclaimed in 1864 but the Hundred of Coombe was not proclaimed until 1906, so the area had only recently been opened up when Walter arrived in about 1922. Coombe was named after The Honourable E.H. Coombe, MP from 1901 to 1917, who was born in Gawler, edited 'The Bunyip' and wrote a history of Gawler. The Hundred of Coombe was described

as “Principally light sandy soil, with occasional low sandhills and swampy flats. Limestone on and near the surface, timbered with gums, mallee and honeysuckle, parts open heath and bushes”. Indications were that, with the good rainfall, a considerable portion of the area could be cultivated with the addition of phosphates. Coombe railway siding was opened in 1913, with Kumorna coming on line in 1915. These sidings were not expected to develop further and no room was left between the main line and the sidings. All that was there were an iron waiting room, a few seats and a noticeboard (Nicholls 2006).

Nicholls (2006) gives a picture of the arduous nature of road travel at that time; for example in 1915 a rubble road stretched from the Tintinara store to the railway crossing and then it became just a sandy track. Eric Filmer of Culburra describes roads in the district as sand tracks with a small piece of metal in the worst spots. His family purchased a Ford car, known colloquially as a ‘Tin Lizzie’, for 169 pounds and 10 shillings in 1925. Sealing of the Duke’s Highway did not occur until 1938-39.

To get a picture of the country that Walter Harvey took up we turn to the Coombe History and Ben Kennett’s story. He took up land at Coombe in 1921, purchasing 10,000 acres of scrub country for 2/6d per acre. “At that time there was scrub for as far as your eyes could see. No main road, only a sandy track and very steep hills. There was no house from ‘Cloncaird’ until you got to the Coombe cottages.

Merino wethers were grazed on the scrub, by burning it, and the sheep lived on the regrowth. Being watered by under-ground water, wells had to be dug by hand with a shovel and crowbar, to 20 feet deep, and timbered around the sides with gum posts, cut by axe and split with wedges, from the trees; that was necessary to save silting in. Windmills were placed over the wells, water tanks, and troughs connected...

The sheep were mustered for Spring shearing by men on horses and a good ‘Border Collie’ dog, Scown; he walked for miles. They were then brought home and shorn by two blade shearers...

A wooden press made of mallee sticks was used for pressing the wool. The wool pack being pinned on the corners by pins made of wire; the top of the bale sewed down when finished, with a bag needle and thread. The wool was consigned to Goldsborough Mort and sent by railway to Port Adelaide. Wool being sold in the early 1920s for 17 pence to 25 pence per lb.”

There is no description of the Harvey farm or its setting in the letters, but we can glean a little about the buildings from passing references. Walter invites SAOA members to visit and stay, although he and his brother are batching and there are only four rooms furnished. Not surprisingly perhaps no members took up this kind offer, although Mr Finlayson (Honorary Curator of Mammals at the SA Museum from 1930 to 1965) did spend a week with Walter at Easter time in 1933 after a Pygmy Possum find, but more of this later. Nicholls (2006) gives an idea of settlers’ homes in the 1920s, when most consisted of two rooms of galvanised iron and flattened used kerosene tins. Floors were earthen, cooking was done over an open fire and lighting was from kerosene Hurricane and Tilley lamps. Walter also refers to a smithy, a shed where the fowls’ eggs were placed after collection and the garden, which was fenced to keep rabbits out. However this did not stop the birds from eating the fruit and nuts, as Walter complains about the depredations of the Silvereyes and the ringnecks.

Walter never describes cooking or the sort of food they ate on the farm, but one could assume that the meat was predominantly lamb or mutton, with perhaps the odd chicken. They must have kept a large number of chickens, as he tells Sutton that one day the “crows” had broken over 3 dozen eggs that had been collected and stored in the shed. With horses being used as transport and for farm work, the smithy would have been an essential element of the farm, so that horseshoes and farm equipment could be made and/or repaired. Rosetta Lacey’s diary describes the food of a railway

cottager from the Culburra area prior to 1924 (Nicholls 2006):

“Jam, flour, tea, sugar, rolled oats, milk, home made bread, scones, caraway seed or currant cake, honey cut out of hollow trees, kangaroo tail soup, kangaroo rissoles, rabbit stew, baked rabbit, parrot pie, mallee-hen eggs, melon pie, muntries pickle, cranberry jam, rice, sago, a limited amount of mutton or pork - mostly smoked or salted, carrots, potatoes, onions.”

Walter tells us little of the native vegetation of the area, except when it was directly relevant to a particular bird that he had seen. When Stan Moeller's family purchased Sections 47 and 48 in 1938 only about one-fifth was cleared or partially cleared, so clearly the Harvey property was still mainly scrub when Walter was there. He talks about oat and wheat crops which would have been put in on the cleared land, with sheep grazing on the stubble or native vegetation. Crocker, commenting in 1944, indicated that in the South East “Land development is now proceeding at such a rate that before long it will be impossible to piece together a picture of the flora of the region as a whole” and Lange pointed out that most clearance was less than fifty years old (Lange 1983).

Walter does mention several times that it was the custom to burn off the scrub in late summer when weather was favourable to encourage regrowth for the sheep. Some birds delighted in this practice as it opened up the country and in a letter of 27 July 1932 Walter reported three Blue-winged Parrots in a three month old burn, later than usually seen and the only time not recorded in grass country. The only other direct reference to the extent of native vegetation was in reference to Bustard numbers. Bustards were sighted in ones or twos occasionally in the district, but Walter notes in 1929 that he suspects that the next few years will see the demise of this species in the area, despite the belief that they were fairly numerous in the country half way between Coombe and Pinnaroo. Walter put their scarcity down to the fox rather than

shooting or vegetation clearance, partly due to his belief that Bustards preferred the open country.

After his first reply from John Sutton in 1928, Walter joined the SAOA; we know from a Christmas card to Sutton in 1936 that he was still a member then, but his membership had lapsed by 1941 when the SAOA published a list of members (*SAOrn*, 15 (8), pp 131-132). One wonders how much John Sutton's infallible patience and letter-writing had to do with keeping country memberships alive. Harvey's membership must have lapsed about the time of Sutton's death in 1938. Due to financial hardship Harvey wrote to Sutton in June 1931 to the effect that he would have to give up his SAOA membership, unless the organisation could see their way to give him a few months grace and then, if he still couldn't afford the subscription, he would be forced to resign. We have a faint rough handwritten copy of Sutton's reply which sympathizes with his situation and hopes that it will soon turn around. He goes on to say that “the Doctor [Morgan] and I realise that we can depend on any observations made by you and appreciate the information you ...[illegible] as well as of specimens to the Museum”. Sutton clearly had a great regard for Walter's observational skills and thoroughness, which could not be said for some of his other correspondents. Of course he allowed Walter to stand his subscription over for a few months, by which time he was able to pay up. Such was Walter's enthusiasm for ornithology in the 1920s that he also joined the RAOU in 1929, but I do not know for how long.