My Decision to Sell the Family Farm

Kuehne, Geoff

Abstract

In this paper I describe how the cultural influences from family farming led me, a farmer’s son, to also become a farmer. I attempt to explain why farmers may choose to continue in their occupation sometimes against increasingly negative economic pressures. I attempt to explain why I chose to continue farming for as long as I did, and then the thoughts and feelings that I had around the time of my decision to exit the farming industry. I examine the range of emotions that I had when experiencing the sale of my farm and place these emotions in a context that makes them more understandable to non-farmers.
1. Introduction

I am a social researcher focused on understanding farmers’ behaviour. I have not always been a social researcher. I was once a farmer engaged in the struggle to make a living from the land. I was born into a farming family and spent the first twenty-five years of my working life as a farmer. I understand the farming environment because I have experienced it at a time and in a way that has left its mark (Elliot, 1995).

I think that understanding the business of farming is not complete without understanding how people become farmers, why they stay as farmers (sometimes struggling against repeated setbacks) and what becomes of them when they leave farming.

Some of farmers’ behaviour is caused by their very strong feelings towards keeping their farm, even if it is against all economic reason. This is because selling a farm, or worse still losing a farm to creditors is perceived to be a sign of personal failure (Vanclay, 2004). I had sold the farm that I had owned for a handful of years and worked on for many more, and I felt that I had failed.

I was able to sell my farm because I was prepared to leave my identity as a farmer behind and experience a period of uncertainty which was to last until my new identity as an academic researcher took hold and became validated by others (Burke and Stets, 2009).

This paper aims to capture the feelings and thoughts that I experienced as a result of selling my farm—a family farm—and seeks to explore why these feelings occurred and what they meant to me. This account has been written more than ten years after the sale.
of my farm for two reasons. First, up until the time of writing this paper, the self-reflexive examination of thoughts and feelings leading to and surrounding the farm sale was uncomfortable enough that I preferred to avoid it. The second reason is that the person I was when I sold the farm has changed over that time into the person who is writing this paper. It is only now that I have the ability to reflect on the sale of my farm and interpret those thoughts and feelings in a way that may be useful for others. The passage of time has made this paper possible.

The reason for writing this paper is to better understand myself and the world that I came from. Even though writing this paper has a personal benefit for me, it may also be useful for others who seek to understand some of the influences on farmers and why they make decisions that might seem irrational in an economic sense. For example, why is it that some farmers are forced out of agriculture by structural adjustment pressures rather than leaving at a more favourable time of their own choosing?

2. The Method

The autoethnographic research method that I have chosen to use for this paper uses my lived experiences and their connection to the broader social and cultural context, to extend knowledge on the issue being studied (Foster et al., 2005). It is a method that, although growing in popularity over the last twenty years, has always existed in qualitative social research.

The analytic autoethnographical approach—used in this research—has allowed me to tell my story at the same time as complementing and expanding on related research (Gallardo et al., 2009). I have done this, in part, through addressing the questions that Muncey (2010) suggests that an autoethnography should answer; “Where does my
experience fit the existing literature?; What does my experience add to existing ideas?; and What new slant could I bring to an established body of knowledge?” (p. xiii). In choosing autoethnography I expect to produce "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience ... " (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 1).

Even though the use of autoethnography means that I am writing about myself it is not autobiographical, instead it is a form of critical enquiry that needs to be embedded in theory and practice (McIlveen, 2008).

It seems that there are few guidelines on how to do autoethnographic writings, and that this is because the meaning of the writing is more important than adhering to existing academic writing conventions (McIlveen, 2008). In this paper, as well as writing my personal story, I have also included a poem as part of the data. This eclectic approach of combining contrasting sources of data is not an excuse for avoiding rigour as the work still needs to satisfy academic standards. With relevance to autoethnographic writing Morrow (2005) suggests the standard of qualitative research should be judged by whether, 1) it is faithful to the author’s experience, 2) the experience that the author describes is transformative, and 3) it is something that the reader has not experienced, or is unlikely to experience. Judged by these measures this paper meets the standards for qualitative research.

My aim in this writing is not to produce a self-absorbed story but rather, a meaningful account that allows the reader to deeply grasp the experience and interpretation of my particular case (McIlveen, 2008). The usefulness of the autoethnographic approach is that by examining previously unacknowledged thoughts and emotions I can understand more about myself, which also helps my understanding of others. This is what Anderson (2006) is suggesting when he says that the autoethnographic approach is “grounded in
self-experience but reaches beyond it as well” (p. 386). It is a research approach that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence, rather than ignoring them (Ellis et al., 2010). This makes it a form of qualitative research that is especially contextual and subjective, rather than generalisable and objective (Whittemore et al., 2001).

I was a farmer and became a social researcher and for this paper, which examines my experiences, I have become the sample of one.

3. Caught up in the farming tradition

Sometime during my high school years my parents gave me the choice as to whether I would become a farmer or not; but I felt that having spent all of my life on a farm, and being saturated with the farming culture from parents and friends from an early age, as well as being the fifth generation of an unbroken line of farmers, I had little choice but to continue the farming tradition.

The tradition that I experienced consisted of:

... family ownership, family labour, a past family connection to farming and usually inherited or partly inherited property from father to usually eldest son, the male head of the household as farmer with farming skills past (sic) from father to son … (Bryant, 1999 p. 257).

In addition, the tradition that I was part of required one child from the farming family to continue on as a farmer. For me, the power of tradition meant that in some ways the choice to become a farmer was never consciously made—I was destined to be a farmer. Gasson and Errington (1993) identify the same abbreviated decision-making process that I experienced when they suggest that farmers who are born into farming families
often exercise little conscious choice in their selection of a career, because “they were socialized into the role and internalized the values of farming ... at an early age” (p. 91).

Being a family farmer does not just carry obligations from the farming tradition but also obligations from cross-generational identities that make it difficult to disentangle the work of one generation of farmer from another, because farmers are not simply representing their own identities, but also the identities of their families stretching from the past to the future (Burton, 2004). This linkage with the past is encouraged by parents, who “influence or determine succession arrangements and expectations, and ... contribute to the instilling of cultural meanings about the land, nature, and the environment” (Silvasti, 2003, p. 144).

The farming tradition is not only passed on by the family but is also transmitted and encouraged by social groups because of their organisation, unity and communication, and their common goals (Lindesmith et al., 1999). For me the social group that were most influential in communicating the farming tradition were the Lutheran farmers; the descendants of the farmers that came to South Australia in the mid-1800s from what was then Germany. The Lutheran farmers carried out their activities “thoroughly, diligently, thriftily” (Koepping, 2008, p. 9) and were also known for “their piety, consistently hard work, frugality and close family ties” (Koepping, 2008, p. 39). I experienced each of these characteristics at first hand, and to varying degrees.

Apart from the pervasive pressure of tradition on my choice to become a farmer, another important influence was the obligation that came from being an only son. I was well aware that the continuation of the farm business that my father had built, was reliant on my becoming a farmer. I felt powerful expectations from my parents that caused strong feelings of obligation to become a farmer.
4. When farmers sell their farms

Before I made my decision to sell my farm in 1999 it was predicted that “… the pressures presently pushing rural Australia into its worst depression since either the 1930s or 1890s will [over the next thirty years] have reduced the numbers of farmers by as many as one-third (Austin, 1991, p. 90). Similarly Williams (1992) had warned that "rural areas in the 1990s are not going to be easy places to make a living” (p. 87).

I was caught up in these pressures and became part of the ongoing structural adjustment process in Australian agriculture; the necessary and continuing process of assimilating smaller farms into increasingly larger, more productive and more efficient businesses. Structural adjustment in Australia is, however, not a recent development but has formed the backdrop to the development of much of Australian agriculture. More recently, from 1986–1996 the annual decline in the number of farm establishments has been about two per cent (Australian Government, 2008). Most of the reduction in farmer numbers occurred in the period before 1991, after which time commodity prices and property prices declined (Department of Environment Water Heritage and the Arts, 2008) making it less attractive for farmers to consider leaving agriculture.

Even when prices are attractive selling the farm is usually a last resort for farmers under financial pressure, because it is an irreversible decision. The finality of the decision is one of the reasons that farmers can experience considerable stress in the process leading to the sale of a farm, and during the move out of farming. To avoid this stress some farmers choose a transitional period of leasing their farm out to other farmers before they eventually sell. The loss of identity, the social values ascribed to farming and the adherence to the cultural script of maintaining the family farm against all odds makes leaving farming a very difficult decision. This means that many farmers would feel that
they have personally failed, as well as failing their obligations to their families, friends and colleagues if they sell the farm. They, therefore, have a strong reluctance to make the decision to sell (Vanclay, 2003).

However, some farmers will always need to leave the industry as their farms become less viable. This provides opportunities for the remaining farmers who buy up these farms in an attempt to counter the effects of declining terms of trade as well as satisfying their own business goals. While this adjustment process has become an accepted part of Australian agriculture it still takes an emotional toll on those that leave because it directly affects their values and deeply held beliefs. In the rest of this paper I describe my experience of this change.

5. The decision to sell my farm

The events described in this paper begin when the bank that I had borrowed from told me that they no longer wanted my business. In some ways this was not a surprise as I already knew that my equity levels were low enough that the bank could become concerned. But when the news was delivered by my bank manager it became much more real.

The bank assured me that they would continue to provide finance for the current cropping season, but once the harvest had been completed it would be time for me to find another source of borrowings. I sought independent advice which verified that the farm business was not financially viable or likely to be so in the future, and that it was time to consider selling my farm before my assets became eroded through increasing levels of debt. After receiving this advice, selling the farm became my preferred option;
although to preserve my self-esteem I clung to the idea that I could have refinanced with another bank, and drawn up optimistic plans for how the debt would be repaid.

However, the financial reality and the implications of my situation were that, borrowing more money to keep farming would have run down my levels of equity further. In time, this may have led to a forced sale of the farm. The timing of the decision to leave agriculture, especially for farmers who are under financial pressure, can make the difference between retaining sufficient equity to reinvest in other income producing activities or setting themselves up for retirement (Vanclay, 2003) or leaving them with little. By these measures my decision to sell was made at the right time.

The sale of a farm is not simply a financial transaction involving the ownership of land, it is an especially fraught process for those involved because of how deeply farming is embedded into the being and identity of the farmer. This is because “farming is a socio-cultural practice rather than just a technical activity. Farming becomes a way of life, a way of making a living, that acquires a meaning far deeper than almost any other occupational identity” (Vanclay, 2004, p. 213). Farming is more than just an occupation, it is a way of life that governs most of the farmer’s aspirations and values (Vanclay, 2003).

My aspirations and values can be seen in the significant snapshots (Muncey, 2010) that prompted the thoughts and emotions found in this paper—the decision to sell my farm, the sale of my farm and the clearing sale. These were not discrete events but occurred during the seasonal cycle of activities on the farm which was mostly focused on the planting and harvesting of crops. These snapshots cover the key events associated with my farm sale.
The key events described in this paper took place over a twelve month period. The decision to sell my farm was brought about after the bank became concerned about my financial position. Selling my farm was not forced by my bank but was certainly precipitated by them; the repayment of their loan was what they wanted. The farm sale had two components; the first was signing the contract to sell the land, and then nearly six months later, the dispersal (clearing sale) of the farming plant and machinery.

When I decided to sell my farm I felt that I was in conflict with an obligation that I owed towards my parents to continue farming. This obligation made me feel like the farm wasn’t mine to sell, but that unwritten and assumed liens and covenants existed over the sale of the farm. I experienced these obligations partly because of the large amount of physical work that my father had done to develop the farm, such as clearing parts of it of the original native vegetation so it could be used for growing crops or sheep grazing. By allowing the farm to pass out of my family’s hands to someone without the same memories of the land, I felt as though I was being unappreciative and disrespectful of my father’s hard work.

While felt obligation is suggested to result in a repayment by children later in life for sacrifices that their parents made (Stein, 1992), my felt obligation—and that which I observed in other farmers—seems to be stronger and more profound. I felt that my father had built a farm through his hard work, which when it was handed over to me also carried an obligation requiring me to continue working in a similar way to what he had. It felt as though the farm was never completely mine because of all the obligations that accompanied it, which meant in some way that my continuing on as a farmer was how that obligation was discharged (Stein, 1992).
It seems to me that farms that are passed from father to son could be seen as gifts that are earned through work. Mauss (1970) suggested that the exchange of gifts is not a simple swapping of objects because "the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble" (p. 31). The obligation that I felt, involved work that my father had done in the past but also seemed to stretch into the future with the work that still needed to be done. The way that I experienced felt obligation is described by Meister et al. (2010) who suggest that a “farm is more to a farmer than just land and equipment, it is often a sacred trust passed on from the past to be maintained for the future” (p. 227).

Although I worked on the farm from the time that I finished my schooling I was only the legal owner of the farm for the last five years of my farming career. For much of my working life I felt that I owned the land but in law I did not. In the same way that Salamon and Lockhart (1980, p. 327) suggest that “attachment to land does not diminish despite a shift in control”, in my case it also did not markedly increase when I became the legal owner of the land. Siebert, Toogood, & Knierim (2006) present an explanation that helps me to understand how I felt about the farm ownership when they suggest that “according to the notion of farm continuity, a farm does not belong to its present individual owner, but to the family—to past and future generations” (p. 327).

Surprisingly the sale of my farm land was not as laden with meaning as the sale of the tools of my trade, which visibly signified the end of my farming career. Because farm tools and machines exist as mean to achieve an end, they necessarily mediate and facilitate the farmer’s experience of and their relationship with the natural world (Baltic, 1996). My tools and machines were the means through which I interacted with the land, and their sale meant that this interaction was no longer possible.
I didn’t only have negative feelings such as those from breaking my relationships with my farm land and my tools and machinery. I also had a more positive feeling, which was that the sale of the farm was an opportunity for a change that I could benefit from. I was freed from the unrelenting nature of the work—work that was demanding because it was physically hard at times, but also because it was never able to be done well enough and never seemed to be finished; in my mind at least.

Therefore the sale of my farm became a significant event in my life, a pivotal point that led to much change. I changed where I lived, the type of work that I did, and the things that I considered as important. But there were even deeper and more profound changes than these. It changed who I associated with, my sense of importance, my place in the community and my relationship with that particular piece of land. The sale of the farm invoked deep feelings of loss. This was caused by more than the loss of a farm; it was loss of certainty, loss of purpose and loss of identity. This loss now makes sense to me because:

The farm is not simply an object, it is consubstantial with the farmer and, importantly, it is the very part of the farmer that is used to express his/her and his/her family’s identities, both to other members of the farming community and to the world in general (Burton, 2004, p. 208).

The decision to sell a farm happens within a context that can result in very different feelings and experiences for people according to their individual situations. An influence that was not important for me, but would have been for others, was that I did not have family members who were interested in continuing as farmers. Therefore, I had not been exposed to the form of obligation that many farmers experience when they need to continue farming until their successors are ready to make a decision to take over
the farm. Another reason that I found the decision easier to make than others might have, was that my farm had only been in family hands since 1957 (the year I was born). Multiple generations of my family had not lived and worked on that same land; meaning that there was not a long and continuing history and tradition that I would be acting against by making my decision. Even though I might have been able to make the decision to sell the farm more easily than others, it still invoked a sense of failure. Some of this was caused by my concern for how other farmers in the community would perceive my actions. I thought that they might think that it was because I was a bad farmer. My imaginings were that judgements were being made on me by everyone that I interacted with, such as shop owners, agricultural suppliers, and all the other people that I communicated with in the community. In some ways I felt that I was letting the team down by telling them that I didn’t want to play with them anymore.

Because this paper is an autoethnographic account; it deals with my impressions and my feelings about the events leading to and surrounding the sale of my farm. I realise that my parents, sisters, partner and friends had different feelings about the farm and were affected by my decision to sell the farm in different ways. I wanted to explain to them and others how I felt about working on the farm using a poem I wrote while operating the grain harvester for my last grain harvest. The poem reflects on my life as a farmer, and tells the others affected by the decision that for me it was much more than a place to visit for recreation; it was where I worked, it was where I lived, and it was my life.

**There’s Work to Be Done.**

There’s a farm to be made,
There’s a land to be tamed,
There’s work to be done.

There’s yaccas¹ to grub,
There’s fences to build,
There’s work to be done.

There’s a tractor to fix,
There’s a pipeline to lay,
There’s work to be done.

There’s lambs to be marked,
There’s sheep to be shorn,
There’s work to be done.

There’s crops to be planted,
There’s paddocks to be sprayed,
There’s work to be done.

There’s dry skies to be seen,
There’s a sheep to be shot,
There’s work to be done.

¹ Common name for the Australian plant Xanthorrhoea australis
There’s a banker to meet,

There’s an agent to greet,

There’s work to be done.

There’s goodbyes to be said,

There’s things to attend,

There’s work to be done.²

This poem provides useful research data because:

Characterized by compression and an economy of words the lyric poem has the capacity to meet the important qualitative aim of capturing the depth of human experience, while also delivering the succinctness that quantitative researchers value (Gallardo et al., 2009, p. 290).

For me this simple and naive piece of writing carries much meaning. It has a temporal spread and also covers the range of a farmer’s responsibilities, desired and undesired. It lists the work that had been done and that needed to be done on the farm and includes a coy reference to the pivotal meeting with the bank manager. I think that the impression that the poem leaves is that I approached the sale of the farm as just another bit of work that needed to be done. The construction of the poem relies on a single repeated line that is more than a refrain. It’s an ‘anaphora’, which is a stylistic device that consists of the

² What the poem does not make explicit is the progression from father to son. My father carried out much of the early work on the farm by himself. I then worked alongside him once I left school. Eventually he retired from farming and left me to work the farm by myself.
deliberate repetition of a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighbouring clauses to draw the reader’s attention to the message contained within the sentence (Delbridge and John, 1998). The message is therefore clearly reinforced that, at the time of writing the poem I considered that the farm was very much about work. It was work that was initially pleasurable, rewarding and meaningful, but became unpleasant and demanding as the seriousness of my financial situation became apparent.

6. Working the farm

As I was being shown around a friend’s farm, that he’d owned for some years, he said “we’ve done so much work here I feel that I own it”. This innocent comment illustrates much about the relationship between work and a farmer’s feelings of ownership. The way that I experienced it, ownership was much more than simply a legal matter; it was earned through work.

I was caught up with feelings (despite evidence to the contrary) that I had not worked hard enough. I felt that the need to sell my farm had become the tangible proof of my failure to be a ‘Good Farmer’ and the sale of my farm was how this was made visible to others. I would later come to realise that my situation was not caused by my management decisions but by choices—correct at the time—that were made in previous years, and was compounded by the structural adjustment pressures of agriculture. I now take some comfort in Vanclay’s (2004) writing when he suggests that:

Farmers who are now regarded as marginal were in the past regarded as having a viable land holding … While many of them continue to survive by having a reduced need for income, it must be remembered that they are not marginal
because of any personal failure or because [of] a lack of management skills; they are marginal because they were structured to be marginal (p. 215).

The pressures of structural adjustment were a problem that I believed could be solved just by working harder. I now understand that this was the typical response of a farmer adhering to an agrarian ideology which relies on the perception of farming as integrating hard work, perseverance and family life (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). Traditional farmers—the living example of the agrarian ideology—equate farm work with physical work (Bryant, 1999). Being born into a traditional farming family I was indoctrinated into the moral virtue of hard work (Thompson, 1994) and became a willing adherent to the protestant work ethic (Weber, [1904] 1958). Hard work is also tied into notions of the ‘Good Farmer’ because the way the farm appears to others is a measure of the ‘Good Farmer’, but the way the farm appears to others is only as a result of the work that has been put into it (Silvasti, 2003). My decision to sell my farm was not because of how hard the work was, or that it had become an increasingly stressful occupation. I just accepted that, because from childhood it was ingrained in me that farm work could be arduous and that dogged persistence was a way of responding to any challenge.

Because I was prepared to leave agriculture before being forced out, and when it seems that most other farmers in my position might have fought harder to remain as farmers, I could be perceived as the deviant example. This doesn’t make my case any less useful for understanding other farmers because it is the deviant example that makes the standard example more understandable (Muncey, 2010). I think it is helpful to see farmers as having a wide range of differing influences on their behaviour, that they experience to greater or lesser extents, and that they respond to these influences in
varied ways; mine has just been one of those ways. Even though my case is not
generalisable it is a case study that can act as a reference point that is useful for
understanding what other farmers may experience when making similar decisions.

7. The sale

After I made the decision to sell my farm the finding of a buyer and the subsequent
signing of a contract for the sale of the property happened quite quickly; ending my
uncertainty about whether any farmers would be interested in purchasing my farm and
how much they would be willing to pay for it. The contract for the sale of the land was
signed nearly six months after deciding to sell and was an event that lacked finality.
Even though the contract to sell the farm had been signed I still remained living in the
same house carrying out many of the same activities as I had done previously. This
meant that it wasn’t the end of my identity as a farmer but it did mark the beginning of
the end of it.

The work changed because there was no longer an emphasis on planning for the future.
The most important remaining tasks became the completion of the final harvest from the
last crop that I would grow on the farm and then the preparation for the ‘clearing sale’
(the public auctioning of the machinery and plant).

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Clearing sales are often the way that farmers who sell their properties dispose of their
tools, machinery and farm supplies; but they are also social events that draw farmers
from the local district as well as from further afield. Some of the several hundred people
that usually attend do so with little interest in purchasing and much more interest in the
social interaction as they meet with friends and acquaintances.
Those that are interested in purchasing are led by the auctioneer down long rows of the machinery and the various tools, spare parts and supplies that are needed to operate a farm. The auctioneer identifies the item, describes it the best that they can, and then initiates the bidding process by suggesting a starting price (his best estimate of the sale value of the item) and then gradually reduces the suggested price until the time that a farmer places a bid. If other farmers choose to place higher bids the price increases until the time that no further bids are placed and the winning bidder is announced. The challenge for the auctioneer is to strike a balance between lingering too long on an item so that people lose interest and spending time trying to obtain a higher price (which is to their advantage because they are paid by commission).

The lines of farm tools and machines were the intermediaries between me and the soil and were what I had used to create a living and a life. I experienced feelings that the machinery that was on display at the clearing sale wasn’t good enough. In my mind a good farmer would have had a more profitable farm and could have afforded better and newer machinery but everyone could see that this was not the case for me. It was machinery that I’d worked with, in some cases, for many years. With this amount of use some of the handles, switches and controls of the tools and machines had been worn smooth by contact with my hands—the tools and machines showed this conspicuous evidence of our relationship. These were witness marks that would never have the same memories for the new owners. I imagined that other farmers were judging and criticising the tools and machines that I spent years working with, tools and machines that I had maintained and cared for. I had repaired them when they broke, made them stronger when they needed it, changed their design if I thought that I could improve it. These were tools and machines that I knew well. It wasn’t just about the marks of use
but it was also important because much of my knowledge of the practice of farming was knowledge about how to use my tools and machines. Once they were sold part of my knowledge of farming disappeared.

The tools and machines that I sold at the clearing sale were important to me because I had a relationship with them that gave them meaning (Sahlins, 2004). These were meanings that were unique for me, and would have been different for any other user. The theory of symbolic interactionism suggests that humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings that those things have for them (Blumer, 1969). The meanings that the tools had for me were derived in part from what I had used them for in the past, who they were purchased from or how they were made or modified (Keller and Keller, 1996). Because the lines of the clearing sale contained machines that were so interwoven with and so fundamental to my farm life; it was as though much of my life was laid out for all to poke, prod and criticise. While the farm sale had begun the process it felt like the clearing sale marked the final dismantling of my identity as a farmer.

I now wonder whether the attachment to land that is usually ascribed to farmers (Burton, 2004) is as important for farmers as others would like to think. Attachment to land does seem likely for a farmer, and would probably be one of the influences that they might initially identify but I think that delving deeper might lead to more important issues emerging such as the practice of farming and the use of tools and machines in the act of production. I think it is likely that these will be felt more strongly but articulated much less commonly.
8. Reflection

Compared to when I signed the contract for the sale of the land, which was somewhat abstract and intangible, the sale of the machinery and the farm plant was immediate and definitive. I understood its significance and its finality quite quickly. Most of my farm equipment was removed from the farm by the evening of the day the sale was held, which provided the final visual proof that the sale of the farm was completed, and that I was no longer a farmer. I also felt that I was no longer a farmer because part of my knowledge base of farming had been sold to others.

My thoughts about my future had been put aside while I did the work that was needed to prepare for the clearing sale. I now think that my focus on the work of arranging the clearing sale was to stop uncertainty creeping in if I contemplated an unclear future. However, following the clearing sale, there was little left for me to do apart from leave the farm and face the doubts of that future. My work on the farm (the sale preparations) had come to an end and there was nothing to replace it.

I now think that none of the feelings that I experienced were very surprising because the change that I faced after selling my farm was not simply a structural change, meaning that I was doing a different job, but it was a change to my most basic social fabric (Burton, 2004) it was a change to who I was. Burton (2004) suggests that as farmers experience social loss they need to revise their self-perceptions, their systems of status transfer, the meanings that they gain from individual acts on the farm. He also suggests that for those who have followed previous generations of the same family this can mean the loss of status potentially accumulated over many years.
Place attachment derived from natural features of the landscape is often touted as a strong influence on farmers (Marshall, 2009) but I felt this place attachment a little differently. It was the altered landscapes of my farm—recording my actions and my beliefs about how farming should be practiced—that I was attached to. Budruk (2009) suggests a broader definition of place attachment that contains place dependence, which is a functional need for the place that is not able to be transferred to an alternative location and place identity, which is emotional and symbolic, and similar to what I felt. In any event, farmers are likely to feel place attachment differently to people in most other occupations because they interact with land for primarily productive purposes; their land is their workplace. The farmer’s need to run a profitable business changes the relationship between place attachment and place specific behaviours (Gosling and Williams, 2010).

There are other ways in which the importance of the landscape is felt. Nassauer (1995) suggests that people in cities create their landscapes to communicate with their neighbours and maintain their approval, so they become public portraits of themselves. Similarly the suggestion that the farm is a farmer’s portrait of himself (Leopold, 1939) may not be a completely satisfactory explanation of the relationship between a farmer and their land, because it only partly describes the opportunity for self-expression that a farm provides. I think that, for a farmer, the farm landscape becomes more like a story that is told without words; and is understood through recognising visual cues and exploring their causes. This is because the actions of the farmer—the practices that have worked and those that have failed—remain as a record in the landscape and allow other farmers to know something about that particular farmer. I think that a farm landscape communicates some things to farmers and other things to non-farmers, which because
of their different knowledges have different meanings ascribed to them. For a farmer, the farm landscape becomes a record of what the farmer sees as being important and how the farmer believes that farming should be practiced. Farmers’ sense of pride in their farms is not usually focused on the natural features of their farms—unless they are uniquely attractive—instead they have pride in the way that they have altered and manipulated the land for productive purposes. The features of the farm are not changed haphazardly but as a result of planned actions, so over time the farm becomes the farmer’s statement—interpreted visually—of how they believe that the land should be managed.

For example the trees that I planted on my farm became a statement of my belief that a consideration for the environment was also an important part of my farming practice. The ability of my farm to communicate my sense of visual aesthetics was also seen in my placement of fence lines, roadways and other farm infrastructure. I had choices that through more harmonious siting of features in the landscape could either add to or subtract from the visual aesthetics of the farm. This was a chance for self-expression that I took.

9. Final word

It seems to me that many farmers who make significant life-changing decisions, such as choosing to sell their farms, make those choices with financial considerations mostly at the forefront but also while being influenced by the tremendous pull of the combined forces of tradition, family expectations (both real and imagined) and the culture of farming.
Even though I feel as though I was more prepared to leave farming than others I still experienced feelings of uncertainty, failure and loss of relevance (I wasn’t important to the farm or the land any more). I experienced a loss of identity, and a loss of the socio-cultural rewards gained from being a farmer. In addition to this I also felt that I had abandoned an obligation that I felt mostly to my family but also to my friends and colleagues to continue farming.

This exploratory paper has identified issues that are worthy of further examination. It would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between farm work and a farmer’s sense of ownership of the land, to understand more about farmers’ relationship to their tools and machinery, and to investigate how place attachment might be different for a farmer compared to people in other professions not related to agriculture.

This paper focused on the end of my farming career and some of the strong feelings I experienced during it. I have not mentioned the aspects of the lifestyle and the work that I found attractive. For me the attractive aspects of farming included, among other things, the process of planting and growing crops, organising, managing and problem solving and the satisfaction of undertaking hard ‘honest’ work. Working with animals and observing nature at close quarters added to the experience. I think that along with the strong forces that I have described in this paper it is the value that farmers place on these rewards that can keep them farming long after an economic rationalist might suggest they sell.

10. Bibliography


Silvasti, T 2003. The cultural model of 'the good farmer' and the environmental question in Finland. Agriculture and Human Values 20: 143-150.
Figure 1: The clearing sale was more confronting than the sale of the land.