

The Herbert River Farmers' Association. Sugar farmer associations on the periphery - an examination from the "other end"

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Ian Drummond and Terry Marsden comment that "development in the Australian sugar industry seems to be going full circle. Development has progressed through one increasingly unsustainable formation, the nineteenth century plantation system, to another based on family farms, only to return to something very much like the original within the space of less than 100 years."¹ The historical record affirms that it will only have been for a brief hiatus that the Australian sugar industry was conducted by land-owning, white small sugar cane farmers, supplying cane to central mills, some cooperatively owned.² The central mill concept was not innovative. Who the small sugar cane growers were, was unique to Australia however, as were the agricultural associations which represented them. The Herbert River Valley and the Herbert River Farmers Association offer a lens through which to examine who those small farmers were and the nature of the sugar farmer association that helped advance the Australian sugar industry from plantation to small farm and into global prominence. This paper illuminates what is a unique peripheral phenomenon in a broader geographical context.

In tropical Queensland, north of what is now Townsville, a sugar growing district grew up around the mighty Herbert River. In 1914 sugar mills globally, sourced their cane from very different types of suppliers. In the Herbert River Valley, prior to 1914, the source of cane was the plantation, then small

¹ Ian Drummond and Terry Marsden, *The Condition of Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 1999), 197.

² In a good part of the sugar growing world in the late nineteenth century planters were of European origin and small growers, independent or tenant, were either indigenous or former slave or indentured labour. In Australia during most of the nineteenth century being 'white' meant having British ancestry, which with the settlement of the tropics became a national type on the tropical frontier. Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 255. The category eventually became more inclusive and in the Australian sugar industry Italians were considered white (and hence desirable) farmers.

family farms owned by white farmers. “Yeoman farmers in the liberal tradition, men of small capital means, farming their own land with the aid of their families and not labouring for others.”³

Despite small farmers being widely described as poorly educated and leaving few written records, a paper trail left by the Herbert River Valley small settlers reveals them to be literate and articulate.⁴ While the small farmers of the Herbert were predominantly Anglo-Celtic immigrants or local-born of that origin, there were also many of other European nationalities.⁵ The first cohort included Danes Swedes and Norwegians. They were not only tenants but landowners. This is in contrast to a good part of the sugar growing world in the late nineteenth century where indigenous, former slaves or indentured labourers farmed as tenants. In Queensland, there was no official encouragement for those of non-European origins to farm sugar cane.⁶

While these small settlers had been farm workers, artisans, or servants in their home countries, plantation owners in contrast were well-heeled Englishmen or Scotsmen, or speculative proprietary companies, funded by Victorian capital.⁷ They conducted vertically integrated operations, meaning that they owned both plantation land and mill and sourced cane from their own land for their mill. They employed the small settlers as overseers, ploughmen and skilled workers. Those planters of the speculative phase aspired to a life style that while not as extravagant as that of sugar planters of

³ C.R. Moore, “Queensland Sugar Industry from 1860 to 1900,” in *Lectures on North Queensland History*, (Townsville: History Department James Cook University of North Queensland, 1974), 39.

⁴ Moore, “Queensland Sugar Industry from 1860 to 1900,” 38; and letters to newspapers, evidence provided to Royal Commissions, surviving memoirs and documented membership of agricultural associations, local committees and Divisional Board.

⁵ Peter D. Griggs, *Global Industry, Local Innovation: The History of Cane Sugar Production in Australia, 1820-1995* (Bern: Peter Land, 2011), 2.

⁶ Peter Griggs, “Alien Agriculturalists: non-European Small Farmers in the Australian Sugar Industry, 1880-1920,” in *White and Deadly: Sugar and Colonialism*, ed. Pal Ahluwalia et al. (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 1999), 135-156; Peter Griggs, “The origins and early development of the small cane farming system in Queensland, 1870–1915,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 23 (1997), 46-61; and Patricia Mary Mercer, “The survival of a Pacific Islander Population in North Queensland, 1900-1940” (PhD diss., Australian National University), 1981.

⁷ Moore, “Queensland Sugar Industry from 1860 to 1900,” 38; C.R. Moore “Whips and Rum Swizzles,” in *Lectures on North Queensland History*, Second Series, (Townsville: History Department James Cook University of North Queensland, 1975), 120-1; and Adrian Graves, *Cane and Labour: The Political Economy of the Queensland Sugar Industry, 1862-1906* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University Press: 1993), 16-7.

Louisiana was nevertheless in stark contrast to that of the small settlers in their humble cottages.⁸ The social divide made for a conflicted approach to their shared industry.

Planters both leased and sold land to prospective small farmers to alleviate financial and labour difficulties. Land ownership was preferable to the small settler rather than uncertain tenancy arrangements with mobile and self-interested planter millers. Only Chinese and former indentured labourers who, as aliens, were not permitted to own land, tended to take up opportunities to lease.⁹ When the Valley settlers were ready to farm sugar it was on their own lands.

Neither in the United States nor England have local agricultural associations received much critical scholarship despite their proliferation.¹⁰ It should not be surprising then perhaps, that in Australian scholarly literature also, there are few treatments of agricultural associations, and even those are conflicting. Alan W. Black and Russell A. Craig claim that Australian agricultural associations failed to provide adequate rural extension while Geoff Raby asserts that agricultural associations were an important intermediate stage preceding “centralized agricultural research.”¹¹ As for their political role, B.K. De Garis, writing of agricultural societies in colonial Western Australia, suggests that the agricultural associations were the most important political organizations in colonial life, while Diane

⁸ Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, *The Herbert River Story* (Ingham: Hinchinbrook Shire Council, 2011); and Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, “The Material Aspects of the Tropical North Queensland Sugar Cane Industry, 1872 to 1955,” M.A. diss., James Cook University, Townsville, 1995.

⁹ Being aliens they were not permitted to purchase land. C.R. May, “The Chinese Community in North Queensland,” in *Lectures on North Queensland History* (Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1974), 124. See also Jan Wegner and Sandi Robb, “Chinese in the Sugar: a case study of Ingham and Halifax in the Lower Herbert District,” in *Rediscovered Past: Chinese Tropical Australia*, ed. Sandi Robb and Kevin Rains (East Ipswich: Queensland Chinese Heritage in Northern Australia Inc., 2014), 10.

¹⁰ There are rare favourable assessments of the unique and enduring place of agricultural association in agricultural history, and reflections on why there is scant scholarly attention given to its roles and functions. See John Hillison and Brad Bryant, “Agricultural Societies as Antecedents of the FFA.” <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.564.174&rep=rep1&type=pdf> and H.S.A. Fox “Local farmers’ associations and the circulation of agricultural information in nineteenth-century England,” in *Change in the Countryside: Essays on Rural England, 1500-1900*, ed. H.S.A. Fox and R.A. Butlin (London: Institute of British Geographers, 1979), 45.

¹¹ Alan W. Black and Russell A. Craig, *The Agricultural Bureau: A Sociological Study* (Armidale: The University of New England, 1978), 7 and 16; and Geoff Raby, *Making Rural Australia: an economic history of technical and institutional creativity, 1788-1860* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136.

Shogren, suggest that the provincial interests and limited membership of colonial Queensland agricultural associations rendered them ineffectual.¹²

I have been very surprised to find that not only is the Australian sugar industry excluded from the generalist discussions of agricultural extension, but that in sugar industry scholarship there has been little speculation on the connection of agricultural associations with either extension or political lobbying. Peter Griggs' recent tome *Global Industry, Local Innovation* captures almost all previous Australian sugar scholarship, and he together with Clive Moore and Ralph Shlomowitz effectively explain how and why Australia's sugar industry transitioned from a plantation mode of production to small farmer supplying to a central mill.¹³ There is however no comprehensive examination of farmers' associations, despite the assertion made by Adrian A. Graves that the demise of plantation production and the development of farm-based central milling came about in Australia, in part, because of the political pressure exerted by small growers through their "farmers' pressure groups".¹⁴

Globally if we do know anything of cooperative efforts in a sugar industry it is from the planter's point of view.¹⁵ Even if from the top the small sugar farmers' associations appear to be "parochial and ephemeral", from the small farmers' view the concerns they voiced through their associations were far from trivial or incidental.¹⁶ By turning the lens on the role of the small farmer and his association a valuable new perspective is gained on the transformative events that took the Australian sugar industry from plantation to small farming.

¹² B.K. De Garis, "Political Tutelage, 1829-1870 in Western Australia," in *A New History of Western Australia*, ed. C.T. Stannage (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), 313; and Diana Shogren, "The Politics and Administration of the Queensland Sugar Industry to 1930" (PhD. diss., University of Queensland, 1980).

¹³ Griggs, *Global Industry, Local Innovation: The History of Cane Sugar Production in Australia, 1820-1995*; Griggs, "The origins and early development of the small cane farming system in Queensland, 1870-1915,"; Moore, "Queensland Sugar Industry from 1860 to 1900,"; Ralph Shlomowitz, "Plantations and Smallholdings: Comparative Perspectives from the World Cotton and Sugar Cane Economies, 1865-1939," *Agricultural History* 58 (1984), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3742781>.

¹⁴ Adrian Graves, *Cane and Labour: The Political Economy of the Queensland Sugar Industry, 1862-1906* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 46.

¹⁵ Moore, "Queensland Sugar Industry from 1860 to 1900," 38.

¹⁶ Shogren, "The Politics and Administration of the Queensland Sugar Industry to 1930."

Sugar planters formed sugar industry associations often in times of crisis and to safeguard their interests and privilege. They provided mutual support, and a platform from which to effectively petition government with a unified voice. Associations were disseminators of agricultural information, and drivers of technical innovation. The continued dominance of the planter's association across sugar industries in the late nineteenth century means that the small sugar farmer association as it appeared in Australia in that period is something of an anomaly.

Agricultural associations formed in the Australian colonies were modelled on those originating in eighteenth-century Europe. Though they may have been called a club, society, association, even a league, the distinction is blurred because their activities and memberships were not categorically exclusive. Though some Australian agricultural associations conducted shows, they are not Agricultural and Pastoral Associations whose principal activity was to conduct 'shows', albeit it with the aim of promoting agricultural improvement and innovation. Similarly, though agricultural associations engaged in political lobbying they are distinct from the Farmers and Settlers' Associations or Farmers' Unions with their political agendas and links to the country party movement. Australian sugar associations appeared within a decade of the first commercial plantings of sugar and forty-six years after the first agricultural association was established in Van Dieman's Land.

As the sugar industry advanced up the Queensland coast associations were formed by planters and farmers to further social, political and agricultural interests. They facilitated the obtaining and sharing of information about sugar cane growing and agriculture in general, for as one Valley small farmer lamented "Some of the settlers have done farming at home, but had done none in the colony before they started on the river... The productions here are very different from those of the old country".¹⁷ It was also thought that associations emboldened the farmers to "exercise their rights as voters."¹⁸ Topics of general concern were access to land, sugar price, tariffs and markets. In Queensland, where indentured Melanesian labour was used, associations petitioned Government prolifically, particularly once there

¹⁷ Evidence of Charles Watson, *Sugar Industry Commission: Report of the Royal Commission, 1889*, 111, <https://ia601006.us.archive.org/24/items/ReportOnTheSugarIndustryCommission/Report%20on%20the%20sugar%20industry%20commission.pdf>.

¹⁸ "Farmers' Associations," *Queenslander*, August 24, 1867, 10.

was increasing pressure for its abandonment. Matters of concern to small farmers included communication, transport and dealings with the millers. Farmers could not depend on access to the mills of larger growers, and the relationship with the planter/miller was a fragile one. The increase in the number of local associations reflected the growing number of small farmers, and their efforts to determine their own milling arrangements. In addition, within a few decades of the commencement of cultivation, overcropping and failure to apply fertilizer had depleted the soil, resulting in a low sugar yield.¹⁹ While the planters had the financial means and ready labour to conduct experiments, and access scientific knowledge, small farmers had none of those things unless they were offered rural extension through an association.

The HRFA challenged the plantation which had been the means the colonial government used to economically exploit the tropics in order to meet a growing domestic demand for sugar. The plantation predominated in the large tropical areas of northern Queensland. This was because in contrast to NSW, Queensland had a more liberal land policy and freedom to use indentured coloured labour, few settlers to contest the plantation and its authoritarian social structure, a lack of an established transportation network, few surveyed towns and ports, and an absence of local capital.²⁰

In 1864 the Queensland Government passed the Sugar and Coffee Regulations which provided for the selection of large blocks of land for plantation agriculture. The first plantation was established in the Valley in 1872.²¹ While small amounts of capital were required to establish the earlier plantation/mills, the later bigger speculative ones required large capital investment. By 1887 northern plantations made up over 80% of the land cultivated for cane and a plantation could be, in the later speculative stage, 5

¹⁹ AU NBAC N305-C1-0-2. A. Meston, *Report on the N.S.W. sugar industry and the lessons it teaches and A History of Sugar and Sugar Growing*, 1895, 12.

²⁰ Adrian Graves and Peter Richardson, "Plantations in the Political Economy of Colonial Sugar Production: Natal and Queensland, 1860-1914," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6 (1980): 228, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2636441>; and B.W. Higman, "The Regional Impact of the Sugar Industry of New South Wales, 1870-1912," *Geographical Research* 6 (1968): 718-19, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8470.1968.tb00176.x.

²¹ "Cardwell," *Brisbane Courier*, November 4, 1872, 3; and "Cardwell," *Queenslander*, November 9, 1872, 10.

000 acres or more in size.²² Meanwhile though, in 1876, the Queensland Crown Lands Act which had opened up more land in the tropical north to speculators, also allowed for the taking up of smaller homestead selections by yeoman farmers who, unlike the planters, wanted to settle permanently in the tropics. Then, in 1884, the government put a halt to the speculative rush, and promoted the selection of land by smaller selectors with the suspension of the 1876 Act and the reclassification of alienable land under the 1884 Crown Lands Act. However, the plantations were generally heavily mortgaged and badly rattled by the tumble in world sugar price when European beet sugar was dumped on the market in 1884. At the same time, the government began to phase out Melanesian labour which had been used extensively in the Valley. In the face of unsustainability under the existing mode of production the industry had to make adjustments or collapse.

Beginning in late 1880 a significant group of small settlers took up small holdings in the Lower Herbert and in 1881, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company's Act was passed. This act enabled the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) to acquire land and commence operations in the Valley under preferential conditions. Under the Act CSR was able to obtain land from certain conditional purchasers even though those purchasers may not have obtained Certificates of Fulfilment of Condition.²³ The new mill, Victoria Mill, was established as a vertically integrated plantation, using indentured labour. Aware that the CSR mills in NSW were supplied by small growers two small landholders were delegated by fellow settlers to approach a CSR officer with a proposal that the small settlers grow sugar cane for supply to the new mill. The officer suggested that the settlers form an association to communicate their proposal to CSR via the local Manager, Ebenezer Cowley.²⁴ No planter association had previously been formed in the Valley and if a farmers' association was formed it would be the first small sugar farmer's agricultural association in the northern tropics.

²² Graves, *Cane and Labour: The Political Economy of the Queensland Sugar Industry, 1862-1906*, 18; and Peter Griggs, "Sugar Plantations in Queensland, 1864-912: Origins, Characteristics, Distribution, and Decline," *Agricultural History* 74 (2000): 634, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3745214>.

²³ Queensland Parliament, *Colonial Sugar Refining Company's Act*, October 17, 1881, 85, 91.

²⁴ John Alm, *Early History of the Herbert River District being "The Memoirs of The Early Settlement of the Lower Herbert and The Start and Progress of The Sugar Industry in The District, 1932/33/35"* (Aitkenvale: Terry Lyons, 2002), 34-5.

Six small farmers formed the HFRA in 1882.²⁵ The founding principle was to promote the interests of the farming industry and progress of the Herbert River district. While membership was not restricted to farmers, the new association planned to be a “Bureau through which the farmers could communicate with the Government or others on any matter of common interest” with one voice.²⁶ Similarly, while nothing explicitly excluded Chinese or Melanesian tenant farmers, all those joining the HFRA were of European origin.²⁷

The Association wrote a letter to CSR detailing a proposal that the members of the new Association put a combined area of 200 acres under cane to augment the plantation’s own supply. Cowley forwarded their proposal on to the CSR General Manager but advised the farmers not to become too hopeful. He held a personal prejudice against small farming and a view that the tropical climate was not suitable for family life.²⁸ The latter opinion reflected a widely held notion that white people could not work and live in the tropics without detriment to their health.²⁹

Given the reputed arrogance of CSR the smallholders’ proposal was audacious. CSR favoured former employees or those with experience in the industry, and as indicated, would only consider a proposal made through an association.³⁰ There are several possible reasons that CSR suggested an association. Sugar industry associations had already demonstrated the potential effectiveness of the united approach. Nevertheless, in 1882, there was no global precedence of small sugar farmers forming associations, and perhaps CSR thought the suggestion that the selectors form an association might confound them and see their enthusiasm wane. Perhaps the company presumed that being formerly labourers and servants, they were uneducated, even illiterate. The agricultural association was a proven vehicle to disseminate

²⁵ Alm, *ibid.*, 32-37.

²⁶ Alm, *ibid.*, 36; and “Northern Mail News,” *Capricornian*, May 9, 1885, 16.

²⁷ P. Mercer, “The Survival of the Pacific Islander Population in North Queensland, 1900-1940” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1981).

²⁸ Alm, *Early History of the Herbert River District*, 36-8.

²⁹ Edgar T. Thompson “The Climatic Theory of the Plantation,” *Agricultural History*, 15 (1941): 49-60; Allan McInnes, “Hambledon Plantation – 1899,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland*, 10, (1977): 38; and John Lely, “Black and White: to the Editor,” *Brisbane Courier*, June 15, 1897, 7.

³⁰ Geoffrey C. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away. A History of North Queensland to 1920* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1972), 147, 236; “Country News,” *Queenslander*, March 23, 1892, 582; and Ahmed Ali, *Plantation to Politics: Studies in Fiji Indians* (Suva: University of South Pacific, 1980), 74-7.

information on agricultural methods and technologies. If the experiment of independent white small sugar cane farmers was to be successful they would need to be informed agriculturalists. This was especially so as, unlike in Fiji where sugar was largely farmed by Indian former indentured labourers, now tenant farmers, the Company would not be able to exert the same paternalistic control over white landowners.³¹ So while CSR encouraged the Association's formation and considered its milling proposal, the extent of the settlers' vision, audacity and confidence in their farming abilities cannot be overstated for few settlers in the Valley, immediately followed the original HRFA members' example to take up sugar farming.³²

Globally, developments in milling technology, and the need to adopt economies of scale in all facets of sugar production were propelling a transition from vertical integration to central mill. Meanwhile, the Colonial Government was promoting yeomen agriculture in the northern tropics of Australia as vital to the national welfare; denser settlement, economic development and strategic defense. Land and labour legislation favouring the yeoman farmer all indicated that the planters' days were numbered. Undoubtedly these factors would have inclined CSR management to consider it expedient to promote the cultivation of sugar by small growers after all. In 1884 the Association was advised that CSR would offer a seven-year contract for cane supply with no limitations on how much cane the farmers could supply to the mill.³³ Unified action was vindicated. The arrangement proved satisfactory and in the following seasons the small growers increased their acreages for harvesting.

The HRFA proved beyond doubt, that family sized farms, despite the tropical environment, could provide a reliable supply of high quality cane. As one small settler put it, they had exploded the belief "that the district could only be developed by gangs of black labour and a few white bosses."³⁴ In 1892

³¹ For CSR's relationship with its tenants in Fiji see Michael Moynagh, *Brown or white? A history of the Fiji sugar industry, 1873-1973* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1981).

³² Queensland Government, *Sugar Industry Commission: Report of the Royal Commission, 1889*, <https://ia601006.us.archive.org/24/items/ReportOnTheSugarIndustryCommission/Report%20on%20the%20sugar%20industry%20commission.pdf>.

³³ Alm, *Early History of the Herbert River District*, 43; and CSR, 142/1547 E. Knox to A. Cowley, Manager, Victoria Mill, Ingham, 12 February 1884. While there is a small amount of correspondence regarding the offered contract retained in the CSR archives, no copy of the contract has survived.

³⁴ Alm, *Early History of the Herbert River District*, 37.

CSR management called a meeting regarding the cutting up of plantation land into small farms for lease or sale. Within five days of the meeting 1 400 acres had been applied for by local residents, emboldened by the HRFA's example and CSR's pronounced commitment to the district.³⁵ Further south, in central Queensland, farmers began to lobby vigorously for co-operatively owned central mills. By 1914 operations of farming and milling across the sugar districts of Australia had by and large, become distinctly separate and specialized, and the plantation lands subdivided. By then the HRFA had passed on the baton to a district wide association, the Herbert River Farmers' League, though it continued on under another name as a branch of that League. The League in turn handed over to an industry wide association as the Australian sugar industry became scaffolded by a government legislated, complex regulatory system.

What the HRFA members could not have foreseen was that this break with the plantation in favour of family farms was not sustainable into the twentieth-first century. Drummond and Marsden argue that the family farm is no longer "the most appropriate or the most environmentally or socially sustainable" unit of production.³⁶ Furthermore, all costly inputs, chemicals, machinery and capital, have become economically unsustainable for a small farmer. As a result, sugar farming in tropical north Queensland today is largely conducted by either, farmers of large land holdings, whose income stream is dependant on financial injections from off farm employment, or by farming companies; and the milling operations by multinational milling companies who bought out not only CSR and other local proprietary companies, but the cooperatively owned mills. Moreover, in purchasing large tracts of land for cultivation of cane a degree of vertically integrated production has been reintroduced by these milling companies.

David Cameron, writing of closer settlement in Queensland in the 1860s to 1960s, remarks that sugar growing by small farmers has been one of the few successes resulting from the colonial government's

³⁵ Griggs, "The origins and early development of the small cane farming system in Queensland, 1870–1915," 55; and "Country News," *Queenslander*, March 23, 1892, 582; and "Country News," *Queenslander*, March 23, 1892, 582.

³⁶ Drummond and Marsden, *The Condition of Sustainability*, 196.

ongoing attempts to bring to reality its “agrarian dream through closer settlement.”³⁷ The HRFA disproved the perception that white small farmers could neither physically farm sugar in a tropical environment nor provide a reliable and quality supply of cane. During its life time the HRFA was, like its global counterparts, responsible for rural extension, political lobbying and the promotion of the Valley’s sugar industry. The HRFA played a vital and hitherto unexplored role in enabling the government’s agrarian dream to become a reality.

Unique features came to characterize the Australian sugar industry distinguishing it markedly from other sugar growing areas: family-sized farms owned by white farmers, worked almost exclusively by white labour and increasingly mechanized means, supplying central mills, some farmer owned and controlled. All this was achieved and maintained with the input of another distinguishing feature, the small farmers’ agricultural association.

It is timely that this unique peripheral rural phenomenon is scrutinized within a global context. The small local sugar cane farmers’ associations are long gone. The intrusion not only in the Herbert River Valley, but across the Australian sugar growing areas, of multinational milling concerns and a degree of vertical integration, attest to the tenaciousness of the plantation system and threaten the family farm with extinction. The Australian small sugar cane farmer, like his agricultural association before him, may well soon be another historical footnote.

³⁷ David Cameron, “Closer Settlement in Queensland: The Rise and Decline of the Agrarian Dream, 1860s-1960s,” in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, ed. Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Clayton: Monash University ePress, 2005)
<http://books.publishing.monash.edu/apps/bookworm/view/Struggle+Country%3A+The+Rural+Ideal+in+Twentieth+Century+Australia/140/xhtmll/chapter06.html>.