

**AUSTRALIAN SUPERFINE WOOL GROWERS’
CONFERENCE PRESENTATION DINNER
SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY
PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
JOSEF CHROMY VINEYARD
SATURDAY 9 APRIL 2016**

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to the presentation dinner for your 2016 Australian Superfine Wool Growers’ Association Conference. I can see from your conference brochure that you have an interesting program which has a strong theme of sustainability and environmental management running through it. You also have a post-conference tour which sounds wonderful – Panshanger Garden; Bangor and the Oyster Shed at Dunalley on the east coast; Kelvedon; and Coles Bay. I do hope interstate visitors will take the opportunity to enjoy this tour and see more of our State.

As an academic for most of my working life, I have attended countless conferences and am well aware of the opportunities they provide for stimulating new ways of thinking, networking and as well, of course, socialising and travel to places you might not otherwise have visited. I would like to congratulate your President, Simon Cameron and his Tasmanian team for the conference program. I hope you will at the end of it feel inspired and enthused.

I noticed that tomorrow you will be visiting the Eliza Forlonge bronze statue before travelling to Winton. So who was Eliza Forlonge? I had no idea and so did a little research to find out. It may be that most of you will know her story, but maybe not all of you. So here is a short version of it, thanks to Mary Ramsay and Vera Taylor’s research.¹ Eliza was quite an amazing woman. She was born in Glasgow in 1784 and in 1804 married a Glasgow merchant to whom she bore six children. Four of them had died from tuberculosis by the mid-1820s and so the family decided to move to a warmer climate. But first they travelled to Saxony in what is now Germany to study methods of sheep rearing and wool preparation because wool from merino sheep from Saxony was attracting high prices. From 1828 to 1830 Eliza and her sons walked through Saxony selecting sheep, attaching an F tag to their ears, paying for

¹ Mary S Ramsay, ‘Forlonge, Eliza (1784-1859)’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Supplementary Volume*, (MUP), 2005; Jan Davis, ‘Farmers echo pioneering spirit’, *The Mercury*, 18 June 2014.

them with gold sovereigns which were sown into the hem of her skirt and returning later to collect and herd them to Hamburg for shipping to England. Back in Britain, Eliza selected the sheep that accompanied her son William to Australia in 1829 and those that accompanied the rest of the family in 1830.

In January 1831 Eliza, her husband John and son Andrew joined William in Van Diemen's Land where he had been granted land at Kenilworth near Campbell Town. There they built sheep houses in the Saxon style, wells, a farmhouse and outbuildings. But because they were not content with the size and situation of their land grants, they tried to persuade the colonial authorities to grant them more land, even returning to Britain to put their case. John died in there in 1834 and Eliza returned to Van Diemen's Land. In 1838 she and her sons sold Kenilworth and part of their flock to the Taylor family and moved to the Port Phillip District of New South Wales (now Victoria). There, after some years of squatting, and a number of trips back to Scotland, Eliza settled with William and his wife at Seven Creeks Station near Euroa, where she managed the house and station affairs during their frequent absences. It seems Eliza had outstanding pioneering and managerial ability and great skill in selecting sheep. She died in 1859 at the age of 65. David Taylor of Winton founded the Taylor stud on the Forlonges' Saxon merinos, which were greatly sought after by breeders of fine-woolled sheep.

Eliza Forlonge is variously described as a sheep classer, a gentlewoman, 'one of the most pleasantest ladies I have ever met',² and 'strong willed' and 'eccentric'.³ I guess she was labelled as eccentric because she did not fit the stereotype of a colonial lady or gentlewoman. Most historical descriptions of female colonial rural gentry do not describe them as working on the land; rather their work was confined to household chores and supervision of servants or convicts.

As a feminist, I am pleased to find that Eliza Forlonge has her female modern counterparts in the fine wool industry. My online research has found two Tasmanians I would like to mention. Georgina Wallace was brought up on Trefusis, her parents' Jim and Josie McEwan's property, which is famous for producing superfine merino wool. Georgina is now the stud classer at Trefusis after returning there in 2007 from Deddington, where she grew Superfine Merinos with her husband Hamish.⁴ The bloodlines from Trefusis, south of

² Ramsay, n 1, quoting W Howitt, *Land, Labour and Gold* (Melb, 1855).

³ Ramsay, n 1 quoting S Wilde, *Eliza Forlonge* (Euroa, Vic, 1994).

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Ross, are derived from the original Saxon merinos that Eliza shipped to Van Diemen's Land.⁵

Georgina is co-principal of Trefusis Merino Stud and was the first Tasmanian in the 56-year history of the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders (AASMB) to be elected President, in 2015.⁶ She is a member and past president (she was the first female president) of the Midlands Agricultural Association, which conducts the Campbell Town Show and has judged at many Merino shows throughout Australia.⁷ In July last year she and Hamish took out the grand champion fleece title with a 17.8 micron superfine merino fleece (is that a tautology?) at the Australian Fleece Competition held at the Australian Sheep and Wool Show in Bendigo, the largest fleece contest in the world.⁸

My second female superfine wool producer, Nan Bray, has quite a different background. Nan was Chief of CSIRO's Marine Research Division in Hobart, before she branched out into producing superfine wool, running 1200 Saxon Merinos at her Lemon Hill property near Oatlands. Her sheep are also descended from Eliza Forlonge's through the Taylor's Winton stud and the Glen Stuart stud.⁹ Nan has brought her scientific mind to producing superfine wool. She recognises that whilst genetics are important in raising high quality wool and healthy sheep, she claims 70% of an animal's characteristics can be attributed to nutrition, so both nature and nurture matter. Nan is, at the same time, alert to the emerging science of epigenetics, whereby the environment can alter genetics. [Last November, we hosted a reception of the Australian Epigenetics Alliance Scientific Conference at Government House]. For Nan Bray, animal welfare is a key priority. Her sheep are neither mulesed nor their tails docked and she believes nutritional choice is an animal's right. She subscribed to the concept of nutritional wisdom after observing the behaviour of Alice, one of her ewes, as she recovered after being cast.

I am sure there are many more examples of women demonstrating leadership in the superfine wool industry. The fact that at least six Australian rural women involved in merino wool production have received Rural Women's Awards demonstrates this.

⁵ Davis, n 1.

⁶ 'New Merino president's positive plan', *Farmers' Weekly*, 22 April 2015.

⁷ Above n 4.

⁸ 'Tassie stud's fleece win', *Stock and Land*, 17 July 2015.

⁹ White Gum Wool, The Farm, <http://whitegumwool.com.au/farm/>, accessed 5 April, 2016.

I make no apology for the focus on women because women's role in agriculture has been ignored and unrecognised for too long. Women don't have adequate representation on rural decision-making and policy bodies. Whilst an early pioneer, such as Eliza Forlonge, appears to have been recognised as a wool grower, for nearly two centuries rural women were housewives and homemakers rather than farmers in their own right. In the 1990s the women in agriculture movement made some progress in empowering women. But since then it seems the momentum has declined and little progress has been made in the last decade.¹⁰ This is despite the fact that 40 per cent of Australian farmers are women and they are more than twice as likely to have a tertiary education than men who are farmers.¹¹ This is not just a gender equity issue. The failure to fully utilise women in agriculture is agriculture's loss.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the wonderful reputation Tasmania's fine wool producers have established over many years. I am also aware of the dedication and perseverance required of fine wool growers to keep flocks together so Tasmania can continue enhance its position in the fine wool market.

Thank you

¹⁰ Tess Marslen, *Empowering Women in Agriculture: Australia and Beyond*, Strategic Analysis Paper, Future Directions International, 2015, <http://awia.org.au/resources/> accessed 5 April 2016.

¹¹ Marslen, n 10, p 6.