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Ruth Ford

Mallee Residues: A Family Photograph Album from Southern Australia

In early winter 1920, 23-year-old William Victor Carson and his 27-year-old brother James Edward Carson took up soldier settler blocks in Kooloonong, Victoria, in southern Australia's Mallee lands. Mallee was the name given to scrubby, multi-stemmed bulbous-rooted eucalypts (*Eucalyptus dumosa*) but was also used to describe the northwestern part of the state of Victoria covered by mallee vegetation as shrubland and woodland. Almost immediately after arrival, the brothers began photographing their land, their living quarters, and their efforts to clear the mallee and these photographs became part of a Carson family album.



Figure 1:
Brothers Jim and
Will Carson, casually
holding shovels, Jim
with a cigarette in his
mouth.

Both Will and Jim were single returned servicemen, having been discharged from the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) in January 1920. Both had been injured during active service and declared medically unfit. The Land Board's notes of evidence recorded of Jim: "I am capable of doing the work incidental to putting the block applied for into a productive state"; and of Will: "Satisfied I can make a living of it, will keep wheat." Within days of their leases being approved, the bachelor brothers had shifted from urban Melbourne to work their blocks together. They erected tents as a temporary home and began clearing the land, using a mallee roller. And they began taking photographs.



Figure 2:
"Bringing the Roller
Home"

The Carson album was typical of family albums from this period that depicted the settler colonial project of clearing and rolling the mallee, establishing a house and garden and planting, and harvesting wheat crops. These snapshots are both evidence of environmental change and a form of storytelling about the transformation of the land. The taking, displaying and viewing of these images acted to reinforce their identity as pioneer settlers and as "mallee men."

The photograph captioned "Bringing the Roller Home" shows the extent of cleared land with mallee shrubland and woodland in the distance. The album as a whole has very few photographs of Mallee vegetation without any human figures, work animals, or clearing or farming equipment. The album reflects the settlers' desire to record their transformation of the landscape and their gradual possession of that landscape. The act of photographing, as with the act of mapping and surveying, is an act of visually possessing the landscape; of creating new meanings about that place.



Figure 3:
A wagonload of wheat

There is only one photograph that depicts the landscape without any human figures, work-animals, buildings, machines, or tracks. The image with the caption “How the country looks before rolling” could be read in different ways. Did the Carsons perhaps see value in recording what was about to be destroyed? Or did the Carsons seek to underscore the enormity of the work before them?



Figure 4:
“How the country
looks before rolling”



Figure 5:
Jim on his horse

The majority of images depict Jim and Will with their horse teams clearing the Mallee. The photograph of Jim on his horse draws on visual codes of rural masculinity and Australian horsemanship.

Yet, while the photographs consciously depict their labour in transforming the environment, they also reveal their intimacy and connection with the environment as they work. Images of clearing mallee scrub, cooking, washing, eating outside, and sleeping in a tent reminds us of their daily enmeshment in that environment—from its smells, sounds, vegetation, and birdlife, to its heat and wind.

A photograph depicting Jim and Bill at their initial wagon tent is striking in showing the extent of mallee woodland vegetation and their close contact with it. Other photographs depict the brothers as bachelor men engaged in domestic tasks. Photographs labelled “Will at the wash tub” and “Jim at the oven” create a very different image of mallee masculinity.

A number of photographs also depict their friends or neighbours relaxing and socialising in the landscape, eating lunch under trees and emphasising the family settlement project with women and children present.

There are notable absences and silences in the album. We see no photographs of failed wheat crops or neighbours walking off their farms or of clearing sales after leases were forfeited. The Carsons photographed only their arrival and beginnings in the Mallee, not endings and failures.

In February 1927, Jim died suddenly at the Commercial Hotel, Swan Hill. Two weeks later, Will went ahead with his marriage to Bobbie (Ada) Fuzzard.

* * *

Following a Commission into Soldier and Closer Settlement, the state intervened to compulsorily reclaim some blocks, in order to increase the farm size of settlers deemed most successful and assessed as being “good farmers.” In 1935, as part of this closer settlement adjustment process, the Lands Department wrote to Will Carson offering £75 to relinquish his holding. Will refused the offer, evidently deeming it grossly inadequate compensation. The Commission recalled advances and demanded monies due of £4663. Carson’s lease was subsequently declared forfeited and his block was



Figure 6:
Jim and Bill at their
initial wagon tent



Figure 7:
“Will at the wash tub”



Figure 8:
“Lunch time at a
neighbour’s”



Figure 9:
Rolling mallee

allocated to a neighbouring settler. Jim Carson's block, which had been managed by his brother George Carson since his death in 1927, was also reclaimed.

In 1935, Will Carson and his wife Bobbie move back to urban life to live in Essendon, in Melbourne's western suburbs. The photograph album becomes a material residue of the Carson brothers' years of farming the mallee.

The photographs, taken within the historical conjuncture of the state-sponsored project of clearing and settling the land, and recording progress towards transforming mallee scrub into wheat fields, gain new meanings in an era of emerging conservation. They become both a record of heroic pioneer settlers' attempts to farm the mallee and evidence of environmental destruction, and the need for the conservation of surviving mallee.