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**IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE : THE EXPERIENCE OF
RETIRED FAMILY FARMERS IN THE MANAWATU**

**A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Social Anthropology
at Massey University**

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ABSTRACT

Family farming has, in recent decades, become a growing area of enquiry for social scientists. Post 1980 globally, and in New Zealand, research focused on a perceived rural crisis, which was characterised by the withdrawal of state subsidies and the exposure of the family farmer to the free market. Many began to question whether the family farm would survive. The future of the family farm is a contentious topic, with theories of its impending demise or survival at the forefront of debate. However, in recent literature there is a recognition that a focus on solely structural change is not enough. This study is a response to the recognition that an understanding of the subjective aspects of family farming is required. Taking a small cohort of retired Manawatu farmers this study provides an insight into the subjective dimensions of family farming and the social construction of 'farmer identity'. The participant's accounts are contextualised by a consideration of both regional and national historical processes that have shaped and continue to shape, family farming practice and farmer identity.

The study suggests that accounts which conceptualise 'family' farming as either oppositional or outside of a capitalist system of production are inappropriate in the New Zealand context; ignore the intimate relation between family farming and the capitalist system; which represents a tendency to rely on common sense assumptions about the nature of the family and family farming with no empirical justification. These accounts are typically ahistorical. This study reveals that in taking into account the historical underpinnings of the family farm in the Manawatu and New Zealand more generally, and by focusing on the subjective aspects of what it means to be a farmer engaged in family farming, it is possible to understand the relation between capitalism and family farming.

KEYWORDS: CAPITALISM; CORPORATE; EXPERIENCE; FAMILY; FARMING; FUTURE; IDEOLOGY; IDENTITY; RETIREMENT; SUBJECTIVITY; SUCCESSION.

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PREFACE

The reason for my interest in family farming and farmers is perhaps indistinguishable from a lifetime of experiences, but the recent focus and formulation of a thesis topic does derive from specific sources. Born and raised in an urban setting, there was never much cause for me to turn my attention to any aspect of farming. Until I worked for two years as a home aid, for a few hours a week for an elderly couple. The couple, Doug and Laura Williams, had retired to town from a farm in the Rangitikei district. When I first met them Laura was ill, she slowly recovered but never regained her former strength. I would arrive at about 1pm, just as they were finishing lunch (which typically in winter and soup followed by scrambled eggs on toast). The table was crammed with their plates, dishes of scones, jars of jam, salt and pepper, and always a pot of tea and cups and saucers, milk, cream; a huge spread with everything which might be needed, so as to avoid getting up from the table once lunch had commenced. I'd sometimes sit and chat with them as they finished their lunch, then Doug would get up, put his toweling hat on his head and shuffle outside to garden, potter, build or paint something.

Sometimes when I'd visit, Laura would be at bridge and I'd chat with Doug, he'd ask me about university, ask if I'd read so and so, or learnt about this or that yet. Once he commented on the amount of Samoan and Maori people at his granddaughter's graduation from nursing and asked if we "get much of that at Massey?" Doug and I were often on different ideological planes, however, he inspired me not to dismiss his views but to understand them. He was a deeply religious man and was also a politically active person as a member of the National party. He was civic minded and belonged to local clubs, and also was an avid bowls player. Even after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he'd put on his cap after lunch and potter around in the garden and then come in for his afternoon rest. He did this until he could physically no longer get about. With his hat, his ute, and his flannel shirt and gumboots, he was in many respects the stereotypical 'farmer', but Laura, on the other hand, had more in common with other retired women I had worked for. However, the conversations I had with the Williams taught me a lot (for in the beginning I knew very little) about rural New Zealand. They

challenged me to investigate further what it means to be a farmer in New Zealand, what is important to them? What is their view of the world? And to contextualise this information within the broader economic and political changes affecting farming.

This text is dedicated to the memory of Doug Williams who past away in 1994 aged 80. Because, knowing the respect and value he had in the printed word, I just know this dedication and the thought that he had influenced me so much would have made his day.