

Stephen MCKENZIE

A Letter To Future Generations

Hello, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Stephen McKenzie, a Melbourne photojournalist who was born in 1967, and dies... well, I'm not sure yet being alive right now, but a date's sure to be added.

The photos you're looking at were taken in May 2021, between lockdowns from the Covid 19 virus. They were taken at a time when surging population growth saw Melbourne expand dramatically northward, past relatively new suburbs of Doreen and South Morang, to farmland areas of Mernda, Donnybrook and beyond. Where those suburbs end today I can only image.

Back then, not far from the bucolic vistas pictured here, cleared fields teamed with cranes, bulldozers and builders laying the infrastructure for massive new communities: roads, houses, libraries, community centres and shopping complexes. Exciting, in some cases visionary projects. But with land values soaring, and costs at a premium, many of the region's iconic river red gums were felled. This wasn't lost on the City of Whittlesea's Cultural Collection Coordinator, a woman fascinated with the work of Fred Kruger, a German photographer who documented the region 150 years before myself.

She studied his sensitive pictures closely, marvelling at landscapes unrecognisable today, and decided that Whittlesea Shire's outer regions needed documented before they became the same. That's where I came in. I'd like you to drive around and photograph as much as you can", she said in a phone call one day. "Future generations should be able to see what places looked like centuries before, just as Fred left us his mirror to the past".

For three wonderful days I drove around Whittlesea Shire, stopping to photograph stately, dramatic, gnarled, and stoic trees I formerly paid scant attention. I marvelled at how they changed colour with the movement of sun and cloud, how some danced in the wind, while others stood defiantly still. I was entranced by the age of some, the uniqueness of others and, in pockets of Doreen and South Morang, thrilled at the number of stunning red gums integral to streetscapes.

I finished the project hoping that you not only recognise some of these marvellous trees today, but that many are cherished features of estates in Melbourne's current outer north. (Or is it "inner" north these days...?)

Part of a photo essay commissioned by Council in 2021 documenting some of the ancient Red Gums in the municipality.

City of Whittlesea Cultural Collection