

GEORGE MALCOLM THOMSON AND THE 1913 ROYAL COMMISSION ON FORESTRY

Part 1: The Political Battle

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On 8 October 1909 the newly elected member for Dunedin North, G. M. Thomson, asked his first question in the House and in doing so launched what was to be a long, persistent, and in the end successful campaign. He asked the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable J. G. Ward, who was also Minister in charge of State forests, "Whether it is the intention of the Government to take the requisite steps to place the forests of New Zealand under a specially trained and qualified officer so that the present destructive system of dealing with this great national asset may be arrested."

Ward's reply, an only too familiar example of departmental self-justification, was bland; but it was much fuller than might have been expected in dealing with an unimportant and inexperienced Opposition backbencher. He said that Crown forests "are periodically inspected and constantly supervised by the various 'Commissioners of Crown Lands' who are also Conservators of State forests and their staff of rangers and timber experts who report on all applications for timber cutting rights and proposed sales of timber. The timber is disposed of . . . in a manner calculated to secure not only the most economical but also the most beneficial results . . . with regard to afforestation, thoroughly trained and qualified officers supervise the operations of the nurseries and plantations in each island and every effort is made to carry on the work on the most modern and efficient lines. [That this is so is evidenced by the remarks and recommendations of the Timber Commission in its recently published report.] It is therefore deemed unnecessary to appoint another officer to the existing staff of specially selected and capable men."

The element of over-kill in this reply suggests that the government was perhaps less than fully confident of the adequacy of its forest administration. Certainly the reply did not satisfy Thomson who knew it to be false and misleading, at least as far

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† The New Zealand Parliamentary Debates references to this and other quotations are given in a scientific bibliography of G. M. Thomson (Thomson, 1985; this and other references are given at the end of Part 2).

as native forests were concerned. He returned to the attack at the first opportunity, two months later, during the debate on the Estimates of the Lands and Survey Department. His attack was then direct and uncompromising. The "Commissioners of Crown Lands," he said, "know nothing about forestry and it would be better to put the forests in charge of specialists." He went on to claim that whereas "in countries where scientific forestry is practised only 50% of the wood was utilised . . . in New Zealand the figure was as low as 5%." He deplored our wholesale destruction of forests and the slow rate of replanting. He pointed out that the slow-growing podocarps could probably not be renewed. He ended with a repetition of his plea that "a well trained scientific expert should be obtained . . . to look after our forests under proper supervision." Ward's reply was again unsympathetic; "as far as the scientific forestry experts, they were not justified in doing more than they were doing at present. They already had one man for the North Island and another for the South Island."

He made the further strange comment that "two libraries have been established in the nurseries . . . which are furnished with the latest works to enable the men employed to read all works published in other lands and so be up-to-date." He did not think it was necessary to spend large amounts on salaries.

Thomson did not have the opportunity then to explain that his point had been completely missed or, more likely, deliberately misrepresented; he had no criticisms of Goudie and Morrison, the Superintending Nurserymen in the North Island and South Island, respectively, or of the Afforestation Branch generally. His concern was with the inefficiencies of the timber sales systems, and of the Commissioners of Crown Lands who administered them.

On 9 September 1910, during the debate on supply, he spoke again to the question he had asked the previous year, quoting in full the unsatisfactory reply then received. He referred to statements of forest depletion in the United States and their implications for New Zealand. As a sideline, whilst advocating a higher rate of afforestation in New Zealand, he warned against the risk of not following up planting with adequate tending. Although this warning was subsequently given by many other people it was always almost entirely ignored with subsequent disastrous effects on the quality and health of the forests established. G. M. Thomson was amongst the first to see these dangers, or at least to give them wide publicity.

He elaborated on these points when he returned to the attack during the debate on the State Forest Account in 1910. In order to raise again the question of desirability of the State Forest Department being under a proper scientific head, he moved a token reduction in the salaries of the two Superintending Nurserymen. In his speech to the motion he said, "New Zealand has no skilled forester who had been completely trained in the science of forestry. Every other country that had State forests was recognising the necessity of dealing with the problem as a whole and as one that must be dealt with on proper and systematic lines. It [the problem of forestry] could not be dealt with piecemeal. The science [of forestry] embraced the denudation of land, the reforestation of desirable areas, the conservation of water, etc. and these matters could not be dealt with as unrelated problems." This was probably the first ever recognition by a New Zealand politician of the fact that forestry is indivisible.

The Government spokesman in the 1910 debate was the Honorable David Buddo*, Minister of Internal Affairs. He was not impressed and expressed surprise at the motion, "seeing the very complete way in which the State forest work was carried out." His further comments were a reiteration of the points which it was stated the Government had already made in a formal reply to earlier representations. This read as follows, "in view of the great amount of success that has already attended the efforts of the Government I think it would be inadvisable to engage the services of an outside expert who could not possibly know the special conditions of forestry in this Dominion whilst we have at our disposal the services of men who had been trained on modern lines and have studied for years the varied features of forest management." Although this statement was palpably untrue and completely unsatisfactory, the motion was lost, the voting being along party lines. Thomson had succeeded in his tactic of getting the matter raised again but he was most disappointed at the debate which had concentrated on exotic forestry rather than what he knew to be by far the most important problem, the management of native forests.

G. M. Thomson at this time was active and influential in scientific affairs, as he had been for many years. A member of

* Buddo on this occasion must have been a good party member because philosophically he was on Thomson's side. He spoke often on the need for forest conservation and when the New Zealand Forestry League was founded in 1916 he was an original councillor.

the Otago Institute since 1872, he was president of that body in 1881 and again in 1891. He was elected a Governor of the N.Z. Institute in 1905 and in 1907. In 1908 and early 1909 he was President, the third person in the history of New Zealand's most prestigious scientific body to hold that office. As a President, ex-President and current governor during the time that he was a member of the House of Representatives*, he was in constant contact with all leading scientists in New Zealand and with leading scientific thought. Amongst the scientists was Leonard Cockayne, a forest ecologist of worldwide repute who had been commissioned by the government to produce what turned out to be masterly reports on Kapiti Island, Tongariro National Park, Stewart Island and Waipoua kauri forest. He had also reported formally to the Government on "The Necessity for Forest Conservation." As well as being a colleague of Thomson's, Cockayne was by way of being something of a protege. They had first met in the early 1880s when the latter was a teacher at Greytown (later Allanton) where Thomson's wife's family lived; and it was Thomson's book on New Zealand ferns which, on his own admission gave Cockayne the original impetus to take up botany as a career.

There is no direct evidence that Thomson and Cockayne worked together in endeavouring to influence the government's views on forest policy and forest administration, but given their close association and their close community of interest it is probable that they did. If there was a third person in the background with a concern for the future of New Zealand's forests and a detailed knowledge of the problems, it would certainly be E. Phillips Turner, who was then Inspector of Scenic Reserves in the Lands Department. In the event, it was Phillips Turner who was Secretary of the 1913 Royal Commission on Forestry; in later years he became Secretary and then Director of the newly established Forestry Department. Phillips Turner at the time was a close personal friend of G. M. Thomson. He was, however, a lone administrative voice in a department unsympathetic to forestry.

In mid-1910 Thomson moved to solicit scientific support in his plea for forestry reform. On 22 August he wrote to the Otago Institute as follows:

*Thomson was the only serving President of the Royal Society to be elected to Parliament.

Dear Fulton

I want to bring some pressure on the Government to put our forest management on a proper footing, as at present this most valuable asset is being rapidly destroyed. I am urging the appointment of a highly trained expert for a short term of years to advise the Government.

It would greatly strengthen my hands if the Otago Institute would pass a resolution urging this matter on the proper authorities. The Wellington Philosophical Society is going to take similar action, and I am writing to Speight and Cheeseman asking them to do the same.

With kind regards

I am, Yours sincerely

Geo. M. Thomson.

The Otago Institute responded dutifully with a strong resolution, using G.M.'s own words, and ending with the suggestion that the specially trained expert should advise the Government "*on all matters* pertaining to forest conservation".

His letters to the Canterbury and Auckland Philosophical Institutes also drew favourable responses, Chilton, Cockayne and Speight in Canterbury in particular giving strong support. The Canterbury Institute also wrote to H. Heaton Rhodes, M.P. for Ellesmere, pressing for the recruitment of "one trained in forestry department work such as India, Germany and Norway". Although the minutes do not record that the Council had this view, the Institute went on to say the Institute however did not believe that the management of native forests should be in the hands of imported experts since a detailed knowledge of local conditions was required. This was yet one more example of what Roche (1983) has described as "the myopic assertions that local appointees could best undertake forest management because European experience would be inappropriate to the N.Z. environment". This letter also stated, "it would be unwise to endeavour to combine this work with that of reafforestation for future timber supply," a point of view with which Thomson did not agree.

Despite these two reservations on somebody's part, the officially recorded response from Canterbury was what Thomson was looking for, as was the reply from Auckland. Cheeseman also wrote from Auckland (to Heaton Rhodes?) saying, "at a meeting recently held in Auckland after considerable discussions it was unanimously resolved to forward a resolution to the Government advocating the engagement of an expert who has had practical experience in modern methods of forest management and reafforestation generally."

The Government's replies were not encouraging. The Minister (Sir Joseph Ward) wrote back to the Otago Institute saying, "the Government already has at its disposal the services of highly competent persons whose knowledge of the subject are quite equal to the necessity of the occasion." The Canterbury and Auckland Institutes had similar letters, the former one prompting Speight to write personally to Thomson saying, "the Government claims for the present administration just those merits which we do not think that the department really does have."

Thomson nevertheless had succeeded in his aim, which was to mobilise scientific opinion on his side and to have it expressed in strong and unequivocal terms. He was thus able to go back to the House with his hand considerably strengthened. This he did in the 1911 Session when J. A. Hanan, M.P. for Invercargill, tabled a question designed to secure an increase in the vote of the Afforestation Branch. Thomson took the opportunity offered to speak once more at length on the theme of scientific forest management, his main point, of course, being that in 1910 there had been a very strong appeal to the Prime Minister by the scientific societies of the country urging forestry reform and that the Government had not responded.

Later in the 1911 Budget debate Thomson spoke at length again, first, on the question of irrigation in Central Otago and the need to conserve water by planting the headwaters of streams (he went against popular opinion of the time by emphasising that tree planting itself does not alter total rainfall). Predictably he used the opportunity to plead once more for a scientifically trained forester. He said, "in this connection I want to come back to the subject I have hammered at for two years and at which I shall continue to hammer in the hope that at last I shall get it. If you stick long enough at a thing you will get it. My attitude in this respect has nothing to do with votes, for unfortunately, it does not commend itself to votes."

This wide-ranging speech elicited favourable editorials from the *Evening Post*, the *Hawke's Bay Herald* and significantly, the *Farmers Union Advocate*. Thomson was beginning to make his voice heard.*

*Later, referring to his battles for New Zealand's fisheries as well as for forestry, the *Evening Post* was to make the comment, "his sympathies are wide over sea and land." This graceful tribute would have been much appreciated by Thomson himself.

In August 1912, no longer in opposition, he came back to the attack and once more tabled a question on scientific forest management, this time making it crystal clear that he was concerned about both exotic and indigenous forests. The question was "whether the Prime Minister would make enquiries with the object of procuring the services of a highly qualified expert in order to conserve and obtain the greatest value from our existing forest and to develop tree planting on scientific and commercial lines throughout the Dominion." Massey needed more time and his reply was brief and non-committal but as the leader of a farmer's Government he was aware of rural thinking on the subject. Thus, in November, when Thomson asked yet again what was being done, Massey was able to say that he was considering the question of appointing a Commissioner to go into the whole question. His attention had been called to the unsatisfactory state of affairs in connection with our forests on quite a number of occasions but he had not had time to go into the matter personally. He thought of asking his colleagues to allow him to arrange for a couple of practical men to go into the whole matter.

Massey was here referring to the pressure from tree planting enthusiasts such as Robert McNab of Southland, T. W. Adams and the Deans brothers of Canterbury, J. G. Wilson of Bulls, and Richard Reynolds of Auckland. These early farm foresters had an influence on the thinking of the farming community, to the extent that "tree planting and afforestation became a subject to which the Agricultural Conference and the Farmers Union gave some attention" (Wild, 1953). The thrust, however, was once again towards exotic rather than indigenous forestry. During this period it was the scientific community alone, prodded by Thomson, which was pressing for reform in the administration of indigenous forests; it was not until years later that the N.Z. Forestry League, guided by Sir David Hutchins and Sir James Wilson, mobilised public opinion towards the same end.

Thomson was not entirely happy with all aspects of Massey's reply but he had at last achieved his object of forcing the government into some sort of action and he was well enough pleased with the result. Thus was the 1913 Royal Commission on Forestry born.

It is of interest to speculate whence came Thomson's dedication to New Zealand's native forests and to their preservation and management. His love for the bush undoubtedly arose during

major botanical expeditions he made as a young man — particularly to Stewart Island in 1875 with Petrie — and to Lake Hauroko in 1882 with R. Paulin (Thomson, 1985). We do not know who or what were the other outside influences in these and in later years but it can be noted that at this time his botanical mentor was Thomas Kirk, Chief Conservator of Forests 1886-1889, and through Kirk, or from other sources, he would undoubtedly have known of the pioneering reforms instituted by Sir Julius Vogel, of the provisions of the 1885 Forest Act, and of the successes, and perhaps more importantly, the failures of the subsequent short-lived Kirk administration.

As a keen supporter of the Otago Philosophical Institute, it is probable that he met and was influenced by Captain Inches Campbell Walker when the latter addressed the Institute in 1876. On the other hand, it is unlikely that he would ever have encountered Lecoy, a French forester who in 1879 wrote critically on many aspects of indigenous forest policy; or of the remarkably prescient Lands Department Officer, Ranger Innes of Otago, who as early as 1874 advocated the silvicultural management of native forests on a sustained yield basis. An avid seeker of scientific information, he would certainly have read the publications of both, as well as those of the Rev. P. Walsh, a conservation minded cleric who published thought-provoking articles in the *Transactions of the N.Z. Institute* in 1892, 1896 and 1898.

Innes's views were not all in accordance with the popular thinking of the time which was much influenced by what Roche has termed the "displacement concept" — a theory that in time the indigenous vegetation would disappear in the face of an inherently more vigorous and aggressive introduced flora. This heresy, propounded and given some weight to by Sir James Hooker, and repeated and given even more weight during the 1870s and 1880s by Travers, Potts, Armstrong and other scientists-naturalists led to the logical conclusion that it would be pointless to try to regenerate or manage native forests and that the only sensible policy was to secure future timber supplies by the planting of faster growing and "more stable" exotics. As Roche commented, "science operated to discourage indigenous forest management in New Zealand."

Thomson, however, was an early student, in very considerable detail, of acclimatisation and the naturalisation of introduced species; indeed his first published paper in 1875 was on this subject (Thomson, 1875). His subsequent studies, a mixture

of observations, reading and correspondence, culminated 45 years later in the publication of the definitive work on the subject, *The Naturalisation of Animals and Plants in New Zealand* (Thomson, 1922). Earlier, though, this work had led him to reject the displacement concept which by the 1890s was starting to be queried, particularly by Thomas Kirk (Kirk, 1895). At the fifth meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) held in Dunedin in 1891, Thomson delivered an important paper entitled, "Some Aspects of Acclimatisation in New Zealand (Thomson, 1891a). In this he argued against the validity of the displacement concept, providing sound theoretical reasons as well as specific scientific evidence to expose its fallacies. It is possible that this paper played a part in changing both scientific and political thinking on forest management. It is of interest to note that present at the Dunedin meeting were Thomas Kirk, Sir William Buller, Captain F. W. Hutton, T. J. Parker (Professor of Biology at Otago University), A. P. W. Thomas (Professor of Natural Science at Auckland University), Dr Charles Chilton (Professor of Zoology at Canterbury University), the early naturalist-politician W. L. T. Travers, D. M. Petrie and R. M. Laing who were both close botanical colleagues of Thomson, the great ecologist, Cockayne, and the great New Zealand systematic botanist, Cheeseman. Never before in New Zealand had such a galaxy of biological talent been assembled. Present also was H. Heaton Rhodes, M.P. for Ellesmere, who 20 years later was to give Thomson political support.

Thomson's thinking about reserving and preserving some native forests as well as managing others had also become clarified by 1891. At the same meeting, as Secretary of the Biology Section, he joined with A. P. W. Thomas in persuading the meeting to pass the following resolutions:

that in the interests of science it is more desirable that some steps should be taken to establish one or more reserves where the native flora and fauna of New Zealand may be preserved from destruction;

that the Little Barrier Island and Resolution Island, Dusky Sound, appear to be the most suitable locations for such a reserve.

It is chastening to note though how small and limited were the territorial demands in the AAAS's resolution.

Resolution Island had been a favourite of Thomson's since his Lake Hauroko expedition in 1882. He followed up the

AAAS's motion later in 1891 when, at a meeting of the Otago Institute, he spoke again on the preservation of flora and fauna with particular comments on Resolution Island (Thomson, 1891b). This speech, published in the *N.Z. Journal of Science*, was his first recorded statement on conservation matters. Here he was anticipating H. G. Ell who in the first decade of the 20th century was to be the architect of the Scenery Preservation Act 1903 and the tireless and successful proponent of setting aside a network of scenic reserves all over New Zealand. Thomson and Ell were contemporaneous in the House of Representatives from 1909-1914; they were very much of the same generation and philosophy, and they were both dedicated conservationists. Though politically opposed, they were complementary, Ell speaking mainly on scenic reserves and Thomson on forestry reform. After Thomson departed in 1914, Ell took over Thomson's role in the Lower House as the major spokesman on native forest protection; Thomson had to wait until 1918 to resume this role, this time in the Upper House.

He also received some, but very little help from the 1909 Royal Commission on Timber and Timber Building Industries. As the name indicates, the report dealt with industries rather than with the forest supplying them. Its few comments on forestry *per se* (stimulated doubtless by one of its members, Ell) were unexceptional but feebly worded.

By the time he entered Parliament (he was then 61), he had without doubt strong and informed views on all three major aspects of forest management and forest policy — indigenous forest administration and management, indigenous forest protection and preservation, and exotic afforestation; he was well qualified to fight the battles he did.