

# Leader, enthusiast and visionary

Allan Priestley (A.P.) Thomson

2 April 1913 – 8 August 2002

Priestley Thomson, former President of the Institute (1962 – 1963) and Honorary Member, and Director General and Chief Executive of the NZ Forest Service (1971-74) died in Wellington on the 8th of August.

His contributions to the development of forestry practice in New Zealand and the forest industry were many and varied, however along with the few others who achieved the same position in their forestry careers – he was first and foremost a leader, an enthusiast and a man of vision.

Priestley was descended from Scottish, Presbyterian pioneers who settled in Dunedin. Both his father and grandfather came to be well known for their contribution to New Zealand science. G.M. Thomson, Priestley's grandfather was a scientist, teacher and politician. His son J. Allan Thomson, Priestley's father, **was** New Zealand's first Rhodes Scholar and a geologist. Both G.M. and later Allan served terms as President of the NZ Institute, which later became the Royal Society.

Both his parents died when he was still relatively young, his mother when he was 2 and his father after a long struggle with Tb when Priestley was 15. He and his sister Margaret were raised by members of his extended family, and lived for periods in Wellington and Christchurch. Priestley attended Fendalton Primary School, Wellington College and then went on to complete a degree in science and forestry, being one of the few graduates of the first (short-lived) Canterbury University School of Forestry.

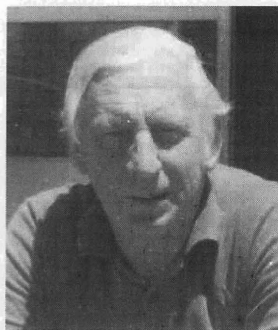
As a young man he also engaged in other strenuous activity being the first, with Pascoe, to climb Mt Evans, and also an accomplished middle distance runner.

His forestry career commenced with the NZ Forest Service (Wellington Conservancy) in 1935, followed by a stint in French Equatorial Guinea (now Gabon) from 1937-39 in a forest management and harvesting role. His return to New Zealand was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II; Priestley joined the army and spent much of the war as a Captain in the NZ Forestry Corps, serving in England, Algeria and Italy. While in England he was part of a specialised unit surveying and identifying essential wood supplies in Great Britain.

This large-scale forest inventory experience was of great relevance to his first major post-war project, for upon his return to New Zealand he was assigned the task of conducting what became one of the country's most significant forestry projects – the National Forest Survey. The then Director of Forestry, Alex Entrican was keen to have the real extent of the country's native forests fixed, and identified Priestley as having the capability to do this well.

The project was designed to quite specifically identify;

- The merchantable volume of wood in the non-protected



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tion forests by species and diameter class.

- To update the national forest inventory which was by then well out of date.
- To prepare vegetation maps for all classes of forested land by forest type.
- To report the extent of damage by introduced animals, and any significant erosion and regeneration of native forest.

Priestley was dispatched to the United States for 6 months specialised training in some of the techniques available for this work, and upon his return was based in the old stables at Whakarewarewa Nursery, and with a minimum

of resources the painstaking work required to implement a survey of the country's natural forests was planned and got underway. Over the next 10 years field notes and data from thousands of plots were plotted and recorded, and a detailed account of the state of all New Zealand's native forests produced.

This remains the only extensive record of our natural forests and it includes a compendium of information few other countries can match. The scores of young men involved over the several summers of the survey developed a camaraderie that blossomed into life-long friendships, frequent reunions and at least a book or two providing accounts of the frequent thrills and spills along the way. It also helped provide a strong sense of esprit de corps that remained with the Forest Service for most of its existence.

In 1946, while still running the survey Priestley was appointed Officer-in-Charge of the Forest Experiment Station (which became the FRI) and Assistant Conservator of Forests Rotorua. In 1951 he moved on from these tasks to take on the role of Planning Officer for the Forest Service in Wellington. This was a key period for the Forest Service as it was over this period that the Tasman Sale was developed and negotiated, leading to the establishment of Tasman Pulp and Paper Limited and its integrated wood processing facilities at Kawerau. There is little doubt that the sale kick-started real life into harvesting and utilisation of the vast forests of the region.

In 1955 Priestley was appointed Conservator of the Canterbury region, in 1959 Conservator Rotorua, and in 1961 he returned to Wellington as Assistant Director General and Director of Forest Management. In 1967 he was appointed Deputy Director General under Lindsay Poole and from 1971 until his retirement in 1974 he was Director General of the NZ Forest Service.

In 1969 the Forest Service convened the country's first Forestry Development Conference, and Priestley was given the responsibility of chairing the important Production Forestry Working Party. This group strongly reinforced the already reasonably established view that, in addition to meeting New Zealand's own wood



*Priestley Thomson (centre) at the Tasman Pulp and Paper Mill, Kawerau, mid 1950s. Left are Director General Alex Entrican and Minister of Forests Hon. Eruera Tirikatene.*

requirements, potential for export growth was good and targets doubling forestry export volumes were recommended. In August 1969 the Cabinet accepted the recommendation and authorised a Forest Service share of the programme of 14,500 ha per annum.

While Priestley in his summary to the conference noted the potential for some local land use conflict he particularly emphasised the criteria for new planting, including a focus around existing large-scale wood processing industry, creating further concentrations of planting to support industrial development in the future, and proximity to ports – all factors which have served the country's growing forest industry well. By 1972 his department was referring revised planting targets to the National Development Committee, claiming that with a more expansive new planting target (28,000 ha per year) forestry sector export earnings could be raised to 9% of the national total, and harvest levels could be increased more or less immediately. Cabinet again approved this target (May 1972) but with a proviso that private planting make up a bigger proportion of the total.

In 1974, at the second Forestry Development Conference, Priestley Thomson and his colleagues noted that even allowing for various economic, legal and environmental needs it was still feasible to promote an even larger new planting target, although they also foresaw the local conflicts that for a period of time frustrated new tree planting endeavours in several regions. The Afforestation Working Party proposed new regional planting targets within this strategy, and Government subsequently approved a new base planting target of 16,200 ha per annum for the Forest Service – although the actual areas planted were around 21,000 ha each year with the addition of special employment programmes.

Thus the second planting boom was launched and implemented in New Zealand, and Priestley and his colleagues in the Forest Service had a large part to play in it.

Like other Directors General of the Forest Service before and after, Priestley saw the department having both

development and environmental roles. The constant challenge from other environmental organizations who saw both the forestry sector and the Forest Service differently seemed at times almost irrational, nevertheless as Secretary of the NZ Institute of Forestry he was a co-signatory of the Institute's 1946 policy statement that acknowledged that the urge for forest areas was for "...spiritual as well as physical recreation". Decades later he was a proponent of the establishment of Forest Parks by the Forest Service.

Similarly he was also an enthusiastic supporter of National Parks, being an inaugural member of the Mt Cook National Park Board while Conservator in Christchurch, and from 1961, when relocated to Wellington, he was the NZ Forest Service representative on the National Parks Authority – a role that continued until his retirement in 1974 (he then served another term representing Federated Mountain Clubs). Priestley also enjoyed a life-long membership of NZ Alpine Club and was a member of the executive of Federated Mountain Clubs.

When Priestley retired from the Forest Service in 1974 at the age of 61 he was still vital and active and he was quickly enlisted to the National Research Advisory Council, while he also worked for the United Nations Development Programme, FAO and Volunteer Service Abroad. His enthusiasm for forestry remained strong, he became very concerned with Government's plans to restructure its forestry interests, and he continued to make strong representations on behalf of retaining the original focus for the country's plantation forests almost right up until the time of his death.

He was variously described by his colleagues and associates as being tough, irascible, and impatient at times, but these same people all agreed that this approach reflected a level of drive and commitment found in the very best of leaders. He was proud of and loyal to his people, nowhere better reflected than through his total support for the development of an annual inter-regional and inter-island sports tournament involving rugby and later netball, and involving Forest Service employees from all levels of the organisation. Participants ranged from All Blacks and provincial players to those with only the most modest of skills and the contribution to esprit de corps was again notable.

Priestley's contribution to forestry development in New Zealand was widely recognised; the NZ Institute of Foresters made him an Honorary Member and Fellow, in 1976 he was awarded the QSO for his services to forestry, and his numerous reports and papers continue to be cited in relation to many aspects of forestry development in this country.

Priestley is survived by his wife Prue, a daughter, three sons and several grand children - to all of whom we acknowledge his special contribution to forestry development in New Zealand.

**Peter Berg**