

# The passing of a "good man"

George Michael (Mick) O'Neill 1923 - 2002

I knew Mick O'Neill for 56 years; at first fly-camping with him in 1946 in the Longwood bush in Southland on the National Forest Survey. That was the start of a long association.

Mick was one of the handful of the first New Zealand Forest Service technical trainees who were appointed near the start of World War 2 as the new Director of Forests, Alex R. Entrican, started to implement his far-sighted policy of improving training and recruitment in the Service. (Mick joined the Service in 1941.) It was a policy which could not be achieved fully until after the War.

In 1949 we travelled across to Edinburgh together with bursaries, as part of that policy, to attend the Edinburgh University School of Forestry, and there we roomed together. Mick had graduated B.Sc. at Otago in 1948 where he had studied with a war service rehabilitation bursary. In the vacations we hitch-hiked round Britain, we rode round Europe on motor-bikes and hitch-hiked around Norway. We worked as navvies on demolition work at bombed sites in London. I got to know Mick pretty well.

It was not the first time Mick had been to the UK. Between 1943 and 1945 he had been there in the Royal New Zealand Navy serving on motor-torpedo boats as a sub-lieutenant. He never spoke much about those days, except to say modestly that he had been lucky and had had a pretty good war. But then he was a modest person.

He was keen on all forms of sport. At his home in Invercargill he had been a keen yachtsman, sailing off Oreti Beach, and later in his career, when he was posted to Auckland, he had a boat there. As Edinburgh students we played rugby, including on a practical course in France against the locals; and we played cricket too, often during practical courses on English village greens. Mick even rowed at Edinburgh, although he was not impressed with racing in line towards multiple finishing posts, because the canal was too narrow to take more than one boat, and said so.

When we arrived back in New Zealand in 1951 we were both sent by the Forest Service to Rotorua. We both got married, Mick to Mary in Rotorua, and Joy and I attended the wedding. Families arrived. Mick became a great family man. After a while our paths in the old Forest Service and beyond diverged but we kept meeting and playing each other when we did. At first it was squash. Later it was golf. Mick rarely lost.

Mick had a good career and moved steadily up the administrative ranks of the Forest Service. His first major post was in charge of a wood preservation plant at Waipa near Rotorua. Then he switched to general forestry. He was a district forester stationed in turn at Minginui, West Otago and Rotorua. He became a conservator (a regional chief) first in Southland in 1964 and then Auckland. Later he reached the top Head Office posts in Wellington: Deputy Director-General of Forests 1974-77 and Director-



General 1977-83. He played an active part in 1981 in the last of the National Forestry Conferences. During his career he had been at times a Member of the Southland Catchment Board, a Member of the Water and Soil committee of the Auckland Regional Authority and a Member of the National Parks Authority. He retired in 1983 at age 60.

Mick was a good administrator with firm views, providing leadership because his staff knew clearly what his objectives were and he fronted the debates for the Service. He was something of a disciplinarian. Mick was essentially a practical forester who listened a great deal to the officers in the field. However it would be fair to say that he did not always see eye to eye with some of the politicians he dealt with. He was too forthright. Mick was basically a "people" person who liked people. As Director-General of Forests he continued the ethos of that now long gone government department which was much concerned with the community and service to them, and with the well-being of its own staff. That was the culture which Mick approved and fostered.

He was a Life Member and Fellow of the Institute of Forestry and Vice-President 1974-75. It was typical of Mick that he would not let his name go forward for the post of President. As he said at the time his first loyalty had to be to the Forest Service and if he attained the status of President he might be faced with a conflict of interest. There was no ambivalence about Mick. He was a Member also of the Commonwealth Forestry Association.

After retirement he worked for four years as a Wellington executive of NZ Forest Products Ltd. He became a Director of Maori International Ltd. He still retained a keen interest in the future of the State forests and national forestry policy, lobbying various ministers with Lindsay Poole and Priestley Thomson for a broader and, as he saw it, more enlightened approach, but to little avail. In the late 1990s when the issue of managing the State beech forests for sustained yield of timber became live once again, and Mick thought that Government was doing the wrong thing, he undertook a tour of some forests in Westland and Southland to see for himself. He was not a fan of minimum-impact closed-canopy beech management. He was impressed by a stand of Southland silver beech on the flanks of the Longwood Range which had been clearfelled 60 years ago and which had now regenerated into a fine pole stand. He would tell you repeatedly about this exemplar.

Mick was a positive character with a quick wit and the gift of repartee. I can remember once his reducing the whole changing room in a Wellington squash centre to helpless laughter with his salty comments. He loved arguments. And there was a dose of Irish contrariness there too; he often took the opposite view of the person

in a way that left you in no doubt where he stood. All in all, he was one of the characters of New Zealand forestry.

But underneath was a surprising degree of sensitivity, which did not always show. Mick was essentially a humble person. He was also a good and loyal friend. Perhaps in these gender-conscious days we shy away from acclaiming someone as a good man, but that is what he was in every sense of the term. I shall remember his wit and humour and the fun we had. And I shall remember him with respect and affection.

Our sympathy goes out to Mary and the family, including Institute Member Terry O'Neill, in their sad loss.

**Peter McKelvey**

*(From eulogy at Lower Hutt, December 2002)*

## "Sad News"

This message by email, usually early in the morning, comes as either a confirmation or a shock to Institute members. Another member has been clearfelled, usually after some essential neuro/cardiac component has failed. Considering the full and sometimes hard life many have experienced, these notices are not unexpected. Premature termination by pathogens or accidents is harder to take.

We that survive the rotation deserve to enjoy our 70s and 80s striving to play a round of golf on a gross score

less than our age. If this is interrupted by yet another funeral let us not complain. Accept that "there for the grace of God go I" and go to the funeral.

Why do we go? It is not only for the wake or the chance to yarn with old friends, perhaps for the last time. Nor to show our departed mate that we valued knowing him – after all he will never know we were there. At Mick O'Neill's funeral, Pat Crequer very clearly stated that we do it for Mary or Vivienne or Prue. Recent widows must surely take solace from being shown that their much-loved partners were greatly admired and will be missed by their former colleagues.

As Mick's strong, slightly cynical and knowing image watched from the memorial funeral programme we sang an Irish hymn to the tune of Danny's Boy – his favourite song. It was a pleasure to talk with the triumvirate of D.G widows present and recall the supportive roles they played when their husbands were battling ignorant Treasury officials to keep forestry on the up and up, and we in our jobs. Innumerable trainees enjoyed the often-unheralded hospitality of Prue Thomson in No 1 house of the FRI village; Pam Conway's Reefton haven, and Jocelyn Kirkland's house on Daniel Street, Kaingaroa.

At funerals, those of us who rode on and benefited from the waves of success that made forestry so enjoyable in the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, have another chance to honour those responsible.

**John Groome**

# Researcher exuded enthusiasm for forestry

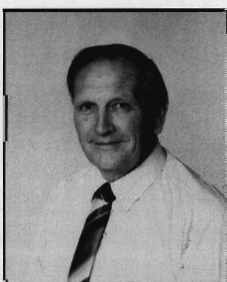
**Ernest Harold (Harry) Bunn 1924 - 2002**

Harry retired from FRI 18 years ago. There have been tremendous changes in the organisation over that period but the flag is flying at half mast, not only as a mark of respect to a past Director but also to recognise the tremendous contribution he made in leading FRI to where it was recognised, both here and overseas, as a centre of excellence in the science and practice of plantation forestry.

That contribution was highlighted at the 50th anniversary of the Institute - he was awarded the Research Leadership Award in Production Forestry.

Harry was a very well rounded forester:

- Of all the people New Zealand sent to the Forestry School in Canberra, Harry as well as being a top student, was the one who more than anyone else developed a special interest in the eucalypts - a deep understanding of this complex group, which ones are best suited to growing in New Zealand, and their potential for timber and veneer. He also had developed an understanding as to how they should be grown to minimise the effects of growth stresses.
- Before coming to FRI, he spent three years at Pureora



involved in indigenous forest and plantation management.

- Then his first period in Rotorua was spent at Waipa Mill which gave him first hand experience of the impact of silviculture on timber quality.

This experience was coupled with a tremendous enthusiasm for forestry and a keen sense of enquiry.

We first met in 1957 when Bet and I were Harry and Viv's next door neighbours. They were great neighbours and we have valued their friendship ever since. However, that was when I first encountered Harry's enthusiasm for forestry - there were times when we were together and Harry would have talked all night. I recall a couple of winter evenings when I decided the best way to call a halt was to let the fire go out. It made no difference!

Other colleagues have a similar story to tell: Harry liked nothing better when away on field trips than gathering everyone around in the evenings and discussing forestry issues into the wee small hours. Next day in