

Otago/Southland forestry great

Keith William Prior 1922-2004

The people of Otago should commemorate and keep alive the memory of a forestry great and one of the last Conservators of Forests, Keith Prior, who died in Invercargill on 10 June. After serving in UK during World War II as a navigator in Bomber Command, Keith joined the family bakery business in Auckland while completing a B.Sc in Botany under the Returned Servicemen's Rehabilitation Scheme. He was chosen to complete his forestry studies at the Australian National University's Forestry School at Canberra from where he graduated as a professional forester.



His first posting with the New Zealand Forest Service was to Balmoral Forest in Canterbury. He was there during the disastrous Balmoral Forest fire in November 1955, and subsequently published an account of the fire in the NZ Journal of Forestry, and co-authored another paper documenting the natural regeneration which followed. These studies were followed by another on wind damage to exotic forests in Canterbury.

He succeeded KW Allison in his promotion to the position of Officer in Charge of the Forest Service's Dunedin District in March 1959 where he remained until July 1970. Dunedin was a district of the Southland Conservancy, based in Invercargill.

Through the vision of Duncan McIntyre, then Minister of Forests, and Lindsay Poole who was Director-General of Forests, Keith was given the task of establishing a major forest estate in Otago. The plan was to purchase and establish forests on 100,000 acres within a 50-mile radius from Balclutha. Over time this plan was modified, with the Otago Coast region becoming the main focus. The obstacles to achieving this were tremendous and many battles had to be fought. Fortunately for Otago, Keith had full support from Lindsay Poole in Wellington. Without Keith's tenacity, drive and determination however, a substantial forest estate would not have been established in Otago; his contribution in laying the foundation for the big increase in the State's afforestation programme cannot be over-emphasised. Keith Prior's contribution to forestry in Otago should never be forgotten.

Keith was a conscientious recorder and continued submitting papers to the Journal. In 1961 he documented shelterbelt mortality in South Canterbury, Otago and Southland and was lead author in a descriptive study of afforestation in the Otago Land District. His last published pa-

per outlined planting trials on dryland stony soils at Balmoral Forest.

Keith was promoted to Principal Forester in Auckland in 1970, and from there went to Hokitika as Conservator of Forests for a short period in 1978-79. He then moved to Invercargill as Conservator of Forests. His strong background in plantation forestry and a good grasp of economics placed him well for overseeing the management of the exotic estate. He embarked with determination to further accrual accounting in the Forest Service, appointed a qualified accountant to promote it, and expected his staff to adopt it also. He investigated the streamlining of in-house services - there were no sacred cows for him.

Keith was never afraid to go into the field, and several times ventured into remote places under difficult conditions. He was not an 'empire-builder' and worked cheerfully alongside other government departments on regional issues. Although the Forest Service had built up a strong presence on Stewart Island, Keith believed the department was not necessarily in the best position to manage the Island in the longer term.

Keith had a brilliant mind and had good ideas, but was an enigmatic man. He was known to be abrasive and aggressive. He never held a grudge for long, even after vociferous differences with his staff, but was nonetheless often unfairly maligned. He was an interesting person to work with; his colleagues in the Dunedin and Invercargill offices found the experience stimulating, with very few dull moments. He put high demands on his staff to achieve goals, but was also very loyal to them when it came to staff assessments.

He deplored the Lange Government's proposals to privatise government departments in the 1980s and made his feelings known. His utterances won him few favours with senior officials. Eventually he retired to Invercargill just before the disestablishment of the Forest Service took place in 1987.

He is survived by his wife Peggy, son Donald and daughters Margaret and Jeanette.

Jim Smith (with contributions from Jack Barber, Dennys Guild and Roger Washbourn).