

# Hugh Corbin

## New Zealand's first Professor of Forestry 1925 to 1931

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### Abstract

Hugh Corbin, who was appointed Professor of Forestry at Auckland University College in 1925, is a somewhat forgotten figure in New Zealand's forest history and the few references to him have been somewhat negative. This paper seeks to understand why this was so and to evaluate these judgements. In doing so it offers a reappraisal of Corbin's time in New Zealand.

### Introduction

Peter McKelvey (1999), among the suite of forest history writing that he completed late in his career, provided a succinct account of the short lived original Auckland and Canterbury Schools of Forestry. He noted that the appointment of Hugh Corbin as Professor of Forestry at Auckland University College in 1925 caused some consternation. This episode is also referred to in the centennial history of the University of Auckland, where it is used as an example of the weakness of the federal University of New Zealand system, although the appropriateness of Corbin's appointment was also questioned (Sinclair, 1983).

By way of reappraisal, this paper endeavours to reconstruct the events leading to Corbin's appointment as professor and to consider why some in the New Zealand State Forest Service reacted so negatively. Finally, extending McKelvey's brief analysis, an evaluation of Corbin's time at Auckland University College is undertaken.

### Advertising a Chair in Forestry

In December 1924 Auckland University College advertised for a Chair in Forestry. The successful candidate was to establish and organise the School of Forestry and undertake the associated teaching and examination. The advertisement also specified that the professor ought to have 'a full knowledge of the different aspects of logging engineering and forest utilisation' (Appointment to Chair of Forestry, 1924, Forestry Correspondence, University of Auckland Archives, UAA).

A salary of £750 increasing by annual increments to £900 was offered. The initial term of appointment was for five years, but this was to be renewable thereafter until terminated by either party. Copies were specifically sent to Australia and South Africa. This advertisement represented the resolution of moves over several years to have forestry established as a university subject in New Zealand. The complex rivalries within the University of New Zealand system meant that the competing claims of Auckland and Christchurch had played out

as an unsatisfactory compromise with two under-resourced forestry schools, whereby Auckland got a chair and Canterbury two lecturer positions. The Reichel-Tate Commission into University Education in New Zealand almost immediately drew specific attention to the absurdity of the situation in 1925.

There were eventually 21 applicants for the chair of whom four, Arnold Hansson, CM Smith, Frank Foster and RB Steele, were from the New Zealand State Forest Service. Other applicants were from India and the UK, and a number today are untraceable. AD Brander, a Conservator of Forests in the Indian Forest Service had shown earlier interest in New Zealand, after being one of two shortlisted for the role of Director of Forests in New Zealand in 1919, but had been obliged to return to India before he could be interviewed, and the position was offered to Canadian LM Ellis. Others expressed interest in the professorship, such as Oxford trained Owen Jones, then heading the Victorian Forestry Commission, where he was somewhat unhappy in his job, but never made a formal application.

### Applicants for the Chair in Forestry

Name	Country or city	Employment
Addie J HF		
Chaffer R R		
Cowan J M	India	
David A N	London, England	DSIR
Hopwood J L		
Hansson A M	Wellington	State Forest Service
Quick W J	North Carolina, United States	
Teal G E		
Carter T	Devon, England	
Zaagier C V		
Corbin H H	Adelaide	Lecturer in Forestry
Anderson M C		
Steele R B	Nelson	State Forest Service
Fraser J		
Foster F W	Wellington	State Forest Service
Brander A A D	India	Conservator of Forests
Smith C M	Invercargill	State Forest Service
Haagis F W		
Wahlenberg W G	Asburton	

Source: Auckland University Council Correspondence, Forestry 1925

## Motivation of some applicants

The motivations of the four State Forest Service applicants warrant attention. Foster, Smith, and Steele, after war service, had taken up the opportunity for university study in forestry and completed their degrees at Edinburgh University. They returned to New Zealand to join the newly established State Forest Service in 1922 and were employed as Forest Rangers, a relatively low position in the departmental hierarchy on £315 a year (Public Service List, 1925). At the same time they were among the few individuals in the country with forestry degrees and shared a commitment to the profession. This was evident in their involvement in the creation of a New Zealand Institute of Foresters in 1928, so their interest in the position was not unexpected.

The fourth State Forest Service officer was Arnold Hansson, the Norwegian born Chief Inspector of the service. Taking a degree in forestry in Norway he migrated to Canada and worked for the forestry operations of various pulp and paper companies before completing an MFSc at Yale. After war service in Europe, Hansson returned to Canada from where he came to New Zealand. The starting salary offered by the University of £750 would have been extremely attractive to Smith, Foster and Steele. In Hansson's case the motives for applying may have also related to his strained working relationship with Ellis.

Smith, who had been a teacher before World War I, certainly saw himself as making a serious application, but at the same time felt he was bedevilled by obstacles. He wrote to the registrar asking for an extension of time so he could get his testimonials in order. His situation, he explained, was one of 'a really practising forester as opposed to a clerical administrator' (Smith to O'Shea, 28 March 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

This may have been an oblique reference to E Phillips Turner, the Secretary of Forestry, who although a dedicated forestry advocate, was a surveyor by qualification and a precise, even pedantic, public servant. This was an opportunity that Smith saw rapidly slipping away from him. He wrote to O'Shea, the registrar, that 'the Director of Forests as you know refused to support me Phillips Turner, Secretary of Forestry also refused because he fears Ellis would be annoyed, but he wrote to me personally "I do not know of anyone more suitable than you for this appointment"' (Smith to O'Shea 28 April, 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

Hansson's case had been raised with the registrar earlier in the year by Alex Entrican, the Engineer in Forest Products of the State Forest Service. Entrican was a recent graduate of the Auckland University College and had lectured there part-time in hydraulics in 1919. He was hired by Ellis in 1921 and

was Director from 1939 to 1961. Entrican described himself as trying to interest Hansson in the position. He suggested to O'Shea, that Hansson 'is a man I am sure, that would credit dignity and respect to our old College. His present position has of course many responsibilities, but I know well that he leans towards university and research work' (Entrican to O'Shea 12 January 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

Hansson was certainly academically well qualified, with an array of experience and many contacts in North American forestry. Furthermore, he had an analytical mind, would eventually publish a number of papers, and in the early 1930s was silviculturalist at the Waipoua Experimental station. Entrican's advancing of his case was therefore not without merit.

Another candidate was H Hugh Corbin, then Lecturer in Forestry at the University of Adelaide. Corbin was a forestry graduate from Edinburgh University having earlier completed a University of London BSc in pure sciences. He made the obligatory study tour of German forests and worked for a time in India before becoming the foundation Lecturer in Forestry at the University of Adelaide in 1912. Adelaide at that time offered the only university degree course in forestry in Australia. During his time at Adelaide he had virtually single-handedly built up the programme, promoted forestry to a still somewhat sceptical public, and undertaken considerable amounts of consultancy work for the South Australian government out of which he had produced a number of publications.

## Appointing a Professor of Forestry

In order to create a short list the University Council invited Ellis to Auckland to peruse the applications and identify suitable candidates (O'Shea to Ellis, 5 May 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA). The length of the short list is unclear, but Hansson and Corbin were certainly included. In the absence of a face-to-face interview, within a fortnight the Council had made its decision and O'Shea was instructed to offer the position to Hugh Corbin.

In offering his congratulations O'Shea also observed that 'from your fine record in Adelaide and throughout Australia we are all looking forward to your arrival as a distinct acquisition to the college staff. I hope your term with the college will be a pleasant and long duration' (O'Shea to Hugh Corbin, 19 May 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA). This latter sentiment was to turn out to be cruelly ironic.

O'Shea's remarks were perhaps of the sort that he expressed to all new professorial appointees. But on the face of it, his hopes were not excessive. On paper Corbin was the most experienced candidate,

and that the university should offer him the position, seems unexceptional. He accepted the offer on 25 May 1925, happy to leave Adelaide because that university had declined his application for a chair.

## Reactions to Corbin's appointment

Various officers of the State Forest Service were less enthusiastic about Corbin's appointment. Entrican reacted quickly in writing to O'Shea that –

'Corbin's appointment has fallen like a bombshell. I have seldom been so depressed regarding the future of our Auckland College. This man who has been appointed has been for many years the stumbling block in Australia regarding the establishment of a first class Forest School. Now he has been panned off on us. Surely in the interests of the College and forestry too this mistake can be rectified. If you cannot get rid of him on a technicality why [not] make the appointment subject to a year's probation. I see he claims to be consulting forester to the South Australian Government. It would be wise to get Mr Julius, Chief Conservator of the Forests Department over there to confirm this claim, (Entrican to O'Shea 19 May 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

O'Shea endeavoured to smooth matters by emphasising to Entrican that Ellis had short-listed candidates and that the Council believed that by definition all were appointable. Ellis was also concerned, although his response was less confrontational than Entrican's. He wrote a personal note to George Fowlds, the long-time chairman of the Auckland University Council, in which he observed that –

'It came as a great shock to me that your Council had not appointed Mr Hansson. My reason for thinking this will become obvious to you in the next year or two. However, this is absolutely strictly confidential as this service (and myself personally) will do all in its power to assist the school to become a real live success and a factor in forestry education in Australasia' (Ellis to Fowlds, 21 May 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

Ellis had never met Corbin until after his arrival in New Zealand. However the two had been in correspondence since 1924 when Corbin was endeavouring to interest the State Forest Service in sending students to Adelaide. Ellis now spelt out his reservations to Fowlds in the following terms,

'It is absolutely a case of the 'old school' versus the 'new school' of thought. Personally I am obviously in favour of the new school of thought with regard to afforestation as it gets the results demanded whereas the old school produces only

dreamers and theoreticians' (Ellis to Fowlds, 21 May 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

Ellis in his own application for the position of director had pictured himself in terms that were the direct opposite of how he characterised Corbin – he emphatically stated that he stood or fell by his record which had been 'one of 'doing' rather than 'going to do' (Ellis, 1920 Application). Additionally, Ellis must have been aware of the job advertisement specifying 'forest engineering' an area that he had been well trained in at Toronto, but in which Corbin had comparatively little expertise.

## Corbin at Auckland

Corbin produced the obligatory, although delayed, statement about the importance of forestry which appeared as *The Relation of forestry to Science and Industry in the Dominion of New Zealand* (Corbin, 1927). He published little in New Zealand compared to his years in Adelaide. Getting the school up and running consumed much of his time. Corbin's 1925 report to the University Council on his activities itemised an inspection tour of forests in the North Island and South Island, completing the curriculum development work for the new degree, securing scholarships, and dealing with student inquiries (Report of School of Forestry, 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

He proposed a four-year course of study with general science options in the first two years and more specialised year (Corbin to O'Shea, 17 December 1925, Forestry Correspondence, UAA). Corbin persuaded afforestation promoters Smith Wylie and Company, to establish a scholarship. L Poole, a future Director-General of Forestry from 1961 to 1969, was one of the students in the forestry course supported by this scholarship.

Proposed schedule of BSc in forestry at Auckland in 1925

Year	Subjects
1	Biology, chemistry, zoology, physics, geology or physiography
2	Forest biology, engineering surveying and drawing, elementary forestry, forest geology
3	Forestry engineering, forestry, forest entomology, forest law, forest mycology
4	Advanced forestry

Source: Corbin Papers MS 81 box 2 Folder 10 Corbin Memo (undated)

In 1926 the Department of Education provided Corbin with an initial grant of £600 for equipment and he began to collect some of the other items necessary for the operation of the school. These included building up of a timber collection and securing technical reports, including some from the Indian Forest Research Institute at Dehra Dun. True to his word, Ellis agreed to assist Corbin by acting

as an examiner. Poole recounted how in a question and answer session he gave a poor reply and was admonished by the Director to the effect that he would have to wake up his ideas if he wanted to become a forester (Poole, 1986, Interview).

Corbin also expended a considerable effort on creating a forest station at Swanson, for field camps and research as well as planning for an arboretum. But the major limitation was that he was the sole forestry staff member, although colleagues such as McGregor gave some forest botany lectures and McLaren provided a course of lectures on forest engineering. Innovatively, Corbin also arranged for students to do an intensive course in forest zoology and entomology at the Cawthron Institute in Nelson in the vacation and forest mycology at Auckland Hospital (School of Forestry Annual Report, 1929, E2 377 27/14/21 pt 2).

Poole, in recalling this time as a student, stressed the value of the scientific grounding that they received in their first two years to which was added Corbin's specialised instruction in forestry. Replicating forestry teaching practice at Edinburgh and Oxford, Corbin sent the students off to do practical work over the summer. Poole went to New Zealand Perpetual Forests where his report was signed off by Owen Jones, since 1925 their Forestry Administrator, in the same manner that Jones himself had prepared a working plan for a forest in Germany under the supervision of the resident forestry official.

### Other work

The conditions of employment had specifically allowed for 'governmental or other outside work' as long as it was in the vacation and did not interfere with university duties. In Adelaide Corbin was officially designated the Consulting Forester to the South Australian government and also carried out some private work for mining companies. Not surprisingly he expected to continue with consultancy work in New Zealand and was very quick to familiarise himself with the activities of the various bond selling afforestation companies established in the 1920s.

The university was less than enthusiastic about giving approval for him to do consultancy work for these companies whose dubious bond selling practices were subsequently exposed (Belshaw and Stephens, 1931). But more immediately, the State Forest Service was extremely wary of claims made by some afforestation companies with regard to growth rate and future financial returns. They and the Ministry of Education were unhappy that Corbin's name was being associated with some of these ventures. Some Auckland forestry graduates also recalled him as frequently absent on consulting work (Lysaght 1986, Interview). Smith, who missed

out on the appointment, also subsequently tended to be somewhat critical of the level of training received by both the Auckland and Canterbury forestry graduates (Lysaght, 1986, Interview; Thomson, 1986, Interview).

### Demise

In 1930 Corbin described his efforts of the previous five years as a 'moderate success' (Corbin, 1930, Memorandum, Forestry Correspondence, UAA). This was a consequence of the lack of other staff and equipment but also suggested an underlying anxiety. Having crossed the Tasman in the aftermath of the debate over the Australian Forestry School which had meant the demise of his Adelaide School (Bennett, 2009), Corbin now found history repeating itself with the Auckland School facing closure in order to create a new Dominion Forestry School at Canterbury.

The Empire Forestry Conference of 1928, held in Australia and New Zealand, officially supported a single forestry school but expressed no view as to the preferred location. However, in a separate 'private recommendation' Major Furse favoured Canterbury University College (Furse to Minister of Education, 1 November 1928, E2 377 27/14/21 pt 2). In 1929 after the recommendation was made known the 14 Auckland forestry students signed a joint letter affirming that though most of them were from outside Auckland, they believed that the city was the 'best situation for the forestry School in New Zealand' (17 September 1929, Forestry Correspondence, UAA).

Although Auckland with support from the timber industry fought a last ditch battle, it was to no avail. Corbin, who for a time believed that he would head a combined Dominion forestry school in Christchurch, was made redundant in 1931. The Dominion School of Forestry in Christchurch was itself closed in 1934.

No longer wanted by the university, Corbin quickly forged a new career as a forestry consultant. He had undertaken work of this sort, as permitted by his terms of appointment from soon after his arrival in New Zealand. Initially it was for New Zealand Perpetual Forests but was also associated with Timberlands New Zealand Ltd from 1927. After 1931 he worked more closely with them on pulpwood production plans and eventually became one of their directors.

### Discussion

Ellis believed in the need for university forestry education and favoured New Zealand-based training rather than overseas training. The more interesting question surrounds his backing of Hansson for the position of professor. Certainly he had impeccable academic credentials and field experience with

Canadian pulp and paper companies which would have met the 'forest engineering' specification in the advertisement. It is unclear if Ellis had any input into the wording of the advertisement, but given that forest utilisation was important and would remain so for some time, he would have approved. The ancillary benefit of Hansson's appointment would not have escaped Ellis, because as Hansson's capacity and professionalism were not in question, the two men were temperamentally incompatible, and Ellis would have hoped for a better working environment within the service.

There were other hints of exasperation evident in Smith's application, though not all of this can be shouldered by Hansson, or Ellis, for Sir Francis Bell, the Commissioner (i.e. Minister) of State Forests had deliberately created the State Forest Service with the Director and Chief Inspector on contract, leaving Phillips Turner, a long-term public servant without any forestry qualifications as Secretary of Forestry and the senior permanent staff member. This particularly galled Hansson, who as Chief Inspector, regarded himself as second to Ellis, but found much official correspondence was routed through Turner.

Sinclair (1983) was incorrect in labelling Entrican as a senior State Forest Service official. He had only been appointed Engineer in Forest Products in 1921. It is clear from the wider correspondence with O'Shea that Entrican displayed a keen, even heightened, interest in the affairs and standing of his alma mater. He also construed Ellis as favouring Auckland as the best location for the school, which was not strictly correct, although Ellis was uncharacteristically ambiguous about this as time progressed. In his correspondence with O'Shea, Entrican expressed his opposition to Corbin, with the confident belief that Ellis shared his views.

Entrican's depiction of Corbin as the 'stumbling block in Australia regarding the establishment of a first class Forest School' is debatable. He had never previously met Corbin and mistook his understandably staunch efforts to promote and save his Adelaide Forestry School in the face of the creation of an Australian Forestry School for intransigence and incapacity, implying he was second rate. To what extent Entrican was aware of Lane Poole's categorisation of only a handful of foresters in Australia as adequately professionally qualified, and this included neither Corbin nor the Adelaide graduates, is unclear (Dargavel, 2008). Corbin continued to contest this point even after he had reached New Zealand (Corbin, 1926).

### Conclusion

Hugh Corbin was the most experienced of the candidates who applied for the position of Professor of Forestry at Auckland. Others had degrees from

more prestigious institutions and more extensive forestry experience, but none of them had any comparable university teaching experience. Corbin also had demonstrated at Adelaide that he could establish a forestry school from scratch. It is not difficult to understand why the Auckland University Council appointed him.

Hansson, in comparison, had the qualifications and work experience but no teaching track record, apart from some instruction at State Forest Service in-house conferences. There may also have been some residual concern about appointing a foreigner to the post, even though Hansson was something of an Anglophile.

Ellis had other motives for supporting Hansson's candidacy, but the more interesting speculation is whether he went so far as to use Entrican as a stalking horse in advancing Hansson's case and later expressing concern over the Corbin's appointment. This seems plausible but hard evidence has not been found. Entrican, as a recent graduate who remained particularly interested in Auckland University College affairs, would doubtless have written on his own volition. In any case after the decision was known, Ellis also wrote to directly to Fowlds. Ellis never criticised Corbin publically after the appointment was made and true to his word assisted by serving as an external examiner. Ellis' concern was rather with the type of forestry education that Corbin would provide than his qualifications and capacity.

In his time at Auckland, Corbin worked hard to establish the school. He was handicapped by limited resources, although he displayed some ingenuity in working to overcome them. Even so, the student numbers were never sufficient to enable the school to grow and survive, although several of its graduates had distinguished careers in the New Zealand Forest Service.

Its closure in 1931 was almost to be expected, but Corbin confidently thought he would be posted to Canterbury as head of the Dominion School. Corbin, however, found a new role for himself as a forestry consultant and eventually became involved with Timberlands New Zealand Limited, which later became Whakatane Boardmills Limited, where he enjoyed a successful career in private sector industrial forestry. Corbin had departed from Australia months before the Adelaide School was closed. In New Zealand, although most of his time was consumed by forestry school affairs, he quickly began outside consultancy work.

These efforts enabled him to exercise his professional forestry skills rather than just teaching about forestry. He had been commended for his keen business instincts in India and shown business acumen in his management of Kuitpo Forest in South

Australia. Perhaps, therefore, after his experiences at Adelaide, and with the obvious problems of the dual forestry school setup in New Zealand, there is just a hint by his actions that he was safeguarding himself in case O'Shea's 'pleasant and long duration' did not come to pass.

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## School of Forestry dissertations

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Congratulations to all our students who have completed their studies this year. Most already have jobs in the sector, with interviews being held by many employers at the School in the second half of this year. This year's fourth-year honours students have submitted their dissertations.

The topics this year are –

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'Evaluation of current bark and taper equations for *Eucalyptus globoidea* in New Zealand' by Mitchell Haberkorn

'A pilot screening study into the wood properties and quality of *Eucalyptus bosistoana* in the Marlborough drylands' by Ben Morrow

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