

# The Royal Commission on Forestry 1913

## Viewed from 2013

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### Abstract

The Royal Commission on Forestry is examined in this article in terms of present day foresters' writings, which have mainly emphasised its afforestation recommendations and against the broader period forestry concerns of Schlich and Hutchins. An argument is advanced for its place as an important event in the development of both indigenous and exotic forestry in New Zealand.

### Introduction

The Royal Commission on Forestry of 1913 was chaired by Henry Haszard, Commissioner of Crown Lands for Westland. Haszard (1901) had earlier written about forest growth rates, but representatives of sawmillers were aggrieved they had no presence on the Commission. Asked to report on 10 questions, the Commission's report, appendices and evidence were completed over four months. During this time they interviewed 88 witnesses, received 58 written submissions, and travelled 11,250 kilometres. G M Thomson, the political force behind its establishment, believed question nine, and to a lesser extent question three, were the crucial ones (Thomson to Royal Commission, 24 March 1913).

The Commission's recommendations are summarised below. Their report provides a rich vein of evidence about the manifestation of early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'timber famine' fears in New Zealand. The remainder of this article assesses the significance of the report by placing the Royal Commission in a wider context, and by considering present day understandings of the Commission as well as period reactions to its recommendations, before offering a further repositioning of its place in New Zealand forest history.

### New Zealand foresters and the Commission

New Zealand foresters in recent years have become involved with the Royal Commission in at least two ways. They have linked their reports on the contemporary forestry scene back to the Commission's recommendation for the expansion of the afforestation effort. Therefore Maclaren and Knowles (1997: 3) indicate that the Commission 'noted that exotic plantations would be required to replace the disappearing native forests' while Sutton (1987: 24) termed it 'far-sighted and comprehensive'.

A second cluster consists of contributions by local foresters to New Zealand forest history. Kirkland and Berg (1997: 35), for example, describe the report as 'effectively the first independent review of the state's role in plantation forestry'. The challenge in producing such studies is to avoid re-litigating old battles and to develop a grasp of historical methods in research

and writing, while bringing to bear an insider's understanding of technical forestry.

McKelvey made a number of such contributions and Thomson (1985, 1985a) has written explicitly about the origins of the Royal Commission on Forestry. Allsop (1973: 2) almost dismisses the Commission's report as 'on the whole not an impressive document'. This view is not shared by later writers. Thomson (1985: 189), in contrast, regarded it as 'a quite remarkable document' and McKelvey (1999: 30) labelled it a comprehensive report.

The Royal Commission lamentably was never McKelvey's specific focus but he did produce biographical studies of Thomas Adams, one of its members (McKelvey 1991, 1993), and was aware of Schlich's criticisms of its report (O'Reilly and McKelvey 2005). McKelvey correctly restores Adams to a central place in fixing the Commission's interest on *Pinus radiata*, something others have attributed to Cockayne, for example, Thomson (1985).

Thomson's interest in the Royal Commission mixed the professional and personal. As a former Director General of Forestry he had an interest in the sector's past, but also in his scientist-politician grandfather from whose efforts the Commission came into being. He identified what he regarded as its major failing as not recommending the establishment of a separate forests department. The common thread that runs through this disparate body of work is that the Royal Commission was the starting point of modern exotic forestry in New Zealand.

### Popular reaction to the report

Tabled in the House of Representatives on 15 July, press reaction to the document was muted. There was some reportage of the main recommendations in the capital's newspapers but otherwise commentary was limited to noting the Commission's view that deer were destroying the forests, to endorsement of afforestation efforts in the treeless Canterbury plains, and special pleading by Westland sawmillers alarmed at the transfer of responsibility for issuing timber licences from the mining wardens to the Lands Department (*Press*, 15 August 1913).

## Questions for and main recommendations of the Royal Commission on Forestry

Questions for the Commission		Recommendations
1	Which of the existing forest land should be permanently retained for flood protection, soil and water conservation and scenery?	Reserve specifically identified areas of 1.69 million acres (683,905 hectares) for climatic and scenic purposes. Reserve all high country catchments in the Southern Alps. Reserve all higher vulnerable hill country forest land in the North Island – the precise boundaries to be determined.
2	What other forests were suitable for settlement and sawmilling and ought they be opened at once or reserved for future use?	Release 16 areas of 45,470 acres (18,400 hectares) of climatic reserve for sawmilling and settlement. Acceptance of broad principle that forest land suitable for farming should not be reserved for climatic or scenic purposes. Milling timber ought to be converted before land settlement.
3	What is the best method for dealing with indigenous forest in the public interest?	Develop a five-fold economic classification for forest land ranging from millable forest on land suitable for settlement through to forest with no merchantable timber and unsuited for settlement. Adopt an auction and tender system for standing forest across the entire country. Conduct a survey of beech forests to investigate regeneration potential.
4	In view of increasing demand for kahikatea should its export be restricted or prohibited?	Seek substitute woods for dairy industry. Does not recommend export restrictions.
5	What was the likely future demand for timber in New Zealand?	Estimated at 716 million super feet (1.68 million cubic metres) by 1948.
6	What types of timber would be required?	Eucalypts for durability. Pines for building timber. Other timbers for carriage of agricultural and other produce. <i>Pinus radiata</i> identified.
7	To what extent would future demand be met from state plantations?	Present area of 18,870 acres (7,636 hectares) would last four months. Two-and-half times increase of 1911 to 1912 planting rate of 2,566 acres (1,038 hectares) recommended.
8	To what extent should state plantations be supplemented and expanded and where?	Estimating that indigenous timber supplies will last approximately 30 years. Noted that dependence on imported timbers is dangerous. That large-scale state tree planting be undertaken. Recommended expanding and creating plantation in Otago, Canterbury, volcanic plateau, Rangitikei sand dunes and Northland gum lands.
9	Are present state operations conducted satisfactorily and on progressive lines?	Retention of a Forestry Branch within the Lands Department, but also giving it responsibility for indigenous forests controlled by an Executive Officer. Creation of a Forestry Advisory Board to assist the Executive Officer.
10	Under what conditions should the state encourage private and local authority tree planting?	State to provide trees at cost and advice to private tree planters and local bodies.

The most critical editorial response had occurred earlier when Prime Minister W F Massey was urged to 'import an expert or two', rather than set up a Royal Commission, a response he had readily criticised in the previous Liberal government (*Marlborough Express*, 17 February 1913).

The Commission's recommendations were subsequently widely disseminated via the *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture* (Anon, 1914) shortly after A H Cockayne's (1914) lengthy article on *Pinus radiata* as the timber tree of the future appeared in the same journal.

## Effect of the Royal Commission in Australia

The Royal Commission's report attracted attention in the Australian press, particularly the extent of additional climatic reserves, the expanded afforestation target and the potential of *Pinus radiata*. Other commentaries were involved with Australian concerns, noting that the report did not recommend restricting the export of kahikatea, imports of which were critical to the Victoria and New South Wales dairy industry (*Argus*, 23 December 1913; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 4 December 1913).

Similarly, New Zealand Railway's evidence about the failure of the 'Powellising' process to preserve railway sleepers attracted considerable attention in Western Australia, base of the parent company (*Western Australian*, 20 December 1913). But the report had a wider resonance in Australia. The *Adelaide Advertiser* editorialised on 'Forests for the Future', adding the Royal Commission on Forestry to a list of local interventions in highlighting timber famine concerns and the need for an expanded afforestation effort (*Advertiser*, 17 July 1913).

The Royal Commission can be positioned alongside a number of similar Australian state initiatives around this same time. All of these were part of a move towards the professionalisation of forestry and the creation of more effective forestry legislation (Carron 1985).

### Professional foresters' response

The Commission's report drew comment from the doyen of empire forestry, Sir William Schlich. While acknowledging he had never visited New Zealand, he observed that –

... what strikes the reader of the various reports at once is the fact that natural forests have practically been thrown overboard, and that future supplies are to be provided from plantations of exotic trees. This is certainly a very bold measure, which the authorities seem to have adopted because they believe that growth of the indigenous trees is too slow in comparison with that of certain exotic species (Schlich 1918: 23).

Schlich rightly queried the growth rate calculations of the Commissioners for indigenous and exotic trees. He also raised a question about whether the 6,415 acre (2,596 hectare) a year scale of exotic planting risked 'the development of disease which may lead in the end to disastrous results?' (Schlich 1918: 24). This point he returned to, noting that 'exotic trees as a rule [are] more exposed to disease than indigenous trees, and it is impossible to say what diseases the former may develop in the course of time' (Schlich 1918: 25).

Another more damning commentary was made by David Hutchins in an appendix to *A Discussion on Australian Forestry*. He chastised the report for its lack of 'technical advice on forestry' and its acceptance of the primacy of settlement where the land was of only just of sufficient quality for agriculture (Hutchins 1916: 398). His other criticisms ranged from the lack of expertise in the afforestation programme to the absence of an independent forests department. He also questioned whether indigenous species grew as slowly as was commonly supposed.

Hutchins rejected the Commission's assertion that 'forestry is not a science in itself, but a combination of many sciences together' and that a trained forester would be 'altogether ignorant of both New Zealand conditions for tree planting and of the indigenous forest' (*AHJR* 1912, C13: xxxviii). He stated: 'this is

like saying that navigation is a compound of stars and salt water' (Hutchins 1916: 391). His more scathing remarks were directed at the Commission's acceptance of afforestation over indigenous forest management –

One thing is certain: to talk about cutting the indigenous forest down and replanting it as a general measure (which is the idea running through all of the report) is like expressing today a belief in witchcraft (Hutchins 1916: 392).

Both Schlich and Hutchins believed in the universality of fundamental forestry principles and a balance between natural forest management and plantation forestry, therefore their reservations about some of the recommendations. In South Africa, Hutchins' reputation was mainly centred on his afforestation work, but invited to report on New Zealand forests in 1915 he was alarmed that local vision extended only as far as exotic afforestation (Hutchins 1919).

### Discussion

The Royal Commission enjoys standing as a foundational document for state-led afforestation in New Zealand. While this viewpoint is defensible, it is too restricted. An alternative position is that the Commission's report was as much an end point as a beginning point. It was the last of a sequence of reports by professional foresters, timber experts, Lands Department officials and tree planters which stretched back to 1877, that slowly and unevenly nudged the settler state to eventually establish a forests department headed by professionally trained foresters.

It was also part of a sequence of more closely linked events extending back to the timber famine concerns raised at the timber conference of 1896 and monitored in a series of Lands Department estimates of exhaustion in 70 years (1905), in 30 to 40 years (1909) and finally 30 years by the Royal Commission.

There was no inevitability about the Royal Commission's main recommendations coming to fruition. The report was not properly debated in parliament. Massey was careful never to let forestry adversely affect his farmer constituency, and the war meant non-essential legislative and administrative changes were deferred for the duration (Roche 2009).

The Commissioners' report deftly sketched out the constraints facing forestry. If forest land was suitable for farming, it was to be given over to that use after a one-off harvest regardless of the merchantable quality of the forests. The residue of this thinking resurfaced in the 1970s in the form of controversy surrounding corporate afforestation on farmland.

### Deflecting attention

Close focus on the Royal Commission on Forestry also deflects attention away from the influence, both positive and negative, of Hutchins on the course of forestry in New Zealand from 1915 to 1920 (Roche 2009, 2010). His vision for this country included sustained

Official reports, conferences, and commissions on forests in New Zealand – 1877 to 1921

Official reports	Conferences and commissions
1877 Report of the Conservator of State Forests C3 (Campbell Walker)	
1886 Native Forests and the Timber Trade C3 C3A C3B (Kirk)	
1897 Conservation of New Zealand Forests C8 (Perrin)	1896 Report of the Timber Conference H24
1905 The Timber Industry in New Zealand C6	1901 Sawmiller's Conference H50
1907 The Timber Industry in New Zealand C4	
1909 Forestry in New Zealand C4	1909 Timber and Timber Building Industries Commission
	1913 Royal Commission on Forestry C12
Hutchins, D. 1919. <i>New Zealand Forestry: Part 1 – Kauri Forests and Forests of the North and Forest Management</i>	
1921 Report on Forest Conditions in New Zealand and a Case for a National Policy C3A (Ellis)	

yield management of indigenous forests, particularly kauri, whereas the Royal Commission was sceptical about the possibilities for indigenous forestry.

In part this was because of the received wisdom of the period that indigenous forest trees were exceptionally slow growing with limited regeneration, while a range of exceedingly fast-growing exotics species were available. But this is only part of the answer, for Cockayne's hand is also evident in the key section of the report: '... the forest is a very ancient one, and the kauri trees are not regenerating, so that as they die they are succeeded by tarairae and other trees'.

Eventually Cockayne (1926, 1928) was able to research beech regeneration, a previously unfulfilled recommendation of the Royal Commission. Although he maintained some hostility towards the 'methods of forestry text books' based on European forests (Schlich and Maw had been drawn on in the Royal Commission's report), he did consider that pure beech forest was a climax plant formation and suitable for harvesting on an 80 to 120-year rotation (Cockayne 1928: 14).

## Central criticisms

This point leads naturally to Hutchins' central criticisms of the Commission, that it comprised no foresters and denied forestry was a science. There

were, in fact, no professionally qualified foresters in New Zealand to appoint. Even if the government had been willing to look further afield the options were still limited. In Australia there was only returned Rhodes Scholar N W Jolly (Dip. Forestry, Oxford) and Hugh Corbin (BSc Forestry, Edinburgh).

The idea that local knowledge was vital to understanding New Zealand's forests was deeply etched in the official psyche. Therefore it is unsurprising that the Royal Commission recommended expanding afforestation and said comparatively little about indigenous forests, apart from suggesting areas that might be reserved for climatic protection purposes, the latter being a comparatively uncontroversial recommendation. The Commission was arguably still the best that could have been assembled in New Zealand at the time.

There is scope for a potentially interesting 'thought experiment' on this point, because on 15 April 1913 Hazard, Cockayne, Murdoch and Phillips Turner were all involved in a car accident high up in the Tutaemaro Range. After hitting a rock in the road, the car veered to the inside bank rather than into the deep gully on the other side (*Poverty Bay Herald*, 5 April 1913).

If the Commissioners had perished, Cockayne's magisterial *The Vegetation of New Zealand* would never have been published and Phillips Turner's steady hand as Secretary of Forestry when Ellis was Director would have been missed. But would the surviving Commissioners, perhaps augmented by others, have produced a substantially different report?

Such a document would have differed, particularly over Waipoua, but the main thrust of the report in favour of an expansion of state afforestation would probably still have emerged. This is because the Commission's report encapsulated popular and official opinion of the times, where the Timber Conference 1896 and establishment of a Forestry Branch in 1897 had already prefigured an exotic afforestation trajectory. This hypothetical Royal Commission's report, like the actual version, would have also been an evolutionary rather than revolutionary document.

## Significant and important

Critics have tended to castigate the Commissioners for not recommending a separate forests department. In hindsight, the Commission's recommendation had subtly brought together the exotic tree planting activities of the earlier Forestry Branch and control of indigenous forests into a single Forests Branch, albeit still within the Lands Department. The importance of the recommendation, which was adopted, was that in incremental fashion it moved responsibility for indigenous forests away from those in the Lands Department who were concerned only with selling cutting rights or were more interested in opening Crown forest land to settlement.

Phillips Turner was appointed as forester in the

Lands Department in 1915. From here it was a series of small steps forward, particularly once Sir Francis Bell interested himself in the matter. This included separating the Lands and Forests portfolios, and taking the latter himself, to establish an administratively independent department in 1919 – initially under Phillips Turner and later Canadian forester L M Ellis – then to the latter's report on forest conditions in New Zealand, and finally to drafting a new Forests Act and establishing a State Forest Service with professionally qualified staff in 1921.

The Commission deserves credit for promoting *Pinus radiata*, which was generally overlooked in Forestry Branch plantings. However the major state and company afforestation boom of the 1920s and 1930s was of an order of magnitude greater than the scale of annual planting recommended by the Commission. In 1926 New Zealand Perpetual Forests planted 46,000 acres, with Owen Jones as forest superintendent (Roche 2012: 206), and the State Forest Service 56,630 acres in 1930 (AJHR 1930, C3: 6).

The Commission may have paved the way for these efforts, but more immediate causative factors are instead found in Ellis' 1925 policy reappraisal and in profit-driven afforestation companies (Healy 1982). Nor did the Commission anticipate the concentration of planning effort by the state and companies on the volcanic plateau. The Royal Commission on Forestry remains nevertheless an important episode in the forest history of New Zealand, one that was significant for the course of both indigenous and exotic forestry.

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