

Peter Wilson Maplesden

Born Wellington 1922, died Nelson 2014

Prepared by John Handiside

Peter Maplesden was educated at Rongotai College in Wellington, Victoria University of Wellington and Edinburgh University in Scotland. In 1953 he married Dorothy who died in 2007. He is survived by three daughters, Frances, Josephine, Mel and four grandchildren.

Peter graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1943 from Victoria University and joined the New Zealand Army in the Engineers, and then the Royal Navy and served in the North Sea. After the war he completed a forestry degree at Edinburgh University, graduating in 1947.

He returned home for a lifelong career with the New Zealand Forest Service, initially in both the Auckland and Rotorua Conservancies. He served as the Officer in Charge of Whakarewarewa Forest, Acting Officer in Charge of Kaingaroa Forest, and Assistant Conservator Rotorua. In 1960 he moved to Nelson Conservancy as Conservator until retiring in 1982 after 42 years of service. When he was appointed to Conservator at the age of 38 he was the youngest person to hold this position.

In 1966, he was the New Zealand Government's representative at the World Forestry Conference in Spain. He also visited forestry activities in Britain, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Russia. Peter was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Honours List of 1983. A significant early contribution he made was in the late 1940s when he worked with others on the major log sale from Kaingaroa Forest, which led to the subsequent establishment of the pulp and paper mill at Kawerau. His major legacy was a result of his 22 years as Conservator Nelson, when he oversaw a massive expansion in the Conservancy exotic forest estate from 12,900 hectares in 1960 to 52,000 hectares in 1982. This was over a four-fold increase compared with a national increase of only two-and-a-half-fold over the same period.

The Wahine storm in 1968 created an immediate and serious management problem for Peter. In a region where the timber industry had operated at a moderate level, markets had to be found within weeks for a three-fold increase in log output. This emergency also forced a review of management of radiata pine in Golden Downs Forest that led to wider initial spacings, heavier



and earlier thinnings, and shorter rotations.

In the late 1960s he was responsible for defining and quantifying beech forest resources of hundreds of thousands of hectares in the Buller area for a proposed new pulp mill. Peter also needed to manage the public concerns in the region and he was closely involved for over a decade. There was strong political support for the scheme, which diminished with time and with growing environmental opposition.

As a result most of the remaining state beech forests, despite their undoubted potential for management, were effectively removed from timber management by legislation in 1987. But prior to this the resource potentially available was progressively reduced by the perceived need to set aside increasingly large areas for ecological reserves. With reducing resources and increasing environmental debate, the proposals for the scheme were abandoned by the late 1970s.

Peter was particularly proud of the amenity and recreation developments during his time alongside the main highway south of Nelson through Golden Downs Forest. Colourful and shapely trees and open accessible green spaces with picnic areas transformed the route over Spooners Range and the Hope Saddle. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the forest park concept and chaired two forest parks committees in his Conservancy – Mount Richmond and North-West Nelson. The North-West Nelson forest park main walking tracks, the Wangapeka and Heaphy, had existed for many decades mostly as narrow one person wide tracks.

Major facilities upgrades and track widening were decided, and a unique tracked small machine was designed and built in the early 1980s at the Golden Downs workshops for widening the tracks and carrying gravel. Two people could then safely walk side-by-side, which was a revolutionary idea at the time. An amusing story relates to a visit by the forest parks committee to a new hut in the North-West Nelson park, when at the end of the day the members retired to two sleeping platforms. In the morning only Peter remained; everyone else had moved outside away from his loud snoring.

Peter's management style was fascinating. He liked to be kept informed and preferred to talk a matter through rather than be told by memo. He acted like a catalyst as he was a good lateral thinker and at meetings would come up with lots of ideas and enjoyed the debate. Often he would favour a particular option and then turn to a nearby colleague and say, 'That's right isn't it ...?' If it was a good idea he strongly supported it, but still stepped back to allow people to get on with the job. Once he was convinced that something was correct he was forceful in support of that position. He could also be quite fierce when his expectations were not met or opposition was not convincingly based. It was well known in Nelson that new graduates, myself included, were all expected to get 'their hands and boots dirty in the field' and cool off for a period after their academic experiences.

He was also very involved in community activities and served on the Redwood College Board of Trustees. He had a strong and practical commitment to his religion and his church. After he retired he was elected as a Nelson City Councillor for three terms from 1983 to 1992.

Peter was also a competent handyman around the home, doing substantial renovations and making

furniture. He was continually on the look-out for specialty woods for seasoning and turning. He made lamps, bowls, boats, croquet mallets, moved walls in the home, and installed and reinstalled bathrooms and kitchens. He even made his own pool table, including the important slate component. Last, but not least, he had strong family values and was very proud of his children and grandchildren and their high achievements.

Peter played an important part in the development of forestry in New Zealand. He had wide interests that he maintained throughout his career and afterwards. For example, he recently visited Waipa, where he was responsible for logging in the 1950s, and was delighted to watch a helicopter logging operation of a third rotation harvest. This was a far cry from using horses for the extraction harvesting of thinnings in his early days. A forester's role is essentially a long-term exercise, and he was pleased to observe three rotations on one site where he was involved so many years ago. Forestry was Peter's passion and a huge part of his life.

Contributors and collaborators: the Maplesden family, Ross Wylie, Alex Johnston, Piers Maclaren and Gerard Horgan.

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