

THE FORGOTTEN CONSERVATOR

By L. Talbot

Mr C.E. Lane-Poole, who was responsible for the draughting of the Forests Act 1918, is generally considered to have been Western Australia's first Conservator of Forests. But that honour belongs to John Ednie-Brown, who joined the Western Australian Public Service as Conservator of Forests on March 16, 1895 - twenty-one years before Lane-Poole was appointed.

Ednie-Brown was one of Australia's most distinguished foresters. Before coming to Australia he had forestry experience in Scotland and Canada. According to one newspaper report he was for many years Conservator of Forests in the latter country. He was a fellow of the Linnaean Society; "a rank of considerable standing in those days."

In 1878 he became South Australia's first Conservator of Forests, a position he retained till 1890.

During those twelve years he staged Australia's first Arbor Day, wrote South Australia's first forest flora, wrote a series of excellent reports on early plantings in that State and established the first forester training scheme in Australia.

In 1890 he was induced by the Parkes Government to go to New South Wales as Director General of Forests. However, a change of Government during the depression of the 1890's was followed by severe cut-backs in the New South Wales Public Service and Ednie-Brown was among those retrenched.

In 1895 he joined the Western Australian Public Service, and when the Department of Woods and Forests was formed in 1896 he became its Conservator under the Minister for Lands.

He was a man of great energy and worked tirelessly to establish the new department. He travelled extensively throughout the timbered areas of the State inspecting and assessing the forests.

A map of his journeys shows that he criss-crossed the jarrah forest between the coast and the Great Southern Railway all the way down the forest belt. He travelled along the coast through the tuart forest and to the Quindalup and Karridale timber mills and forests. In the karri forest he travelled from Nannup to the Warren River, from Fly Brook to Dingup, from the head of the Warren to the Lower Gardiner River, from Deeside to the coast and from Broke Inlet to Lake Muir, as well as inspecting the Denmark and Nornalup forests. He travelled 1500 miles, mostly by horse, in one tour.

In the four and a half years he was Conservator, the annual value of timber exports from Western Australia leapt from £116,420 to £553,198 and Government revenue from timber increased from £2,280 in 1895 to £30,000 in 1898.

Prior to 1898 large tracts of forest - up to 250 000 acres - were leased to timber companies for an annual rental of as little as £200 to £400. Such leases gave the company sole rights to remove, sell or export timber upon them and in some cases protected the company from any Government duty on the sawn timber.

Ednie-Brown was responsible for the draughting of laws in 1898 which limited leases to 75 000 acres and set an annual rent of £20 per square mile. Also under the new laws, seedlings and saplings had to be protected and a minimum girth limit of 60" for jarrah and 90" for karri was set. Land from which the matured timber had been removed had to be surrendered to the Government for conservation purposes.

He was responsible for the draughting of a Bushfires Act, A Forest Act and Regulations - included in the Lands Act of 1898 - and the establishment of a State Nursery at Hamel.

He strongly advocated the selection and dedication of State Forests and Forest Reserves:

"So that they may be at once placed under a defined system of Conservation."

Today that would be considered just common sense, but in his time there was much opposition to anything that stood in the way of Land Settlement.

He proposed the inspection of export timber so that customers could be sure that timber products purchased from W.A. would be of the very finest quality and true to name.

He had plans for the establishment of softwood plantations, for he foresaw the probability that eventually the supplies of softwoods from overseas would become:

"If not altogether exhausted, at least so impoverished as to become practically unable to supply our wants."

He considered that the humid districts of the south-west would be well suited for growing Pinus insignis. Of Pinus pinaster he wrote:

"Delights in sandy soils and therefore a tree of considerable value for planting our coastal sand hills and sandy plains"

Some other quotes from his 1898 report underline his concern for the necessity to dedicate large areas of State Forest.

"We want portions, at least, of some of the State Forest to have soil of the very best description, so that we may experiment with and probably successfully grow the softwoods of commerce."

"The thirst for the opening up of the land, to the detriment of the forests, is not always productive of the natural good; and ought not therefore, to be always listened to. To my certain knowledge, it has been the ruination of some magnificent natural forest country in some of the other colonies."

"There is plenty of land in the country, outside of the best forest areas, for settlement of all kinds, and to prostitute the former, with its exuberance of timber, to the varying and unstable requirements of ordinary settlement would be an unsound policy, to say the least."

"I do not think there is any chance of a greater area being reserved than is necessary. The requirements of the country in this line are just as much as the country can afford to give."

"- much of the forest land in this colony is unfit for cultivation. For ploughing and ordinary agriculture a large percentage is absolutely worthless; and although no doubt, this might be improved by ringbarking for pastoral purposes - the gain derived therefrom being the growing of a few more blades of grass - the loss to the State in the absolute destruction of the forest is

a matter of grave responsibility to those who carry it out, or even countenance it in any way."

"I claim therefore that the forest reserve question should not always be determined by that of the popular cry 'The settlement of the land'."

Perhaps had he lived longer he would have been listened to eventually, and then the story of forestry and land settlement in this State may have been very different. But unfortunately he died suddenly of a heart attack in November 1899 aged 49 years. Then W.A. was without a trained forester until the appointment of Lane-Poole in 1916.

The names of all other Western Australian Conservators of Forests have been bestowed upon various forest features but so far as I am aware the name of John Ednie-Brown has not been commemorated in this way; and in the Department's publication "50 Years of Forestry," although reference is made to the appointment of a Conservator in 1896, he is not mentioned by name. It would seem fair comment then, to say that he is the forgotten Conservator.