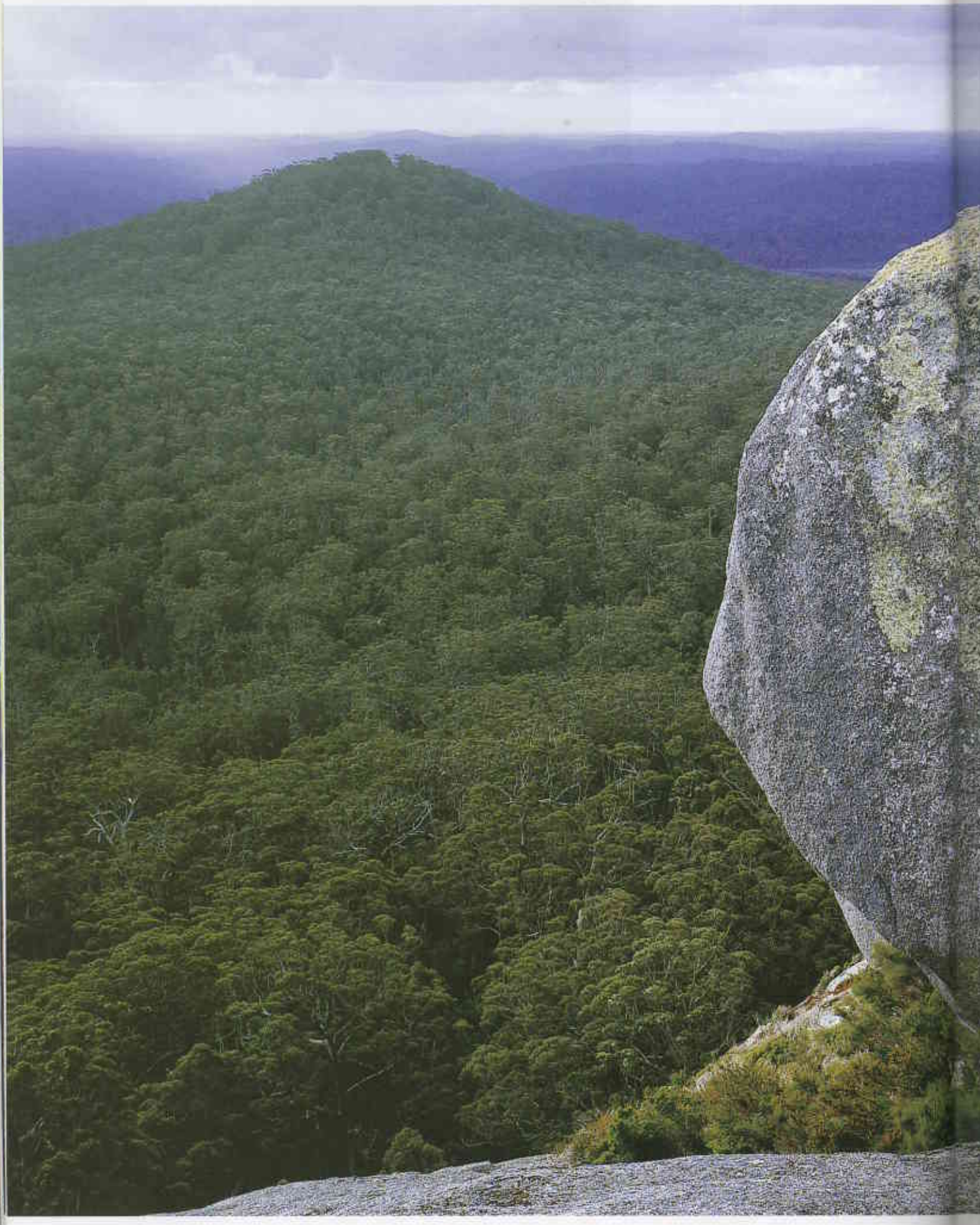

John Thomson
tree man

What was it like being a forester in the first half of last century in Western Australia? In the case of John Thomson, who joined the Forests Department as a cadet in 1917, he was profoundly influenced by his experiences in the Western Australian bush and later became an outspoken conservationist.

by Andrew Thomson and Beth Schultz

John Alfred Thomson was born on 29 August 1902 in the outback mining town of Laverton, where he was christened in the local pub (there was no church). His father Alf owned the Mulga Queen goldmine, 150 kilometres north of the town, with three others. Here, John spent his first few years and received some early bush training.

Later, with his mother, two brothers and two sisters, he moved to a weatherboard cottage in Victoria Park, while Alf continued to go prospecting until he was 74. John spent two years at the State School at Victoria Park and two years at Perth Boys School. During the Christmas vacation, the Forests Department advertised for forestry apprentices. John thought it would be marvellous to mix with timber men and, to his surprise, was one of only two applicants selected (from more than 130) by Conservator of Forests Charles Edward Lane-Poole. Hence, he became the first Forests Department forestry apprentice when he began work at Hamel Nursery near Waroona, on 14 March 1917 at the age of 14. The other boy, Dick Perry, (see 'In search of the perfect pine', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1992) began two days later and went on to become one of Australia's most respected foresters. Four more apprentices, Bill Ross, Claude Kinsella, George Clover and another boy who left after two months, were appointed in the middle of 1917. The five remained close friends all their lives.

Previous page
Main Mount Frankland, in the heart of the karri country.
Photo – David Bettini
Insets Compass, water bottle and field book carried by John Thomson in the bush.
Photo – Maria Duthie/CALM
Portrait of John Thomson.
Painting – Dale Couper/Courtesy of Carolyn Thomson-Dans

Left John Thomson in the 1920s.
Photo – Courtesy of Carolyn Thomson-Dans

Below right Forestry school tent, 1923.
Photo – Dick Perry

Lifelong hero

Lane-Poole took a keen interest in his apprentices. John admired his wisdom, courage and integrity, and his independence in coping in the bush with a missing arm. Lane-Poole had a natural charm, but he was most forthright in expressing his views. When Lane-Poole took up his post in 1916, the management of forests was in a deplorable state. As early as 1876, a select committee of the Legislative Council expressed their concern about the enormous damage to the Colony's forests. In August 1877, a Royal Commission was appointed to consider ways to conserve the forests, but failed to convene.

Fortunately, Lane-Poole was a man with a mission and his achievements were remarkable. Being conscientious and hard working, he was able to argue a case clearly, logically and forcibly. He wrote numerous lengthy articles in newspapers and magazines in an attempt to change attitudes to forestry. Within six months of his arrival, new regulations were gazetted, even though the Forests Act was not proclaimed until January 1919. Royalties were increased by 50 per cent. He established a new softwood policy. Working plans were developed for Mundaring and Collie for regeneration work, and near Capel to assess the tuart forest. In 1918, forestry classification camps were commenced to conduct assessment surveys, and a new set of regulations was gazetted. However, Lane-Poole resigned in 1921 as a result of his inability to work with the newly-elected Premier James Mitchell, who instigated the ringbarking of large areas of prime karri forest for the ill-fated Group Settlement scheme.

Nevertheless, John always admired and tried to live by Lane-Poole's guiding principle of sustained yield:

"We may cut the interest but the capital must remain intact".

Above The first forestry apprentices (from left to right): Dick Perry, Bill Ross, Claude Kinsella, John ('Jack') Thomson and George Clover in about 1920.

Right The same men in the 1960s.

Bush life

Lane-Poole established the Ludlow forestry school for cadets, where the five apprentices were the first participants. After their first year at Hamel Nursery, they were given wide experience in a variety of places. John, called 'Jack' in the bush, assisted the District Ranger at Donnybrook for five months, spent three weeks planting pines at Ludlow, joined the classification camp at Wilga and Margaret River for 16 months and worked as a classifier at Pemberton for six months. In 1920, he was transferred to Collie to do general forestry work such as felling trees, fire lookout duty, fire fighting and surveys for 11 months. During this time, the boys were expected to study and at the end of each year they were given exams.

Those early days were no picnic. In Bill Bunbury's book *Reading labels on jam tins*, 'Jack' described some of his experiences in bush camps.

> The cook's chief equipment was a good strainer and plenty of vinegar because when the meat's half stinking and you pour plenty of vinegar over it, it takes the smell away. This is what we lived on.
>
> I remember once, the first camp we went on. We were camped on the Wilgaru —Balingup Road, on the Balingup Brook, and we couldn't find a place to cross the brook—it was in flood... I suppose about 30 feet across and waist deep... you had your own crib rolled up in a bit of newspaper and put in a handkerchief and you hung it on the back of your belt, with a jam-tin billycan, tea and sugar. So we'd lift this up and just wade through this icy-cold water up to your waist. But after you'd walked for about half a mile you'd walked yourself warm again. You took all that in your stride.

After four years John was appointed Forest Guard. His duty was to assist the

District Forester at Bridgetown for a year. In September 1921, a child became lost overnight. About 100 men searched on foot while the local policeman mounted a horse and organised about 20 horsemen riding through the bush 50 metres apart. John rode in the opposite direction and found the boy, Norman Morris, standing by a blackened jarrah log.

Around the traps

In 1924, John was promoted to Assistant Forester at Jarrahwood, where he was in charge. He introduced tree marking, regeneration and fire protection to this district. He was transferred to Manjimup in October 1927 and put in charge of a major timber assessment survey between 'Deeside' (a local property) and the Frankland River, with a team of 10 men, for several months. While there, he fell in love with Ethel Muir, the daughter of Andrew and Una Muir at Deeside, and they were married in 1929.

He was transferred to Mundaring Weir in December 1930 for five years as Assistant to the District Forest Officer. It was the Great Depression,

Top left Logging in the jarrah forest in the early 1920s. John loved the horses that worked in the forests in the early days: "It was a marvellous thing to see eight big horses pulling a whim where an overall length, the length of the log and the length of the horse team, could be about 100 feet and the only reins on the horses were the reins that connected the two leaders, the others didn't have any reins on them and the whole thing was controlled by word of mouth by the teamster".

Centre left Marri blossom. John had a special affinity with the marri tree, saying "wherever I had been in the native forests of the South West the marri was always close at hand", from Ludlow to Dryandra, and from Mundaring to Nornalup.

Left John conducted a boronia survey throughout the State in 1969 in order to establish which species were being picked, and where and how they were being utilised.
Photos – Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

Right In the early days of his apprenticeship, John Thomson was part of a team that assessed the tuart forest prior to the Forests Department purchasing it from the Layman family at Wonnerup. The area is now in the Tuart Forest National Park.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

and his experiences with sustenance workers while at Mundaring influenced him to become a champion of working class people for the rest of his life, including joining the Communist Party, for which he was widely vilified. Wendy Lowenstein's *Weevils in the Flour*, an oral record of the 1930s Depression in Australia recorded John's feelings at the time.

> About 85... unemployed came up to Mundaring Weir and we had to find them jobs in the plantations. They had to go through the rows with a mattock... It was back-breaking soul-destroying work and they had to do it, eight hours a day... They'd talk about their families and their sick kids and the way they used to manage on that seven bob [the 'Sustenance']... This all gave me tremendous sympathy for people like this, for working men. I've been a rebel ever since. It was due to my Depression experience.

In 1937, John was appointed Forester in Charge at Denmark, where he spent 17 years. His district covered about 20,000 square kilometres and included Walpole, Albany, Mount Barker, Kendenup and Cranbrook. On the way to Denmark, in 1937, with his parents and two sisters, son Andrew remembered:

> I vividly recall the burnt black bush all the way from Deeside, near Manjimup, to Denmark as a result of a huge wildfire. The fire caused enormous damage with staghorns—huge dead white karri limbs protruding from the top of the green canopy—even to this day... Years later, a very dense thicket of karri wattle developed in many parts of this forest.

While at Denmark John often visited various schools to talk to the children about trees and timber.

On his promotion to Senior Forester in 1954 he was transferred to Harvey. After two years there and a further two years at Mount Barker (where he was made the first 'Honorary Ranger' of the Stirling Range National Park, in 1956, in response to reports of illegal tree felling there) he was seconded to the Tree Society as secretary-organiser. Previously, he had just formed the first country branch of the Society. In the three years in that position, while stationed in Perth, he formed 34 country branches and a similar number of metropolitan branches. When he left in 1961 he was awarded an honorary life membership in appreciation of his outstanding service.

His final three years with the Forests Department were spent organising 33 experimental tree plots in the semi-arid Wheatbelt, stretching from 280 kilometres north of Perth to 50 kilometres east of Pingelly. It was work he carried out with great enthusiasm as he continued to visit schools regularly to give talks.

'Retirement'

Though he retired in 1963 at the age of 61 he soon became restless, and accepted an appointment in charge of the Forestry and Timber Bureau's

tropical tree nursery at Darwin for 10 weeks.

The next three years, until his second retirement in 1967, were spent as a Ministerial appointee in the Department of the North-West to give advice on suitable tree species and to organise a tree-planting scheme for the fast-developing mining towns in the region. Seeds of local trees were collected and identified at the State Herbarium. Volunteer tree nurseries were established at schools, police stations, district main road headquarters, the Broome gaol and the Carnarvon Agricultural Research Station. John never missed an opportunity to call into the local school to talk to children and he became known in the North-West as the 'Tree Man'.

In September 1969, he conducted a boronia survey throughout the State.

During his period up north, John was asked by the State Archivist and Librarian of the Battye Library to tape record interviews with various characters he met. These oral history tapes are still held by the Battye Library and John himself subsequently became a favourite interviewee of oral historians, with his crystal clear recollections of forestry and timber cutting days, many of which are recorded in *Reading labels on jam tins* (the title of which was based on a quote by John). He was awarded the first Honorary Life Membership of the Oral History Association of Australia at the inaugural national conference in 1979.

Top left Jarrah, a giant specimen with a height over 60 metres, hidden in South West forest.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies

Centre left John Thomson with his great friend, author Rewi Alley, at Kings Park during the 1970s.
Photo – Ethel Thomson

Left John surveys clearfelling in the karri forest during the 1980s. He was particularly upset about millable logs being left on the forest floor.
Photo – Guy Magowan/Courtesy of The West Australian

Right John marvelled at the majesty of the karri forest.
Photo – Marie Lochman

Below right John Thomson in 1980, surveying burnt karri logs on a trip to the forest with other conservation activists.
Photo – Beth Schultz

Conservation activist

Before retirement John had become critical of forestry practices and, after his retirement, outspoken about bauxite mining in the jarrah forest and clearfelling and woodchipping in the karri forest. He joined the two local forest conservation groups, the Campaign to Save Native Forests and the South-West Forests Defence Foundation soon after they were founded in 1975 and regularly attended their meetings. He wrote numerous letters to newspapers, frequently spoke in public and made many trips to the forests in support of their campaigns. During the 1980s, for example, he went up in a light plane to see how the trees he had tended in his youth were faring: "It made me sweat blood—it was like looking down on the back of a mangy dog," he later told *The Australian* newspaper in an article critical of woodchipping.

His wealth of knowledge and lifelong experience in forestry were invaluable to both groups and greatly increased their credibility. For his sustained efforts on their behalf, he received two more honorary life memberships. Another one was later awarded by the Friends of the Tuart Forest. After donating a block of land at Nannup to the Great Walk Networking he was made patron of the group.

John died in August 1993, aged 90. Many who knew him considered him to be a man of great vision who was prepared to head off in a different direction to the crowd, just as he had found the lost boy at Bridgetown by heading in a different direction. At his request, his ashes were scattered in his beloved karri forest at Mount Frankland, on Thomson Block and along Thomson Road south of Lake Muir, both of which are named after him.

John's son Andrew Thomson, a former school principal and active conservationist, prepared this article for *LANDSCOPE* shortly before his death in August 2004.

Beth Schultz, one of WA's foremost conservationists, campaigned against woodchipping and bauxite mining alongside Jack from the mid-1970s and they became close friends. Beth can be contacted at the Conservation Council of WA on (08) 9420 7266.

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