

OBITUARY

Lancelot William McCaskill: An Appreciation

An esteemed Honorary Member of the New Zealand Institute of Foresters, Lance McCaskill, died last August aged 85. Teacher, educationalist, conservationist, naturalist, research director, author, and friend, he was a man of many interests and talents and of quite extraordinary energy. His great achievements were in the fields of soil conservation, nature protection, scenery preservation and agricultural education, and through these he had a profound effect on the land and people of New Zealand.

Lance was born in Winchester, South Canterbury, and educated at Timaru Boys' High School, Canterbury Agricultural College, Christchurch Teachers' College and Canterbury University College, from which he graduated Bachelor of Agricultural Science in 1922. From 1923 to 1927 he was an Agricultural Instructor for the Education Board, and Agricultural Master at Timaru Boys' High School. He lectured in Agricultural Biology at Dunedin Teachers' Training College from 1928-32 and at Christchurch Training College from 1933-44. In 1930 he completed the (then new) Master of Agriculture course at Lincoln and became the first student to graduate with First-class Honours. Thirty-six years later his alma mater conferred upon him an Honorary D.Sc. degree. In 1944 he was appointed to the new position of Lecturer in Adult Education at Lincoln, becoming an Associate Professor in 1950. On his retirement in 1960 he became the Foundation Director of the Tussock Grasslands and Mountainlands Institute, and remained there until second retirement [*sic*] in 1965. He then embarked on two further careers, one as an author and historical researcher, and the other on what can perhaps be best termed a "Scenic Reserves Consultant". In the latter capacity, working jointly with the Lands Department and the New Zealand Forest Service, he completed the mammoth task of physically inspecting and reporting on over 700 of New Zealand's scenic reserves.

Such are the bare bones of Lance's working life. He brought to these various causes immense enthusiasm and energy, a great love of nature, a deep concern for the welfare of the land and people of New Zealand, and a passionate desire to share his knowledge and beliefs with others. He also brought doggedness,

an indomitable fighting spirit, intolerance of beauracracic and other bungling, and, it must be admitted, some intolerance of those holding different views from his own. When presenting Lance with his Honorary Degree, the public orator summed him up in saying, "Everything apart from his stature was big — his enthusiasm, his energy, his courage, his heart, his loves and his hates." And in his book and TV documentary series *Landmarks*, K. B. Cumberland singled him out for special tribute, saying, "Lance McCaskill was like a terrier in his determination to establish a soil conservation policy . . . and like a terrier he could snap back demolishing poorly informed criticism to take obstinant officialdom by the scruff of the neck and shake sense into it." Lance did not court or ever enjoy universal popularity.

Teaching was Lance's main career. As a teacher he was ever-stimulating and ever-innovative. In his early years he brought the teaching of biology out of the classroom and laboratory into the field, just as my grandfather, G. M. Thomson, did at Otago Boys' High School, 40 years earlier. Later as a lecturer in rural education he likewise went far beyond the university and its classrooms. With his usual energy and enthusiasm he organised farmers' conferences, spoke to young farmers' clubs, master-minded field days, and lectured, broadcast and wrote incessantly; and what is more he stimulated other members of Lincoln College staff to do the same. There was no room in Lance's view for a cloistered university approach to the teaching of agriculture or nature study or anything else. He was never a great lecturer in the classroom sense, nor was he a distinguished academic; but he could communicate with people, and interest and inspire both his students and the public. As a teacher, then, he had elements of greatness, for which he is remembered and respected by generations of his past students.

Lance has been termed "the Father of Soil Conservation in New Zealand". He first became aware of soil erosion problems in 1929 when he was secretary of an Otago Royal Society Committee studying deer damage in forests. The links between introduced animals and soil erosion which he then noted were reinforced in his mind by reading what little evidence was then available and by subsequent studies of his own; and he became in later years a consistent hardliner in the great noxious animals debates of the 1950s and 1960s. He travelled widely throughout the South Island backcountry during his training college years, observing and noting not just animal damage but all the processes

of natural and induced erosion and the effects of land management practices on the country. And he came under the influence of such fellow soil conservation pioneers as Kenneth Cumberland and N. H. Taylor. Having by then been persuaded that soil erosion was both a serious and extremely underestimated problem for New Zealand, he was particularly well qualified to undertake in 1939 a Carnegie Travelling Fellowship in the United States of America which enabled him to study not only his main official concern, rural education, but also both nature protection and soil conservation including importantly the operations of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

Back home he became involved in the battles to get effective soil conservation and administration in New Zealand. His main concern was not so much that soil erosion was insufficiently recognised, but that the powers-that-be would not attack the fundamental causes. Lance's fight was with Semples and Ministry of Works engineers who were convinced that flooding could be contained by merely building higher stop-banks and could not see that the problem had to be tackled at its source — *i.e.*, in the headwaters of rivers. Here Lance, if not entirely a lone voice, was as in so many other things ahead of his time, and certainly he was ahead of then official thinking.

He threw himself into the cause with missionary zeal, using his chairmanship of the soil conservation committee of the Canterbury Progress League as a springboard. He lectured, cajoled, lobbied, wrote numerous letters and personally pressurised politicians even to the extent of giving a slide lecture at Parliament House when the legislation was being debated. The Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Act of 1941 was a milestone in the history of land management in New Zealand and Lance played a key part in ensuring that it took the form it did. He became an original member of the North Canterbury Catchment Board (in 1944) and served on it until 1956 and again from 1959-60 and from 1966-74. He represented catchment boards on the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council from 1953-57. On Board and Council (I served with him on both) he was a dynamic and fiery figure, fighting relentlessly for the issues he considered most important — the retirement of badly overstocked and eroded high country, the natural and artificial revegetation of key catchments, sensible sustained yield land management, research into the causes and cures of soil erosion, and, particularly, the training of a cadre of soil conservators. He was im-

mensely proud of the group of soil conservators which he did so much to train himself. Together with National Park Rangers and Forest Rangers they were his favourite people, and it was typical of him that, when in retirement he wrote a book on the history of soil conservation in New Zealand, he gave all the royalties to the New Zealand Association of Soil Conservators.

Despite his enormous achievements in the field of soil conservation there are those who would consider that he made even greater contribution to nature protection and conservation. He developed an early passion for native flora and fauna and in a manner that has perhaps not been matched by anyone else in New Zealand he gave this quite highly individual forms of practical expression. Thus he established a nursery for native plants in the Thames Valley in the 1920s and distributed plants free; at the Christchurch Teachers' College he established a unique teaching garden of over 400 native species; in 1940 he played a large part in organising a "Centennial Native Plants Scheme"; he personally maintained at his own expense the alpine gardens at Arthurs Pass, and he personally "managed" and regenerated Riccarton Bush in Christchurch. His efforts to preserve *Ranunculus pauciflora* at Castle Hill and the botanically unique Arthur's Pass tarns are well documented. He was a foundation member of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and, through an illustrated public address he gave in Dunedin in 1930, he was instrumental in forming the first local branch of that organisation. He took the teaching of nature study into all his classes and at all levels. For decades he lectured, broadcast and wrote widely on many aspects of New Zealand natural history, in order that as many people as possible could share with him his love of nature and could support his efforts for the protection of both individual species and of important habitats.

However, it was in the field of National Parks that he probably made his greatest contributions. Lance was a Foundation Member of the National Parks Authority as he was of the Arthur's Pass National Park Board. And in both organisations he was a dominant and domineering figure. In the early years of the Authority, he was very much its scientific "conscience" and it was he who more than anyone else fought for decisions on the basis of principle rather than expediency. This historical role was important for two reasons; first, owing to the maldistribution of age classes of the other private members he was the only one with the verve to do so; and secondly be-

cause the administration of National Parks at the time was in the hands of a Department of Lands and Survey which was staffed by administrators with clerical rather than technical or scientific or even land-use backgrounds. Later, this "conscience" role was taken over by people like Sir Charles Fleming and David Thom, although the role became less important as Lands Department attitudes changed. But there was a brief interregnum when it was left to the representatives of other government departments to do this and I like to think that Lance's influence on those of us who were involved was both pervasive and beneficial.

Lance was always both clear and far-sighted on National Park issues; and of course he was often controversial. Although his National Parks ethos was founded on a good understanding of sociology as well as of ecology, there were those who considered him to overemphasise the scientific and protection roles of National Parks and to underemphasise the needs of people. Hence he would tend to come into conflict with the tourist industry; he was very much against over-development and, over quite large areas of actual (or potentially legal) wilderness, against any development at all. Nor was he a great friend of Federated Mountain Clubs despite the fact that the leaders of this organisation more than anyone else had been responsible for promoting National Park legislation. But the FMC interest was obviously oriented towards people and particularly the use by people of the high mountain chain of the South Island. Federated Mountain Clubs was always concerned about land and scenery and their preservation but did not then have the same concern for biota as such. Lance could not accept this; he was years ahead of his time in advancing biological and scientific as well as sociological reasons for the extensions of National Parks.

Lance was always a good friend of forestry, foresters and, to some people's surprise, the New Zealand Forest Service which he often defended when he would have been more popular with many of his friends if he had criticised it. Early on and not surprisingly considering his agricultural and land-use background, he developed a sympathy for the foresters' "conservation ethic", and he was always a believer in good multiple-use rather than single-purpose land management. He came to respect the Forest Service, first I think through its activities and policies in the fields of soil and water conservation; but it was the early research of the Forest and Range Experimental Station, which

turned him into such a keen supporter of the Department. It also made him a disciple of the late Jack Holloway who had a deep influence on him. Lance's knowledge and interest in forestry and his ability to present a balanced environmentally orientated viewpoint on matters of forest policy and forest management led to his appointment to the Forestry Council to which he gave valuable service for three years. He started attending meetings of the New Zealand Institute of Foresters in the 1950s and his contributions to debates there were typically forceful and stimulating. At the 1965 meeting he presented a paper in a symposium on forest recreation; and in 1971 he was chosen to sum up the discussions of that meeting on multiple-use forest management. On this occasion to his obvious great delight he was elected an Honorary Member of the Institute. It was also to his great surprise; it was one of the few occasions when he was completely at a loss for words.

Other honours, of course, came to him; indeed, almost without exception he was accorded the highest possible honours by all those bodies with whom he had close contact.

He was the recipient of the following awards and distinctions:

- * Bledisloe Medal. Awarded by Lincoln College for services to agriculture, 1944.
- * Loder Cup. Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture, 1952. (He was also an Associate of Honour of this body).
- * Honorary Member (the first ever), New Zealand Association of Soil Conservators, 1965.
- * Fellow, New Zealand Institute of Agricultural Science, 1966.
- * Grand Patron, New Zealand Young Farmers Clubs (who also established the L. W. McCaskill Trophy in his honour).
- * Companion of the British Empire (CBE), 1969.
- * Distinguished Life Member, Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand.
- * Honorary Doctor of Science, Lincoln College, 1976.
- * Honorary Life Member, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1981.
- * Peter Scott Award for Conservation, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1984.

This impressive list is a telling tribute to the esteem and affection in which he was so widely held; in itself it is a great record of a great career. It is also of interest to note some strange bed-fellows in the list, particularly Forest and Bird and the Institute of Foresters. Without hypocrisy on his part, Lance managed to

maintain the respect of the largest preservation-orientated society in New Zealand and at the same time of a professional body that many environmentalists regarded as little more than vandals. In this as in many other ways he was unique.

In retirement he became a good historical researcher and a fluent author. His two major works were *Molesworth, the Story of New Zealand's Largest Pastoral Run*, and *Hold this Land*, a history of soil conservation in New Zealand. This is the definitive work on the subject, though inevitably it is a little history of Lance McCaskill himself. He wrote for the Forest Service the handbook for the Hanmer Forest Walks, and for Lands Department several major reports as a result of his surveys of scenic reserves. It is a great pity he did not write his own memoirs although probably many of them would have been too libellous for publication; he had the vanity to do so but on the other hand he had the humility to consider there were always other things of greater importance.

Like Dame Nellie Melba, Lance was a bit of a prima donna and like Dame Nellie made many a final "last" appearance. I well remember one of these when, as he often did, he was leading a party of visitors through the Waimakariri Basin to Arthur's Pass. In a masterly fashion he described the land, the countryside, the people who lived there, and its history. As we approached Arthur's Pass, he regaled us with all the details of his famous fight with officialdom to save the Arthur's Pass tarns. His blue eyes crackled with undiminished intelligence and vigour; undiminished also was his delight in recalling past battles. We ourselves shared his delight. His stories were scurrilous but the whole performance was pure vintage McCaskill and we loved him for it. When he died he left a host of friends from all walks of life, from the North Cape to Stewart Island.

A. P. THOMSON

Max McKee (1914-1985)

Max was brought up at Methven and, in spite of the treeless nature of that environment, he chose forestry as a career and went to the Canterbury School of Forestry towards the end of the depression. The School closed before he was able to complete his degree, but, encouraged by Frank Hutchinson, he and Edith went off to Missoula, Montana, to complete his studies.

Before returning to New Zealand in 1939, again on Frank Hutchinson's advice, he went to the Pacific Northwest and gained