

Ranger who could turn his hand to anything

Raymond William Cleland 1920 –2004

Ray Cleland had a long, if intermittent, connection with forestry, particularly in the last years of his life in Southland.

Ray was born in Fielding in 1920, the elder of identical twins, and grew up there in the depression where, as everywhere, all members of the family had to muck in from an early age. He and his brother kept rabbits and fowls, cut firewood and grew macrocarpa seedlings for people wanting shelter trees. This had one big advantage – the twins had money to buy their own individual clothes.

After three years as a P & T messenger in Fielding, Ray moved in 1937 to Wellington to train as a draughtsman. When the war came he joined the army, to serve what he called his 'tertiary education' in Italy as an intelligence sergeant in the New Zealand Armoured Brigade. He talked a lot about Cassino and retained some interesting souvenirs of the battle, but he did not admire the war and later on would never have anything to do with 'Warbirds over Wanaka' even though he had close connections with the district, which he loved. The name, he said, was obscene.

After the war he joined the New Zealand Forest Service and trained as a forest ranger at Rotorua. He told me he topped the class but, still unsettled, in 1948 he returned to Europe where he continued his forestry life in Sweden. He worked for a while on the Royal estates and he still had the immaculate plans that he had drawn for the royal elk shoots, reminiscent of the illustrations of old battles that featured in my school history books.

Returning to New Zealand, he took up life first as a deer culler for the Internal Affairs Department and then as a wildlife ranger. In 1950 he was appointed ranger in charge of the Arthurs Pass National Park. This suited him down to the ground. There was no bureaucracy and he was chief cook and bottle washer, building and doing everything himself and scrounging whatever he could get. He built an entrance to the park, only later to see it demolished by a more prissy successor, and just failed by a matter of days to see it reinstated at the recent 75th anniversary celebration of the park's founding.

In 1958 he was appointed Supervisor of National Parks until, in 1965, fed up with Wellington and paper, he managed to get himself demoted to Chief Ranger of the Mt Aspiring National Park, a position he held until he retired in 1979. Whilst in Wanaka he played a major role in the development of the Treble Cone ski field and was deeply involved in the 'Hands off Lake Wanaka' campaign to protect the lake from hydro development.



At his retirement function he said that his experience as a Forest Service Ranger had stood him in good stead. It had made him a generalist and protected him from specialisation, so that he could turn his hand to anything. And that really was Ray. Just as he had fled the iron grip of Wellington for Wanaka, so I feel he would have left the Park Service of today for some freedom elsewhere.

Saved by retirement, he found that freedom at Pukerau, on the border of Southland, where his son Arne has a native plant nursery.

He converted a small woolshed into a comfortable house, with a high country herbfield garden by the veranda (he liked to feel he was in a mountain hut and was mortified when a good Southland frost cleaned the garden out – it was immediately replanted). The acre or two of land round about was planted in trees, mainly birch, to remind him of Scandinavia.

He worked in the nursery and took up forestry again as an active member of the local sections of the NZIF and the NZFFA, enjoying and helping with field days and attending conferences, and donating a prize for forestry. He watched with admiration the growth of the nursery and revelled in the successes of his grandchildren.

On his retirement in 1979 he was awarded the Queen's Service Medal for public service, and a Nature Conservation Council citation for services to conservation, and in 1990 the New Zealand Commemoration medal.

He died, aged 84, from complications following a fall from his bicycle when in pursuit of the postman. He was predeceased by his first wife Constance, with whom he had two children, Arne and Lesley. He is survived by them and his second wife Elaine.

John Purey-Cust