

John Lawrance Nicholls MNZM BSc (NZ) 1920-2010

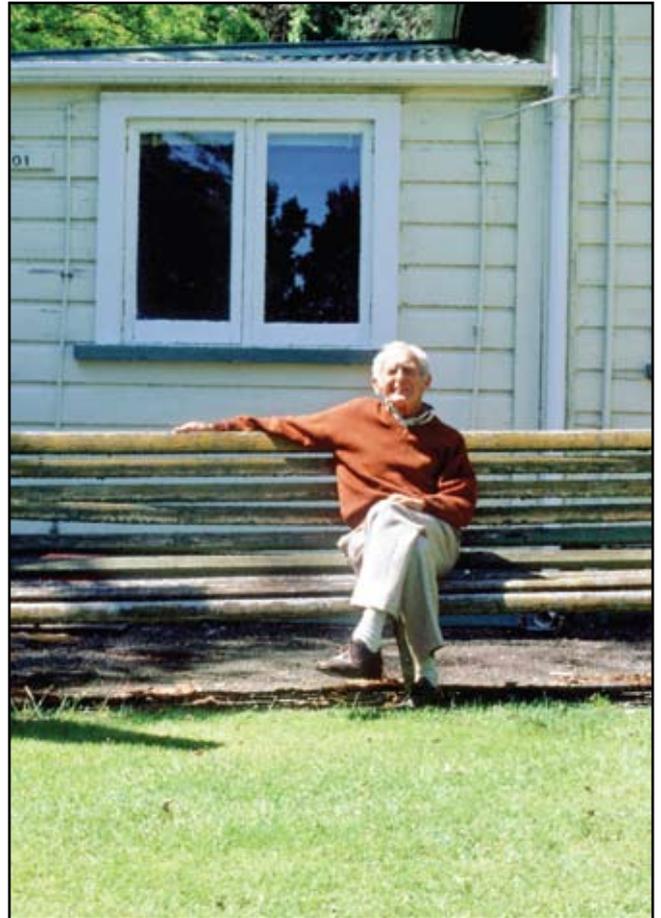
Shy Forester and Champion Wordsmith

The passing of John Nicholls in Rotorua on 19 August 2010 marks the end of an era in New Zealand forestry. John was intimately involved in the National Forest Survey of 1946-1955 and oversaw the subsequent Ecological Survey (1960-1967) that filled gaps in the original survey. These were monumental undertakings that surveyed the remaining indigenous forests, primarily to assess native timber volumes but also to better understand forest pattern across the country.

John was born and grew up in the small Waikato spa town of Te Aroha. His father was a lawyer, and it seems likely that he inherited his capacity for systematic thought from him. After the untimely death of his mother, he was sent to board at Mt Albert Grammar School in Auckland where Robert Muldoon was a classmate. A career in journalism beginning with proof-reading at the New Zealand Herald offices in Auckland and foreshadowing a lifelong love of the written word was interrupted by the Second World War and five years of active service with the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy. That period, shadowing shipping from the air in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic, was described by him as “the adventure of a lifetime”.

Adventures of a different kind were to follow on his return, during summer vacations in the backblocks of Nelson, Westland and Southland. While studying botany and geology at Canterbury University College, John-like many other university students and Forest Service trainees—did field survey for the National Forest Survey, described so aptly by Julia Millen in her book *Through trackless bush*. Joining the Forest Research Institute in 1953, he soon found himself working with Peter McKelvey, later Foundation Professor of Forestry at the University of Canterbury, on the first ecological classification of North Island native forests. Many years of detailed forest type mapping (at inch-to-the-mile scale) and later broader forest class mapping and re-classification of North Island forests followed, constituting the first phase of his career and culminating in the publication of the superb 1:250,000 Forest Class Map Series published by the Forest Service. The aftermath of the National Forest Survey saw an active research programme in native forests at FRI in the late 1950s but it was not to last. John survived its near dissolution in 1962 and remained with Tony Beveridge in a skeleton staff through the bleak years of the 1960s, the bitter conservation debates of the 1970s, and its renaissance in 1980.

The second phase of his career began in the early 1970s with reserve recommendations for the ill-fated Westland and Southland beech schemes. In the late



John Nicholls

1960s, the Forest Service had decided that some tracts of ‘cutover’ State Forest would be better converted to exotic plantation, and a new era of native forest clearance began. Setting aside representative examples of the beech forest ecosystem in a network of reserves became a matter of urgency, and no-one was in a better position than John to make recommendations. In time, this was extended nationwide, leading ultimately to the establishment of some 150 ‘Ecological Areas’ covering 300,000 ha in State Forests throughout the country. Each was described, mapped in detail, and proposed to the multi-disciplinary, inter-departmental Scientific Co-ordinating Committee. Ahead of its time, this magnificent achievement for conservation has been subsequently vindicated, with many Ecological Areas now the focus of conservation management, a testament to the thoroughness of their original assessment.

Despite his aptitude for writing, John was not a prolific publisher. Rather, his written legacy lies largely in his vast correspondence with Conservancy offices

and with other government departments, notably in the Department of Lands and Survey, now catalogued and archived at Landcare Research. With colleagues in other departments, he played a pivotal role in the early 1980s in developing the classification of New Zealand into Ecological Regions and Districts. For over 25 years and with only minor later refinement, this has provided the context for assessing the significance of natural areas in the extensive Protected Natural Area Programme of Lands and Survey and now Department of Conservation and more recently, the continuing Significant Natural Area surveys of local authorities.

John had an extraordinary memory for native forests and could recall where he was, with whom, and more importantly, the composition of the forest on particular days during the National Forest Survey. With its end-on-end rimu desks and pine boxes crammed full of black and white aerial photographs, his large sunlit office in Silviculture House became something of a pilgrimage centre to which a steady succession of lay and professional people came to enquire about forest pattern. As observed in Characters of FRI, "It is unlikely that John's encyclopaedic knowledge of New Zealand native forest composition and species distribution on a national scale will ever again be known by a single person".

Always astute and wry, John did not suffer fools lightly but - if he had them - tended to keep criticisms to himself. Like so many civil servants of the day and contrary, perhaps, to popular view, he worked quietly but effectively for conservation within the confines of a department (and Governments) whose views he did not always share, and while helping raise (by modern standards) a large family. He enjoyed cordial relations with and the mutual respect of some Conservancy colleagues with whom he had fundamental disagreements over the intrinsic value of native forests. He loved words. Colleagues in and around Silviculture House in the 1980s remember with affection many games of lunchtime Boggle that he could not resist, with up to nine people crammed around a table competing to make long words from scrambled letters, then debating whether the words were actually allowable.

Retirement in 1985 did not mean the end of his contribution to science. He continued with a considerable amount of contract work for FRI and private consultancies in his old haunts, where lively discussion about forest pattern and process continued until the formation in the early 1990s of the Crown Research Institute and the relocation elsewhere of his colleagues. During this period, John and his wife spent happy years caretaking the Okataina Outdoor Education Centre east of Rotorua. Here, in the middle of a large clearing surrounded by tall kahikatea and rimu, John took on something of the role of the country naturalist, contributing substantive articles to the Rotorua Botanical Society journal.

John joined the New Zealand Institute of Foresters in 1952 as a Student Member, advanced to Associate Member in 1957 and to Full Member in 1964. The New Zealand Journal of Forestry was his chief publishing outlet, where he authored or co-authored at least 10 articles between 1956- 'Historical Ecology of the Indigenous Forests of the Taranaki Upland'-and 1987-a Letter to the Editor on birds in native forests. Major papers in the intervening years included 'A Provisional Classification of North Island Forests (with Peter McKelvey) in 1957, 'The indigenous forest types of North Auckland' (also with Peter McKelvey) in 1959, 'Scientific Reserves in New Zealand Indigenous Forests (with Priestley Thomson, then Director-General of Forests) in 1973, and 'A Revised Classification of the North Island Indigenous Forests' in 1976.

A shy, modest man, John never sought the limelight. Recognition came late. The New Zealand Ecological Society made him a Life Member in 1985 and in 2004, he was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to ecology and forest research.

John married Monica Moke from Whakarewarewa, in 1953; they leave behind 7 surviving children and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren, to whom he was devoted. A scholar and a gentleman, he will be remembered as a champion of our indigenous forests.

Mark Smale

References

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