Forestry is important only as its products meet the needs of the community. It is for this that forestry as a science exists, for this that our protection forests guard the country against disasters of flood and famine, for this that production forests are perpetually renewed. Forestry is for the people—but do the people know?

All that I have learned of the history of forestry in New Zealand has shown that in the past there was widespread ignorance of the value and purpose of forestry. We would have had scientific forestry in New Zealand in the 1870s if Julius Vogel’s Forest Act of 1874 had received public support, and notice been taken of Campbell Walker’s recommendations. With public support, Kirk’s forest department, established under the 1885 Forests Act, would have survived and the school of forestry authorized under that Act would have been established. Some broadening of public interest in forestry has taken place in subsequent years. There is some understanding of the subject today—that is particularly noticeable in political attitudes—but, considering the increase in population, I wonder whether the ratio of enlightened to unenlightened among the general public is really any greater today than it was in the past.

The establishment of a Chair of Forestry at the University of Canterbury is under consideration, and the establishment of such a Chair should be of great service to New Zealand; but education at university level of those who show an interest in forestry as a career is not enough. Needed is a sustained programme of educating the public to an understanding of the basic reasons for forestry, to a knowledge of how essential protection forestry is to the wellbeing of the community in which we live, and how necessary production forests are to communities as dependent on wood as ours are.

This Institute is charged with the object of furthering (and I quote from our Constitution) “the development of forestry and the interests of the profession of forestry in the Dominion of New Zealand”. Is anything more calculated to advance the interests of forestry in New Zealand than enlightened public interest? It seems to me that it is the plain duty of this Institute to take up the question of the education of the public in forestry matters with the same vigour with which it has dealt with technical forestry matters.

The Institute brings together in membership those whose careers are based on, or closely allied with, forestry. In a country with a population of almost 2.7 million people our inclusive membership is little more than 500. Occasionally a meeting is advertised, sometimes members bring friends to the meetings, but, in general, when our members spend their energies preparing talks and addressing our meetings, they are almost always preaching to the converted.
I think there may be a case for extending our categories of membership to include a subscribing membership open to the general public. In any event, this Institute, in my opinion, should take upon itself greater responsibilities in the matter of public education in forestry—perhaps by organizing one or two public lectures each year, one of which could be timed to coincide with our Annual General Meeting. These could be delivered in the first instance to already organized societies wanting guest speakers: farming organizations, commercial and educational groups. What does our fellow user of land, the farmer, really know about the overall purposes of forestry? Does he regard forestry merely as competition for land, for growing what he considers an inferior product, wood? Or as a plain nuisance, “the forestry”, the people who interfere with his burning-off operations? Better informed, would farmers more readily admit forestry to be another essential form of primary production? And in the cities, the commercial world—members of these communities use the direct product of the forest, wood, and the indirect products, protection, recreation and amenity. How do they regard forestry? Merely as a source of supply of goods that could be imported if not available locally? Are they aware of the real services of forestry to New Zealand?

I believe this Institute should take an active interest in the education of the public, should work towards the awakening of a national consciousness of forestry. An informed public is forestry’s surest defence against a repetition of the neglect forestry has suffered from in the past. I repeat—forestry is for the people, and this Institute should take a lead in telling the public so.

In conclusion, turning from “forestry and the people”, I have something to say about “forestry and its people”. Forestry’s people are a colourful lot, and their experiences and manner of living could be of great interest to others. I think that by publicizing this aspect of forestry, greater public interest in, and understanding of, forestry could be developed. Yet in our discussions and published papers (apart from obituaries) the emphasis is always on the forests—its people are overlooked. When I say “people” I do not mean, of course, only the “top brass”, but the significant characters of all ranks who have left their mark. I should like to think that, at some not too distant time, the theme for an Annual General Meeting might be “Forestry and its People”—and that, thereafter, at least one paper on a forestry personality would be presented and published annually.