

# GEORGE MALCOLM THOMSON AND THE 1913 ROYAL COMMISSION ON FORESTRY

## Part 2: The 1913 Royal Commission

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Having given his promise, Massey acted quickly and the Royal Commission was set up by Order in Council in 11 February 1913. The Commission consisted of H. D. M. Haszard, the Commissioner of Crown Lands (Westland) as Chairman, with, as members, S. I. Clarke and C. P. Murdoch, both of Auckland, respectively a builder and a woodware manufacturer, two farmers, F. Y. Lethbridge of Feilding and T. Y. Adams of Canterbury, and finally Leonard Cockayne. Adams was a prominent farm forester who subsequently gave generous bequests to the University of Canterbury and particularly to the Forestry School.

Thomson had every reason to be pleased with the latter two appointments, if not with the choice of the Commissioner of Crown Lands (Westland) as the chairman;† although this had obvious advantages to the government, in Thomson's view it combined the roles of judge, jury and executioner in the one person.

The Commission's terms of reference were as follows:

- (1) Which of the existing forest lands it is desirable to permanently retain under forest covering for the purposes of soil protection and prevention of denudation, water conservation, prevention of floods, climatic, scenic, or any other national benefit.
- (2) Which of the forest areas are not required for any of the purposes mentioned in (1), but are suitable for settlement, saw-milling, or other commercial purposes, indicating whether such areas should be utilised forthwith or rendered available at some future period.
- (3) The best method of dealing with the indigenous forests in the public interests generally.
- (4) Whether or not, in view of the large and increasing demand for white pine timber in connection with the butter industry, the exportation thereof should be wholly or partially prohibited.

And with regard to afforestation operations:

- (5) The probable future demand for timber for commercial purposes within the Dominion of New Zealand.

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† In fairness to Haszard it should be said that he did have a genuine interest in native forests; witness his earlier contribution in the *Transactions of the N.Z. Institute* entitled "Notes on the Growth of some Indigenous and other Trees in N.Z."

- (6) The nature and kinds of timber likely to be so required.
- (7) How far the operations of existing State nurseries and plantations meet the probable demand.
- (8) To what extent such operations should be supplemented and expanded and in what localities should new nurseries and plantations (if any) be situated.
- (9) Whether the present operations of the State are being conducted on satisfactory and progressive lines. If not, to what extent and in what manner the present management and control should be altered.
- (10) Under what conditions should the State encourage and assist tree planting by private individuals and local bodies; and, generally, any matters which, in your opinion, affect forest conditions and afforestation in the Dominion, or would tend to promote their development, including the necessity or expediency of any legislation in the premises.

Thomson put in one submission (not included in the report) and appeared only once before the Commission during its brief term of existence. And brief it was. Commissioned on 11 February, it was required to report by 30 April giving only three months to deal with major and complicated problems, which it will be seen the terms of reference fully recognised. In the event, the time was extended by one month to 30 May, but Massey's haste in dealing with the matter still seemed to border on the unseemly. It is of interest to note that the proclamation for the extension of time was signed, not as before by Massey himself, but by his deputy, Francis Dillon Bell. This was Bell's first official connection with a matter of forestry concern. The Commission duly reported on the prescribed date — a tribute to the hard work and literary abilities of Phillips Turner and Cockayne — and the report was tabled in late July 1913.

During the 1913 and 1914 Sessions of the House, Thomson kept pressing for the report to be debated but without success. In July 1914, however, he took the opportunity to give his views during the debate on the Address in Reply. Having first expressed his general disappointment with the report itself and with the personnel of the Commission, he went on to make these specific criticisms.

— The report recommended that all but 200 acres of Waipoua Forest should be felled and opened for settlement. He considered this small reservation of a most important kauri forest was completely inadequate. (In private he thought it was scandalous.)

- The report did not really address the most important question of all—*i.e.*, how wasteful it was to cream native timber when logging indigenous forests and then to fell and burn the rest and convert to agriculture.
- Arising from the latter concern, there was a great need, not recognised in the report, for research into the pulping properties of New Zealand hardwoods.
- The report signally failed to recommend, as he had been advocating for several years, the setting up of a separate forestry department under scientific and expert advice and management.

These criticisms were repeated and in much stronger terms, some years later by Sir David Hutchins.

Thomson agreed, though with reservations, to what was one of the most important and significant statements in the report, although it was not then recognised as such. The report said, "it may be stated as a broad principle that no forest land except it be required for the special purposes of a climatic or a scenic reserve and which is suitable for farmland, should be permitted to remain under forest if it can be occupied and resided upon in reasonably limited areas." The fact that Thomson, a dedicated conservationist and forest protagonist, could agree with this limited view of the role and importance of forests is telling evidence of the general opinion which had prevailed in New Zealand since it was first settled, and which still did prevail — that forests were basically a hindrance to the development of New Zealand, and that unless they were on steep mountain country they should be removed entirely.

Despite his failure to get the report on the 1913 Forestry Commission debated, Thomson continued with his campaign for forestry reform. In September 1914, in the debate on Supply, he stated that he wanted to make his usual protest against the management of the Forestry Department. "Forestry", he said, "appears to be conducted under no system of control and we are not getting what we should out of existing forests nor going the right way to work to supply new forests." He urged on the Prime Minister the importance of putting the Department on a proper footing in order "to develop this great national asset".

This was Thomson's last speech in the House of Representatives; he lost his North Dunedin seat in the October 1914 General Election.

History may judge that Thomson and, subsequently, Sir David Hutchins were both over-critical of the 1913 Commission Report. It did make some most important and far-reaching recommendations. Amongst these were:

- Forests should be formally classified, on economic grounds, in consideration of their relative values for timber and for settlement.
- There should be a major survey of the large area of beech forests in New Zealand with a view to ascertaining their potential for sustained yield management.
- Administration of the remaining millable forest should be revised and made uniform.
- Timber sales policy of selling State-owned wood on sawmill output should cease and the sales should instead be made on the contents of the trees standing in the bush estimated in advance. (The fact that this extremely important recommendation was largely ignored by subsequent administrations, perhaps more than any other reason, later led Sir Francis Bell to press hard for the establishment of a separate State Forest Department.)
- Much greater recognition should be given to the damage done to the undergrowth of forests and the possibilities of regeneration. Measures should be taken to restrict deer to limited areas, sufficient for sport, which may be proclaimed deer parks, where they can do the smallest possible damage.
- Perhaps most importantly of all, the over-riding principle was clearly established that all forests with a vital protective role should be classified as climatic reserve and zealously protected. Specific recommendations were made for the classification in this manner of large areas in the mountain lands of both islands. Likewise, most important recommendations were made for scenic reserves.

The big shortcoming of the 1913 Commission report was its complete failure to recognise the need for a separate specialist forestry department, though, considering its chairman, perhaps this was predictable. And as had been seen, there were other major areas for justifiable criticism; but considering the extremely wide terms of reference and the short time given to consider them, it was a quite remarkable document which, in many major respects, helped set the course of forestry for years to come.

## POSTSCRIPT

It took some six to eight years for the main recommendations of the 1913 Commission to be adopted. Historians have generally blamed this delay on two factors, the war years and in-built bureaucratic opposition from the Lands Department. They were probably wrong on both counts. The recommendations were so comprehensive and far-reaching that, war or not, it would have taken several years — and a shift of pressure on the Government from scientists to farmers — to put them into effect. And this is just what happened. On the other count, the evidence is that, divided though it may have been, Lands Department did conscientiously move during this period to improve both its native forest administration and the operations of the Afforestation Branch. The influence of Phillips Turner was persuasive. Amongst the main steps taken during the early years were:

- The immediate appointment of a professional forester\*.
- The establishment of a working group consisting of Phillips Turner, Goudie and Morrison to report on recruitment, staffing and training. Its report, quoted by Roche, was a far-sighted one.
- Reformed timber sales procedures directed to achieving sales on standing tree measurement rather than on output. These measures, described elsewhere (Thomson, 1974), were unfortunately not adopted in the field.
- As a result of strong representations to Massey on the part of J. G. Wilson of Bulls, the appointment in 1915 of D. E. (later Sir David) Hutchins to advise on reafforestation in New Zealand.

This latter event was a point of some historical interest in New Zealand forestry, not only in itself, but also for the fact that it heralded the importance and influence of J. G. (later Sir James) Wilson. Wilson, already a towering figure in New Zealand agriculture and agricultural research, was a keen farm forester who became interested in the wider fields of forest management and forest policy, and whose talents and reforming zeal were soon put to work in the cause of improving forest administration. Wilson's contributions have been ably written up in the biography by L. J. Wild (1953). This is not the place to describe the contributions which Hutchins himself made,

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\*W. A. Fraser, an Edinburgh graduate, soon joined the N.Z. Expeditionary force and was killed in action.

but one of the most important was the way in which he saw clearly that a popular forestry movement was needed if the Government was to be budged and to persuade Sir James Wilson of this fact. Wilson was the first President of the New Zealand Forestry League which he set about establishing in conjunction with Alexander Bathgate\* of Dunedin and his farmer friends throughout the country. He got wide support and not only from rural areas.

The main thrust of the Forestry League was towards having the recommendations of the 1913 Commission adopted together with the other main reform which the Commission had not recommended and G. M. Thomson had over the years, the establishment of a separate forestry department under trained professional staff. The Forestry League could claim to be a remarkably successful lobby, since all its main objects were achieved in the course of a few short years. Looking back after over half a century, it is hard to judge whether its greatest contribution was in successfully persuading Massey and his Government to act, or in influencing and stimulating Sir Francis Dillon Bell and in pressing for his appointment as the first independent Commissioner of State Forests.

These matters have been described in some detail, though not entirely completely, by Roche in his Ph.D. thesis (Roche, 1983). But there is a field for some further interpretative research, particularly in the interplay of power and personality between the three forestry giants which the era threw up, Wilson, Hutchins and Bell, and the then senior administrative officers of Lands Department.

Out in the political wilderness and with little to do in Dunedin but write and think, Thomson was far removed from all this; but not entirely. Though most of his letters and papers over this period have been lost there is one valuable fragment extant†. It indicates clearly that Thomson, far from giving up the battle, was still lobbying away and using to good effect his political and personal influence. In July 1918, soon after his appointment to the Legislative Council, in a memorandum to Alex Bathgate, Thomson said:

Mr Sidey left Wellington this morning, but I saw him yesterday and we discussed the situation together, after he had perused the enclosed correspondence. He undertook to see Sir F. D. Bell and

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\*A prominent Dunedin lawyer, the originator of Arbor Day in Dunedin, a fellow-conservationist and a close personal friend of G. M. Thomson.

†It came to me, presumably from the Wilson papers, via L. J. Wild of Feilding.

Hon. Mr Guthrie, if possible, and to learn from them how far the Government are prepared to go in the direction of conserving the existing forest areas, and especially those areas out of which milling timber has been taken, and which — if not looked carefully after — the Lands Department is likely to take for clearing and settlement. Mr Sidey agrees with me that we ought to bring pressure on the Government to establish an independent Forestry Department, under one or other Minister, but quite separate from Lands, and that it should be put under a scientifically-trained forestry expert. I think it should be possible to work up a sufficient body of members of both Houses who would make this a matter of national policy, and I am determined to try to do my part in this direction.

Bathgate passed the latter on to C. E. Statham, Member for Dunedin Central (and subsequently Speaker of the House). Statham replied:

Dear Mr Bathgate

I enclose papers sent to me by the Hon. G. M. Thomson. I shall be very glad to work with him and Mr Sidey in trying to move the Government.

Yours sincerely

E. Statham.

As is now common knowledge, the Government did allow itself to be "moved". In November 1918, the Hon. F. D. Bell was appointed the first independent Commissioner of State Forests and the stage was set for the formation of a separate forestry department administered by a professional forester, as well as for the necessary legislation, which Bell quite brilliantly master-minded himself. It had taken twelve years for Thomson to see the final successful result of his own personal campaign. In reality when considering the pioneering efforts of Vogel, Kirk and others, the battles had gone on for very much longer, as Thomson himself would have been the first to proclaim.

The latter part of the memorandum to Mr Bathgate is also worth quoting. Apropos of whose idea we do not know, he said:

I don't think much of the seed store idea, not that such a thing might not do good under proper conditions, but that the Lands Department is not the body to administer it. Nor do I think that scattering of seeds broadcast is likely to do anything in the way of forming forest. I have for years been looking into the question of the naturalisation of species (both plants and animals) in this country, and have accumulated a considerable body of evidence. It is marvellous how many kinds of plants and millions of seed have been scattered broadcast in the last 70 to 80 years, and how very few, relatively, have established themselves.

One can think of few off-the-cuff comments better designed to put a nail in the "displacement theory" coffin; or which display such good simple ecological commonsense. Nearly two decades later C. M. Smith (a devoted Otago Boys' High School pupil of G. M. Thomson) in a contribution to the 37th meeting of ANZAAS\* in 1957 put what are perhaps the final nails in the coffin (Smith, 1957); but by then it was all old history.

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\*ANZAAS — Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science.