
Obituary

Jack C. Westoby, C.M.G.

1913-1988

With the death of Jack Westoby in September last year the world of forestry in general lost possibly the most influential spokesman and critic it has had in the last 40 years.

Jack retired from The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations in 1974 after almost 25 years of service, firstly in the Forest Economics and Statistics Branch of the Division of Forestry and Forest Products, as it was before forestry was raised to departmental status in the organisation. He became Deputy Director of the Division and then Director for Programme Co-ordination and Operations in the Forestry Department. It was during this period that forestry in FAO became synonymous with inspiring, innovative leadership for the foresters and forest services throughout the world. Much of that was due to the drive, the dedication and determination which Jack, through sheer intellectual brilliance, superlative writing and Yorkshire doggedness, brought to bear to force world forestry out of its pre-war nostalgia and into the reality of post-war reconstruction.

Jack persuaded foresters to substitute an attitude aimed at forest management for social and economic development. In doing this he drew on the achievements of New Zealand and Australia in plantation forestry based development of their forest industries long before he had any direct experience with those activities. He thus had an interest and connection with forestry in the Pacific region well before he first visited New Zealand and Australia in the 1960s. This awareness of the potential of a vigorous and well-planned plantation programme led to the Fiji Pine Scheme which grew out of the United Nations Development Programme/FAO project in Fiji which Jack had helped initiate in 1967 and which New Zealand aid greatly helped to bring to fruition.

In 1969 Jack was the keynote speaker at the Golden Jubilee of the New Zealand Forest Service. In an address entitled "One World Forestry: New Zealand's Role" he outlined a philosophy which visualised New Zealand playing a much more active and vital role in the world of forestry than simply looking after its own affairs. Whether that had any influence on the way the New Zealand aid programme in forestry has since developed is hard to assess. But at least that very effective programme had

followed along lines which Jack, on the whole, would have endorsed.

Jack became the first NZ Forest Products Visiting Fellow at the School of Forestry in Canterbury. There would be very few students of that time and none of the staff who were not permanently influenced by his views and his presentations of them.

Of his many achievements in the world of forestry he will probably be remembered most for his linking of forest development and management with forest industry for social and economic betterment. Yet his influence on forestry education, in broadening the perspective of forest economics applied to development, in forest policy, and in elaboration of the now popular field of social forestry is equally outstanding and enduring. Truly there are very few people in our time who have had such a widespread and wide-ranging effect on forestry thought and policy.

Yet he was not a forester by training. He came, as he was fond of saying, into forestry by accident. After graduating from the University of Hull in physics and statistics he worked for some years in railway administration before joining the Board of Trade in 1945. One of his responsibilities covered the timber trade and in that capacity he represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EEC/FAO Timber Committee which was then working on the first European timber trends study. His contributions to that work led to him being invited to join the secretariat, which he eventually did in 1952. He moved to FAO headquarters in Rome in 1958 as Chief of the Forest Economics Branch.

When forestry in FAO was raised to departmental status Jack virtually shaped its programme in technical assistance throughout the developing world and mobilised the support of the developed countries in the thrust of that programme. It came as rather a shock therefore to many people when he seemed to repudiate the idea of forest-based industrial development in his outstanding address to the Eighth World Forestry Conference in Djakarta in 1978. To those who had been following his thinking over the previous decade it was, however, no surprise. Indeed it was but the logical development of his concern to see the potential of forestry directed towards the alleviation of the mass poverty in the developing countries.

What he said needed to be said and nobody could have said it better or to more effect. For the enormous expansion in the utilisation of the tropical forests which had taken place over the last 20 years had, with few exceptions, done nothing for the people most in need. The reason lay largely in the fact that most of the increase in output had gone into equally large increases in log exports rather than providing a base for domestic forest industries.

The alternative which he worked out and which has come to be known, somewhat erroneously, as Social Forestry was the main theme of his very active retirement. Although increasingly handicapped by the disability from which he eventually died he wrote and lectured on the theme "Making Trees Serve People" to very great effect. As his book "The Purpose of Forests", a collection of his writings and speeches tracing the development of his ideas towards this end, shows, his dissatisfaction with the conventional wisdom he had inspired was well advanced before he retired from FAO. It is a book that every forester should own and refer to repeatedly if for no other reason than to see that great forestry can also be great literature.

Just before his death he completed a second book, "Introduction to World Forestry", in which he drew together the threads of how forestry had become what it is, how it had, almost inevitably given that historical evolution, run into the difficulties it is now facing and what it will have to do to reform itself. It is very much a political book, because as he shows, forestry is a political activity.

Jack's influence on forestry is not that of the great technical innovators such as Brandis, Jacobs, Schlich, Pinchot or Entrican. He, by contrast, was entirely concerned with the question of why forestry rather than the how. In today's world his concern is turning out to be the more relevant. We who have to work out how to handle the unfamiliar and uncomfortable new situation are fortunate to be able to number him as one of our most illustrious thinkers and leaders. And we should be grateful that we have his work and works to guide us to recovery from the self-inflicted wounds of obsession with the technical problems of timber production management rather than the social purpose of forestry.

Alf Leslie