

Leon Ellis - in search of an enigma

Peter McKelvey

A very few old-timers in the New Zealand forestry industry and some knowledgeable about New Zealand forestry history will recognise the name above as belonging to the first Director of Forestry, a Canadian forester who was appointed the first head of the New Zealand State Forest Service and who, in his initial 1920 report to the Government, produced a blueprint for State forestry in this country. (Even today it is worth reading this balanced, inspirational report expressing breadth and vision for New Zealand forestry and recommending the professionally managed organisation he favoured and which came to pass.)

With his competence, energy and force of personality he inspired the cadre of foundation Forest Service staff to tremendous efforts for the new department of State and initiated large-scale State exotic afforestation. Then, surprisingly and unexpectedly, he left New Zealand abruptly in 1928 to work as a consultant in Australia.

The name belongs also to his son who, with his wife Ann, arrived in New Zealand for two weeks last November to find out something about what his father had achieved here all those years ago. Leon Ellis junior is a retired professor of dentistry from the University of California who last saw his father when he himself was only two years of age, so there was much to find out. Several Institute members

responded to the visit by helping the Ellis' in their quest.

In Christchurch the writer, who had studied and written about Leon Ellis senior, hosted them initially, providing data and references, and also showing them parts of the city. Then the couple travelled to Wellington where they were met and shown around the capital by Lindsay Poole, who is the sole remaining forester to have met "Cappy Ellis" in the 1920s. (The military sobriquet by which he was commonly referred to was an indication of his service in France in World War 1 and his military status there with the Canadian Forestry Corps.) Andrew McEwen hosted an enjoyable afternoon tea which was attended by several old Forest Service senior officers.

In Wellington also the Ellis' were shown the offices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on the walls of which are photographs of former Director-Generals of Forests. Then the Ellis' flew to Rotorua where they were met by Wink Sutton who told them much about the early State forestry work in the district and drove them through Kaingaroa Forest to show them the scale of the afforestation programme the elder Ellis had been responsible for.

Leon and Ann were a delight to meet and show round, and were avidly interested in all they were told and shown. It was all a nice brush with New Zealand forestry history.

NZIF Study trip Copland Valley, Westland

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Most of the Institute membership missed out on three days of near typical West Coast conditions over New Zealand Day weekend – it only rained for about 20 minutes on the Sunday afternoon! Seven members (and six friends) took a stroll up and down the Copland Valley to Welcome Flat and beyond in what could be called 'mildly humid' conditions – one of the team was overheard to mumble 'I'm losing a fair bit of gravy today'!

For two of the team, it was the second visit into this valley and both still variably recalled the large slips (which were 'recent' about 10 years ago, but which Department of Conservation still advise punters not to loiter because of the risk of further falling rocks!). Suppose this is yet another example of changes in attitude since Cave Creek.

The hot pools were well patronised by the group despite the warm, humid conditions – they sure helped relieve those aching muscles! The author has since been recently advised that a winter visit might be the best time to visit these pools. The distinct lack of that Rotorua smell was another 'welcome' feature here. But while Welcome Flat lacked the smells, it more than made up for it with those insects that Charlie Douglas called those 'wee ... beasties'! And the author's feet still have a resemblance of a used pincushion to prove it.

The group was appreciative of the resident DoC warden for the use of her botanical texts when it became apparent that some confusion existed with the nomenclature/identification of certain species of *Olearia* shrubs. The



difference(s) between *O. ilicifolia* and *O. macrodonta* were debated for some time. So yes, we did have an element of 'study' on this year's tramp. For the record, the author remains convinced that *Olearia ilicifolia* (together with *O. avicenniaefolia*) is the predominant of the two seen in this area and is also thankful that a taxonomist was not present to confuse us even further!

Next year's study trip is a traverse of the Kepler Track to monitor changes in the track and vegetation since Institute members walked it prior to official opening in the late 1980s.

Richard Thum