

The Professors of Botany and Forestry Education in Victoria

Professors of Botany in The University of Melbourne exercised a huge influence on the development of forestry education in Victoria. Alfred J Ewart (1872 to 1937) became foundation Professor in 1906, and until the professorship was made full-time, was also Government Botanist. He was the first chairman of the forest examiners, in 1908, and continued in that role until 1937. His Handbook of Forest Trees for Victorian Foresters (1925) was still issued to students of VSF from stocks held by the Commission well into the 1940s. A sticker inside the front cover read: *'Many enquiries having been received for a handy work on Forest Trees of Victoria, for the use of students, the offer of Professor A.J. Ewart, Ph.D., D.Sc., to prepare it was gladly accepted by the Forests Commission of Victoria, who arranged for its publication in its present form.'*

In addition to his vocational interest in the forests Professor Ewart had a personal link to the training of foresters; his past student, and brother-in-law-to-be, was appointed head of the School in 1927, and took up the position in 1928, on secondment from the Education Department. I have no doubt that the invitation of the Forests Commission Victoria to Semmens to take on the job was inspired by Professor Ewart, who had known him as a student. When the secondment expired after three years Semmens decided to carry on at the School of Forestry.

The Annual Report of the Forests Commission 1937-38 recorded this tribute to Ewart: *'He was closely associated with the development of the Creswick Forestry School from its inception in 1910, and it is due in no small measure to his encouragement and valuable assistance that the School has attained its present high status. The Commission takes this opportunity of placing on record its appreciation of his service to Victorian forestry and his work as Chairman of the Board of Examiners.'*

John Stewart Turner (1908-1991) succeeded Ewart at the University in 1938, when this young and unexpected appointee commenced his distinguished career in Australia. He was authorised in 1938 to be an examiner under the Forest Examination Board, and became a member of it in 1943. He was chairman of the Board of Forestry Education and mentor and protector of John Chinner and his small school of forestry within the Faculty of Science in The University of Melbourne. The second and third year botany syllabuses encouraged forestry students no end.

Prof. Turner also mentored the resident lecturer in botany (and forest botany) at the Creswick School. William Litster, BScFor (Hons) Edinburgh, was there from about 1928 to the end of 1968, and there was occasional need for some catch-up, or sprucing up, one might say. Turner kept an eye on that.

I was told that not long before he retired, in 1973, Turner came to think that the future of the forestry section under the umbrella of the Faculty of Science would become doubtful without his influence to support it. He decided to advise the Reader-in-Charge, John Chinner, to explore the prospects of a future within the Faculty of Agriculture.

Forestry moved into the Faculty of Agriculture. As I understand it, John was overwhelmed by the ranks of agriculture and the forestry course was buffeted badly. Students of forestry were required, in time, to study biochemistry to make up classes with agriculture students. Bovine physiology remote from forestry subjects? For agriculturalists' reasons, the forestry students were required to attend the farm-campus at Derrimut on the volcanic plain some 20 km west from Melbourne's CBD for one academic year. The lectures and practical classes in the School of Botany remained bright spots. I listened, in helpless silence at one meeting at the Faculty building, to professors of agriculture scoffing at silviculture as a worthwhile

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study, one even likening it to horticulture, which the speaker said could be read up during a long weekend, enough for an introductory course. On that occasion, John Chinner was cruelly outgunned.