

The Zealous Conservator: A Life of Charles Lane Poole

John Dargavel

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John Dargavel has done a remarkably good job of compiling the story of the professional life of one of Australia's pioneer foresters, Charles Lane Poole, largely from historic records. The result makes a very good read, giving great insights into the work and personal characteristics of this remarkable forester, who at the age of 19 had his left hand amputated and replaced with a steel hook. Reading through the story, one is somewhat humbled by the challenges that early foresters like Lane Poole endured and surprised that some of the challenges have a nature remarkably similar to those facing foresters today.

Born in Sussex in 1885, Charles was one of two English cadets, sponsored by the Colonial Office, to graduate from the French Forestry School at Nancy in 1906. He then spent more than four years in the Transvaal Forest Department and then another five years in Sierra Leone. For much of this time he worked on demarcation of the best of the remaining forests as well as establishing plantation trials. By modern standards, times were tough. He often spent three months away from his post surveying forests and when he married in 1911 his wife Ruth remained in Dublin for the next five years and they corresponded regularly by letter.

Most of Lane Poole's working life was spent in Australia. When he arrived in Australia in 1916 and became Western Australia's Conservator of Forests, he was only the second university-trained forester working in Australia. There was so much to be done: it was not clear how much forest there was, no one knew how fast the trees grew or when they reached maturity, his staff could not identify the forest flora botanically, indeed much of it had never been classified, and wood science investigations had barely begun. He attacked all of these problems in his first year as the Conservator of Forests.

The book provides intriguing insights into the political dimensions of forestry in the early part of the twentieth century in Australia. Between 1916 and 1921, Charles put enormous personal energy into the development of Western Australia's first forestry legislation. The process was long and complex and was a battle between the forest scientist and powerful stakeholders, particularly the owners of Millars, then the largest sawmilling company in Western Australia, that stood to have their concessions converted to permits and their log prices increased to levels consistent with those of other timber permit holders. He had to do battle with the Premier of the state, and in the end when he could not achieve the outcome that he believed was right for the forests he tendered his resignation. This is fascinating as one often thinks the political challenges faced by today's foresters are of recent making.

Lane Poole spent the next two years working in the Australian Territories of Papua and New Guinea conducting forest assessments. The description of the challenges he faced when surveying

the forests of Papua and New Guinea, including crossing flooded rivers, dealing with malaria-infected mosquitoes and savage attacks from indigenous tribesmen, puts today's remote sensing inventories into perspective.

Lane Poole always had a great interest in the education of foresters. When he attended the third Interstate Forestry Conference in Adelaide in 1916, he drafted a resolution that set out the need to train foresters at the university level and apprentices in a training school. In 1927, he became the acting principal of the Australian Forestry School when it opened in Canberra and remained in the post for 28 years. But this period was not without its controversies, as he had major conflicts with his staff and more significantly with Alfred Galbraith and Harold Swain, the respective heads of the Victorian and NSW forest departments, both of whom Lane Poole considered not to be properly trained foresters. These conflicts seriously impacted on student numbers and led to the partnership between the Creswick School of Forestry and the University of Melbourne. This conflict explains the tensions that persisted until the late 1970s between Victorian- and Canberra-trained foresters.

Despite the conflicts he had with some politicians, Lane Poole was well connected with many politicians including Prime Minister Stanley Bruce. These connections enabled him to achieve some of his goals, such as the establishment of the Australian Forestry School, but weren't sufficient to allow him to achieve his ultimate desire of having the control of forests vested under the Commonwealth. He also failed to get agreement for the headwaters of the Hume Weir catchment to be managed by the Commonwealth. He also spent about 20 years as Inspector General of Forests trying unsuccessfully to forge the development of a national forest policy. He was, however, more successful in getting the Forestry and Timber Bureau established to conduct the forest research he knew was needed to guide the management of Australian forestry.

Lane Poole made very significant contributions to botanical knowledge in many of the places he worked, including Africa, Australia and Papua New Guinea. He collected 44 type specimens during his survey work in Papua New Guinea. He also collected specimens when on tour in Western Australia and one of them, *Eucalyptus lane poolei*, was subsequently named after him.

Dargavel goes to great length to give the reader an accurate portrayal of the personality of Charles Lane Poole, including his advocacy regardless of the personal consequences or political realities. Lane Poole was very strong minded and intolerant of other's views, including those of other 'less well-trained' foresters working with him and in the various forestry agencies he interacted with. This characteristic made it very difficult for him to achieve some of his goals as the principal of the Australian

Forestry School and the Inspector General of Forests with the Commonwealth government in Australia. It also explains some of the tensions that existed in Australian forestry when I entered the profession in the early 1970s and which persisted until a national forest policy was agreed to in 1992.

Two other things of significant interest are described in the book. Lane Poole's wife Ruth had great skills in interior design and was given the job of designing the furniture and interior colours in both the Prime Minister's and Governor General's residences which were under construction in the new national capital of Australia. Lane Poole developed a life-long friendship with one of Australia's great philanthropists, Sir Russell Grimwade, who was an early member of the Australian Forest League — the forerunner of conservation organisations in Australia. Both Grimwade and Lane Poole believed strongly in the importance of Australian foresters gaining first-hand experience of the long-standing forest management systems practised in Europe. Grimwade donated funds to establish a prize that enabled Australian foresters to study at the Imperial Forestry Institute at Oxford, from which nearly 30 Australian foresters have benefited.

Dargavel's story of Lane Poole's life is well worth the read, both from the historical perspective and from the insights it gives into successes and failures of a forestry leader.

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