

## **John Johnstone, ‘a glorified landscape gardeners’ role in forestry in Australia**

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The Victorian School of Forestry (VSF) established in 1910 at Creswick offered the first formal Forestry Course in Australia. The School was managed by the Forest Commission of Victoria from its opening until a period of co-management with the University of Melbourne in the 1980s and finally, after 2000, as a Department within the University. Yet the origins of the VSF are effectively lost. The one material statement is a metal plaque installed in 1952, honouring the former Premier and local member for Creswick, Sir Alexander Peacock. The plaque credited Peacock,

*To whose inspiration & initiative the establishment of this school was largely due.* <sup>1</sup>

However, reconstructing the story through historical newspapers, parliamentary papers, forest department records and private correspondence has revealed that other individuals were involved in the establishment of the school. The primary inspiration for the establishment of the School, and the one who took the initiative and did the work at Creswick, was not Peacock but John Johnstone, the Superintendent of State Plantations from 1902 to 1926.

Johnstone has been overlooked in the history of the School for a number of reasons: he was not listed in the official Department records or the *Government Gazette* prior to 1913; he

had clashed with others who fostered grudges, was seen as an outsider and was not considered to be a forester by those who came after him.

Unlike Johnstone, Peacock was an amiable person with few enemies and good relationships across the various sides of politics. He is acknowledged in political histories for his long parliamentary service, his involvement in factory and sweatshop legislation and his loud laugh,<sup>2</sup> but his biographers make no mention of any involvement in the establishment of the School at Creswick.

As the local member in 1910, Peacock supported the School's establishment and the nursery and plantation developments at Creswick. It was in the years after the School's opening, when the scheme seemed to stall that Peacock became more involved in agitating the government to fulfil their commitment to the School and to Creswick to support the local economy and employment.<sup>3</sup> This would explain the plaque.

Johnstone, by contrast, is only mentioned in passing in the histories of the School. His background and training were in large-scale estate landscaping and plantation forestry. He began his working life in Scotland, training at Gordon Castle. He then worked for Thomson's Nursery in Edinburgh and then at Kingston Hall, the estate of Lord Belper in Derby, before coming to Australia where he first worked on an estate in South Australia, under the auspice of the seed and nursery company, Law, Somner and Co. In 1887, he took on the role of curator and developer of Maddingley Park at Bacchus Marsh.<sup>4</sup> Maddingley Park was a community public space with a Committee of Trustees formed in 1872 and the beginnings of a pleasure garden established in 1886.<sup>5</sup>

Over his ten years at Maddingley Park, Johnstone was held in high esteem, developing sculptures, a lake, botanical and other park features. He was also active in the community and as a contributor to the local paper. His creativity and ambition were well known. The proposed removal of the oval from the park in 1890 was viewed as an opportunity for

*.. the unlimited ambition of the Curator, Mr. Johnstone, to create lakes, caves, grottoes, a museum, an aviary, a zoological collection, and a fernery*<sup>6</sup>

The local paper described a typical 'Johnstonian' style as the

*ingenious: adaptation of a natural formation to an artificial use.*<sup>7</sup>

Johnstone went from Bacchus Marsh to the Forests Department in 1898 and was stationed at the Macedon Nursery, as with most new staff up to that time.<sup>8</sup> He was brought into the department by George Perrin, the Conservator of Forests,<sup>9</sup> who may have known him in South Australia but more likely from his work at Maddingley Park.<sup>10</sup> Perrin had shown a keen interest in the Creswick nursery and an associated parkland, drawing up a park landscape plan for what would become Park Lake at Creswick.<sup>11</sup> Johnstone had transferred to Creswick by the time of Perrin's death in December 1900 but appears to have been working at a labourer's rate, as Perrin had been unable to have him appointed to a better position.<sup>12</sup>

Johnstone applied for the position of Conservator of Forests in 1901 and while he was not appointed in his own right, he was proposed as joint conservator with H. R. Mackay in 1901 by Daniel Duggan, the Minister for Lands. Mackay had been secretary to the Royal

Commission on State Forests and Timber Reserves which had run for four years producing fourteen reports. These appointments were challenged both in Parliament and in the Press, which presented James Blackburne, an Inspector of Forests, as Perrin's obvious successor.<sup>13</sup> However, Blackburne was over sixty and had strong views on the management of forests and had previously resigned his position over differences in management.<sup>14</sup>

The debate was emotional and at times personal, with those who supported Blackburne seeing Johnstone in particular as an interloper with overseas training and connections who threatened the positions of men already in the department.<sup>15</sup> Blackburne had been with the Department for some time and had support from some mining interests and also most likely from many Forest department field staff. It was in this context that historian Stephen Legge notes that Blackburne was supplanted by 'a glorified landscape gardener'.<sup>16</sup> While the source of this quote is not available, it does represent the sentiment of the day, where Johnstone was challenged in the press.

The Press argued that the government had set aside Blackburne and ignored the Public Service's recommendations, instead appointing Johnstone, an unknown quantity and outsider. This cut across the established processes and was seen as a political appointment that impacted on more worthy officers.

In a letter to the editor of the *Argus*, Hugh K. Lyptus argues,

*.. it is seriously proposed to appoint a casual hand, now working in the Creswick plantation, over the heads of those who have complied with all the public service regulations. Mr.*

*Johnstone has never been in charge of a Victorian forest, and it seems strange that a man should be content to work for 7/6 a day if he had had any appointment or experience of any consequence in any other country. True, he is a Creswick man. There are men, however, who have faithfully served the department for many years past, and several of them have both theoretically and practically qualified themselves for promotion... It seems to be only men with letters of commendation from other countries who receive consideration here ..*<sup>17</sup>

This theme is continued by the *Bendigo Advertiser*:

*Why such a man as Mr. J. Blackburn, the chief inspector, and Mr. J. La Gerche, one of the regular inspectors, should be passed over seems incomprehensible, as Mr. Johnson is not even a regular, employe (sic). ... If outsiders are allowed to step in no encouragement is afforded the regular staff of officers to make advancement.*<sup>18</sup>

In July 1902 Mackay's appointment was gazetted but Johnstone's was not. Mackay was made acting conservator for twelve months (a post which he moved in and out of over a period of years, usually alternating with A. W. Crooke or W. Wallace). Johnstone became the Superintendent of State Plantations which gave him oversight of the Creswick plantation and the relocation of some of the nursery from North Creswick back to Sawpit Gully, east of the town.<sup>19</sup> He began the improvements, extensions, buildings, dams, roads and more extensive plantings. He also designed the striking nursery office building and the idiosyncratic fountain along the lines of his many features at Maddingley Park.

By 1905 Johnstone's work at Creswick was recognised by Crooke, the Acting Conservator, in his Annual Report, noting that.

*No one place is precisely suitable for growing well all the trees and shrubs indigenous to Victoria, but Creswick has more advantages, to my view, than any other place, one of the principal being that the officer in charge of State plantations Mr. Johnstone who is a trained practical arboriculturist, is stationed there.*<sup>20</sup>

In 1900 Victoria's forestry staff were all self-taught, mostly with experience gained in the Victorian context. This included Perrin whose experience was from interstate but whose qualification, Fellow of the Linnean Society (FLS), was based on an application by Frederick von Mueller to have Perrin admitted as a Fellow. No qualification was required, and no process was used to assess his admittance.<sup>21</sup> There were no qualified Foresters from either the French or German Forestry Schools which were considered the highest-level of training. Johnstone was the exception, with recognition of his training and experience from overseas acknowledged even by his detractors. He was then the most qualified officer in the department.

From 1887 Johnstone published newspaper articles about the importance of trees for climate and erosion, their aesthetic value and how to plant and tend them.<sup>22</sup> In 1906 he co-authored an article with J.M. Reed, the Surveyor General in the *Victorian Journal of Agriculture* on tree planting and preservation.<sup>23</sup> In 1906, he published two articles about the Creswick plantation in the *Australasian*.<sup>24</sup>

Johnstone was creative and productive: from designing metal pots to improve sapling growth, to the nursery office and iconic fountain; from laying out extensive plantations to designing a wheelbarrow and plantation stables.<sup>25</sup> His vision for the future was evident in a song published in 1888, 'Song for Australia';<sup>26</sup> his hope that the School would become a Forestry University and his grand plan for an Arboretum at Creswick.<sup>27</sup> If it had been continued, the Arboretum would be of national significance today.

In 1907, the Forests Act included regulation and training of forest staff, creating the opportunity for a School to be established. Johnstone began to promote the idea to the Conservator, Minister and the government, at some point drawing on support from Peacock, now the local member after a redistribution in 1904.<sup>28</sup> By 1909 Johnstone also had several apprentices working under him and Creswick had become the starting point for trainees in the Department.<sup>29</sup>

The newspapers were full of praise for Johnstone and the various visitors to the nursery and future school, and also his exploits around the state inspecting and establishing new softwood plantations.<sup>30</sup>

The School of Forestry was opened on 29 October 1910, by a large delegation of Members of the Victorian parliament, and their companions. The visitors toured the School, nursery, plantation and proposed Arboretum, and toasted the great endeavour.<sup>31</sup> Newspapers all made good mention of Johnstone along with then Minister of Forests, McBride, the previous Minister, McLeod, the Conservator, Mackay and Peacock, the local member. The

speakers acknowledged Johnstone's central role in the endeavour, including McBride and Peacock who stated,

*The State was indeed fortunate in possessing such a splendid officer as Mr. Johnstone, who had proved himself to be the first man in forestry in the Commonwealth.*<sup>32</sup>

The *Creswick Advertiser* concluded,

*Mr Johnstone has had to convince the heads of the department and the Minister, of the utility of the schemes which he originally brought forward, and the benefits likely to be conferred upon the community if they were given effect to. ... It speaks volumes for the capabilities of Mr Johnstone, and his special knowledge of forestry gained after a lengthy experience, that his schemes have stood the practical test.*<sup>33</sup>

The press of the day and the other players in the School's development acknowledged Johnstone as the inspiration and instigator of the scheme and the one who got the work done.

Given this evidence, why then is Johnstone not part of the current Victorian Forestry historiography? There are several reasons, which combined have effectively kept him from view.

#### The plaque:

The plaque on the gates at Creswick declares Peacock as the instigator and inspiration for the School. The plaque is not evidence of the events of 1910, being the work of a local



community group and installed forty-two years after the events. The plaque and gates were proposed for the Creswick Town Centenary in 1952 by the Centenary Committee and designed by P.R. Patterson and S. Hart<sup>34</sup>, T.S. Hart's son.<sup>35</sup> As stated earlier, it was Peacock's efforts in the years after the School's establishment that likely resulted in the actions that lead to the plaque.<sup>36</sup>

#### Carver's papers:

Carver's papers, *Forestry in Victoria 1838-1919*<sup>37</sup> are considered by some historians as the authoritative source. Maurice Carver was a clerk in the Forests Department where, in the late 1920s, he was given the task of destroying 'inactive files'.<sup>38</sup> This task may have led him to compile his history. He indexed reports, gazette references and other documents up to 1919 and provided an overview. He produced staff lists for 1908 and 1917 but did not include nursery and plantation staff as these staff were neither listed nor counted by the Public Service.<sup>39</sup> As Johnstone was only first gazetted under the Public Service Act in 1913, he did not appear in the first list which covered the period leading to the School's establishment.

#### The historians:

Moulds, Ferguson, Youl, Collett, Hateley all cite Peacock as the instigator.<sup>40</sup> No sources are given for any of the claims made about Peacock's involvement. They do note the close proximity of the Creswick nursery and plantation, and mention the central place of practical instruction in the School's early curriculum, but do not explore this in detail. Youl mentions the Superintendent of State Plantations as the practical instructor but Baker is the only writer to name Johnstone.<sup>41</sup> Orr is the one writer to focus on the resources in place at

Creswick to support practical forestry training as the reason for the establishment of the School, highlighting the local nursery, plantation and forest and he does not mention Peacock.<sup>42</sup>

### Personality

Johnstone seems to have clashed with some of his colleagues.

He had issues with T. S. Hart, one of the teaching staff brought over from the Ballarat School of Mines on a casual basis before becoming 'Senior Master' of the Forestry School from 1913 to 1916. Whatever the reason for the dispute, it seems students took Hart's side with one student seeing Johnstone as *cunning and unscrupulous*<sup>43</sup>

Johnstone had a long-standing confrontation with W. L. Hartland, who had been manager at Creswick prior to Johnstone's arrival. This went on for several years, even after Hartland was relocated to the Frankston plantation. Correspondence between Johnstone, Hartland and Mackay as Conservator fills the Frankston plantation archive at the PROV. Hartland blamed Johnstone and others for failures at Frankston and Johnstone responded, sometimes with wit but also bitterness. In 1912, Hartland complained to Mackay that seed sent to Frankston by the manager at Creswick was of poor quality and would likely result in a failed crop. After meeting with Hartland, Johnstone was annoyed and referred Mackay to old files from Macedon, that showed that Perrin had had similar issues with Hartland.

Johnstone then finishes:

*Hearing this I left him, disgusted and wondering what he had taken me for. ... I feel very much annoyed over this seed question. Which I discovered by accident. It is a serious charge to make against officers.”*<sup>44</sup>

The effects of this animosity were still evident in 2000, when Johnstone’s granddaughter came to Creswick to find evidence to write his story. She was dissuaded from proceeding by a former staff member of the VSF who felt that Johnstone was not a nice person because he had caused Hartland problems.<sup>45</sup>

Taken together: the undue weight given to the plaque; Johnstone’s absence from early records; being overlooked by other writers and animosity with his contemporaries, these elements have created a fog so thick that the researcher has little hope of seeing through to the facts.

That John Johnstone, Superintendent of State Plantations, ‘a glorified landscape gardener’, was the reason a School of Forestry was established at Creswick in 1910.

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<sup>1</sup> *Victorian School of Forestry Memorial Gates*, 1952. Bronze plaque bolted onto a brick pillar. Forests Commission Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> John Chesterman, "Alexander Peacock: The Laughing Pragmatist," in *The Victorian Premiers, 1856-2006* (2006); Alan Gregory, "Peacock - the Laughing Premier," *The Victorian Historical Journal* 52, no. 1 (1981).

<sup>3</sup> "Forestry in Creswick. A Foward Movement. Action by Sir Alex. Peacock," *Creswick Advertiser*, 17 August 1911.

<sup>4</sup> "No Title," *Bacchus Marsh Express* (Vic. : 1866 - 1918), 19 March 1887.

<sup>5</sup> Fred C. Sharp, "Official and Un-Official History of Maddingley Park," *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 20 February 1932.

<sup>6</sup> "No Title," *ibid.*, 24 May 1890.

<sup>7</sup> "No Title," *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 07 April 1894.

<sup>8</sup> The Department's name changed as it was moved between various Government Sections, but I will refer to it as the Forests Department.

<sup>9</sup> "Victorian Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly," Legislative Assembly (Melbourne: Robt. S. Brain, Government Printer, 1901); John Johnstone, 16 October 1912.

<sup>10</sup> The railway station adjoined Maddingley Park, with the park coming right up to the platform. Train travellers would have seen the park. Johnstone was writing in the local paper from 1887 about trees and their value.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Tolhurst and Rosemary Tolhurst, *Park Lake Botanical Reserve : Notes on the History of Park Lake* (Creswick: Kevin & Rosemary Tolhurst, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> "Victorian Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly."

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- <sup>21</sup> He was nominated by Ferdinand von Mueller (Government Botanist, Melbourne), William Woolls (Incumbent of St. Peter's and Rural Dean, Richmond, NSW), and Robert D. Fitzgerald (Deputy Surveyor-General, Sydney, NSW). Lynda Brooks, 2017.
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- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
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<sup>43</sup> Martin C. Campbell, interview by R. G. Orr, 19 September, 1977, Interview.

<sup>44</sup> Johnstone.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Baker, 2017.