Chapter 10—*Australia's Ever-changing Forests VI:* Proceedings of the Eighth National Conference on Australian Forest History. Brett J. Stubbs et al. (ed.).
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Passionate advocates

Stephen Legg
School of Geography and Environmental Science,
Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3800

My forest history research is accumulating an increasing range of agents and agencies of a forest conscience and forestry policy and practice in colonial and early federal Australia. An early emphasis on investigating public forestry included the role of the state and its attendant politicians, bureaucrats and scientists, along with more structuralist acknowledgments of capital in general and powerful industrial interests in particular as well as the exigencies of an imperial setting. Attention then turned to more popular input into the forests debate: the role of private individuals, communities, businesses and the press in both public and private forestry. The political economy of forest use and abuse has remained an abiding interest, and my recent research has investigated the remarkable role of the gold mining industry in promoting forest conservation in Victoria, and the surprisingly consistent pro-conservationist, improver, colonial editorial line.[1] Snippets of information in all of those research endeavours sourced from a variety of popular and official documents has suggested a hitherto neglected field, and in this paper I discuss the role of three individuals representative of an echelon part-way between, but no less influential than, the dozens of private planters who quietly afforested large tracts of, for example, the squatters' runs on Victoria's western plains on the one hand, and on the other, the now relatively well-known officials of the colonial parliaments and public service who

had the most direct influence on the development of forest policy and the fledgling forest services established by the end of the Great War.

I will outline the individual contribution of each of these three contemporaries to the development of a forest conscience in Victoria in general as well as their influence on selected aspects of forest policy or practice, and then offer a brief synthesis.

George Andrew Brown (1834–1909)

George Brown was born on Bruny Island, Tasmania, in 1834. As a young boy his family joined the many 'over-straiters' who settled across Bass Strait in search of greener pastures in the Port Phillip district during the early 1840s. His grandfather and father pioneered Mount Elephant station on the windswept grassy Western Plains near Mount Emu Creek in what was eventually to become one of the world's leading fine-wool producing regions. Thinking it a good omen, in his early twenties, George and his brother took up land nearby in December 1853 where the axle on his uncle's bullock dray broke on what they named Mount Emu station. After a decade, their station was over-run almost overnight by selectors (ironically many of them transient speculators or 'dummies') during a land rush in January 1864, forcing Brown to relinquish the lease and take up land in the drier Boort country far to the north. Drought there put paid to the last of his pastoral ambitions, and in 1867 after a brief sojourn to England he put down the shears and took up the pen, under the pseudonym of 'Bruni' as a writer on sheep breeding and a rural and 'turf' reporter for the Melbourne *Argus*.[2] In 1867, Brown began what was to become a 42-year stint as a rural affairs reporter writing a range of columns in 'The Yeoman' section of the *Australasian*—the rural arm of the *Argus*, and arguably the most influential of Victoria's half-dozen specialist rural newspapers.

The first of his five books on rural topics was published in 1880—*Sheep-breeding in Australia*.[3] Armed in part by what was popularly viewed as unconventional mid-nineteenth century French scientific principles (Bruni was fluent in French), most of his other four books until 1904 dealt with various aspects of stock breeding and husbandry (including arboriculture on the sheepwalk), and he achieved international fame as an expert on the merino sheep. During

his career as a rural reporter for the *Australasian* between 1881 and 1909, Bruni maintained a punishing schedule and had at least one (and often up to four) articles each week published—probably at least 3,000 articles altogether, many of which were reprinted in provincial and metropolitan newspapers throughout Australasia (and not counting his earlier work on the *Argus*). Most, but not all, of these were written under his pseudonym, but others were undoubtedly anonymous or written with a general moniker such as 'Our Rural Correspondent'; not to mention the influence Bruni had on the tone and nature of the coverage, as the paper became known for providing specialist knowledge and championing particular agendas.

Despite a crippling permanent injury following a leg fracture on a return visit to Tasmania in the mid-1880s, Bruni's task for his 'Flock and Herd' column was to capture the condition of farm and station, offer expert advice on improvements, and doubtless increase the *Australasian*'s far flung readership. His travels meant that he was rarely at home with his family in Flemington, and (like his now better known travel-writing contemporary 'The Vagabond', John Stanley James) Bruni became a familiar face throughout rural Victoria and farther afield, particularly on regular excursions through Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. He toured New Zealand in the first quarter of 1884, contributing more than two-dozen articles on the state of farming there (especially the leading agricultural estates and studs from Invercargill to Auckland) as well as a few popular tourist pieces. He also penned a chapter for the *Western Australian Settlers Guide and Farmers' Handbook* in 1897. His brief for the New Zealand excursion is a bit more populist than his usual specialist fare that generally focused on individual properties with broader comments on the surrounding districts, as well as thematic pieces on an enormous range of topics useful for the landowner or manager:

> To visit the chief pastoral and agricultural districts of the colony and to report the result of his observations on the progress of settlement of this character, and of farming works [including stud farms, turf and sporting matters, sketches of towns visited or any scenes of general interest met with him on his travels].[4]

Bruni had three *cause célèbre*: general agricultural improvement, improving the quality of livestock through judicious breeding programs, and arboriculture. On the latter issue, Bruni was neither

the first nor the last passionate advocate of tree planting and forest conservation in the Victorian popular press; many reporters lamented the lack of arboriculture from the late 1850s and especially in the 1860s, and, for example, 'Etonian' of the *Town and Country* extolled forest plantations and live fences in Victoria in 1873.[5] Nevertheless, Bruni was undoubtedly Victoria's most durable, persistent and best known arboricultural promoter during the period following the 'awakening' to forest conservation from the early 1860s. This is notwithstanding the remarkable unanimity on forest conservationist stance amongst the liberal-minded editors of most of the newspapers in Melbourne and in the mining districts. Given that agricultural clearance was the major threat to Victoria's forests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bruni was able to command a strategic position in the leading conservative rural newspaper to promote his forest conscience. Not only did he rarely fail to lament the loss of trees to injudicious deforestation on the lands he visited, but he also continually sought opportunities to promote the establishment by landowners of 'plantations'—shelter belts, woodlots or larger forest plantations. He never opposed the clearing necessary to make farms productive, but railed when the settler had gone too far.

Bruni's advocacy of tree planting was born of pragmatism. From his youth on the basaltic Western Plains he had observed the increased productivity and aesthetic improvements to nearby sheep stations brought by their occupiers (and later owners) planting for shelter and shade. His arboricultural advocacy never waivered, regardless of the topography or climate, wherever he travelled: from the temperate forests of Gippsland, the Otways or New Zealand, to the tropical 'scrubs' of north-eastern New South Wales and coastal Queensland, or the vast semi-arid drought-prone interior. He appreciated the meteorological improvements that plantations could bring by reducing wind, maintaining humidity and lessening temperature, but he wasn't beguiled like some of his contemporaries by the more extreme theories of landscape meteorology that forests could shape the climate. Writing of one western Victorian station he noted:

> Jancourt is situated well within the line of the old western forest, and consequently it enjoys a good rainfall, for the forest was a consequence of the rain, and not the cause of it, as many Western pastoralists here have been apt to imagine.[6]

A detailed analysis of the many hundreds of his articles that mention his observations on deforestation on private lands, the need for forest conservation more broadly, and his specific advocacy of tree planting lies beyond the scope of this brief article. However, a few comments will be instructive. Bruni was generally eclectic in his championing of particular tree species, but expert in his knowledge of their particular values. Native trees should be left where appropriate, and the debate over the utility of natives or exotics was secondary to the necessity of planting something. 'Live fences' (hedges) were also championed, but shelter-belts of trees were his particular focus. He was one of the earliest (but unsuccessful) advocates of Arbor Day in Victoria during the 1870s, but persisted in his support after it was introduced to that colony in 1890. His writings reflected a sound proto-ecological awareness, and he often mentioned the importance of farm trees as habitats for pest-controlling birds such as small raptors and insectivores. He rarely wrote political pieces, but periodically took up the cudgel to lambaste governments on their persistent failure to curb rampant forest destruction, often timing his critiques to coincide with parliamentary debates over the introduction or disposal of forest bills. He championed progressive forest services and legislation such as in South Australia and New Zealand. He took particular dislikes, for example to the planting of wattle plantations that spoiled the view and caused fire hazards along the railway lines between Geelong and Colac, but was rarely curmudgeonly in his criticisms. He appeared eternally surprised that so many landowners could not see the value of arboriculture, but vehemently denied the view that private plantations 'did not pay in a new country'. And always he returned to promote the lessons learned by the dozen or so large planters on the great wool estates of his beloved Western Plains.[7] Theirs was a relationship of mutual respect, born initially of family ties (although class divisions may have remained) and cemented by Bruni's expertise in stock-breeding and the wool industry. He honoured their memory with obituaries as the pastoral pioneers died near the end of the century, and he outlived most of those whom he had admired, writing his last column in January 1909 and dying after months of illness in August of that year at the age of seventy-five.

James Millinch Bickett (*c.*1828–1917)

Born in Scotland in the late 1820s, Bickett left school for a printery at the age of eight but kept on with night school. He migrated to Australia in 1848 and was employed on a Kyneton sheep station amongst other short term jobs until the first gold rushes in 1851. He took ship to Sydney, and coach to Bathurst, then walked to the Turon diggings in New South Wales where he spent four months before returning to Victoria on foot over six weeks to seek a fortune at the newly discovered Forest Creek (Castlemaine) diggings. He moved on to the Bendigo diggings before settling at Ballarat where he was elected to the Buninyong Local Mining Court in 1856 and its replacement Ballarat Mining Board in 1861. He ran into financial difficulties in 1862 and was insolvent by January 1865 (when he was recorded in the *Government Gazette* as a miner from Brown's Diggings). He retained Mining Board membership continuously from 1861 for an unprecedented forty-five years, for most of that time as secretary, but periodically as Chairman (1868–74) and regularly on the executive where he was a principal strategist. Bickett was also appointed Clerk of the Ballarat Prospecting Board in 1889.[8] His finances righted, he soon rose to be one of Ballarat's most prominent citizens and was noted for leadership in a remarkable range of civic activities. These included successfully agitating in 1869 for the establishment of the Ballarat School of Mines and being elected on its council and as a trustee, as well as organising the Robert Burns and Thomas Moore memorial funds, and being elected to committee membership on the Mechanics Institute, Fine Art Gallery, Royal Arch Lodge, and Old Colonists Association. But it is Bickett's links to, and organization of, the gold-mining industry and its liaison with a long succession of governments that caused him to have such a significant and lengthy engagement with forest conservation in Victoria. More directly, those strategic links explain why Bickett was elected in 1873 to the short-lived Ballarat Local Forest Board, but this was only one of many initiatives that he led.[9]

The Ballarat Mining Board was then the most powerful of the six (and later thirteen) local boards established throughout Victoria by the government in 1857 to regulate and advise on local mining affairs, and in part to assuage the radical demands of miners in the post-Eureka period.[10] Despite the latter radicalisation, the mining boards mainly

aligned themselves with the powerful corporate interests on the deep-lead and quartz-reef gold fields of central Victoria where the 'small man' had by the mid-1860s begun to succumb to the needs for increasing capitalisation of their mining operations. At that time, Victoria's 842 publicly-floated mining companies had a paid-up capital of three and a half million pounds sterling (and a nominal capital almost three times as great). When added to the private mining companies, the figure was closer to five million pounds sterling of actual capital invested, employing more than eighty thousand miners.[11] But surface and deep-lead miners, mine managers, mine owners, and local goldfields municipalities soon became united by the threat that the land rushes brought to auriferous lands by a combination of direct deforestation and of speculative hoarding of trees to inflate timber prices—both influenced the cost and availability of essential mining timber. These land rushes were broadly similar to those that had put paid to the young George Brown's dreams of pastoral progress in the mid 1860s. In particular, the Grant Land Act's innovative section 42 clause enabled miners to select a 20-acre agricultural allotment on the goldfields. It was designed to provide small farms for restless diggers, thereby alleviating the shortage of agricultural produce on the goldfields, and slowing the drift back to the cities. Many of the hundreds of small allotments selected on the goldfields in the first few months of 1865 were entirely speculative, with the selectors intentionally halting logging on their newly acquired land to raise timber prices. Others cut injudiciously, flooding the market with timber but damaging long-term supply. The few *bona fide* settlers generally destroyed the forest through clearing to establish agriculture.[12] Either way, by challenging the gold mining industry, the rush was fundamental to the initial politicisation (or perhaps the radicalisation) of Bickett who was now well placed to utilise his growing organisational capacity.

I have begun to detail elsewhere the remarkable intricacies and political machinations of the pursuit of control over the rapidly disappearing forests on the goldfields over the ensuing fifty years, so will limit the present discussion to some broad observations, especially as they relate to James Bickett's persistent, tireless and central role.

Despite the powerful agricultural interests that dominated parliament and much of the country during the early 1860s, Bickett's coordination of disparate mining interests and agitation through the

Ballarat Mining Board was effective in forcing the government to establish an inquiry into the workings of the Land Act and its impact on forests in the goldfields. The resultant tightening of land regulations was soon followed by Ligar, Hodgkinson, and Brough Smyth's 'Report on the Advisableness of establishing State Forests', tabled in October 1865, and the introduction of 'permanent' State Forests from the following year that protected reserves from Ministerial whim—in an era when forests were most often controlled by Lands Ministers with obvious conflicts of interest. The permanency of State Forests, however, was largely illusory, as subsequent parliaments regularly voted to alienate the reserves for settlement purposes. During the next seven years Bickett maintained pressure on parliamentary alienation of local timber reserves, and ensured that all applications before the board by holders of miners rights and others covetous of forested auriferous lands were meticulously considered, mindful of the impact on the forests. He also promoted the establishment of effective forest conservation through public forestry through numerous memorials and deputations to the relevant government ministers and key bureaucrats.[13]

In 1872, alarmed at the continued loss of mining timber, Bickett initiated discussions that led to the establishment of a local Forest Board in Ballarat. For a variety of reasons (legislative shortcomings, financial weakness and political conflict with neighbouring boards), the local Forest Boards failed, but Bickett continued to agitate for local control for the next fifteen years. This was despite the government's advocacy of a single central Forests Board, and regardless of his support for centralised control of the local Mining Boards.[14] On numerous occasions he shaped policy by advising key bureaucrats on local conditions, and was the essential initiator and go-between for the various stakeholders. These included the local mining boards, forest boards, shareholders associations, municipalities, politicians (the so-called parliamentary mining members who introduced his deputations to the relevant ministers then pressed parliament during debate, and disproportionately filled the membership of the Mining Royal Commission from 1890 and the Forests Royal Commission from 1897), mine owners, and mine managers. Bickett was a registered mine manager and clerk of the Mine Owners' Association of Victoria, a position he regretfully relinquished due to other pressing engagements in 1883.

Bickett reacted swiftly each time forests and mining bills were mooted, calling for and organising a series of forest conferences in the late 1880s, and pushing for the establishment of a Royal Commission on forests that was eventually established in June 1897. Bickett dealt with eleven different forest administrations, and with many more ministers and parliaments, during his time on the Ballarat Mining Board. His relationship with Forests Conservator George Perrin (1888–1900) was occasionally strained by the uncompromising Perrin's promotion of the royalty system and his insistence on strict regulation of timber cutting—both contributing to the higher costs of mining timber. Bickett's prime aim was to secure a reliable, cheap, and voluminous supply of mining timber, which he believed could be achieved only by an effective system that prevented alienation and destruction of forest lands combined with a sustainable professional forestry service to improve forest productivity and ensure permanent timber supply. His anachronistic advocacy of local control owed much to his desire to prevent encroachment by other sectional interests sanctioned by parliament (although some of his critics saw it as overzealous protection of Ballarat interests over disputed forests), and was only soothed by the promise of effective central control after the turn of the century. Bickett only relinquished his position on the Ballarat Mining Board under forced 'early retirement' at the age of 87 in January 1905. He was replaced under the new Mining Board system by 'government nominated theoretical men'—although, ironically, they asked him to stay on as an adviser for another few months. He died in 1917, only a year before the establishment of Victoria's first truly independent forests service—the Victorian Forests Commission.[15]

James Blackburne (*c.*1839–1923)

Blackburne sits uncomfortably in this categorisation of 'independents' because he was a bureaucrat who, after a long career as a Victorian forester appointed in 1877, rose to power and prominence as Inspector of State Forests in 1889. His reports to the Lands Minister recommended the introduction of Arbor Day to Victoria as early as 1877, and he is credited with its actual establishment in 1890.[16] Arguably the pinnacle of Blackburne's formal career in the Victorian Public Service was his joint authorship (with Surveyor-General

Vickery) in May 1897 of a report on Forest Areas of the Colony suitable for Permanent Reservation. This was accommodating of the use of forests by mining interests for mining timber, but scathing of the long history of government mismanagement. It was tabled only a month before, and was directly responsible for, the appointment of the long-running Royal Commission on Forests (1897–1901). Blackburne was later anointed by an expert board as successor to George Perrin after the Conservator's untimely death in 1900 but the government opted for a more malleable choice—'a glorified landscape gardener from Creswick'. The government ordered Blackburne to retire without even so much as the normal compensation for long service or his pension (an oversight for which he sought compensation).

Blackburne had spent much of his time as a forester responsible for State Forests on the central goldfields (for example, in 1883 his bailiwick included more than 40,000 acres of heavily degraded forests in fourteen reserves), and he was a long time resident of the Maryborough district which along with Ballarat and Bendigo was the centre of a massive deep-lead gold mining industry. Nevertheless, my interest here concerns Blackburne's period as an independent citizen after his retirement, especially with his involvement as secretary, organiser and chief spokesperson of the National Forests Protection League (1903–1904). Ironically, he had even more influence in that short time than during his long career within the forests department, especially because his passionate advocacy of scientific forestry and an end to unfettered alienation and forest destruction was no longer constrained by his political masters. I have detailed these events elsewhere and offer here only a brief mention of Blackburne's role.[17]

Doubtless disappointed by his treatment and the post-Forests Royal Commission push to unlock the forests for Closer Settlement, Blackburne was initially roused by Lands Minister Taverner's 1903 plans to settle the Fumina lands in Gippsland—land whose alienation Blackburne as Inspector of Forests had earlier expressly advised against. He stated that many of his reports on other forest reserves had either been 'lost or suppressed'.

The National Forest Protection League was a loose amalgam of Maryborough mining interests (mainly local municipalities, mine managers, miners' associations, and ancillary mine workers) as well as other forest users alarmed at the threat to auriferous areas from the

revival in forest alienation. Their particular concern, as had been that of James Bickett, was the dwindling supply of mining timber, especially in an industry that had long passed its golden age and was now crippled by rising costs and declining gold yields. In a series of well-publicised and well-executed memorials, deputations, conferences, and public speaking engagements, the League rapidly increased its membership throughout the state and beyond. The old Mining Board networks were instrumental in the League's success, but Blackburne's expert knowledge and his organisational and oratorical skills were widely acknowledged. Blackburne strategised to include more than narrow sectional interests in the League's platform. In the torrent of publicity that he supplied to the press, and in his numerous public speeches, he extolled the non-utilitarian as well as utilitarian value of forests, with the latter cleverly calculated to include the many benefits to the agricultural lobby. The latter included the importance of protection forests to ameliorate climate, ensure water supplies for irrigation, and to prevent erosion.

In a series of political master-strokes between 1903 and 1907, the government was able to blunt the League's influence largely by acquiescing to many of their demands for inquiries into forest alienation, establishing additional forest reserves, and slowing alienation of forested Crown Lands for Closer Settlement. Premier Bent also made key mining members supporting Blackburne more vulnerable. In addition, Blackburne's pension was restored and he was briefly reappointed to the Forests Service within which he could do much less political damage. Major concessions flowed from the report exacted by the League from the government, and without Blackburne's involvement, the establishment in November 1904 of Victoria's first separate Ministry of Forests with mining member Daylesford MLA Donald McLeod as the first Forests Minister would have long been delayed.

Conclusion

Brown, Bickett, and Blackburne are three lesser-known advocates of a forest conscience in Victoria. It is highly likely that they knew each other. Bickett and Blackburne almost certainly had a professional relation discussing forest regulations and conditions on the goldfields before

joining together in some of their joint rallies and forest conferences. They all had a remarkable ability to communicate their passions effectively, consistently, and persistently, and each in his own way made a small but significant contribution to forest conservation. All were 'practical men' and proud of their long experience in their chosen fields. Although having little effective power, Bickett and Blackburne were politically dangerous because of their remarkable organisational skills and their uncompromising character. Nevertheless, they were effectively marginalised in a long era before 1918 that saw precious few gains against a strong tide of forest destruction. Doubtless, Bickett championed sectional and local interests, and he often conveniently ignored the fact that the mining industry he supported was the second biggest cause of forest damage and destruction in Victoria after agriculture. Bickett's independence was severely constrained because the Forest, Mining, and Prospecting Boards to which he was elected were semi-governmental instruments, regulated and funded by parliament. But no one else harassed governments so effectively on forest policy or maintained even such a modicum of priority on the political agenda as did Bickett, and without the political pressure from the mining industry much of the remaining forest reserves would have been alienated for agriculture long before.

Blackburne was more than a disillusioned retiree, but he appears to have played little part in the subsequent success of the fledgling forest conservation movement that achieved enormous gains in the fourteen years after 1904 (ironically at a time when the political power of the mining interests soon effectively collapsed as the gold yield plummeted). Brown had little direct influence on forest policy, although his awareness-raising of forest destruction, his demonstration that arboriculture could be valuable, and his advice on tree planting were singularly remarkable in the popular press. Arguably his advice was reactive—championing the efforts of the 'wool kings' of the Western Plains rather than pre-dating it—and my research into their efforts has not indicated that their actions were predicated by any press campaign of the type mounted for so long by Bruni. Perhaps as much as he did by informing the readers of his columns, he affected change through his direct contact with land-owners throughout Australasia and the trust he engendered with them. All three men were more than symptomatic of their time—an era of awakening to forest conservation—for they

were leaders and not followers. The powerful Secretary of the Board of Crown Lands and Survey, Clement Hodgkinson, had much more direct influence on forest policy than all three men considered here, and only government botanist Ferdinand von Mueller, who shaped popular and scientific attitudes to forests, rivalled the longevity of Bickett and Brown. But no others before at least 1904 outside of parliament and the public service, and arguably few if any inside, played as significant a role in raising a forest conscience in Victoria as did the three passionate advocates, Brown, Bickett and Blackburne.

Notes

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9 *Ballarat Star*, 23 December 1905; Gervasoni, C. 2006. 'James Millinch Bickett (*c.*1828–1917)' Art & Historical Collection, University of Ballarat, guerin.ballarat.edu.au/aasp/is/library/collections/art_history/honour-roll/honourroll_Bickett,%20James.shtml; on the history of the Ballarat Forest Board, Legg, S. M. 'Mining and the Timber Question—early forest conservation movements in Victoria before 1918', Asia–Pacific Economic and Business History Conference, Melbourne, February 2008.

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