

John Harding Chinner, FIFA

Born Adelaide, 9 January 1915; died Melbourne, 13 November 2001

John Chinner was born in Adelaide on 9 January 1915. After attending school there, he was selected as a cadet in the Forests Commission, Victoria, and attended the Victorian School of Forestry from 1929 to 1931. He graduated to an Associate Diploma in Forestry and was Dux of the School in 1931. He then completed a thesis and graduated to a Diploma of Forestry while serving as an Assistant Forester in district work for four years. He served as Secretary of the first Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade in Victoria for a time and then was appointed Assistant Silvicultural Research Officer.

In 1937, he took up a scholarship at the University of Melbourne and graduated to a Bachelor of Science degree in 1938 with Exhibitions in botany and geology. He married Elwyn Dunstan who died much later following illness and their divorce. He had a frightening baptism in fire-fighting during the 1939 Ash Wednesday fire, while working with the Forests Commission over the summer, when he had to seek refuge in a creek along with others while the fire passed over. Among other officers, he was commended for his work in saving lives during that fire.

His academic achievements, together with a University Blue in lacrosse and an active role in student affairs, saw him awarded a Rhodes Scholarship for 1939.

Typically, on the outbreak of war in September 1939, he elected to defer his scholarship and to enlist in the Australian Infantry Force. He served in the Middle East and New Guinea and was 'Mentioned in Despatches' for conspicuous service. He reached the rank of substantive Lieutenant Colonel. Like many returned servicemen, he spoke little about his war experiences but always offered assistance to former servicemen in need.

After six years in the armed services, he returned to take up his Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University and undertook postgraduate research in silviculture and forest ecology. Given the period of war service, and a disaster when a large field experiment of his was destroyed by wind, this must have been an unsettled and difficult period for him. He never made direct mention of that disaster to fellow staff or postgraduates at Melbourne, but was keen to ensure that others did not leave themselves exposed to reliance on a single field experiment. He graduated to a postgraduate Bachelor of Science degree in forestry.

On his return to Victoria, he was appointed Senior Lecturer-in-Charge of the recently established School of Forestry. The School was located within the Faculty of Science and had strong links to the School of Botany. Its redoubtable Head in the days of the 'god-professors', Professor John Turner, F.L.S. had a strong influence over the School of Forestry; generally (but not always) for the better. John Chinner was promoted to Reader-in-Charge in 1956.

Initially, the first degree in forestry was almost solely reliant on Creswick graduates being sponsored by the Forests Commission to return to studies and complete a Bachelor of Science in Forestry over two years. During this period, the training at the School of Forestry was greatly strengthened by new and additional staff, Dr Frank Moulds being appointed as Principal in 1951. John and Frank were natural rivals who had overlapped at Creswick. With the development of a four-year stream in 1970 at the University for those who did not want to go to Creswick or join (or could not join) the Forests Commission, the competition between the two intensified, notwithstanding the continuing progression of Creswick graduates going on to the University to complete a degree. The competition was always polite but the undercurrents were turbulent.

In the period from 1945 to 1965, John forged the development of postgraduate research at the University of Melbourne, and substantially for Australia, at the time. He successfully sought funding for a succession of research fellowships and scholarships, principally from APM Forests Pty Ltd. These achieved notable success in silviculture, forest ecology and forest management in both native forests and plantations. Academic colleagues such as Alf Leslie, John Howard and Bailey Carrodus aided him in these endeavours. The development of postgraduate research overtook the excellent reputation that the first degree had established, and it has continued to grow since.

One of his characteristics as a supervisor of research was that he never sought, and very seldom allowed, the use of his own name on publications to which he had given much. Many postgraduates will remember him for the detailed and time-consuming sessions in which plans and drafts were combed through — an experience that was sometimes infuriating, but in retrospect valuable. All past students will also remember him for his interest in and assistance towards their careers. He was generous and unbiased in his advice, as many of those Victorian students who went to the Australian Forestry School at Canberra can attest. He was always supportive of lame ducks — staff and students who had suffered misfortunes; notwithstanding, in one notable case, his efforts proving to be founded on a massive falsehood by the student concerned. He was also a master at writing references which highlighted the best in many an unlikely candidate. Classroom lecturing was not always his strong suit, and the story of the good-humoured contretemps with a class over reading Troup in lectures often surfaces at reunions. John preferred and was at his best in open discussion in the bush, where his incisiveness, humour and experience were used to great advantage.

In 1962, he married Patsy Forsyth, following their respective divorces. Andrew, Jocelyn and Jane were the children of Patsy and Lee Forsyth, and John was fond and proud of the children, a pride only to be eclipsed by the birth of Sally in 1964 towards the

end of a period of sabbatical leave in the United States. John had been appointed to a prestigious Bullard Fellowship for 1963–64 and was Special Auditor for the Forest School of Harvard University at Petersham.

Members of staff and postgraduates of the School of Forestry at the University of Melbourne recall with gratitude the hospitality and kindness that John and Patsy offered at their delightful home, set in a radiata pine plantation at Doncaster, in the years that followed. John also played an important role locally in the development of what is now Warrendyte State Park.

By the early 1970s, the School of Forestry at Creswick had forged an alliance with the Victorian Institute of Colleges, a peak body for the Colleges of Advanced Education. After Frank Moulds became Chairman of the Forests Commission, he pursued a change of affiliation of the School of Forestry with the rapidly developing Ballarat College of Advanced Education. John continued to press the University to combine the School of Forestry at Creswick with the University, and to establish a Chair in Forestry to give it the standing and academic leadership that it needed to counter this alternative affiliation.

Those negotiations were tortuous and there were several occasions at which success seemed forthcoming, only to be thwarted by internal politics of the University or those of the Forests Commission. Within the University, much of the resistance came from those who saw the move as an attempt to secure a Chair for himself. Within the Forests Commission, the personal rivalry with Frank Moulds played an important role. Despite these difficulties, John never gave up. In 1973, the School of Forestry was transferred into what became the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry and this secured some new allies at a propitious time, when any aspirations he might justifiably have had for a Chair were fading with the prospect of (then compulsory) retirement.

It was therefore an especially fitting culmination to his career that as Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry in 1978

and 1979, he was able to oversee the implementation of an agreement reached between the University and the Forests Commission in 1977. He carried the administrative burdens of the Deanship with characteristic good humour and was always accessible to staff and students. As part of the Agreement, the Commission agreed to cease offering its Diploma course on condition that the University taught two years of its four-year degree course at Creswick commencing in 1980. The University created and advertised a Chair in Forest Science at this time. The University conferred an honorary Doctor of Forest Science on him in 1994 in recognition of his many contributions to forestry education and research.

John was active in the Royal Society of Victoria and served as its President in 1966 and 1967. He was also a Foundation Fellow of the Institute of Wood Science in Australia. He was always an active member of the Institute of Foresters of Australia, from its early days. He served as Chair of the Victorian Division from 1953 to 1955 and often assisted in other ways. He was elected a Fellow of the Institute in 1974 and was further honoured by the award of the N.W. Jolly Medal in 1982, the Institute's highest award for merit in forestry.

John radiated a warmth and sense of fun and could hold the floor as a good raconteur with an engaging twinkle in his eye. He was much liked by all who knew him, and even more so by those who worked with or for him, for his unfailing courtesy, kindness, patience and good humour.

The Institute has lost an outstanding forester, dedicated scholar, and cheerful colleague and is proud to carry forward his memory through the J.H. Chinner Medal awarded annually to the outstanding graduate in the Bachelor of Forest Science course at the University of Melbourne.

Ian Ferguson
Melbourne