



VALE: Owen Loneragan

MSc

26 March 1924 – 5 June 2021

With the death at 97 of Owen Loneragan, Western Australia lost one of its greatest foresters, one of the fast-fading links to WWII and a man of passion and peace. His involvement in forest research spanned 33 years.

Despite being an excellent student, he left school at 15 and took up a position as a laboratory technician and junior clerk in the Public Health Department. However, by studying at night school, he was able to gain a Leaving Certificate and in 1941 was admitted to the University of Western Australia.

As it did for so many young men at that time, the war intervened. Owen volunteered, and after training as a Wireless Operator, was posted to the RAF's Bomber Command in England, where he flew in the crew of a Lancaster bomber. Against all the odds, and with several miraculous escapes, he survived the bombing missions over occupied Europe. When he retired in 1984, Owen was the last professional officer in the Forests Department with active war time experience.

On returning to WA after the peace was won, Owen recommenced his studies at UWA. When he had completed three years of basic science, he moved to the Australian Forestry School in Canberra and completed a degree in forestry. In 1952, under the supervision of forester WR Wallace, he commenced a lifetime of silvicultural research in WA forests, unlocking secrets of the jarrah and karri forests, and the way in which the native sandalwood regenerated. Owen worked at Gleneagle and Dwellingup until 1957 (studying jarrah growth), and at Manjimup and Pemberton until 1967 (studying karri seedling regeneration). He then transferred to Kensington (Perth), becoming involved in sandalwood research and vegetation mapping up to 1979.

In 1961 the University of WA awarded him the degree of MSc for a thesis on jarrah and karri regeneration.

One of the most important outcomes of his research was to clarify the unusual (and at that time unpredictable) flowering and seeding cycles in karri. This work had major benefits for the regeneration of cut-over forests, and was also of considerable value to beekeepers. The results of these studies were not, however, published until 1979.

Owen suffered (and recovered from) periods of depression. These were attributed to the lasting effects of his wartime experiences, and later the death of his wife. It also did not help that AC Harris, Conservator of Forests, published a paper in 1956 on jarrah regeneration based almost entirely on Owen's research. Although generously acknowledging his 'great assistance and active participation in the preparation of this paper', Harris acted unethically by not granting co-authorship.



Owen was an excellent bushman, with a profound understanding and love for the forest, especially the jarrah forest, which he considered was under-rated by West Australians. His ability to stand in a patch of forest and reconstruct its history back through the decades was renowned. His deductive powers led his contemporaries to sometimes refer to him as “the Sherlock Holmes of the Forest”.

Owen was a modest and unassuming man with a broad knowledge of silviculture in WA’s forests and woodlands. His research planning and data collection (both observational and experimental) revealed an approach to science that combined the methodical with the meticulous.

If Owen had a weakness, it was that he did not enjoy, nor was he good at, writing up the results of his research. From 1956 to 1958 he contributed four short-form articles to the IFA Newsletter and during the 1960s and 1970s seven short articles to the Forest Department’s journal Forest Notes. Many other unpublished reports are preserved in the library of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

Owen suffered writer’s block and found difficulty in shaping a narrative of his research results for long-form papers in science journals. His first scientific paper was published in 1964. This was based on experimental studies of the effect of nutrients (from ashbeds) and soil heating on growth of karri seedlings. This paper was co-authored with his younger brother Jack, a plant nutrition scientist.

Two papers submitted to Australian Forestry in 1970 were rejected for publication. In 1971 the Forests Department declined to publish two substantial research bulletins (numbers 72 and 78) on second-growth jarrah and the artificial regeneration of karri.

These difficulties were eventually overcome in the early 1980s when the Forests Department, under different management, realised that Owen’s knowledge was at risk of being lost upon his looming retirement. His research manager (Dr Frank McKinnell) teamed him with a younger scientist (Dr Ian Abbott) in a fruitful collaboration that lasted until Owen’s retirement in 1984. The result was eight scientific publications (1982-89) about jarrah ecology and its silvicultural history. These synthesised his data and thinking with the broader ecological and silvicultural literature.

Similar collaboration with Dr Libby Mattiske resulted in publication in 1990 of a substantial historical review of research into sandalwood ecology, including seed viability, germination, sowing method, seedling survival, and early growth rate, from 1895 to 1981.

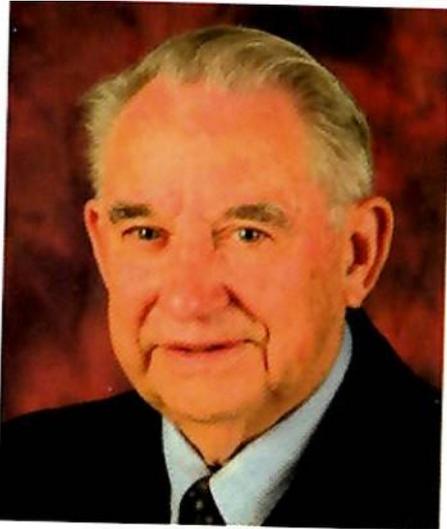
Upon retirement, Owen’s greatest legacy was his retrieval, archiving, and cataloguing of historical matter in several filing cabinets, dating back to field books from the 1920s. These documents offer invaluable insights to Departmental thinking at the time.

Outside of his life in forestry, Owen was well-rounded. As a young man he had played soccer at the U19 state level, and the French horn to a high standard, in both the Perth Concert and RSL Bands.



Above all, he was passionate about the cause of world peace, and became involved in many humanitarian projects. Believing that language differences were a major constraint, he studied, became fluent in, and promoted Esperanto. He was a tireless worker within the United Nations Association (a member of whom, in 1986, described Owen as 'A man of many parts – all working'). He was that rare individual who actually relished working on committees.

In 2014 Owen published his views of the future of humans on Earth. His book, *Sustainable Planet Destiny: Biosphere Care and Social Equity*, provides an extended synopsis of his thinking about politics, economics, the value of Esperanto, culture, Georgism (an economic theory known also as the single tax movement), and the importance of environmental sustainability. The book stands as a testament to a fine and resilient man who devoted his life to the conservation of Western Australian forests and to the cause of humanity.



Owen Loneragan



Owen at work, early 1980s - demonstrating the size of the stump (from the 1870s logging of a large jarrah tree), typical of high quality forest near Jarrahdale. This was one of the first areas to be logged.



Owen at work, early 1980s - measuring (at the standard height of 1.3 m above ground level) the diameter of the bole of a king jarrah near Dwellingup;

Authors: Ian Abbott, John McGrath, and Roger Underwood