

# HOW TO SAVE A FOREST

Conserving New Zealand's  
Waipoua Kauri Forest.

*'...probably the first successful conservation story  
in New Zealand.'*

Keith Sinclair

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# PREFACE

Thomas family legend says that although Auckland University's zoologist Professor William Roy McGregor received all the publicity, it was Norman Russell Withiel Thomas, commonly known as NRW, who worked quietly behind the scenes lobbying to preserve Waipoua Forest. NRW spent twenty-four years lobbying governments of the day, on behalf of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture, to preserve Waipoua Forest from the axe.

In 1947 the Minister of Agriculture awarded NRW the Loder Cup, a distinguished conservation trophy now managed by the Department of Conservation. The citation says: 'He will be remembered for his perseverance and untiring efforts for the preservation of at least 7200 acres, 2900 hectares, including 2300 acres, 930 hectares of heavy primeval kauri forest of the Waipoua Forest...'

There can be no question of the scientific knowledge and campaigning that Roy McGregor undertook to bring the Waipoua Forest to public attention. As Erne Adams said in his book *Kauri: a King Among Kings*, 'No one has done more than Professor McGregor to promote the forest sanctuary policy, by which large tracts of primeval forest are absolutely protected and in which nature alone will be in supreme control.'<sup>1</sup>

In their account *The World of the Kauri*, Halkett and Sale write: 'The call to protect Waipoua from further destruction became New Zealand's first major national forest conservation issue. It was spearheaded by Roy McGregor, who is now identified more conspicuously with Waipoua Forest than anyone else, either before or after him.'<sup>2</sup>

In his *The Penguin Natural World of New Zealand*, Gerard Hutching writes that 'Barney McGregor... was largely responsible for the creation of the Waipoua Forest Sanctuary.'<sup>3</sup>

Keith Sinclair continued the accolades in his *A History of the University of Auckland* stating that 'McGregor led a successful and highly creditable campaign... probably the first successful conservation campaign in New Zealand.'<sup>4</sup>

Roy McGregor has had both a reserve at Waipoua and a kauri tree in the forest named after him. At the same time, it can be argued that while Roy McGregor's public style was acerbic and confrontational, NRW was conciliatory, working behind the scenes to persuade politicians of the worthiness of the cause.

# INTRODUCTION

This story was inspired by the citation in the *History of the Loder Cup* booklet of 1960 that the award for 1947 was made to Norman Russell Withiel (NRW) Thomas: ‘... for his perseverance and untiring efforts for the preservation of... Waipoua Forest.’ I decided to investigate what those ‘efforts’ were, and discovered ‘NRW, the incorrigible lobbyist.’ That was the original title. NRW never spoke to me about his role in the campaign. In 1954 he drove his daughter, Fiona, and her husband, Peter Thompson, through the forest. He never mentioned his role in the campaign.

The Te Roroa iwi exercised guardianship of Waipoua from the earliest Polynesian contact until the ‘sale’ of Waipoua to the Crown in 1876. This account draws heavily on the Te Roroa Claim, Wai 38.

The following chapter examines the widespread exploitation of forests in New Zealand and explores not only the efforts of New Zealanders who fought a rear-guard action to conserve our native timbers.

Prior to 1927 Waipoua Forest’s demise was thwarted by the actions of people like Prime Ministers Bill Massey and Gordon Coates who resisted pressure to mill. This history is sketched in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 examines the controversy surrounding the proposal to extend the road from Donnelly’s Crossing through the forest to Waimamaku near the Hokianga Harbour. NRW began to hold meetings to gain the support of several organisations such as local borough councils and the Automobile Association (AA) to oppose the proposal.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore the early life of NRW, focusing on the influences that shaped his horticultural and conservation interests. These influences include his father, Professor APW Thomas, and NRW’s membership of the Auckland Branch of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. It is believed that NRW wanted to become a horticulturalist, but his father dictated that he pursue a career in law.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 examine NRW’s early role in the battle to save Waipoua Forest prior to the main campaign that began after World War Two. Chapters 11 to 15 cover the six years after World War Two. The launching of petitions began, principally by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society who kept resubmitting them to keep the issue alive. The campaign continued through a change of government and the 1952 Waterfront dispute until a sanctuary was proclaimed in 1952. The campaign is poorly treated in major history books. This account seeks to redress that oversight.

# PROLOGUE

The kauri tree was revered by Māori, and both admired and ruthlessly exploited by Europeans. In 1876 Te Roroa 'sold' Waipoua to the Crown. The political discourse up to 1924 indicated that the milling of Waipoua was unlikely. Then the proposal to drive a road through Waipoua was the catalyst to more direct action and the emergence of the Waipoua Kauri Forest Preservation Committee in which NRW played a significant role. It was not until 1945 that the campaign heated up with division increasing among the conservationists. Roy McGregor formed the Waipoua Preservation Society in 1947. There followed a series of petitions from 1947 to 1952 eventually leading to the proclamation of the Sanctuary.

What is so special about the New Zealand kauri tree?

From the time New Zealand was 'discovered' by Europeans in 1772 until the decline of the kauri milling and gum industry in 1908, kauri was the principal contributor to the nation's wealth. For well over a century, as an exploitable natural resource, it had no rival.

The kauri tree or *Agathis australis* is found exclusively in New Zealand, although there are 20 other *Agathis* species found in the northwest Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Kauri trees were discovered to grow solely north of a line extending from Kawhia in the Waikato, southwest of Hamilton, to approximately Tauranga on the east coast of the Bay of Plenty.

Kauri trees were found in mixed coniferous, evergreen forests, typically forming stands or groves. Strictly speaking there is no distinct 'kauri forest'. In 1840, there were likely around 1.2 million hectares of significant kauri stands, but today, only approximately 80,000 scattered hectares remain.<sup>2</sup> When fully mature, kauri trees dwarf most other trees<sup>3</sup> and some specimens have been known to live for over 1000 years.<sup>4</sup>

The largest existing kauri tree, Tane Mahuta, is located in Waipoua Forest and is venerated on a New Zealand stamp. Tane Mahuta has a girth of 13.77 metres and a total height of 51.5 metres. Nearby, Matua Ngahere is 16.41 metres in girth and 29.9 metres in height. A larger specimen destroyed by fire, around the 1890s, was the nearby Kairaru with a girth of 20 metres. Edmund Sale, in his *Quest for the Kauri*, quotes Elsdon Craig, who wrote 'The kauri tree ranked second only to the totara in the estimation of the early Maori. Like all trees, it possessed divine properties — the Children of Tane, descendants of the god of the forest, the life-giver and sustainer — and with other species was endowed with a soul. It features strongly in Maori

tradition. Rona, the 'woman in the moon' was clasping the bole of a kauri tree when she was snatched up by the moon and imprisoned forever in the stratosphere...'

Forester PJ Thode noted that 'the Kauri was not the most prized tree of the Maori; the totara was because it was easier to work with. The resin could be worked into a blue-black pigment used in the production of the moko. It was also used as fuel for torches while fishing at night and was a form of chewing gum.'<sup>5</sup>

When milled, kauri timber is arguably the most versatile of all timbers. It is a very strong soft wood conifer. It is largely defect free, floats with ease and works easily. It is highly durable, has even texture and great strength. It was an outstanding ship and boat building timber. The kauri resin and gum contributed significantly to the New Zealand economy in the nineteenth century. It had probably the greatest usable timber content of any tree in the world.<sup>6</sup>

To its passionate advocate, Roy McGregor, the kauri at Waipoua was 'one of nature's most sublime of all her noble works'. In his book *The Waipoua Kauri Forest of Northern New Zealand*, published in 1948, just as the petitions to save Waipoua were underway, McGregor eloquently describes the forest as 'the last virgin remnant of the once vast kauri forests of this country'. He wanted the forest preserved 'in a state as nearly as possible akin to that in which Nature fashioned it.'

The kauri deserved special attention as it represented a 'relic of the flora of a forgotten world meriting absolute protection.' 'The associated trees in the forest were endemic, so the peculiar plant-association which we term kauri forest is a distinctly New Zealand production.' He continued: 'the Waipoua Forest is in very truth a unique fragment of a unique fragment of extremely ancient vegetation.' 'The destruction of this incomparable botanical museum would be an irreparable loss to world science.' 'We of this generation are, after all, merely trustees for the great natural treasure that we possess in the Waipoua Forest, trustees not only for our own posterity, but also for the civilised world at large.'<sup>7</sup>