

**Brown, John Ednie (1848–1899)** (published in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 3, (MUP), 1969)

by Richard Refshauge

John Ednie Brown (1848-1899), silviculturist, was born in Scotland, son of James Brown, LL.D., deputy-surveyor of woods and forests and an expert on European arboriculture, and his wife Jeannette, née Erskine. He was educated in Edinburgh but left school at 15 to take up his father's profession. After three years with him, learning the practical management of nurseries and reporting on forest management in England and Scotland, he was sent to the large Invercauld estate in Aberdeenshire where he learnt the profession of assistant agent and forester. He then moved to England where he laid out plantations and managed estates in Yorkshire and Sussex.

In 1871-72 Brown visited the United States and Canada, gathering more useful information on trees and forests. As a result he wrote 'Report upon Trees found in California' and 'Forests of the Eastern States of America' for which he received the gold medal of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland. His essay, 'The Trees of America', won him the prize of the Scottish Arboricultural Society. In 1878 he was again in Canada, when he was offered the job of conservator of forests by the South Australian government. He returned briefly to England, sailed from Plymouth in the *Garonne*, and arrived in Adelaide on 15 September. His first report showed the thoroughness with which he had made himself acquainted with the situation and possibilities of the South Australian forests, but he was bitterly disappointed when its adoption was opposed on technical grounds by the chairman of the Forest Board, George Goyder, who was himself qualified in forestry.

Brown wrote *A Practical Treatise on Tree Culture in South Australia*, and presented the manuscript to the Forest Board in 1880. It was printed by the government and the board distributed 2000 copies free and sold another 1000 to cover printing costs. In 1883 the Forest Board was disbanded and Brown was placed directly under the commissioner of crown lands. In 1884 he exhibited botanical specimens and forest literature at the International Forestry Exhibition, Edinburgh, and was awarded the silver medal and diploma.

Sir Henry Parkes heard of Brown's ability through Alexander Kethel, a New South Wales parliamentarian, and invited him to New South Wales. On a visit to Adelaide, Parkes also found the whole colony claiming that 'Mr. Brown was about the most competent man in dealing with forestry in all the Australian colonies'. In 1890 Brown accepted the position of director-general of forests in New South Wales at £800 a year, £50 more than the South Australians paid him, and nearly three times the salary he originally came for. His interests and experience were largely practical and he spent fully half his time in the field. In 1893 he served on the commission for the World's Columbian Exhibition, Chicago, but the government had begun to retrench. Although Brown had done much work, most of it would be productive only in years to come; this was not good enough in a time of depression, especially when the Forestry Department was spending more than it was making. In the Legislative Assembly the secretary for mines and agriculture accused Brown of injustice in his appointments and of making erroneous statements about his work. Forgotten was the enthusiasm at his first appointment and amid comments like 'splendid reputation', the vote for the Forestry Department was reduced by £2137 and among other economies the office of director-general was abolished.

In March 1895 the Bureau of Agriculture in Western Australia engaged Brown to examine the colony's forests so that 'the Government would have some reliable information as to the quantity of marketable timber in the colony'; when this task was completed, a permanent officer was to be appointed. Brown inspected nearly all the forest land in less than a year, travelling over 5000 miles (8047 km). His report was printed in 1896 and the Department of Woods and Forests was created, with Brown as its first conservator. He held this post to the great satisfaction of the government. In his brief régime much planting of softwoods was initiated, some sandalwood was sown, seedlings were distributed to encourage annual arbor days, and the value of hardwood exports rose by five times to reach more than £550,000. The commissioner of crown lands declared that 'it would be a calamity to dispense with the services of so useful an officer as the Conservator of Forests', and Charles John Moran, M.L.A., proclaimed him 'the first authority on timber in Australia'. After an attack of influenza Brown died at his home in Cottesloe on 26 October 1899, aged 50. At Christ Church, North Adelaide, on 22 March 1883 he had married Bertha Amelia, daughter of James Doughty Willshire; they had three sons.

Much respected in the scientific world, Brown had been elected a fellow of the Linnean and the Royal Horticultural Societies. His report on the forests of Western Australia was republished by the government in 1899. Although his written output was large, all his reports were detailed, intelligent, closely reasoned and revealed a fine mind. He also had hosts of non-scientific friends, many of whom attended his burial at North Fremantle cemetery.

### Select Bibliography

- J. H. Maiden, 'A Century of Botanical Endeavour in South Australia', *Report of the Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science*, 11th meeting, 1907, pp 158-99