



George Brockway

the forgotten
conservationist

Roger Underwood's career was beginning just as George Brockway's was coming to an end, but their chance encounter and George's remarkable legacy inspired Roger not only to make his own mark on the conservation of Western Australia, but to make sure the world knew the story of his hero.

by Roger Underwood



My career in forestry and land management, and that of George Brockway, only just overlapped.

On my second day as a forest officer on 3 January 1963, I was in the old forestry office at Mundaring Weir, and was introduced to a visitor. This was George Brockway, visiting the scene of his first appointment as a forest officer in 1923, and now on the brink of retirement. He was softly-spoken and courteous, an old-fashioned gentleman, but his eyes spoke of many years spent in the most remote bushland of Western Australia. It was only later that I discovered that he was perhaps WA's greatest pioneering forester, a man who left a proud legacy in the fields of conservation and land management. I later trod many of the paths he had blazed, and he became my hero.

Over the years, the memory of Brockway's work and his many achievements faded. I began to think of him as 'the forgotten conservationist'.

FIRST FORESTER

Born and educated in Perth, he studied forestry at the University of Adelaide, and after graduation became our first WA-born professional forester. He joined the Forests Department when it was still in embryo form, the entire staff numbering less than 30, including clerks.

Aged only in his early 20s, Brockway was appointed district manager of the department's first field district at Mundaring. Mundaring was a key area, as its forests comprised the catchment area for the Goldfields Water Supply. Brockway had to start from nothing.

Luckily, he was a man of vision and boundless energy, and he soon set about pioneering systems of district administration and bushfire management that have survived to this day.

FIRST FIRE TOWER

His name is associated with the first fire lookout towers, the recruitment and training of the first fire crews, the first systematic approach to bushfire fighting,



the first planned fuel reduction burning, the first bush telephones and the first experiments with wireless. Within a few years Brockway's methods were being applied across south-west forests.

WHEATBELT WOODLANDS

In late 1920s, Brockway left the department for two years, to work with his brother as a surveyor on land classification in the vast virgin bushlands that later became the north-eastern Wheatbelt. Here he discovered his greatest love: the beautiful and valuable eucalyptus species of the inland.

Returning to the department, Brockway became a voice for bushland conservation. His great concern was wholesale fence-to-fence clearing in the Wheatbelt. He wrote a pamphlet for new settlers, urging them to retain areas of bushland on farms, citing the many benefits of trees, and he undertook surveys of prospective farming areas locating the best woodland areas and then ensuring their dedication as timber reserves in advance of alienation (most of these later became

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Main The Great Western Woodlands.
Photo – Sallyanne Cousins

Inset far left George Brockway with a fine sandalwood tree.

Inset above left The lookout at Mount Gungin, WA's first fire lookout tower, constructed under the direction of George Brockway.
Photos – DBCA



part of the network of nature reserves that today dot the agricultural regions).

But his was truly a voice in the wilderness: almost nobody was interested in conservation in those days.

Brockway found his true vocation when he was appointed as officer in charge of the department's Goldfields and Wheatbelt regions, stationed at Kalgoorlie. He was the first professional forester to work in these areas. The jurisdiction, and the responsibilities, were enormous.

Over the next thirty years, Brockway devoted himself to conservation and

land management programs in these remote regions. He oversaw, and brought into line, the massive and previously unregulated firewood industry supplying the gold mines and pumping stations, and he oversaw the regeneration of woodlands after timber cutting.

This work included the vast area of eucalypt forest now known and revered as 'The Great Western Woodlands'. These woodlands, admired today for their beauty and biodiversity, are nearly all regrowth, regenerated under George Brockway's watchful eyes.

CHIDDARCOOPING

He also developed regulations governing the sandalwood industry, and the conservation of mulga on pastoral leases, and was responsible for the creation of numerous reserves. He almost single-handedly fought off attempts to alienate several valuable bushland areas,

including the Dryandra Woodland and the outstanding botanical treasure-trove in the Chiddarcooping Nature Reserve.

It was while he was inspecting Chiddarcooping that Brockway discovered the variety of *Eucalyptus caesia* that became known as Silver Princess, and which is now one of the most widespread garden ornamental trees in Australia. Another beautiful tree, the Dundas mahogany, was named *Eucalyptus brockwayi* after him.

NURTURING NATIVES

Brockway not only loved the inland trees, he collected specimens and mapped occurrences, he undertook research into propagation and silviculture, and he promoted their use as ornamentals. These passions led to three of his most famous achievements.

The first was the establishment of a nursery at Kalgoorlie, the first nursery in

“George Brockway was a hero of forest conservation and land management in WA and left a proud legacy...”



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Far left Dundas mahogany (*Eucalyptus brockwayi*).

Photo – Roger Underwood

Left The blossom of the variety of *Eucalyptus caesia* that became known as Silver Princess, first discovered at Chiddarcooping Nature Reserve by George Brockway.

Photo – Geraldine Buckley/Alamy

Inset The staff of the Forests Department circa 1923, George Brockway seated second from the right. Seated third from the left is Charles Gardner, at that time the departmental botanist, but later to become WA's Government Botanist and one of Brockway's close associates.

Photo – DBCA

Left and inset left The George Brockway Tree at Yilliminning.

Photos – Roger Underwood

Above Chinnock (*Eremophila maculata* subsp. *brevifolia*).

Photo – Andrew Brown

Australia to focus on growing native trees. The second was his involvement in the planting of street trees in Kalgoorlie, using the most beautiful trees of the region.

The third was the development of a new industry, collecting and exporting seed from tough inland eucalypts for use in land rehabilitation overseas (see 'Eucalypt emigrants', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1990–91).

TREES-ON-FARMS

Above all, George Brockway was the 'father' of the trees-on-farms movement. He wrote articles for newspapers, gave radio talks, visited farms, addressed public meetings and established arboreta of suitable trees. His message was that trees did more than beautify and protect the landscape; they would ensure the sustainability of agriculture.

Unfortunately, in all of this, he was a man before his time. During most of

his career, the focus of government was agricultural development, and the generation of settlers who had cleared the land showed little enthusiasm for its reforestation.

It was not until the 1990s, when all the problems of land degradation that Brockway predicted started to emerge, that a new 'landcare' ethos emerged, and farmers and land managers began applying the methods Brockway had originally advocated, but which at the time were ignored.

THANKS GEORGE

Every profession needs its heroes. People who have performed outstandingly, have left an indelible mark on their field, who are role models and exemplars. George Brockway was a hero of forest conservation and land management in WA and left a proud legacy; not simply the magnificent reserves and

regenerated woodlands in the Goldfields and Wheatbelt or the street trees of Kalgoorlie. He left an idea and a vision, an appreciation of the beauty of the inland bush, and the value of its trees in the recovery of degraded land.

It is appropriate that in a little ceremony at Yilliminning in September, 2020, a magnificent salmon gum was designated The George Brockway Tree. This ensures he is 'the forgotten conservationist' no longer.

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Roger Underwood's latest book *The York Gum Chronicles* - adventures with Western Australia's most beautiful trees is reviewed on page 43

