

A History of the New Zealand Grassland Association

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INTRODUCTION

New Zealand's grasslands are widespread and variable to anyone travelling through the regions and seeing the different farming systems. I have heard it said that on a farm every pasture is different and each paddock is unique. The soil type, environment, livestock type and each farmer's management of livestock interact to cause such variations.

Look closer at a pasture sward and you will see that it comprises many plants, each occupying a niche and mostly providing valuable feed for grazing livestock.

It's the same way with New Zealand's grassland farming industry – it comprises a unique blend of people, each playing a role to make it successful and profitable. It is this success that has built this country's reputation across the world as an effective, more animal-friendly way of livestock farming, producing consumer products that are appreciated by people in many countries.

Since arriving here almost 50 years ago, through the New Zealand Grassland Association (NZGA) I have enjoyed meeting many grassland people – farmers, researchers, those in pastoral servicing companies, the educators, advisers and those who make it work - the administrators. Some have been leaders, others enthusiastic employers and employees; and many have run their own enterprises and farms. Others are “backroom boys” but still contribute to the end result. Just as in an engine, some components play dominant roles, others remain the main frame while a few parts are merely nuts and bolts. But they all work together to create the desired effect.

One day back in the 1960s, I discovered a set of thin volumes called *Proceedings of the New Zealand Grassland Association*. Inside them I discovered gold! At the time I was lecturing to students at the West of Scotland Agricultural College near Ayr, Scotland. The papers presented at each annual conference of the NZGA in the 1960s were in easily-understood language and salient discussion points were included after each paper. To me this was practical farming information on pastures that could be applied on farms, whereas other research volumes were written in technical language in which scientists are required to document results of their research.

Discovering these volumes led me another life and career in New Zealand and a lifelong enthusiasm for the NZGA and its annual conferences.

NZGA Membership enabled me to learn about all the varying regions of grasslands within this country. In addition I met and made friends and contacts among the grassland enthusiasts who attended the meetings. They were working in different sectors of the livestock farming industry but at these meetings we “took off our corporate jackets” and met with a singular interest - pastures and livestock farming. They were the people that collectively made up NZGA. They shaped it, contributed valuable information and influenced the livestock farming industry, making NZGA what it is today.

When I arrived from Scotland to work as a pasture scientist at what was then DSIR’s Grasslands Division, I immediately joined NZGA. I soon learned and met some of the “grassland legends” who had pioneered pastoral agriculture in this country. As I gradually became addicted to NZGA and its activities I learned about these people and heard about their achievements and exploits from colleagues and NZGA members who had known them.

I attended my first annual Grassland Conferences from November 1973, in Te Kuiti, and continued until November 2006 in Dunedin when I retired. In addition there were several special conferences on particular topics. However a definite move from practical farming research towards revenue-earning laboratory-based science was influencing the conference presentations by then, and this diminished my interest. After several years of retirement I lost any regular contact and preferred to use what was left of my life following other interests. But I never forgot those characters.

In 1989 Dr Derek Woodfield and I presented a history of the first 50 years of NZGA. We found that approximately half the membership of up to 1500 comprised farmers, around a quarter were researchers, a fifth were farm advisers and the remainder included lecturers and private company people. I befriended people in all these sectors and valued their joint contribution to the industry. This pie chart may well have changed since then, as computers and the Internet invaded and changed our lives forever. However, it is the pasture people from all sectors who still remain the nucleus of NZGA.

When I began writing for NZGA and other organisations, I wrote short articles about some of these people and was privileged to visit many farms throughout the regions, experiencing and reporting on how the better farmers used their mixed pastures so effectively.

The impressive jigsaw of people and pastures gradually formed an overall picture in my mind, so it now seems worthwhile to write about these people while I can still remember it. NZGA began in 1931 when 26 farmers,

researchers and commercial people met to resolve the problems that the Great Depression had caused and to promote the good ideas that many were developing to improve livestock farming.

The first NZGA President said, “Let us have a grassland caucus which will dominate grassland research and improvement.” Since then the annual conferences and special meetings have tried to achieve that aim. At each conference 200 to over 500 grassland enthusiasts experience and debate the regional issues and advances during paper presentations and field days.

Over the decades the mixture of NZGA members has remained remarkably consistent, with around half those attending meetings being farmers, a quarter researchers and the remainder comprising the other sectors. In writing this account it therefore seems logical to group the characters I have known about in these sectors. Some will take more words than others, as some have contributed more, but any omission doesn't mean that they have not achieved, but rather that my knowledge of them is lacking.

I will also sprinkle the text with a few repeatable anecdotes that show them as human beings. In doing so I intend to embarrass no one, so will apologise in advance if offence is taken. The main aim is to show that New Zealand's grasslands industry was built by enthusiasts of all kinds and types, and not all of them were perfect all the time! We were and are “a team of well over a thousand!”

Throughout the conferences I attended, from 1980 onwards, I used a camera extensively, as the NZGA Proceedings from 1981 to 2006 will confirm! These and others I have gathered will help to illustrate this text. I hope they will help to paint a complimentary picture of those whose pleasure it was for me to know in recent decades. It was also a great pleasure to hear positive replies from those I emailed for their information - their positive comments have spurred me on to write all that follows.

These people are impressive examples for younger enthusiasts who are just gaining a foothold in the pastoral industry. I hope they will follow their own pathways with similar success.

THE BEGINNING

The New Zealand Grassland Association (NZGA) was born in January 1931 when the Assistant Director-General of Agriculture, AH Cockayne invited 21 representatives to a meeting in Palmerston North. They were:

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| AH Cockayne | Department of Agriculture (chairman). |
| HH Allan | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| HE Annett | Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) Ltd. |
| HO Askew | Cawthron Institute, Nelson. |
| WV Blewett | Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) Ltd, Australia. |
| FR Callaghan | Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). |
| RP Connell | Department of Agriculture (secretary). |
| W Davies | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North (from Wales). |
| JW Deem | Department of Agriculture. |
| BW Doak | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| EJ Fawcett | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| AH Flay | Canterbury Agricultural College. |
| JW Hadfield | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| GH Holford | Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) Ltd. |
| AW Hudson | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| WA Jaques | Massey Agricultural College. |
| EB Levy | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |
| WJ McCulloch | Department of Agriculture. |
| MJ Scott | Canterbury Agricultural College. |
| FLC Scrivener | Massey Agricultural College. |
| JW Woodcock | Plant Research Station, Palmerston North. |

The aim was “to meet and discuss, in the light of the global depression, how to the organise relevant research and communication to improve grassland farming”.

Ironically, it was probably Mr WV Blewett, the Australian representative of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) Ltd, who suggested that New Zealand should form an organisation, as AH Cockayne had placed high regard on him and had arranged the first meeting on the particular days that he was available.

There was no formal programme but the first day, Monday 19 January 1931 involved inspection of plots at Tiritea (now the AgResearch Grasslands Research Centre) in the morning, led by Bruce Levy, William Davies (visiting from the Welsh Plant Breeding Station, Aberystwyth) and JW Hadfield.

The afternoon involved a visit to the Marton Experimental Area. Cockayne gave a Presidential address in the evening. On the following day, Tuesday 20 January 1931, the group continued and concluded their discussions.

After the meeting a committee comprising some of these enthusiasts recommended the formation of an Association to advance grassland farming and organised the inaugural NZGA Conference in August 1931. Thankfully RP Connell served as Secretary to document these historic meetings and continued in the role for many years.

Twenty-eight Foundation Members included such renowned names as AH Cockayne, Bruce Levy, Abe Hudson and Geoffrey Peren. Twenty-three years later, eleven of these were still NZGA members. The last to die was Jack Woodcock in 2001 and he remained a member until 1980.

A second conference was planned, to be held at Canterbury College (now Lincoln University) in January 1932 but it fell through. The Second NZGA Conference was eventually held in Christchurch in August 1933 when at least 52 people attended. Cockayne was ill in bed but he was able to broadcast his Presidential Address through the NZ Broadcasting Service. Conference attenders listened to it at the venue.

This conference was the first occasion that a farmer presented a paper.

Since then NZGA has been a major influence on the livestock farming industry. Many people organised the annual conferences and produced the publications. Some also served on the NZGA Executive Committee and as editors and publications officers.

In the NZ regions many have served on Local Organising Committees, the hardworking teams keen to ensure their particular conference is successful; and this led to progressive livestock farming in their region.

Some individuals stand out in the NZGA's history, and I intend to give a summary of as many of these as possible. Inevitably some are missing, as the old files, my own notes and articles and now the websites on the Internet do not include information on them all. In future this history will be updated so long as NZGA continues to achieve the original aim.

I am presenting chapters on the following groups:

- **Administrators** who made it all happen.
- **Presidents** elected from the membership.
- **Honorary Life Members** for dedicated service to NZGA over many years.
- **Researchers** provide scientific results presented at annual conference.
- **Farmers** used new methods and depended financially on their success.
- **Advisers/consultants** spreading information that advances farming.
- **Academics** taught the aspiring students - the next agricultural generation.
- **Commercial managers and agents** marketed the products and supplies.
- **Award winners** who had excelled in an important way in the industry.

Each and every one of these groups form an essential part of the team that is NZGA.