

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

CRESWICK – A FORESTER'S FOREST

By Mary Ryllis Clark, circa 1999

The La Gerche Walking Track is more than a charming two-kilometre ramble through picturesque Sawpitt Gully in the Creswick Regional Park. It is a lesson in reclaiming a degraded landscape and a celebration of the life of little-known forester John La Gerche.

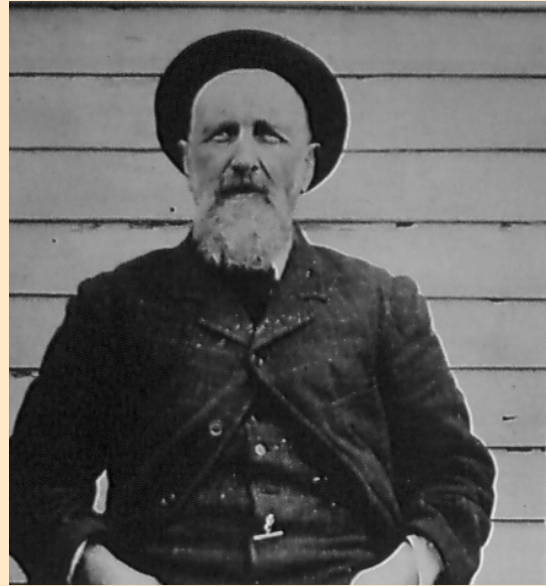
Until recently, few people knew of the quiet, dedicated man who worked in the Ballarat-Creswick State Forest between 1882-1897. His name was buried in the bowels of 19th century Victorian bureaucracy. But a series of events over the past 30 years led not only to his rediscovery but to two major tributes to his place in the history of Victorian forestry.

One is the walking track named after him; the other is a beautiful book, 'A Forester's Log', written by historian Angela Taylor and published in 1998 by Melbourne University Press.

In the 1960s, La Gerche's pocket books were found at the Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick and, in the mid-1980s, his letter books turned up in a cupboard in the old Forest Office in Melbourne.

From these neat hand-written manuscripts emerged the picture of a man with no training in forestry, who restocked the Creswick Forest in a way that was a model of forest management, established the first forest nursery, planted more than 100,000 trees, and yet saw himself as just a public servant doing his job.

The books inspired Ron Hateley, a lecturer at Melbourne University's department of forestry at Creswick, to propose the walking track through La Gerche's forest and plantation. This was achieved with a grant from the National Tourism Development Program and the support of the then Department of Natural Resources and



John La Gerche. Courtesy of DSE

Environment (now the Department of Sustainability and Environment).

It was Mr Hateley's enthusiasm for the forgotten forester that sparked Angela Taylor's interest when she visited Creswick on a field trip as a student of public history at Monash University in 1995.

La Gerche was born in 1845 on the island of Jersey in the English Channel. He grew up on the family farm and excelled at school. At the age of 20, he emigrated to Victoria, and, six years later, was running a small sawmill in the Bullarook Forest.

In 1871, he married Elizabeth Nora Bendixon, also from Jersey. Almost nothing is known about his private life, but his granddaughter, Eugenie Johnston, describes him as a very cultured man who loved to read Shakespeare with his wife and six children in the evenings.

Powerful neighbouring timber mills forced La Gerche out of business in the early years of

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his marriage, and he became a public servant. In 1882, he was appointed crown lands bailiff and forester to "supervise the Ballarat & Creswick State Forest and to take legal proceedings under the 1869 Land Act against all persons found cutting or removing timber in the forest".



School of Forestry, Creswick. Courtesy of DSE.

The job not only involved the prevention of illegal timber cutting, but growing useful trees for commercial use and reforesting denuded areas. It was a daunting task at a time when trees were regarded as a resource to be exploited and forestry, as a science, scarcely existed.

At the beginning of the La Gerche Walk it is possible to imagine the foothills and gullies of the forest in the early 1880s, ravaged by mining practices. Some way into the forest, the track passes the remains of a 25-kilometre water race built by an elderly Chinese miner in the 1860s. In 1884, La Gerche wrote a detailed report on the people living in the forest, the fringe dwellers who never appeared on any official census. Some were there legally on mining or timber splitters licences, others, like the Chinese, were not.

The fair-minded forester resisted pressure from his superiors in Melbourne to clear the Chinese, in particular, out of the forest. They were old men, he objected, mostly fossickers

and vegetable growers, and "likely to die off soon".

La Gerche had far more trouble from illegal wood cutters and wattle bark strippers (selling to local tanneries). They were his "natural enemies", responsible for a "great slaughter of saplings", he wrote.

He would often sleep in the forest at night to prevent the theft of young trees. His diligence, especially in the early years, was not always supported by distant officialdom and often made him unpopular locally.

In 1883, La Gerche embarked on the immense task of restocking the forest. Over the years, he experimented with a range of eucalypts, pines and introduced species. La Gerche planted each tree by hand. It was he who foresaw the potential of *Pinus insignis*.

For Ron Hateley, La Gerche's Sawpitt Gully Plantation is a unique teaching resource. He takes students through it to give them a better understanding of the development of silviculture - the cultivation of trees - and of the significance of La Gerche's work, paving the way to the establishment of the famous Victorian School of Forestry established nearby in 1910.

La Gerche was not the only forester in Victoria doing pioneering work. Because his workbooks were rescued, so was his memory. As a result, a walk in Creswick is made more enchanting by a little knowledge of the man who shaped the forest it meanders through.

FACT FILE

Creswick is 130km north west of Melbourne via the Western Highway. The La Gerche Walk in the Creswick Regional Park begins at the Victorian Landcare Centre in Daylesford Road. Brochures on this and a series of local park and forest walks are available in the centre between 10am and 4pm. For further information call (03) 5345 2200.