



Poster produced in 1973 for the campaign to save Te Tai Poutini West Coast beech forests. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY EPH-D-ENVIRONMENT-1970S

FOREST & BIRD'S LONGEST-SERVING PRESIDENT

Roy Nelson (1897–1988) presided over some of Forest & Bird's most successful campaigns, such as the saving of Lake Manapōuri, the creation of national parks, and measures to improve soil and water conservation. He was president from 1955 to 1974, a crucial time in the Society's history, and oversaw a huge expansion in membership after the Manapōuri campaign, with donations rising in tandem. At this time, most of the work of the Society was still carried out by volunteers, including the president, who received expenses but no salary.

Born in Petone in May 1897, Roy was one of 10 siblings. His was a poor, difficult childhood; often left to his own devices, he would wander the Petone swamps and into the hills, barefoot. He didn't attend school until the age of eight, but was put through his lessons quickly, leaving at age 13 to become a junior clerk at Petone Borough Council. Tall and awkward, he didn't socialise easily, and forged the spirit of a quiet rebel. On Sundays he would escape to the hills, camp in the bush, and shoot pigs and goats. He took up various odd jobs until World War I intervened, and the 21-year-old was drafted into the army and sent to Britain in July 1918, returning a year later unscathed.

Roy was a keen supporter of New Zealand's early scouting movement, joining when young. In 1916, he founded the St Augustine Scout Troop in Petone, and he remained a Scouts leader all his life. Roy spotted a poster advertising the Native Bird Protection Society of New Zealand in 1926 and decided to join. He went on to establish the Kiwi Patrol, a Scout unit of the Society, and began a long correspondence with its founder, Val Sanderson. At Sanderson's request Roy joined the Society's executive in 1944, serving there for a decade before being asked by Arthur Harper, president in 1954, to take over the reins.

Nelson served as president for the next 19 years. His was a Christian conviction, which he carried quietly, believing it was his duty to care for nature, God's Creation. Manapōuri was so shocking a debasement that 'only those minds that are completely obsessed with power could contemplate such a crime against nature,' he believed.¹

He was not a man to yield on what mattered to him most, and yet was always calm and measured in his approach, carrying out his conservation work with diplomacy and polite resolve. Roy was respected in ministerial offices and at select committees. His voice was firm and loud in the defence of nature, and he left the Society on a sound financial footing for the coming decade of upheaval.



Roy Nelson in 1964. FOREST & BIRD