

MARMADUKE SPENCER-BOWER – April 13, 1905 – February 27, 2004

Marmaduke Spencer-Bower and his twin sister Olivia, were born on April 13, 1905, in St. Neots, Huntingdonshire, England, to Rosa and Anthony Spencer-Bower. Rosa was a daughter of early Canterbury settler, Marmaduke Dixon. After attending the Canterbury School of Art, she then in the early 1900s, travelled to England to study at the Slade School of Art.

After the First World War, Rosa was anxious to return to New Zealand because of her property and family here. It was also thought very desirable that Marmaduke should attend Christ's College where all the Dixon boys had gone. A house was purchased in Christchurch.

At the end of 1923, Marmaduke was faced with the dilemma of what to do when he left school. His own inclination was to study electrical engineering, but he lacked the academic achievements necessary for a scholarship, and money was short in the family. It was decided that he should go to work on his uncle Richard Dixon's farm, Holton, at Eyreton.

His time at Holton was a learning curve for Marmaduke. Richard Dixon also leased Claxby from Rosa, and Marmaduke was often sent to lend a hand at that property. While still working for his uncle, he lived on Claxby from 1925 to 1928, and during this time he became aware of the tremendous potential of that farm and became anxious to farm it himself, and so it was arranged that he would take over from 1928. Prior to that he had his first experience of farming on his own when he took over the lease of a block in the top west end of Claxby, and stocked it with over two hundred merino ewes.

In 1928 when he took over Claxby, Richard Dixon guaranteed a bank overdraft, which enabled Marmaduke to buy machinery and stock. Claxby in 1928 was in a largely undeveloped state. South Eyre Road, which ran up through the property, was just a track. Due to his determination and hard work, this dry and light land some sixty years later carried more than ten times the original stock numbers.

The farm contained a variety of land, including a large area of manuka shrub. He attempted to clear it with fire and ploughing but both methods were costly and time consuming. During the Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the idea of planting trees in the scrub was put forward. Claxby sold a 1,500-acre block of this land to the Forestry Department for twenty-five shillings an acre, which was considered a good price.

The area was originally going to be called Horrelville Forest, but when Rosa Spencer-Bower heard of this, she was horrified at the thought. The majority of the land came from what was originally the Eyrewell Estate, and she insisted that it should be named after the Dixon station. So Eyrewell State Forest it became.

Trees were also needed around Claxby, as the cold and wet storms of the Canterbury Plains were killing new born lambs, so from the 1930s onwards, a yearly programme was implemented to plant trees for shelter.

With the introduction of new farming technology, Marmaduke was willing to try new techniques to improve productivity. In 1930, he went in with the owners of Woodstock and Eyrewell to purchase a Wheat Header, the first in the district.

After weathering the Depression and World War II, the 1950s were a prosperous time for farmers. Marmaduke took advantage of rapid scientific advances in farming, reading every farming article he could lay his hands on, and also attended farmer education courses. The wool boom of the 1950s was also crucial to Claxby's success.

In 1941, Marmaduke inherited part of the Woodstock Run in the Waimakariri Gorge when his Uncle Richard died. The land needed a lot of development to clear gorse, manuka and swamp. He planted trees, introduced irrigation and completely changed the use of this back hill country.

The largest effort of farm development Marmaduke was involved in was installing an irrigation system at Claxby. This did not happen until the 1970s. Irrigation transformed Claxby, making it possible to grow far greater quantities of stock feed. The feasibility of using water from the Waimakariri River to irrigate Claxby had been proven nearly a century before by Marmaduke Dixon. In 1891 Dixon and his two sons had made two intakes on the Waimakariri River, and using horse teams, had dug water races to provide irrigation. However, all their work was washed away by the 1896 flood.

In December 1942, Marmaduke married Fay Roberts whom he had met through a shared interest in horses. He had put off marrying for many years because his parents and Olivia were still living with him at Claxby. However, his father died in 1939, and it was agreed that he would purchase a house in Christchurch for his mother and sister. Marmaduke and Fay had four children, Helen, twins Simon and Richard, and Virginia.

During his lifetime, Marmaduke was committed to the community in which he lived. He belonged to the Farmers' Union (now Federated Farmers) almost all his farming life. He served as the Cust and West Eyreton branch Chairman for 12 years and also served on the executive of the Canterbury area branch.

Marmaduke was also involved with the Waimakariri River Trust 1941-47, the North Canterbury Catchment Board 1947-56, the Waimakariri Rabbit Board 1960-70 and the Oxford Lime Company 1970-1990. He was involved with the National Party for many years, was a life member of the Rangiora Lions Club, and chaired the Swannanoa School Committee for 10 years.

He spent 45 years as a vestry member of St Thomas' Church in Eyreton and the Kaiapoi Parish. A firm believer in the values of Christianity in loving and serving your neighbours, he encouraged the church to be involved in the community as much as possible.

Marmaduke's twin sister Olivia was an accomplished painter, which placed her at the top of the New Zealand art world. Her death in 1982 brought to an end a life devoted in full to painting and latterly, art administration.

Fay died in 1988, and Marmaduke in 2004. They are buried in the family plot at the Eyreton Cemetery in South Eyre Road.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

HAWKINS, D N Beyond the Waimakariri : a regional history. Christchurch : Whitcombe and Tombs, 1957.

SPENCER-BOWER, Marmaduke Ninety years – some memoirs. Eyreton : The Author, 1998.

WILLISCROFT, Colin "Looking back on the life of a NC farming identity." *The Northern Outlook* (March 13, 2004). Page 9.