



Stephen Lackey Kessell (1897-1979), forester and administrator, was born on 17 March 1897 at Wollongong, New South Wales, second child of Stephen Kessell, a Primitive Methodist minister from England, and his native-born wife Annie Jane, née Lackey. The family moved to South Australia about 1905. Young Stephen attended Adelaide High School and studied forestry at the University of Adelaide (B.Sc., 1917; M.Sc., 1927). He enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on 18 December 1917 and reached England in August 1918. In the following year he was granted leave to further his studies and entered the University of Oxford (Dip.For., 1919). Discharged from the army in April 1920, he then worked with the forests department of Western Australia under the conservator C. E. Lane-Poole, whose unsuccessful attempts to persuade government to endorse his policies ended in resignation. Kessell acted in his stead from October 1921 and was confirmed in the position in January 1923. He was to hold that appointment for a further twenty-two years. On 20 August 1924 at Christ Church, Claremont, he married with Anglican rites Barbara Morton Sawell (d.1978), a pharmacist.

Following Lane-Poole's lead, Kessell developed 'working plans' for most timber, but jarrah especially, on accessible crown land, seeking to curb over-cutting and to regenerate earlier damage. While never so acerbic as his precursor, Kessell yet lamented that 'the Anglo-Saxon settlers who populated Australia brought with them no traditions of forestry as a rural industry, and for 100 years or more the forests were looked upon as an enemy to be slaughtered'. His fame became greatest for developing defences against bushfire, although he was also innovative in using fire as a silvicultural tool. Kessell's widespread use of unskilled labour during the Depression aided regeneration and pine plantation. Application of science and technology suffused all the department's work, as did pursuit of the best standards in forester training. Kessell insisted on skilled and specialized direction in a report on forestry written for the New South Wales government in 1934. That concern also inspired his moves to establish (1935) the Institute of Foresters of Australia, of which he was founding president (1936-38).

In May 1941 Kessell was seconded to the Commonwealth Department of Munitions as controller of timber. He fulfilled the job's potential, prompting L. T. Carron's judgement that 'if Australia ever had a "national forest policy" . . . it had one during World War II'. In 1944 Kessell advised the Tasmanian government on forest policy, remarking that the State's bargains with business interests 'have been largely at the expense of the forests and the Forestry Department'. Some of his criticisms bore especially on Australian Newsprint Mills Pty Ltd which in 1941 had begun production at Boyer. Seeking to redeem the situation, A.N.M. appointed Kessell its managing director in 1946. The newcomer called upon his workforce to build an industry 'which will contribute for all time to the essential needs of the community'. Under Kessell's administration A.N.M. weathered shortages and dislocations to join the ebullience of the Menzies years. Throughout the 1950s production and employment rose steadily. Chemical and silvicultural work advanced. Mill management heeded welfare and amenity. Kessell was disappointed by the board's decision (1958) not to support plans for further expansion. He retired in 1962.

A member (chairman 1944-64) of the Australian universities' board of higher forestry education since its inception in 1931, Kessell promoted the Australian Forestry School's inclusion within the Australian National University, Canberra, an incorporation achieved in 1965. He served on the councils of the A.N.U. (1960-63) and the University of Tasmania (1947-48 and 1952-62), showing at the latter institution but marginal sympathy for academic dissidence in general and less for the upholders of S. S. Orr. In 1951 Kessell was appointed M.B.E. He was also deputy-president (1967-71) of the National Safety Council of Australia.

Retiring to Melbourne, he served on the board of A.N.M. and other companies. He belonged to the Australian Club, complementing his earlier membership of the Weld (Perth) and the Tasmanian. An able sportsman, 'Kim' Kessell was ever urbane and courteous, and often charming. Many found him aloof, some self-effacing. His very ease of style might have contributed to his historical standing being unduly small. Yet, in all he did, Kessell went beyond supreme competence towards creativity. Survived by his daughter, he died on 29 June 1979 at Armadale, Melbourne, and was cremated. His estate was sworn for probate at \$519,292.

## Select Bibliography

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- L. T. Carron, *A History of Forestry in Australia* (Canb, 1985)
- A. Meyer, *The Foresters* (Hob, 1985)