
THE NEW ZEALAND GRASSLAND ASSOCIATION

By S. H. SAXBY, Secretary, New Zealand Grassland Association;

With the increased interest that is being taken in the New Zealand Grassland Association, there is associated an increased need for a consideration of the origin and development of the association and its activities.

In 1930 the farmers of New Zealand were beginning to feel the effects of what was, two years later, to develop into a period of extremely low prices for primary products. Farmers were producing as much as they could, not because the produce was wanted—much of it was not wanted—but in order to **secure** sufficient revenue to keep them solvent.

Coinciding with this recession in prices was an increasing interest in the need for an expansion of research and advice regarding the country's grassland. The gumlands of Northland, the pumice land of the Central Plateau, the arable land of Canterbury, and the rolling, cold clay country of Otago and Southland were all regarded as problem country. The solution to the satisfactory grassing of these was just round the corner, but some materials and knowledge were lacking.

Before 1930, Certified ryegrass was unknown; a good strain of white clover was not available; subterranean clover, except to a very few farmers, was regarded as being no better than a weed. Topdressing with lime, phosphate, and potash had been carried out for many years, but, largely because of the absence of a good legume in the swards, much of the topdressing was not producing the results that it should have done. Experimental work on grassland production was producing information, but the value of the results was limited because of the lack of suitable techniques.

But during 1930 important changes were taking place. Critical measurements of pasture production had been initiated. In January, Certified ryegrass had been placed on the market and was to meet a very mixed reception; some interest was being taken in the value of subterranean clover on dry land; pasture manage-

ment was being studied more closely than ever before and a good strain of white clover was being selected. A major change was taking place in New Zealand's grassland. Research and advisory staffs were being recruited to the limit of the small amount of finance available.

It is not surprising therefore that on 19 and 20 January, 1931, a conference was held in Palmerston North with the object of discussing among grassland workers "the betterment, of research, investigation, demonstration or instruction in grassland,, management generally." This conference was called by Mr A. H. Cockayne, then Assistant Director-General of Agriculture, and was attended by 21 persons representing the Departments of Agriculture and Scientific and Industrial Research, Lincoln College, Massey College, Cawthron. Institute, and representatives of some fertiliser interests.

The meeting inspected trial work at Palmerston North and at Marton and held discussions based on "a consideration of grassland truths which could be accepted." Mr Cockayne, as convener, gave an impromptu

Persons attending meeting at Palmerston North, January, 1931. Those whose names are underlined are still members of the Association.

<u>Cockayne</u>		
Allan	Jan., 1931	Hadfield
<u>Annett</u>		Holford
Askew		<u>Hudson</u>
Blewett		<u>Levy</u>
<u>Callaghan</u>		<u>Jacques</u>
Davies		McCulloch
Deem		Scott
<u>Doak</u>		Scrivener
Fawcett		<u>Woodcock</u>
<u>Flag</u>		
Connell		

Persons who attended the inaugural meeting of the New Zealand Grassland Association in Palmerston North in August, 1931. Those whose names are underlined are still members of the Association.

	<u>Cockayne</u>	
Aitken	<div>Aug., 1931</div>	<u>Hudson</u>
Allan		<u>Jacques</u>
<u>Annett</u>		<u>Levy</u>
<u>Askew</u>		McCulloch
Blewett		Napier
<u>Burnard</u>		Peren
<u>Callaghan</u>		Rich-White
Cathie		Scott
Deem		Scrivener
<u>Doak</u>		Stewart
Fawcett		Taylor
Flay		Wilson
Holford		<u>Woodcock</u>
	Connell	

presidential address in which he said, "Let us have a grassland caucus which will dominate grassland research and improvement. . . ."

This meeting set up a committee which was required to report on what it considered could be done to further co-operation and co-ordination in grassland research.

The Committee, which reported on 25 June, 1931, recommended among other things "the formation of an association or institution of workers in all departments of grass farming advancement," and that an inaugural meeting of such an organisation should be held in the near future in Palmerston North.

This meeting was held on 5 August, 1931, and the 28 persons present resolved to form the New Zealand



Some of the members who attended the second conference of the New Zealand Grassland Association held in Christchurch in 1933,

Grassland Association and adopted a constitution. Mr Cockayne was elected chairnian and Mr R. P. Connell secretary.

It is of interest to note that of the 28 foundation members no fewer than 11 'are, 23 years later, still members of the Association.

Although members were anxious to hold another conference, their efforts were defeated by the financial depression. A proposal to hold a meeting in December, 1931, was abandoned. Another meeting, proposed for January, 1932, reached the advanced planning stage, but also had to be abandoned.

In a letter to a correspondent concerning the proposed 1932 'conference the secretary stated,, "Regarding the inviting of 'leading farmers. to the January meeting of the Grassland Association, it appeals to me as highly desirable that this should be done"..

Unfortunately, the Association languished until, April, 1933, when a move was 'again made to hold a conference. This conference was held at Canterbury College, Christchurch, in August, 1933.

The conference was of interest for four things:-

1. The president broadcast his address from his bed in Wellington and was listened to by the assembled members in Christchurch.
2. The very full and sometimes almost acrimonious discussion on 'Certified ryegrass and on the organisation of the seed trade.
3. It was the first occasion on which farmers attended and on which a farmer presented a paper.,
4. It was, the first of very few 'occasions when the Association acted (unsuccessfully) as a pressure group.

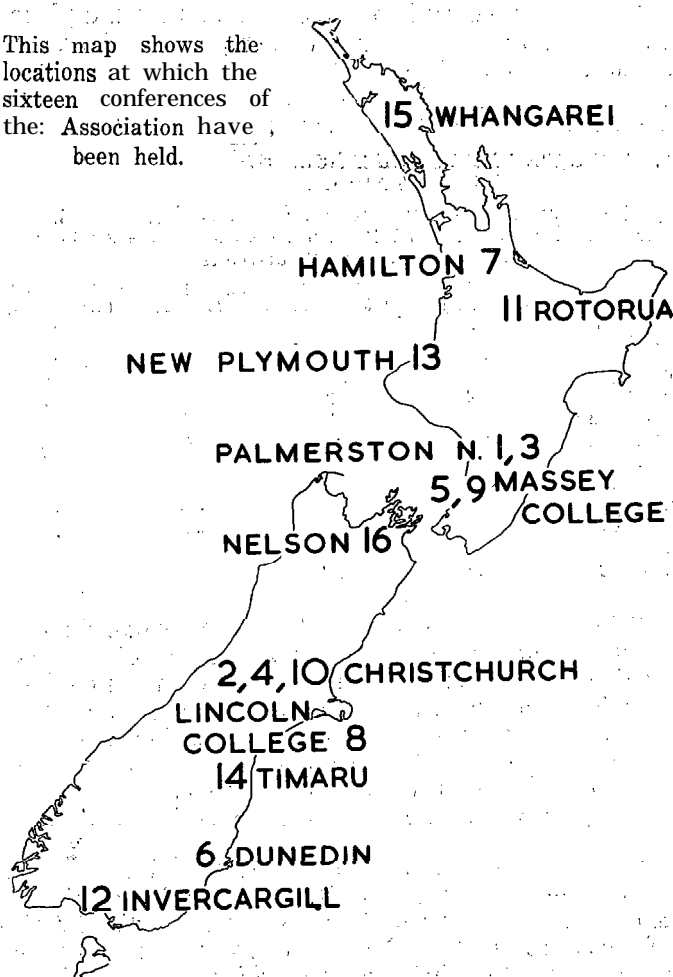
Such was.. the birth and the early days of the New Zealand Grassland Association.

Since its' enthusiastic but rather faltering beginning in 1931 the Association has, with the 'exception' of the years 1940-1946, held annual conferences in various parts of the country, the present one in Nelson being the sixteenth.,

Although half of the conferences have been 'held at or near Palmerston North and Christchurch, the remainder have been held in widely separated centres , throughout the country.

At the first meeting of the Association members decided that the conferences should be peripatetic.

This map shows the locations at which the sixteen conferences of the Association have been held.



That this has been justified has, been shown by the ever-increasing attendances at conferences and by the steadily increasing membership;

TABLE 1

Membership for years ending May 31.

	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954
Full Members . . .	—	268	425	600	716	784
Conference Members .	187	108	67	66	248	127
Total Members . . .	187	376	492	666	964	911

If all conferences had been held at only one place, it is most unlikely that membership would have increased as it has done. The reason for this is the large, more or less temporary, increase in the number of members at each conference, and is shown in the table below :-

T A B L E 2
Proportional distribution of full members showing the percentage in each land district at the time conferences were held in each of four land districts.

	Southland (Invercargill)	(New Taranaki Plymouth)	Canterbury (Timaru)	Northland (Whangarei)
Northland	4	5	5	32
Auckland	11	10	7	10
Taranaki	1	23	5	4
Gisborne	2	2	1	1
Hawke's Bay	3	3	2	1
Wellington	22	24	16	15
Nelson	1	1	1	1
Marlborough	1	1	1	1
Westland	—	—	—	—
Canterbury	13	12	47	23
Otago	10	7	8	6
Southland	32	12	7	6

When the conference was held in Southland membership in that district was at a high level but has since dropped off considerably. Similarly the membership in Taranaki was very small until a conference was held there, when it rose rapidly. Since then membership in that district has dropped off. As a contrast the membership in Hawke's Bay shows a consistently low level, largely because no conference has been held there.

One does not have to look far for the cause of these changes. It is essentially the short-lived interest of a large number of the farmers in whose district the conference is held. Nevertheless, the interest of farmers is, on the whole, very considerable, as is shown in the following table, which sets out the numbers of members in each of several occupational groups:-

T A B L E 3
Numbers of full members in each occupational group for years ending 31.5.50 to 31.5.54.

	Year ending May 31.				
	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954
Farmers	91	196	310	419	488
Extension and Research	122	148	196	179	175
Commercial Interests	32	46	63	77	90
Others	27	36	31	41	47
Totals	272	426	600	716	800

This; shows the general increase in the number of members in each group, particularly that of farmers. It is obvious that farmer membership could be increased 'very greatly. Moreover, the -extent to which the other interests can be increased is problematical; and they would -reach 'saturation point long before farmer interest- would.

The following table, which shows the same break-up as above but in percentages, is of interest :-
8.

TABLE 4

Percentage of full members in each occupational group for years ending 31.5.50 to 31.5.54

	Year ending May 31.				
	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954
Farmers	33	46	52	58	61
Extension and Research .	45	35	33	25	22
Commercial Interests .	12	11	10	11	11
Others	10	8	5	6	6

In this is clearly shown the proportional increase in farmers from about one-third of the total members to almost two-thirds. It also shows that extension and research workers have decreased from half of the total number of members to a little over a fifth.

It may be asked: Is it necessary or desirable to secure such a large membership with such varied interests?

There are two answers to this question. First, a large membership is desirable if for no other reason than to enable the Association to remain solvent. The important reason, however, is that for the Association to be of the greatest value it must have. a large membership of "workers in all departments of grass farming advancement".

Second, a wide variety of interests is desirable if the main function of the Association is to be achieved. This answer is associated with another question that might be asked, namely: 'What do farmers gain from attending a Grassland Conference that they cannot gain by attending Farm Schools which are conducted in most districts?' Such a question implies a similarity between Farm Schools and Grassland Conferences.

As I see it, these have very different functions, with only a small overlap.

Farm Schools are primarily an advisory service to farmers and are concerned with the application of improved farm practices.

Grassland Conferences, on the other hand, are not concerned with advising farmers or any other group on the application of any farm practices. They are concerned more with the discussion of factors which may or may not later lead to improved farm practices. For example, at the Timaru Grassland Conference blind-seed disease of ryegrass was discussed with considerable profit to all concerned, even though, no recommendations could be made, regarding the application of existing knowledge regarding its control. Surely all groups of members were interested to know that so much work was being carried out and how difficult it was to find a practical solution to the problem.

Similarly; in the early days of the Association, papers on the isolation of strains of ryegrass and white clover were of real interest to members of the Association. A similar paper given now would be quite out of place, but might be quite a satisfactory subject for discussion at a Farm School as a background for a talk on the seed certification scheme.

I feel sure that there are many subjects to which all groups within the Association can make valuable contributions, both as prepared papers and in discussions. Take this conference for an example. The symposium on "Pasture Species" could be dealt with in two ways, one suitable for a Farm School and the other suitable for this conference. For a Farm School one would discuss the place of, say, subterranean clover, amount of seed to sow, seasonal production, and so on. For a Grassland Conference subterranean clover would be regarded critically with emphasis on an examination of its shortcomings rather than on its advantages. In this manner grassland knowledge would be increased by the contribution of the research worker, the advisory officer, the farmer, and the commercial man.

For these reasons I feel that no group of members should be too concerned with changes in the numerical strength of any other group, provided always that the reasons underlying practices rather than the application of the practices form the basis of papers and discussions.

It is sometimes argued by "technical members" that there are not enough technical papers and by "non-technical members", that there are not enough "popular papers". Both of these arguments are unsound. It would be quite impossible to prepare a

“technical conference” in which all papers would; interest all “technical” members present, if, of course, a “technical paper” can be defined. For example, a soil chemist might not be interested in a paper on plant breeding, but a farmer might. Similarly, a paper by a sheep farmer on the economics of hill country improvement might not interest a dairy farmer any more than it would interest an entomologist.

It is felt, therefore, that members attending a Grassland Conference must be prepared to hear some papers and listen to some discussions which are not in their normal line of work. Nevertheless, it would certainly be unfortunate if anyone was so narrow-minded that he was interested in only what he himself was working with. The argument is therefore not one of technical versus non-technical papers, but of the conflicting interests of a wide range in the life work of individuals.

It may be of interest to review briefly some of the topics which have been discussed at Grassland Conferences in the past. The subjects discussed have, on the whole, been a reflection of current thought and research on grassland problems, usually with a bias toward the problems of the district in which the conference is held.

In the early years strains in grasses and clovers were the subject of a number of papers. Because of the financial depression at that time papers on economics and marketing were very acceptable. Bush sickness, the cause of which was still a mystery, was also discussed. Sometimes papers well away from the subject of grassland were given. Pigs, lucerne breeding, animal health, and the production of brassica seeds were all discussed. The plant-animal relationships has recurred frequently, sometimes as the subject of specific papers such as feed flavour, the relation of pasture species to the quantity and quality of milk, the animal as a means of measuring the nutritive value of pastures, and sometimes as incidentals in a paper. In recent years, possibly because of the formation of the Animal Production Society, papers on the plant-animal relationship have almost ceased.

For many years a most important aspect of grassland improvement has been entirely neglected. That aspect is that dealing with economics. It is fortunate that it has been revived this year.

What has the New Zealand Grassland Association

achieved? In itself it can achieve little, because it is not a controlling body and because it does not function as a pressure group. Its achievements can be measured only in the stimulation which its members are able to gain from its conferences. If attendances at conferences and the discussions which are held are any indication, then the Association must have stimulated all groups of members.

The Association has widened its activities to some extent during the last few years, by interesting itself in the production of a film and by acting as host body of the 7th International Grassland Congress, which is to be held in New Zealand in, 1956. For the Association to increase its value, it must also increase its services. To what extent and in what direction these can be extended is -uncertain. Any extension entails additional cost and effort, whether it is in the direction of arranging additional conferences or in arranging for more published, material. Nevertheless, with the Association in a strong financial position, a consideration by the Executive Committee of making an additional effort may be warranted in order to maintain interest in the Association.

As an interesting sideline on the conference it could be mentioned that as the result of what was seen on the screen at the last conference, an effort (and I believe a successful one) has been made to devise a scheme (1) whereby the bane of all audiences, the illegible slide, can be banished for ever.

REFERENCE

(1) Saxby, S. H.; Scott, R. H., and Averis, M. W.: Legibility of Lantern Slides, J. Sci. Tech., Vol. 36, Sec. B., No. 3, 1954, p. 191.