

# British Columbia



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"THE BACKWOODS BARONET AND THE GOLDEN SPRUCE"  
Adapted from a 1974 MacMillan Bloedel newsletter

Fifty years ago Eric Anstruther, a young Scottish surveyor, was strolling along a river bank in the Queen Charlotte Islands when he discovered a golden tree, a lone beacon in forest of green conifers. Since then both man and tree have achieved some measure of fame.

The golden Sitka spruce of Juskatla has emerged as a scientific enigma, puzzled over by botanists and foresters, while Anstruther went on to inherit two baronetcies and a large Scottish estate on the brink of financial disaster. He became Sir Windham Eric Francis Carmichael-Anstruther, Baronet of Nova Scotia, Baronet of Great Britain and Hereditary Grand Carver to the Royal Household in Scotland.

Many scientists maintain that the golden spruce he found is without parallel, a genetic accident that may never be repeated by nature and that has yet to be duplicated by man under experimental conditions. It is now 161 feet tall and bathed in the same golden sheen which enthralled the young surveyor in 1924.

Unique in the sea of giant green trees which carpet Graham Island, largest of the 150 islands which form the sparsely-populated Queen Charlotte group off the north coast of British Columbia, the golden spruce remains a botanical puzzle.

Anstruther spotted the tree on the west coast of the Yakoun River near what is now MacMillan Bloedel's Juskatla logging camp. The man who became affectionately known as the "Backwoods Baronet" following his nine years in Canada recalls he was "dumbstruck by the sight of the golden wonder tree."

Several other spruce trees have been discovered in the Queen Charlottes since Sir Windham's find evidencing similar but less spectacular golden traits. However, not a single golden specimen has been found to date in the huge spruce stands on the B.C. mainland.

Grant Ainscough, former MacMillan Bloedel chief forester, said that the tree at Juskatla may be a genetic freak that is unable to fix chlorophyll. "We suspect that it can manufacture chlorophyll like any other tree but that it breaks down in sunlight to give a golden colour."

No one has a theory as to why this phenomenon is peculiar to the Queen Charlottes, although there is a great deal of spruce in the islands that has evolved in isolation from mainland stands, increasing the odds of a genetic accident through inbred pollination.

Botanists and foresters have been testing the golden spruce and attempting to grow other large specimens from cuttings and graftings for more than 40 years, with little success to date. A decade ago, 20 cuttings were brought down from the Charlottes and planted at MacMillan Bloedel's Nanaimo arboretum on Vancouver Island. At last count only three survived, despite meticulous care and attention. The three survivors have retained their golden tones but refuse to grow at the same rate as their green brothers. Nature appears reluctant to duplicate a rare, beautiful mistake.

Dr. Oscar Sziklai of the U.B.C. Faculty of Forestry has been studying the golden spruce intermittently for the past six years and is recognized as the foremost expert on it. He says the Juskatla tree is the finest example of this particular type of mutation known in the world and represents a unique opportunity to study the genetics of the tree, pollen distribution, and the photo-oxidation process involved in its chlorophyll breakdown.

"At the moment, we're just probing into the darkness," said Sziklai. "With this particular specimen we could do some very, very, valuable work that we couldn't do on any other tree. I'm hopeful that we'll be able to carry on much more intensive studies in the future than have been done to date."

Sir Windham has his own theories about his find. He has long maintained that the golden spruce results from a genetic accident: "That tree must be to others of its species as an albino human is to other people -- lack of pigment, so colourless hair."

Born in South Africa, Sir Windham was raised by other members of the Anstruther family in Britain after his parents died. He entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst late in the First World War. However, the war had ended by the time he was ready to obtain a commission and Sir Windham decided to chuck the military life to go adventuring in Canada, arriving in 1920 on his 20th birthday.

He rode the hard way across Canada, hopping freight trains with a pet German shepherd, and worked intermittently in the prairies prior to arriving in Vancouver in 1921. Looking at his dwindling finances one evening over a glass of beer in a downtown Vancouver beer parlour, Sir Windham strayed into conversation with a man who turned out to be a civil engineer. When the engineer learned that the future Laird of Carmichael had studied trigonometry at Sandhurst, Ric Anstruther was hired on the spot and was on his way to a coastal surveying job in a matter of days.

In the years that followed, he mapped substantial portions of the B.C. coast and Vancouver Island, but he always preferred the Queen Charlottes. "It was beautiful country, hardly any inhabitants except the Haidas, and long silver beaches on the east coast," he recalled many years later.

Early in 1924 he moved into the Yakoun River country with a survey team, and a base camp was established 21 miles upstream from the Yakoun mouth. "The Yakoun had over 20 logjams, some of great size and height, and I was nearly drowned by being washed under one of them. We had to dig wells for water as the river was choked with dead salmon that had just spawned. Much spare time was spent throwing these fish back into the water, trying to get rid of the frightful stench. We towed our birchbark canoes in shallow water with salmon brushing against our legs. And I remember one salmon leaping into the canoe which already had four of us and supplies in it."

During his days off and after-work hours Sir Windham liked to ramble into the silent forest alone, and "it was on one of these trips that I found the golden spruce. That tree is becoming a starlet, or at least one of the minor wonders of the world. I didn't even make an axemark on it, being, I suppose, a bit overcome by its strangeness in a forest of green."

The Haidas native to the Charlottes were aware of the tree and it had been seen as early as 1885 by white explorers, who thought it was interesting but did nothing about it. Sir Windham was the first to recognize it as an important botanical rarity and bring it to the attention of scientists.

When the small cuttings he took reached the outside world a few months later, they created a sensation among botanists and foresters. At first it was thought that Sir Windham had discovered an entirely new species of spruce. Then it was believed that the tree was suffering from some rare disease. Both ideas proved incorrect, and the question of what caused the golden hue is still unresolved.

At the time, the discovery had little impact on the life of Ric Anstruther and he continued to move from one surveying job to the next. Today, Ric Anstruther recalls his youth, the timber tracts of the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the golden spruce. "If I was 30 years younger and someone would lend me a canoe, I could paddle straight to that tree from the mouth of the Yakoun River, straight to it..."

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN  
by Bill Young

Have you reserved June 10, 1989 as your "1989 Forest Heritage Day?" Along with this newsletter you will read of the association's annual general meeting planned for that day in Port Alberni. A great program has been developed so make plans to attend.

Your directors decided at a recent executive meeting to send complimentary issues of the 1989 newsletters to each British Columbia MLA. Along with an accompanying letter, the April 1989 issue was the first to be sent. It is hoped that the newsletter will assist in furthering a greater understanding of the province's forest history and heritage. Several letters of acknowledgement have already been received - one that has is printed in this newsletter.

With the next issue we expect a change of format to higher quality printing. This will enable the association to also increase the content of each newsletter, to a degree, as well as have the ability to print pertinent photographs. Thus, your editor continues to solicit articles, vignettes, news items, book reviews, requests for information, letters, and comments. Please contact the editor (John Parminter) or myself if you can contribute.

W. Young,  
President

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NEWS ITEMS

Green Timbers

The following is an excerpt from a letter received from the Honourable W.N. Vander Zalm, Premier:

"Thank you very much for your correspondence received in my office January 23, 1989 regarding Green Timbers Nursery...and thank you too for the interesting historic postcard. I have been pleased to share your letter with my colleague, the Honourable Dave Parker, Minister of Forests, so that he, too, may be aware of the potential of Green Timbers as a pro-active force in the ongoing debate of forestry issues."

March 15, 1990

Reserve this date!!! Plans are underway for a suitable ceremony to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the first production reforestation project in B.C. It was on March 15, 1930 that the initial commemorative grove was planted by a group of dignitaries at Surrey's Green Timbers. While some of the larger plantation has been lost to development over the years, this commemorative grove of trees remains intact.

### 1989 Awards of Merit

The association is seeking "candidate projects" for consideration for its 1989 Awards of Merit. Eligibility includes individuals, associations, clubs, companies, government agencies, and other groups who have made a significant contribution toward furthering a greater understanding of B.C.'s forest history during the year. Contact the President, Bill Young, for further information or to submit nominations.

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### LETTERS

"Thank you for sending me a copy of your Newsletter. May I offer my congratulations on a fine effort. I imagine the article on B.C.'s Pioneer Hardware must have rekindled memories, stirred hearts, and brought smiles to the faces of your readers.

Since my Father was involved in logging and sawmilling, both in Northern Saskatchewan and later in the Joe Riche Valley area of Kelowna, I have some knowledge of the forest industry. As a matter of fact, I recall looking through Dad's copy of a thick hardcover Mc and Mc catalogue.

Good luck on your initiative. The romance and colour of the forest industry of B.C. infuses a sense of excitement in all those who have touched it.

It has, it is, and will continue to be a dominant factor in both our B.C. culture as well as in our provincial economy."

Cliff Serwa, MLA  
Okanagan South

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### FORESTRY SHORTIES

The first of these appeared in our last issue and will, hopefully, be a regular feature of future issues. The column will highlight people, places, and memories of personal experiences on the job in the forests of British Columbia.

Our pioneering effort entitled "Jim Dunlop - The Lone Ranger" described the start of Jim's stint as a forest ranger at Lower Post. While there he developed the concept of "Rapattack." This means of allowing fire fighters to access remote forest fires by means of rappelling from a hovering helicopter is now an established part of our fire suppression arsenal.

Presently, Jim Dunlop lives in Victoria and is completing his first year as the Director of Protection Branch of the B.C. Forest Service and his 25th year with the service.

If you have a "Forestry Shortie" story to offer, or wish to suggest someone who might, please contact Bob DeBoo at 387-8740 (office) or 478-7446 (home) or write him at 410 Raynerwood Place, Victoria, B.C. V9C 2B3.

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INDEX TO ARTICLES IN NUMBERS 1 - 20

No. One                    December 1981

British Columbia Ministry of Forests Project 87 (D. Adderley)  
Big Tree Search (A. Carder)

No. Two                    June 1982

T.S. Higginson - Crown Timber Agent, New Westminster (E. Nyland)

No. Three                  November 1982

The Colony of Vancouver Island - Cutting Permits, Scaling, Stumpage, and  
Trespass (W. Young)  
Early Logging Days on Denman Island - Part One (W. Baikie)

No. Four                    March 1983

The Colony of Vancouver Island - The First Major Timber Allocation  
(W. Young)  
Early Logging Days on Denman Island - Part Two (W. Baikie)

No. Five                    April 1983

The Colony of Vancouver Island - Timber Allocation Policy (W. Young)  
Early Logging Days on Denman Island - Part Three (W. Baikie)

No. Six                    November 1983

Into the Archives (reprinted from The Forintek Review)  
It Has All Happened Before, or Swedish Forest History (J. Thirgood)

No. Seven                      February 1984

Forest Service Dedicates Cowichan Lake Cookhouse As Heritage Building  
(I. Karlsson)  
Oral History and Forest History in British Columbia (P. Chapman)  
A True Bull Story (W. Baikie)

No. Eight                      April 1984

Schmozzles, Steamboats and Sawmills (W. Young)  
The Colonial Era - A Sawmill in Stanley Park? (W. Young)  
Logging With Bulls (W. Baikie)  
Forestry-related Theses to 1974 (F. Woodward)

No. Nine                      November 1984

Forestry-related Theses and Essays 1974 - 1984 (F. Woodward and J. Parminter)  
A History of Forest Entomology in British Columbia: 1920 - 1984 - Part One  
(H. Richmond)  
Steward's of the People's Wealth: the Founding of British Columbia's Forest  
Branch - Part One (T. Roach)

No. Ten                      March 1985

Resource Managers Stumped by Trees (K. Bernick)  
A History of Forest Entomology in British Columbia: 1920 - 1984 - Part Two  
(H. Richmond)  
Steward's of the People's Wealth: the Founding of British Columbia's Forest  
Branch - Part Two (T. Roach)

No. Eleven                      June 1985

The Other Douglas and the Ill-fated Journey to British Columbia (W. Young)  
A History of Forest Entomology in British Columbia: 1920 - 1984 - Part Three  
(H. Richmond)  
Steward's of the People's Wealth: the Founding of British Columbia's Forest  
Branch - Part Three (T. Roach)

No. Twelve                      November 1985

A History of Forest Entomology in British Columbia: 1920 - 1984 - Part Four  
(H. Richmond)  
Forestry - Past, Present, and Future - Part One (R. McKee)

No. Thirteen                      March 1986

Forestry - Past, Present, and Future - Part Two (R. McKee)

No. Fourteen            April 1987

Reconnaissance in South Cassiar - 1913 (A. Gold)  
Cotta's Preface (H. Cotta)

No. Fifteen            March 1988

History of the Forest Industry - West Kootenays (D. Anderson)  
The Green Timbers Plantations - a British Columbia Heritage (W. Young)

No. Sixteen            May 1988

What is a Forest? (F. Waugh)  
Reforestation - the First Day (W. Young)

No. Seventeen        August 1988

Recollections of a Forest Ranger on the Coast 50 Years Ago (R. Douglas)  
David Douglas - the Last Letter (W. Young)  
Reforestation - the First Day: a sequel (W. Young)

No. Eighteen        December 1988

A Major New Forest History Museum for British Columbia (E. Nyland)  
Junior Forest Wardens Mark 58 Years (B. Myring)

No. Nineteen        April 1989

"Mac and Mac" - B.C.'s Pioneer Hardware (A. Klenman)  
"Ties to Water - the History of Bull River in the East Kootenay" by Verdun  
Casselman, a book review by D. Wallinger  
Jim Dunlop - the Lone Ranger (R. DeBoo)

No. Twenty            May 1989

The Backwoods Baronet and the Golden Spruce (MacMillan Bloedel)

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This newsletter is the official organ of the Forest History Association of British Columbia and is distributed at no charge to members of the Association, libraries, and to certain institutions. Items on forest history topics, descriptions of current projects, requests for information, book reviews, letters, comments, and suggestions are welcome. Please address all correspondence including changes of address to the Editor: John Parminter, # 1 - 949 Pemberton Road, Victoria, B.C. V8S 3R5.

**Membership** in the Association is \$5.00 yearly. Should you wish to join or obtain further information please write to the Treasurer: Edo Nyland, 8793 Forest Park Drive, Sidney, B.C. V8L 4E8. The President, Bill Young, can be reached at 6401 Conconi Place, Victoria, B.C. V8Z 5Z7.