
'Playing Sad Havoc with Our Forests': Foresters versus Railway Sleeper Hewers in Late Colonial Victoria

André Brett

Introduction

In 1897, George S. Perrin, the Conservator of Forests in Victoria since the position had been established in 1888, submitted his annual report of the Lands Department's Forest Branch for the previous year. 'My views [on sleeper hewing] are too well known to need recapitulation', he wrote, 'as I consider hewing in any shape or form a wasteful method of procuring railway sleepers.'¹ Nonetheless, in a report extraordinary for its blunt tone, Perrin excoriated those who had either opposed or ignored his opinion that sleeper hewing, the fashioning of logs into sleepers by axe rather than sawing them at mills, squandered valuable timber and heightened the risk of bushfires. He sighed that 'I have warned Governments of the inevitable result of the forest vandalism', and with a stinging I-told-you-so undertone lamented that 'giving freedom to the miner, the splitter, and the sleeper-hewer has produced precisely the effects anticipated and prognosticated by me in my various reports now extending over nine years'. He condemned public apathy towards 'self-patent facts which cannot be shirked' and tried to appeal to the colony's hip pocket with his fear that Victoria would soon have to import railway sleepers from New South Wales or Tasmania at three times the price.² Sleeper-hewers, unsurprisingly, disagreed with his characterisation of their profession. The *Melvor Times*, printed in Heathcote and circulated through a region dependent on forest industries, mocked Perrin's argument as 'a potent one under certain conditions and circumstances which are entirely absent in the case of the forests in this neighbourhood'.³ The dispute became so severe that the Royal Commission on Timber Reserves and State Forests, established in 1897 with a wide brief to enquire into almost all aspects of the colony's forests, was compelled to issue one of its first progress reports on the topic of sleeper hewing.

The friction between Perrin and the Forest Branch on the one hand, and the Railways Department and the hewers who supplied its needs on the other illuminates the tensions between developmental and conservational ideals that attended the rapid expansion and maintenance of Victoria's railway network in the late nineteenth century. Victorian governments of all political persuasions were eager to construct railways to encourage the spread of settlement and link rural industries to markets and ports. On the other hand, the previous thirty years had already featured severe destruction of forests by hewers and other parties, and Perrin approached his task of organising and managing Victoria's timber resources with zeal and a sense of urgency. Hence the demands of railway construction for timber increasingly came into conflict with the plans of forest conservators. Yet was antagonism inevitable, and once sharp disagreements emerged were they handled appropriately? This presentation, after sketching the background, will show how the dispute played out and how it was—or was not—resolved. Perrin's arguments against hewing were not consistent, but went through a process of evolution and encountered sustained opposition from hewers, who pressed their case through local newspapers and lobbying members of parliament. Opportunities for resolution emerged by 1896, but were not taken and antagonism reached its apogee at the end of the decade.

Background

Railways require significant quantities of timber, and the greatest single demand by the Railway Department was for sleepers. These rectangular wooden supports are laid perpendicular to the rails for the purposes of load distribution and maintaining the correct width between rails. Hence railways need sleepers to be made of a strong and durable wood, with ironbark, box, and especially red gum the preferred timber in Victoria. Initial railway construction from 1853 focused on the Melbourne region and trunk routes to Ballarat, Bendigo, Echuca, and Geelong, with 274 miles open for traffic in 1870; from this basis, rapid regional expansion meant that 3,004 miles of railways were open by 1894, servicing almost every part of the colony.⁴ The Department had a sustained annual demand not only for sleepers on new lines but also for maintenance and upgrades. In Victoria, sleepers typically measured 9 feet by 9 inches by 4.5 inches or 10 feet by 9 inches by 5 inches, or roughly 30 and 37 superficial feet respectively, and the Department preferred sleepers to be hewn rather than sawn. Hewn sleepers could generally be sourced at cheaper prices, and the Department considered them to be stronger. Sawmillers, as Kevin J. Frawley notes, could produce sleepers from almost any wood, while hewing ensured good quality, straight-grained timber.⁵

The demand for sleeper renewal and upgrades became significant by the late 1880s, as the sleepers laid on Victoria's first railways in the 1850s and 1860s began to show their age and technological advances required greater stability on main lines. The average annual demand for sleepers for maintenance and upgrades was over 46,000 sleepers during the 1880s, and in the subsequent decade demand skyrocketed—it passed 130,000 in 1895, and by 1900 it was over 370,000. In the fifteen years from Federation to 1916, when the exigencies of the First World War slowed railway maintenance, annual demand for sleepers fell below 250,000 only three times, with 1908 representing a peak demand of over 389,000.⁶ Unfortunately, similar figures were not published for sleepers used on new construction. Allusions throughout Railway Department and Forest Branch reports indicate the total was similarly substantial, albeit more prone to sharp annual fluctuation.

This burgeoning demand gave encouragement to the sleeper hewing industry, with hundreds of men in forested districts employed either in hewing sleepers for railway contracts or in carting the sleepers from forests to railway stations. The relationship between the Department and hewers was not always harmonious; 'Monthly sleeper "pass" days were a test of wits between sleeper cutters and railway inspectors', whose standards were exacting.⁷ Hewers became discontented when inspectors were seen to be rejecting too many sleepers that the hewers considered to be sound and had paid royalties to cut, and the Department was liable to accusation of 'fads' in what it accepted or rejected.⁸ However, both were able to find common cause against Perrin and his like-minded colleagues, whose measures to conserve forest resources routinely raised the hackles of the most voracious consumers of timber and the men whose livelihoods derived from meeting that demand.

From the late 1850s there was recognition—albeit limited—that some Crown land had to be reserved from sale to provide for the protection and management of natural resources. Victoria's first forest and timber reserves were set aside in February 1862 to provide for the needs of the goldfields, evidently on the initiative of Clement Hodgkinson as Assistant-Commissioner of Crown Lands and Survey. A parliamentary report tabled in October 1865 recommended the designation of state forests, and from the next year Hodgkinson put this into effect; by 1874, almost a million acres were reserved.⁹ State nurseries were also established. These measures did little to stem the enormous consumption of timber throughout Victoria, especially in the absence of a full-time conservator to co-ordinate management of the colony's stocks of such a valuable resource. Hence on 23 June 1888 the administration of Duncan Gillies appointed Perrin as the first Conservator of Forests to administer the Forest Branch and provide centralised control and authority. That year, the Forest Branch was transferred from the Department of Agriculture to the Lands Department.¹⁰ It then bounced around multiple departments for the next twenty years, spending most of the 1890s within the Lands Department. From humble foundations—Perrin claimed to have no clerical assistance during the first six months of his appointment—he built up the Branch to a field staff of sixty-eight by his sudden

death on 24 December 1900.¹¹ It was not erected as the State Forests Department until 1 January 1908 after the passage of legislation the previous year.

Perrin's tenure as conservator and his battle with sleeper hewers occurred within a wider political and economic context. Like many of his contemporaries he shared the belief that natural resources were to be utilised—but he encountered opposition through his views on the extent to which such usage should be managed and regulated. Victoria's sawmillers and Perrin both held the objective of turning mixed forests into stands of uniform timber suitable for milling, yet millers resisted and asserted their political influence whenever Perrin sought to control the forests or increase the financial return for the public from this state resource.¹² Furthermore, the Forest Branch's location within the Lands Department (and other departments) meant it was subordinate to expectations that forested land would be cleared to make way for agriculture and close settlement.¹³ Hence, without a sympathetic bureaucracy or minister, Perrin struggled to impose his will and had to draw on considerable wells of persistence and stubbornness to see the realisation of his objectives.

More broadly, the economic position of Victoria served to limit the force of Perrin's arguments. The long boom of the 1880s that underpinned the prosperity of 'Marvellous Melbourne' came to a crashing halt in 1891 and the colony plunged into depression. With thousands of men out of work, hewing offered valuable employment. It also afforded many timber getters the freedom of tendering and working independently or in small groups for railway contracts, rather than being employed by wealthy sawmill owners. It was a lonely and itinerant lifestyle, but one that appealed to men who wished to be masters of their own destiny. Hewers often tendered for contracts to supply the railways with 200 to 500 sleepers—though some were employed by local contractors who tendered for larger figures.¹⁴ Despite the Railways' preference for hewn sleepers, the solitary nature of the profession meant hewers lacked political influence. Wealthy sawmillers enjoyed much greater access to government ministers—indeed, some politicians possessed financial interests in sawmills—and could exercise clout and influence within parliament and the Lands Department.

The dispute begins

From the start of his tenure as Victoria's conservator, Perrin advocated against sleeper-hewing. This does not appear to have a precedent in his previous work as Conservator of Forests in Tasmania, a position he held from 1886 until 1888. There, his leading concern with regards to timber for sleepers was to cultivate plantations of trees especially suited to the purpose—he does not appear to have engaged in any struggle with forest workers over methods of sleeper cutting. Perrin's primary difficulty in Tasmania was countering demands for unrestricted access to timber from the powerful mining industry.¹⁵ He found the colony's existing approach to forest resources to be chaotic, so questions of sleeper cutting techniques were subsumed by his attempts to implement a basic system of management.¹⁶ Perrin was, however, trained in South Australia—the first Australian colony in which he resided after emigrating from England in his twenties—before taking up his appointments in Tasmania and Victoria, and in that colony sleepers were typically sawn at mills rather than hewn in forests. This background may have coloured his views before arriving in Victoria, where sleeper hewing was widespread. Perrin was also a man who could not be easily dissuaded when acting on a conviction. He has been described as a 'hard task-master' and a man 'given to testy outbursts'.¹⁷ His sustained conflict with hewers reflects both his tenacity and an autocratic tendency to make decisions without consulting or even properly foreshadowing his intentions to interested parties.

Initially upon arrival Perrin was most concerned with the wastage of timber created by widespread ringbarking but he also condemned 'the axe of the destroyer' wielded by timber getters and land selectors, especially in Gippsland. He did not speak strongly against sleeper hewers in particular at this stage, but he made clear his belief that individuals hewing timber bore the majority of responsibility for the destruction of Victoria's timber, not sawmillers.¹⁸ To some extent this may have been an attempt to pacify powerful millers, as he did not cut a popular figure in timbered regions. One journalist, travelling with Perrin less than a year into his appointment, reported that in Echuca 'a good many people look ugly at Mr. Perrin' since those involved in felling the red gum forests along the

Murray River 'imagine that he seeks to destroy their craft' through his policies for forest management.¹⁹ Perrin encountered strong opposition in his attempts to regulate forestry and in viewing sawmilling as preferable to hewing. In Gippsland, 170 petitioners contended that hewing was no more wasteful than sawmilling and urged against any policy that would make sleeper production the sole domain of sawmillers, and a correspondent in Cuninghame, near Lakes Entrance in East Gippsland, described sawmills as 'a curse to the district'.²⁰

The most direct early articulation of Perrin's disdain for sleeper hewing is contained in his report for the year ending 30 June 1890. Perrin urged that 'sleeper hewer[s] should be excluded from the forests ... when a sleeper hewer gets into a forest he selects all the young timber and leaves the rest, and, as a necessary consequence, very often drives out the saw-miller'. With limited equipment and a licence costing five shillings, Perrin argued that hewers could drive sawmillers out of business by entering forests near to mills and taking all the best timber.²¹ In the first months of 1890 he directed his foresters in Gippsland to crack down on that region's sleeper hewers, who in his view were causing 'dire havoc' and 'terrible destruction'. The officers enforced forest regulations rigidly, confiscated timber cut illegally, and refused to issue fresh licences to culprits.²²

Hewers resist Perrin's decisions

These remarks and actions set a pattern that gained potency during the mid-1890s. Perrin sustained the language of hewers causing 'havoc' and frequently articulated his belief that hewers were wasteful and felled young trees that were protected by regulations. He accused the Railways Department, by accepting hewn sleepers in its contracts, of 'play[ing] sad havoc with our forests' and urged this acceptance be discontinued.²³ A change in railway policy was not forthcoming, so from 1894 Perrin actively sought to close large parts of state forests to hewers, often with limited notice to those affected. What he wished to do was to close some forests entirely and to leave only special sections open in others for hewing, thereby confining hewers to a more manageable area. In May 1894, for example, he banned hewing for any purpose other than railway sleepers in districts such as Heathcote and Rushworth, and sleepers could be hewn only under a special permit. This decision came as a surprise to local timber getters and the immediate consequence was that a number of men lost employment at a time of job scarcity.²⁴ A reprieve in June meant that all contracts up to 21 May were honoured and hewers would have three months to complete them, but this delayed the issue. In August, Perrin instructed that hewing in state forests and timber reserves must cease from the 21st of that month, and this time gave no exemption for railway sleepers. Furious hewers contended that there were large quantities of timber only suitable for hewing and that hundreds more men—both hewers and the sleeper carters who depended upon them—would be thrown out of work.²⁵

The hewers earned another reprieve when the Minister of Lands, Robert Best, overruled the cessation order, but Perrin was permitted to give the Heathcote district hewers six months' notice to discontinue hewing. This simply deferred the controversy again and illuminates the general pattern of behaviour: Perrin would set a deadline, stern opposition by hewers would achieve a partial back down to postpone the matter for some months, then the new deadline would be reached and the cycle repeated. Hewers in Heathcote continued to take contracts to supply the Railways Department with sleepers and telegraph poles during the deferral period, as if the plan for discontinuation would lapse or be forgotten. When Perrin instructed William Code, the local forester, to close all state forests in the district in February 1895 there was predictable and immediate disapproval.²⁶ The Minister of Lands was petitioned. A deputation waited on the Secretary of Lands; they protested that a prohibition on hewing would leave 300 hewers and carters unemployed and emphasised the Railways' preference for hewn rather than sawn sleepers. The Victorian Sawmillers' Association made counter-representations, with a representative of Wandong Sawmills condemning hewers for 'enormous' waste and damage. The millers' somewhat rosy view was that men put out of work by a prohibition on hewing would find employment in the mills.²⁷ Best sympathised with the millers, especially their upbeat talk of developing an export trade in timber, but the hewers found some relief. Perrin reversed his instructions insofar as he permitted the continuation of hewing until existing railway contracts were completed.²⁸

Confrontations during 1895 and 1896 reprised the arguments and themes of 1894; allegations of waste by Perrin, supported by millers, were met with opposing arguments from hewers through which fears of unemployment permeated. Hewers and their allies perceived Perrin, the Lands Department, and certain politicians as being in the pocket of the sawmilling interest—a perception more true for politicians than for Perrin. The depressed economic climate exacerbated the situation; a prohibition on hewing ‘would mean starvation almost at the present time’ in the view of William Webb, one of the Legislative Assembly representatives of the electorate of Rodney that covered Heathcote and other forested districts in northern Victoria. The other member for Rodney, Andrew White, also joined the hewers in their stand. He suggested that if there was excessive waste in the forest, that meant the existing regulations ought to be reformed rather than laying down a blanket prohibition on hewing.²⁹

Perrin had, in fact, been working to reform the regulations. Victoria’s forest regulations in general were notoriously lax compared to those in New South Wales, which led to particularly rampant cutting in forests on the Victorian side of the Murray River border such as the Barmah Forest. Perrin oversaw the introduction of royalties on sawmill output from 1892.³⁰ As his attempts to lock forests to hewers had drawn such vociferous opposition and led to protracted sagas such as those outlined above, he turned again to royalties. In late 1896, the nominal licence fee for hewers—which in Perrin’s view meant hewers ‘roamed about our forests ... and virtually did as he liked’—was replaced with a royalty of three pence per sleeper, cut to strict conditions outlined by a permit that each hewer had to obtain by deposit. Hewers could only cut trees marked or branded by the local forest officer, and no sleeper could be removed from the forest until the royalty was paid and the officer applied a Crown brand.³¹ These regulations, which were somewhat grudgingly accepted by hewing communities, provided for significantly closer monitoring of hewing and ought to have defused much of the conflict. Further actions meant this was not the case.

Peak controversy

Hewers, their communities, and the Railways Department were galvanised in opposition to the Forest Branch when Perrin without warning proposed in November 1897 to close during summer those areas of state forests in which hewing was permitted. This meant that no hewing could take place between 15 December and 15 March. Sleeper contracts with the Railways Department specified that sleepers had to be delivered within a certain period of time, so as well as throwing the hewers and carters out of employment over summer, the order would also make it difficult or even impossible for these contracts to be fulfilled.³² The animosity that had been assuaged by the previous year’s regulations came back to the surface. Protests were loud and vociferous, and on 9 December 1897, Best as Minister of Lands acted on the recommendation of the Royal Commission on Forests to suspend Perrin’s order so that the Commission could report on the necessity of closure.

Perrin’s previous critiques of hewing fixated on it as a wasteful form of timber getting in general, but to justify the summer prohibition he now linked hewing with the spectre of bushfires, with which he was increasingly concerned. This was not itself a new critique—wastage left by woodcutters was blamed for spreading bushfires in 1865 by the report that recommended establishing state forests—but it was the first time Perrin made the argument forcefully.³³ In an interview with the *Argus* he articulated his view that hewers caused fires or encouraged their spread. He alleged that hewers were consistently ‘leaving strips or sheets of bark lying about, [as well as] numerous dried chips and branches (with their dead leaves) ... The debris and bracken which are to be found in bush country thickly strewn about the ground are an important factor in spreading a fire’.³⁴ Hewers and their supporters were flabbergasted. Particularly vocal was the *Bairnsdale Advocate*, which could not find ‘the faintest suspicion, if they [forests] are fired, accidentally or wilfully, that the men engaged in working in them are in any way the offenders’.³⁵ Hewers thus positioned themselves not as destroyers of trees—despite the obvious destruction involved in their profession—but as guardians of the forests and dependent on it for their employment, more closely concerned with its welfare than Perrin or any other group. ‘There are always people in the bush, sleeper hewing or no sleeper hewing’, the

Advertiser contended, 'who, as a rule, have very much less interest in protecting the timber than the men to whom it offers a means of a livelihood.'³⁶

Hewers were permitted to continue working through the summer of 1897–98 while the Royal Commission undertook its investigations before reporting to parliament in October 1898. Its findings were an embarrassing loss for Perrin. The Commissioners could find no evidence that hewers were responsible for fires and recommended strongly against any seasonal closure of state forests to hewing. Their report in fact recommended that the current 2,968,680 acres of Crown land open to hewing were inadequate, and urged further areas be opened to meet the large demand for sleepers. It also called for the cost of the deposit paid by hewers to be reduced. Conservation, even for long-term utilisation, was very much secondary to meeting the large immediate demands of railway development. However, a couple of findings were more favourable to Perrin. The Commissioners agreed that unrestricted hewing would lead to wastage of useful timber, citing experience in New South Wales and New Zealand. Hence the report encouraged consideration of less wasteful sleeper options, such as half-round hewn sleepers for light lines—a very modest attempt to link conservation and development—and more broadly urged the Railways Department and state foresters to cooperate with each other. The Railways were particularly anxious about the price of sleepers, which had been rising steadily—especially, but predictably, after Perrin introduced the royalty system. Perrin turned this accusation back on the Railways, blaming their hunger for sleepers as running ahead of supply and driving up prices. The Commission hoped to broker increased understanding between the two parties. Astonishingly, the Railways had not previously provided the Forest Branch with advance estimates of timber that would be required for maintenance.³⁷

In the wake of the Commission's report, greater areas of state forests were opened to hewing, such as in Barmah and Gunbower, and the deposit paid by hewers was reduced. This acceded to some demands, but Perrin and the Forest Branch remained the subject of considerable suspicion—some hewing advocates even demanded, unsuccessfully, inquiries into why such large tracts of forest had been closed in the first place.³⁸ The new measures brought some relief to the Railways by facilitating an increased supply of sleepers. This was essential to meet maintenance demands, which had been rising sharply as Victoria's network began to age, and to facilitate further expansion as the colony emerged from the depths of depression and could invest in new lines. In 1898, the Department used almost 240,000 sleepers for maintenance, more than triple its demand of only five years previously (which, at the time, was already a record). New construction was prone to greater fluctuations, but also required tens or hundreds of thousands of sleepers every year. A shortage had caused at least some construction projects to be delayed, and there were fears that sleepers would need to be imported from other colonies.³⁹ Had Perrin not been overruled by the Commission, the Railways would have faced even greater delays from sleeper supply lagging far behind demand or been forced to import sleepers. Neither option was welcome; railway expansion was the catchcry of the day, touted by enthusiastic local advocates to provide employment and open new regions to close settlement, while the depressed financial conditions of the time required economies in expenditure. Hence, whatever the force of Perrin's argument, the findings against him were welcomed by those who viewed railways as integral to Victoria's economic revival.

This did not mean the controversy was over. Perrin dragged his feet opening forests to hewers. In East Gippsland, for example, only the Wy Yung forest north of Bairnsdale was open for hewing in early 1899. Perrin contended that it was not cut out of sleeper trees, and he refused to open another forest—Colquhoun, east of Bairnsdale—to hewers on the basis of his personal opposition to their practice and the waste that had occurred in Colquhoun during the early 1890s before it had been closed. The years of clashes between conservator and hewers motivated the use of particularly forceful language. An angry local contractor, A.C. Brabet, was 'wholly at a loss' to understand the 'mere caprice' of Perrin in keeping closed to hewing those parts of Colquhoun abandoned by sawmillers. The *Bairnsdale Advertiser* denounced Perrin as 'dogmatically stubborn' and a 'veritable autocrat ... under the impression that the Crown forests have been specially designed by nature to provide him with a snug billet'. Brabet travelled to Melbourne in February 1899 to secure the support of the Railways Department and to meet with Perrin. He reached an agreement from Perrin to open

eighteen thousand acres of Colquhoun to hewers—though only fifty men at a time. Perrin then delayed on conveying instructions to open the forest, leaving the *Advertiser* to lament that hewers were ‘still hanging about town awaiting the pleasure of Victoria’s forest king’. It was only after further agitation that the hewers secured unrestricted access in March.⁴⁰

After Perrin

The controversy came to an abrupt end in late December 1900 with the sudden death of Perrin at age 54. His final year was much less disputatious compared to the decade beforehand. He opened sections of forests to hewing in small stages, aiming to open new areas only after those already available had been cut out—in the process sometimes over-ruling local foresters such as Code in Heathcote who wanted to open larger areas. Nonetheless, in Perrin’s annual report for 1899, the last he authored before his death, he maintained that forest closures would be necessary in the near future—but now eschewed his old bushfire and waste arguments, the former of which was left discredited by the Commission’s report, in favour of highlighting that some districts were nearly exhausted of first class timber.⁴¹ This played into a wider discussion about what timbers were suitable for railway sleepers, rather than raising questions about the practice of hewing itself.

Perrin’s successors took a more conciliatory approach with hewers. They, of course, enjoyed the institutional groundwork prepared by Perrin during his twelve year tenure and benefitted from the conservation directions provided by the Commission’s recommendations. Samuel Williamson Wallace in 1903 was enthusiastic about the potential for the Forest Branch to earn greater revenue from royalties charged to sleeper hewers.⁴² These were not raised to the level Wallace envisaged, and the costs of supervision by forest rangers—to mark trees for hewing and protect those intended for milling—meant the financial gains for the Crown were limited. Nonetheless, when Augustus Warren Crooke as acting conservator wrote the Forest Branch’s report for 1905, he spoke of how hewing, ‘once looked upon as a scourge’, ‘has proved, under proper regulations and strict supervision, to be a blessing to the forests’. Crooke’s idea of a ‘blessing’ was framed very much in terms of utility rather than preservation: the programme of supervised hewing allowed for the use of trees that were ‘unsuited to any other purpose’.⁴³ Crooke’s successor, Hugh Mackay, did not share the ‘blessing’ view but recognised hewing as valuable for a quite different reason: as a stable job. 380,000 sleepers were procured from state forests in the 1912–13 financial year, representing roughly 13.5 million superficial feet of durable hardwoods. ‘[T]he work of procuring them’, wrote Mackay, ‘gave regular employment to a large body of men’.⁴⁴

As Mackay’s tenure progressed he became more critical of indiscriminate and wasteful hewing, seeking regulations that would require sleeper hewers to work short lengths and off-cuts into fence posts, house stumps, pickets, and other items.⁴⁵ However, none of Perrin’s successors attacked hewing with the almost religious fervour that activated Perrin’s campaign of the 1890s. They recognised its value, both in terms of providing employment and providing sturdy, straight-grained sleepers, and to at least some extent believed it could be beneficial to forest management under appropriate guidelines and supervision. At any rate, the Railways Department enjoyed much greater political clout than the Forest Branch/Department, so there was not cause to hope it would shift its policies to favour sawn over hewn sleepers.

Conclusion

Perrin was always fighting an uphill battle to restrict hewing, even if he could count on self-interested support from sawmillers. His interest in limiting waste within state forests did not mesh well with the colonial goal of development through railways. Colonial development and forest conservation were uncomfortable bedfellows, but they were not inherently mutually exclusive. The logic of forest preservation in the late nineteenth century emphasised the management and active use of timber resources; hewers, the Railways, and Perrin all wanted there to be trees available in decades to come for sleepers. The pressures of railway expansion and widespread joblessness, however, prioritised immediate usage over long-term considerations, and Perrin made co-operation unlikely through his

own actions. Abrupt changes in policy made without consultation did not endear him to local communities and ensured widespread opposition, especially when his decisions robbed men of work at a time of high unemployment. After finally framing new regulations in 1896 that were accepted despite implementing a much stricter regime, Perrin squandered the opportunity for peace through another unilateral move—the proposed closure of forests during summer months. This announcement was made all the more unpopular through his accusations of hewers causing bushfires and precipitated a Royal Commission report that found against Perrin’s policies. His successors, unsurprisingly, pursued more flexible policies that recognised the contribution of hewers to Victoria’s policy of railway expansion and sought to regulate rather than prohibit the profession. Hewers did have much waste to answer for, and the failure of the Railways Department to work with foresters was unaccountable, but Perrin’s unwillingness to accommodate hewing created a decade of unnecessary rancour and conflict.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Charles Fahey for comments on the text, Robert Onfray for information on Perrin’s time in Tasmania, Angus Ferguson for helpful discussions when this research was in its early stages, and Susan Reidy for her useful suggestions.

Notes

¹ ‘Report of Proceedings Taken Under the Provisions of the Land Acts and the Wattles Act 1890 During the Year Ending 31st December, 1896’, Appendix C: Forest Branch, *Victorian Parliamentary Papers (VPP)* 1897 no. 14, 21.

² Ibid.

³ *Melvor Times*, 10 June 1896, 2.

⁴ N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 324.

⁵ Kevin J. Frawley, Logging Technology and Forest Cutting Practices, in *Australia’s Ever-Changing Forests II*, eds John Dargavel and Sue Feary, Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, 1993), 148.

⁶ Figures for 1881–1901 are from Report of the Victorian Railways Commissioners, *VPP* 1901 no. 41, 14. Figures for 1902 onwards are sourced from the Commissioners’ reports in the *VPP* for the relevant year.

⁷ Frawley, Logging Technology, 148.

⁸ *Argus*, 2 March 1900, 4; *Melvor Times*, 15 March 1900, 2; *Melvor Times*, 13 December 1900, 2.

⁹ R. Wright, *The Bureaucrats’ Domain: Space and the Public Interest in Victoria, 1836–84* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 109–14, 154–5; Report on the Advisableness of Establishing State Forests, *VPP* 1864–65 no. 77.

¹⁰ Report of Proceedings Taken Under the Provisions of the Land Act 1884 and the Mallee Pastoral Leases Act 1883, During the Year Ending 31st December, 1888, *VPP* 1889 no. 85, 12.

¹¹ Report of the Conservator of Forests for the Year Ending 30th June 1890, *VPP* 1890 no. 202, 3.

¹² Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000:, 184–5.

¹³ Francis Robert Moulds, *The Dynamic Forest: A History of Forestry and Forest Industries in Victoria* (Richmond, VIC: Lynedoch Publications, 1991), 26.

¹⁴ See, for example, the list of contracts for 1898–1900 held in the Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 3840, unit 1.

¹⁵ *Tasmanian News*, 22 October 1887, 2; Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, 183. A search of Hobart’s *Mercury* for the period of Perrin’s tenure brings up little more than incidental news about his actions and reports, and makes no note of any controversy regarding sleepers.

¹⁶ ‘Woods and Forests of Tasmania: Report of the Conservator of Forests, 1886–7’, *Journals and Printed Papers of the Parliament of Tasmania* 1887 no. 59.

¹⁷ Angela Taylor, *A Forester’s Log: The Story of John La Gerche and the Ballarat-Creswick State Forest 1882–1897* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 117.

-
- ¹⁸ *Argus*, 30 January 1889, 4.
- ¹⁹ *Argus*, 26 January 1889, 13.
- ²⁰ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 24 August 1889, 2; *Traralgon Record*, 10 September 1889, 2.
- ²¹ Report of the Conservator of Forests for the Year Ending 30th June 1890, *VPP* 1890 no. 202, 17.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²³ Report of Proceedings Taken Under the Provisions of the Land Acts and the Wattles Act 1890 During the Year Ending 31st December, 1893, Appendix C: Report—Forests and Plantations, *VPP* 1894 no. 18, 17.
- ²⁴ *Mclvor Times*, 10 May 1894, 2; 17 May 1894, 2.
- ²⁵ *Mclvor Times*, 7 June 1894, 3; 3 August 1894, 2.
- ²⁶ *Argus*, 12 February 1895, 2.
- ²⁷ *Argus*, 7 March 1895, 6.
- ²⁸ *Mclvor Times*, 22 February 1895, 2.
- ²⁹ *Age*, 9 January 1893, 3; *Mclvor Times*, 20 July 1894, 2; *Mclvor Times*, 31 May 1895, 3.
- ³⁰ Charles Fahey, *Barmah Forest: ...One of the Greatest Public Estates in the Colony*, Melbourne: Department of Conservation, Forests, and Lands, 1987:, 42.
- ³¹ Report of Proceedings, *VPP* 1897 no. 14, 21; *North East Ensign*, 4 December 1896, 3.
- ³² *Maffra Spectator*, 22 November 1897, 3.
- ³³ Establishing State Forests, *VPP* 1864–65 no. 77, 3.
- ³⁴ *Argus*, 6 January 1898, 7.
- ³⁵ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 11 December 1897, 2.
- ³⁶ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 16 December 1897, 2–3.
- ³⁷ Progress Report of the Royal Commission on State Forests and Timber Reserves on the Question of Sleeper-Hewing in Forest Reserves and on Crown Lands, *VPP* 1898 no. 52; *Argus*, 13 October 1898, 5.
- ³⁸ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 5 November 1898, 2; *Australasian*, 26 November 1898, 11.
- ³⁹ *Mildura Cultivator*, 26 November 1898, 4; *Australasian*, 21 January 1899, 37; sleeper figures calculated from annual reports in the *VPP*.
- ⁴⁰ *Maffra Spectator*, 9 February 1899, 3; *Maffra Spectator*, 13 February 1899, 2; *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 23 February 1899, 2; *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 18 March 1899, 2.
- ⁴¹ *Mclvor Times*, 13 December 1900, 2; Report of Proceedings Taken Under the Provisions of the Land Acts and the Wattles Act 1890 During the Year Ending 31st December, 1899, Appendix C: Forest Branch, *VPP* 1900 no. 11, 23.
- ⁴² *Bendigo Advertiser*, 31 August 1903: 5.
- ⁴³ Annual Report of the Secretary for Mines and Water Supply ... for the Year 1905, *VPP* 1906 no. 22, 64.
- ⁴⁴ Department of State Forests Report for the Year Ended 30th June, 1913, *VPP* 1913 no. 47, 24.
- ⁴⁵ State Forests Department Report for the Year Ended 30th June, 1915, *VPP* 1915 no. 55.