The Zealous Conservator
A Life of Charles Lane Poole

John Dargavel
In memory of

Charlotte Ruth ‘Charles’ Burston (née Lane Poole)

23 October 1913 – 14 July 2007
INTRODUCTION

Charles Edward Lane Poole commanded attention. He was a little over average height with a square face, a strong jaw and a determined eye. Old photographs show him still and serious, looking straight ahead with an energy about him. He was well-dressed, shoes polished, trousers pressed, tie straight and a hook in place of his left hand.

He is the flawed hero of this biography. He was captured by the ideals of forest conservation and its science, and he followed their dictates across the world, irrespective of personal consequences or political reality, through much of the twentieth century. He was a truly zealous Conservator of Forests, so sure in his path that he was intolerant of any other views. The heroine is his wife, Ruth. She too was determined and well-dressed with a penchant for hats. She had a short, but notable career as an interior designer in a life disrupted by Charles’ career.

The story follows Charles’ life from his birth in England in 1885 to Ireland, France, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Western Australia, Papua New Guinea, Canberra and Sydney, where he died in 1970. Charles and Ruth were well-connected people. He came from an eminent English academic family and had an imperialist and Tory outlook. She came from the notable artistic Yeats family in Ireland. The story sees their lives in the changing context of their times: from the full flowering of the British Empire to its demise, the Anglo-Boer War, both World Wars, the Irish rebellion, and
the Great Depression. Half the story is set in Australia where the context is that of English–Australian culture and class, federal–state relations, national science, conservation, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the creation of the national capital.

Charles advanced the frontier of forest conservation with knowledge and enormous energy. Yet conservation was a complex, contentious matter, no less so in his time than today, because it challenged vested interests, called for change, made moral claims, and was as intensely political as much as it was material and scientific. In this biography, I have cast Charles as a hero struggling with these difficulties. How he did so and how his character set his triumphs and his debacles is the theme that runs through the story.

Charles Lane Poole commanded my attention. I share his background as an Englishman and a forester, but not his political outlook. Although my forestry training came fifty years after his, some sense of the imperial forestry ethos that imbued him was conveyed by some of my lecturers at Edinburgh University in the 1950s. We were both trained in the same classic principles of European forestry, and we saw their application in the great oak-beech forest of Tronçais in central France. Many lessons there impressed: the permanent marking or ‘demarcation’ of the forest boundary, the geometric layout of roads with scenic vistas, the care of generations of foresters, and the time it takes to repair the damage caused by short-term government decisions or wars. The stands that I was taught to mark there for their first thinning when they were sixty years old were those that Charles would have seen when they were ten-year-old thickets. Now as I write, they are 110 years old and will have to be cared for for as long again before they yield their splendid timber. The forests he knew in Australia, I know too. Thus are we connected, Charles and I, through the trees, as foresters should be.

The records and papers that Charles and Ruth left behind and my interviews with their family and a few people who knew them provide the sources for this book. From their wedding, there remains only the marriage certificate, some letters, Ruth’s sash and the order of service printed conventionally in silver on a white card. There are extensive public records from the later years when Charles became a controversial public figure and Ruth became, briefly, more widely known. Importantly, Charles’ personal papers and field notebooks, and Ruth’s designs and photographs are lodged in the National Library of Australia.
In this book, I refer to them as Charles and Ruth, in today’s friendly Australian manner, although had I met them, I would have called them Mr and Mrs Lane Poole. I refer to their daughters, Charlotte, Mary and Phyllis, by their proper names, although to their family and friends, they are confusingly ‘Charles’, Mary and ‘Cookie’, and I refer to Charles’ brothers as Francis and Richard rather than to ‘Frank’ and ‘Dick’ as he called them.

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped me with the research for this book. Mrs Phyllis Hamilton and the late Mrs Charlotte Burston, who had generously lodged their parents’ papers in the National Library, were equally generous with their time in talking to me, as were their own children. I enjoyed a commission from the National Archives of Australia to prepare the text for an entry on Charles and Ruth Lane Poole for the ‘Uncommon Lives’ feature of their website. A Visiting Fellowship in the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University provided a warm and welcoming environment in which to write.

I was particularly fortunate and am deeply grateful for the advice and help I received from: Janet Allport, Judy Bennett, Kate Bignall, Robert Boardman, Geoffrey Bolton, Mary Booth, Axelle Boulay, Roger Bourke, Gabrielle Brocklesby, Charlotte Burston, David Burston, Ruth Burston, Jane Carruthers, Lyn Craven, Robin Cromer, Philippa Currie, Ricki Dargavel, John Fox, Kevin Frawley, Martin Golman, John Gray, Tom Griffiths, Ned Hamilton, Phyllis Hamilton, Susan Hamilton, Debbie Harding, Caroline Hassing, Mathew Higgins, Clive Hilliker, Hartmut Holznecht, Laurie Jessop, Wally Johnson, Fiona Kilby, Jane Lennon, Gifford Lewis, Norm Lewis, Brenda Libbis, Marie-Jeanne Lionnet, Jenny Mills, Merilyn Minell, Carol Priestley, Libby Robin, Michael Roche, Xavier Rochel, Claire Sadler, Joanna Sassoon, Peter Savill, Corinne Sutherland, Ian Templeman, Kevin Thiele, Laurelle Tunks, Roger Underwood, Christophe Voreux, Jim Williamson and Susan Mary Withycombe.
This book starts with all the happiness and hope of a wedding. Imagine it as in a photograph. In front stood Charles, tall for the time, lean and tanned from the tropical sun, a handsome man and smartly suited. He took care how he was turned out, this day especially. And Ruth stood beside him, comely, healthy and touched by beauty on her wedding day. She was paler, as Dublin people are, and wore a cream dress with a sash she embroidered with flowers and was to keep all her life.¹ Next to her stood Hilda, her younger sister and bridesmaid, and next to Charles stood Edward Lane Poole, his cousin and best man. The chapel was plain, the service was short in the Church of Ireland and the Reverend William Blackburn soon proclaimed them man and wife.

No doubt there were tears: Lily Yeats’ surely. For a decade she was more a mother or an older sister to Ruth than her cousin and guardian. Perhaps there were for Elizabeth Yeats as they had all lived together, but she was a stormy character. Beside them was their famous brother, the poet and playwright, William Butler Yeats, rather grand in his new suit. He had
brought Ruth to the church and ‘given her away’. His brother, John, was there too no doubt, but not Ruth’s uncle John Butler Yeats who was in New York. Behind them were friends, sociable and talkative in the Irish way.

Across the aisle, sat the Lane Poole family. In front was Charles’ father, Professor Stanley Lane Poole, but his brothers, Francis and Richard, were in the navy and far away. Charles’ young sister, Rosamund, might have been there, but in that era people with disabilities were often kept out of sight and now even the nature of the disability is lost to memory. Charles’ uncle Reginald Lane Poole, Aunt Rachael and cousins Mary and Dorothy may well have come over with Edward from Oxford. Perhaps his Aunt Jet also came for she was certainly important to Charles.² They were a well-connected English family for whom showing emotion in public was not well thought of. There were fewer friends, less talk or tears.

The chapel belonged to St Columba’s College, Charles’ old school. It pleased Ruth and her cousins aesthetically, while for the Lane Pooles, William Yeats and the world at large, it bore all the values of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy: privilege, education, achievement, leadership and

Chapel of St Columba’s College, Dublin. (Courtesy: St Columba’s College)
a path to rule. It being a Protestant chapel, the dozen Catholic girls Ruth worked with could not come, but there were harsher, more painful absences. Charles’ mother, Charlotte, had died four years before and neither of Ruth’s parents was there. No one talked about it, everyone was conscious of it.

Charles and Ruth signed the register and returned full of smiles and love, his good hand with hers. Families embraced them, guests gathered round in front of the chapel, and although the Dublin Times did not report the wedding or the weather that day—it was Thursday, 20 July 1911—it could have been one of those fine, balmy summer days that sparkle the Bay. They went to their wedding reception, which was no doubt good but not extravagant. William Butler Yeats gave the whole occasion an admirable style and Charles replied, although surprisingly he was not a confident speaker.3 There were all the inherent hopes and unspoken questions of any wedding: What will their lives be? Will fortune bless them? Will they be happy and care for each other? Will they make a family? Where will they settle? Charles and Ruth came from families of high achievement and they were expected to make their mark on the world. But there were greater tensions beneath this marriage to worry their families.

Ruth Johnstone Pollexfen was born on 27 September 1885 in Limerick. Her mother, Henrietta Johnstone, had married Frederick Henry Pollexfen, son of a well-to-do shipping merchant at Sligo on Ireland’s west coast.4 Ruth was the second eldest of their nine children. The Pollexfens were already linked to the Yeatses because one of Frederick’s older sisters, Susan, had married John Butler Yeats, the painter, in 1863; hence their children—William Butler or ‘Willie’, Susan called ‘Lily’, Elizabeth called ‘Lolly’, and John Yeats called ‘Jack’—were Ruth’s older cousins. While the Yeatses lived carefully and respectably from what they could earn artistically, Frederick Pollexfen, lived a profligate, disgraceful life. The biographer, William Murphy, notes that, ‘he ran through money on yachts and horses and other more pleasurable objects and on gambling’ to the extent that his father cut him and his children, including Ruth, out of his will. When Henrietta eventually left him ‘no one held it against her’, but when Fred divorced her, everyone knew, and in 1901 divorce was as rare as it was disgraceful.5 The family break-up seared teenage Ruth and it seems that she never saw her mother or father again. She certainly denied her Johnstone middle name and did not invite her father to her wedding, a circumstance that provoked angry letters to Lily and vituperative telegrams to Ruth on the day.6
After the divorce, Lily Yeats took fifteen year-old Ruth as her ward and brought her to the London home of John and Susan Yeats. It was a haven for Ruth. She was cared for, she was the centre of attention, and above all she was loved and could love. She and Lily, 35 at the time and unmarried, developed a bond with all the closeness of a daughter and a mother that lasted all their lives. The busy household plunged Ruth into a world of art, design, colour and ideas. Her Uncle John’s sparkling personality brought other painters and Irish visitors to the house. Cousin John ‘Jack’ Butler Yeats too was a painter, while Lily worked in the William Morris embroidery workshop and Lolly in its printery. The Morris workshop espoused elegant design, insisted on hand craftsmanship and restored medieval techniques, such as embroidery, where it could. It was a set of ideas that became known as the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Ireland called the Yeats home. In 1902 Lily, Lolly, Jack and Ruth returned and set up home at Dundrum, about eight kilometres from the centre of Dublin, in a house they named ‘Gurteen Dhas’. There was new spirit about as theatre, poetry, literature, painting and all forms of the arts flourished as never before, in what is now called the Celtic Revival. William Butler Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and Æ (George Russell) were its leading figures, and the Abbey Theatre, started in 1904, was the often-tumultuous venue for its new plays. The revival was assertively Irish. One strand revived the Gaelic language; another sought the Irish essence in its ancient, mystic past but wrote in English, as Yeats, Synge and Joyce did. Lily and Lolly Yeats brought all their skills and ideas to join Evelyn Gleeson in a new arts and craft workshop, Dun Enmer. It aimed to supply high-quality Irish products to Irish people, and support the nationalist interest with evening classes in the Irish language, painting and design. In 1908 Lily and Lolly separated from Gleeson and set up their own workshop, Cuala Industries, with an embroidery room run by Lily and a printery run by Lolly. In the Morris tradition, they taught a new generation of craft workers, and in liberal and suffragist spirit hired local girls.

Ruth’s uncle George Pollexfen was eventually shamed into paying something towards her education, which she completed at Alexandra College in Dublin, gaining a scholarship for Botany. Her artistic training was at home. Uncle John taught her art appreciation, Lolly taught her lettering and watercolour painting, Lily taught her embroidery, and she had a ‘terrific sense of colour’ naturally. She joined Cuala as a part of Lily’s embroidery
team, and doubtless hand-coloured cards and did other jobs as Lolly or
the small business needed. It was no sinecure as Cuala was continually
struggling to pay its way and Ruth had to work hard. However, domestic
labour was cheap and they could keep two servants at Gurteen Dhas.

Ruth Pollexfen, c. 1906. (Courtesy Phyllis Hamilton)
Ruth entered the intellectual and artistic society of Dublin with her cousins at art exhibitions and the Abbey Theatre, on country excursions, and when either Lily or Lolly were ‘at home’ to visitors on Monday afternoons. Although they had little money to spare, they dressed tastefully and looked ‘so handsome and well-bred’ in public, even if they had walked there. The ‘Butler’ middle name given to male Yeatses added a sense of connection to an ancient Irish nobility. It was in this relatively small circle that Charles met Ruth in 1902 or 1903 when they were 17 or 18 years old. Neither centuries of song, nor laboratories of pheromones can help us understand the mysteries of their attraction to each other. They fell in love.

Charles’ family had misgivings about Ruth’s parental background, but the household at Gurteen Dhas was respectable, reserved and Protestant enough for Ruth to be invited to stay with the Lane Pooles, probably when holidaying in the Irish countryside. Charles and Ruth, healthy, young and energetic, strode across, and tarried too in that bright green land; Ruth knowing and loving it better, sensitive to its moods and colours; Charles determined, inquisitive, noting its differences from England and France. Their rambles together led Charles to see its beauty through Ruth’s eyes. Sometimes they went shooting. Charles had probably saved up to buy an old gun, or perhaps he borrowed one from his brothers; whatever its provenance, it led to disaster when he was about nineteen years of age. The circumstances of the accident are unknown, although it is likely that its barrel exploded causing him terrible injuries to his left hand and arm. His left hand was subsequently amputated above the wrist and when it healed, his arm was fitted with the prosthesis of the time, a shiny steel hook. Charles was determined to overcome the disability, and he learnt to ride, swim and even shoot again. Ruth stayed unwavering in her love for Charles as she did for Lily; as she did in rejecting her parents. Ruth’s cousins too had misgivings at the wedding. Charles was intelligent, energetic and devoted to Ruth, but he was quick to anger and impulsive, and he worked abroad. They worried about the sort of a life it would be for Ruth if they could not always live together. They knew she loved him, but to be a new wife left with no husband, to be almost abandoned again, seemed so perilous for her. No wonder that Lily had tears to wipe away.

Charles Edward Lane Poole was born in the Sussex village of Easebourne on 16 August 1885, just six weeks before Ruth was born in Limerick, but unlike her, he had a comfortably-off family and a privileged upbringing. Writing to Ruth from the tropical heat of Port Moresby in 1922, he recalled nostalgically.
the domestic scenes of his mother reading to the children around the fire, teasing his brother Richard, and the characteristics of the household servants:

There was a gamekeeper called Richard Marchant who married Mary, Mother’s maid, at Berling Gap where Rosamund was born. Richard wore a moleskin waistcoat and I don’t think I envied anyone his waistcoat as much as I did R.M. I must have been 4 years old then.15

Or writing to her in 1925 from Madang, he remembered, when he was about nine years old, spending a family holiday at Robin Hood’s Bay in Yorkshire in a:

a queer little hotel, whose bow windows dropped down to the sea waves, with Aunt Jet, Father and Mother all shaking their heads over Horace [who had been] sent to Australia by Grandma who wouldn’t hear of him taking up law—ungentlemanly.16

Academic life was, however, acceptable enough to Grandma Wilson when her daughter married Stanley from the noted Lane and Poole families. Stanley’s father, Edward Stanley Poole, had been an Arabic expert in the British Museum and his uncle, Reginald Stuart Poole, had been its curator of Greek and Egyptian coins before becoming Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge University.17 Stanley took to the family tradition of wide-ranging scholarship with prodigious energy. He continued his uncle’s work on coins in the British Museum, extended it to the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Khedival Library in Egypt. He wrote a series of books on Middle-Eastern and Arabic history as well as biographies, and edited several others.18 His brother, Reginald Lane Poole, was a historian of medieval Europe who became Keeper of the Archives at Oxford University.19

Charles’ two older brothers, Francis and Richard, were born in 1881 and 1883 and his sister Rosamund in 1889.20 Although the family lived pleasantly by the Thames at Richmond while Stanley was at the British Museum and Francis was born, it lived at several places elsewhere, probably while Stanley spent periods in Cairo. The boys must have been sent to several schools, probably as boarders to a British ‘public’ (i.e. private) school when they were older and Charlotte could enjoy life in Cairo with Stanley. Charles spent some of his holidays happily in Oxford with his uncle Reginald’s family,
and is highly likely to have joined his parents, in Cairo or by the sea at Alexandria, for some of his long summer holidays. Directly, or indirectly, it gave him a taste of Empire, for although it had a cosmopolitan atmosphere, it was the British who ran the place. Languages were important in the family and Charles received part of his education in France, giving him a fluency in French that stood him in good stead later.

Charles’ happy enough childhood in England ended abruptly. First Francis, then Richard left home when they were 14 or 15 to become cadets in Dartmouth Naval College. Francis was to be a Captain in the Royal Marines Artillery and die at Gallipoli, while Richard was to be a knighted Vice-Admiral, reunited with Charles on the far side of the world. The remaining family moved to Dublin when Charles’ father returned from Egypt in 1898 to ‘take up the chair’ as Professor of Arabic, Persian and Hindustani at Trinity College. Charles was 16 when he was sent to St Columba’s College to finish his schooling, but as the new boy he seemed to make no lasting friends there. At home, his sister’s disabilities were not lessening and his mother was becoming increasingly ill. Although Charles and Ruth came to Dublin at the same time, they saw it with very different eyes. For Charles there was a comfortable home and the centre of Dublin had the well-kept environs of Trinity College, the Castle, the Four Courts, and some of the better squares, but beyond them was a different world. The prosperous, elegant eighteenth-century city was in disrepair, poor and dirty, its terrace houses overcrowded, its streets filled with beggars, urchins and people he couldn’t stand or understand. It was the world of McCourt and Joyce, and it was always drizzling. For Ruth, Ireland was home, although Sligo and the West Coast were more fondly remembered than Dublin, as they were for her Yeats cousins. Hers was a comfortable enough home with her cousins in the peaceable outskirts, but as she walked to town, nothing seemed strange and no voices jarred even if hers had little of the Irish in it.

The whole world was open to Charles when he left school. It was part of his family’s outlook, the British Empire was triumphant, its navy commanded the seas and carried his brothers. In Egypt, his family had been part of the class that ruled the place. Here in Dublin, British power in the Castle was very evident and even his father’s appointment was linked to Empire. Trinity College needed him to teach oriental languages to its almost exclusively Protestant Irish students so that they would be eligible for plum positions in the Colonial or Indian services. But Charles had
a different cast of mind from his father and grandfather, and from the artistic Yeats family. His was directed to science and the material world of the present, nowhere more triumphant at the time than in engineering. He started to study it in Dublin and probably completed more than a year of the course before it was interrupted by his terrible accident.

For some unknown reason he turned his ambitions from engineering to forestry. Rather than wait for the forestry course about to be started in Oxford University, he applied for one of the two cadetships advertised by the Colonial Office to study in France and work in South Africa. With impeccable family connections, some undergraduate training already and fluency in French, he was accepted to be sent to the French National Forestry School, L'École Nationale des Eaux et Forêts at Nancy in Lorraine, near the German border. His application to the school was accepted in April 1904 and he left Ireland for Nancy early in October. Imagine Ruth going to the quay at Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire) to wave him goodbye as Charles left on the Holyhead steamer.

Charles enrolled in the Forestry School on 16 October for the courses in forestry, natural sciences, law and mathematics. A few days later, Hugh Ryan, the other English cadet, arrived. Their previous university studies enabled them to be excused the preparatory year of basic sciences. Charles passed his first year at Nancy and continued for the second year as one of four foreign students who were not lodged in the School. His results seem to have been mostly middle of the range, which is creditable given that he was studying in a foreign language, and that his previous engineering studies had not given him any background in biology. The course at Nancy included advanced surveying and taking astronomical observations to determine latitude and longitude, a study that suited Charles and was to prove very useful to him, if to few others of his fellow students. Practical studies in forests that had been managed systematically for many years impressed him deeply. He saw how the ideals of science were applied to restore them after years of uncontrolled felling and then to manage them for the future. He learnt that it was all based on a careful assessment of the forest by measuring the trees, not only to find out how much timber was there, but also on repeated measurements to determine how fast they grew. In his silviculture lessons he learnt how the different sorts of trees grow together, how to regenerate a forest after felling and how to establish a plantation. All these subjects came together when he studied the way in which forests could be planned to sustain their
yield of timber forever. The French course was also about how to manage steep catchments, guard them against erosion and prevent downstream flooding, important matters in the French Alps. In the forestry he learnt at Nancy, he found something that engaged him mind, heart and soul for the remainder of his life.

The two years that Charles spent at Nancy not only earned him his diploma, but imbued him with French values and attitudes to forestry that he carried through his professional life. This went well beyond forestry as he also came to love France, its wine and its language. The French Forest Service was exemplary for Charles. To be a commissioned forest officer, trained at Nancy, was accepted as being a prestigious occupation for upper-class men, quite gentlemanly enough for Grandma. It was hierarchical and uniformed; its officers had legal powers; and in war it mobilised as an army unit. It had a long tradition, it was firmly entrenched in French polity and culture, it exerted a strong national direction over regional and commercial interests, its plans were rigidly enforced, and its results in forests like Tronçais were magnificent. It also protected and restored the forests in the mountain catchments to avert the risks of avalanches, erosion and floods. At

Class of 1906, L’École Nationale des Eaux et Forêts, Nancy. Centre, not in uniform, Hugh Ryan (left) and Charles Lane Poole (right). (National Library of Australia, MS 3799/3/42)
Nancy it was establishing an arboretum, l'Arboretum d'Amance, not only to teach students like Charles, but also to test species from other countries for possible use in French plantations. And in an example famous around the world, the Les Landes region of south-west France had been transformed into a prosperous, healthy region by stabilising the coastal dunes, draining the swamps, and planting pines.27

Charles returned from Nancy in 1906 imbued with the ideal that science energetically applied, with policies rigorously enforced in a national forest organisation led by thoroughly trained and reputable men, could correct the follies of the past. He was full of energy and enthusiasm for forestry. He stopped in London to report to the Woods and Forests Branch of the Colonial Office, and eagerly asked when he would have to sail for South Africa. He was allowed time to go home to get his kit together before he sailed. As the Irish Mail Steamer pushed through the Irish Sea, he must have felt excited at the thought of seeing Ruth and telling her of his posting. It was an age of letter-writing and doubtless they wrote to each other during those two long years, but, although Dublin’s archives reveal the Yeatses as prolific correspondents, few of their letters remain and none from that time.

Ruth looked for him eagerly, but a little nervously, as the Holyhead steamer drew in. They met. But Charles returned to the sad house at Duncanstown outside Dublin that was now without his mother. She had died while he was in France. He found his father was drinking too much, though still continuing to write, as academics do regardless.28 Many years later, he reflected:

The trouble is that one forgets so much or rather one’s memory records the pleasant things and not the horrors...You [Ruth] know how easy I put the A.P. [his father] and Rosamund at the back of my mind.29

But in 1906, Charles was just twenty-one and perhaps felt that such family problems were properly Francis’ responsibility, though in truth it is doubtful that Charles would ever have dealt with them well. For Ruth, these were precious days and we can imagine them spending every moment together before he must sail for South Africa. Yet he had to go and the pattern of their story would repeat itself like a film clip: the dock, the luggage, the steamer. He sailed, she waved and at last turned away. It was to be five years before their wedding and much would happen in that time.