

Stopping by Woods – a travel guide and history of Irish forestry

Donal Magner. Lilliput Press, Ireland, 2010.

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The author of *Stopping by Woods* will be known for his weekly column on forestry matters in the *Irish Farmers Journal*. Indeed, several of the forests included in the book were first featured in the Journal in 2004 in the series ‘A Woodland near You’ which marked the centenary of modern Irish forestry.

Shortly afterwards, he began compiling an account of forests and woodlands open to the public in Ireland. He has crisscrossed the country “seeking out woodlands with a story” in what must have been a fascinating journey to familiar and unfamiliar forests. The result is a book which is the first of its kind to be produced in Ireland and, as far as this reviewer is aware, the first of its kind in Europe. All the popular recreation forests are featured, but his epic journey in discovering and writing about the lesser-known woodlands makes for spellbinding reading.

He features Ireland’s native and semi-natural woodlands, the mixed native and naturalised woodlands of the old estates and the forests established since the beginning of the last century. His account of the estate woodlands provides fascinating snapshots of the evolution of Irish forestry, even for foresters who will be well-informed about this aspect of our forest history. He is particularly adept at tracing the history of these estates and how they evolved into State forests, as typified in accounts of Moore Hall, Co Mayo, Coole Park, Co Galway, Curragh Chase, Co Limerick, Tomnafinnoge, Co Wicklow and lesser-known woodlands such as Ballysaggartmore Towers, Co Waterford.

He examines the role of the State in becoming directly involved in restoring the country’s woodland resource when Irish forests had been radically diminished by centuries of exploitation and neglect. He explains why exotics have formed the main species mix and discusses with spirit about forests established at a time when forestry was known as “the land-use of last resort”. He provides numerous case studies on the silvicultural rationale behind coniferous forestry. The book illustrates the productive and beautiful resource that has been created as foresters planted the “right trees in the right places”.

In Gortin Glen in Co Tyrone, for example, he writes “there is no pretence about the silvicultural objectives” as the main aim was to “produce commercial spruce for the Irish wood-processing industry”. He goes on to say: “Some of the pre-war Sitka is still standing and regardless of one’s views about this species, it has a monumentality and presence that most species don’t acquire until centuries old.”

He delights in the diversity of Ireland’s forests such as: Brackloon, Co Galway, “an echo of a distant world” when Ireland was covered in native and natural forest; Bonny Glen, Co Donegal with its “melancholic mood” where seven families of crofters lived. They sold their land during the Great Famine for the price of passage to America before “silence settled on this strange but beautiful glen”.



*The Green Road, Glenadlough Forest, an attractive walk through ancient sessile oak woodland.
Photograph: Donal Magner*

He writes knowledgeably about species selection, including the pine forest established at Raven, Co Wexford, where species choice was influenced by the famous French forests of Landes which were planted on the sand dunes around the Bay of Biscay. He is intrigued by the beech forest of Mullaghmeen, on the Westmeath-Meath border, reputedly one of the largest beech plantations in Europe.

One would have thought that in chronicling 340 forests by county, the site descriptions would become monotonous and repetitious but he manages to avoid this and maintains a freshness in the accounts. True, Sitka spruce and other fast growing conifers crop up repeatedly, but as he points out there are 53 species featured in the National Forest Inventory. These are all included, as well a many more that reflect species selection trends – “some experimental and some eccentric.”

He emphasises that most of the sites are working forests where operations such as harvesting, planting and road making are essential to the livelihoods of the people who work the forests and the downstream industries that depend on timber. These are the forests featured in the State’s open forest policy since the 1970s and now enshrined by Coillte and the Forest Service of Northern Ireland. In these forests he explains the rationale behind the various management operations and techniques.

He is a forester first and foremost and doesn’t shirk from making the case for commercial forestry. A former technical councillor, PRO and vice-president of the Society of Irish Foresters, he is also at home in the woodlands managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and local authorities. His demonstrates his journalistic

instincts by seeking out some fragmented woodlands in private ownership and in the hands of agencies and community groups.

The author has visited and researched every forest featured in the book, often making repeated journeys to take photographs. Though he surely cannot have been blessed with beautiful weather during the years 2007-2009, some of the photography featured is extremely beautiful.

This book should have a wide appeal and readership. Foresters will browse these pages because this is above all a celebration of their work, which the author readily acknowledges. The general reader will find much of interest in *Stopping by Woods*, as too will walkers, tourists and specialist groups, while teachers and lecturers could use this publication as a learning tool in the open classroom of the forest.

He describes the evolution of Irish forestry over the past few generations as “a quiet revolution” where “forest cover has doubled within two generations, benefiting both woodland owners and the forest industry”. There are many facets to Irish forestry and commercial achievements are only part of the narrative. He writes: “Forests, however, are valued not only for their economic benefits, but for their enhancement of landscape, ecology, heritage and the soul.”

Stopping by Woods is a welcome addition to the story of Irish forestry. It is also a useful book for these recessionary times as there is no charge in over 320 centres described, with only a modest fee for cars in the forest parks. It is a handsome volume and one that gives rise to the hope that private growers – mainly farmers – and the next generation of foresters will create a new wave of forests in Ireland as successfully as the previous generation.

Pat O’Sullivan

(Pat O’Sullivan is the Technical Director of the Society of Irish Foresters.)