

Forest Perspectives

Commissioner Bailey's Foresight

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Abstract

Among the earliest voices, around 1890, to draw attention to the annihilative effects of the Land Acts on Irish woodlands, and to advocate their conservation and their extension by new plantings was that of a Land Commissioner. W.F. Bailey, traveller, *littérateur* and art connoisseur, became aware of the benefits that forestry could bring, and used his influence to publicise those benefits. He served on the 1907 Committee which led to the development of Irish state forestry.

Introduction

Specialist historians and biographers know where to go in search of the information they are looking for; in other cases information comes through sheer luck.

Re-reading Adrian Frazier's biography of George Moore (Frazier 2000) a passage prompted me to take down the little book of satirical verses, *Aids to the Immortality of Certain Persons in Ireland* by Susan Mitchell¹, the 1913 edition (bought for 2/-, i.e. two shillings), in Greene's Bookshop, Clare Street, Dublin, about 1960); a previous owner's name on the front flyleaf, W.F. Bailey, rang a bell: I went back to the biography.

George Moore (1852-1933), born at Moore Hall beside Lough Carra, Co Mayo, a successful novelist in London, had moved back to Ireland in 1901. His intention was to take part in the literary renaissance then in its initial stages. He hoped to regenerate Irish as a literary language as, he claimed, Dante had done for Italian. He left, disillusioned, in 1911.

Commissioner Bailey

It emerges that William F. Bailey was a Legal Commissioner in the Irish Land Commission. He had a lively interest in afforestation and in woodlands, particularly in their utilitarian functions. But before we consider that let us explore his other interests. George Moore, in his *Hail and Farewell* (1976), an account of his time in Ireland from 1901 to 1911, first published in three volumes from 1911 to 1914, describes Bailey thus: "I had gained his friendship in the last year of my sojourn in Ireland, and I found his alert and witty mind so pleasant that I had begun to think it a pity I had let him go by unknown for so many years. Bailey knows a good picture and buys one occasionally, he reads books and has practised literature and will

¹ Born 1866 in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim. Assistant to George William Russell (Æ) at *The Irish Homestead*, journal of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, died 1926 (Pyle 1998).

probably practise it again; some day he will write his memoirs. And better still, he practises life, going away every year for long travel, to return to Ireland, his mind enriched...If I closed this book without mention of him it would seem that I had forgotten the many hours we spent together.” In February 1911 Bailey held a dinner party to mark Moore’s departure from Ireland, where “... he assembled all my friends: AE [George William Russell, promoter of the co-operative movement, pen-name Æ], Ernest Longworth [Dublin barrister; helped Moore to avoid potential libels in the composition of *Hail and Farewell*], Philip Hanson, John Healy [Editor of *The Irish Times*], John Eglinton [librarian, the National Library], the graceful and witty Dena Tyrrell, and Susan Mitchell, who sang songs about the friends I was leaving behind me”.

Susan Mitchell (1918) in her own biography of George Moore, in a passage listing the literary persons than active in Dublin concludes “... one cannot pass from this company without mentioning Mr. Commissioner Bailey, clever, discriminating, at whose hospitable house anything that painted, sang, composed, or acted was sure of a welcome.”

Regrettably as it might seem, it appears that Bailey did not write memoirs, but he was active and highly visible in the arts scene in Dublin. He was a trustee of the Abbey Theatre and Governor of the National Gallery. The poet W.B. Yeats developed an interest in the ruined tower house at Ballylee, near Gort, Co Galway, and moved to buy it. In the autumn of 1916 he was in the process of negotiating with the Congested Districts Board which then owned the building. Yeats’s biographer R.F. Foster (2003) describes him writing to the ‘ubiquitous’ W.F. Bailey, who passed the letter to Henry (later Sir Henry) Doran, Chief Land Inspector at the Congested Districts Board. Foster’s use of the term ‘ubiquitous’ in this context indicates Bailey’s prominence at that time. Doran² was by then a permanent (or paid) member of the Board (Micks 1925).

Life, career and character

Surprisingly, Bailey does not feature in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a British publication (perhaps the reported manner of his death, as indicated in the final section, may have led to this omission), but he does appear in *Who Was Who 1916-1928* (1967). He was born in Castletown Conyers, near Ballingarry, Co Limerick, on 9 February 1857, educated at Trinity College, Dublin, called to the Bar in 1881 and appointed to the Land Commission in 1887. He presented eleven papers to the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland³, including those on forestry which we will come to presently. He also edited the poems of Thomas Gray, and Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. His recreations are recorded as golf, cycling, motoring, photography and travel.

² Doran, a civil engineer, gave detailed evidence about the planting of Knockboy to the 1907 Departmental committee on Irish Forestry (OCarroll 2004).

³ It is noteworthy that the same society was the publisher of an important paper by H.J. Gray (1963), where it was publicly revealed for the first time that government policy to exclude agricultural land from afforestation was implemented by setting a low maximum price that could be paid by the Forest Service for plantable land.

Irish Land Commission

For readers of more recent vintages it might be useful to briefly describe the Irish Land Commission. It was set up in 1881 with a dual purpose: to fix fair rents for tenant farmers and to buy estates or untenanted land for division among the existing tenants or other landless farmers. The Commission could advance a large proportion of the purchase price to the new tenants at a low interest rate, to be repaid over long periods, which varied over time from 35 years to 66 years. Transfer of land from landlord to tenant was by means of a two-stage sale process: landlord to Land Commission, then Land Commission to tenant; it was not a free gift. The tenants' annuities, were initially passed on to the UK government (which had advanced the money to buy the land), but from 1932 were retained by the Irish government, leading to the 6-year Economic War with Britain. One or more of the Commissioners had the status of a judge of the High Court. In all some 88% of the land area of the Republic of Ireland passed through the Land Commission, which was finally dissolved by an Act of 1992 (O'Shiel and O'Brien 1954, Connolly 1998).

Personal character

George Moore describes Bailey as living "in Earlsfort Terrace." A footnote to a mention of a "conversation at Bailey's" dated to September 16, 1909 in W.B. Yeats's *Memoirs* reads "William F. Bailey (1857-1917), Irish Land Commissioner, traveller, and *bon viveur*. His flat at 3 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, was a meeting-place for artists and politicians." (Yeats 1972). In the National Archives of Ireland internet version of the returns for the 1911 census for Dublin (NAI internet), that premises is recorded as occupied by two females, initially described as 'Servants', but the first of these descriptions is struck through and the word 'Head' inserted. One may hypothesise that Bailey was enjoying his hobby of travelling on census night.

Forestry matters

Publications

As already mentioned Bailey presented two papers dealing with forestry to the Statistical and Social Enquiry Society of Ireland. (He was elected president of the Society in 1902.) They were: *Forestry in Ireland* (1889) and *The Woods, Forests, Turf-bogs and Foreshores of Ireland. Opportunity for, and advisability of, establishing Government management and protection* (1890).

Paper of 1889

In the 1889 paper Bailey regrets the effect on woodlands of the transfer of holdings from landowner to tenant under the Land Purchase Acts. "It is pitiable in many cases to see the occupier, as soon as he gets a conveyance executed to himself, proceed to cut down and sell any trees that may be on his holding ... In view of the probable further extension of the Land Purchase Acts, it is worth consideration whether the legislature should not introduce provisions which would prevent purchasers from acting in a manner undoubtedly detrimental to the country at large." He contrasts the apathy of the British, (and, at that time, also Irish, legislature), in this area with "other

civilised countries”, and adds “Most probably the time is not far distant when the people will be driven to planting trees for fuel purposes.” It is not suggested that Bailey foresaw the rise and subsequent probable decline of oil as a universal source of heat and energy, but it is possible now that his prediction may be about to come true for reasons not remotely on the horizon in the 1890s. Bailey was conscious of a decline in the supply of turbary in Ireland and, as he assumed, the prohibitive cost of importing supplies of coal from England. He goes on to record the continuing decline in Irish woodland area from 152,000 ha in 1841 to 133,000 ha in 1881 (from 1.78 to 1.55% of the land area).

In his survey of the position in other jurisdictions he draws attention to the fact that in the Austrian Empire “... the [forest] proprietor cannot exercise a single act of ownership except under the control and with the approval of the forest inspector.” Troup (1938) refers to the Austrian Forest Act of 1852 (presumably the legislation in force at the time of Bailey’s visit) under which there may be no diversion of forest land to any other purpose without authority. An FAO survey (1988) of forest policies in Europe found that one of the objectives of forest policy in Austria was “Promotion of conversion of *productive* agricultural areas into forest (e.g. *for the production of firewood*)” (emphases added). It is also specified that “clearings of more than 2 ha. may only be carried out in exceptional cases.” In an analysis of the results of the FAO survey just referred to, Hummel and Hilmi (1989) state that “... some countries place particular emphasis on maintaining the extent of the existing forest area by stipulating that any necessary forest clearance (e.g. for road construction) must be compensated by the afforestation of an equivalent area in the vicinity.”

Bailey concluded that “Provisions should be introduced into future acts prohibiting the cutting of trees without the permission of the Land Commission, or whatever government department may be entrusted with the duty of supervision...Special legislation should be devised for the encouragement of planting.”

Paper of 1890

In his second forestry-related paper entitled *Woods, Forests Turf-bogs and Foreshores of Ireland* (1890), following on from his 1889 paper already described, Bailey cites examples of large areas of woodland that have been cleared following implementation of the Land Purchase Acts.

He suggests that the legislation currently being prepared for introduction to Parliament should include a clause whereby all woodland areas potentially useful to the local district or community should be excluded from each farm sold under the Acts, and should be vested in the Land Commission. The Commission should then have power to manage them as thought best. The Commission should also have power to reserve any land of any estate to be disposed of to tenants, which is considered best suited to be afforested. He goes further and suggests that the Commission should have power to acquire land in various parts of Ireland with the purpose of having them planted.

Among the persons trying to promote forestry in Ireland he acknowledges a Mr Dermot O’Connor Donelan, J.P., of Tuam, C. Galway. He quotes Mr Donelan: “It is

often surprising, in districts as bare of trees as the Sahara, the number of hills and townlands, called after woods, which have long since disappeared. All along the coast from Ballina to Galway, these constantly recurring names prove that, at no very remote period, a great part of that district was covered with timber”, a point which has been often repeated by proponents of forestry. The present writer has no further knowledge of the said Mr Donelan.

In this paper Bailey discusses other wood-based industries then developing. These included paper-making, and downstream products such as “barrels, railway carriage wheels, gas-pipes, chimney-pots, carpets, artificial leather, and the thousand-and-one articles made from papier-mâché.” He continues: “Celluloid made from paper-pulp is already proving an efficient substitute for ivory. It can be manufactured into cuffs and collars, backs of brushes, umbrella handles, and billiard balls, and makes drumheads better than parchment, as it is not affected by damp.

“The chemical products of timber are also very important. Among them we may mention charcoal for gunpowder and filtering, wood-tar, and extracts for tanning, and pyroligneous acids from which are formed creosote and acetic acid.”

While not all of the avenues listed have proved fertile in the longer term, their mention shows that Bailey had done his homework very thoroughly.

He concludes: “The demand for telegraph poles, railway sleepers, pit props, etc., is constantly increasing. These articles are mainly supplied from pine forests, which would undoubtedly flourish in Ireland.”

1907 Committee, and conclusion

As a result, presumably, of his demonstrated interest in forestry, W.F. Bailey was appointed to be a member of the 1907 Departmental Committee to enquire into forestry in Ireland, which reported in 1908! (Departmental Committee on Irish Forestry 1908). That report led directly to the beginning of state forestry in Ireland. William Bailey was appointed a Privy Councillor⁴ in 1909. He died on 16 April 1917. In the first, privately printed, edition of *A Story-Teller's Holiday* (1918) George Moore states that Bailey “died a few months ago of a gun-shot wound”, while in the commercial edition (1928) the words “of a gun-shot wound” are omitted. In both editions the passage continues “... and already Dublin society has forgotten him. His gift was atmosphere. He brought an atmosphere of happiness into the room; a precious gift truly for the conduct of life, but one so easily appreciated that it is forgotten as easily as the passage of a pleasant breeze coming and going in and out of a garden.” The unsigned obituary notice in *The Irish Times* (Anon.1917) simply states “The death of Mr. Commissioner Bailey occurred on Monday at his residence, Earlsfort terrace, Dublin”. He appears not to have married.

It seems that William Frederick Bailey may have been the earliest authoritative voice to articulate the need for positive moves to protect and increase the area of woodland in Ireland, primarily with utilitarian purposes in mind. Some of his suggestions were taken up by the Department of Agriculture and Technical

⁴ Most of the powers of the Privy Council had transferred to the Chief Secretary so that the appointment was more honorific than functional.

Instruction in the years following 1908, but more substantial implementation had to await the Forestry Act, 1928, passed into law by the independent Dáil of the Irish Free State.

We may conclude that William Bailey was one of that class of nineteenth century prominent persons whose principal objective was the enhancement of the public good, rather than self-aggrandizement or self-enrichment.

It is my personal regret is that I did not observe and investigate the autograph signature on my copy of Susan Mitchell's book before I started work on my *Forestry in Ireland – A Concise History*.

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