

Mick McCarthy 1914 – 2009

Mick McCarthy, one of Ireland's best known foresters, passed away peacefully on 24 April after a long and fulfilled life. Mick was born in January 1914, the youngest of a family of seven. Brought up on the family farm at Ballycullane, near Rathmore, Co Kerry, he attended the local national school. After spending a year in Clonakilty Agricultural College (1935-36) Mick successfully sat the forestry entrance examination to Avondale Forestry School. This course offered both classroom and practical work under the tutelage of Alisdair Grant, a Scottish forester, who was an excellent lecturer according to Mick. His older brother Tim also qualified as a forester from Avondale Forestry School.



After qualifying, he was assigned as a forester to Ballinglen, Co Wicklow – a busy forest where up to 100 workers were employed during peak periods. Here he met his wife Brigid O'Neill, a native of Annacurra. Shortly after they married he was transferred to Banteer Forest, Co Cork and from there to Pettigo Forest, Co Donegal. Just when Mick, Brigid and their young family were adapting to life in Pettigo, they were transferred to Multyfarnham, Co Westmeath where they had to set up house all over again, this time in a remote area far from shops and other amenities. But he recalled that there were positive aspects to this transfer. The McCarthy's new home was on two acres of land where Mick put his farming background to good use. Here he grew potatoes and other vegetables, kept a cow and fattened a few pigs. Not only was the McCarthy household self sufficient in food but Mick was also able to supplement his income by selling the surplus produce of his carefully tended garden.

Although he had now worked with the Department of Lands as a forester for almost ten years, he was still classified as a 'non-established' Civil Servant. This meant that, in addition to his being subject to transfers at short notice, his post was neither permanent nor pensionable. He recalled purchasing his first car, a Baby Ford, for £97 from the proceeds of the sale of a few pigs in 1947 after his bank manager turned him down for a loan because his position wasn't permanent. Like other foresters, he lobbied to change this ruling and foresters eventually secured 'established' status in 1954.

Multyfarnham was followed by a transfer to Ravensdale Forest, Co Louth in the early 1950s. Without doubt, the transfer system that operated at the time was harsh especially for Brigid and their children. However, Mick maintained that it provided him with valuable practical experience as there was little information on silviculture,

which was specific to Irish conditions, available at the time. Species selection was simple but shifted dramatically over the years. European species, mainly Scots pine and Norway spruce, which were popular during his early years in forestry, were replaced by Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine from the 1950s onwards. Ravensdale forest provided him with opportunities to experiment with a wide range of species.

Mick was appointed Senior Forester at Shelton Forest near Arklow, Co Wicklow, in 1959 and he remained on the east coast for the rest of his career. Shelton had an important forest nursery at the time. Here he developed his nursery skills and management techniques. This aptitude was quickly recognised and he was promoted to the rank of Inspector in the Nurseries Division of the Forest Service, Dublin.

An excellent forester, he adapted quickly to life in Nurseries Division. The Forest Service was now collecting more home produced seed from the fine forests established earlier in the century and, although reliance on imported seed continued, for Mick there was a great sense of achievement in setting up Irish provenances. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the entire nursery stock and could speak with complete familiarity about the quantity and quality of stock in each nursery. Mick McCarthy, and the late Joe Deasy, made up a formidable team in Nurseries Division and, with limited resources; they developed a very efficient sector which provided good quality plants for the developing forest industry.

When Mick McCarthy received honorary membership of the Society of Irish Foresters on his 95th birthday in January 2009, it was a well-deserved recognition of his role as a forester, nursery inspector and founder member of the Society of Irish Foresters. It is difficult to believe that when he attended the inaugural meeting of the Society in 1942, he already had four years of experience as a forester in a career that spanned 43 years of loyal service.

Mick's philosophy – which he always practised – was to treat forest workers fairly and with compassion. From his days in Ballinglen, he greatly admired the forest workers who worked six days a week and made their way by bicycle or on foot, often in harsh weather, to bleak bogs and inhospitable mountains where much of the early afforestation took place. For the many foresters he encountered, his was a calming and encouraging voice and it is for this mixture of dedication to his work and kindness of heart that he will be best remembered.

Mick, whose wife Brigid predeceased him, is survived by his daughters Maura and Carmel and sons Diarmuid, Seoirse, Michael and Cathal. Seoirse followed his father's footsteps into a career into forestry.

Donal Magner