

## Forest Perspectives

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### A Supplement to *Forestry in Ireland, a Concise History*

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My book, *Forestry in Ireland - A Concise History* (hereinafter referred to as “the main work”) was published by COFORD (The National Council for Forest Research and Development) in 2004. My interest in the subject has continued, and I have therefore noted any relevant items which have since come to my attention. I now offer these as a supplement to the main work. They are arranged in the same order as the sections in that book.

#### Times Past

##### *Giraldus*

Giraldus de Barri, called Cambrensis (of Wales) (1146-1223), came to Ireland with Prince John (Monarch 1199-1216) in 1185. His *Topography of Ireland* was published in 1188.

Giraldus is briefly quoted at second-hand in the main work in connection with the woodland cover of Ireland towards the end of the twelfth century AD.

The *Topography of Ireland* was written, or perhaps one might say “composed”, by Giraldus after his visit. It has been published in several translations. That by John O’Meara (1951) is claimed to be from the earliest manuscript, dating from the twelfth century. In a section on agriculture it is reported that Ireland “has bees that produce honey but the swarms would be much more plentiful if they were not frightened off by the yew-trees that are poisonous and bitter, and with which the island woods are flourishing”. It is not clear whether the term “island” here refers to the island of Ireland or the lake islands. O’Meara’s version of the statement quoted by Joyce (1903) that “the open plains are of limited extent compared with the woods” and repeated in the main work, is that “...there are, here and there, some fine plains, but in comparison with the woods they are indeed small”. (It is pointed out in the main work that Fergus Kelly takes a different view.) That statement is also found in another translation, that of Forester and Wright (1887), from an unspecified source. That version talks of the “yews with which the woods of the island abound”, which seems to suggest that the statement applies to the whole island. In describing the “barbarous” nature of the people, Giraldus, in O’Meara’s translation, says the cultivator “is too lazy to plant the foreign types of trees that would grow very well here”. Forester and Wright’s translation, states that “the lazy husbandman does not take the trouble to grow the foreign sorts [of trees] which would grow very well here”. And adds “There are four kinds of trees indigenous in Britain which are wanting here. Two of them are fruit-bearing trees, the chesnut and the beech; the other two, the arulus and the box [a

footnote states that other manuscripts have ‘alarus’ and that it is uncertain what tree is alluded to], though they bear no fruit, are serviceable for making cups and handles... The forests of Ireland also abound with fir-trees producing frankincense and incense”. [A note here states ‘Giraldus means no doubt the *pinus sylvestris*, which is also indigenous in Scotland’.] Elsewhere in this version “the soil of Ireland” is described as “friable and moist, well-wooded, and marshy”.

Giraldus is quoted here because it would not be reasonable to ignore his existence. However, many of the phenomena and occurrences he describes are so outrageously incredible that it is impossible to take seriously the work as a whole, even where it is seen now to be true, as in his account of the Irish climate and on the excellence of Irish musicality<sup>1</sup>. It might be pointed out that according to O’Meara’s (1951) Foreword, Giraldus produced at least four later revisions adding further material until his final version was almost twice as long as that used by O’Meara<sup>2</sup>.

### *Deforestation*

One possible effect caused by the decline of woodlands in Ireland is suggested in Bielenberg (2003, p 20). There Colin Rynne writes “Until quite recently the cluster of early medieval [c 500-1100 AD] dates for Irish horizontal-wheeled sites [a primitive form of water-mill], and the apparent absence of high medieval [c 1100-1400 AD] sites from archaeological record, led to the suggestion that a shortage of timber for building purposes seriously curtailed mill-building activity”. Rynne does not provide source references for this speculation.

The diarist, John Evelyn (1620-1706), author of *Sylva: A Discourse of Forest Trees and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesties Dominions* (1664), one of the first books in the English language dealing with forestry, worried about the depletion of English timber reserves through the “increase of devouring Iron-mills” and suggested that Ireland would be a better location for that industry (Campbell-Culver 2006).

In 1973 Eileen McCracken, author of the well-known 1971 volume *The Irish Woods Since Tudor Times*, later contributed an article on The Woodlands of the Central Shannon Basin to the *Journal of the Old Athlone Society* (McCracken 1973). Her account is based largely on the Civil Survey of 1654-6, intended as a preliminary to the Cromwellian confiscation, and The Books of Survey and Distribution, summarizing the Cromwellian Settlement and its modification at the Restoration (O’Connell 1998). McCracken lists woodland areas by townland in Counties Clare, Galway, Roscommon, Leitrim, Longford, Westmeath and Offaly, but specific forests are

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1 Both versions include a rather fanciful account of the generation of a species of wild goose. In Forester and Wright this is in a chapter *On barnacles, which grow from fir timber, and their nature*. It begins ‘There are here likewise many birds called barnacles, which nature produces in a wonderful manner, out of her ordinary course. They resemble the marsh-geese, but are smaller. Being at first gummy excrescences from pine-beams floating on the waters, and then enclosed in shells to secure their free growth, they hang by their beaks, like seaweeds attached to the timber. Being in process of time well covered with feathers, they either fall into the water or take their flight in the free air, their nourishment and growth being supplied, while they are bred in this very unaccountable and curious manner from the juices of the wood in the sea-water’.

2 John J. O’Meara (1915-2003), a former Jesuit novice in the Gandon-designed Emo Court, Co Laois, Professor of Latin in University College Dublin (1948-84). In his Foreword to the translation he admits to having toned down some of the expressions connected with bestiality.

generally not identified. She points out that “the presence of ironworks is an indication of nearby woods for the works were fuelled by charcoal and it was uneconomic to transport wood over a distance of twenty miles”. She mentions 560 acres of wood in the Coologory townland in the parish of Aughrim<sup>3</sup>. In Roscommon “it is abundantly clear that the most densely wooded area lay in the extreme north of the county, in the parishes of Ardcarne, Boyle and Kilbryan”. “Thick tall woods” were found in the townlands Aghrafinigan, Drumcormick, Kilfaughna, Derreendonagh and around Lough Skean. In Boyle parish lay the “thick tall woods of Aghacarra” and in Kilbryan parish there were “tall timber woods”.

There are many similar examples listed but the conclusion appears to be that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the counties bordering the river Shannon were well furnished with discrete areas of woodland but apparently there were no extensive areas of forest cover.

### **Positive Moves**

#### *Afforestation by Planters*

*And few in the candlelight  
Thought her too proud,  
For the house of the planter  
Is known by the trees*

(From *The Planter's Daughter* by Austin Clarke)

It is to be presumed that the term “planter” here refers to a participant in one of the strategic political human “plantations” of the 17th century, rather than the literal meaning of a planter of trees. The implication is that only the “planters” were disposed to plant trees.

However, according to Connolly (1998) “Early planters exploited the local forests...”

#### *Introduction of beech*

Forbes (1933) refers to an appendix to Boate's *Ireland's Natural History*, being a letter from Dr Molyneux FRS to the Bishop of Clogher describing “swarms of Cockchafers...which at Eyre Court [Co Galway]...stripped groves of beech in 1697”. Boate's volume was published in 1652, so the report clearly was not carried in the original edition. Forbes does not specify the edition he consulted. In Boylan's (1998) *Dictionary of Irish Biography* William Molyneux (1656-1698) is described as a student of philosophy, optics, and astronomy, and a specialist in optics. Forbes appears to throw doubt on the likelihood that “one of the commonest trees in England

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<sup>3</sup> Only one townland of this name is listed in the *Townland Index* (H.M.S.O. 1861), comprising 895 acres (362 ha), located in the parish of Tomgraney near the town of Scariff.

should not have found its way here before the Robinia from N. America, or the stone pine [*P. pinea*], evergreen oak [*Quercus ilex*], or walnut [*Juglans regia*] from the Mediterranean region”.

According to Nelson and Walsh (1993) “The date of introduction of beech to Ireland is not known” although they speculate that it may have come “with the Normans to whom this was a familiar tree”. No supporting reference is provided. Hayes (1794) already cited in the main work, suggests Shelton Abbey, Co Wicklow, as the location of its first introduction.

We may conclude that we do not know when beech was introduced into Ireland.

#### *Nimmo’s contribution*

Alexander Nimmo (1783-1832), a Scottish engineer, came to Ireland in 1811 and was employed by the government to carry out surveys and supervise engineering works such as road and pier construction in the west of Ireland. He soon became a visitor and guest at the homes of Connemara landowners where “he offered advice and made recommendations on engineering matters, on agriculture and on forestry, and these were frequently acted upon” (Villiers-Tuthill 2006).

He believed that “The region [Connemara] also possessed many advantages for the raising of timber. And although Connemara was ‘destitute of wood’, in some sheltered spots oak, beech and hazel appeared in abundance and with a little care could be cultivated more widely. Most of the old timber had been consumed by several ironworks established a century before, and he was surprised that no attempt had been made to replace them. For Nimmo, planting was the obvious solution for the ‘extensive moors, which [were] so far from manure or limestone’, and the advantage of ‘sheltered vales, navigations and abundant water-power’, all pointed towards the possibility of developing a timber industry in the future.

“Between Galway and Oughterard several of the proprietors had planted trees, principally for ornamentation, and they seemed unaware of their potential commercial value. In contrast, nurseries and copses already thrived along the coast: ‘Mr John Darcy (sic)<sup>4</sup> of Killolla (sic)<sup>5</sup>, has succeeded well in raising most kinds of timber at Clifton (sic) [presumably Clifden] and Ardber Bay, though immediately exposed to the Atlantic. His nursery there is in good order, and he is extending his plantations. The copses at Ballinaboy, Munga [near Clifden] &c. are also very near the ocean and the wood of Cloonill (sic) [Cloonisle, near Clifden], and Birterbuy (sic) [Bertraboy] Bay, grows down to the water edge.

‘Mr Martin had planted extensively at Ballinahinch, but for want of enclosures, much of it has been ruined. Mr Thomas Martin, his son, has formed an extensive nursery, and begun to plant upon a very great scale; there could not be a finer field than what his demesnes afford. He is also rapidly fencing in his numerous copses.

‘[William] Bald [Scottish Surveyor, (1789-1857), conducted the Trigonometrical Survey of Mayo] held the opinion that the bog could be easily reclaimed and

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4 John D’Arcy (1785-1839), of Kiltullagh, Co. Galway, founded the town of Clifden in 1812.

5 *The Townland Index*, 1861, records a townland “Killolla” near the town of Oughterard, Co Galway.

cultivated...’ He compared the bogs to new colonies: ‘The reclaimed bogs in Ireland would have all the advantages of new colonies, both as to room and food in abundance, and none of their difficulties in distance and transport’. And in areas where the bog was on high ground, too high for the cultivation of grain, he suggested that it be fenced off and planted with trees.

‘McLaughlin [owner of a fish-curing house in Galway] was employing a number of coopers to contain the fish and this had increased the demand for local timber and sally rods. Prior to this the sally had been imported from England and Scotland, but was now being raised on marshy waste-ground locally’” (Villiers-Tuthill 2006, with quotations from Nimmo).

Villiers-Tuthill quotes further from Nimmo/Bald ‘Connamara is very destitute of wood, a few scrubby patches only being scattered thinly through it.

“The country, however, possesses an extensive stool of timber, for in almost every dry knole [knoll] or cliff the oak beech and hazel appear shooting in abundance, and require only a little care to rise into valuable forests; several bloomeries<sup>6</sup>, which were erected about a century ago, consumed much of the timber, and coping was afterwards neglected. The sheltered vales, navigations and abundant water-power, would form great advantages in the cultivation of timber.”

#### *Commercial Estate Forestry*

George Moore, who was extensively quoted in the main work on the subject of rural poverty and the related land hunger, also became aware of the commercial value of sustainable exploitation of woodland. In 1880 he wished to continue his writing career, not yet financially successful. He returned to Mayo and appointed a neighbour, Tom Ruttledge, as his agent. This move was questioned by his widowed mother, who enquired “But is Tom going to advance money, and where is the money to come from?” “Tom tells me that the woods have not been thinned round Moore Hall for the last thirty years. He has had them examined by a timber merchant, who will pay four hundred pounds for the surplus trees. The woods will not be spoiled but benefited.” “And you will live, George, in London for two years on four hundred pounds?” “I hope to do so<sup>7</sup>. The trees of Moore Hall shall not be wasted, that I promise you, Mother, and you can live at Moore Hall as long as it pleases you and invite your friends to keep you company.” (Moore 1933). Hone (1939) also records that “soon after” 1851 George Henry Moore, the novelist’s father, supervised the construction of an oak-panelled dining-room using oak cut in the demesne woods.

#### *British attitude*

Lord Lovat, first Chairman of the Forestry Commission of the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, in his opening address to the first British Empire Forestry Conference, held in London, July, 1920, said “If we take the case of our blood relation, the United States of America, we find an almost exact replica of our own policy of

6 ‘From the earliest times up until the late sixteenth century, wrought iron in Ireland was produced in one step in a *bloomery* by smelting the iron directly from its ores...in primitive furnaces where temperatures reached about 800° C. (Colin Rynne. 2006. *Industrial Ireland 1750-1930, An Archaeology*. Collins Press, Cork.

7 Moore eventually became quite wealthy through his publications.

inaction. As early as 1799, possibly under French influence, the first forest legislation was attempted.” [...] “If we glance for a moment at the forest history of Europe, we are struck by the fact that in the Middle Ages, whilst forestry laws on the Continent were being built up on national and constructive lines, our forest laws were based on injustice, cruelty and repression.” [...] “It is a significant fact, whether arising from British dislike of forests or lack of appreciation of the possibilities of communal forest enterprise that the area occupied by the British during the French Wars of the Middle Ages is the only area in France where no communal forest exists, and this in a country where five million acres of communal forest are to be found in the departments untouched by British rule!” [...] “We are at heart not forest preservers as they are in Switzerland, France, Germany and Belgium, but at heart forest vandals who look on all forests as their prey.” (Richard 2003).

#### *An estate owner's involvement*

Sir Shane Leslie (1885-1971), a hereditary Baronet born at Glaslough estate, Co Monaghan, was, according to his biographer Otto Rauchbauer (2009), “... probably the most notable amateur forester in Ireland at that time (after c.1919).<sup>8</sup> The issue was strongly politicised and delicate, particularly as far as Irish farmers were concerned, who were reluctant to invest in schemes that promised no short-term profits”. After the war of 1939-45 “Leslie became involved in organising a congress of the international society known as Men of the Trees which took place in July 1948 in Dublin”.

Men of the Trees is an organisation founded in 1924 by the Englishman, Richard St. Barbe Baker (1881-1982). Its purpose is “to use every possible means of moulding world opinion so that people everywhere will cooperate with their governments in passing wise and beneficent laws for the protection and preservation of their forests, which are so vitally important to the health, wealth and well-being of every country.”

Sir Shane addressed the Annual General Meeting of the Society of Irish Foresters in January 1945 reading a paper entitled *National Parks in State Forests*. In it he said that “since the year 1903 I have had an intense, overwhelming interest in trees”. (1903 was the year of the great storm when “a [60 and 70 years old] famous wood” on his grandfather’s place was blown down.) “I knew the great Theodore Roosevelt [US President, 1901-1909] and his great lieutenant, Gifford Pinchot [1865-1946, First Head of the US Forest Service]. I have followed as well as I could the developments in England and Scotland and tried to reproduce them, if I could at all...I have known two public men in this country, each of whom, I think, was a milestone; each of whom, if he did not actually reverse a side of our life, certainly altered it for all time. One was George Wyndham, whom I knew when he was passing the Land Act<sup>9</sup> which, I think, changed this country as far as he could, and the other was Horace Plunkett<sup>10</sup>,

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8 In a letter to his gamekeeper in 1909 Leslie wrote “...I am afraid I should never come and live [at Glaslough] like in the old days. The world is worse than I ever thought and I have got to help put it right.” (Rauchbauer 2009)

9 George Wyndham was chief secretary for Ireland (1900-5). His Land Act, 1903, gave landlords who sold their whole estate to the Land Commission a bonus of 12 percent over the agreed valuation. (O’Shiel and O’Brien 1954)

10 Sir Horace Plunkett (1854-1932) first president of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, largely responsible for the establishment of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland in 1899 (Boylan 1998).

who changed farming. The great disaster is that neither of them was interested enough to change forestry ... but perhaps the man who will make Irish forestry a reality, a monument to himself and a delight to posterity, is not yet on the horizon.” (Leslie 1946). Sir Shane clearly did not then foresee the advent of Seán MacBride and his 25,000 acre (10,000 hectare) annual planting target.

## Learning

### *University Education*

William Delany, President of University College, Dublin, in a letter to the Chairman of Dublin County Council in 1910 advocated that scholarships supported by County Councils should be devoted to “... an education dealing with agriculture, industries, and commerce”. Expanding on that he envisaged that “Travelling scholarships would be made available in this whole area [of agriculture], and scholarships would also be available to the University of Nancy [France] for the study of forestry “with the view of utilizing our waste lands”. By means of such a programme and such scholarships he believed that professorships, fellowships and scholarships in Agriculture would become as highly regarded as in Medicine, Arts and other academic subjects in the university.” (Morrissey 1983).

Both Augustine Henry (1857-1930) first Professor of Forestry at the Royal College of Science, Ireland, incorporated into University College Dublin in 1926, and Gifford Pinchot, studied at the forestry school at Nancy.

### *Forest Research in Wicklow, ca 1830*

Possibly the earliest record of forest research in Ireland is that published in 1878. “At the sixth meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1836), a paper from John Nuttall, of Tittour<sup>11</sup>, county of Wicklow, was read on this subject [Management of the Pine Tribe]. Having noticed that almost all the plants of *Pinus sylvestris* and other species, when planted in a light clay-slate soil on exposed situations, grew too rapidly, or out of proportion to their rootings, and thereby become *wind-waved*, and that those which, by accident, had lost their leaders took a strong hold on the ground, he commenced a series of experiments, as follows: In the spring, when the buds were fully developed, he went over those that were suffering from the foregoing causes, and broke off all the buds except those on short branches. By this process their upward growth is checked for a year, the trunk increases in bulk, and the plant roots much more freely than if the shoots had been allowed to grow. New buds are formed during the summer, and in the following spring these plants present the most vigorous aspect.

“The larch he cuts down to a strong lateral branch, on the windward side, when possible. These soon begin to spread their roots, increase in size similarly, and ultimately become choice trees. In some instances he had cut them down a second

<sup>11</sup> This townland is listed in the Townland Index (H.M.S.O., Dublin 1861), as Tithewer, in the parish of Calary near the town of Rathdrum. P.W. Joyce, in his *Irish Names of Places* (Dublin, 1869) interprets this as Tigh-tuair, the house of the bleach-green.



time, when he found it necessary, and with equally good effect.” (Hough 1878).

### Conclusion

I have chosen not to extend this account beyond the period covered in the main work, therefore it does not deal with the increasing emphasis on broadleaf planting or on the virtual cessation of state afforestation. Much extra information on trees and forestry in Co Wicklow, including the plantations at Tittour (Tithewer) referred to above, and, generally, about earlier centuries, is to be found in Carey (2009).

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