

If trees could talk. Wicklow's trees and woodlands over four centuries

Michael Carey. COFORD, Dublin. 290 p. ISBN 1 902696 64 6 (€25.00)

Travelling through Wicklow today, it is clear that there are two types of woodland, the old broadleaved woodland and the new coniferous plantations. The casual observer might be forgiven for thinking that the old oak woodland has always been there, that it was, in a sense, natural. It is, today, a place of great beauty and tranquillity. By contrast, the coniferous plantations are dynamic; many of them planted when some among us were students, have now been clearfelled and replanted. They are intensively managed and clearly, a valuable economic resource. They are what makes Wicklow the foremost county in Irish forestry today.

Dr Michael Carey's book makes it clear that this haven of tranquillity, the old "unchanging" broadleaved woodland, was itself a valuable economic resource and the focus of intensive management for many centuries. It is quite clear from this excellent book on the history of forestry in Wicklow, that before ever the sustained yield principle was formalised, in the early nineteenth century, the woodlands of the county were managed on a sustainable basis not only for timber production, but to supply a range of forest products from bark to coppice material for charcoal production. That this woodland industry was viable is evidenced by the fact that it endured for several centuries.

There wasn't a great deal of woodland in Wicklow for at least a few hundred years prior to the massive expansion in coniferous afforestation in the twentieth century. Michael takes us, in a highly readable fashion, through a maze of surveys, ancient documents, paintings and old photographs. The picture we get is of a landscape largely devoid of trees. In 1791, only 1.6% of the county was wooded. By 1904, this had increased to 3.4%. These woodlands were all privately owned, most of them on the lands of large private estates.

It is clear from the increase in woodland cover over this period of a little more than one hundred years that the process of reforestation had already begun, long before the State programme of the twentieth century. Indeed, Michael quotes from a document written in 1652 in which Sir William Petty, who served Oliver Cromwell in Ireland, set a target to plant "5 million fruit trees.... and 3 million timber trees.... in order to create employment and wealth". In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Dublin Society (now the RDS), offered incentives to encourage tree planting. In the relative stability of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, tree planting on private estates became fashionable, a symbol of their maturity and their stability.

For foresters, familiar with the many introduced coniferous species in Ireland, the section on the plant hunters will be particularly interesting. Most of us who have made our careers in forestry owe them and the landlords, who enthusiastically planted these new species on their estates, a debt of gratitude.

The book is divided into three main sections, "The Woodland Resource", "Tree Planting over the Centuries" and "Woodland Industries". The activities of the major estates in planting, silvicultural work and marketing are detailed. The uses of wood for

ship building, house building and firewood, pipe and barrel staves, bark for tanning and charcoal for iron smelting are each described in detail. Bark was very profitable between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The need to control debarking in order to protect the tree was recognised as early as the seventeenth century. The author describes the process of harvesting the bark, quoting from a variety of sources.

The meticulous attention to historical detail is one of the great strengths of this book. For natives of Wicklow or those intimately familiar with the county, it is an essential read, but its appeal is far wider than that. This is history at the level of the townland, recounting the presence of forest since time immemorial in certain places and the silvicultural treatment of others, supported by copious quotations from contemporary sources and beautiful reproductions of ancient maps.

A substantial part of the book is devoted to woodland industries, again in fascinating detail. We all know of the market for oak for ship building and house construction, but how many were aware that spools for thread were once made in Kilpedder, or that wood was used for glassmaking in Arklow in the seventeenth century?

The woodland business of the large estates was documented, by their owners, in considerable detail. The description of this is fascinating, particularly that of the largest forest owner, the Watson-Wentworth-Fitzwilliam estate, based at Coolattin, in south Wicklow. The forest operations carried out on the estate are described, including detail on outgoings and income.

This is a truly excellent book, which I strongly recommend not only to foresters and to natives of Wicklow, but to all who have an interest in how life was lived in past centuries. It is beautifully produced with many excellent illustrations, photographs (the great majority the work of the author), maps, line drawings and paintings.

Ted Farrell

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