

## Trees, Woods and Literature - 34

*There is a curious change in the appearance of the county when one moves inland from the coast of Mayo to the congested portion of the inner edge the county. In this place there are no longer the Erris tracts of bog or the tracts of stone of Connemara; but one sees everywhere low hills and small farms of poor land that is half turf-bog, already much cut away, and half narrow plots of grass or tillage. Here and there one meets with little villages, built on the old system, with cottages closely grouped together and filled with primitive people, the women mostly in bare feet, with white handkerchiefs over the heads. On the whole, however, one soon feels that this neighbourhood is far less destitute than those we have been in hitherto. Turning out of Swinford, soon after our arrival, we were met with almost at once by a country funeral coming towards the town, with a large crowd, mostly of women, walking after it. ... When the funeral was out of sight we walked on for a few miles and then turned into one of the wayside public houses, at the same time general shop and bar, which are a peculiar feature of most of the country parts of Ireland. An old one-eyed man, with a sky-blue handkerchief round his neck, was standing at the counter making up his bill with the publican, and disputing loudly about it. ...*

*While he was talking some men who were driving cattle from a fair came in and sat about in the shop, drinking neat glasses of whisky. They called for their drinks so rapidly that the publican called in a little barefooted girl in a green dress who stood on a box beside a porter barrel rinsing glasses while he served the men, They all appeared to know the old man with the one eye, and they talked to him about some job he had been doing on the relief works in this district. Then they made him tell a story for us of a morning when he killed three wild ducks 'with one skelp of a little gun he had', and the man who was sitting on a barrel at my side told me that the old man had been the best shot in the place till he got too fond of porter and had had his gun and licence taken from him because he was shooting wild over the roads. Afterwards they began to make fun of him because his wife had run away from him and had gone over the water, and he began to lose his temper. On our way back an old man who was driving an ass with heavy panniers of turf told us that all the turf of this district will be cut away in the next twenty years and the people will be left without fuel. This is taking place in many parts of Ireland, and unless the Department of Agriculture, or the Congested Districts Board, can take steps to provide plantations for those districts there may be considerable suffering, as it is not likely that the people even then will be able to buy coal. Something has been done and great deal has been said on the subject of growing timber in Ireland, but so far there has been little result. An attempt was made to establish an extensive plantation near Carna, in Connemara, first by the Irish Government in 1890, and then by the Congested Districts Board since 1902; but the work has been a complete failure. Efforts have been made on a smaller scale to encourage planting among the people, but I have not seen much good come from them. Some turf tracts in Ireland are still of great extent, but they are not inexhaustible, and*

*even if turf has to be brought from them, in few years, to cottagers great distances away, the cost of it will be serious and additional hardship for the people of many poor localities.*

Extracts from *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* by J.M. Synge; first published in 1911 by Maunsell & Co Ltd., Dublin, and republished in a number of editions since the 1960s.

The playwright and poet John Millington Synge (1871-1909) was born at Rathfarnham in Dublin in April 1871. He was educated privately, and then studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. After graduating he travelled to Germany to continue his music studies, but changed his mind and decided to concentrate on writing. Synge was one of the founders of the Irish National Theatre (which went on to become The Abbey Theatre), along with Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats and others. He is best known for *The Playboy of the Western World*, the drama which caused riots during its opening run in 1907 at the Abbey Theatre. His views on theatre are summed up in the quote: “I do not believe in the possibility of ‘a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, spring-dayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre’ ... no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid.”

As a schoolboy Synge’s passion was birdwatching, along the banks of the River Dodder and in the grounds of the nearby Rathfarnham Castle (now owned by the state and open to the public). Summer holidays were spent at Greystones, near the Synge estate at Glanmore Castle, close by Ashford, Co Wicklow. His great-grandfather, Francis Synge (who built Glanmore), was one of the most prolific tree planters in Wicklow, becoming involved from the late 1700s and on into the following century (Carey 2009). Synge was, therefore, likely to have had a knowledge of forestry, and to have used it to inform his references to tree planting in the extracts reproduced here. He also spent a holiday at Avondale in 1897.

The extracts are from a series of articles Synge wrote in 1905, on commission from the *Manchester Guardian*, on the congested districts of the west of Ireland. He spent four weeks travelling through Galway and Mayo, in the company of Jack B. Yeats who provided illustrations to accompany the articles. Synge brings up forestry in the context of turf bogs being cut away, with a need for a replacement fuel. Increasing affluence, better transport and the availability of coal, and more recently oil, meant his predicted fuel shortage did not arise, and the use of wood fuel he advocates stayed at low levels throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, with rising oil prices and turf bogs increasingly off-limits, the situation has changed radically, with wood fuel use expanding rapidly, with some quantities coming from farm plantations established in areas similar to those Synge wrote about over a century ago.

An unsuccessful attempt to establish tree plantations near Carna is also described by Synge. This was the Knockboy project, described in detail by OCarroll (2004) who concludes: “More recent knowledge would leave little doubt that the primary cause of the failure of the tree crop at Knockboy was deficiency of soil phosphorus. Even with added phosphorus fertiliser the exposure would have had serious adverse effects on

tree quality, and we have not enough knowledge of the effectiveness of the original drainage system to know whether it might have been adequate.”

Despite the Knockboy setback, much has been learned in the intervening period, and the forest estate has expanded ten-fold since Syngé wrote his articles for the *Guardian*. In a postscript he writes of possible remedies, including forestry, to improve the state of the people in the congested districts. But he warns against “... a sort of contempt for the local views of the people which seems rooted in nearly all the official workers one meets through the country.” Syngé may be too one-sided here, as experience suggests that there may also have been a reciprocal suspicion and mistrust of officialdom among the people. Attitudes have become less fixed, though a reticence to change still exists, which, together with subsidies, constricts the further expansion of forestry onto lands unfit for any other economic use.

*Lia Coille*

### **References**

- Carey, M. 2009. *If trees could talk. Wicklow's trees and woodlands over four centuries*. COFORD, Dublin.
- O'Carroll, N. 2004. *Forestry in Ireland – A Concise History*. COFORD, Dublin.