

Book Reviews

The Road to Avondale

Thomas Briody. Choice Publishing & Book Services, 2009
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(Available from the Society of Irish Foresters. €15.00)

Today, most public figures publish a biography; politicians unusually do so when they retire from active politics and sports people see it as a fitting end to their careers. Until now, no forester in Ireland has done so. Tom Briody is the first and what a story he has to tell!

Tom was born in Mullahoran, in south west Cavan on 28th October 1913. This was one year before the outbreak of World War I and three years before the 1916 Rising. He attended national school when Ireland was ruled by Britain. At the age of 96 he published the first volume of his life story. The second volume is already written and will be published in late 2011.

Tom began recording his story in 1999 when he was in his late eighties. In all he filled 1,000 pages of “foolscap”. He was assisted in his endeavours by his son Mícheál, who is a lecturer in the Language Centre of the University of Helsinki. Tom proofed the text as it was edited and checked the final draft twice. This is no mean achievement for a man at 96 years of age who retired in 1978, more than ten years before Coillte was established.

The book begins with his youth in Cavan and he tells the family story so intimately that the reader feels they are prying. His observations and clear recall of people and places are phenomenal. He was witness to a way of life that has long vanished. He describes going to Mass by a horse and trap. He describes in detail the types of timber used in thatch-roofed houses. His accounts of old farming methods are a marvellous record for future generations. But it is his reaction to and preoccupation with the Economic War in the 1930s that is a recurring theme in the book. Tom’s love of our native language is evident throughout the book and his son Mícheál includes, in an appendix, a comprehensive account of the decline of the native language in Co Cavan.

Tom Briody’s path to forestry was circuitous. It begins with a year in Ballyhaise Agricultural College in Co Cavan. He describes this year in great detail. It was here that he met some of his future classmates in forestry. Tom then went on to the Albert College in Glasnevin, an institution no longer in existence. Once again we get a very detailed description of life there.

The sections of the book that should be of greatest interest to foresters are Part IV and V. These chapters recount the life of a trainee forester. His account of lining out with a rope and spade is very descriptive, even somebody who never witnessed it will

understand the process through the wonderful images he creates. Similarly he describes pit-planting and the importance of digging “soil pits” to ascertain which species was best suited to a particular soil type. It would appear that good workmanship was a *sine qua non* for these early foresters -as is evident in his description of laying down pole lines to ensure straight lines for planting, with the lines separated by five feet in all directions.

It is disappointing that none of this early work on the afforestation programme was ever documented. The state broadcasting service has many hours of archival material on the rural electrification scheme and peat development but none on our extensive afforestation programme. Perhaps this is something the Society of Irish Foresters should address.

Tom worked in four forest centres during his practical year; Kilsheelan, Aughrim, Kinnitty and Woodford. His account of the different treatment he received from the foresters-in-charge at these centres is a masterpiece in diplomacy –a career in which Tom would also have excelled! He was a qualified forester in Clonmel/Kilsheelan Forests and a forester-in-charge at Slievenamon Forest. He describes the difficulties encountered during the war in supplying firewood for industry. A recurring theme is the continuous moving about and the difficulty in finding suitable “digs” and houses. This story ends and the next book begins when he marries in 1943.

The reader is left with the impression that Tom Briody remains a positive and happy man despite the ups and downs in his life. As he says so often in the book, he feels he achieved a lot ‘for his country’ -a noble aspiration in today’s world. Like his generation of foresters they achieved a lot with very little and for very little recompense. There may be a lesson in that for all of us today. I am eagerly looking forward to the second volume of his auto-biography.

John Mc Loughlin

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