

Niall O'Muirghéasa 1921 - 2011

Son of Mary and Henry Morris, Irish scholar, educationalist and writer, Niall was born in Skerries, Co. Dublin in September 1921 and educated at Belvedere College in Dublin's north inner city. The family lived in Clontarf from where his regular cycle rides to the Botanic Gardens kindled an early interest in trees. These excursions lead ultimately to a career choice that dominated his life until his retirement in 1986. He graduated with a First Class honours forestry degree from the National University of Ireland in 1945 and was appointed a Forest Foreman in January 1946. His career began in Woodford and he later moved to Slievenamon; the ballad of that name becoming his party piece for decades to come.



In 1948 he applied for an advertised post for Forestry Inspector but his application was rejected. For some reason never fully explained, forest foremen, regardless of academic qualification, were not deemed eligible for a forestry inspector post. Special permission to allow Niall to apply for such a post was the subject of a plea to the Minister (Joe Blowick) by the Departmental Secretary (Tim O'Brien). In 1949 permission was granted and he was successful in the subsequent interview by the Civil Service Appointments Commission. In July 1949 he was appointed a Grade 3 inspector in Mallow and his salary increased from £185 (€235) a year to £378 (€480). He was among the first forestry inspectors to work solely on land acquisition. The price of forest land was determined by the Department of Finance and, as Niall often commented, the maximum price of an acre of forest land seemed to track the cost of a decent pair of shoes! Even in later years when land prices, and those of shoes, rose with inflation, the price of an acre remained uncannily close to a pair of brogues. "No wonder," he said, "Ireland's new forests were banished to the hills and bogs." Undaunted by these constraints Niall enjoyed his days in Mallow with fishing, photography and amateur dramatics filling his leisure hours.

His career took a new turn in 1957 when he was promoted to officer in charge of establishing and overseeing the first detailed forest inventory in Ireland. This followed the realisation among the higher echelons that a forest organisation unaware of its growing stock did not match best international standards. With school-boy zeal Niall dived into the challenge and within a few months his team of two (Tony Hannon and Padraic Joyce) were scrambling to keep up with his ideas of how and what should be done to make the inventory the envy of Europe. In those pre-computer days he adapted the "Hollerith" punch card¹ system to record, and retrieve, the vast array of

¹ Hollerith punch cards were constructed of stiff paper that contained digital information represented by the presence or absence of holes in predefined positions. Now an obsolete recording medium, punched cards were once widely used throughout the 19th century for controlling textile looms and in the late 19th and early 20th century for operating fairground organs and related instruments. They were used through the 20th century in unit record machines for input, processing and data storage. Early digital computers also made use of punched cards.

information gathered. He designed and personally made, the first mapping boards used by the inventory field-foresters using old X-ray films and plywood. Like the count-down to a space shuttle launch, Niall had date lines and deadlines, which he oversaw with unrelenting exactitude.

It was during this time that he organised the Society's 21st Annual study tour which consisted of a grand tour of Ireland in a less-than-grand bus which had seen better days. Undaunted he kept, or attempted to keep, to a strict time-table which frayed the nerves of many!

In September 1964 he returned to acquisition as a Grade 1 inspector. At this time the concept of linking land prices to timber and revenue potential was being developed with Niall playing a pivotal role in its field introduction. Although the new procedure helped to acquire better land, the watchful eye of the Land Commission prevented any meaningful upgrade and lead to individual acquisitions scattered throughout the country. Later on in his career Niall sought to improve this situation by setting a premium for better land within forest clusters, known as "Prime acquisition areas" with a corresponding reduction in land-price outside such clusters. Such an innovation did not however, meet with Department of Finance approval.

His promotion to Senior Inspector in 1975 saw his brief extended to include forest research and forest education and training. With the passing of the Wildlife Act in 1976 this was extended to include wildlife research; an area with which he was never really comfortable.

His promotion to Assistant Chief Inspector 1980 coincided with a focus on the increasing availability of cutaway bog for alternative uses. He sat on an interdepartmental committee on the topic and he fought successfully to have forestry recognised as a viable and legitimate use of such areas.

His final promotion was to that of Chief Inspector in March 1982. The "Western Package" had just been introduced, which marked the very first EU stimulus to private forestry in Ireland. Niall responded enthusiastically and appointed the first forestry professional within the service to work specifically on private forestry. However, this was a time of great financial stringency and severe budgetary reductions. Some of his plans and innovations never materialised. Kinnitty Castle closed as a forestry training centre, land purchase practically ground to a halt while the official mood was gradually moving towards the splitting of the Service into Authority and Enterprise.

Niall always displayed a boyhood enthusiasm for most topics especially beekeeping and fishing. He had a propensity for debate, often heated but never damaging to long-term relationships. Displaying a fertile and agile mind his innovations were often thwarted by "the official line" or experienced difficulties in their implementation. He was highly principled and followed those principles with scrupulous honesty. His attention to detail and tendency to micro-manage was both his strength and his weakness. His sincerity however, was never in doubt.

Niall died on 15th July 2011. He is survived by his wife Maureen, his children Conall, Ciarán, Mary and Eoghan to whom we offer our deepest sympathy.

Fergal Mulloy