

EDITORIAL**Future of forestry in Ireland -unlikely to be
a walk in the park**

This year has been a momentous year for forestry in Ireland. We celebrated the centenary since the Faculty of Forestry was established at UCD (then the Royal College of Science), where Augustine Henry became the first Professor of Forestry. It is also 100 years since the publication of the “The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland”, by Henry John Elwes and Augustine Henry (see Trees, Woods and Literature section). Other developments are also worthy of mention.

It is 50 years since John F. Kennedy visited Ireland (June) and his assassination (22nd November). The John F. Kennedy Arboretum in Co. Wexford is also 45 years-old (see also Forest Perspectives Section and the cover of this issue, which features a stunning aerial photograph). The Arboretum has an extensive collection of forest tree species from around the world, an invaluable repository of the types of trees that grow in Ireland. The Arboretum also contains valuable data on tree growth. With the fear of climate change looming, it is important to be able to evaluate the potential of different species to not only survive the predicted rise in temperature and reduced moisture availability, but also to continue to be productive. The future of the Arboretum has been uncertain for some time, so the Society has lobbied hard to secure its position. There has been a positive outcome in that regard, which the Society may have helped achieve. The National Botanic Gardens will take charge of the Arboretum and the title “JFK Arboretum” has been retained, which is welcomed. However, it is not clear as to whether or not a long-term plan for the development of the Arboretum has been put in place, which is worrying. Sadly there is also a link with an obituary in this issue, the death of Dr Jack Durand. Jack was Director of the Arboretum from 1972 until 1978 and contributed greatly to its development during those years.

Many readers will have welcomed the news that the Irish government will not sell Coillte’s harvesting rights. The Society campaigned to protect the public ownership of Irish forests, publishing a policy document on the subject in 2013. The Society believes that privatisation had the potential to disrupt the sustainable development of forestry in Ireland. However, it is not clear if Coillte is out of the woods yet. It remains to be seen if the proposed merger between Coillte and Bord na Móna goes ahead, and in the meantime, the continued uncertainty about the future of the company is not good for Irish forestry. In particular, there is concern that the Coillte part of this planned new entity might shift its focus away from the multifunctional value of forestry into other areas such as energy production.

The potential threat of disease and/or pest damage to Irish forests is real, a threat that has perhaps been exacerbated by a changing climate. The journal commissioned a paper by Dr Alistair McCracken on this topic, entitled “Current and emerging threats to Ireland’s trees from diseases and pests”, which is likely to be of huge

interest to our readers. We are indebted to Dr McCracken for carrying out this detailed review. Dr McCracken also presented an excellent talk on this topic at the Annual Augustine Henry Forestry Lecture, held at the Botanic Gardens in Dublin in March entitled “Are Ireland’s Trees Under Threat from Pests and Diseases?”

Dr McCracken’s paper is particularly timely given the reported spread of the ash dieback disease (*Chalara fraxinea*), found in recent times on nursery, garden centre, and roadside plantings. The majority of the outbreaks have been identified as part of a trace-forward exercise of batches of plants originating from a source known to be infected. Almost all of the trees were planted within the past five years, but there has been a recent report that the disease has been found on native hedgerow material.

In relation to ash dieback, Dr McCracken suggests that it may be possible to breed for resistance, but this is not likely to be an easy or inexpensive task. In one Danish study¹, only a small fraction of the ash trees were found to possess resistance, so it may not be possible to exploit this resistance without the risk of other adverse consequences. Some of the resistance may be indirect, perhaps reflecting the ability of some trees to “avoid” damage. In general, the most susceptible trees in that study were those whose buds flushed latest and retained their leaves latest into the autumn. It may be difficult to justify investing in a disease resistance breeding programme at the national level, but collaborating with other European countries on breeding efforts to this end may make more sense.

Plant health strategies and policies at international, national and local levels need to be developed to address ash dieback and other disease and pest threats. In particular, the lack of expertise (mainly as a result of retirements) and low level of research investment in the area of tree health are of concern. There is currently no forest pathologist working in Ireland. Given the limited resources available to it and other limitations, the Forest Service is doing a decent job in trying to address these problems. Nevertheless, the current approach is mostly reactive and appears to rely heavily on information supplied by well-meaning amateurs. The lack of expert advice has led to poor decision making. The Department of Agriculture is urged to act now in the interest of forest health.

¹ McKinney, L.V. Nielsen, L.R. Hansen, J.K. and Kjær, E.D. 2011. Presence of natural genetic resistance in *Fraxinus excelsior* (Oleraceae) to *Chalara fraxinea* (Ascomycota): an emerging infectious disease. *Heredity* 106: 788–797.