

SCENIC AMENITIES AND THE FOREST

By K. L. SCHORMAN

MUCH criticism has been levelled at the Forest Authorities both in this country and Great Britain, on account of the policy of laying down large areas of coniferous forest. It is claimed that the conifers are alien to this country, that their uniform dark green colouring is monotonous and dull and that the regularity of spacing with which they are planted destroys any charm they might otherwise have. Some critics go so far as to maintain that the purple of the heather and the varying hues of the bracken in Autumn should be preserved at all costs while others content themselves with a plea for the planting of hardwoods for their tender green in spring and their colourful Autumnal foliage.

On the first type of critic very little sympathy need be wasted. To leave the land to the heather and bracken is very largely to leave it to waste and, with an annual bill for the importation of timber and timber derivatives running into millions of pounds, we just cannot afford the luxury. Moreover, bracken spreads rapidly and is a threat to the better grazing lands in its vicinity. Its elimination, except above the timber line, is highly desirable and planting of the middle slopes of our hills would safeguard the lower slopes from further encroachment by this weed. For my own part I feel that any scenic value it has in growth and early maturity is not sufficient to compensate for the black ugliness in decay but I may be peculiar in that respect.

When we come to the second line of criticism there is perhaps more to be said. Alien most of the conifers certainly are but so also are most of the hardwoods we now regard as the ordinary trees of the countryside. It is only a question of time, and not necessarily a very long time, before the Spruces, Larches and other introductions become just as natural to our scenery as the native so called Scots Pine. Moreover, apart from a certain conservatism which is innate in most of us, a lot of criticism of the conifers seems to be based on the appearance of the young plantations. In the thicket stage these are certainly not very beautiful but it appears to be forgotten that this is a temporary stage, that as they grow older the plantations will improve in appearance, and a lot of the regularity will disappear. All conifers do not grow at the same rate nor are they all the same shade of green, thinnings may alter the regularity of spacing, the Larches at least have a winter colouring of their own. If ultimately felling is done on a selection basis and not by clear cutting

there will ultimately be an irregular mixture of ages and heights in our forests which will definitely free them from the objections of mechanical uniformity. In any case the vast bulk of the land acquired by the Forest Authority for planting is mountain land of inferior quality, not fitted for the growth of good hardwoods but eminently suited to the growth of coniferous timber. The main problem before the Forest Authority is to produce timber of commercial quality. Four fifths of the timber used in commerce is softwood. In these circumstances is there any real choice open to it?

The Forestry Act of 1946, from which the powers of the Forestry Authority is derived, nowhere lays it down that the State's operations must be conducted on strictly commercial lines and, keeping in mind the considerations mentioned above, we are entitled to ask whether, in fact, the commercial aspect is not being overdone and whether more consideration could not, and should not, be given to the aesthetic aspect. Even from a financial point of view the growth of a screen of hardwoods on the edges of coniferous plantations is to be recommended as a check upon the risk of fire. This is done in some cases but by no means in all. Such belts, along the roadsides for instance, would provide attractive colouring and the loss of ground, in so far as there would be a loss at all, would be so small as to be negligible. Personally I would like to make a plea for still greater efforts to add beauty to the plantations by a deliberate policy of planting purely ornamental trees along the roadside edges and on the margins of such rides as are visible from the roads. Admittedly these trees would never produce commercial timber but think of the addition a few rows of say flowering cherries would make to the beauty of the countryside in spring and autumn and the delight they would give to the motorist, the cyclist and the pedestrian. Some destructive vandalism could be expected, particularly in the early years, but if the Roadside Tree Association has found it worthwhile to plant such types of trees on some of the main roads near Dublin and elsewhere and the Wexford Co. Council has had the courage to plant apple trees on the roadsides of that county, the State ought not to flinch from a slightly greater task.

Recent announcements regarding the State forestry activities have mentioned extensive experiments in the planting of bog land and if these are successful it is to be expected that they will be expanded. Though the motive is again purely financial, the results are likely to bring about big changes in scenery of some of the most desolate looking areas in the country, areas where any change could hardly fail to be an improvement. Of course, there will be dissidents who maintain that the bogs have a beauty of their own but it is difficult to maintain patience with those who see beauty in the monotony of a huge sweep of bog but complain of the dullness of a similar area of pine woods.

I suppose Ministers and their advisers are considered to be infallible because, while the Forestry Act does not mention aesthetic considerations

in connection with the powers and duties entrusted to the Minister and gives no direction either positive or negative, it does make specific provision for the retention of trees on private lands in order to preserve scenic amenities. Under Section 44 of the Act it is provided that the Minister shall not refuse, solely for the preservation of scenic amenity, permission for the felling of any tree unless the district planning authority (usually the County Council) has consented to the refusal. If permission is refused the owner may require the planning authority to acquire the site of the tree, and presumably the tree itself. The clauses dealing with compensation refer to various other Acts and, without a study of those Acts, convey very little to me and would, I suppose, convey very little to most of my readers. It would seem reasonable to assume that the compensation should at least equal the market value of the tree as timber plus the market value of the land and, in practice, it is likely to be somewhat higher. So far, I am not aware of any instance in which the County Council or other planning authority, has insisted upon the retention of trees purely for the purpose of preserving scenic amenities. Indeed their problem is not quite so simple as it may seem at first glance. Trees do not live for ever and without some provision for replacement of the existing trees the wooded aspect of any area would probably disappear sooner or later.

If I may revert to a personal note, one autumn some years ago I was walking through an area of scattered trees beside a stream. On lifting my eyes from the stream, in which I confess I was mainly interested, I looked ahead and beheld a most glorious sight. In amidst the green of other trees there was a patch of brilliant red standing out as would a lighted torch in the dusk of evening. It was a maple of some sort and the colouring of the foliage was something to marvel at. Whether seen from afar or from close at hand this tree was a thing of outstanding beauty and a joy for ever, or at least for as long as the mind can carry a picture. I do not want to suggest any specialisation in or concentration on maples. For ought I know they may be most difficult subjects to grow but if a few of these or some allied species could be scattered irregularly through the pine woods, as an autumnal supplement to the spring flowering trees, to which I have referred above, the Forest Authority would have taken very positive steps to add to the scenic amenities of our countryside and have redeemed itself from the charges made against it of sordid commercialism and soulless monotony of outlook.