

# IRISH FORESTRY

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## *Editorial*

### **A Returning Menace.**

THE appearance of myxomatosis in Co. Carlow three years ago was an event of major importance to Irish Forestry. Helped by the rabbit flea the disease spread rapidly through the country until all but a few isolated areas were affected.

The introduction and spread of the disease was deplored by many: the naturalist bemoaned the fate of one of the most familiar and interesting of the country's fauna; many people living in rural areas lamented the wiping out of a source of cheap meat; the "lamper" found himself out of business and the sportsman had to think of other quarry.

The appearance of infected rabbits was none too pleasant and we all experienced a feeling of revulsion towards what was indeed a loathsome disease.

There was for the forester, however, another side to the picture: the wild rabbit, so long his arch-enemy, had, at last it seemed, met his Waterloo. Experience abroad of course indicated that a small proportion of the rabbit population could be expected to survive and that these, if not exterminated, would form the foundation stock of myxomatosis-immune animals. The forester nevertheless breathed a sigh of relief—the rabbit was no longer a force to be reckoned with at least for some years.

Up to that time forestry in Ireland had been grievously burdened by the expense of combating this pest. The cost of protecting plantations against its ravages was anything from 15% to 20% of total establishment costs. In addition there was the very significant loss due to the killing of natural seedlings and, sometimes, in spite of protective measures, the destruction of planted stock.

Irish foresters who studied the theory of silvicultural systems evolved in continental Europe, where rabbits were the exception rather than the rule, could only throw up their hands in hopelessness when they tried to put the theories into practice here: natural regeneration, which was the basis of most of these systems, just was not possible in this country owing to the presence of the rabbit.

Farmers too had suffered severely. Yields of corn crops had often been reduced drastically and production of milk, beef and mutton had

been depressed. Farmers were well aware of the fact that these losses far outweighed any value the rabbit might have had as food—rabbits reduced the grazing value of their fields not only by eating the herbage but by fouling the areas as well.

The disappearance of the rabbit, therefore, had, as one would expect, a marked influence on the countryside. Lush vegetation appeared on ground which hitherto carried only a carpet of moss. Farmers noted with satisfaction the increase in yields of milk and grain crops and the improvement in the condition of their flocks and herds. Foresters saw young natural seedlings gain a foothold and old seedlings which had been repeatedly nibbled back shoot away at last. More important, most of them saw their way to dispense with the use of expensive wire netting in fencing new planting areas.

While all this was taking place a small number of rabbits which had survived the disease had been multiplying in a fecund manner and we find that in some places today the menace is again raising its head.

The National Farmers' Association realize that a successful comeback by the rabbit could be achieved and they are organising counter-action through their branches.

It may be thought that foresters who have vivid memories of the depredations caused before the appearance of myxomatosis should not need to be reminded of the importance of stamping out the pest as soon as it appears in their plantations. Foresters are, however, busy men and in the execution of their programmes, which tax their time and energy to the limit, there is a danger that the re-appearance of the rabbit may not receive the attention it merits. This applies particularly in the case of plantations which have passed the vulnerable stage. It must not be forgotten, however, that farmers' efforts at extermination may be thwarted by the fact of those plantations serving as breeding grounds and havens for hunted animals.

Foresters should, therefore, tackle the job of extermination in a determined manner. Every available means short of deliberately spreading myxomatosis—this may not now be possible anyway—should be employed. Trapping, snaring, shooting, gassing, any or all of these methods should, if necessary, be employed. The war on the rabbit should not be confined to any particular season of the year; it should, if necessary, be waged all the year round.

No campaign can be regarded as successful until the last rabbit has been exterminated. To achieve this a well co-ordinated effort by all land users, for which the conditions are now ripe, is absolutely essential.

It is indeed a matter for regret that we have to employ such methods as trapping and gassing but there are hopes that a more humane type of trap may be developed in the near future. The problem, clearly, does not brook delay. Prompt action is necessary.

## **The Constitution of the Society.**

In the early days of the Society when there was a preponderance of technical members in relation to associate members the latter had no vote nor were they eligible for election as office-bearers or members of the Council.

As the years went by, however, the proportion of associate members increased to the extent that it was felt that some alteration of the Constitution was necessary.

Accordingly at the annual general meeting of 1948 changes were introduced which gave associate members the right of nominating members for election to the Council and of voting as well as giving them a representation of two on a Council of twelve.

As many members have joined since that time the Council decided last year that it was desirable that the Constitution in its present form should be circulated to all members.

Accordingly copies have been printed and issued to members. Non-members interested in securing copies should make application to the honorary secretary.

## **Cover Photograph**

The Cover photograph shows a mixed crop of douglas and norway spruce growing in intimate mixture on a sheltered alluvial plot at Compartment 8, Avondale, Co. Wicklow.

The trees are recorded as having been planted at  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. spacing in 1905.

Recent sample plot measurement gave the following results :

Species			Douglas	Norway Spruce
Number of Stems per Acre	...	...	80	74
Mean Tree Heights	...	...	107 ft.	94 ft.
Volume per Acre (Hoppus ft. U.B.)	...	...	4,377	2,327