
Letter to the Editor

Wanted - A FOREST COMMUNITY

Sir,

When I arrived at Shillong from Burma in 1942 I was welcomed by that great forester, Mackarness, then Senior Conservator, Assam. Over his office were the words : "You can take the man out of the forest but you cannot take the forest out of the man." I think that is about the best description of a forester that I know. Anyone whom it does not fit had better go on the Stock Exchange or something else.

It was said that a man who made two blades of grass grow where one grew before was the greatest benefactor of the human race. This pales to insignificance before the task that devoted band, the foresters in Ireland, have to face. *Vide* the foregoing, they are two :

i. To grow millions of trees where none grew before and in some cases may never have grown.

ii. To create a forest-minded community.

The latter task is probably the harder by far.

In the days of my youth, I, with other students, was going round a forest in Alsace. Feeling between French-Germans was then exceedingly high. We were being shown around by an officer who started each harangue with "*Les Boches*" and said how they went wrong. With us was the Strasbourg City forester whose views differed, and at last his patience gave out and he said : "*In Frankreich gibt es keine Wälder, nur Hecken.*" (There are no woods in France, only hedges). This was going much too far but it does, I think, show what the foresters in Ireland had to start with. Not only had they no sizeable woods to speak of, but there was no forest tradition at all, no skilled woodmen, no villages where lives depended on the forest and no real forest industries; no feeling for wood as a major product.

I think the first thing that strikes one after returning to Ireland

after some years is that in a town, apart from doors and windows, one sees no wood at all. No wooden, or even half-timbered houses. In the country likewise one sees no wooden gates, paling fences, wooden sheds, or anything made of wood used as a major part of a work. Even grandstands are concrete.

The reason is that wood is scarce and dear.

The Forest Service by pure grinding hard work has managed to acquire a couple of hundred square miles of forest land. The difficulty, to my mind, is that this has had to be got in scattered blocks all over the country, a square mile here, a couple of square miles there, and so on. How they must wish the miles *could* be square and not involve fantastic lengths of fencing per unit of area.

There are other uses for forest but the main one is to produce a crop of timber which will be available annually, perennially, to the timber using industries, *close to the said industries*. In other words the annual yield must be enough to justify the establishment of processing industries, sawmills, pulp factories etc., in or near the forest, with an adequate skilled labour supply.

I submit that piecemeal planting of comparatively small forests will not help to produce cheap forest produce, probably the most expensive thing on Earth, relative to its value, to transport otherwise than by water.

There are areas in Ireland—West Galway where this is written is one—on which, in the last century or so, millions of pounds in money and much effort has been expended, to my mind uselessly, in an effort to recreate a viable agricultural community. It produces a few sheep and cattle and the emigrants save the C.I.E. trains and buses from travelling completely empty—that is about all.

The land does however grow trees reasonably well.

My submission is that the whole area west of the great western lakes, Corrib, Mask, Carra and Conn be scheduled as a forest and administered as such. There are of course areas that would have to be excluded, there is a strip of land from Castlebar to Westport for example, and the existing population would need their fields. Some cultivation would be needed to provide food for the forest staff.

Such an arrangement, to my mind, is the only economic solution for the area and would produce a prosperous major industry. Of course it would take time and money: grazing rights would have to be bought out, the question of turbary rights would have to be considered—in time wood fuel should be available cheaply saving the laborious turf-saving work.

Timber processing industries would be established in the area, and as none of it is far from the sea, exports would not be hampered by long hauls, just as timber would no longer have to be carried as now up to 50 or 60 miles.

In time the inhabitants themselves would be mainly interested in the forest, in a word the forest would have got into the man.

At first sight this may seem a mad scheme. But is it? Anyway perhaps I have started a discussion and if there is anything in the idea perhaps "*exegi*".

Yours, etc.,

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Co. Galway.

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