

## A Song for the Forest

Tom Mongan.

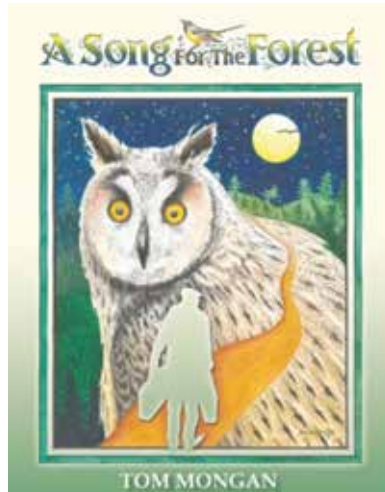
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In writing *A Song for the Forest*, Tom Mongan has produced a delightful book which recounts his travels and experiences while working as a “forestry plough operator” around Ireland during the 1960s. His odyssey leads us through a “hidden Ireland”, to places which are well off the beaten path and tourist trail. However, Tom also brings us to towns and even to some cities since his story coincides with the “show-band era”. Long, dreary days on the plough were relieved by the bright lights and music at night, when great dreams and youthful ambitions were granted full rein.

Tom began his career as a forest worker near his home in Letterfrack, Co. Galway. Back then he was happy working in the forest and living the days for the night as dancing was uppermost in his mind. However, on his way home from work one evening he fell off his new racing bike and was rushed to hospital in Galway with severe head injuries. When he recovered, several months later, he returned to the forest only to find that his job was gone. Undaunted, Tom wrote to Head Office as follows: “A Chara, I wish to apply for a position as a plough operator with the Forestry Department”. Not knowing the correct address, Tom decorated his envelope with

nothing more than “Forestry HQ, Dublin” – evidently, there was no need for Eircode back then! One way or another, his letter did the trick and in due course he received the following, equally curt response “Report to Derrybrien Forest next Monday week at 8.00 am to commence three months training as a machine operator”. Following his training he was sent to the Nephin area of Co. Mayo and was based in Crossmolina. From there he moved to Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath where he purchased his first car - a VW Beetle. In those days the Beetle was the foresters’ car of choice as it was very reliable, cheap to run and, most importantly for travelling on forest roads, it was well sprung. Next, Tom moved to nearby Lough Sheelin and then back to his own county of Galway, although he was still 80 miles from home in Letterfrack. Following this to Co. Meath again, to Carnaross near Kells. He then moved to Mountbellew, where he remembers the forester in charge (the late Jim Cronin) was a real gentleman.

Tom rarely records people’s full names and perhaps this is just as well, as the following little story will illustrate. One day, when ploughing near Finea in Co. Cavan, a neighbouring farmer called him for help to rescue a cow from a deep drain. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned rescue mission coincided with a surprise inspection by a forestry chief from Dublin. In Tom’s own words this man considered himself to be not just “one of the gods” but the Supreme Being!! His name is not divulged but those of us who are of a certain vintage will enjoy the mental exercise of lining-up the suspects. Tom concludes the episode with this on-the-button comment: “This high ranking official did not understand country ways. If you want to get co-operation from the locals you have to be flexible. Back then, just as now, forestry depended on the goodwill of the local people. After all who else can you turn to for help in an emergency?”

Unfortunately, the outcome of Tom’s misadventure was that he was “put back on the spade” as punishment. Having thus served his time, he later returned to the ploughs. This time he went many miles from home to Waterville, Co Kerry and later to Mullaghareirk, Dunmanway and Ballyvourney, Co. Cork. He clearly enjoyed his time in Cork and Kerry and writes glowingly about the magnificent scenery and the friendly people he met there. Tom finally returned to where it all began in south east Galway. He met his wife in nearby north Clare and decided (or was persuaded) to give up his travels shortly afterwards.

Without the forestry plough, which was developed after World War II, whole tracts of peatland and uplands could not have been forested. Afforestation became possible because tracked machines, a legacy of the war, could travel these sites which were incapable of supporting wheeled tractors. The public forest estate would certainly be very meagre today without the extensive areas of peatland planted from the 1950s until the 1980s. Ploughing continued until the late 1980s when it was superseded by mounding which is a silviculturally superior system of ground cultivation. However,

ploughing was a very cheap cultivation method and planting on the ribbons, particularly with a dibble, was very fast as up to a 1,000 trees a-day could easily be planted. It should be remembered that all this took place in an era long before environmental impacts were considered; in the days when the *Ploughing Plan* comprised no more than getting the job completed at the least possible cost and this usually entailed making the ribbons as long as possible and getting water off-site as fast as possible.

Nowadays, an entire generation of foresters is unfamiliar with the forestry plough in much the same way as younger farmers are unfamiliar with corn-threshing. The only difference is that vintage machinery shows, which are now quite common, give farmers an understanding of the threshing process. However, the forestry plough is no more. There were three distinct types of ploughs. The Cuthbertson Double Mole Board plough which threw up two ribbons was the most common form of ploughing. However, it proved disastrous silviculturally as the tree roots tended to follow the ribbon and when storms came the entire ribbon with the trees often blew over. The Single Mole Board plough was mainly used to put in drains across the double mole board ploughed area and often necessitated two crawler machines pull it. Finally, there was the Clarke plough which was used on dry but rocky ground usually to break up the iron-pan. These ploughs had an ingenious device called the “shear-pin” which was the weakest link in the chain so when the plough head hit an immovable object the shear-pin broke, thus saving the plough from serious damage. The famous James A. Cuthbertson & Sons company of South Lanarkshire in Scotland, which spearheaded the development of these ploughs, is still thriving. However, nowadays it is better known for the manufacture of snow ploughs!

Books such as this, together with *A Social History of Forestry in Ireland* and Tom Briody’s *The Road to Avondale* and *In the Service of the State*, Tony Gallinagh’s *A long Journey in a Short Time* and Cecil Kilpatrick’s *Northern Ireland Forest Service – A History*, have made a hugely important contribution to recording the story of Ireland’s afforestation programme. Other national programmes such as rural electrification have been well documented for posterity. Huge credit is due to Tom for persevering with this project. In doing so, he has set a fine example for others to follow. The value of this book is that it contributes to a preservation of our country’s store of forestry history and stories - before “time steals our past forever”. Tom has blazed the trail, he has ploughed the furrow. The Society of Irish Foresters should now follow his lead.

*John Mc Loughlin.*