

Obituaries

Tomás de Gruinéal 1923-2014

Tomás de Gruinéal passed away peacefully on 14th November 2014 having reached the wonderful age of 91.

He was born in Creagh, Ballinrobe in South Mayo on 28th March 1923, the eldest of seven children born to Martin and Margaret (née Caulfield). He received his primary and secondary education at CBS Ballinrobe.

Tomás studied forestry at Avondale Forestry School, Co. Wicklow from 1942 to 1945. Having grown up during the years of agricultural depression, he was convinced that forestry could be a powerful force for improving Ireland's rural economy, particularly in more disadvantaged areas. On completion of his studies at Avondale Tomás seriously contemplated returning home to support the family, as tuberculosis had claimed the lives of both his parents. However, the then Director of Forestry, Dr M.L. Anderson (who had himself lost both his parents at a young age) was sympathetic to his plight and facilitated him with a forester's post close to the family locality (see Irish Forestry, Vol. 49 No 1&2, 1992). However, tragedy affected both men quite differently. Dr. Anderson was introverted and distant with staff, whereas Tomás was always full of good spirits, was close to his staff and forever encouraged and defended them.



Major planting programmes were undertaken from the early 1950s. The Inter-Party government, influenced by Seán Mac Bride and to comply with conditions for receiving aid under the Marshall Plan, adopted a long-term economic plan which supported an annual planting programme of 10,000 hectares. Here, Tomás began the pioneering work of establishing extensive forests at Ross, Maam and Cloosh, Co. Galway. This was not an easy task, as the fiasco of an ill-advised, late nineteenth century afforestation scheme at Knockboy in west Galway was often recalled when these major afforestation schemes were proposed. However, the establishment of these major forests provided significant rural employment and, in time, became a major source of material for sawmills throughout the west of Ireland. Tomás took great pride in being able to provide sustainable jobs for men who would otherwise have been forced to emigrate to England or the USA. It is said that his only regret was that the new OSB mill was located in Co. Waterford rather than in Co. Mayo or Galway which supplied huge quantities of its raw material.

In 1957, Tomás was promoted to the inspectorate in Galway. In this role he proved to be a

dedicated and innovative man who guided the establishment of afforestation on blanket bog and some elevated sites in the west of the county. In 1964, he became District Inspector in Co. Mayo. He took a keen interest in the nurseries at Foxford and Glenisland which supplied the plant requirements of the forests within the county. In 1980, he was promoted Divisional Inspector in Galway. Tomás retired in 1988, the year before Coillte was established. However, he maintained his keen interest in Society matters and in forestry in general.

In 2012, Tomás was conferred with honorary membership of the Society of Irish Foresters. In accepting this honour, he saw it not as an acknowledgement of his own efforts, but of the Herculean work of those who worked with him in very difficult conditions to establish forests in the west of Ireland. Tomás was synonymous with the west of Ireland. He was very proud of this affiliation and he always defended his staff on the basis that it was considerably more difficult to achieve comparable output from the region as it lacked the fundamental resources, particularly soil and climate, of other regions of the country.

Tomás had his own view on most matters. In the 1970s when an attempt was made to introduce uniformity in tree species names, Tomás persisted in calling lodgepole pine *Contorta*, arguing that it was *Contorta* when he planted it and he assumed it still was the same! He was always conscious of the long term consequences of decisions and tried to predict the interest of future generations. He was cautious in planning and pondered how to approach a decision whose consequences could be irreversible.

He published several articles in *Irish Forestry*, he wrote about Cloosh forest in Vol. 13, No 2 (1956) and on the wood ant (*Formica rufra*) in Vol. 23, No 2 (1967). He organised several field trips in the West for the Society and during these memorable outings he would draw attention to the many features and landscapes that moulded and influenced his path in life. Tomás attended his last field day in 2002 in counties Galway and Mayo. This was on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Society.

Bhí suim mhór ag Tomás i nGaeilge agus bhí an leagan Gaeilge dá ainm cláraithe sa Roinn i 1946. Thóg sé fein, agus a bheanchéile Noreen, arb as an nGaeltacht di, a chlann go hiomlán leis an nGaeilge. Ina theannta sin bhain sé feidhm as an teanga oiread agus ar fhéidir le linn dó bheith i mbun a oibre.

Tomás was a deeply religious man and a lifelong teetotaler. At his funeral the coffin was draped with the flag of The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association (PTAA) in recognition of his lifelong membership and advocacy.

Tomás was predeceased by two of his sons Kieran and Finian. To his wife Noreen and family Gearóidín, Ailish, Emer, Cathal, Bláth, Fergal, Annin, Sinéad, Tom and Doireann we offer our sincere sympathy.

“Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dlíis.”

Frank Nugent