

Niall OCarroll 1934 – 2015

The death has occurred of Niall OCarroll in his 81st year. As a forester he played a leading role in Irish forestry from the time he entered the Forestry Division of the Department of Lands in 1957 until his retirement in 1995. As a young forester in the organisation he pioneered procedures for scientific field research which would become established practice. Later, as Chief Inspector of the Forest Service, he was involved in the process leading to the formation of Coillte, the semi-state forestry company for the management of a timber resource which he had helped to establish. On his retirement he retained a strong interest in state forestry. His frequent letters to the Editor of the Irish Times were influential in shaping public opinion whenever the publicly owned forests were threatened with sale or acquisition by another body.



Niall was born in Athlone into a musical family whose influence would remain with him all his life. He received his primary and secondary education locally. When it came to a choice of career he could hardly ignore the fact that two of his first cousins, Joe and Tom, were serving forest officers in the state Forest Service. He entered UCD to study forestry in 1951, graduating with 1st Class honours in 1956, and went on to take a Masters degree. He completed his practical year in Ballygar Forest, Co. Galway under the tutelage of Harry Silke, Head Forester. His experience there gave him an insight into what it meant to be a forest worker and he would often refer to them as the real creators of our national forests.

On graduation, he secured a teaching position at Johnstown Castle, which was then the headquarters for the Soils Section of the Agriculture Institute (now Teagasc). In 1957, he accepted a position in the then Forestry Division of the Department of Lands and was assigned to the newly formed Research Branch with responsibility for research into forest crop nutrition. The poor quality of soils which formed the major part of the expanded forestry programme of the 1950s required soil amelioration of some form or another and nutrient input. Niall's task was to determine what was needed to support productive forest growth. His approach was based on scientific experimental design, using replicated field trials, something of a novelty at the time. This soon became standard practice across Research Branch and was bolstered by a course, instigated by Niall, on statistics and experimental design at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The success of the experimental approach he advocated and practiced, led him to a number of important discoveries, including unravelling the essential role of potassium in forest growth in the Midlands, and the cause of group dying disease in conifers. Both of these findings were implemented in practice and this led to healthier and more productive forests. His scientific approach

became the standard practice in forest research and subsequently led to a series of findings by Research Branch. These form the basis for the establishment, species composition and management of many Irish forests up to the present day. Indeed the productive nature of Irish forests owes a lot to Niall's approach and leadership.

In 1972 he was awarded a PhD for his work on tree nutrition by the National University of Ireland.

Promotion took him away from research for a period but he returned there as Senior Inspector (Research) in 1979. In 1982, he took over the duties of Assistant Chief Inspector, and was promoted to Chief Inspector of the Forest Service in 1986. He retired in 1995.

Although he had often said that he would retire to the west of Ireland, many colleagues were much surprised when he did relocate to Ballinrobe, Co. Mayo. An inveterate bibliophile, even from his student days, he set about converting an outbuilding into a library to house his book collection. This he continued to build on with purchases on the Internet, many of them rare books of forestry interest. He also found time to write: he is the author of 'Forestry in Ireland – A Concise History' and co-author of 'Sitka spruce in Ireland'. The former is dedicated: *To the memory of those who worked hard for little reward and less thanks to create the asset we all now enjoy* – a fitting tribute to the hardy forest workers. He had many publications on tree nutrition to his name both as author and co-author and he edited the revised edition of 'The Forests of Ireland', which was published by the Society of Irish Foresters. Under the pen-name Wood Kerne he contributed forestry related articles of literary interest to Irish Forestry for many years. These articles, gleaned from his extensive library, were first choice reading for many.

He was a lifelong member of the Society of Irish Foresters on which he served as Editor, continuously from 1969 to 1977. He was President from 1983 to 1985 and was elected an Honorary Member in 2006.

Niall had a love of Irish music and was an accomplished uilleann piper. He was passionate about state forestry. The associated principle of sustainability of wood supply and services was his creed, and one he adhered to throughout his professional career. He would remind those who would listen, that sustainability in forestry had its origins in the early 18th century and that, as foresters, we had a moral obligation to leave to future generations something more than depleted forest resources.

Niall was a highly principled individual, never prepared to compromise. This trait often led to disagreement with those who viewed forestry as too long term an enterprise as well as colleagues who saw it as a resource to be exploited for short-term gain.

He was laid to rest among the Partry hills in west Mayo, not too far from Nephin and Glenamoy, where he conducted some of his seminal field work many years ago.

He is survived by his wife, Theresa, children Cormac, Aoife, Derval, Eadaoin, Ellen, Art and grandchildren, to whom we offer our deepest sympathy.

P.M. Joyce