

Michael McNamara 1912–2016

Michael McNamara passed away peacefully on 3rd October 2016 in his 105th year.

He was born in Cratloekeel, Cratloe, Co. Clare the fourth eldest of seven children to John and Jane (née Cherry) on 21st July 1912 – two years before the outbreak of WWI and three months after the sinking of the Titanic.

He quickly realised, on completion of his secondary education that he would have to leave home as there were few employment opportunities locally. At that time, Ireland was beginning a slow, protracted recovery in the aftermath of independence and the tragic Civil War. In his late teens, Michael mixed politics and sport both as secretary of the local Fianna Fáil Cumann and an athlete with O’Callaghan’s Mills Athletic Club. He was a fine athlete and was selected for the Irish cross-country international panel. In later life Michael took up golf, a sport he excelled in for over 50 years. For much of this time, he achieved a low single figure handicap. A regular at forestry golf outings, he captained St. Anne’s Golf Club, Dublin and was President of Cork Golf Club.



He received a scholarship from Clare Co. Council to attend Athenry Agriculture College in 1931 followed by two years in the Albert College, Glasnevin, Dublin. After successfully completing the Albert College course, he received two career offers. His choice lay between a three-year forestry course in Avondale or an appointment as agricultural and rural advisor with the Land Commission. The Land Commission had replaced the Congested District Board, which was dissolved in 1923.

When I interviewed him just before his 100th birthday in 2012 for a series of articles and the RTE radio programme “Sunday Miscellany”, he told me that he was leaning towards the Land Commission at the time. “I had fluent Irish which this post required and I must confess that I was tempted as I would be based in the west of Ireland, probably close to my native Co. Clare,” he said. “The position also offered a reasonable salary but Professor Drew – an excellent lecturer at the college – advised me to opt for Avondale. Professor Drew said that a forestry course would eventually provide a good qualification even though it offered only a paltry allowance to begin with.”

He opted for forestry and when he entered Avondale in 1935, Michael, like many of his fellow students, had little knowledge of forestry and the difficult challenges that lay ahead. The training regime was tough; a mixture of manual forestry and nursery work combined with lectures by Alistair Grant, a Scottish forester. Grant was a strict

but fair disciplinarian recalled Michael. "He was a good teacher but we were fortunate to also receive brilliant lectures each month from Mark Loudon Anderson who was then acting director of forestry in Ireland."

Anderson impressed him but he could be prickly and authoritarian in his relationship with students. "He was a born lecturer but the advice was 'not to question him'", advice which the youthful Clare student ignored to his peril on one occasion. "I got on very well with him until one day when he was discussing forest windthrow, I offered an alternative view to his," recalled Michael. "My comment was given in the spirit of youthful enthusiasm, but Anderson took serious exception to my remark which he perceived as questioning his knowledge and his authority. In fact it was neither, but he barely acknowledged me after this."

Luckily, for Michael by the time the final exams and interviews came around in 1938, Anderson had been replaced by Otto Reinhardt, a former Oberforstmeister in the Prussian Forest Service.

Michael was an enthusiastic and diligent student and he impressed Reinhardt. "Reinhardt put greater emphasis on German silviculture and was instrumental in providing two final-year students with an opportunity to further their education in Germany," said Michael. "Joe Deasy and I were chosen and we headed for Wageningen in 1939 but had scarcely arrived when we were ordered home as the threat of World War II loomed.

He was tempted to emigrate but was offered a post as a forester in Galtee Forest, Co. Tipperary, which he accepted. He recalled humorously that after his hasty return from Germany, he was told that life would at least be more peaceful in south Tipperary. However, as it turned out, he landed in the middle of a local land war. As he cycled to a planting site one morning, he had to take shelter as gunfire echoed around him. Some of the sheep farmers who sold the hill commonages for planting wished to retain grazing rights on the newly planted land and the young Co. Clare forester stood in the way.

Despite the threats, he persevered with his work. At a hastily convened meeting in a pub in Kilbehenny to settle the dispute, his genial approach softened their attitude towards him. His arguments about the employment potential of forestry were convincing and the tide was now turning as more locals – including sheep farmers – were recruited for the Galtee Mountains planting programme. While the threat to his safety receded, the Department of Lands transferred him to Ravensdale Forest, Co. Louth as a precaution.

After Ravensdale, he was transferred to Cong Sawmill in 1940 and the following year he was back in Avondale as housemaster. Despite qualifying as a forester in 1938 and managing forests with large numbers of employees his status was a forestry foreman. "We were unestablished public service workers and when we sought Civil Service status we were refused," he says. "We were liable to be transferred almost on a yearly basis with neither security of employment nor pension rights."

Despite his precarious financial situation and poor prospects, he married Mona Boyle a native of Co. Donegal in 1941. He continued to fight to become an “established” public servant with reasonable conditions, but said that “nine years after qualifying my wages were still a paltry two pounds, six shillings and two pence”. His final appointment as a forester in charge was in Freshford Forest, when he was based in Jenkinstown, north of Kilkenny city.

In 1948, he was promoted to the position of Assistant District Inspector. Based in Navan, he worked with the District Inspector, Roddy Crerand in an area that covered North Co. Meath, part of Co. Westmeath and Co. Cavan.

A few years later, Michael was promoted again, this time to the position of Acquisition Inspector. Now based in Dublin, his skills as a negotiator served him well in buying land from individual farmers or groups of farmers when commonages were purchased.

The Acquisition Inspector played a key role in forestry during the 1950s and 60s. “Sean McBride played a major role in setting a 10,000 ha planting target, which was eventually achieved,” he said. “We more than doubled our annual intake of land especially large tracts of mountain and bogland, but when reasonably good land was included, it was usually taken over by the Land Commission,” he admitted ruefully.

He recalled sad moments, especially when the vendor was emigrating or was forced to sell because there was nobody left to inherit the land. But there were also a humorous side to the job. Land was a measure of a person’s status in the community and to illustrate this Michael cited an example of a land purchase deal he negotiated in Tipperary. “I had agreed a price for the purchase of 90 acres and had the various documents drawn up, but when I returned I was told that the farm had been sold to a neighbour for the same price.”

A dejected Michael met the neighbour who told him that he would sell him the land within a year. “I sensed that he was speculating, so I told him I wasn’t interested. But he assured me that he would sell it for the same price and sure enough, a year later, true to his word, he sold the land back at the original price.” A bemused Michael asked him why go to all this bother especially as he had lost some money in the transaction due to legal fees. “I asked a girl from Limerick to marry me but her family farm was 70 acres while mine was only 40 acres,” he explained. “By purchasing the 90 acres I had a farm which was much larger than the Limerick holding so my future in-laws were very impressed. Now that we are married, we are both happy to farm the 40 acres which is the best of land and every bit as good as the 70 acres below in Limerick.”

He was later promoted to Divisional Acquisition Inspector and given charge of the southern half of the country. By now he was living happily in Dublin with Mona and their two sons, Fergus and Conor but sadly, this idyllic life ended in 1970 when Mona died suddenly.

As he was now in charge of acquisition in the southern half of the country and with

much of the land purchasing taking place in Munster, Michael eventually moved to Cork and set up home outside the city in Little Island.

In the late 1960s he had the good fortune to meet Marie O'Connor, a secondary school teacher in Cork. They met through their involvement with the Samaritans in Cork. They were married in 1972 and a new and exciting chapter began in Michael's and Marie's lives.

Michael retired in 1976 and began a new career as a consultant forester with the support of Marie. This was a rewarding experience for both of them. By now Marie had also retired and Michael always emphasised the major role that she played in their new venture. They both enjoyed their new careers in private forestry. Michael had a wonderful retirement, he worked for 41 years in the State Forest Service and followed that with 40 years of retirement.

When I interviewed him in 2012 he looked back on his career with pride. He said that one aspect of the State forestry programme – the purchase of land – sat uneasily with him for many years. He felt that in many instances the landowner had no choice but to sell, even if many others benefited from this decision. He understood the hurt of selling land especially when forced to do so because of emigration or economic hardship.

So when the State took the visionary decision in the 1970s to create an "open forest policy", it was a very welcome development in Michael's eyes because it returned the land and the forests to all the people. Here, they could roam at will over one million acres of State forests, much of it established when the Irish economy was in dire straits. This was the tangible benefit of his work as forester and acquisition inspector.

During our interview the sale of the harvesting rights of State forests was being proposed. Michael was appalled by the decision to sell off the forests and his birthday wish was that the forests which he helped to create would continue to be forests for all our people, "forests whose value is measured not just in narrow economic terms but in their total contribution to society". He was granted his wish as the proposed sale was wisely dropped later that year.

Highly regarded and respected as a forester, Michael was elected President of the Society of Irish Foresters on two occasions, in 1963-1964 and again in 1969-1970. The last surviving founding member of the Society of Irish Foresters, he was elected an Honorary Member in 2008. Michael will always be remembered as a generous, loyal and good humoured colleague and friend; the best of company and an eloquent raconteur throughout his long and rewarding life.

We extend our sincerest sympathies to Marie, Fergus and Conor, and all Michael's friends and relatives, including his nephew Sean who followed him into forestry.

Go ndéanfaid Dia trócaire ar a anam.

Donal Magner