

EDITORIAL**Championing trees and forestry**

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate:
I think they have no portion in us after
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Ernest Dowson

Ernest Dowson the poet and translator, described by his friend Oscar Wilde as “poor wounded wonderful fellow”, was rather unfortunate in life and in the above underlines the transient quality of human life and of our wishes. Of course, forestry offers an immediate antidote to such feelings of impending doom. All those who manage trees and forests quickly come to appreciate their contribution is to a much bigger and longer-lived goal. An example of which is the story of our latest champion tree - an unexpected stand in a somewhat unlikely location which was spared from harvest has now allowed some very fast-growing Sitka spruce to take the top place for tallest tree in the country. The Lugduff stand (see front cover image) demonstrates what a beautiful tree Sitka spruce is, especially if given the time to express itself in all its majesty. It deserves to be featured on the cover of *Irish Forestry* as homage to the tree hunters who introduced this western North American exotic to Ireland and the generations of foresters and forest workers who planted and nurtured it to play such a vital role in the short but proud history of Ireland’s forests. John Mc Loughlin’s update of Ireland’s champion trees in the Perspectives section makes cheering reading. Another article by Niall Mac Coitir traces our long, but sometimes forgotten, wood culture. Similarly, Dermot Byrne describes the world of his father, a timber merchant in Wicklow spanning four decades from the 1940’s. One hopes that some decades from now there will begin to appear such fondly-remembered silvan memories in Leitrim!

The theme of long-term silvicultural management is addressed by a series of articles examining Sitka spruce in a mixed species system (Black et al.),

alternative approaches for the forests on western peatlands (Lundholm et al.) and the potential for agroforestry in Ireland (McAdam). Kelleher describes an action plan for the conservation of forest genetic material. In a year where the summer has now uncovered the alarming and saddening decline among ash and elm (again), it is unsettling to hear of signs of another dieback disease, this time of alder (O Hanlon et al.), though the story of how it was uncovered is interesting. Magner's depiction of O'Rathaille's commentary on forest decline in the 17th and early 18th centuries, caused by over exploitation but also likely because of an earlier period of climate change, is timely. This places the Houlihan and Black article, which provides a practical carbon calculator for describing the climate mitigation potential of afforestation, into context. Dowson's "days of wine and roses" can evaporate easily and be "gone with the wind" if we take our eyes off that ball.

Irish forestry would be in a good place, if the performance of the sector was measured by reports, policy documents and strategic plans. Since *Growing for the Future* was launched in 1996 there has been a plethora of reports mainly addressing Ireland's afforestation programme. Each strategic plan, including the *Malone Report - Factors Affecting Afforestation in Ireland in Recent Years* (2007) and *Forests, Products and People – Ireland's Forest Policy – a Renewed Vision* (2014) has singularly failed to address the fall in afforestation rates.

Since 1996 our annual afforestation rate has fallen from 20,981 ha to 2,016 ha in 2021, despite COFORD's recommendation to increase planting "to a level approaching 16,000 ha per year" (COFORD 2022). In addition, the future of the forestry and forest products sector has been threatened by a forestry licence appeal system that resulted in a backlog of 4,500 planting, felling and road licences by late 2020. Forestry consultants and companies, contractors, timber processors, and nursery managers have had to seriously curtail operations. To rectify this situation, sawmills have increased log imports from Scotland as Coillte and private forest owners cannot get felling licence approvals while nurseries depend on exports of plants to Scotland. In summary, forestry in Ireland is now at a crisis point.

Scotland faced a similar downturn in afforestation in 2016 but took action by commissioning a report from Jim Mackinnon to address falling afforestation programmes. Backed by the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy, Fergus Ewing, Scottish forestry acted on those recommendations and recovered, increasing afforestation from 4,600 ha in 2016 to 11,200 ha in 2019. Calls for a Mackinnon report for Ireland – by forestry stakeholders – were accepted by DAFM in July 2019. Commissioned by the then Minister of State Andrew Doyle, the Review of Approval Processes for Afforestation was delivered in November 2019.

Essentially, it contained 22 relevant recommendations if Mackinnon's call for a review of "the legislation on forestry [to] consider the introduction of a single

consent covering planting, road construction, management and felling” is included. In addition to this standout recommendation, the report recommended an 8,000-ha annual planting programme, a renewed forestry strategy and crucially, a requirement to address the problems with the appeals system.

This was followed by the *Implementation of the Mackinnon Report*, which was produced by Jo O’Hara in February 2021, with “advice to the Minister on the implementation of the ‘ways forward’ proposed by Jim Mackinnon in his review of forestry licences.” Minister of State Senator Pippa Hackett, has taken ownership of O’Hara’s report by establishing *Project Woodland* to “tackle issues in forestry in Ireland and drive forward the planting of trees”. O’Hara, former chief executive of Forestry Commission Scotland, acknowledged “some notable progress” on legislation, staff recruitment and strengthening the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) the independent body that assesses appeals against the granting of licences for afforestation, road building and felling. However, she says the pace and progress of legislative changes has not been matched by other recommendations made in the 2019 Mackinnon review. For example, there has been “little visible progress in addressing the difficulties with afforestation approval”. While it would be easy to dismiss *Project Woodland* as another in a long line of well-meaning but failed reports, there are a number of critical differences in this report compared with previous exercises.

First, Jo O’Hara stresses the need for urgency to make change happen. “The Department now needs to act swiftly to address weaknesses in project management and communications, establishing a clear pathway for delivery of the Mackinnon recommendations,” she says at the outset of the report.

Second, she outlines an organisational structure which provides a voice for key forestry stakeholders as well as an external independent input. This structure has a project management board which is chaired by Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General within DAFM and has three external members including O’Hara. The board oversees delivery of the report to Minister Hackett including key sectoral reports provided by four “work streams” or working groups chaired by external appointments.

The report identifies the following key issues that must be addressed urgently: reducing the licencing backlog; the need to develop a forestry strategy; the creation of pilot studies on land availability; achieving clarity on the interpretation of European directives on forestry; and pre-application site-based discussions between forestry inspectors and registered foresters.

Finally, O’Hara is emphatic about achieving deliverables within a limited time: “Detailed progress should be tracked monthly by the project board, quarterly updates provided to the Forestry Policy Group and the whole project should undergo a rapid review after 6-8 months to ensure it is delivering the desired outcome and make any necessary changes.”

Postscript

The objectives of *Project Woodland* are laudable including its willingness to engage with a wide range of stakeholders including Society of Irish Foresters' members. It deserves our support and it deserves to succeed. As a result, 15 months on, there is no target date for completion and only three of Mackinnon's 22 recommendations have been implemented. We have been down this weary road before where "Our path emerges for a while, then closes..." Against this backdrop, another Dowson line comes to mind: "Can famine be so nigh to harvesting?" However, even at this late stage, with the energy and drive of a "dedicated project manager" and a realistic timeframe, *Project Woodland* could champion the cause and steer forestry on a pathway to success.

The publication of the print version of this issue has been seriously delayed by the limitations and complications to professional and personal life imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is regrettable but hopefully such difficulties are almost at an end and publication can return to an annual pattern.