

Report by H.M. Forestry Commissioners Great Britain, June, 1943

This report appears opportunely, so far as forestry in Great Britain is concerned, when the second world crisis has again thrown a severe strain upon the woods and forests of that country and when the Forestry Commissioners are, as a result of almost twenty-three years of experience in the acquisition and afforestation of land by the State, in a better position to realise what the development of a forest estate, under the general social and economic conditions prevailing in that island, involves. They are in a position to consider what mistakes in general policy have been made, if any, and to remedy these and also, at the same time, to bring forward stronger arguments to support any plan for forestry development.

The report is full of excellent material and ably drafted and well worthy of the importance of the occasion.

There are seven main sections under the following headings: Historical; Considerations basic to British Forestry Policy; Private Woodlands; Technical Services; Amenity and Recreational Facilities; Forest Policy and Progress; The Forest Authority.

There are also thirteen appendices. The report should be read with discrimination by all those interested in forestry generally and in the development of forestry in this country in particular.

In comparing the forestry position in Eire with that in Great Britain as indicated by the report, it is clear that in many respects there are several striking similarities, especially as regards silvicultural problems, education of the public in forestry matters, the development of markets for home produce, necessary technical measures to meet emergency conditions and other technical matters.

On the other hand, there are also very wide differences, especially in respect of general policy, relations between the State Forest Service and the rest of the community, supply of forest labour and other matters directly affected by the general social and economic backgrounds of the two countries, the one being predominantly an industrial country and the other predominantly agricultural. The very marked differences in respect of land tenure in the two countries is, of course, a matter of paramount importance.

It would be impossible to deal fully in a brief review with all the subject matter handled in the report, but one or two remarks which have equal importance in both countries may be selected for special emphasis, as they are an indication of certain difficulties common to both countries.

"There has been a tendency among those inexperienced in afforestation to exaggerate greatly the extent of afforestable land." In Great Britain, as here, no systematic survey of afforestable land has been completed, but according to an estimate made by the Commission's technical officers, it has been computed that 4.2 million acres of afforestable land exist in Great Britain. If we assume that the same proportion is afforestable in Eire we get an area of 1½ million acres. The assumption may or may not be correct, but the figure has at least a more substantial basis than some of the wild guesses that have been made.

"We regard the employment which is afforded as only incidental to and not the main object of afforestation." Needless to say this is the normal attitude in all forest services. Some figures are given, however, based on German experience, of the amount of employment

which could be given both directly and indirectly. This works out at 10,000 men full time in the forest and 40,000 in forest industries for an area of one million acres under productive forest, making a total of 50,000 men.

"A widespread idea is that small trees are planted and that nothing of any consequence happens until they are cut down as large trees some 80 or more years later. It is important to remove that conception which is quite inaccurate." In this country, too, the need to remove such a conception is an urgent one and, probably, in view of the greater age of some of the State-owned plantations, it is even more important that the point should be stressed.

"Trees do not seed to order and we are dependent on overseas supplies of some species. This is a position which cannot be forced. It is better to wait a year or two than to plant the second best or wrong kind of tree on a given site." Some of the enthusiastic amateur planners would do well to consider this point seriously.

"The essential duty of the Forestry Commission is to grow timber and encourage others to do the same." There can be no denying this and one might also emphasise that the duty is to grow timber and not merely to plant trees.

"It is necessary to ensure that sound technical procedure is never sacrificed to large programmes." Here again any experienced forester must agree.

"We think that education in 'Rural Manners' has been neglected, and that both the necessity and opportunity for improvement will arise after the war. It is of great importance that the British people should learn better respect for forests and trees." The same applies, it is to be feared, to Eire, but the attitude of the rural population in Eire is in most districts helpful and appreciative.

Speaking of fires, which are very serious in Great Britain, the report says: "Damage has been caused because adjoining graziers have persisted, in spite of warnings, to burn under hazardous conditions. We consider that it should be an offence to start a moor fire unless there is a force of men present to keep it within bounds." In this matter legislation in this country seems to be in advance of that in Great Britain.

"In most places it is still a waste of money to plant without netting." This needs no comment.

"As regards sylviculture, we consider that the best results will be secured by growing those species whether softwoods or hardwoods, which are best suited to the local environment, that is to say, that there should be no artificial 'forcing' on preconceived lines." This is in entire agreement with the sylvicultural policy in Eire.

"There is room for both small and large forests in this country. Small forests are of great service if easily accessible to road and rail; locally housed labour is easily organised and supplies of standing timber are more evenly distributed about the countryside." This statement is extremely interesting, in view of the line of development which economic conditions compel forestry to take in Eire.

Enough has been said to show where there are obvious resemblances between the two countries and how conditions compel the same attitude to be adopted in certain respects. It is, however, probably more important to stress the differences and also to refer to one or two weaknesses in the report.

The main differences are due to the difference in general land policy in the two countries during the past half-century, approximately. In Great Britain there is no body comparable to the Irish

Land Commission specially concerned with land settlement. There has been no policy of State acquisition and sub-division of large estates. This means, in the first place, that quite a considerable area of private woodlands and land suitable for afforestation is still held by private owners and that private forestry still occupies an important place in the rural economy of the country. The position here is very different, although a few private owners have been able to carry on forestry with commendable efficiency. The relationship between the Forestry Commission and those directly interested in private forestry would appear to be a somewhat unhappy one. The Commission have been accused of negligence, and part of the report is concerned with answering this charge. As a result of recent agitation a change of policy is proposed and a special chapter deals with private woodlands and with the scheme which is intended to rectify matters. A somewhat cumbrous method of providing financial assistance to private owners is proposed, the administration of which seems likely to be expensive and troublesome. The substance of the scheme is, briefly, this: owners of woodlands judged to be suitable and necessary for timber production must so use them for that purpose. The Forestry authority is to select those woodlands coming into this category and the owner is to decide whether he will "dedicate" such woodlands for forestry purposes. If so, he will receive State assistance. If owners are unable or unwilling to do the work, the State will acquire the land. The system of Felling Licences imposed during the emergency is to be continued.

The attitude taken up in respect of what are called "small woods" seems extraordinary. A small wood is not defined. Apparently, it may be up to 30 acres in extent, but in any event it is proposed that no direct State assistance is to be provided in respect of these. It is stated, quite wrongly, that the outlay of replanting such small units is relatively small. Relative to what? If relative to larger areas, the contrary is true. It is then suggested that good advice given free by the State in respect of these areas will more than make up for a planting agreement of £2 to £4 per acre. In this case, presumably, the horse will drink. The extraordinary point about these small woods, however, which are much more difficult and expensive to deal with than large areas, is that they are estimated to amount to one million acres. The policy, therefore, appears to be to let these one million acres, admitted elsewhere in the report to be capable of great service, to go to waste. Their owners are to be left unaided to deal with them. One wonders whether it is a wise policy for a country to exclude entirely one million acres of good timber-producing land while, at the same time, the transfer of three million acres of grazing land to forestry purposes is advocated.

The report devotes considerable space and an appendix in an effort, which is far from convincing, to show that the replacement of sheep stocks by afforestation is a sound procedure. The Commissioners, however, are wise not to carry their argument beyond the volume stage and to avoid considering the question of value. It is unfortunate, from a forestry point of view, that, unlike wool and mutton, timber cannot be walked off the ground on which it is produced. As a result, the cost of putting the timber so produced on the market is very much increased, per unit of volume, compared with mutton and wool. The Commissioners seem to think that the accumulation of timber on sheep runs, which are usually difficult of access, is an advantage. In another part of the report, however, they stress the advantage of growing the timber as near to the markets as possible. It has not, therefore, been shown just at what stage and under what conditions forestry is more advantageous nationally than sheep grazing. This section of the report is reminiscent, therefore,

of the arguments of certain amateur "forestry authorities," who quote the price per ton obtained in the London market for wood-pulp and assume that the same price can be got per ton for standing timber in the forest, having failed to take into account the cost of felling, extraction, transport to the pulping mill, pulping and transport of the pulp to the London market.

In the second place the existing system of land tenure in Eire has resulted in the creation of a large number of small holdings from which is provided the labour necessary for widespread forestry operations. There is, therefore, no need for the Forestry Service in Eire to undertake the construction of forest workers' holdings, which forms an important part of the Forestry Commission's work. In this country such work falls on the Irish Land Commission and the acquisition of 59,000 acres of agricultural land by the Forestry Service would quickly be called in question.

It is interesting to note that the proportion of unplantable land acquired in Great Britain is as high as 38 per cent. compared with 17½ per cent. in Eire. It is from this large area of unplantable land that it has been possible to establish three National Forest Parks.

It is interesting to refer to what are described as the pre-requisites for the success of British forestry, and to see how far the five essential conditions mentioned apply to the position in Eire.

The first essential condition is recognition by Government of the importance of timber production at home. This recognition exists fully in Eire amongst all sections of the community, with the possible exception of individual sheep graziers. There is not, therefore, the same need for propaganda as appears to be necessary in Great Britain.

The second essential is continuity of national policy including finance. In this country forestry has shown steady progress for the past twenty-five years at least and the necessary means have been forthcoming.

The third essential is an *ad hoc* Forest Authority with the main duties of formulating policy for government and ensuring that the approved policy is carried out. This represents a belief that the Forest Authority should be independent of any other Government Department. The success of forestry in Eire shows that the attachment of the Forestry Service to another Department does not necessarily mean that forestry must suffer. It may.

The fourth essential is a unified Forest Service, highly qualified in professional sense and imbued with a keen *esprit de corps*. The difficulty here is to find an outside standard of comparison in respect of qualification, but the service in Eire is imbued with keenness in its work and is, no doubt, anxious to attain the highest professional qualifications.

The fifth essential is the presence of adequate service for research, education and information. In respect of this matter improvements are, doubtless, desirable, but that is a development which must be held over until the Forest Service begins to pay its way. It is possible to improve technique considerably without indulging in heavy special expenditure which is not yet absolutely necessary.

It is interesting to note that the report says that there is no escape from a single Forest Authority for Great Britain in order to attain the third, fourth and fifth essentials. It is suggested that it is impossible to build up an efficient Forest Service otherwise. This must be doubted or are we to accept it as a truism that our own Forest Service can never be effective? It is quite certain, at least, that if the Forest Service in Eire had not escaped from the

control of the Forest Authority for Great Britain and Ireland it would have been impossible to acquire and afforest satisfactorily the extent of land which has been dealt with in the past 20 years. Very few, indeed, of the forests in Eire were originally large enough to be suitable for acquisition according to British standards. The machinery for acquiring land and for building up the forestry organisation in Eire is, and must be, quite different from what it is in Great Britain. In other words, timber supply in Eire is both a national problem and a sectional problem which can best be solved nationally and sectionally.

To illustrate how different the position is, the report stresses that the reserve of plantable land necessary to carry out a State afforestation programme should, for comfortable working, be ten times the annual planting programme. When it is as low as eight times difficulties arise which lead to inefficiency. How uncomfortable the Forest Service in Eire and how great the difficulties of working it must have been during the past twenty years will be appreciated when it is known that the reserve of plantable land has seldom exceeded twice the area of the annual planting programme. In spite of these disabilities, the area planted at September, 1939, in Eire was 65,000 acres compared with 361,000 acres planted in Great Britain at the same date. Forest policy in Great Britain aims at growing approximately one-third of the probable peace-time needs of timber. Consumption of timber *per capita* is, of course, much higher in Great Britain than in Eire. Five million acres are estimated to be required for this purpose.

In Eire the present policy appears to be to grow the whole of the peace-time needs of the country, for which it is estimated that a forest area of 700,000 acres approximately will be necessary. In 1939, therefore, whereas about one-tenth of this programme had been completed in Eire only one-fourteenth of the contemplated British programme had been completed. Relatively, therefore, progress in this country is not behind that in Great Britain.

The necessity for maintaining the home timber trade in a healthy condition is stressed; special and exceptional reasons why the Commission should carry out timber conversion are mentioned and the possibility of having to subsidise thinning as well as planting is envisaged.

An important chapter is devoted to National Requirements of timber and wood products. It would probably be wrong, however, to assume that Russia will not be in a position to export timber until eight years after this war and it may be assumed that forestry and the home timber trade will still have the same battle to fight against imported timber and the same difficulty in convincing the general public of the good quality of timber produced at home.

As regards silviculture, which is a matter specially interesting to us, the statement is made that the general level of silviculture in private woodlands has not improved. It is claimed, however, that there have been improvements in the Commission's own technique. The fact is that it is extremely difficult to assess the standard of silvicultural technique or to say whether it has improved or deteriorated. The Commission are their own judges in this respect and, therefore, not altogether unprejudiced. While the Commission's own technique has undoubtedly improved since its inception, it is very doubtful whether it has yet reached the standard of all-round efficiency which private forestry technique had at one time reached in these islands. This is only to be expected, as the Commission have in effect been engaged, not in the whole business of forestry—

as it is put in the report—but merely in tree planting. It has been one of the most unfortunate aspects of the Commission's policy, perhaps, that it has not had to concern itself with the whole range of forestry activities and that there has not been closer touch between the Commission and those private interests who did have, and still have, a high standard of forestry technique.

There are welcome signs, however, in this report that the Commission has retraced its steps some way back along the road leading towards the slavish imitation of Continental methods, inapplicable to British conditions, and that it is beginning to take a line more in harmony with these conditions. As an instance of this, one may quote the new attitude towards the value of small woods, the evidences of a change of the attitude of the State towards private forestry; the evidence of a sounder appreciation of the possibility of species other than exotic species; the need for maintaining the home timber trade in a healthy condition and so on. Further progress along this line is not only desirable but inevitable, and it will be hastened by the better support of private forestry, provided the latter is allowed to exercise its reasoning power and judgment and is not compelled merely to imitate the methods of the Commission, which, one feels bound to point out, are not necessarily superhumanly infallible. As a next step in the Commission's progress, one would expect less emphasis to be placed on the value of the "outstanding qualities of suitability to British conditions, rapidity of growth and timber quality of Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce and Japanese Larch," particularly in the southern half of that island where the development of proper silvicultural technique is perhaps to a large extent hampered by its close association with the northern half of the island, where conditions are more favourable for the development of a different forestry technique. A still better appreciation of the value of small woods and less emphasis on that of "forest regions" may also be confidently predicted in the future and a better harmony between the State forest policy and the general policy in respect of other national activities.

One important advantage of "sectional" forestry in these islands, which the Commissioners have not appreciated, is that it allows of more than one method of procedure and line of development, and of comparisons between methods. This report should be valued by us because of the comparison it affords.
