
Afforestation and the National Plan

By JAMES M. AIKEN, A.M.T.P.

The author of this pamphlet is to be congratulated on a very fine job of work. He has spared no pains in collecting material and data bearing on the much-discussed subject of Irish afforestation. Unlike most pamphleteers he has tried to state the case for Forestry fairly and without any trace of hysteria. He introduces his subject well and shows how the forest "through the development of its products, has given a fuller meaning to life in music, sculpture, architecture, painting, writing and the thousand and one conveniences of our modern civilization." He goes on to show the rôle that timber and timber products are playing in the industrial life of the timber-producing nations and says: "there seems to be no limit to the application of timber in the provision of things necessary to the civilization of to-day."

With 0.66 per cent. total land area under forest, Ireland stands as "Very poorly, indeed" when compared with other European countries. "We suffer from timber starvation," says Mr. Aitken. The effects of chronic timber starvation can indeed be seen in every walk of rural life. The old houses were built with a minimum of wood, being largely of mud and straw or corballed according to the locality, illustrating the effects of a shortage of timber on the building habits of the people. Compare this with the beautiful wooden churches and timbered houses of Sweden and Norway and the half-timbered houses of Germany and eastern England. It is only in recent times that timber has replaced straw and wicker work in doors and partitions. The glass of windows was at one time set in the mud of the cabin wall without any wooden frame. The straw roof required a minimum of timber and most of that used had to be excavated laboriously from the bog. No wonder then that we have the lowest per capita consumption of timber in Europe. According to Mr. Aitken, "our official forest policy (700,000 acres) would give an annual timber yield of approximately 8 cubic feet per head as compared with Switzerland's 28, Germany's 27, Denmark's 24 and Britain's 19.3." Mr. Aitken does not compare our timber consumption with that of heavily-timbered countries such as Finland, Sweden and Canada, and his figures are all the more telling on that account.

The author is inclined to overdraw the picture with regard to future timber supplies from abroad. If the average Irishman can get along, though poorly it must be admitted, with 8 cubic feet of timber every year, the Finns and Swedes can certainly cut down on their enormous home consumption to have more for export, especially if prices tend to soar. The law of supply and demand will act as a brake on prices to a certain extent.

The importance of "forest influences" is stressed but not overdone, and there is much evidence to support the claim that "with sheep grazing on mountain pastures we are mining the land" of its fertility.

An imposing array of authorities are quoted to substantiate the claim that 2,000,000 acres should be available for afforestation in Ireland. The opinions of such renowned foresters as Dr. Schlich, Professor Fischer, A. C. Forbes and the Report of the Departmental Committee on Irish Forestry cannot be dismissed lightly. It appears, however, that A. C. Forbes has been misquoted and that his figure of 7,000,000 acres included Great Britain as well as Ireland. With regard to the present official policy, Mr. Aitken remarks, "it would be interesting to learn on what data was fixed the 700,000 acres of mixed forest which is said to be the official aim."

The need for a national forest policy aiming at the ultimate establishment of 2,000,000 acres, three-quarter million to be planted in the next 40 years to avoid thinning difficulties, is stressed. This relieves the present Forestry Service of bearing the brunt of the "normal" planting programme which such a policy would involve. An *ad hoc* forest authority, a great increase in grants for research and education, an overhaul of our land acquisition machinery are among the recommendations made.

The influence of Forestry on the development of Agriculture, Industry, Arterial Drainage, Electrification, Recreation and Inland Fisheries is touched on. In fact, Mr. Aitken has ranged over a very wide field and his well-written pamphlet is indeed a noteworthy contribution to the "lay" literature on Irish Forestry.