

“Planned Forestry”

By the REV. B. KROMER, C.S.Sp., Rockwell College
(The Handbook of National Planning and Reconstruction)

The object of this article is to bring to the notice of those interested in national reconstruction the need and value of large scale state afforestation. The author, in his opening paragraph, rightly stresses the importance of dealing with forestry as an economic question which “has therefore to be treated in its different aspects and in its connections with the whole of economic and social life.”

The main argument is that two million acres of mountainsides, now put to the primitive, wasteful and unproductive purpose of grazing, could be profitably afforested in Eire and by so doing the evils of drought, erosion, bad drainage, silting up of rivers and unemployment would be automatically cured.

Every Irishman is aware of the existence of the vast stretches of poorly productive bog and mountain land in the country and there are few who would not wish to see those acres turned to better account. There seems, however, to be little foundation for the author's sweeping statement that grass is the most dangerous and insidious enemy of this country. Truth to tell, it is the shrubby growths, such as furze, heather, briars, etc., the precursors of the forest, which tend to replace the true grasses on permanent pastures, that really are the insidious enemy of this country. It is only by exercising great skill in the management of the grazing and by occasional cultivation, that these forerunners of the forest can be kept out and the yield capacity of the pasture maintained. There is a growing volume of evidence to show that if our most important industry, stock-raising, is to thrive, a change from the older methods of husbandry is necessary.

Forestry is, of course, an alternative to grazing as a method of utilising our upland soils, but it is not sufficient to state that, because our “perennial meadows,” owing to the development of a strong and matted root system, are unable to absorb more than 25 per cent. of the rain water they should be replaced by forest. It is generally recognised that a thick sward of lowly herbaceous or woody vegetation such as grass or heath, can approximate in value the effects of a forest in preventing run-off and erosion. In fact, in times of drought, the water table under forests may be lower than in areas under grass. In South Africa the “new” plantations laid down on the “veld” are suspect of upsetting the moisture balance, drying up streams and accentuating the effects of drought. The forest soil is indeed a fine water storage medium, but it is far from certain that it is the best or only means of providing against drought, floods, erosion, etc. Ley farming and the frequent breaking of hill land could, however, readily lead to serious erosion and all the attendant evils. This whole problem of the utilisation of mountain land has never been tackled seriously in this country, and it is high time that the matter should be taken up. It is a task, however, requiring team work and we must hear all sides—the stock-breeder, grassland experts, foresters, soil scientists—before driving the stock off the hill sides. The replacing of an age-old and traditional form of rural economy by a new one is a thing that can be only gradually done even after it has been shown to be highly desirable.

The writer, while stressing the importance of state action in matters of large-scale afforestation, rightly states that “private initiative, additional to the re-afforestation by the state, is not less important.” There is a danger that lack of interest in tree planting on the part of the individual landowner may eventually react unfavourably on Irish Forestry in general and state forestry in particular.

According to the recent report of the Minister for Lands on Forestry the present planting programme aims at creating a national forest estate of 700,000 acres, not 200,000 as stated by Father Kromer. Whether this is sufficient or not is another question. The Forestry Division seems to be encountering great difficulties in their attempts to achieve their annual planting programme of 10,000 acres.

Unfortunately a good many figures given in support of the author's argument for a nation-wide, large scale programme are wide open to question. The writer states: "the net return of a re-afforested area of two million acres to the State would amount to about £9,000,000 a year based on pre-war price levels." This is equivalent to £4 10s. per acre. At present maximum prices, an annual increment of 100 cubic feet of timber (a yield possible only on the best hill sites) would bring a gross return of less than £4 per acre. When production costs are subtracted the best nett return one could expect is £1 per acre, and the average for all land might be as low as 10s. 6d. To quote still further, "the pre-war price of a well-managed acre of spruce forest, 40 years old, was about £800 for third-class timber and about £1,200 for first-class timber." Now, a fully-stocked 40-year-old stand of spruce would carry about 4,000 cubic feet of timber to the acre, so that, at the present maximum price of 10d. per cubic foot, the most one could legally get is £150 per acre. The price obtainable for pulp wood would be much less than for saw timber.

While it is very desirable that every effort should be made by means of propaganda to awaken a "forest" sense in the people and to win new friends for Forestry, no lasting gain will be achieved by an over-statement of the case. We are fighting in a good cause. The case for forestry is good and when fairly and repeatedly stated will eventually win a large body of solid and steadfast supporters among the Irish people.
