

“ National Parks for Eire.” Sir Shane Leslie : *Studies*, September, 1945.

The use of forests for recreation is nothing new. The existence of many forests and indeed, organised forestry in Europe to-day is due in no small measure to the value placed on the outdoor sports of hunting and shooting. The sporting value of woods and forests at one time was reckoned to exceed all other benefits derived from them. The enjoyment of the out-of-doors was, however, the right of a privileged class. History is full of the struggle between noble and serf to assert their respective claims to their rights of enjoyment of the amenities of the forest. The forestry profession has grown up in the midst of this struggle. In many countries the original forester was a glorified game-keeper, water-bailiff and wood-ranger combined. His main concern was to prevent “ the common people ” from exercising their so-called rights to fuel, to game and to fodder for stock and it is only natural to find this “ policing ” sense more highly developed in countries with an old tradition of royal forest and where the pressure of right-holders and trespassers has been

severe. In the state forests of western and central Europe the forester is as much a policeman as anything else but the people, through long training have become sufficiently disciplined to be allowed free enjoyment of the forest just as we can enjoy the freedom of the open road. The forester in Britain and this country does not like to act the role of policeman and places his trust more in fences and trespass notices. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sir Shane Leslie's campaign for National Parks in Eire should arouse, not enthusiasm, but distrust among Irish foresters. The publication of his article on "National Parks for Eire" caused the first fluttering in the dovescotes. Here was a new danger to Forestry, whole regions containing much likely and coveted forest land to be thrown into protective custody for the benefit of week-enders with pockets full of matches and an inordinate desire for throwing cigarette ends into the driest tufts of bracken, furze or heather!

It is doubtful if the idea of National Parks will ever receive the whole-hearted support of the forester or farmer. Can the forester or the farmer be expected to throw open his woods or fields to an undisciplined horde or turn guide and host on Sundays and Bank Holidays when he feels that these very guests will leave behind them a trail of destruction, broken fences, trodden crops, unsightly and dangerous litter and—worst of all—smouldering embers of picnic fires to say nothing of deliberate incendiarism? The farmer and forester are, however, acting ostrich-like if they expect to stem the ever-growing desire of city folk for the out-of-doors. The appeal of the green fields and woods, the high hill and the waterside, is well-nigh universal and so deep-seated and strong as to be almost irresistible. After all the forester chooses his profession not because it is a lucrative one—it is far from that—but because it brings him the many satisfactions of the out-of-doors. The people will come to the country in ever-increasing numbers and the question of handling this "problem" will have to be faced, the sooner the better.

A closer study of the problem would suggest that the forester and the farmer are in many ways responsible for the ill reputation of the city hiker or vacationist. There are rules in the country just as in the city but the city authorities find it pays to put up signs and lights to tell one when to go and where to cross over. The farmer and forester put up signs too—but never "the Green light" to tell us where to go and what to do, always the "red" one. How the city person, unused to the out-of-doors, wishing to get away from the din and dust of motor cars would welcome notices and trails inviting him along, showing him pleasant vistas, sudden thrills like "lover's leaps," waterfalls and expanses of water or well farmed country. The city vacationist likes to know where he is going and likes to have the going easy. Rough forest rides and dense plantations offer no attractions, but winding, easy paths through tall timber, by running water, or along a mountain ridge will give him all he wants.

No one likes to climb fences if there is a stile handy, no one likes to start trouble when on pleasure bent.

Sir Shane Leslie opened the discussion on the subject in his articles in *Studies*, he carried it a stage further at the Annual General Meeting of the Society of Irish Foresters, but many came away from that meeting with the feeling that the idea was not fully explained and that the official attitude as expounded by Dr. Anderson and Mr. Nally was very sound, regrettably so, because the idea of bringing "the regions of our forest landscape into full public service, preserved in their natural beauty and kept or made accessible for open air recreation and public enjoyment and particularly for cross country walking" appeals to everyone who has savoured the beauties of this land.

Is it necessary to do anything spectacular to make, say, County Wicklow a national park? Do we require a great steel fence with gates at places in the Glen of the Downs or at the Scalp at which we can read the list of park regulations or be instructed in park etiquette by the uniformed state park ranger? I'm afraid some people got that impression from the reading of Sir Shane's article and the discussion at the Society's Annual General Meeting. Wicklow, and for that matter, all rural Ireland is open to the hiker. One could travel from the outskirts of Dublin city to Wexford without setting foot on a motor road if one knew the heather tracks and bohereens. Could we not open up those trails and tell more people about them? Could we not arrange to make beautiful paths or keep existing ones along the stream side or through old woodlands and tell the tourist and hiker about them as we do about the Devil's Glen and Powerscourt waterfall? We need never lead them through young plantations and only open such areas when the fire risk is small and the æsthetic value great. In fact the æsthetic value of a thicket of conifers is nil and few will leave the open road or heather track for the boulder-strewn woodland ride.

Nor is there sufficient justification for the contention that the opening up of State forests for recreational purposes is incompatible with good forestry. In Germany, and this no doubt applies to many European countries, one could hike for hundreds of miles through pleasant woods, along well-marked trails and yet these forests are all models of good silviculture and management. Admittedly the area of young woods under "normal" forest conditions is relatively small. We here are passing through a stage when all woods are young woods and no place for the trespasser. This condition of affairs is passing and with time, many forest areas may be "visited" without causing undue alarm to the forester.

It is possible then to have all the benefits of National Parks in Ireland without undue expense. Some organisation is necessary, however, and areas designated as National Parks would need special planning and be the special care of some body or association.

In Ireland the forest area though relatively small still, encloses much wild and beautiful country and any development of the National Park idea will involve the tree planter. At first glance the State Forestry Department would appear to be in the best position to supervise and manage the area designated a National Park, but on further consideration so many interests are involved that only a special association or development board could hope to handle the thing properly. There is the question of hotel sites, camping sites, sanitation, transportation services, and new roads and trails. The forester might consent to supervise camping sites or to co-operate as far as his woods were concerned but further than that forestry or foresters have no claim in Ireland to dictate whether National Parks are feasible or desirable but it would be unwise not to co-operate if the idea takes hold.

The idea is good but can only be made a reality by hard work, sound planning and some sacrifice on the part of all concerned, land owner and holiday maker alike. The development of National Parks would serve to bring our people into closer touch with the task of forestry and it would amply repay both the forester and the State to encourage this idea in every way.