

OBITUARY

ARTHUR CHARLES FORBES *

ON November 7th, in his 85th year, there went from among us a quiet, unassuming figure, who will long be remembered with affection and esteem^s by those who have the cause of Irish forestry at heart.

Arthur Charles Forbes came to this country on September 1st, 1906, bringing with him a wealth of forestry knowledge and experience possessed by comparatively few of his contemporaries. He had been forester in charge of the Longleat Estate of the Marquess of Bath, and later became Lecturer in Forestry in Armstrong College of Science, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, as it then was, had awakened to the fact that there had been a great deal of discussion about the necessity for planting trees in Ireland. An embryo Forestry Service was created, as a gesture, and it was looked upon as one of those things which could be forgotten, except for once a year, when financial provision had to be made in the Budget to allow it to carry on. Nothing of a nation-wide scale was contemplated, and forestry was merely to be of back-garden significance.

Fortunately for Ireland, it completely underestimated the calibre of the man it had appointed. Forbes had shown, in his written works, that he was well acquainted with the past history of forestry in this group of islands, and thoroughly convinced as to its importance in the economic life of the country. He was not one of those men content to remain in a groove, and just to carry on as required until superannuation overtook him. He brought to his task a mind which refused to be circumscribed by short-term views, nor was it tolerant of temporary expedients. It was not long before he began to make his views known in no uncertain fashion.

Though small of stature and delicately made, he had a spirit which could not be contained within mere physical limitations. He was much too forthright to be able to suffer fools gladly; not for him the tortuous paths of circumlocution, and his very directness was on occasion a source of annoyance and embarrassment to his superiors. Day in and day out, he continued to argue the case for forestry, but it was not until the outbreak of the first World War, with its attendant restriction of timber imports focussing attention upon the woods and plantations throughout the country, that the cogency of what he had continually declaimed began to be recognised. From that time onwards, so far as this island was concerned, Forbes and forestry became synonymous terms.

As Timber Controller during the war years, he was always guided by the long view, and had it not been for the restraint he exercised at that time, this country would not have had the growing timber stocks which stood it in such good stead during the second World War.

The lessons of the war years were not lost upon Whitehall, and, in 1916, the Acland Committee was set up to go into the whole

question of creating forests as a reserve and protection against future emergencies. As a result of the labours and recommendations of this committee, the Forestry Commissioners were set up, and Forbes was appointed Assistant Commissioner for Ireland in November, 1919.

His new appointment came at a very unhappy time. The country was in rebellion against an occupying Power, and, even after the Treaty of 1922, when the Irish people had their own Government and he was styled Director of Forestry, the country was still to be racked by civil war. Progress during those years was virtually nil, as forestry is an occupation very sensitive to disturbed political conditions, and a tranquil countryside is essential if it is to continue.

He must have inherited the dour persistence of his remote Scottish ancestors, to have been able to carry on in face of such difficulties. Nevertheless, the work went on, and when he retired on June 1st, 1931, instead of the few hundred acres he was called upon to manage in 1906, there were 36 forest centres in active being, and new plantations established amounted to 26,900 acres.

Retirement did not mean an end of active life for him. His advice was continually sought by estate owners in Ireland and elsewhere, who possessed woods and plantations. The outbreak of the second World War meant that his services were in greater demand than ever, and it has to be recorded that he was still carrying out inspections and valuations of standing timber in his 80th year. Evidently the statement in the 90th Psalm, that the strength of the octogenarian "is but labour and sorrow," did not apply to him.

It would neither be desirable nor possible in the course of a short appreciation to give details of all that he did, but one highlight in his career was the establishment of sample plots at Avondale in 1906-'07. This estate had a considerable area of open grass land, which he at once fenced in and established 104 sample plots, of both native and exotic trees, so that their growth under Irish conditions could be studied by future foresters. He explained that he did so before the agricultural fanatics could get their hands on it. Not all of the plots were successful, but mention must be made of one growing *Abies Grandis*, which has shown an annual production of timber unequalled anywhere else in Europe. His faith had been justified by results.

No forester requires a storied urn or broken column to be erected in his memory. There could be no fitter memorial than living trees. In those splendid forests of Avondale, Rathrdum, Aughrim and Mountrath, to mention but a few, there are living testimonies to his memory, which will still be standing long after many of us have been gathered to our fathers.

Let those woods be his epitaph; he would have wished nothing better.

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