

POST-WAR FORESTRY.

A Report on Forest Policy Prepared by the Royal Scottish Forestry Society and the Royal English Forestry Society, 1944

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The report of H.M. Forestry Commissioners, Great Britain, which was issued in June, 1943, was reviewed in our last issue. This joint publication by the Forestry Societies of Scotland and England, the issue of which has been somewhat belated, puts the case for private forestry in these countries in the post-war period.

The report is a long one of sixty-two pages and comprises sixteen sections and an appendix. It conveys the impression of having been conceived and brought forth in the southern part of the island and of having received the blessing of the northern half on condition that due recognition of the order of precedence of the two Societies in respect of age and veneration, if not of vitality, should be made. The result is a report which does not always pay full attention to the differences existing between the two countries.

The report is a complete document and puts a good case for the development of, or should we say, for the arrest of the decay of, forestry on privately-held lands.

Section 3 describes the economic structure of rural land management and how the traditional system of tenure has tended to break down in recent years. It is claimed that the best managed areas of land in Britain are still those where a competent and vigorous landowner has been able to maintain the estate structure. It is stated, although it seems hardly credible, that the Societies believe that there are three fundamental conditions for the revival of rural industry namely, (1) that the Government should take an active interest in the problems of land ownership and land management, (2) that the "dedication" principle should be applied generally to agricultural and forest land and (3) that a system of taxation should be devised to allow continuity of estate management. The first two conditions amount to a plea for more and stronger State control. The third condition is one which certainly deserves attention.

In Section 4 the usual orthodox arguments for a great expansion of British forestry are put forward.

The condition of estate woodlands, the features which influence their management and the problems of their restoration after the war are discussed in Section 5. The apathetic attitude of the Government towards private forestry is stressed, but the fact really seems to be that the vast majority of private landowners have been woefully apathetic in respect of forestry. Very few owners made any real attempt to run estate forestry as a business concern on sound lines but the few who did, where local conditions were favourable, were reasonably successful.

No one can deny, however, that estate woodlands have made very important contributions during serious national emergencies, not only in Great Britain, and there is general recognition that assistance is necessary to make good the loss these woodlands have suffered.

Section 6 begins with some plain speaking in respect of the constitution and policy of the State forestry authority in Great Britain. This recognition of the true position of the Forestry Commission is somewhat belated and especially of the fact that the State forestry authority must inevitably be a powerful competitor in the markets of the future with its forestry produce. The pay and conditions of service of many members of the Commission's staff are adversely criticised. In a brief history of the unsuccessful efforts of the two Societies to get the State authority to take a more active interest in estate forestry, it is claimed that the position has been worsened and not improved since the Forestry Commission was founded.

In Section 7 the report of the Forestry Commissioners on the post-war policy is fully discussed, especially those sections having a bearing on the working of private woodlands. There is full support for the pro-

posal to increase the forest area, to allocate grants to forestry and for the "dedication" scheme. The constitution of the post-war forest authority and the policy in respect of small woods is opposed, and modifications in respect of proposals for State assistance, marketing, education, research and for dealing with pests are considered necessary. The failure of the Commissioners to adopt a policy in respect of securing and growing the best strains of various species of trees and to deal with the problem of valuation of standing timber and immature plantations is commented upon.

The remaining sections deal with recommendations which the Societies make and these may be summarised as follows. It is proposed that the existing Forestry Commission should be replaced by a new forestry authority responsible to a Minister and composed of a Board with a President, the latter to be represented by an active chairman, who must not be a technical officer. The Board is to include four paid technical members and five unpaid members. Two of the technical members are to be responsible, with a separate staff, for estate woodlands and the other two for State woodlands. The country is to be divided into twenty or thirty regions each under a Conservator to be assisted by a regional forestry committee, appointed in part by the forestry authority and in part by the Forestry Societies. Obviously this elaborate scheme of control is bound to be cumbersome and unwieldy in the extreme and could only be applied, if at all, by the English end of the island. It is indeed the very antithesis of the autocratic control hitherto in force and no doubt some compromise will have to be reached. A determined effort should be made to bring "small woods" into the dedication scheme. Dedicated woodlands would not be subject to licence. More favourable planting grants are considered necessary and grants for clearing scrub and debris. Decontrol of existing controlled prices for standing timber is advocated or else a material increase in the existing maximum prices. The need for improved pay and conditions of service of men in the forestry profession generally is stressed. A considerably expanded education scheme is advocated and an expansion of expenditure to not less than £150,000 a year by the end of the fourth year on research work is proposed. These last proposals seem to err on the side of exaggeration. Finally recommendations are put forward for extermination of rabbits, squirrels and roe deer, based on certain assumptions which are at least open to question.

When one has read this report one is left with the feeling that there is a fundamental difference of outlook between those engaged on State afforestation on the one hand and the heirs of those who have engaged in private forestry in the past on the other. That there should be political differences of opinion one can understand but there certainly should not be that wide gulf between the day-to-day forestry work which goes on in private forests and that which is carried out in Government forests. The trouble seems to be almost entirely due to those responsible for State forestry acting on the assumption that the new State forests now being created are going to be something entirely different to any so far seen in these islands; to a deliberate attempt to build up ideal, self-contained forest units out of touch with the communities by which they are surrounded and certainly out of touch with existing "local" forests. If the State authorities could accept as a fact that their large-scale forests will not differ essentially from the smaller private forests or wooded estates, except in respect of size, and that much can be learned from the past experience of all such local forests on all aspects of forestry, there would be greater harmony and a brighter future for British forestry. The Forestry Societies have in the report begun at last to make a stand—too long delayed—for a forest policy which will be more in sympathy with the national instincts. The future of British forestry depends on a closer link-up of the older forest traditions with the newer enterprise, energy and technical ideas of the State service. It will be interesting to see if this can be done and how.

It would be wrong, however, to agree entirely with the severe criticism which the Societies make of the past attitude of the Forestry Commission, on which, after all, landowners have been well represented. The fact is, and it must be admitted, that only about five per cent of the present landowners in Great Britain are really interested in practising forestry as forestry. It has for the most part merely been an adjunct of estate management to meet purely domestic needs or to render landed property more attractive from the sporting or amenity aspects. In a changed and less wealthy world that is not enough and much more could

have been done by the Societies themselves in closer co-operation with more active associations of private owners actually engaged in forestry and not merely in "advancing" forestry, than has been done. Possibly it is too late now for this mistake to be remedied, but if the co-operation between the Forestry Commission and the private owners does not become too one-sided, the prospect for the eventual improvement of private forestry under whatever scheme of assistance is adopted, should be brighter. The advantage to any country of a healthy private forestry practice is too great to be lightly set aside. The position in Eire cannot be said to be a very happy one in that respect.
