

THE IRISH NURSERY TRADE

By JAMES GALVIN.

It has been suggested that some notes on the Irish nursery trade might be of interest to the readers of this Journal. Unfortunately, as the private planting of forest trees in commercial quantities is only practical for administrators of extensive tracts of land who are not worried by rapidly changing conditions, the heyday of forest tree nurseries coincided in Ireland and Great Britain with the spacious days of the landed aristocrat between the middle of the eighteenth and the latter part of the nineteenth centuries. The decay of their estates due to changes in social legislation and, additionally in Ireland, due to the Great Famine and to the land division legislation, militated against the survival of the numerous small nurseries scattered through the country.

These nurseries would appear to have catered mostly for a local demand and there do not appear to have been any large nurseries sending plants all through the country, nor, strangely enough, is there any evidence of any group in the Dublin area to take advantage of its metropolitan position in the same way as occurred around Edinburgh. There was, however, a very interesting group of small nurseries at Summerhill, Co. Meath, which specialised in the growing of *seedling* forest trees for re-sale for growing on by the country nurseries.

It is a melancholy fact that, with a business of such a traditional character and so completely divorced from the changes wrought by the development of mechanics, it seems rare, even in the richer and better developed countries of Europe, for families to survive in the nursery trade. It seems further an evidence of the lack of prosperity of the industry that when the original family drops out the firm is not taken up and carried on by another. In spite of this and of the exceptionally difficult times in Ireland through much of the nineteenth century, there remained up to the beginning of this century, perhaps twenty-five of the Summerhill growers and the following of the old firms: Fennessey of Kilkenny and Waterford, Hartland of Cork, Saunders of Cork, Griffin of Croom and Limerick (still extant), Harpur of Wexford, Madden of Ballinasloe, Tully of Hollymount, Behan of Tullamore, Galvin of Roscommon. Perhaps some of your readers can fill in gaps. At this stage the breaking up of the estates under the Land Acts virtually gave the *coup de grace* to private forestry planting on any scale, though a little still continued to be done by contract planting (which my firm continued to cater for) and some estate owners continued to buy limited quantities from Scottish or English nurseries, a few of which still retained a world-wide connection. Incidentally when things were at their most difficult in Ireland Irish nurserymen managed to keep going by

exports of young forest trees to Scottish and English nurseries and this gradually became a large part of the trade at Summerhill, continuing up to 1938. Unfortunately this is now broken by our inability to get over the English discriminatory regulations against such supplies from Ireland as compared with other European countries, and enforced apparently against the expressed wish of important British nursery firms.

At the turn of this century a few other firms of comparatively recent establishment were able to take advantage of the growing prosperity of the farming population. The newly-formed Department of Agriculture and Land Commission, as well as encouraging the planting of fruit trees, paid considerable attention to the planting of small shelter belts of forest trees on the new divided holdings of which a great number were established, especially in the western counties. To this activity, which has been continued more or less up to the present day, and to the occasional purchases for the State Forestry service we can ascribe, the survival of commercial forest tree growing. Useful as these recent developments were to the trade their nature was too spasmodic in the opinion of the writer to continue to maintain a healthy, even though small, forest tree industry. This view was shared by the surviving firms and in 1932, when it appeared that the Government would be able to arrange for a considerable increase in its planting programme, they sent a representative delegation to wait on the Minister for Lands. They offered to provide some share of the increased supplies that would be necessary in the same way as in other countries, notably in Germany, where much of the supplies of trees for State forests are supplied under a contract system. These trees are produced from seeds supplied by the State Forest Services according to their rather particular requirements as to seed strain, particularly in the case of *Pinus sylvestris*. The nurserymen maintained that such an arrangement would provide a useful "cushion," as their connection would provide a practical outlet for the occasional surpluses and gluts due to variation in germination and in planting programmes which necessarily cannot be completely foreseen when making sowings and which must create considerable worries for those in charge of nurseries in the State organisation with its narrower scope. Some such arrangement would have helped to round out the activities of these nurseries most of which also raised fruit trees and hedge plants mainly for the small farmer population, and which, due to the close prices at which these were sold under the contract system, found difficulty in maintaining a practical volume of sales. Unfortunately such counsels did not prevail; on the contrary, before very long the forest tree-raising nurseries had to face the prospect of having surpluses from State nurseries intermittently dumped on their limited market. Strong representations on this point were made to the Minister for Lands and for one season he conceded the rights of

the case presented by the producers but in less than twelve months the decision was reversed and the threat of such State dumping is apparently to hang over the head of anyone rash enough to risk any extensive commercial forest tree production. At the same time quite a number of one-man nurseries have recently sprung up started by ex-workmen from Forestry Division nurseries who have learnt something of tree raising and, though individually of lesser importance, in the aggregate further reduce the market for the firms who in the past endeavoured to give a comprehensive service in all the species that might be called for.

All this unfortunately strikes a pessimistic note and I have not made any reference to the planting called for under the 1928 Forestry Act to replace the exceptional felling during the recent war. The total numbers are very large but the impossibility of obtaining the necessary seeds and the consequent inability to have the necessary small trees available in practical quantities before 1950 or 1951, means only another temporary demand. Without some comparatively steady outlet which, as far as I can see, could now only arise in sufficient volume from state sources or from export to Great Britain (both of which seem at present most unlikely), practical commercial forest tree raising in Ireland must gradually and at no very distant date disappear.
