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THE FARMER'S PART IN NATIONAL AFFORESTATION

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SINCE State afforestation came to occupy a prominent place amongst our national undertakings, it is a regrettable fact that many people have gained the erroneous impression that tree-growing is a form of enterprise in which the private landowner is not expected to interest himself, or in which he cannot profitably engage. This is a most unfortunate state of affairs, because national afforestation can never be completed without the landowner's assistance.

State afforestation is a large scale business, dealing with those broad expanses of marginal land which the average private individual has neither the capital nor the technical skill to handle. It generally operates on those outlying mountainous areas where soil poverty and exposure necessitate lengthened crop rotations—rotations which an enduring institution can take in its stride, but which prove discouraging to the private investor.

While it is generally recognised that State departments, government sponsored companies, private companies and local authorities are the most suitable bodies for undertaking large-scale afforestation on marginal lands, it is not always realised that the planting and tending, by them, of those small and isolated plots of waste ground, which are to be seen up and down the agricultural lowlands of our country, would be a doubtfully economic proposition, as well as a most exacting task in administration.

Yet these plots and strips, ranging from a fraction of an acre, upwards, cannot be overlooked when national afforestation is being tackled. They are of special importance for several reasons. In the first instance, though individually they may appear of insignificant dimensions, when considered from the national stand-point, they are not so by any means. If they represented but one in every two hundred acres, they would total 100,000 acres or 156 square miles (approx.) for the whole country. On a conservative estimate this area, if planted and looked after, would increase our timber yield by 6,000,000 cubic feet per annum. Secondly, these waste areas are generally well above the normal run of afforestable land in site quality and consequent timber-producing capacity. Fundamentally they seldom differ in marked degree,

from the soil types of the arable and pasture areas through which they are interspersed. They are neglected for a variety of reasons. In some cases it is because they were at one time under timber crops which being cleared, were never replaced—except by briars and useless scrub, in others it is because of protruding rocks, steep gradients, uneven ground surface, drainage difficulties or simply because of the bad layout of the farms concerned. While these factors reduce the agricultural value of the land, they do not always reduce its forest value in like degree. The luxuriant growth of weeds and scrub vegetation on these lowland plots and strips—growth which simply shouts timber production to the forester, seems to mock at him as he wends his way to the leisurely-growing pine woods on the hill. In the third instance, these areas should not be neglected because, being distributed through agricultural lands, they would if planted, afford that shelter which is such an obvious necessity on a large proportion of our farms. They would moderate the micro or local climate, and would prove a much more potent factor in beautifying the land than the extensive mountain-side plantations.

To interest Irish farmers in the planting of their waste corners, however, is not a simple process. Possibly this is not without reason. We have no forest tradition to inspire us. Security of tenure—which is a *sine qua non* for all private forestry, is something relatively new to our agricultural community. Markets for home-grown timber have been rather unreliable, up to quite recent times, and the groundless bias against native timber dies hard. Again, people without experience in the matter, frequently labour under the impression that tree-planting yields no return for forty or fifty years after the operation has been carried out. This idea, though containing a kernel of truth, is completely misleading. While the final removal of a conifer crop, growing on average quality ground, may not take place for fifty years after planting, a visit to any fifteen year old conifer plantation, on the moderately good type of ground such as that with which most private planters would have to deal, will prove that even at this early age, worthwhile returns may be expected. It will be seen that these plantations are already providing timber in the form of thinnings, for which there is an almost unlimited market, in most parts of the country. The removal of such thinnings from young crops, far from affecting them adversely in any way, improves them. Thinning is an essential part of the process of timber growing. If it is neglected, valuable intermediate yields of both timber and cash are lost, and the over-all timber production in cubic feet per acre, for the rotation is reduced.

Planting costs are sometimes mentioned as another difficulty confronting the private planter. Admittedly, they, like most other costs to-day, are high. But then timber prices are high also, and it is difficult to see how, with an increasing world demand confronting an ever diminishing supply, they will do anything but rise still higher. Though planting costs may be high, the farmer who is dealing with small areas

can effect economies which are impossible where extensive operations by large organisations are concerned.

We live in changing times and it is important that we should be quick to appreciate the significance of some of these changes, and that we should act accordingly. The great timber exporting countries of the past, are now, in some cases finding difficulty in meeting the requirements of their home markets. Importing countries like our own, are as a result, finding timber more costly, and more difficult to obtain. Every country is being thrown more and more upon its own resources. Ireland is no exception. Despite the pitiful shortage of home-grown timber here the native timber industry is struggling hard to play its part.

Our Landowners should realise that those waste corners need no longer be a burden on their holdings. They should realise that these areas can now meet their own share of the rates, rents and taxes which fall for payment with such unfailing regularity. In the economic circumstances of our time, no country can afford the luxury of wasteland. Our farmers should question themselves as to whether they can afford it either.

The financial outlay on the establishment of forest crops may be considered rather heavy. It is surely good economy however, to convert a depreciating asset into an appreciating one, to invest money in one's own land and transform that money into timber which is good currency the world over and which tends to be rated more highly with the passage of time.

To encourage this form of investment, in Ireland, a grant of £10 is payable to private planters, by the Department of Lands, on every acre of land planted with trees, in accordance with recognised silvicultural practice. This grant is paid in two instalments of £5 each; the first is paid immediately after planting, and the second, after a lapse of five years. The second payment is held over in order to insure that the trees are looked after during those critical early years when they are most susceptible to injury by weeds and vermin.

Technical advice as to the establishment and management of plantations may be obtained on the ground, by arrangement with the Department of Lands, Forestry Division, or through commercial concerns which specialise in forest advisory and contract work.

When in the early days of this century, William Bulfin bemoaned the paucity of our forests, and boldly declared that 'Forestry is the work of nation-builders', what a tragedy it was, that his words passed unheeded. Ireland now knows what stability and economic strength an adequate forest reserve would afford her. The State Forest Service is striving to play its major part in making up the lost ground, let our landowners join forces and hasten the day when the truth of those words will be borne out; when a balanced rural economy built through the afforestation of our marginal lands, provides prosperity and comfort to a happy people.