

Obituaries.

Matthew Dalton

25th September 1902 — 6th November 1967

Matt Dalton was one of the first group of half a dozen "apprentices" taken on for training by the British Forestry Commission in 1920. He went to Dundrum Forest on the 1st October of that year when he was a bare week over the minimum age for entry. Unlike his companions he already had considerable experience of forestry having worked for his father at timber in the woods of his native county, Roscommon, and was a formidable hand with axe and saw. But these tools were of



small account in the forestry of the early twenties and Matt had to take to the spade, an implement with which he quickly became a master in nursery and in plantation.

Whatever Matt Dalton did he did with all his might. He was a hard worker from the start and never shirked the tough jobs. Those were the days of large and venomous Sitka spruce transplants whose lifting in the nursery was a purgatory. Others would opt for the spade or the fork but Matt always tackled the painful chore of "pulling and shaking" day after day when his forearms would be swollen and bleeding. At work he never slacked but when work was done no man was more ready to enjoy himself. All his friends remember him as a cheery companion, full of amusing stories and boyish laughter. This school-boy attitude to life was his outstanding characteristic. He could be grimly serious at times, how grim his assistants are not likely to forget, but the clouds rolled by quickly and his hearty good humour soon took over again. He never spared himself and he, perhaps unreasonably, expected the same dogged determination from others.

The second year of the two year course was spent in Baronscourt Forest, Co. Tyrone at nursery work and as an "honorary head labourer" in charge of a planting gang. In 1923 he came south to start a long term, first as a foreman and later as forester-in-charge of Aughrim Forest. Here his memory is forever green in the massive

planting that stretches from the village up the valley of the Ow to the slopes of Aughavannagh. From those early days he showed discernment in the selection of species — Sitka spruce, Japanese larch and, later, *Pinus contorta* were his wise choice for this rain soaked district. Douglas fir he would plant when he had to, but always against his better judgement as he was not slow to point out. In his attitude to the forest he was certain of one thing—no one high or low, was entitled to make mistakes. If others "let the job down" Dalton told them in plain language where the fault lay, and some of his superiors in rank, new to him and his way of thinking, were at first startled by his candour.

We associate Aughrim with Dalton more than anywhere else. There he spent his formative years, there he married and there he rests in Annacurragh churchyard. But his forestry career took him far afield and at each new centre he approached the local problems with an open mind. In Cappoquin, where he spent a brief spell in the mid-thirties, he recognised the virtues of Norway spruce on the mineral soils of Dromana. Later, during the many years in charge of Mountrath he quickly realised that it was a Sitka spruce area par excellence and the slopes of the Slieve Bloom to-day bear witness to his work.

At Baunreagh he met up with timber again—timber, road-making and bridge building. Bridges were a challenge which Dalton enjoyed and there on the Delour River and later in county Donegal he went at their construction with a heart and a half.

It is hard to know if he ever aspired to rise above forester rank. He was, undoubtedly, happy in charge of a forest. He was a practical man first and foremost. His job as he saw it lay amongst the men and the trees. Office work he did not like, as many a sorely tried official can testify, and he was often painfully slow with returns, but when they eventually came they were accurate to the last figure and thorough to the last particular.

Matt rose to be Head Forester in Mountrath in 1941, but shortly afterwards transferred to Co. Donegal and was stationed at Ballybofey. He retired under the age limit on the 25th September, 1967 and planned to come south again to his first love, Aughrim, where he bought a house for his retirement. His last illness overtook him before he took up residence there and he died a short six weeks later.

He was a Foundation Member of our Society and remained a member all his life, taking an active part in its affairs and attending outings whenever they came to his locality. His interventions in discussions were always vigorous and to the point and rarely failed to be entertaining.

To his wife, a hospitable hostess to many visiting foresters, and to his two daughters we extend our heartfelt sympathy. Irish forestry will never be the same again.

H.M.F.