

Reviews

Forest Service

By George Ryle.

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Sub-titled "The first forty-five years of the Forestry Commission of Great Britain", *Forest Service* tells the story of the growth and development of the Forestry Commission as seen through the eyes of the author, a professional forester, who joined the service as a forest officer in 1924 and retired from the post of Deputy Director-General in 1965.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I sketches the birth and development of state forestry and the forest service in Great Britain. Conceived by the Acland Sub-Committee of 1916, which laid the foundations of forest policy in Great Britain and Ireland for almost half a century, the Forestry Commission was born in 1919 and ably weaned by its first Chairman, Lord Lovat. To Lovat fell the difficult task of putting into effect the recommendations of the sub-committee and to him is given the credit of saving the Commission from the scrap-heap following the recommendations of the Geddes Committee in 1922.

During the 1920's and 30's the Forestry Commission came to be recognised as a fixed part of the nation's structure upon which it was safe to build in providing permanent employment. The author sketches the initiation and implementation of the Forest Smallholdings and Dwellings Scheme which he develops in depth in Part II. Although it was eventually outmoded and abandoned, this scheme enabled the Commission to build up the nucleus of a labour force in areas where labour was scarce. The period was one of progress for the Commission in contrast to the state of stagnation and depression that existed in industry and agriculture.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, the Forestry Commission was split into two sections, the Timber Production Department and the Forest Management Department. The author, then a Divisional Officer in South Wales, was allocated to the Timber Production Department and later seconded to the Ministry of Supply when the department was transferred and renamed the Home Timber Production Department. A thumb-nail sketch of the South Wales contribution to the war effort was given. Working with equipment often of Heath Robinson construction and with a motley labour force, the department purchased and converted 18 million cubic feet of timber to many different specifications. This was achieved by cutting red tape and allowing the Divisional Officer to purchase the timber.

The Forest Management Department comes in for some criticism for its attitude and behaviour during the war years. Apparently, it

held on to its young woods so jealously that thinnings, much needed for pitprops, were allowed to fall into arrears to such an extent that line thinnings had to be introduced in an attempt to redeem the situation. There must have been a blind spot somewhere in administration. On the credit side this department planted and restocked 123,035 acres from 1939 to 1944; a very notable achievement in those times. Old practices, like old ambitions, die hard.

A digression to cover the author's experience with the North German Timber Control in the post-war years is noteworthy for his impressions of German Forestry. He makes the point that the German love for exactitude and complicated forms was seemingly much greater than their love for good silviculture or economic management practices. Whatever truth there may be in this it is hard to believe that the Germans knew nothing about cutting trees into diameter assortments for sawlog and pitwood until the British showed them how.

The period immediately following the end of the war was one of consolidation and all the energies of the Forest Service were concentrated on putting into practice the recommendations contained in the White Paper, "Post-war Forest Policy". This document was, in the author's opinion, the greatest and most constructive work the Forestry Commissioners had ever undertaken. It was also to be their last serious contribution to the formulation of Forestry Policy. Subsequent decisions on policy were brought about by outside influences or *ad hoc* committees to make investigations which should have been the prerogative of the Forestry Commissioners. The author attributes this failure on the part of the Commissioners to lack of awareness as to what was taking place around them, possibly because of lack of guidance by their top professional advisors or by a failure to maintain close personal contacts with the government. The White Paper recommended further devolution of powers away from the Headquarters of the Commission, but with the death of Robinson, a professional forester and Chairman of the Commissioners, the tendency to direct authority away from the conservators and directors into the growing headquarters staff became more pronounced. The author makes it quite plain that he has little time for this type of activity which he terms "empire building".

Towards the end of the period the Commission had the privilege, or the agony, to be selected for review by the Select Committee on Estimates of the House of Commons. The only real criticism to emerge was as to the method of accounting. The idea of running a business without regular knowledge of the capital value of the stock struck the Estimates Committee as unusual, even irregular. On the whole, however, its report was favourable, but before the Commissioners had been given time to examine it and comment, another outside departmental group was set up to take this function out of their hands and eventually report direct to the Minister. This, of course, sounded the death knell of the devolution policy proposed

in the "Post-war Forest Policy" White Paper. As the author puts it "Henceforth a single heavy *praesidium* of confusedly overlapping functional Commissioners was to rule direct from Saville Row". Sweeping changes were made in the administration including the abolition of the post of Deputy Director-General and the retiring age for forest officers lowered from 65 to 60 years. The organisation was to move from a primarily timber growing one to one where exploitation, selling timber and marketing would play a major part.

Part II consists of ten somewhat unconnected chapters dealing with major functions of the Forestry Commission. Some of these functions have been mentioned briefly in Part I and the author now takes the opportunity to deal with them in depth. In some of the chapters, such as "The Crown Woods" and "Private Forestry" he breaks new ground.

For a history of an organisation the text is relatively free of unnecessary tables and statistics. Anybody who wishes to find such data as the acreage of land acquired, the incidence of forest fires, the number of men employed or the planting progress by private landowners is referred to the appendices.

The author sets out to paint a picture rather than write a history and in this he has succeeded admirably. It is a story of the people who built up and made the Forestry Commission; a story of their dedication to an ideal, their successes and their shortcomings and the inevitable clashes of personalities at the top. While many of the names mentioned are almost legendary in forestry circles, the author does not forget the rank and file even if they are not named.

Throughout the text the author employs a directness of approach that is refreshingly candid. He does not beat about the bush. He is lavish in his praise where it is merited, but he is also highly critical of people and procedures on occasions. It is inevitable, however, that he should view the events and personalities of his early years through rose-tinted spectacles and be much more discerning and critical in later years. During his time as a forest officer, the field staff managed their forests and made their decisions with the absolute minimum of direction from above. The District Officer had almost unlimited freedom of action with the broad policy framework and generally the planning sequence was upwards rather than downwards. Just as the automatic pilot of the jet age has superseded the "fly by the seat of your pants" aviator of pre-war days so are the planning and decision functions of the field officer being eroded, first by drillbook solutions and ready reckoner techniques and now by operational research and the computer. It had begun to happen in the Forestry Commission when the author retired. Now it has progressed to the stage where district staff are being given short courses to familiarise them with the jargon and to get them on the right wavelength. The author hopes this is just a passing phase; this reviewer feels it is the price of progress.

The author faithfully portrays the changes which have taken place down the years. Acquisition is a case in point. In the 1930's the planting programme was 20,000 acres per year and acquisition was scaled down to ensure merely the retention of a workable reserve. One acquisition officer catered for England and Wales during the period. In contrast the planting target in post-war years was not achieved mainly because of inability to acquire land. Part of the difficulty arose because the Minister's Agricultural Officers and the County Agricultural Committees considered improved pasture land and high mountain land to be "too good for forestry", but a contributing factor was the complacency of the Commissioners. The adoption of a properly calculated land-use policy is urged so that acquisition can be boosted to achieve the post-war target of 5 million acres by the end of the century. The comment that a planting reserve of anything less than six years would seem to be precarious will not receive wide acceptance in the Irish Forestry Division.

The author is rightly critical of what he terms the "airy-fairy" policy which emerged in 1963. This recommended that purchases of land should be restricted to places where there "were good economic reasons" or where tree planting would "maintain or improve the beauty of the landscape". Yet one suspects that the criticism is directed not so much at the wooliness of the policy but at the Treasury which has taken the final decision on acquisition out of the Foresters' hands.

A strong advocate of recreation facilities, amenity and game preservation the author makes the point that they must be secondary to wood production. On the question of economics he is less lucid. He takes issue with economists who have suggested that forests not achieving an ultimate discounted revenue of some preconceived figure should be abandoned and queries the validity of their decision making under conditions of future uncertainty. His argument is valid and evaluation of a pay-off matrix by *maximin* or *minimax* criteria is not going to solve the question of future uncertainty of supply, demand and price to everybody's satisfaction. Yet until we can breed clairvoyant economists we must make do with what we have. The author's formula for successful forestry is quite simple—the production of as much wood as possible of the quality required for the best markets. Economic motivation must not be the sole criterion, but the raw material should be produced as cheaply as possible.

The present state of overstaffing is better understood in the light of data provided. From 1954 to 1964 the number of directly productive men declined by 3,768 but clerical and managerial staff increased by 628. Is the Commission reverting to the German practice which the author so abhorred or is it simply Parkinson's Law in operation? The author does not elaborate, but comments that the non-industrial staff is big enough for an increased rate of progress without the need to recruit a single extra man or woman.

The book is anything but the dry history which the title might suggest. The text is liberally interspersed with anecdotes and the illustrations are excellent. A criticism which the author acknowledges in the preface is the unduly strong Welsh bias, the result of the author being almost permanently stationed in the Principality. The development of forestry in Scotland, in particular, is somewhat neglected.

Another criticism is the author's poor knowledge of Irish history. He refers to the planting achievement in the early years which was carried out without Irish collaboration and "but for the partition in 1923 substantial land would have been acquired and dealt with in that country". Despite this error Irish foresters will enjoy the book.

P. M. Joyce.
