

Reviews

The Irish Woods since Tudor Times

EILEEN MCCRACKEN

David and Charles. 184 pages. £2.25.

All Irish Foresters owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. McCracken for the publication of this most readable book which has been made possible by a grant from the Institute of Irish Studies of The Queen's University of Belfast.

It is difficult to imagine the number of hours of detailed research through old records and newspapers which preceded this work. Dr. Eileen McCracken has, of course, become the recognised authority on the history of Ireland's ancient woods and has contributed many articles in forestry and historical journals. In fact, some may be lulled into imagining that they have read it all before, or may consider this a dry subject which is of no interest to present-day foresters.

In this they would be quite wrong as this book has the freshness of completely new writing and holds one's attention throughout.

The distribution of our native woodlands through their last two centuries is traced and well illustrated by maps. It would be appropriate if more of our modern forests could adopt ancient forest names which have vanished from use as has been done in the case of "The Fews".

The utilisation of the timber in the various industrial processes of the day is covered in a most interesting way. What havoc must have been caused by tanners and brogue makers who stripped the bark from oak trees for miles around and then turned their attention to less suitable trees.

The explanation as to why so much timber from Ireland was used in making staves for casks, etc., is revealing.

In the interest of English cattle graziers the export of live Irish cattle was prohibited so that numbers fell from 60,000 in 1660 to 1,454 in 1669. Irish cattle thereafter had to be shipped as salted beef, much of it going to the colonies.

The timber trade is well covered in two chapters. The first deals with the seventeenth century when only native timber was in use, with the exception of masts and spars for ships, which had to be imported due to the complete lack of softwoods.

The other chapter brings out the effects on the population and trade of our dependence on imports. Timber frame houses ceased to be built, dug out boats could not be constructed, turf had to be used for fuel. Belfast could only

build small ships by 1660 and none at all 100 years later.

Costs, of course, rocketed so that an average standing Oak fetched 1/- in 1600, £3 17 0 by 1700 and £13 10 0 by 1780.

The Scandinavians were using wind and water driven sawmills while the pit saw was still in use here, yet the artisans fearing for their livelihood frustrated attempts to follow suit. As a result timber was imported in plank rather than in the round.

The era of private planting followed by state planting brings the book to our own period and introduces a more controversial note.

Our modern exotics are said to be forced like battery hens with a resulting loss in quality of timber. The statement is made that it is a long time since the fattest pig was considered the best bacon producer.

Far from being forced in hothouse conditions and spoiled with rich soil our poor trees have to make do with the poorest of food and the most exposed conditions. Fat pigs and battery hens indeed with a few ounces of phosphate to keep them going maybe for 40 years.

Doubts are expressed about the economics of forestry and yet with all a plea is made for the planting of more hardwoods which would hardly remedy the situation.

The only historical point which puzzles the reviewer was the statement that Ballykelly Forest, formerly Walworth Wood, was owned by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Walworth, who struck down Wat Tyler in 1381. To the best of my knowledge the English were virtually driven out of Ulster for 300 years following the Bruce invasion 1315-1318.

Foresters have for long begun their talks to the public with a mention of our great forests of the past. "The Irish Woods Since Tudor Times" should be well studied by all who wish to be well informed in the subject.

I recommend it to all Irish Foresters.