

Tree Planting¹

By LADY GREGORY

It was pleasant to read in the *Homestead* of January 15 that the number of trees planted in Ireland last year was considerably larger than the number of trees cut down; for trees vanish very quickly—"a bit of ash for the shaft of a cart", "a bit of spruce for the rafters of a shed", "a bit of larch for roofing", "a bit of firing on account of the turf being so wet", and a clump that has taken years to grow is gone in a day. And if woods, like friendships, are not kept in constant repair, the day will come when they will be but a memory. And Ireland, more than other countries, ought to be a country of trees, for the very letters of her alphabet are named after them. Perhaps with the revival of her old language they will be better called to mind.

Sir Walter Scott gave wise advice to his son when he said, "Put in a tree whenever you can; it will be growing while you are sleeping." And we should never be discouraged by thinking that the growth will be slow for the years pass all too quickly, and some day we find the little seedlings we had put down in faith are over our heads, and acting as our protectors. And even if we do not live to sit under their shade, yet none the less "they will grow while we are sleeping" that long sleep in which we may so easily be forgotten, and we are not likely to have more lasting monuments put over us, and we cannot have more gracious ones than the living, rustling trees that we had planted and that we had loved.

There are such monuments here at my home. There is an avenue of ilex trees planted by my husband's mother some where about forty years ago. When we come into their shelter from a windy drive we think gratefully of her as we note their evergreen compactness and their silvery upper shoots shining against the sky like olive boughs against the sky of Italy, for here also our sky is sometimes blue. And a childless member of the family, wishing to have his wife kept in remembrance, planted a wood in her name—the "Isabella Wood." So when descendants of the people whose friend she had been pass near it, or ask for timber from it, her name is on their lips. And there is a corner filled with larch, strong and straight, planted by a young garden boy, who was sent to do the work by a careless steward as best he could in faith and

1. From *The Irish Homestead*. February 12th and 19th 1898. Reprinted by kind permission of the Lady Gregory Estate, and Colin Smythe Ltd. publishers of the Coole Edition of Lady Gregory's works.

ignorance. He died not long afterwards, but the trees did well, and when his mother came crying and lamenting for his death I took her to see them, and told her how his name clings to them, and will long cling as only a name can do. My husband planted rare pines that now tower skywards, and many larch and spruce, for he believed in the future of home-grown timber. A little time ago my schoolboy son got hold of an axe, and cut down a tree—a deal one. But I told him that he must never cut one down without planting two in its place, so that very day he brought out an insignis and a silver fir from the nursery, and he planted them near a path that, if they thrive, he may see them all his life and remember their lesson.

We can't all have woods, nor is it to be wished that pasture or tillage fields should be turned into forests. But no one need be without even a few trees about his farm, to screen his house from storm, or to give shade and shelter to his sheep and cattle. In England it is said the number of trees about the country, in hedges or clumps, or by roadsides, is greater than the number in woods and enclosed plantations, and these trees give to fields and lanes a charm that we miss over here. I know of a district where many tenants have lately bought their holdings, and are already beginning to find a pleasure in planting on their own land. And as all good tenants will doubtless be in full possession of their farms sooner or later, they might well begin to plant in anticipation.

I wish that every Nationalist would plant at least one tree in this year of '98, and every Unionist in 1900, and every waverer or indifferent person in the year that separates them, and the face of the country would be as different in the new century from what it is now as is a head covered with soft waving hair from a head that is bald or close shaven.

“When Ulysses, after a ten years' absence, was returned from Troy, and coming home found his aged father in the field planting of trees, he asked him, ‘Why, being now so advanced in years, he would put himself to the fatigue and labour of planting that of which he was never likely to enjoy the fruits?’ The old man, taking him for a stranger, gently replied, ‘I plant against my son Ulysses comes home.’”*

How many Irish homes there are from which a son has gone—another Ulysses—a salt sea voyage, in the hope of coming back some day, laden with spoils, to the old home. I would gladly think that each such wanderer could find on his return that his memory had been kept green by living green trees planted “against Ulysses comes home.”

* Evelyn's “Silva”.

"Men seldom plant trees till they begin to be wise," says Evelyn in telling this story, so the sooner we begin to plant the sooner we shall give practical proof of our early wisdom.

As to the time for planting, November to March are the best months, so for this spring there is not much time to lose. The cold winds of March and the dryness we hope for—but don't always get—are against the little transplanted roots, and they don't get a fair start. But in a soft, wet February they will be quite safe.

When choosing the sort of tree to plant it is wise to look round and note what does best in the neighbourhood, for trees are capricious as to soil. Some will not thrive in clay and some in limestone. And it is best to choose those sure of finding food to suit them, for a sickly tree will never be an ornament, while a healthy one can never be anything but beautiful in its strength and vigour. If there is a nursery near it is an easy matter to choose what one wants, or where there are woods seedlings of many sorts may be had for the asking.

When the trees have been planted, either singly along walls or hedges, or in a little clump as a "screen" for shelter, there must be no delay in protecting them against cattle or goats or rabbits, or any other enemies from whose attack they may be in danger. An old poet has written:

"If cattle or coney may enter to crop,
Young oak is in danger of losing his top."

The taller the sapling is the easier it will be to protect it, and where there is not a long journey or a delay in planting very good sized ones may be moved with a good ball without danger.

Ash is easily come by and easily moved, and its timber is useful in a hundred ways, but it should never be planted near tillage. Its rambling roots run along near the surface, and suck up the nourishment that should go to the crops. It is less hurtful to pasture, and its slight shade does not interfere with the undergrowth. Oak strikes deep, and its roots find their nutriment below the region of grass and crops, and no tree can be more beautiful where it does well. But it is a slow grower, and on light soils it will always be stunted and look like a poor relation of the great oaks of England. Beech will not let the grass grow well under it, so is impossible as a field tree, though planted closely in a row and kept clipped, it makes a good and useful hedge. Horse-chestnut kills all vegetation under it, and should only be admired from afar. Lime also hurts the grass, though its blossoms are the delight of bees. I am inclined to think that elm is the most satis-

factory hedgerow tree. It stands well in storms, it does not impoverish the land, and it gives a good, though not too dense a shade. And on land subject to floods it will stand up to its waist in water as contentedly as cattle do in summer time, but for weeks instead of hours, and with no ill results. Sycamore will stand wind where nothing else will, and makes a good nurse for more delicate trees, growing quickly and sheltering them in their early years. Plane is a very beautiful tree, with its smooth, clean stem and serrated leaves, and gives an example to farmers, hanging up its little dry bags of seed for the winter, and scattering them when soft spring days come. It is said not to bear a blast, but I know one that enjoys our Atlantic storms. Larch grows quickly, does no harm, and is of value even in its early years, but care should be taken not to put them, when planted singly, in too exposed a place. For a larch is nothing if not straight, and it is sad to see them as Usheen saw the trees near the coast:

“Dripping and doubling landwards as though they would hasten away,

“Like an army of old men longing for rest from the moan of the seas.”*

Then for ornament no one need grudge a corner for the slight delicate mountain ash, the rowan, with its clusters of scarlet berries, or the black willow, with its plummy catkins bursting out to greet Palm Sunday, or the scarlet sallow with its twigs all ready for basket mending, or the laburnam with its golden rain, or the crab tree, with its snowy blossoms. Of the thorn bushes I need not speak; they are looked after and preserved by invisible powers.

Birch may be put under the heading either of use or beauty. Buyers come now to look for it, wanting its wood for clogs used in the North of England. When I heard this I planted a thousand or thereabouts, with a provident mind. But I hope such evil days will never come as will force my successors to cut down their shimmering quivering beauty to be trodden under foot by the British workman.

If evergreen is wanted, there is the spruce, hardy, substantial, handsome, and there is also the evergreen oak, a little difficult to start, for it does not like its roots moved, but once started it flourishes happily in our mild moist winters. Yew is dangerous to plant, except among the dead. It takes sudden freaks of poisoning, and is not to be trusted. Scotch fir is hardy and brave, and so is Austrian, but Scotch is the more beautiful. Its red stem lights up a

* W. B. Yeats.

landscape when the sun shines on it. And when the sun is hidden and all is grey the gleam of the silver fir, like the silver lining to a cloud, keeps depression away. But the silver fir is gentle and likes shade and safety; it is with the Scotch, the sycamore, the elm we must hold the heights.

But whether the holding be large or small, tillage or pasture, there is not one that would not be the better for ever so small an orchard upon it. Apple trees are easy to cultivate, they don't take up much room, crops and vegetables grow happily under them, they are beautiful in their spring blossoming and in their autumn ripening, and the profits they bring in are quick and certain. I know a man who had planted some apple trees near his house, and after a time the old house, small and inconvenient, disappeared, and a new one took its place, with slates on the roof instead of straw, and an upper story. It was built with money borrowed from the Board of Works, and the interest has been paid from year to year with the money the apples bring in. The debt will soon be paid off, and the orchard and its profits will remain.

When Wolfe Tone was in France, a hundred years ago, he noticed how the people there planted orchards, and their children looked after them, and he wished the example might be followed in Ireland. "But", he says, "he who can barely find potatoes for his family is little solicitous about apples; he whose constant beverage is water dreams neither of cider or mead. Well, if we succeed we may put our poor countrymen on somewhat a better establishment. We shall see."

But fruit trees are not so easily come by as forest trees, and where there is no good nursery in the neighbourhood the I.A.O.S. will have to come in, and a co-operative order will have to be sent to one of the best growers. For a tree of a poor sort takes as much care and manuring as one of a good sort, and only brings disappointment in the end.

So we must think again of the old father of Ulysses, and plant orchards for our sons, that they at least may not have to stoop to see how their only fruit is ripening, the "earth apple," the potato. They will then be able to look upwards as well for their crops, and to see them not only taking strength from the earth beneath, but sweetness, and savour, and colour from the sun in heaven.