

EDITORIAL

One Man's Contribution

"The necessity which will always exist for timber will necessitate in future great forest reservations, so there is hope. A forest is the finest thing in the world."¹

Augustine Henry, the fiftieth anniversary of whose death we commemorate this year, wrote these words when working with the Imperial Chinese Customs Service at Szemao in southwestern China. Henry was not a forester at that time. He was not even a qualified botanist although he was firmly established in that field as a result of his untiring and meticulous work in plant collection in China. He remained in China for nineteen years and towards the end of his time there he became more and more interested in trees.

Irish foresters have good reason to cherish Henry's memory. He took up the Chair of Forestry at the College of Science in Dublin in 1913, but his contribution to Irish forestry had begun many years earlier. In his recognition of the importance of hybrid vigour and his tree breeding work at Kew he was ahead of his time and gave impetus to what was then a new science and which has now become of such importance to us here. Indeed, had his ideas on the importance of provenance been more widely recognised at the time, costly errors might have been avoided.

In 1907, as an expert witness before the Departmental Committee on Forestry, Henry had argued strongly in favour of the widespread use of conifers. It was he who pointed out the similarity between our climate and that of coastal northwest America. Plantings should be concentrated on species from this region. He considered it was essential to choose fast growing species giving quick returns. If afforestation was to be embarked upon, it should be on a realistic scale, commercial forests giving real returns. These ideas, which for the most part we accept now were quite unorthodox at that time. Had we not had a man of such vision, where would Irish forestry be today?

1. Reprinted from Sheila Pim's excellent biography of Professor Henry, "The Wood and the Trees" with permission of the author.