

Obituary

Thomas Clear, Emeritus Professor of Forestry

Tom Clear, Emeritus Professor of Forestry at UCD died on the 12 December, 1994, just ten days short of his 83rd birthday. His passing brings to an end a life of service to forestry and forestry education unparalleled in the history of the State, spanning almost half a century from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Tom was born in Portlaoise on 22 December, 1911. He attended the local secondary school and secured a county council scholarship to study agriculture at UCD in 1930. During his first year he was influenced by a forestry student, Sean M. O'Sullivan to change career, a move he was never to regret. Tom, together with Sean O'Sullivan, O. V. Mooney, Martin Feehan and Douglas Walsh formed a forestry cadre which has contributed much to what constitutes Coillte today. They were greatly encouraged by the policies and programmes of the government of the time, which had made afforestation an election issue, and they were to benefit educationally from these policies by a four month study period in Sweden during their final year, to acquire experience in forest engineering, surveying and forest inventory.

Having graduated in 1935 with first class honours, Tom was awarded a travelling scholarship to undertake postgraduate study. On the recommendation of Dr. Otto Reinhard, the Director of the Irish Forest Service on secondment from Germany, Tom opted for study at the world renowned Prussian *Forstliche Hochschule* at Eberswalde, some 100km east of Berlin. It was a move which, not alone influenced Tom's attitude to forestry theory and practice but through him, had a profound effect on forestry in this country.

At Eberswalde Tom's mentor was Professor Dr. W. Wittich, one of the most highly regarded forest scientists of the period. Here Tom was imbued with principles of silvicultural practice which were to remain his forte for the rest of his life. During vacations he travelled widely to study forest management practices in the States of Bavaria, Baden, Hessen, Saxony and Thuringia as well as Prussia. It was characteristic of the man that he threw himself into student activities with his usual fervour. He mastered the language, an accomplishment which was to stand him in good stead in later years, and students were to benefit from his translation of excerpts from Dengler's *Waidbau*, the standard silvicultural text in German Universities. He engaged in sporting activities but, on his own admission, was not a great success. Later he would laughingly recall his attempts to achieve proficiency in woodcraft and rifle marksmanship, a prerequisite for the post of forest officer in Germany. It would seem that Tom's aim was so wide of the target that the score enumerator on the rifle range feared for his life and suggested to Tom that he might like to give up target practice as it was unlikely that he would ever become a Jäger.

On his return to Ireland in 1937, Tom was appointed an Assistant District Officer in the Forest Service based at Gort, Co. Galway. However, his stay there was short. In 1938 Professor Drew, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, invited him to take the post of acting Lecturer in Forestry at University College Dublin. From then until his retirement in 1981, he was the foremost forestry academic in the country. He adapted Central European forestry theory and practice to Irish conditions with a refreshing pragmatism and due regard for the national requirements. In the North American conifer, Sitka spruce, he saw the answer to Ireland's constructional timber needs and it

is worth recording that his views on this subject were vindicated during his lifetime. To quote his own words, 'Sitka spruce is God's gift to the Irish nation'. He would argue that, but for a quirk of ice-age glaciation, Sitka spruce would have been an indigenous species.

In his role as lecturer and professor, Tom was a strong advocate of the final year forestry student tour, arguing that forestry was essentially a land use enterprise which needed to be taught in a field environment. During the 1939-45 war the tour was, of necessity, confined to Ireland and forestry students of that period have occasion to remember some marathon hikes. Niall Morris, one of the class of '45 recalls a cycle stage from Cashel to Portlaoise, after a day on the Galtees, with Tom leading the *peloton*. After the war Professor Clear focused on mainland Europe for the student tour with a view to broadening the forestry students' education. The Nordic countries provided frequent venues but Germany remained a favourite destination. Unfortunately, however, he never had the opportunity to revisit Eberswalde. By the time the Berlin Wall was dismantled his failing health curtailed travel outside Ireland.

Like many foresters of his generation he leaves a living memorial of woodlands which he helped establish. From Wicklow to Clare many private forestry estates have had the benefit of his expert advice and are ecologically and financially richer on that account. He made no excuses for his choice of conifers over broadleaves knowing that few estates could afford the long rotations and dubious financial returns associated with the latter in an era of meagre forestry grants and no premiums. In his view, the promotion and establishment of broadleaves was the responsibility of the public rather than the private forestry sector: only the State could afford to grow them.

Professor Clear was the very antithesis of the 'ivory tower' academic. He was most at home in the forest environment, holding forth to his students or discussing a silvicultural point at a Society of Irish Foresters field outing. He was a founder member of this organisation and its Secretary and Treasurer for almost two decades. Later in life he was to become its President. His immense contribution to forestry was recognised by the Society in recent years when he was made him an honorary life member.

Promoted to Statutory Lecturer in Forestry in 1944, Tom was appointed to the Chair of Forestry in 1959. His analytical approach to problems and sound judgement lead to his election as Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and in this capacity he served two terms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Throughout this period he was actively engaged in negotiations and arrangements for the new faculty building at Belfield. His broad vision and insistence on maintaining core values ensured the world-wide recognition of the UCD degree.

Apart from a great interest in reading, current affairs and travel, his almost total immersion in forestry left little time for other activities. Following retirement he became an enthusiastic gardener and maintained a keen interest in forestry.

He married Kathleen Mitten from Wexford in 1938 and they were blessed with a large family. Although Kathleen was not directly involved in forestry, her invaluable contribution to Tom's work and career was widely recognised as wife, mother, private secretary, organiser and confidant. To Kathleen and to their family, Michael, Judith, Mary, Aidan, Declan, Colman, Eoghan, Simon and Richard we offer our deepest sympathy.

Padraic Joyce