

Celebrating Irish Forests

Coillte and An Taisce. 1998. ISBN 0 9518612 3 9. 56 pages. Paperback. IR£5 (available from all Coillte offices).

Reviewed by Niall OCarroll, former Chief Inspector, State Forest Service.

Coillte and An Taisce have come together to produce and publish this pamphlet, or brochure, celebrating that great, man-made national resource, the forests of Ireland, even now less than 100 years in the making.

The text is by Frank J. Convery, with acknowledgement for editorial advice going to Michael Carey, David Hickie, Tony Lowes and Alistair Pfeifer. This combination is our assurance of scientific accuracy. The photographs are by various hands and eyes.

The guarantee of an accurate text is fine as far as it goes. But that text covers considerable ground under the headings Introduction, Ecosystems, Landscape, Water, People, Spirituality, Farmers, Commerce and Sustainability, all in a total, by this reviewer's reckoning, of 4,000 words. A thin cover, it might be said.

The format is the standard glossy A4, profusely illustrated, with scattered blocks of text and lots of blank space, presumably dictated by 'design' considerations.

That a commercial forestry company and a national conservation organisation could co-operate in this project is highly creditable, even if at times one can almost hear the grinding of the wheels of compromise, as in "Where soils have a granite base...there may be a tendency towards some acidification of waters, which may affect fish life." But 'compromise' is a word much in the air in recent times. It is hoped that this co-operation will develop and flourish, and that its scientific base will be more firmly established by the necessary research.

The use of lodgepole pine of Lulu Island origin is given as an example of a past mistake. The background of that 'error' is not as straightforward as might be inferred. But that is a story for another day.

The picture of the cover and on page 17 is captioned "The Great Ride, Avondale". The adjective 'great' in this connection was a recent administrative 'refinement' of the name of a feature traditionally and universally known as 'the big ride'.

It is a pity that there is no explicit celebration of that marvellous species, Sitka spruce, the staple of Irish forestry for decades, and likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. The interior of a mature Sitka spruce wood, such as can be found in the Slieve Blooms and no doubt in other places also, need yield to nothing in terms of aesthetic quality (or spirituality, to refer to one of the section headings).

Once more we encounter that insidious plural *premia*, a word which has no validity in correct English. All authorities are agreed on 'premiums'.

Churchill's catty remark about Clement Atlee's modesty, quoted on page 52, might well have been eschewed, particularly in view of the high esteem in recent years for Atlee as Prime Minister. Far from being modest, I think Irish foresters have much to feel proud of, even if there is still a lot to learn. As T.S. Eliot puts it:

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death...