

Forest perspectives

This new section of the journal is devoted to short articles dealing with past events, practices or personalities. Articles on these themes are welcome and should be addressed to the Editor.

The first article in the series is taken from an appendix to *Changing Times – Ireland since 1898* by Edward MacLysaght (see below for biographical sketch).

Some aspects of the Civil Service

I am still a farmer in Clare as well as a civil servant but I find myself more and more attracted by the fascination of forestry. It is the sense of continuity which makes silviculture so satisfying an occupation. I feel as I see trees taking root and thriving, that even if the exigencies of the uncertain world we live in should decree that I should not be followed here by my own descendants, someone at any rate will benefit in the future by what I am doing. A man establishes a pedigree herd or a specialized library and how often does it happen that on his death his life work is dispersed at an auction sale; so too the ruins of the once apparently everlasting landlords' houses of the nineteenth century, to be seen all over the face of the country, are ocular evidence of the futility of imagining that one can leave a mark on the future. But a well-established wood will remain until it is mature; and if the trees planted are hardwoods, with a fair proportion of oaks in their composition, the chances are that it will be there several hundred years hence. I do not seem to mind the fact that the name of the planter of a wood is seldom if ever preserved, so well expressed in the Irish proverb, '*maireann an tor ar an gelaidhe ach ní mhaireann an lámh do chuir*', for there is a definite satisfaction in saying to oneself, 'here is something which will last'.

Following the establishment of a Department of Agriculture as a prelude to Home Rule a Forestry Division was added. A. C. Forbes, an Englishman, was the first Forestry Director. He was followed by one Crozier, a typical Scot of pawky humour and very inelastic ideas on forestry. When his term of office expired, the British regime, under which one expected men of his type to be appointed, was a thing of the past and under the new system his successor had to be chosen by a selection board. In this case the board consisted of an official of the Department of Finance as chairman -it was J. J. MacElligott -my friend, Michael Deegan, the secretary of the Department of Lands (of which Forestry is a branch), another official whose name and personality I forget, and two laymen -Robert Barton and myself. The applications for the job were numerous, some 65 if I recollect aright. Each of us was furnished with a complete copy of the credentials of all of these, perusal of which made it obvious that 40 or 50 of them were quite unsuitable while the other 20 or so had qualifications worthy of careful consideration. The first meeting of the selection board was called for 3 p.m. on a day when there happened to be a Davis Cup match taking place at the Fitzwilliam Club. We have only limited opportunities of seeing first class tennis in Dublin and I bought a ticket thinking that, as I expected play to continue till nearly 6 p.m., I would be able to watch it for an hour or two: I argued that all we had to do that first day was to pick out the more likely candidates and arrange for the more lengthy work of interviewing them on a subsequent occasion. How wrong I was! At 6 p.m. we were still ploughing conscientiously through the list, obvious duds being scrupulously considered, whose claims I personally having read their applications would have dismissed in thirty

seconds. Eventually at any rate a preliminary selection was decided on. The dozen or so chosen for further consideration included several from various continental countries -in one case we paid the fare of a Norwegian to come to Dublin by air for interview.

The man who impressed me most favourably was the only Irishman on the list: a genuine Irishman at that with an O name, hailing from Co. Limerick. In voting for him, I was in a minority of one. I may have been wrong because so far from blowing his own trumpet, he was of the self-deprecating type and may have been lacking in the drive necessary in a director whose main function was to be the reorganization and vitalizing of a service which up to then had been somewhat stagnant; but with the arguments used by the other selectors against him, I still do not agree. Most of this man's forestry career had been in India: consequently, they argued, he could know nothing of Irish forestry requirements. My answer was that he was therefore in no danger of starting with preconceived ideas -he would hardly be likely to advocate the growing of mahogany or teak in Ireland -whereas a man with experience in a country not altogether unlike Ireland might tend to favour practices unsuitable to our usually damp summers and mild winters. Moreover, I urged, Mr O'F. knows the Irish people, as well as the Irish climate, and this appears to me to be a prime essential in a Director of Forestry, since so much of the success of an ambitious afforestation programme depends on the acquisition of land from landowners who are far from forestry-minded and on creating enthusiasm in a staff hitherto accustomed to indifference almost amounting to defeatism. As I say, I was in a minority of one so there was no more to be said. I then concentrated on pushing my second choice, one Reinhardt, a German. Barton agreed with me in this; the others were undecided. As usually happens in a committee, when two or three members have decided views and the rest have not, the former carry the day. The result was that Reinhardt was appointed. He was, in fact, only a moderate success and when the War broke out in 1939, he returned to Germany and the senior permanent official, a dour Scot called Dr Anderson, was automatically promoted to the directorship. After a while he resigned, only to be succeeded by another official, again a Scot but not a dour one, an able after-dinner speaker who potters along awaiting his approaching civil service pension. I have hopes that the next director will be the young and energetic Irishman who now occupies the position of chief inspector.

Taken from Appendix B, *Changing Times – Ireland since 1898* by Edward MacLysaght. Published by Colin Symthe, Gerrards Cross, London. Reprinted here by kind permission of the MacLysaght family.

Edward MacLysaght (1887–1986) was born in Somerset and educated in England. He came to Ireland in 1908 when his father bought a farm of 600 acres (240 ha) near Tuamgraney, Co Clare, half of which was leased to the Forest Service starting in 1926. He joined the Gaelic League, learned Irish and was nominated to an Industrial Resources Commission set up by the 1918 Dáil. He was elected a member of the first Free State Senate.

In 1939 he published *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century* (revised and enlarged in 1950), an account of everyday social life at that period. He became an Inspector for the Irish Manuscripts Commission and joined the staff of the National Library in 1943. Later he became Chief Herald at the Irish Genealogical Office and in 1949 Keeper of Manuscripts at the National Library. The culmination of his life's work came with the

publication from 1957 onwards of a series of books on Irish families and Irish surnames.

In his memoirs he records a visit in 1914 by "A.C. Forbes the head of state forestry, an Englishman, who is, by the way, devilish uninteresting outside the subject of trees."

Edward MacLysaght appears in the lists of members of the Society of Irish Foresters published in *Irish Forestry*, Vol. 6, 1949, Vol. 12(1), 1955 and Vol. 30(2), 1973.

It has not so far been possible to identify the writer's favoured candidate, the 'genuine Irishman...with an O name hailing from Co. Limerick'. If any reader can help in this regard the Editor would be pleased to learn details.

Selection and note submitted by Niall OCarroll.