

Book Review

Forestry in Ireland – A Concise History. Niall OCarroll. COFORD, Dublin. ISBN 1902696379. €20.

Besides being concise as its name indicates, this history of forestry in Ireland is also comprehensive, in that it treats within its 100 pages virtually every aspect of its subject in appropriate, that is to say proportionate, detail. Its appearance is timely for two reasons, coinciding as it does both with the centenary of the beginnings of the modern Irish forestry renaissance and the announcement of the imminent commencement of the most comprehensive survey of Ireland's forests since the establishment of the State.

Although he deals with the entire period from the primaevae forests of ancient times to the present day, for reasons that most readers will understand in advance, Dr OCarroll focuses attention on the 20th century which opened with a new and hopeful chapter in the fortunes of Irish forestry. This came about as a result of the wide acceptance at that time of two beliefs, namely, the need for both a serious reforestation programme and for state involvement as the only means of ensuring its viability over the long period between investment and return which characterises forestry, as distinct from agricultural development.

The preceding centuries had been marked by intensive exploitation of the country's forest resources which, though deplored by many thoughtful people, including Jonathan Swift, and made the object from the 18th century onwards of remedial efforts by the Royal Dublin Society and some enlightened estate owners, continued to go largely unchecked up to the end of the 19th century.

As the nature and scope of his material, evident from the extensive literature reflected in the exhaustive bibliography, were not amenable to chronological treatment, Dr OCarroll was obliged to present it by means of a series of separate headings such as Learning, Silviculture, The Product, etc., a method not without its risks that happily he has largely succeeded in avoiding.

The appearance of a dedicated English forestry scientist, Arthur Charles Forbes, and the acquisition of the Parnell Estate at Avondale under the aegis of the recently-established Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in 1904, marked the birth of modern Irish forestry. Thereafter the new Irish Free State from 1922 onwards maintained the impetus with an annual planting quota determined principally it would seem by the ability, often limited enough, of the exchequer to find the money to pay for it. It is doubtful, from what Dr OCarroll has found, that there was ever a forest policy in the sense of a formal statement of intent to operate in a consistent fashion on a long-term basis. The nearest to what could be regarded as such were the decisions, taken on an ad hoc basis from time to time in the light of prevailing circumstances, to plant a certain acreage each year and to thereby ultimately achieve a total acreage within a certain stated period. Even the difficulties of the so-called Economic War of the 1930s', the even greater problems created by World War 2 and the hardship of succeeding decades, did not deter successive governments from pressing on to at last achieve in 1991 the million-acre target set by the first Inter-Party government in 1948, "a creditable achievement in

respect of a long-term government target”, writes Dr OCarroll, “which surprisingly was not accompanied by any overt publicity or jubilation”. There is a curious irony in this writer’s view in the fact that this phenomenal target could not have been achieved had it not been for the chronically depressed land values that prevailed throughout the country up to our entry into the EEC in 1973.

Different readers, whatever their particular interest in Irish forestry, will all learn something of interest in these pages. My own favourite is the chapter on silviculture with its fascinating detail about such matters as the choice of species, methods of planting, etc. Another attractive feature is the variety of characters encountered in the course of the narrative. While only forestry professionals will recognise such names as Daniel Howitz, Gifford Pinchot, Augustine Henry and John Mackay, the general reader will be interested to find Edmund Burke, William Bulfin, Lady Gregory, Horace Plunkett, Sean O’Casey, Bulmer Hobson, George Russell, James Joyce and Theodore Roosevelt mentioned or quoted.

Politicians, scientists and administrators all contributed to the saga of 20th-century Irish forestry. Many are mentioned by the author, some as remarkable for their shortcomings as for their successes, most who in the way of men everywhere disagreed as often as they agreed among themselves, though always in good faith, concerning the complex issues that their task presented. I would like to have seen more attention paid to the wider social aspects of forestry history and in particular to the roles of the forester and the forestry labourer. At the very heart of this significant national enterprise, and vital to its success, was the forester who bore responsibility for day-to-day management, the supervision and welfare of his labour force and for so many other operational details including the vital task of choosing the species to be planted. Can the work of these men, forester and labourer, working for long hours daily, the year round, on bleak hillsides and remote bogland, establishing and tending plantations on thousands of acres, be ever adequately appraised? I believe that the author had them principally in mind when he generously dedicated his work “To the memory of those who worked hard for little reward and less thanks to create the asset we all now enjoy”.

Gerry Brady

Gerry Brady is a barrister practising in Dublin who served in the Forestry Division of the Department of Lands from 1952 to 1969