

FOREST IMAGES

Father Browne's Woodland Photographs



E.E. O'Donnell SJ

THE SOCIETY OF IRISH FORESTERS
1942-1992

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THE SOCIETY OF IRISH FORESTERS
Cumann Foraoiseóirí na hÉireann

PREFACE

DR. TED FARRELL
President
The Society of Irish Foresters



ONE HUNDRED years ago, Ireland was almost denuded of forest. The great natural forests of oak, elm and ash had been destroyed through generations of exploitation and neglect. Then, in the early years of this century, the slow task of restoring this lost resource began.

When Father Browne began his series of Emo woodland images in 1931, little had changed. However, it is obvious from these remarkable photographs that change was taking place. We are fortunate that he stayed with his subject for over twenty years, developing a thematic series of images that capture virtually all aspects of the forestry cycle. We are fortunate too that he was interested in forestry not just for its aesthetic appeal, but as a subject which was slowly reshaping the landscape and the lives of the people who worked in it. Many forests have been planted since then. Now, almost 7% of the land is under forests, which supply much of our demand for wood.

Fifty years ago, when Father Browne was halfway through his Emo series, the Society of Irish Foresters was founded, "to advance and spread in Ireland the knowledge of forestry in all its aspects". From a forestry perspective, fifty years is not a long time. Foresters take a long view. They plant trees that others, who come after them, will harvest. They have faith in the future and an implicit confidence in the stability of society. Forestry development in Ireland was modest in scale during the period when the initial Father Browne photographs were taken, but he captures the sense of excitement that is always present at the beginning of something new.

This is an exciting time to be involved in forestry in Ireland. Times of change produce threats, challenges and opportunities. When the Society of Irish Foresters was founded, the challenge was to establish and develop a forest industry. The challenge of the future is to consolidate and diversify the resource that has been created and to develop the best markets for the wood from these forests.

Father Browne's woodland photographs are a visual celebration of the story of Irish forestry. In celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Society, it is fitting that we draw on these images, remembering that fifty years is but a short time in the life of the forest.

INTRODUCTION

Irish Forestry and The Society of Irish Foresters

FORESTRY has recently come into its own in Ireland. For generations it was non-existent. In more recent times it was the poor relation of agriculture; the land use of last resort. The worst land was often described as 'only good for trees' and, to a large extent, only the worst was made available for planting.

This attitude was understandable in a land where food production was of prime importance. Food was needed to provide for large populations living in congested conditions, to ward off the experience of famine, to sell in order to pay the rent and have a little over. Food production was an overwhelming imperative and any land which could contribute to it was coveted.

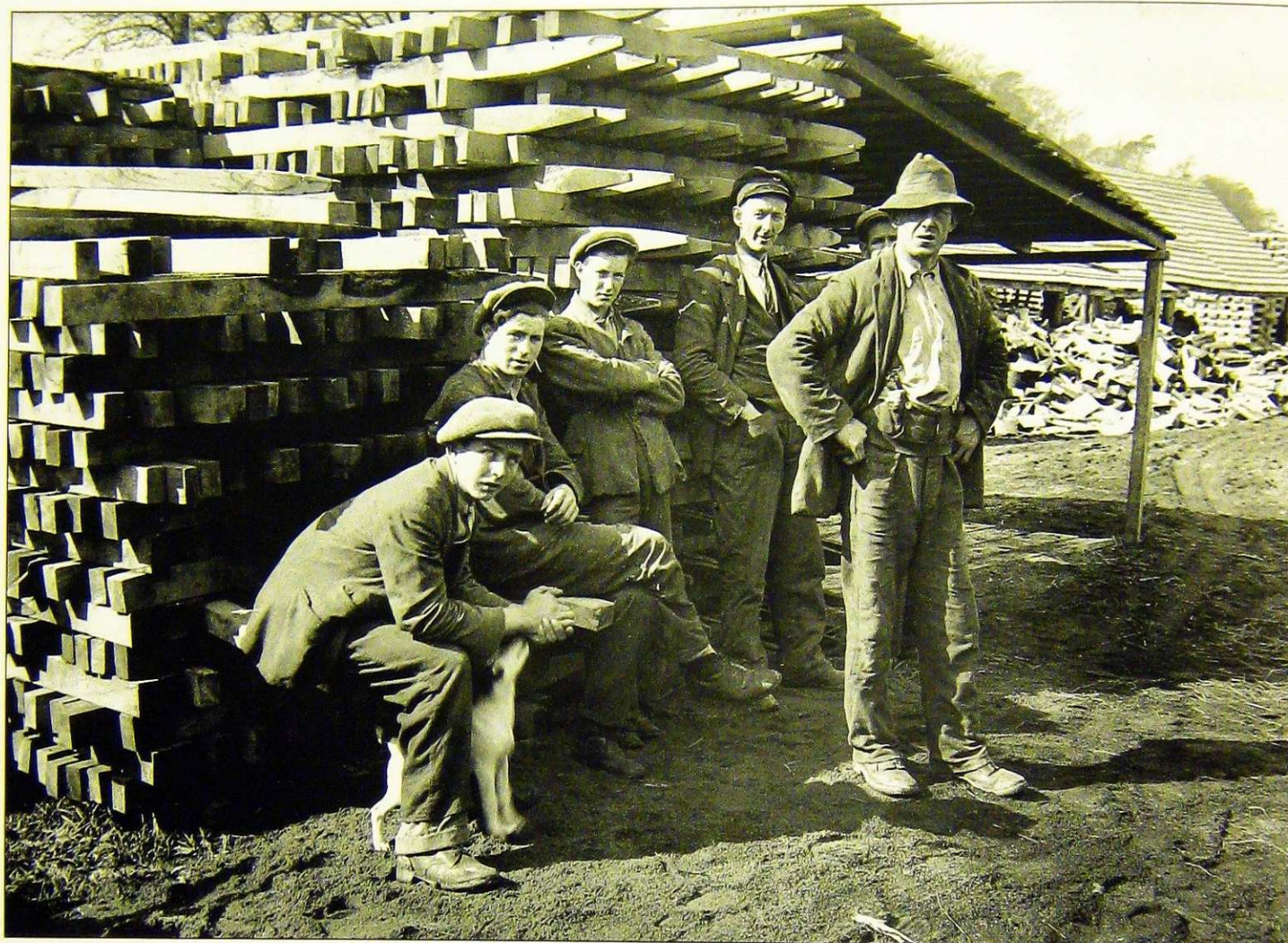
It took the development of the European Community to end that situation, but only after it had first exacerbated it by subsidised production and high commodity prices. Costly food mountains, together with increased imports of wood and wood products caused a shift in emphasis from producing excess food to the growing of wood instead. Ireland has been well placed to benefit from that shift.

Destruction of Irish Forests

Ireland once had great forests of oak, elm, ash and pine. Deforestation began with the earliest inhabitants and happened in two ways. Domestic

animals grazed in the forest and ate the young developing seedlings so that regeneration, and hence sustainability, was prevented. More directly, these early farmers cleared the forests to create fields for growing food crops and for the controlled management of animals. Deforestation increased after the Norman influx and, by 1600, forest cover was reduced to 12%. The available timber, in particular, oak, was in demand in large quantities for construction and ship-building, also to produce charcoal for iron-smelting and glass-making and, interestingly, to be manufactured into barrels for the export of food and for sale to French wine producers. It was also advocated that a reduction in forest cover would have military advantages for a controlling army. By the early eighteenth century Ireland, for the first time, reached the position of being a timber-importing country.

There were some attempts to reverse the destruction of our forests. Ireland has the distinction of being the first country in the world, so far as is known, where State grants were made available for forest planting. The Dublin Society, now the Royal Dublin Society, was founded in 1731 by a group of Irish philanthropists to improve Irish agriculture and industry. It soon saw the need for extensive tree planting and in 1741 it offered premiums, or grants, for the planting of trees to its specification. In 1761, the Irish Parliament in Dublin voted funds to finance the premiums, which continued to be



This group of sawmill workers in front of well-finished squared stakes were photographed at New Inn sawmill in 1933.



THE SOCIETY OF IRISH FORESTERS 1942-1992



The Society of Irish Foresters was founded in 1942 to advance and spread the knowledge of forestry in all its aspects. The activities of the Society are largely educational and include forestry seminars, study tours and forestry shows. The Society has published two books on Irish forestry and produces the technical journal 'Irish Forestry' twice yearly.

While most of its members are professional foresters (technical members), associate membership is open to all with an interest in trees and forestry.

The Society is now more active in influencing Irish forestry development and has published a number of policy papers on subjects such as species diversification, research and the environment. It also promotes the profession of forestry and the role it will play in the evolution of Irish forestry.