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978-1-108-06939-7 - Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1776, on Several Parts of Great Britain: Particularly the High-Lands of Scotland: Volume 1

William Gilpin

Excerpt

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OBSERVATIONS
ON SEVERAL
Parts of GREAT BRITAIN;
PARTICULARLY THE
HIGHLANDS of SCOTLAND.

SECTION I.

IN this excursion we propos'd to visit some of the more remarkable scenes in Scotland; and in our journey through England, some parts of it also, which we had not seen before

Having pass'd the wild, open country of Enfield-chace, lately despoiled by act of parliament of it's trees; and having left the sweet woodlands of Hertfordshire; our views

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became coarse, and unpleasant. The fatiguing uniformity of them was, here and there, just relieved by a distance; particularly at Alconbury-hill.

From hence among other remote objects, that large piece of water, called Whittlefeymere, makes a considerable appearance, stretching into length, far to the right. You get a sight of it from other parts of the road; and if the foreground happen in any degree to rise, you may see perhaps a point of land pushing out into the water: but, in general, it appears only a long narrow slip, without form. The eye however makes some judgment of its length, which is two leagues; tho none of its breadth, which is at least one. Its dimensions are larger than most of the Cumberland lakes; yet through its want of accompaniments, its flat shores, and vile neighbourhood of fens, and marshes, of which it is the great drain, few travellers desire to see more of it than is exhibited from the road.

To the inhabitants of its shores however it is a great source both of *use*, and *amusement*. It abounds with fish: and the winds being more constant here, than in a lake surrounded with mountains, where they blow in gusts,
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and eddies, a boat is more manageable, and sailing a more agreeable amusement.

In Danish times Whittlesey-mere was considered as a great inland sea, and navigated only in cases of necessity. Camden tells us, from an old history of Ely, that it was once the scene of a great calamity. When Canute resided at Peterborough, his children, and others of the royal family, had occasion to go to the abbey of Ramsey. Whittlesey-mere lay directly in the way. Here they embarked; when *in the midst of their pleasant voyage, and their singing, and jollity, the turbulent winds, and a tempestuous storm arose*; their vessel foundered; and the greatest part of the royal family perished.

About the sixty-ninth stone, the view is beautifully confined by *Monk's woods*. As we approach Stamford, the country, tho every where full of little varieties, is on the whole rather flat.

From Stamford we visited Burleigh-house; which is a place of great magnificence. It

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has no advantage of situation; being buried in the dip of a park, which indeed possesses no where much agreeable scenery. The house formerly was approached by descending avenues; which were as displeasing, as formality, and awkwardness could make them. Mr. Brown was employed to reform them; and if possible to give some air of elegance to the approach. Much he could not do. The situation of the house forbid; and the unaccommodating form of the park. Every thing however, that was disgusting he has removed. He has closed the avenues: he has varied the slopes; and has led the approach through a winding valley, in the very path, which nature would have chosen, as the easiest. The magic of these improvements is such, that it has given the house a new site. It appears, as you approach it, to assume even an elevated station.—But the *scenery* about Burleigh is not the object: it is the *house* chiefly which attracts the traveller.

Burleigh-house is one of the noblest monuments of British architecture in the times of Elizabeth, when the great outlines of magnificence were rudely drawn, but unimproved by taste. The architect, till lately,
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was unknown; as indeed we know very little of the architects of those days. But the earl of Warwick has a book of original plans in his possession, by John Thorpe; from which it appears, that he was the architect of Burleigh house. It is an immense pile, forming the four sides of a large court; and tho decorated with a variety of fantastic ornaments according to the fashion of the time, before Grecian architecture had introduced symmetry, proportion, and elegance into the plans of private houses, it has still an august appearance. The inside of the court is particularly striking. The spire is neither, I think, in itself an ornament; nor has it any effect; except at a distance, where it contributes to give this whole immense pile, the consequence of a town.

How far the fashionable array, in which Mr. Brown has dressed the grounds about this venerable building, agree with its formality, and antique appendages, I dare not take upon me to say. A doubt arises, whether the old decoration of avenues, and parterres was not in a more *suitable* style of ornament. It is however a nice question, and would admit many plausible arguments on both sides.

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The rooms are fitted up in that rich, but solemn manner, which the magnificence of the house requires. Some of them indeed, which had been long disused, are now adorned in a lighter taste: but their uniformity is lost.—The grand stair-case, and many of the ceilings are painted by Verrio, who spent twelve years, we were informed, in this work; during which time he had a handsome pension; a table kept; and an equipage. Verrio was a man of extraordinary pomp; and had been so carried by Charles the second, that he thought himself a capital artist. He was a painter, as Mr. Walpole justly observes, whose *exuberant pencil was well adapted to adorn those public surfaces, on which the eye never rests long enough to criticize*: but he was certainly not worth the attention, which lord Exeter paid him; tho his works at Burleigh are confessedly the most correct of any he has left behind him.

Painted ceilings however are at best, I think, but awkward ornaments; not only as it is impossible to examine them without pain; but also as the foreshortening of the figures, which is absolutely necessary to give them any kind of effect, is so contrary to what we see

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see in common life, that it is disgusting. Mr. Pope also, with his usual just taste, suggests another objection to them. He speaks of *the sprawling saints of Verrio, and Laguerre*: by which expression he seems to consider them as floundring in some strange medium, we know not what, which affords them no stable footing. Figures indeed represented *in the clouds*, are not so obvious to this exception. We can bear however to see such an artist as Verrio employed on a ceiling; but when we see a master, like Rubens so engaged, it is mortifying.

Yet still a painted ceiling, if the colours are rich, and dark, adds a pleasing solemnity to these antique mansions: but we wish only for elegant, ornamental scrolls. It is merely the *general effect of the gloom* that pleases; as in a chapel we are soothed with that solemn light, which passes through painted glass; tho we wish neither for figures, nor any other form of creation.

In rooms of a lighter taste, as they are generally now fitted up in great houses, more airy ceilings are suitable. Lightness and gaiety in furniture is now the fashion; corresponding more perhaps with the manners

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of the times. The manners of the great were formerly, reserved, grave, and dignified. Their apartments, of course contracted a more solemn air. They were hung with darker colours; to which the furniture was adapted. How far the manners of those days were more agreeable, I know not: but I have no scruple in giving the preference to their apartments. Awkwardnesses there might be, and certainly were: I speak only of their *general air*.

The pictures in Burleigh-house, of which there is great profusion, are highly valued. Indeed we seldom find a better collection. They are in general pleasing. In the chapel, which is adapted rather to *amusement*, than *devotion*, hang several very shewy pictures. Solomon's idolatry, and Moses in the rushes, both by Loti, are such. The altar-piece, by P. Veronese is more classical; but it is so deficient as a *whole*, that we could admire only some of the *parts*. Among these the head of St. James is wonderfully expressive. The death of Seneca by L. Giordano, is esteemed one of the best pictures in the collection: but it is wanting, both in *composition* and in *effect of light*. Either of these requi-
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fites will contribute greatly to an *agreeable whole*: but when a picture is deficient in *both*, the eye cannot rest upon it with pleasure. The passion of grief is indeed well distributed among the attendants of the dying philosopher: but it is conveyed through the medium of very awkward characters.

We must not leave this grand house without looking into the kitchen; which is a noble room; and decorated with the ensign armorial of hospitality, an immense carcase of beef well painted.

From Burleigh-house, we visited a more retired mansion, which this noble family possesses at Stamford. The family-vault there is a curious scene of the kind. Here lies the old statesman of queen Elizabeth; with a numerous race of his descendants collected around him. Even in these silent regions are found the vanities of dress. The ancients of the house are clad in plain lead and stone; but you trace the progress of fashion in the decorations of succeeding ages. Many, who came last from the upper regions, are adorned in crimson velvet, coronets, and lace; and
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figure away in these cells of darknes. One would think the grave had little to do with vanity: but our foibles adhere to our last sand. It has ever been so.

———— quæ gratia —————
 ————— fuit vivis, —————
 ————— eadem sequitur tellure repostos.