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978-1-108-08486-4 - Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views:

Illustrated by the Scenes of New-Forest in Hampshire: Volume 2

William Gilpin

Excerpt

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OBSERVATIONS
ON
FOREST SCENERY.

B O O K III.

S E C T I O N I.

W E concluded the last book with a catalogue (for it was little more) of the principal forests, which formerly overspread the island of Britain. None of them at this day possess it's original grandeur. A few have preserved some little appearance of scenery: but the greater part are wastes. New-forest in Hampshire is among the few, which have retained any ideas of their ancient consequence.— At least it is superior to the rest, on account of the extent of it's boundaries; the variety of it's contents; and the grandeur of it's scenes.

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With these scenes I propose, in the following book, to illustrate the observations, which have been made in the two preceding books; and shall in several excursions, through the different parts of this woody country, endeavour to point out it's peculiar beauties. But tho I shall chiefly consider it in a *picturesque light*, I shall vary my subject by giving a general idea of the ancient history, and present state, of this celebrated forest.

This tract of wood-land was originally made a forest by William I in the year 1079, about thirteen years after the battle of Hastings; and is indeed the only forest in England, whose origin can be traced. It took the denomination of New-forest from it's being an addition to the many forests, which the crown already possessed; and which had formerly been appropriated in feudal times. The original name of this tract of country was Ytene.

As several forests were more commodiously situated for royal diversion than New-forest, the historian hath been sometimes led to
conceive,

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conceive, that William must have had other ends, than amusement, in making this addition to them: and observing farther, it's vicinity to the coast of Normandy, he hath from this circumstance drawn a surmise, that under the idea of a forest, William meant to preserve an unobserved communication with the continent; which would enable him to embark his troops, on either side, without giving alarm.

But this surmise depends on no historical evidence; neither indeed is it probable. The coasts of Kent, and Suffex were more commodious for the embarkation of troops, than any part of New-forest. And it is absurd to suppose an army could be embarked any where without observtion. Southampton indeed was commodious enough: but this port neither lies in New-forest; nor does the forest in any degree, skreen it's avenues.—Besides, the affairs of William were never in so perplexed a situation, as to require privacy; especially at the time when he made this forest; which was after he had defeated all his enemies, and was of course in the height of his power.—Nor indeed was it agreeable to the general character of this prince to do

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things secretly. He rather chose, on all occasions, to sway the sceptre with a lofty hand.—The judicious Rapin seems to close the whole debate very justly, by observing, that this surmise seems to have arisen merely from an opinion, that so politic a prince as William, could do nothing without a political end: whereas the most politic princes, no doubt, are swayed where their pleasures are concerned, by passions, and caprice, like other men*.

The means, which William used in afforesting these extensive wood-lands, create another question among historians. The general opinion is, that he destroyed a number of villages, and churches; drove out the inhabitants; laid their lands waste; and formed New-forest in their room.

This opinion has appeared to some ill founded; and Voltaire in particular, has stood up in defence of the humanity, or rather the policy of William. It is absurd, he thinks, to suppose that a prince so noted for prudent and interested conduct, should

* Vol. i. fol. page 178.

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lay waste so much cultivated ground; plant it with forest trees, which would be many years in coming to perfection; and for the sake of a few deer, turn adrift so large a body of his industrious subjects, who might have contributed so much to the increase of his revenues*.

Voltaire's conclusion may be just; but his reasoning is certainly ill-founded. It proceeds on the *improbability* of so wide a desolation; whereas it might have proceeded better on the *impossibility* of it. For how could William have spread such depopulation in a country, which, from the nature of it, must have been from the first very thinly inhabited? The ancient Ytene was undoubtedly a woody tract long before the times of William. Voltaire's idea therefore of *planting a forest* is absurd, and is founded on a total ignorance of the country. He took his ideas merely from a French forest, which is artificially planted, and laid out in vistas, and alleys. It is probable, that William rather opened his chafes by cutting down wood; than that

* See his abridgment of universal history.

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he had occasion to plant more.—Besides, tho the internal strata of the soil of New-forest are admirably adapted to produce timber; yet the surface of it, is in general, poor; and could never have admitted, even if the times had allowed, any high degree of cultivation.—Upon the whole therefore, it does not seem *passible*, that William could have spread so wide a depopulation through this country, as he is represented to have done.

On the other hand, there is no contending against the stream of history: and tho we may allow that William could not make any great depopulation; we are not to suppose he made none at all. Many writers, who lived about his time, unite in lamentable complaints of his devastations. According to them, at least thirty miles of cultivated lands were laid waste; above fifty parish churches, and many villages destroyed; and all the inhabitants extirpated*. But it is to be considered, that these

* In sylvæ, quæ vocatur nova foresta, ecclesias, et villas eradicari; gentem extirpari; et a feris fecit inhabitari. Hen. de Huntingdon.

Nova

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these writers were monks, who had taken high offence at William for his exactions on their monasteries; and were neither, as it appears, informed themselves; nor disposed through their prejudices, to inform others. Many things they say, are palpably false.

In this dearth therefore of historical evidence, we are still at a loss To suppose that William made no devastation, and to suppose that he made all, which these prejudiced

Nova regia foresta, anglice Ytene, quam Gulielmus bastardus, hominibus fugatis, desertis villis, et subreptis ecclesiis per 30, et eo amplius milliaria, in saltus, et lustra ferarum redigit. Brompton.

Per 30, et amplius milliaria, ubi erat hominum mansio, terra fructifera, necnon frugifera, extirpatis domibus, cum promariis, et hortis, et etiam ecclesiis, cum cæmetariis, in forestam, vel potius in desertam, et ferarum lustra, rege jubente, redacta erant. Hist. Winton.

Hic Gulielmus (Rufus) fecit forestas in multis locis, per medium regni; et inter Southampton, et prioratum Twynam, qui nunc vocatur Christ-church, prostravit, et exterminavit 22 ecclesias matrices, cum villis, capellis, maneriis, atque mansionibus; secundum vero quosdam, 52 ecclesias parochiales; et fecit forestam novam, quam vocavit suam novum herbarium; et replevit eam cervis, damis, et aliis feris; parcens illis per septem annos primos. Knighton.

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monks lay to his charge, seem to be suppositions equally unsupported. On the whole therefore, the truth of this matter, as of most others, lies probably between the two opinions.

With regard to the situation, and boundaries of this extensive forest, it occupies the south-west extremity of Hampshire; and in its earlier form was a kind of peninsula, bounded by the bay of Southampton on the east—by the river Avon on the west—and on the south; by the channel of the isle of Wight, as far as the Needles; and to the west of those rocks by the ocean. Thus the boundaries of New-forest were determined by the natural lines of the country.

It does not however appear, that William I extended the bounds of New-forest thus far. They are supposed rather to have been enlarged by succeeding princes; particularly by Henry I, who was probably tempted by the natural limits of the country. By this prince, or at least by some of the early successors of William, the whole peninsula was taken in; and the bounds of the forest were fairly

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fairly extended, as I have described them, to the bay of Southampton, the river Avon, and the sea.

In those days it was a matter of little ceremony either to make, or to enlarge a forest. Thus saith the law: "It is allowed to our sovereign lord the king, in respect of his continual care, and labour, for the preservation of the whole realm, among other privileges, this prerogative, to have his places of recreation, and pastime, wheresoever he will appoint. For as it is at the liberty, and pleasure of his grace to reserve the wild beasts, and the game to himself, for his only delight and pleasure, so he may also at his will and pleasure, make a forest for them to abide in*."

Agreeable to this spirit of despotism, the royal forests were regulated. Each had its laws, and government; and as these differed from each other in very few particulars, all were equally grievous to the subject. Forest-law indeed was one of the greatest incroachments that ever was made upon the natural

* See Manwood on forest-law, chap. ii.

rights

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rights of mankind; and considering the disparity of the object, one of the greatest insults of tyranny.

The Romans had no idea of appropriating game. Under their government the forests of England, like those of America, were common hunting-grounds. The northern barbarians first pretended to the right of making private property of what, being naturally wild, belonged equally to all.

The idea of forest-law, and forest-rights obtained early indeed in Saxon times. But the Saxon princes were in general a mild race; and there were some traces of liberal sentiment in their institutions. Under them, untenanted wastes only were afforested—the penalties of forest-laws were gentle—and the execution of them never rigid. So that, in those equitable times, forest-law was hardly esteemed a burthen upon the people.

The Norman princes were a different race. They were fierce, haughty, violent, and despotic. Under them the language of English law in general assumed a new tone; and of forest-law in particular. For as the Norman princes were all mighty hunters, this part of jurisprudence engaged their peculiar attention.

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