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EDITORIAL

LANDSCAPE WITH PEASANTS

THE Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote in the 1730's:- "If we take in our hand any volume [of philosophy] let us ask: *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Two centuries later Professor A. J. Ayer put the same idea in different words when he wrote that a statement "is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express — that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept it as being true or reject it as being false".

But what of either Hume's or Ayer's criteria is to be found in the modern accepted attitudes towards forestry and the landscape? A sagging boundary here; a promontory there; a thinning out of the edge somewhere else. A general blurring all round?

Apart from providing wood, what service does the forest afford to a member of the general public? The opportunity to indulge his fantasies. Just that. Whether he likes to imagine himself living in a primeval unpopulated past, or in Walden-like solitude, or a feudal nobleman with unseen vassals and peasants to do his bidding. Then, do we require all of our forests to provide this service as a matter of priority? After all, other spheres of human fantasy are confined to designated premises, where an appropriate fee may be payable.

On the other hand, from a purely aesthetic standpoint, it is possible to argue that beauty lies primarily in efficiency. Thus a forest which produces the maximum of wood will be beautiful, as a modern aeroplane undeniably is (at least to a deaf person). This equation of virtue with perfection of function goes at least as far back as Plato, while the current adoption of resemblance to nature as the criterion of beauty arose probably with the nineteenth century Romantics, a decadent influence as evidenced in the statement of one of its archetypal characters, Villiers de l'Isle Adam's Axel: "As for living? our servants will do that for us".