

## Trees, Woods and Literature – 21

*It is my decided opinion that this Blacklock will never pay any proper rent; and if Craig o' Putto were mine, I really think I would almost rather build a ring-fence round it, and leave it to the teewheets, than allow such an unprincipled ( I fear this is the word, unprincipled) sloven to farm it for money. I spoke of thinning the plantations! By Jove they have rather need of thickening: at every gap in the dikes you find somewhere between a dozen and a score of young trees cut down as if they were so many broom twigs, and carelessly dashed in to stop the gap, in place of building in the stones! Nay Alick and I computed some two hundred yards of wattle-work (vulgarly called stake and rice) absolutely formed entirely of young firs, some of which were as thick as my leg at the butt: the number of them we reckoned between two and three thousand. I should add, however, that most of this must have been the work of Thomas Macqueen; only some twenty or thirty yards seemed to have been repaired (with rather thicker trees I thought) by Blacklock. But what totally took away from me all pity, and made me use the harsh word unprincipled, was the fact, palpable beyond discussion, that the scoundrel had actually wintered his cattle (I mean had them lying over night thro' the winter) in the heart of that long stripe of planting that runs transversely from the height down towards the water! The fence had been broken down; and there had the kyloes been ranging and rubbing, and eating and breaking! Had he taken a furnished house in Heriot-row and driven in his cow to eat her draff and dreg on the Brussels carpet of the drawing room, I could sooner have forgiven him. It was altogether damnable. We tried to ascertain by inspection whether the gaps by which his bullocks had found access to this comfortable shelter had been accidental or intentional: one of the places was half and the other three fourths filled up; so that we could judge but vaguely; and all the charity we had corroborated the evidence for the milder hypothesis. The damage done extended indeed only to a score or two of yards; for the cattle had been of Christian spirit: but the spirit of their owner was too well marked by it. But why dilate on these things? The man is an utter and arrant sloven; and had simply gone upon the principle that most probably no mortal concerned in the farm would ever see it during the lease.*

Thomas Carlyle (1799-1881), from a letter to his wife dated 14th April, 1827.

“Craig o' Putto” is his wife's ancestral farm at Craigenputtock, near Dumfries in Scotland, which had been leased to Mr. Blacklock. Carlyle and his brother had gone to inspect its condition. (“Teewheets” are lapwings and “draff” is brewer's spent grains.)

Carlyle was born at Ecclefechan, also near Dumfries, the son of a stone mason who later turned to farming (he foresaw the rise of jerry-building). After periods as a school master and free-lance journalist, he moved to London and became rapidly famous with the publication of his *French Revolution* in 1837. (There is a well-known account of how the only manuscript copy of Part 1 of that work was destroyed. It was borrowed by J.S. Mill, then used by a maid to light the fire. It had to be re-written from scratch. Anyone who has laboured long over some piece of writing can understand the full horror of this.)

He eventually came to be one of the best-known men in Britain as commentator, historian and philosopher. (It is difficult to think of any modern equivalent: perhaps Bernard Shaw would be the most recent example.) He travelled extensively in the south and west of Ireland in 1849 studying the effects of the famine. His article "Trees for Liberty" about planting in Ireland was published in the *Nation*, the New Ireland journal, in November, 1849.

Carlyle is now largely unread, but the real genius of the household seems to have been his wife. The five volumes of the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1883 and 1903) can be read with great pleasure by anyone who can find them.

Perhaps the extract from Carlyle's letter printed above acquires a new topicality with the current increase in farmer planting.

Selection and note by Wood Kerne