

Trees, Woods and Literature – 24

As we have a prodigious number of students in literature of both sexes here at present, I will not anticipate their discoveries; but, as your particular friend, will communicate a rare improvement on nature, which these great philosophers have made, and which would add considerable beauties to those parts which your lordship has already recovered from the waste, and taught to look a little like a Christian country. The secret is very simple, and yet demanded the effort of a mighty genius to strike it out. It is nothing but this: Trees ought to be educated as much as men, and are strange awkward productions when not taught to hold themselves upright or bow on proper occasions. The academy de belles-lettres have even offered a prize for the man that shall recover the long-lost art of an ancient Greek, called le sieur Orphée, who instituted a dancing-school for plants, and gave a magnificent ball on the birth of the Dauphin of Thrace, which was performed entirely by forest trees. In this whole kingdom there is no such thing as seeing a tree that is not well behaved. They are first stripped up and then cut down; and you would as soon meet a man with his hair about his ears as an oak or ash. As the weather is very hot now, and the soil chalk, and the dust white, I assure you it is very difficult, powdered as both are all over, to distinguish a tree from a hair-dresser. Lest this should sound like a travelling hyperbole, I must advise your lordship that there is little difference in their heights, for a tree of thirty years' growth being liable to be marked as royal timber the proprietors take care not to let their trees live to the age of being enlisted, but burn them, and plant others as often almost as they change their fashions. This gives an air of perpetual youth to the face of the country, and if adopted by us would realise Mr. Addison's¹ visions, and

Make our bleak rocks and barren mountains smile.

From a letter of September 8th, 1769, from Horace Walpole in Paris, to the Earl of Strafford.

Horace (originally Horatio) Walpole, fourth Earl of Orford (1717-1797) was the son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, and had himself an undistinguished career as a Member of Parliament. He famously created a pseudo-Gothic showpiece named Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, London. He is regarded as probably the most assiduous letter writer in the English language: his correspondence was published in 42 volumes.

The addressee, the Earl of Strafford, was presumably a descendant of Thomas Wentworth ('Black Tom Tyrant'), first Earl of Strafford (1593 – 1641), Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1633, whose aim was "to make a prosperous Protestant Ireland into a source of revenue to the English crown". He was later convicted of treason and beheaded.

(Selection and note by Wood Kerne)

¹ Joseph Addison (1672-1719), poet and essayist. Associated with the periodicals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The line quoted by Walpole is from *A Letter from Italy*, 1701:

*'Tis Liberty that Crowns Britannia's Isle
And makes her barren Rocks and her bleak Mountains smile.*

Presumably Walpole was quoting from memory.