

PART II.

Ceylon.

suited for the growth of vegetable products more remunerative than any hitherto introduced into the Island. There is reason to fear that districts may be hastily cleared of forest under these inducements, which it may prove impracticable to permanently occupy when the fertility of the soil has been lowered by a few years' cultivation.

It is principally on climatic considerations that the cutting down of forests seems to require Government supervision. There is good reason to think that in tropical countries the removal of wood operates effectively in reducing the rainfall. There can, at any rate, be no doubt that the presence of forests plays a most important part in storing the rainfall, and yielding up gradually to the streams a continuous supply of water—a thing, I need hardly say, in a hot country of primary importance.

Moreover, the rain is retained by forests on the surface of the ground; it gradually permeates to the subsoil, and so feeds the underground water-bearing strata, upon which springs and wells must eventually depend. If the forest is indiscriminately removed, the rain runs off as fast as it falls, and washes away the superficial and fertile soil with it.

The mischief already done in Mauritius and various West Indian Islands is so widely spread (being in some indeed irreparable), and the feeling of the colonists against any interference on the part of the Government is apt to be so determined, that I venture to press upon your Lordship my own opinion as to the urgency of active steps being taken in the case of an Island so beautiful, and at present so fertile, as Ceylon.

I have lately received an account of the deterioration of the climate of some of the Leeward Islands, which affords a melancholy confirmation of what I have urged above:—

“The contrast between neighbouring Islands similarly situated is most striking. The sad change which has befallen the smaller ones is, without any doubt, to be ascribed to human agency alone. It is recorded of these that in former times they were clothed with dense forests, and their oldest inhabitants remembered when the rains were abundant, and the hills and all uncultivated places were shaded by extensive groves. The removal of the trees was certainly the cause of the present evil. The opening of the soil to the vertical sun rapidly dries up the moisture, and prevents the rain from sinking to the roots of plants. The rainy seasons in these climates are not continuous cloudy days, but successions of sudden showers, with the sun shining hot in the intervals. Without shade upon the surface the water is rapidly exhaled, and springs and streams diminish.”

It is not, however, simply to the restriction of the removal of existing forest that I would venture to direct your Lordship's attention, but also to the object, no less important, of making new plantations of forest trees useful for timber and in the arts. Such plantations would serve the double object of retaining the desired humidity, and of yielding a revenue to the Island.

I have, &c.,

Jos. D. HOOKER,
Director.

His Excellency the GOVERNOR to the Earl of KIMBERLEY.

(No. 237.)

MY LORD,—

Queen's House, Colombo, Ceylon, 31st July, 1873.

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your Lordship's Despatch No. 134, of the 13th June, together with the copy of a letter from the Director of the Royal Gardens, Kew, on the subject of the destruction of the forests in Ceylon.

2. I am gratified to find that your Lordship approves of the policy I have pursued in arresting the destruction of the forests in this colony, which has, in some districts, been progressing with hardly any restraint since the British occupation of the Island. Your Despatch will have the effect of strengthening my hands in the determination I have come to, of maintaining considerable Crown reserves in the coffee districts, against which, no doubt, I may expect some outcry.

3. As the subject of the preservation and encouragement of the growth of timber in this Island is of such great importance, I have no hesitation in going generally into the subject.

4. I had not been in Ceylon more than a few months when I was astonished by seeing vast tracts of jungle country through which I passed, utterly denuded of all valuable timber, and converted into low, useless, and unhealthy scrub. That these tracts were eminently fitted for the growth of timber, was apparent from the size of the few trees which here and there had escaped the general havoc.

5. The diminution of timber in the Island is to be attributed to four causes:—

First, and chiefly, chena cultivation;

Second, absence of all system in the cutting of timber in the Crown forests, and of replanting;

Third, sale of valuable forest at inadequate value;

Fourth, want of proper reserves being maintained in the coffee districts.

First, in regard to chena, it is desirable to give some information as to this system of cultivation.

It may be briefly described as the rotation of soil instead of the rotation of crops. The cultivator proceeds to cut down and burn a block of forest; in this he sows a crop of a grain called kurakkan, or some other fine or hard grain, as it is termed, and after that another crop of the