

CHAPTER III.

PROPOSALS FOR ORGANIZATION AND WORKING.

1. I confess that I see no feasible plan of dealing with the forest question in New Zealand save by the agency of a State Department, acting on definite and well-matured principles of scientific forestry, and supported by a Forest Act giving the necessary powers, and prescribing adequate penalties for the infringement of the forest laws. I am aware that many who are strongly in favour of some intervention to save the forests from destruction consider that it can be done by local bodies—that is, I presume, Waste Land Boards, County Councils, or Road Boards. The experience of other countries is, however, quite opposed to this theory. Not only are such local bodies naturally more or less ignorant of the very rudiments of forestry, but they must of necessity take far too local and limited a view of the question; they are besides subject to constant changes amongst their members, to local and political influences and bias, and to the very natural inclination of members of all such bodies to make the best of things, especially financially, during their lifetime, without regard for the welfare of future generations. I have said that the experience of other countries is opposed to the experiment of intrusting the great question of forest conservancy to local and non-professional bodies. It has been tried in Germany, and I believe also in France in the case of the Communal forests, but the *régime* proved so detrimental that they have all been placed in charge of the Imperial Department. It has been tried over and over again in India with like results; and, to come still nearer home, it has been, and I believe still is being, tried in Victoria with anything but encouraging results. There have been repeated appeals to the Government of Victoria in the Melbourne *Argus* during the past twelve months to do something in the matter, and the Forest Act recently introduced seems to have failed to satisfy the requirements of the country for the very reason that it provides no adequate special machinery, but hands over matters to local bodies, whilst giving what may be regarded as too much latitude to the Government as regards the making and enforcing regulations. So recently as the 10th of last month the *Australasian* concludes an article on "Forest and Lake," with the following words: "Let the Government not attempt to shirk its duty by handing over to local bodies the management of forests, but let it grapple with the whole question in a statesmanlike manner, and earn, even though it may not immediately win it, the gratitude and respect of the people whose interests have been intrusted to its care." I do not maintain that planting operations on a comparatively limited scale may not be carried out by the help of local bodies, as is proposed in South Australia: nay, if we limit our aspirations to this, fairly good results have been obtained in Canterbury under the Tree Planting Regulation Act of 1872, without the intervention of any public body at all. But this is not forest conservancy. Still less do I propose that the State Forest Department should stand alone and without the co-operation and support of the local bodies and councils—far from it: no department can less afford the loss of such support, and that of the weight of public opinion, for it must often, from the very nature of its duties, be unpopular for a time, or in a certain locality. All I do maintain is that some central controlling agency, with adequate machinery, working on a uniform and preconceived plan or system, is absolutely necessary to introduce and work out to advantage any satisfactory scheme of forest conservancy, such as New Zealand has it in her power to initiate and maintain. By all means utilize all existing local agencies, and ingraft the forest management as much as possible on the local or county institutions; but we cannot, if we hope to introduce a successful system, not for this generation alone but for the future, leave each local body to its own devices, or trust to them any more than to private enterprise for the conservation and maintenance of the forests of the colony.

I cannot, I think, conclude the consideration of this point better than by re quoting an extract from a despatch from the Secretary of State for India to the Government of Fort St. George, already cited in my address in Dunedin:—

"To forests, from their nature, the usual maxim of political economy which leaves such undertakings to private enterprise cannot be applied. Their vast extent, the long time that a tree takes to reach maturity, and the consequence that few persons live long enough to obtain any, and more especially the highest, returns from expenditure even once in the course of their lives, are proofs of the necessity that forest management should be conducted on permanent principles, and not be left to the negligence, avarice, or caprice of individuals, and therefore point to the State as the proper administrator, bound to take care that, in supplying the wants of the present generation, there is no reckless waste, no needless forestalling of the supply of future generations. This is matter of experience, not in India only, but in all other countries of the world."

2. But, it has been urged, the colony is too young for such a scheme—it will be time enough a century hence, when timber will be becoming scarce, and we shall be better able to afford it. The fallacy of this argument is, to my mind, so apparent that I have been astonished to hear it made use of by men whose opinions are, as a rule, worthy of consideration, and carry weight. It seems, indeed, scarcely necessary to refute it by pointing out that when the want is felt it may be too late to provide for it, and apply remedial measures, even at enormous cost, to the evils, especially those affecting the climate, which a century of abuse and heedless waste of natural resources will certainly engender. Population will have increased, vested rights and privileges sprung up, and incalculable damage to property been done, which it will be all but impossible to deal with and rectify.

The forest question is daily attracting more and more attention at the hands of all enlightened Governments and individuals. New Zealand is in a position to benefit by the experience of older countries, and what I understand to be the object of conservancy in this country is, to take Time by the forelock, preserve as much as is necessary of the State or public forest property *before* the crop of standing timber has been exhausted or deteriorated by indiscriminate felling and want of system, whilst we secure all the legitimate revenue we can from the sale of the large margin of "bush" which it