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THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL SCENERY.

AN ADDRESS

Delivered by The Right Hon. JAMES BRYCE, D.C.L., M.P., President of the Club, to the Members, on 8th June, 1897.

MR. BRYCE, who was cordially received, expressed his regret that, although his visits to Aberdeen had several times fallen within a few days of the date of one of the excursions of the Club, it had never yet been possible for him, having regard to other engagements already made, to be present and accompany the Club. He was glad, therefore, to have this opportunity of endeavouring in some small way to acquit himself of the obligations which he undertook in becoming their President, and of assuring them of the very warm sympathy which he had always felt, and, he hoped, would always feel, in the objects and prosperity of the Club. When he considered how he was to fulfil the promise made to give an address to the Club on some subject falling within the scope of its action, it appeared to him that he could not do better than ask them to consider a subject which had occasionally flitted across the minds of most people, but which had been, so far as he knew, very little seriously discussed in this country—that is the question of what is the worth of natural scenery, in what the elements that make scenery worth preserving consist, and what steps can be taken to preserve it. Mr. Bryce remarked that what he was to say must be of a tentative character, and if, after he had concluded, any one would do him the

favour to express his views either of consent or dissent from the propositions he should submit he should be grateful, desiring as he did that the whole matter should receive a fuller treatment than it had yet received, and believing that in the multitude of counsellors upon this subject, especially as it had been hitherto so little discussed, there was likely to be wisdom and resource—(applause).

Remarking, then, that a subject of this kind was well suited to a Club like that, Mr. Bryce noted that the feeling of admiration of natural scenery had grown of late years. The conscious interest in, or love for, the beauties of nature was perhaps not much more than 120 years old. It was rather interesting to notice how it began with poetry in the later half of the last century. It began most distinctly, perhaps, with a Scottish poet, James Thomson, and became a more and more prominent feature in the illustrious poets of the generation that wound up the last century and opened this one. There were strong evidences of it in Cowper, it inspired in the fullest measure the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and some of their younger contemporaries, notably Keats and Shelley, and from that time until now had gone on widening the circle of its influence. Yet it must not be supposed that those who lived before that time were ignorant of or insensible to the beauties of nature; it was rather that they enjoyed without pausing to consider and meditate what it was they were enjoying, and wherein the roots of their enjoyment lay. One could hardly fail in the literature of the ancient world and of the Middle Ages to be struck with the feeling there was for nature, the exactness of the poetical descriptions, the accuracy of the epithets the poets employed, and the way in which many of them dwelt lovingly upon the features which struck them in nature. Noting, by way of illustration, how these things appeared in the 104th Psalm, and in the poems of Homer and Theocritus, among the Greeks, as in those of Lucretius, Catullus, and, above all, of Virgil, Mr. Bryce reminded his audience of how Mr. Stopford Brooke finds in the Celtic poets very striking passages indicating a true and abiding admiration of nature, and argues that it is largely to the

Scottish poets that English poetry owes its supremacy in modern literature, so far as this particular point is concerned. He (Mr. Bryce) might add that in the few extant lays of St. Columba, whose anniversary was being at that moment so worthily celebrated, there were evidences of a feeling for nature, as true and deep as they could find in any modern bard. He took it as undoubted, however, that the love of scenery and conscious interest in its beauty is now much more widely diffused than it used to be, and thought it not wonderful, when the conditions of modern life are taken into account, that this love, and the necessity, therefore, of preserving in nature that which gives us joy, should be more widely felt than it ever had been before. In proceeding to deal with this subject, he did not think it necessary to discuss with a Club like that the question of whether natural beauty was worth preserving, because it was for the very reason that they were fond of nature that they had formed themselves into a Society to explore the mountains and valleys. And he did not know that, even if he were to argue it out, he should succeed in establishing to a demonstration what the pleasure that nature gives consists in, or what it is worth. It must be felt, but was not easy to prove to those who did not feel it. It was felt, no doubt, by a minority of mankind, for he supposed that the greater number of their fellow citizens did not yet realise the pleasure that was to be had from nature. In travelling by steamboat or coach through parts of the Scottish Highlands, he had often observed that out of the whole number of tourists there were a good many who were quite ready to go into ecstasies when they reached a place which the guide-book indicated as having a beautiful view, who were perfectly indifferent to equally beautiful views that had not been mentioned in the book—(laughter). And as showing the curious views of natural beauty that even intelligent people sometimes hold, he told of an old friend of his in Strathearn, a bit of a geologist, who held that before the fall of our first parents there were only gentle undulations and soft acclivities in nature, corres-

ponding to the state of man's happiness and innocence; and that the degradation of the Fall was typified by the harsh lines, the rugged rocks and steep mountains which then appeared upon the scene—(laughter). When one had to prove, therefore, wherein the pleasure in natural scenery consists, each of us must be content with telling that he himself felt it, that the poets had felt it, and that the great majority of the most cultivated and educated people had now come to feel it. They could not prove to a man who had no ear for music that music gives pleasure, nor prove to a man who had no taste for pictures that pictures are beautiful things, although in the case of pictures, there was the advantage that by telling such a person that a certain picture cost £20,000, they would no doubt lead him to think there was some value in it—(laughter). The next question was—Who are the enemies that threaten natural scenery, against whom it had to be preserved? It had to be preserved chiefly against three classes of enemies—advertisers, commercial companies, and railways. These were not the only enemies, but he singled them out as being good instances, and perhaps the most conspicuous. Advertisements had really become a horrible nuisance in our time. They were a nuisance even in our towns, for many of the advertisements in towns were so ugly and revolting as to be a positive defacement of walls and wooden structures, and in this connection he noted that there had been annually brought into the House of Commons during the last few years a bill intended to give local authorities power to put advertisements under control—a bill, however, which had not yet been able to obtain the chance of being debated. However, there was one form of advertisement from which we did not suffer in Scotland—at least to so considerable an extent—and that was the advertisement in the form of large painted boards stuck upon poles in the prettiest pastures and along the banks of rivers, and bordering upon the roads and railways that lead out of large towns, and particularly in the neighbourhood of London—advertisements usually of quack medicines. The practice was still worse in America,

because there they had taken to painting the names of medicines on the rocks and trees in the finest scenery they possessed. They had lately removed these from the Niagara Falls, but the rocks there used to be entirely covered by advertisements of painkillers, liver pills, and things of that sort—(laughter). Things were not so bad as that in this country, although they were bad enough, and the abuses of advertising had become an offence to good taste and propriety against which the public ought to set their faces. He had sometimes thought that if the consumers of the articles thus advertised were to combine in a resolution not to buy what was obtruded on them in this way it might produce some effect on the minds of the advertisers, but as the things advertised were mostly quack remedies, and as these were not largely consumed by members of such a Club as that and by persons who travelled to enjoy scenery—(laughter, and hear, hear)—he feared that that course was impracticable as a solution of the difficulty. He hoped that, although they had not made much progress so far with legislation in this matter, they should be successful before long in getting their bill carried through, and perhaps be able to persuade some local authority to make use of it—(applause). He came next to commercial companies. There had not been a great many of them that had as yet attacked natural scenery, but one had done so on such a large scale and in such an audacious way that it ought to be taken as an instance to ponder over. It was the case of the Aluminium Company, which had destroyed the Falls of Foyers. That was, he believed, the highest, and it was certainly the most beautiful and striking waterfall for its height and for its surroundings in the United Kingdom. This Company purchased a large piece of land there from the proprietor, and had constructed a tunnel, which diverted the water of the stream above the Falls, and was used to drive turbine wheels in connection with the manufacture of aluminium, leaving, except after heavy rains, only a trickle to come over the precipice. The great body of the water had been turned into the tunnel. Well, the advantage of

having secured this water-power might perhaps be measured by one or two per cent. in the Company's dividends. But what was it that this Company had done? It had taken a perfectly unique piece of scenery, the most striking of all British waterfalls, and had absolutely destroyed it by taking away the water—for, although in the newspaper correspondence the Company had stated that they were not destroying the waterfall, because they were not touching the rocks, yet it took water to make a waterfall, and in this case, though the rocks remained, the water had been diverted. All this the Company had done merely for the sake of adding a little to its dividend. The Company could equally well, though no doubt with the prospect of a somewhat smaller profit, have planted its works somewhere else. The place was not convenient for the clay used in the manufacture, for it had to be brought from a distance, he believed from Ireland; the industry was not going to give much employment to the people of the district, because the Company was to bring the work-people from other parts of the country, and therefore there would not be a compensating advantage to any considerable extent to the population of the district. Even Parliament was unable to step in to arrest the mischief. The Company had somehow got hold of the County Council of Inverness, who ought to have known better; it had bought the land, and did not require to go to Parliament for powers, and Parliament had no means whatever to prevent the destruction of this unique and wonderfully beautiful piece of scenery. There ought to be, he contended, some means of preserving for the nation as a whole a thing in which the nation as a whole had an interest, and which was part of the inheritance the nation had received and wished to hand on. He put it to them that, when a thing like this destruction of the Falls of Foyers happened, there should be some means by which they could prevent a Company from sacrificing a national possession for the sake of a small addition to the dividends of its shareholders—(applause). Mr. Bryce went on to discuss the other case of the railway to the top of Snowdon, the highest mountain south of the Tweed. Here, again

the land taken unfortunately belonged to one proprietor, and the railway company purchased, by private bargain, the right of making the railway, and was not, therefore, under the necessity of going to Parliament for a bill, so that neither Parliament nor the Board of Trade had power to stop the scheme. That also was a case in which the State ought to have had a voice, where a fine piece of scenery ought not to be defaced and irreparably injured by a railway without the public having an opportunity of interfering.

There were a certain number of cases in which the scenery was injured by the putting up of buildings in unsuitable sites and places; but there, again, it was difficult to see how a public authority could interfere. But still there were some cases where the building put up was so singularly ugly and inappropriate that one would think it would be a kindness to everybody, and even, perhaps, to the proprietor, to prevent him from putting it up. He saw a most glaring case of that kind three months ago on the top of the Bozrah or citadel hill of Carthage—one of the most beautiful and historically famous sites in the whole world. On the top of that hill an Archbishop—Cardinal Lavigerie—had erected one of the least handsome churches he (Mr. Bryce) had ever the misfortune to see. That was an extreme instance, but he believed many of his audience would remember buildings which have been set up in places of natural beauty that are, to say the least of it, singularly unbecoming. But the railways were, perhaps, their most frequent enemy. There had been a great deal of controversy as to the influence of railways upon scenery, and this part of the subject had been, perhaps, canvassed more than any other, because there had occurred several discussions in Parliament when attempts had been made to stop railways on the ground that they were going to injure scenery. He would begin the consideration of the point by admitting that railways do not always injure scenery. The scenery, for instance, of the inland parts of Buchan, in the neighbourhood of Maud Junction, and in the Hinterland of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, would not be seriously injured by any railway—(laughter)—in fact, he was not sure that more railways

would not improve it. Pointing also to the London and North Western Railway, as adding a noble element of life to the landscape in the district from Lichfield to London, Mr. Bryce further admitted that there are many cases in which even if a railway does injure scenery one must be content to bear with the railway, because of the gain in other respects. To say exactly when the scenery had to give way was, of course, difficult, depending as it did on a person's esteem of the commercial or political objects to be gained by the railway, and also on his esteem of the value of the scenery. He would take a very familiar instance—the railway which runs up the valley of the Reuss, under the St. Gothard Pass, and down Val Levantina, the Italian valley which extends to Lago Maggiore. Here there were two extremely beautiful valleys, that on the Swiss side and that on the Italian side. Both of these valleys had suffered from the making of the railway. On the south side there was a lovely stream coming over in admirable cascades. These were the points where the famous corkscrew tunnels had been made and where immense quantities of loose rubbish had been thrown down, destroying the charm of the cascades. But this valley was the cheapest and most direct line by which South Germany and Switzerland could be connected with North Italy. It would have been more costly and more difficult to make the railway on almost any other line, and any line that could have been chosen would have injured the scenery more or less. No one, therefore, he thought, would argue that because the scenery would have suffered the St. Gothard railway should not have been made. They must acquiesce in it for the greater benefits the construction of the railway brought. He thought, however, that a little more pains might have been taken to spare some of the more beautiful points. But he had to call attention to the fact that there were a great number of cases where railways did harm without giving any compensating advantage. These were mostly cases where the scenery was on so small and delicate a scale that the railway became itself a potent factor in it, and there were cases where the charm of the scenery consisted very

much in its [pure wildness, and in the bold or graceful character of the lines. For instance, the effect of irregular cliffs, with broken faces and masses of tumbled rocks below them, would be destroyed by the construction of a straight railway embankment. And, in a third class of cases, there were instances where the beauty consists in an exquisite and refined combination of various elements of picturesque beauty, such, for instance, as a river with pretty little runs, and pools between the runs, curving in sweeps round a meadow with thickets hanging over or trees dipping into the stream, and little vistas opening up through the wood showing glimpses of hills beyond. Where they had scenery like that, a line of railroad, with its embankments, bridges, and tunnels, its two or four straight parallel lines of iron running across the ground, entirely destroyed the charm which these soft, delicate lines, which these fields and meadows, and the curvings of the stream possess while they are left to themselves, and an element was intruded which destroyed the beauty of form, and which also destroyed what might be called the associations of simplicity and silence and spontaneity. Unfortunately it was very often through valleys of that kind that railways had been made or were being projected. For instance, he had referred just now to Wordsworth's house at Ambleside. The scenery there, as in most parts of the Lake country, was on a small scale, and of so finished and delicate a character that it would receive irreparable injury by the construction of a railway. And this was also the case with the valley of upper Strathearn. This railway, which was lately under discussion in the House of Commons, was proposed to be made from the village of Comrie, in Strathearn, along the shores of the river Earn, and then along the shores of the loch as far as Lochearnhead. From Comrie to St. Fillans was nearly six miles, and the scenery of the valley was just of the kind he had been describing. It was something like the valley of the Dee, on a smaller scale, and with mountains of bolder and more rugged forms, its winding stream running here under woods and there through meadows. If the railway cut through these woods

and followed the course of the stream, the charm of the valley and woods and meadows would be gone. After the railway reached Loch Earn, it was proposed by the present line to run along the north side of the loch. On the north side of the loch there was a steep hill, 600 or 800 feet high, covered with copsewood, of the same kind as was seen on the shores of many Scottish lochs. The hill was so steep and the copsewood so wild and natural that if a railway were made at a height of 200 or 300 feet above the loch, it would make one long, broad, straight score across the face of the hill, and would injure the wild grace which the steep hill, with rocks rising here and there and the natural copsewood clothing the slopes, now possesses. He did not say that the loch would not still be a beautiful loch, but a great deal of what now makes its beauty would be gone. If a railway was wanted at all, it would be quite possible, and much better, so far as he had been able to ascertain, to make it on the other side of the loch. The same observations might be made about the margins of Scottish lakes. A railway was often made to take its course along the very edge of a lake, because that gave it a level run, but sometimes the margins of the lakes were just the most beautiful parts. He could think of nothing more beautiful than many parts of the margin of Loch Lomond. After giving a description of the margin of Loch Lomond, Mr. Bryce said he was afraid that the West Highland Railway must have injured the picturesqueness of the northern part of the loch, though he had not seen it since the line was made. A curious feature, he said, of these destructions was that when the original charm was gone people going through afterwards could never realise what the charm had been before. The other day he was discussing the Strathearn Railway with a very distinguished professional man. This gentleman pooh-poohed the whole thing, and said he did not understand what people made such a fuss about. He said—Look at the Pass of Killiecrankie, a railway runs through there, and the Pass of Killiecrankie is none the worse. But this eminent man admitted that he was never in the Pass of Killie-

crankie before the railway was made. Those who had been in the Pass of Killiecrankie before the railway was made would bear him (Mr. Bryce) out in saying that it was then one of the most exquisite pieces of scenery to be found anywhere in the world. He did not think there was anything else quite equal to it even in Scotland, and if there was nothing in Scotland, then he submitted that there was nothing on the Continent of Europe like it, because in that particular kind of scenery the Scottish Highlands had no peer. He remembered how he had been amazed—

“ Its loveliness with wonder and delight
Froze the swift soul ”—

at the exquisite beauty and richness of the scene when he first wandered slowly through it in 1857. He had twice traversed Killiecrankie on foot since the railway was made, and it was not in the least the same place. He knew that the Highland Railway Company laid themselves out for giving to passengers opportunities for seeing the scenery. They had even provided coupé carriages with glass at both ends. But the tourists who had a rapid glimpse of the fall of the Garry from their coupé, did not really see the Pass of Killiecrankie, still less could they form any idea of what it had once been. He submitted, therefore, that where a railway went through scenery of the particular types he had tried to describe, it would necessarily injure the scenery, and unless it could be shown that great benefit was to be derived from the railway they should oppose it. But it was said that not to make the railway was to keep the masses from seeing good scenery. Well, he was sure they all earnestly desired that all classes of people, down to the very poorest, should have the opportunity of seeing the scenery of their country. But there was a great difference between taking people to scenery and taking them through scenery. He was heartily in favour of making railways to the points where the finest scenery begins, but, unless some clear necessity could be proved or great advantage gained, they should not carry the railway further than those points. They should give people every possible access to scenery, but they should not at the same time spoil the scenery, and

deprive the people of the opportunity of really seeing it to advantage. They had to bear in mind that they could not see scenery properly from the railway. For one thing, the point of view was always changing; the landscape was never the same for one minute. If the passenger came to a spot where there was an exquisite combination of wood and water in the foreground and mountain and peak behind, the kind of thing an artist would like to make a picture of, the moment after he had grasped it, and before he could enjoy it, he was a quarter of a mile away. The dust and soot-flakes came into his eyes, he had to crane his neck, and at the very moment when he was perhaps enjoying the best view, he was engulfed in a cutting or plunged into the black depths of a tunnel. After having travelled many thousands of miles by rail through mountains, he had been convinced that it was really very little use to try to enjoy any scenery of the finer kind from a railway train.

Discussing what steps should be taken to preserve Scottish landscapes, Mr. Bryce said he wished we had more regular means of raising opposition in Parliament as regarded railways. It depended really very much upon how many members they had been able to speak to beforehand or upon what members happened to be in the House of Commons when the discussion came on. He wished they had something like the clause he succeeded in getting introduced into the Light Railways Bill last year, which provides that where any one objects to the construction of a light railway on the ground that it will injure any building of historical interest or any fine piece of natural scenery, the Board of Trade and the Light Railways Commissioners shall be required to hear and consider the objections. And, speaking of light railways, he thought it was very much to be desired that they should be made along the roads. It was a great deal cheaper, and as the line of the road was already laid out, and seldom interfered much with the scenery, the light railway would not injure the scenery if put along the road. He had travelled on light railways, made along public roads, through beautiful valleys in France and Italy, and they did not seem to interfere with

the scenery in any way. In a case like that of Foyers, they had no means of preventing a commercial company from destroying the most beautiful scenery. He thought a Department of State should be constituted whose duty it would be to protect three classes of articles—buildings or sites of great historical interest, ancient buildings of exceptional beauty and architectural interest, and striking and remarkable pieces of natural scenery. The principle had been recognised in the Act for the preservation of ancient monuments, which provides that certain prehistoric monuments should not be destroyed by their possessors in virtue of their right of property, but being placed under the protection of the State could never be hereafter interfered with. He should like to see that principle very much extended, and to see a Department of State established which might be called a Department of Taste, constituted of an official and a Council of persons chosen from the public, and representative of the most enlightened opinion, with the view of protecting these three classes of objects in the interests of the public. It might be argued that they would thus be giving a wide discretion to that Department—which might sometimes interfere where it should not and sometimes refuse to interfere where it should. But that was true of all discretionary powers, and he put it forward as being at any rate better than the total want of protection which we have at present. There ought, moreover, to be everywhere societies for the preservation of all those things in which the public had an interest. They wanted to develop the idea of what was national property in the true sense of the word. He included under that term not only scenes of great natural beauty, but also historic scenes and places where very remarkable incidents in our history have occurred. There should be in every district of the country a local society which would undertake to protect all these things, and also public rights in such matters as footpaths and ancient rights of way. There was an excellent Society in Edinburgh, but it should be seconded and supported by local societies in all parts of the country. They must feel that in this matter they

would succeed only if they could enlist public opinion. They must try and diffuse a feeling of the value of natural beauty. He fully believed that the appreciation of such beauty was increasing every year; but what he feared was that by the time when it had so grown as to command sufficient power it would have come too late. A great deal that was infinitely valuable might be lost before public opinion has become sufficiently enlightened to feel the necessity of preserving it. There was no city in the country that would not willingly possess to-day buildings which were destroyed without a thought thirty or forty or fifty years ago. In these matters they ought to consider those who were to come after them. They ought to feel that they were trustees of the world they had received, with the duty of handing it on, if possible, better, and certainly not worse, than they received it. Perhaps they should go a little further, and reconsider their ideals, and ask themselves whether the ideals of national welfare and happiness that people had fifty years ago were now the true ones. The world was getting too full. Instead of making it any fuller, he should be very glad to see the population not increase further, and he would much rather have a really bright and enjoyable life for those who lived in the planet than see the planet overcrowded any more. There were places, no doubt, where there was still room, but in our country there was no longer much room, and in Western Europe altogether there was not very much room, and it was far more important to give a really happy, enjoyable life, full of the best pleasure, to the mass of the people, and to raise them in the social scale, than to have a larger population, and a greatly increased product of commodities, which would further swell the population. We had now-a-days abundance of rapid transport, but it was more important that we should consider where we were going, and what we were doing, and what use we were making of the facilities for locomotion and communication which science has placed in our hands than merely to hurry about from spot to spot in the restless way we do. If it was our duty to consider those who come after us, it was not less

our duty to take thought for the preservation of those beauties of natural scenery which the Creator had bestowed upon us, and, feeling in that as in other things that we are trustees, to recognise that we shall best consult the future of the race by endeavouring to conserve for them as much as possible of this priceless source of the purest pleasures—(loud applause).

Mr. Bryce, in reply to a vote of thanks proposed by Mr. Alexander Copland, ex-Chairman, and seconded by Mr. Alexander Walker, LL.D., said he was glad Mr. Copland had called attention to the question of river pollution, which was a most important branch of the subject, and to which he ought to have referred. It was a subject with which there was the greatest difficulty in dealing, on account of the pecuniary interests involved, but he was persuaded it was one in which the general welfare was very largely concerned, and if they could get public opinion distinctly expressed upon it, they should succeed in rescuing some of their rivers from the pollution which was completely destroying their charm. It was also a question of importance to anglers, who were a numerous body, and from the time of Isaak Walton known as a very harmless and estimable body of men—(laughter). A great deal might be done for public health, as well as for the fuller enjoyment of rural scenery, if the pollution of rivers was more strictly prohibited. In the neighbourhood of very large towns the mischief had gone so far that it could not be now easily removed, but the Dee, coming down to within a short distance of Aberdeen as an untainted river, might with a little care and forethought be kept pure; and he hoped they would always desire to preserve the beauty, both of the sparkling stream and of the lovely valley which it traverses—(applause).