BOOK REVIEWS


This book is an account, based on extensive research, of the woods of Dean Forest in west Gloucestershire, one of Britain's historical forests. It aims to lay stress on its trees and timbers and on the progress from natural woodland to a multi-use forest under modern management.

Dr Hart belongs to the footnote school of historians — a random count in the main text shows 7.4 per page. There appears to be the usual fear of being caught with a fact which cannot be substantiated, and one also gets the impression that any unearthed fact applicable to the pre-1700 period has had to be included.

Research has been very extensive indeed and, as far as can be seen, very painstaking. By pushing through dense thickets of facts, as through patches of hardwood regeneration in the forest, we can follow Dean's history. For almost all the time it has been a Crown forest, but one which was a major source of livelihood to local people and so obviously not an easy one to administer. Iron deposits on the outskirts led to a demand for charcoal for smelting. Probably the most eventful history was in the seventeenth century when the demands of the iron industry for its improved blast furnaces rose to a peak. The illegal depredations of Sir John Wintour, a local ironmaster who had bought concessions, caused the forest to be depleted of medium size and mature trees.

After the Restoration there was a growing demand for ship timber for the expanding British Navy, and it was in 1668 that a notable afforestation act was passed which provided for enclosure and hence protection of regeneration. Management steadily became more honest and efficient. A major planting effort in the early eighteen-hundreds restocked the forest. Coal-mining caused added complications. As history becomes more recent, Dr Hart's treatment becomes less intensive — there are only 57 pages to cover the period 1700-1965, which should surely have produced much more of silvicultural or management significance.

An interesting sidelight is the report by Nelson of an inspection in 1803, in connection with supplies for the Navy. It quoted a lot of local opinions with that "of-course-I-don't-know-much-about-this-but" attitude of the very amateur forester — it even includes a thinning table. Field Marshal Montgomery could hardly have done better on a subject he knew little about.

To sum up, this is careful historical work but of a somewhat uneven coverage, of a sort that must inevitably be undertaken as a matter of record. The book might be of major interest if one lived near Dean or was associated with the forest. But for a wider audience its presentation fails — there are too many barely connected facts and too little highlighting of salient trends; the history is too dry.
Dr Hart's study does emphasize that the sooner we in New Zealand start on our forest histories the better. All memories and many records are ephemeral, and time marches on. But we must produce a more digestible story than this.

H.V.H.

Faber and Faber, London. Price 50s.

This book follows the earlier and well-known Shelterbelts and Microclimate by the same author. It deals in great range and detail with the need for shelter in specific types of land use and park planting. The second half of the book considers the principles of shelter, design, permeability and so on, giving an exhaustive list of tree and shrub species, useful for northern hemisphere planting and, to some extent, for our South Island conditions. The final chapters deal with restoration of old shelterbelts, with shelterbelts for timber, and farming-cum-forestry. Each of these chapters could well be extended to small book size for New Zealand conditions.

The impression that remains after reading this book through for the first time is of the wealth of information that is contained in it. The amount of thought that has been given to each section, for instance that dealing with shelter in relation to market and horticultural gardens, is most impressive. Effects of frost are noted as being most harmful if belts are poorly sited. Means are described whereby shelterbelts of angular design can conduct away descending frost-bearing draughts, maintaining air circulation and avoiding low frost pockets. It is noted that entirely still air is inclined to increase blights of various kinds, so that complete shelter is not desirable. On the other hand, bees and insects can increase fertilization of crops very markedly under sheltered conditions.

A chapter dealing with the shelter of house and garden quotes measurements taken in the United States over a number of houses showing that a windbreak on the northern side saved 20% of the fuel. The author notes that in his opinion the plantations around many of the country seats of Scottish lairds were not planted for adornment. Aye! that could well be so.

Dealing with subjects of particular importance to New Zealand farming, the sections concerned with design of shelter for stock and crops, including grass, are most exhaustive. Results of experiments are quoted where shade and shelter have been of great financial benefit in rich farming districts. The discussion on windbreaks to trap snow would be of interest to South Island farmers and local bodies, particularly after their experiences in last year's unseasonable storms.

For some reason or other, our agricultural scientists have given little thought to the influence of climate, especially wind, on our grassland and crop production. Many of the new generation of high-pressure farmers, in their quest for more grass, are whacking out their shelterbelts and not replacing them with better, narrower breaks. The provision of shelter is a long-term project needing