

CHAPTER THREE

The Liberties of the Greenwood

i Green Men

During the reign of the Stuarts, when gentility might be surmised from the elaborate dip and flutter of a deep bow, there dwelled in Dorset one Henry Hastings, second son of the earl of Huntingdon.¹ Though his family had been painted by van Dyck, Hastings was technically, not culturally, a cavalier. A stranger to frills and furbelows, he was one of the keepers of the New Forest, his jurisdiction being the “walk” of Christchurch. While others may have taken their duties with aristocratic carelessness, everything that is known about Henry Hastings suggests he took his *walk* seriously.

Hastings’s house in Dorset was called, aptly enough, Woodlands. (He was also the landlord of a farm at Little Piddle near Combe Deverel in the same county.)² He made a point of dressing only in green broadcloth, and entertained guests in a chamber that had been built for him in the hollow of an oak. Should any of his company have ventured inside the house, they might well have wished they were back in the tree. Stepping into the great hall of Woodlands meant grinding the heel of one’s boot on a carpet of half-gnawed marrowbones, while the evil-smelling chamber itself was filled with an inconceivable number of hunting, pointing, and retrieving dogs—spaniels, ter-

riers, and hounds of every description. Hawks and falcons roosted from the sconces set in the panelled walls, spattering the floor with their droppings. At the upper end of the room hung two seasons' worth of fox-skins with the occasional polecat pelt mixed in among them.

With his brick-red face and unkempt straw-colored hair, Henry Hastings must have looked as though he had more in common with the feral creatures of the woods than with an ancient noble line. He was also notorious for emulating their rutting, "there being not a woman in all his walks of the degree of a yeoman's wife and under the age of forty but it was her own fault if he was not intimately acquainted with her." This "made him very popular," John Hutchins, the eighteenth-century antiquarian of Dorset, implausibly claimed, "always speaking to the husband, brother and father who was very welcome to his house."³

In respect of its moldy beastliness, the parlor at Woodlands was not much of an improvement on the hall. Litters of cats lay in the great chairs and supped with their master, only occasionally batted away by a fourteen-inch white wand so "that he might defend such meat that he had no mind to part with to them." Most often their dainties were oysters, carted in from the fishing port of Poole twice a day for Hastings's dinner (at three) and supper (at eight). But they were always supplemented with whatever he had killed and hung to an acceptable degree of decomposing ripeness: venison, hare, or woodcock; roast, stewed or stuffed into pasties and pies. And should he still be peckish, he could walk to the end of the room, through a maze of little tables and desks overflowing with hawks' hoods, fowling poles, ancient guns, hats with their crowns stowed in to make a nest for the eggs of plover and partridge, past the chaos of dice and cards and ancient, grimy pipes, black and green with crusted smoke, past the cobwebbed books of martyrs and a single mildewed Bible, through a closet filled with bottles of ale and wine and the syrup of gillyflower with which he flavored his sack, and out the other side into his chapel. There, waiting for him in an old, intricately carved pulpit that had not heard a sermon for many years, would be a mighty chine of beef, a welcoming rosy side of gammon, or, most toothsome of all, a great crown of apple pie sweating sweet and spicy juices within its thick crust, "extremely baked."

Though he was given to yelling, "calling his servants Bastards and Cuckoldry knaves (in which he often spoke truth to his own knowledge)," Henry Hastings thought himself a moderate, sober sort of fellow. He never drank more than a glass or two of wine with his meals, preferring his small beer flavored with rosemary. "He lived to be a hundred," wrote William Gilpin admiringly, "and never lost his eye-sight nor used spectacles. He got on horseback and rode to the death of the stag till he was past fourscore."⁴

It is virtually impossible to disentangle myth from reality in this portrait of Henry Hastings. A century after his death, the squire of the New Forest had become as much folklore as history: an emblem of English incorrigibility,

bloody-minded, freely fornicating earthiness, in all likelihood the model for Addison and Steele's Sir Roger de Coverley and Fielding's Squire Western. But Gilpin, who occupied the New Forest parsonage of Boldre, celebrated Hastings in the pages of his *Remarks on Forest Scenery* because he had become an emblem of the English greenwood: a survivor of an ancient forest knighthood; virtually a living extrusion of the verdure; a piggy truffle-grubber; a specimen of the tradition of wild men of the woods; an Arcadian prince of Pan-ic, goatish and greedy. And though the Claudes and Poussins which supplied Gilpin with his definition of *picturesque* generally featured more comely types of herders and hunters, the filthy *terribilitas* of a Hastings, all crazed and blasted, a type in which ruined splendor and homely charm mixed in equal degrees, satisfied the picturesque's demand for irregularity. Besides, Hastings exuded a kind of warty rustic integrity that was at the opposite extreme from Gilpin's smooth aristocratic neighbors in the New Forest, with their obsessive interest in landscape "improvements": broad avenues of elms and oaks or ornamental fishponds made from the damming of perfectly good streams. Some, like Mr. Welbore Ellis at Paulton, who passed for a man of good taste, had even compounded these affectations with the abomination of a Chinese arched bridge. It was Sir William Chambers, whose *Designs of Chinese Buildings* had been published in 1757, whom he held accountable for such abominations. "Above all ornaments," wrote Gilpin with his literary handkerchief to his nose, "we are disgusted with the Chinese."⁵

Chinese fences and bridges had no more business in the New Forest, thought Gilpin, than pagodas (which had arrived at Kew) replacing his own church at Boldre. For the forest was much more than his own parish. To Parson Gilpin (also the high priest of the picturesque), it was the essential England—not just the abode of ancient oaks and wild ponies but the seat of English liberty and its long resistance to despotism. That was why he rejoiced in the splendidly horrible anachronism of Henry Hastings, who held the king's office of keeper of the forest but who was so unlike the sinecure-holders who took the perquisites and kept clear of the woods. That was also why Gilpin was proud to confess that he had befriended an ex-poacher who had confided to him in elaborate detail how he had taken (on average) a hundred bucks a year from right under the nose of the royal gamekeepers.⁶ With considerable ingenuity, which Gilpin obviously admired, the poacher had constructed a special gun that could be unscrewed into three parts and concealed beneath his coat as he walked about the forest with the underkeepers, locating the best game. At night he would remove his kill to a secret storeroom he had built behind a false wall in his house and, when it was safe, would sell it to marketmen who were happy enough to observe the old forest adage *Non est inquirendum unde venit venison*.

As another exemplary forest type, Gilpin recounted the story of an "ancient" widow, living like many of the poor woodlanders in a tumbledown

cottage in the trees, much harassed by the forest officers who tried to remove them as "encroachers." When the Whig duke of Bedford had been lord warden of the New Forest he had tried to have such folk cleared out wholesale. But when faced with the determined resistance of two hundred of the woodsmen, he had reluctantly backed away from using force. The widow's husband had died young, leaving her with two small sons and an infant daughter but also with a carefully planted orchard at the back of the cottage and a garden at the front. And though her old age was "oppressed with infirmity . . . and various [unnamed] afflictions in her family," she was nonetheless pious and good-hearted, and her "little tenement . . . the habitation of innocence and industry." It was, in

fact, very much the kind of cottage Gainsborough liked to paint, standing "sweetly in a dell on the edge of a forest," the family subsisting modestly through virtuous labor. Such a place, though technically illegal, Gilpin thought, could hardly be considered an "injury," producing as it did so much happiness and utility from a "petty trespass on waste."⁷

The wondrous-crazy lord of Woodlands and keeper of the forest, the bold and ingenious poacher, and the innocent trespasser were all prime specimens of what Gilpin believed to be English freedom set in the truest and most picturesque of English scenery: forest scenery. Yet he closed his long and superb

account "with a sigh" because he did not think

its unkempt splendors would be likely to survive the apparently insatiable demand for naval timber that was leading to acre after acre being felled, or the threat of mistaken embellishment in aristocratic parks.

His pessimism would prove, in some respects, unfounded. The nineteenth-century change in the construction of naval vessels from wood to iron, and the replacement of wood by coal for industrial processes, was to be the salvation of the royal forests. The market price for timber dropped steeply, reducing the incentive for subcontractors to lease off areas of old forest for commercial exploitation. But in any case, Gilpin believed that his own advocacy of the picturesque might ultimately affect official and fashionable views



"New Forest Scenery," from William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, 1808.

of what landscapes were worth preserving. What he was looking for was some sort of grand patron who would share such a view. And it was not even completely out of the question that England had such a prince in its reigning monarch.

For on June 25, 1789, while Louis XVI and his ministers were plotting an armed march on insurrectionary Paris, George III arrived at the lodge of his lord warden of the New Forest at Lyndhurst.⁸ It was meant to be nothing more than a brief stop en route to the new sea-bathing resort of Weymouth. But the king, who was the first monarch since Charles II to visit the most famous, ancient, and beautiful of all his royal forests, was so taken with what he saw that he stayed five days, along with Queen Charlotte and three of the royal princesses. In the same week that the Bourbons were putting up padlocks in Versailles, the farmer king and his daughters dined at the Lyndhurst lodge with the windows thrown open, or at wooden tables on the lawn before a cheering (though railed-off) public. It was a scene of spontaneous and disorderly merriment, right from the sketchbook of Thomas Rowlandson, and only slightly marred when "the populace became rather riotous in their joy [and] there was a necessity to exclude them."⁹

As the vicar of Boldre, no less than the advocate of unadorned Britain, Gilpin rejoiced at seeing George III galloping around the New Forest villages, doffing his hat as he was huzzahed on his way, the very picture of the bluff patriot king come among his loyal woodlander subjects. But then Gilpin had inherited a long memory of the forest as a place where history and geography met: the seat of greenwood liberty, a patrimony shared by both the polite and the common sort. If he had been able to suspend all disbelief, he could have shown friends and visitors the very tree off which, it was said, the arrow of Walter Tyrrell glanced before entering the body of King William II, Rufus, in the year 1100.



IN THE LORE of the free greenwood, Rufus, the son of William the Conqueror, was a chief and singular villain inheriting his father's lust for vengery and his contempt for the traditional common woodland rights of grazing and gleaning. To nourish the hart and the hind, it was said, whole parishes had disappeared into the arbitrary jurisdiction of the new royal forests, their "vert and venison" (the trees and the beasts) protected by the most despotic institutions ever seen in Old England. But those who had committed this assault on the liberties of the greenwood would not go unpunished. So the arrow intended for a red deer, loosed by an especially worthless sycophant, was somehow providentially deflected in flight toward the body of the Norman despot. Indeed the whole dynasty of the Conqueror seemed to have been cursed for their crimes against greenwood liberty, for another of William I's sons, Richard, was also

killed in the New Forest, as was a grandson (also called Richard), his brother Duke Robert died with an arrow in his neck, and *his* son hanged from an oak by his hair, a Norman Absalom.¹⁰

The eleventh-century monk Oderic, of Saxon stock, was quite certain that Rufus had died unshriven amidst the oaks as punishment for his brutal and ungodly rule, and reported that the prelates and doctors of theology had decreed he should remain unabsolved because of his "filthy life and shameful deeds."¹¹ The monk Eadmer similarly believed him justly killed for falsely accusing fifty men of taking the king's deer. Though they had been condemned to the ordeal of the hot iron, he added, God had preserved their innocent hands from any scorching.¹² According to this pious tradition, it would be another century before the true justice of the greenwood returned embodied in the *Charta de Foresta*, signed just two years after the *Magna Carta* in 1217, and in the myth of sylvan liberties, every bit as important.

The legend of ravaging Norman despotism annihilating whole villages and parishes to create the private hunting reserve of the New Forest was based on the claims of medieval clerics like Oderic and Walter Map, archdeacon of Oxford, who wrote that "the Conqueror took away much land from God and men and converted it for the use of wild beasts and the sport of his dogs for which he demolished thirty-six churches and exterminated the inhabitants."¹³ Passed on through the generations as far as the eighteenth century, it evolved into the farfetched claim (found, for example, in Voltaire) that the Conqueror and his heirs had been so determined to swathe Old England in woods populated only by boar and by buck that they had gone to the length of planting good arable fields with trees. Gilpin rejected this assertion as transparently absurd and was skeptical about the magnitude of parish destruction claimed in the canonical history of the New Forest.

Pruned of its most improbable features, though, the mythic memory of greenwood freedom survived into the nineteenth century as material for the historical novel, not least, of course, Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Before the Norman tyranny, it was supposed, Britain had been mantled with the greenwood, a habitat where lord and peasant, thane and churl co-existed in pre-feudal reciprocity—the one exercising his hunting rights with moderation, the other allowed the freedom of the woods to pasture his swine and collect the wood for his wattle and hearth. The forests of England—Arden (Eardene, north of Worcester) and Sherwood, Dean and Epping—entered the popular imagination in a quite different style from the primeval woods of Polish Lithuania or the German *silva Hercynia*. There, the hunt was the expression of tribal community. In the idyll of the English greenwood, though, the hunt was an alien despotism, the hoofs of its horses trampling primitive liberties embodied, it was said, in the Saxon assembly, the witengamot, or the Scottish midsummer assembly at Glen Taner, where tribal chiefs met in their clan games. There were perhaps some links with

the Germanic tradition of martial woodland *Gemeinschaft*. The Celtic king Caractacus was said to have made his last stand against the Romans from Clun Forest. But in the English greenwood, the blood pact turned into mere bloody-mindedness: overbearing authority corrected by acts of anarchic justice, the true law executed by the out-law.

Greenwood was not, then, like Dante's *selva oscura*, the darkling forest where one lost oneself at the entrance to hell. It was something like the exact opposite: the place where one found oneself. In the Arden of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare has the banished Duke Senior discard the vanities and corruption of court life in favor of woodland authenticity. "They say," Charles tells Oliver, "he is already in the forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." Greenwood, then, is the upside-down world of the Renaissance court: a place where the conventions of gender and rank are temporarily reversed in the interest of discovering truth, love, freedom, and, above all, justice. "You have said," remarks Touchstone, "but whether wisely or no, let the forest judge." And so the forest does. At the very end of the play the usurping Duke Frederick—the urban condottiere—

*hearing how that every day
Men of great worth resorted to this forest,
Address'd a mighty power, which were on foot
In his own conduct, purposely to take
His brother here, and put him to the sword;
And to the skirts of this wild wood he came;
Where, meeting with an old religious man,
After some question with him, was converted
Both from his enterprise and from the world,
His crown bequeathing to his banish'd brother,
And all their lands restor'd to them again.¹⁴*

The "old religious man" so abruptly and conveniently introduced by Shakespeare functions as both priest and judge of the ancient forest: a woodland magus. So too the trees of Birnam Wood march relentlessly toward the usurper Macbeth in an act of justice and redress. This being England, the greenwood generally votes conservative. Its reversals of rank and sex are always temporary and its sentiments incurably loyal and royal. The grim slaughters of Białowieża and the Teutoburgwald are unthinkable in the sylvan habitat of Merrie England: there it is forever green, always summer. The nightingales sing, the ale is heady, and masters and men are brought together in fellowship by the lord of the jest: Robin Hood.