The total want of wood

Trees have a large impact on how we see the landscape. Where abundant, as in woods or forests, they eclipse our view, while an absence of trees opens up the landscape, allowing us to take in a far broader view – the dune fields of the strandveld, the rolling hills of the renosterveld and the rugged mountains of the sandstone fynbos. The general absence of trees was particularly striking for many arriving at the Cape from heavily forested regions of Europe and North America. The sentiments expressed by Dugald Carmichael, who was at the Cape between 1806 and 1815 and travelled throughout the greater Cape Town area as far as Tulbagh, were fairly typical of many early visitors:

> The country over which we travelled is the least interesting to an admirer of natural scenery that can be imagined: a remark with I feel no hesitation in extending to every part of the Colony that I have seen. No country in the world, perhaps, unites so much boldness of outline with such unvaried tameness of detail. This tameness, arising from the disposition of the surface, becomes the more fatiguing to the eye from the total want of wood. In the whole course of our travels, we did not see a single tree of nature's planting, nor a shrub much taller than one of ourselves. In the mountain ravines, you sometimes meet with stumps which show that trees of a considerable size did formerly grow there; but nothing of that sort can be traced on the acclivities of the hills, or the interjacent plains. These seem to have always been as destitute of wood as they are now.[34]

Carmichael was correct that indigenous (afromontane) forests are largely restricted to mountain ravines and that most of these had been felled by earlier settlers. Many early visitors to the Cape – including Carmichael, who professed an interest in botany – did not appreciate the way we do today the richly diverse plants of the fynbos. From their perspective, the low-lying shrubs simply did not compare to the grandeur of the forests back home. In addition to the felling of large trees, many of the smaller protea bushes and woody shrubs had been removed, roots and all, to provide the daily need for firewood. The result was a landscape in the vicinity of Cape Town described by many as windswept, bleak, barren, bright, rocky, dusty and treeless. Denuding the steep slopes of plants led to severe soil erosion, with some early visitors commenting on the suspended mud washed from Table Valley into Table Bay. The scars of erosional gullies are still visible today on the lower slopes of Table Mountain.

Aesthetics of the landscape aside, the absence of trees was also of practical concern, right up there with the general lack of fresh water. Large trees were essential for building ships and shelter, and wood was the dominant source of energy for the hearth. The silver tree is one of the few indigenous trees that grows outside of mountain ravines to

Figure 164. A grove of silver trees on Plumpudding Hill (Mowbray Ridge, left). The silver tree is named for the fine hairs on their leaves that reflect sunlight, giving them a shiny, silvery appearance and a silky feel (right).

heights of up to 4 or 5 metres – too small for timber, but useful for household fires. The silver tree is endemic to the Cape Peninsula, with groves on Plumpudding Hill above Mowbray (Fig. 164). Many of these, along with those near Paarl and Stellenbosch, may have been planted, for according to Barrow 'whole woods of it [silver tree] stretch along the eastern side of Table Mountain, planted solely for fuel'.[35]

The need for wood compelled the planting of pine plantations, which started in the 18th century and was greatly expanded between 1880 and 1903, including the Tokai and Devil's Peak plantations (Fig. 165). The planting of all those trees was considered heroic, and the 1902 plaque near the King's Blockhouse commemorates the forester Mr Frank Jarman: 'He found these barren rocky slopes treeless. He left them covered with forest.' The main reason for the Devil's Peak plantation was to restore the heavily eroded slopes, the first phase in the long-term plan to rebuild the topsoil, much of which had washed away, and to stabilise the erosional gullies. Despite these good intentions, the cluster pine soon spread and displaced indigenous fynbos wherever it was introduced, an invasive species that has proved difficult to eradicate. Fortunately, the stone pine is a far less aggressive alien species.

Times have changed and the biodiversity and beauty of the fynbos plants are now appreciated far more than previously. Efforts are now under way to convert alien forests back to fynbos, a reversal of what foresters like Jarman had set out to do. However, the replacement of plantations by fynbos remains controversial, as many still find much to enjoy about the forests. In addition to saving lowland fynbos biome species, with 5 plant species already extinct and many others threatened with extinction,[36] one of the main arguments for reversion of plantations to fynbos is water conservation – water loss is far greater from large trees than from fynbos plants.

Figure 165. Tokai pine plantations (background) are slowly being returned to fynbos (foreground).

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