The Right to Divert Water to Non-Riparian Land

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THE RIGHT TO DIVERT WATER TO NON-RIPARIAN LANDS.—Though at one
time in England there may have been some doubt as to the character of a
riparian owner's rights in the waters of the stream, it must be considered as
definitely settled by a series of cases that the doctrine of reasonable use by
all the proprietors on the stream is the rule of the common law, and that the
matter of priority of use or appropriation is, under that system, immaterial,
unless, of course, a question of prescriptive right is involved. Wright v.
Howard, 1 Sim. & S. 190; Mason v. Hill, 3 B. & Ad. 304, 5 id. 1; Wood v.
Waud, 3 Exch. 748; Embrey v. Owens, 6 Exch. 353; Sampson v. Hoddinott,
1 C. B. (N. S.) 590, Miner v. Gilmour, 12 Moore P. C. 131. The American
courts have generally adopted the view of the law early expressed by Chancel-
lor Kent, which is the view approved by the English courts above referred
to. See 3 Kent, Comm. § 439. The rule of law is clear, the difficulties arise
in its application to particular cases in the determination of the question as to
whether a certain use is reasonable or not. In the second edition of his
splendid treatise on Irrigation and Water Rights, Mr. Kinney has said:
"Under the common law there are three classes of uses which the riparian
proprietors may or may not make of the waters of a stream flowing by their
lands. These are: First, natural or primary uses for which any riparian
proprietor may take the waters of the whole stream; second, artificial uses or
uses which are not classified as those for natural wants; and, third, uses of
the water which may not be made at all; such, for example, would be the
use of water by a riparian owner upon non-riparian lands." § 486.
In the first class of uses mentioned by Mr. Kinney in which the water is
used for the so-called primary or ordinary or natural purposes, it has been
said by a great many courts that it is not unreasonable to abstract water to
such an extent that in the case of small streams the supply is entirely ex-
hausted. Miner v. Gilmour, supra; Swindon Water Works Co. v. Wilts &
Berks Canal Navigation Co., L. R. 7 H. L. 697; Wadsworth v. Tillotson, 15 Conn. 366, 39 Am. Dec. 391; Arnold v. Foot, 12 Wend. 330; Evans v. Merriweather, 3 Sme. 492, 38 Am. Dec. 106; Stanford v. Felt, 71 Cal. 249, 16 Pac. 900; Willis v. Perry, 92 Iowa 297, 60 L. R. A. 124; Lone Tree Ditch Co. v. Cyclone Ditch Co., 26 S. D. 327, 128 N. W. 596; Caviness v. La Grande Irr. Co., 60 Ore. 410, 119 Pac. 731. In the second class of cases the amount of water that may be wholly diverted from the stream depends upon the volume of water and the effect of the diversion upon the proprietors lower down. Embrey v. Owen, supra; Sampson v. Hoddinott, supra; Swindon Water Works Case, supra; Tyler v. Wilkinson, 4 Mason 397, Fed. Cas. 14, 312; Eliot v. Pittsburg R. Co., 10 Cush. 191, 57 Am. Dec. 85. Cases to the same effect are numerous. However, it is Mr. Kinney's third class of cases with which this note is particularly concerned.

Is it true, as stated, that a riparian proprietor has no right to use the water upon non-riparian lands? In the leading English case, which later English cases have referred to as practically codifying the law of rights in running streams, the doctrine is laid down that the rights of riparian ownership extend only to use upon and in connection with an estate which adjoins the stream, and cannot be stretched to include uses reasonable in themselves, but upon and in connection with non-riparian estates. Swindon Water Works Co. v. Wilts & Berks Canal Navigation Co., L. R. 7 H. L. 687. And in McCartney v. Londonderry & Lough Swilly Ry. [1904] A. C. 301, the House of Lords made a declaration that the railway company, which had been taking water by a pipe from a river where the railway right of way crossed same to a tank about one-half mile distant for use in running the company's engines, had no right to continue such diversion of water as against the lower riparian proprietor. There the amount of water diverted was so small in relation to the whole volume of water in the stream that the lower riparian proprietor's mill could have been run by the diverted water only three minutes in each day. In both cases the suggestion is made that if the diverting upper owner had said, "We do not claim a right at all, but what we propose to do is such a trivial matter that it cannot do you any practical injury," the court might have thought fit not to interfere. The Lord Chancellor, in the McCartney case, said, "If the question were the reasonableness in respect of quantity, I should think it a most unreasonable thing that the use of a stream passing through a very small area of riparian land should be made to extend to forty miles of country. * * * Speaking of it simply in respect of quantity, I think it more unreasonable than supplying drinking water to an asylum built on the banks, which has been held to be unlawful. But, in truth, it is not a question of the quantity at all. * * * The use which they (in this case the railway company) claim to make of it is not for the purpose of their tenements at all, but is a use which virtually amounts to a complete diversion of the stream. * * * It is a confiscation of the rights of the lower owner."

In the English courts, then, it seems clear that whatever may be the right of a riparian owner to divert water and consume it upon his riparian lands, he has no right to abstract water for consumption or use upon non-riparian lands, whether owned by him or not, and regardless of the amount used.

In accord with the cases last cited is the very recent case of Stratton v. Mt. Hermon Boys' School, (Mass. 1913) 103 N. E. 87. In that case the defendant, which owned a tract of riparian land, erected thereon a pumping plant and diverted water from the stream to other lands beyond the watershed where it was used to supply the manifold needs of a large boys' school. The defendant requested the court to rule, "in effect that diversion of water to another non-riparian estate owned by it, was not conclusive evidence that the defendant was liable, but that the only question was whether it had taken an unreasonable quantity of water under all the circumstances." The court refused the request, and instructed that "the defendant's right was confined to a reasonable use of the water for the benefit of its land adjoining the water course, and of persons properly using such land, and did not extend to taking it for use upon other premises, and that if there was such use the plaintiff was entitled to recover at least nominal damages even though he had sustained no actual loss." It was held that the instruction given was erroneous, and the doctrine laid down as applicable to such cases was substantially the charge requested by defendant. "If he diverts out of the watershed or upon a disconnected estate," said Rugg, C. J., "the only question is whether there is actual injury to the lower estate for any present or future reasonable use."

The doctrine of the courts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and North Carolina would seem, then, to be in conflict with the rule of the English courts. What the other courts of this country, even those above referred to, would hold in a case where the water abstracted for use on non-riparian lands was so small in amount as to cause no actual or potential injury to the lower owners in the reasonable exercise of their riparian rights,
is of course problematical. It is submitted that at least in those sections of the country where the supply of water in streams is abundant the doctrine of the Massachusetts court as expressed in the Stratton case is preferable to the strict rule of the English courts.

In streams nature has provided tremendous possibilities for public good, and it would seem a clear dictate of common sense and a wise public policy that all possible avail should be made thereof. The common law has declared that riparian owners, in respect of their riparian lands, shall have the primary and perhaps the sole right of use of the waters. For the present purpose it may be conceded that it is wise that such persons in respect of such lands should have the primary right, but it is believed that it is not wise to give them the exclusive right when thereby a portion of nature's gift is squandered. If the riparian proprietor is assured his primary right of use, he is amply protected therein by his right of action against any one above, whether riparian owners in the strict sense or not, who makes such a use of the stream as to result in actual or potential injury. It may well be that proof merely of such potential injury should not be sufficient basis for a cause of action. The reason for allowing the action when there is a showing only of possible future injury is of course to prevent the acquisition of a prescriptive right. To deny to some member of the public a use of a stream, perhaps to him very beneficial, merely on the ground that some riparian proprietor lower down would be injured thereby if he were to make a use of the stream which he would be entitled to make but which as a matter of fact he is not making, thus losing to all this gift of nature, may well be said by anyone but the precedent-worshipper to be absurd. If some theory is required to prevent such use ripening into a prescriptive right, why not imply a license on the lower owner's part, so long as his rights are not actually injured, thus meeting any claim of adverse use by the upper owner? In cases such as the principal case it might be well to consider a diversion of water to non-riparian land as presumptively injurious to the lower owner, thus casting upon the abstractor the burden of proving that his diversion was, under the circumstances, lawful.

R. W. A.