

## The properties of the Dukes of Arenberg in the Low Countries (from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

(excerpt from the article by P.-A. TALLIER)

It would be unwise to try to make a definitive evaluation of the extent of the forest estate of the House of Arenberg, or to attempt to follow in detail the evolution of the individual compartments that comprise it. As with any real estate holding, its size continually fluctuates with the sales and acquisitions which characterise the management of an estate – be they voluntary or as a result of successions or political decisions –, and also due to the reforestation or clearing of certain areas. But in contrast with the overall area of a seigneurie, which can remain relatively stable for a number of decades, significant changes concerning the various types of undeveloped land which form the estate (park, pastures, agricultural lands, forests, heaths, moors and marshes) occur on a regular basis.

Be that as it may, between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the House of Arenberg was credited with more than 12,005 ha of forest within the territory of the French Republic, of which 6,902 ha in the 9 “reunited departments” (3,069 ha in the department of Dyle [Brabant], 2,020 ha in the department of Jemappes [Hainaut], 1,122 ha in the department of the Forêts [Luxembourg] – an undivided half of the forest of Neufchâteau – and 691 ha in the department of the Ourthe [Liège])<sup>1</sup>. During this period, the aforementioned holdings were placed under sequestration and were managed by the forestry authorities. This sequestration was only lifted on the 6 *Brumaire an XII*<sup>2</sup> after a number of incidents<sup>3</sup>.

The Revolution and the Empire were difficult periods for the head of the family, the duke Louis Engelbert, whose estate was drastically reduced in just a few years (from more than 23,000 ha in 1790 to less than 10,000 ha in 1820). As a consequence of the military and political climate he was obliged to withdraw to his estates situated in the Kingdom of the Low Countries, the principal properties being Heverlee (3,000 ha) and Enghien (1,900 ha). The sale of Crown forests during the Dutch period allowed his son, the duke Prosper Louis<sup>4</sup>, to considerably increase his holdings. In just a few years he acquired 17 woods and forests covering 2,168 ha (including the second half of the 2,244 ha of the forest of Neufchâteau, thus an area of 1,122ha). He capitalised on these sales to purchase the Crown’s part of the forests that they held in joint ownership, buying the areas which bordered on his own land or were in the immediate vicinity of them. Although able to pay for these purchases in twelve instalments over as many years, he set himself apart by rapidly paying in full for them all.

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<sup>1</sup> J. DESCHEEMAEEKER, *Histoire de la Maison d’Arenberg d’après les archives françaises*, Melun, 1969, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> [Translator’s note : Reference to Republican calendar adopted after the Revolution. Corresponds to autumn 1803]

<sup>3</sup> A. GEUBEL, L. GOURDET, *Histoire du pays de Neufchâteau. La Ville - La Seigneurie - Le ban de Mellier*, Gembloux, 1956, p. 70-71 et 133.1

<sup>4</sup> A. DUCHESNE, “Arenberg Louis Prosper”, in *Biographie nationale*, t. 30, col. 77-79; E. LALOIRE, *Généalogie de la maison princière et ducale d’Arenberg (1547-1940)*, Bruxelles, 1940; E. VANDERVELDE, *La propriété foncière en Belgique*, Paris, 1900, p. 155, 180-181.

By around 1830, his forest estate on the “ Belgian” territory extended over nearly 8,500 ha. The largest forests included Neufchâteau (2.244 ha), Heverlee (2,235 ha), Enghien (1,060 ha), Braine-le-Comte (789 ha) and Halle (393 ha).

Thereafter, Prosper Louis acquired yet more significant sections of forest : part of the Soignes forest (the second half, 202 ha, of the Halle forest), the forest of Haute-Marlagne (817 ha), the main wood at Champlon (318 ha)<sup>5</sup>; and he proceeded to buy the forests owned by the company of Vedrin (369 ha) of which he was one of the shareholders.

In the meantime, however, many hundreds of hectares of forest had been lost to the process of trading possession of part of the forest in return for communities relinquishing usage rights elsewhere in the forest of Neufchâteau (loss of 744 ha), and to the clearing of a number of the other properties.

Nevertheless, as the will of Prosper Louis went through probate, half of his real estate holdings in Belgium were of woods and forests (nearly 9,500ha out of a total of 18,500 ha), making him one of its largest private forest owners<sup>6</sup>.

With the exception of the property of Neufchâteau in the Ardennes, which initially gained little in value as the charcoal forges situated in the vicinity closed down, these forests had a number of strengths.

In the Namurois region, the forest of Haute Marlagne was ideally located, being close to a number of industries (mines, forges, glassworks, collieries), to the town of Namur and to a waterway. The other large blocks of forest (Heverlee, Enghien, Braine-le-Comte, Halle) were generally situated on good land in regions with a well developed road system (Brabant and Hainaut) and centres of high wood consumption (towns and industries).

This unique estate was divided between his successors, but most of its components were sequestered at the end of the First World War, and followed various paths thereafter.

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of its purchase, the Champlon-Famenne land covered 522 ha of which 318 ha of woods.

<sup>6</sup> In terms of properties, the estate of Prosper Louis’ covers 20,886 ha of land situated in Belgium, France, the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and Holland, including roughly 9,500 ha of woods in Belgium. If one adds to this latter quantity the areas of the forests in the domains of Meysemburg (450 ha in the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg) and Wallers (350 to 400 ha in France), the total area of wooded land is 10,350 of the 20,866 ha estate.