

The Long, Long Life of Trees

by Fiona Stafford (Yale University Press 2016)



O dreamy, gloomy, friendly Trees, begins a poem composed by the now all but forgotten Herbert Trench (1865-1923). In this he describes his journey into woodland carrying his *heart that burns* and evokes the emotional balm provided by the presence of trees.

The obscure Herbert was obviously a poetical visionary, judging by the crowded book and magazine shelves now devoted to ‘mindfulness’ and its attendant prancing about in the green woods. It is therefore no surprise that the best-selling Fiona Stafford’s *The Long, Long Life of Trees* should be awarded *The Sunday Times* Nature Book of the Year and receive universal praise for its lyrical celebration of trees and our relationship with them. Stafford is professor of English at Oxford University and her book delves into cultural, literal and metaphysical aspects of trees.

A chapter is devoted to one tree; yew, oak, cherry and so-on. Within the description of the tree’s form and historical origins in the landscape is an examination of the ‘layers of meaning’ of every tree species. For example; of all trees the yew is the one most apt to provoke unease and fear, the oak is a ‘genial, protective home-lover’ but also a ‘fearless explorer, pushing into the unknown and at one with the wind and waves’, the graceful, soft and inviting birch also has the fearsome reputation of supplying intimidating punishment rods.

There is so much in Stafford’s book to remind us of how much of our geographical and cultural life is influenced by trees. Placenames are a starting point - Ashford, Sevenoaks, Willoughby and Poplar for example, provide evidence that early settlers identified their homes with local trees. The word *ash* derives from an Anglo-Saxon root. The place name Ashby means a farmstead where ash trees grow, Ashendon means ‘overgrown with ashes’. Hawthorn derives from Old English *haga* which shares Germanic roots with *hecg/hegge* meaning hedge and the legacy of these ancient marker trees can be seen in hedge free urban locations Thorn Street in London and the Hawthorns, home of West Bromwich Albion, built on the site of a hawthorn field. Stafford draws examples from the countless literary works inspired by encounters with and the presence of trees. In the medieval *Sir Gaiwan and the Green Knight* Sir Gaiwan’s frankly terrifying opponent carries a holly bough, a symbol of the holly as the winter king. In Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage* a group of elms provide a motif of life and community tree. Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* explores the complex intimacy between people and trees. A.E. Housman celebrated the cherry, the ‘loveliest’ of trees, but also mused on its brief blossoming as a metaphor for ageing.

The human/tree relationship ranges from the economic and prosaic to the emotional and spiritual. Trees historically were and still are a source of food, fuel and construction materials; oak supplying the roof timbers for cathedrals, pine the dead straight poles required for cables, the springy, shock-absorbing ash the frame of the WW2 Mosquito bomber, light-weight willow met the demand for artificial limbs during WW1. Notwithstanding all this, it is the relationship of trees to human hopes and fears that startles the reader in this rational, secular age. Both rowan and holly trees were regarded as woody and prickly defenders against witches. Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* cites a belief in East Sussex that holly trees in a hedge should be left tall to prevent witches from running along the top. Hawthorns are associated with the passion of Christ and the best known bearer of this narrative is the twice flowering Glastonbury Thorn which, according the legend, originated from a staff carried by Joseph of Arimathea.

However much we may celebrate our cultural relationship with trees and congratulate ourselves on our appreciation of the wooded landscape, poignantly, Stafford reminds us of human impact on their survival and her book includes laments for the loss of trees generally, and certain species in particular. The elm has gone from 'essential to endangered to extinct'. In roughly a decade Dutch Elm Disease destroyed twenty five million trees. Throughout much of England and Wales the sight of a mature elm tree is a thing of the past, a backdrop to a Constable or Stubbs painting. The belief in the invincible oak is threatened by a host of afflictions including the doom-laden 'sudden oak death'. Ash dieback' threatens the survival of the tough, ubiquitous ash tree. Its effects can be seen throughout the Parish with the dieback of twigs and branches in the canopy of mature trees. How tragic it would be if the ash were to follow the elm, only to be remembered in paintings, poems and songs.

Jean Stewart