

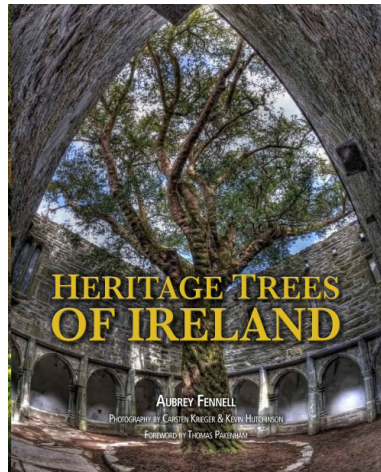
## Heritage Trees of Ireland

Aubrey Fennell, Carsten Krieger and Kevin Hutchinson,  
2013 (reprinted 2014).

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This handsome hardback publication has its genesis in the survey of heritage trees initiated in 2009, jointly funded by the Tree Council of Ireland, the Heritage Council, the Irish Tree Society and Crann. This work identified 1,200 trees of particular heritage significance, complementing the database of 11,000 (... and counting) trees already recorded by the Tree Register of Ireland, which was initiated in 2000 to record “champion trees”, defined as the tallest or oldest or the more massive example of a species in a given region. The author undertook Trojan work under both projects. In *Heritage Trees of Ireland* he takes a plunge into the records and pulls out a personal selection of just over 140 trees of particular note. Each entry comprises text and photographs. Through the pen of the writer and the eye of the photographers, these elements combine to capture the beauty and character of each subject.

In many ways, the author of *Heritage Trees of Ireland* has delivered us a swashbuckling adventure through Irish history and folklore – both local and national – as viewed through the “prism” of those trees contemporary within those now historical landscapes. Trees are used to explore local manifestations of history, bringing it into sharp focus and lending it a certain human scale. For example, we have the Courtown

Holm Oak (thought to be Ireland's first of that particular species), planted around the time a particular Cromwellian soldier, called Ford, stood on a local hill greedily pointing out land he wanted for himself in this part of Co. Wexford. Similarly, the Crannabachall Lookout Tree is described as an ash used to keep watch over local approaches during illegal masses at Coolaghmore, Co. Kilkenny during the Penal times. In this regard, Fintan O'Toole's *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* springs to mind.

Of course, for a sense of deeper history, there is the yew and the section entitled "The Ancient Yews" does not disappoint. In this section these glorious trees provide us with further tantalising glimpses into earlier times. Yew is an evocative tree and it is interesting to note that this section of the book presents perhaps the greatest number of individual specimens that would be generally known outside "tree" circles – the Muckross Abbey Yew, the Florence Court Irish Yew (the "mother" of all such yews the world over) and the Crom Yews (actually two, not one). Why is it that the yew occupies such a prominent position in our collective consciousness – perhaps a shared cultural memory harking back to the status of these trees as sacred entities and as one of the "Nobles" under the Brehon Laws? The photographs included remind this reviewer of trees in the ancient Ta Prohm Temple in Cambodia – roots like frozen quicksilver. Regarding age, looks can be misleading. We have the monolithic Glencormac Yew at Kilmacanogue, long thought by many to be Ireland's oldest and largest. However, the author's gut instinct is telling him that a far more diminutive-looking specimen, the modestly named Cliff-Face Yew at Turloughmore, is in contention. This yew is located in the wildest Burren, where trees have more to worry about than putting on mere girth. Regardless of which is the senior, both trees earn their position in this book.

As is the nature of these works, *Heritage Trees of Ireland* also captures interesting juxtapositions. We read about the Brian Bóru Oak in Raheen Woods, Co. Clare, associated with the High King of Ireland who was born nearby and who went on to defeat the Dublin Norse at the Battle of Clontarf (incidentally, an event that features in one of the principal Icelandic sagas, The Saga of Burnt Njál). In the same entry, the author points out the source of our "native" sessile oak, which migrated northwards from its refuge in the Iberian Peninsula after the Great Ice retreated. This entry alone captures the constant churn of influences – both natural and historic – through which time delivers us.

There is great fun here. For example, several entries describe various trees gorging themselves on unlikely items, including a headstone (a beech at Adare, Co. Limerick), a park seat (a London plane at King's Inn, Dublin) and even a castle (or at least, part of one) (an ash at Bawnboy, Co. Cavan). There is also the Turkey-Roost Tree (a European larch) at Moone, Co. Kildare and an enigmatically entitled entry "Strange

Trees Indeed” regarding a specimen in Glengarriff, about which this reviewer won’t write another word, just to stoke up the reader’s curiosity! However, sombre entries cut through, such as the Hanging Oak among the parkland trees at Shane’s Castle, Co. Antrim, used to dispatch highwaymen and those who failed to pay for using the nearby toll road. Often the passage of time and erosion of detail depersonalises these people and the desperate fear and resignation they must surely have felt, whether guilty or not. Judging from the picture accompanying this entry, the tree itself seems to remember them all too well, and to curse its form and the use it was put to.

Numbering more than 140, there are so many entries to savour in this book that the metaphorical box of chocolates just doesn’t do it justice – here we are presented with the entire sweet shop to choose from. The variety of trees is huge, but by using broad brush categories (“The Ancient Yews”, “The Europeans”, “Landmark and Junction Trees”, “Trees Associated with a Person”, etc.), the author has done a heroic job in bringing order to merry chaos, to produce a catalogue whose readership will surely encompass many disciplines and interests, from tree people to historians to visitors to our wonderful outdoors, both domestic and from further afield. The tone of the book is warm and inviting. It reads like a conversation, with the use of the first and second person reminding this reviewer of what it is like listening to an individual whose love for a topic – be it trees, sport, music or whatever – creates an electric hum of infectious curiosity. The text is inclusive and will draw even the most lukewarm reader into a conversation with the author, with each entry revealing a wonderfully diverse conglomerate of facts, folklore and informed commentary. One unfortunate drawback with this publication is that it’s unlikely to ever leave the house. This is a book you’d want on your person, best produced as you gaze upon the tree in question. If ever there was a book ripe for conversion into an “app” for a smartphone, complete with GPS functionality, contact details of landowners, and links to other relevant sources of information, then this is it. Indeed, such an app would sit very well beside a similar app for Donal Magner’s *Stopping by Woods*, to give potential enthusiasts every reason for getting up and out to experience our trees and woodlands at first hand.

Another inclusive aspect of this book is the very selection of trees. It’s not all about the tallest, oldest or rarest. These “A-listers” are present, of course, but so too are less obvious candidates – local landmarks, “lesser” trees, curiosities and misfits. All have great stories to tell and a reason for being here in this collection, and this will help readers to bridge the gap between trees deemed to merit inclusion in this publication, and trees within their own physical landscape, or indeed, that of their past. This will underscore for readers the value of all trees in our environment, and will, in all likelihood, yield many new candidates for future editions of the book.

Each entry is accompanied by at least one full-page photograph. These are consistently illustrative and often works-of-art in their own right. Two visual styles

dominate: a factual depiction (with some slight leaf blur, to create a sense of motion); and a slightly “otherworldliness” depiction, with some post-shot image processing used to realise the photographer’s vision. While Pakenham’s glorious Linhof large-format camera will always be missed (although perhaps not by the poor unfortunate who has to carry it!), all of these photographs work closely alongside the text to create as much of a presence of these trees as one can achieve in any book. Many would also merit larger reproduction, perhaps as a limited edition run of fine art prints or as a public exhibition. They also create invaluable “baseline” information on the trees themselves, for any future monitoring or assessment of health. However, as a keen photographer, this reviewer would like to have read about the equipment and techniques used, perhaps also some of the stories the photographers themselves might have to tell of their own experiences approaching these trees. This would have encouraged other photographers to try their hand at capturing their own images of these specimens, or indeed, of other potential candidates for heritage tree status.

Of course, underlining this work is the need to highlight the tremendous heritage – natural, historic and cultural – that these trees represent, and also their fragility and often tenuous hold on life, and the concerted effort needed to protect and conserve them. Natural causes will of course take their toll – the 42-metre-tall grey poplar at Birr Castle Demesne is now no more, having been toppled by storms in early 2014. However, human interventions – whether deliberate or not – are likely to be the main drivers towards their demise and over this we have at least some control. Writing about the wise stewardship of our natural resources for the sake of future generations, Chief Dan George, a 20<sup>th</sup> century chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation in British Columbia, asks “Have I done everything I could to earn my grandchild’s fondness?” These trees are sparkling jewels in our shared heritage, and in light of the wonder and delight they give us now, doing what we can to protect and conserve them will indeed gain us some much-needed favour with future generations. Multiple examples throughout the publication which document the efforts of landowners, community groups and county councils in standing guard over many of these trees, give us every reason to hope.

But in the meantime, we can only marvel. The section entitled “The Ancient Yews” describes the Burton Hall Yew at Ballynakilly Wood. According to the text, measuring this tree started the author off on his quest to record Ireland’s champion trees. We have much to thank the Burton Hall Yew for, as the result is this remarkable collection and its unequivocal reminder of how precious – and precarious – these trees really are. As for the yew itself, this fateful meeting with the author is no doubt just one of the many tales it could tell, as it approaches its sixth century of life. We wish it many more.

*Heritage Trees of Ireland* is a great read, a visual treat, and a real credit to all involved.

*Kevin D. Collins*