

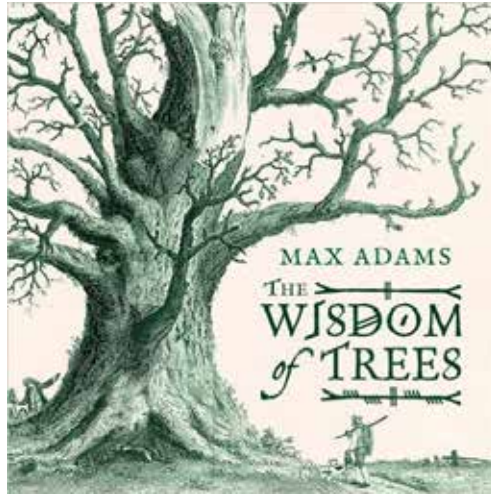
The WISDOM of TREES

Max Adams.

Head of Zeus. 2014.

Hardback. 256 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78185-546-1.

£14.99



The Wisdom of Trees is a fine example of a new genre of book, written by non-foresters for the wider public, which looks at trees from an alternative perspective. The over-riding value of such publications is that they give us foresters a helpful insight into the public's attitude to trees and forests. As trees are the largest living organisms on the planet, people tend to have strongly held views on their presence in the landscape. In recent years, this awareness has been heightened by the media. Furthermore, associated issues such as climate change and tropical deforestation have helped to focus increased attention on trees. The author of this book, Max Adams, is an archaeologist and a teacher of "tree history" and he also manages an area of woodland in County Durham. The author says he named the book *The Wisdom of Trees* not because trees are wise per se, but because we would be wise to learn from them.

It is his contention that trees have an economic value primarily and if we wish to restore the benefits of an active, wooded landscape then our trees and woodlands must provide sustainable economic and social benefits for the inhabitants of this landscape. Many publications in this genre eulogise about the beauty of trees and their undoubted biodiversity value, but fail to adequately recognise their fundamentally important economic values. Adams bemoans the fact that since wood was largely replaced by

metals in the 19th century, it is no longer seen as a strategic resource. In Britain, he says that the overwhelming majority of the broadleaf resource is in private hands and very little of it is managed with a “production” objective. It is timely to ask if we in Ireland will follow a similar path.

The author also questions why there is so little coherent thought given to the issue of what we might do with the trees being planted today, when they mature. Foresters know that over the course of history, trees have been used for many different purposes; indeed this reviewer can recall life without Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF), Oriented Strand Board (OSB), glulam beams and other engineered wood products.

Wearing his archaeologist’s hat, the author postulates on how humans developed over time by learning from the forest. He argues that man learned how to fell trees by observing the beaver at work. We may also have invented the axe and the saw as a result of these observations since both these valuable tools are based on the use of a “tooth”. The beaver also makes dams - useful for diverting streams, catching fish and generally manipulating water flow. The birds showed us how to use twigs as the essence of nest building is the “knitting” of flexible materials to produce a rigid structure. It may sound far fetched but the basket, the hurdle, the mat, the coracle and even our primitive “clay and wattle” hut may have been inspired by the nests of birds. Resins show us the potential for glues, bark and climbers for rope, fruits for nutrition and medicine. Then there is rubber and the paper made by wasps to construct their nests. It is difficult to disagree with his hypothesis. Just think of the many uses to which a child can put a simple stick ...and adults too!

Max Adams argues that trees are very patient but he neglects to emphasise that foresters must also be patient; that we need to take a much longer term view of woodland management. Adams relates the story of the elderly French Marshal who asked his gardener to plant a tree for him. The gardener protested that the tree was slow growing and would not reach maturity for a hundred years. The Marshal interjected “In that case, there is no time to loose; plant it this afternoon!”

Overall this book is a pleasant and interesting read which contains some rare nuggets of information between its covers. Especially noteworthy is his theory that governments tend to worry about trees only in wartime or when trees are dying in great numbers. In other words, governments worry about trees only when it is already too late! Is he correct? I’m afraid he may be but, for all our sakes, I hope he’s not!!

John Mc Loughlin