

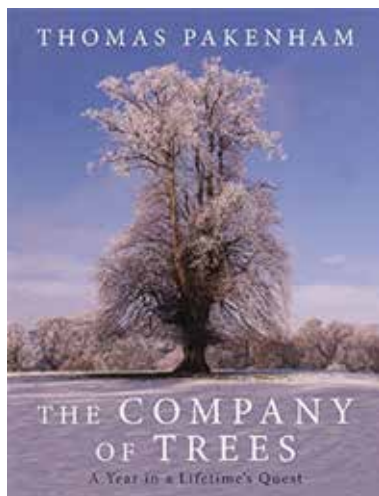
## **The Company of Trees: A Year in a Lifetime's Quest**

Thomas Pakenham

Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2015

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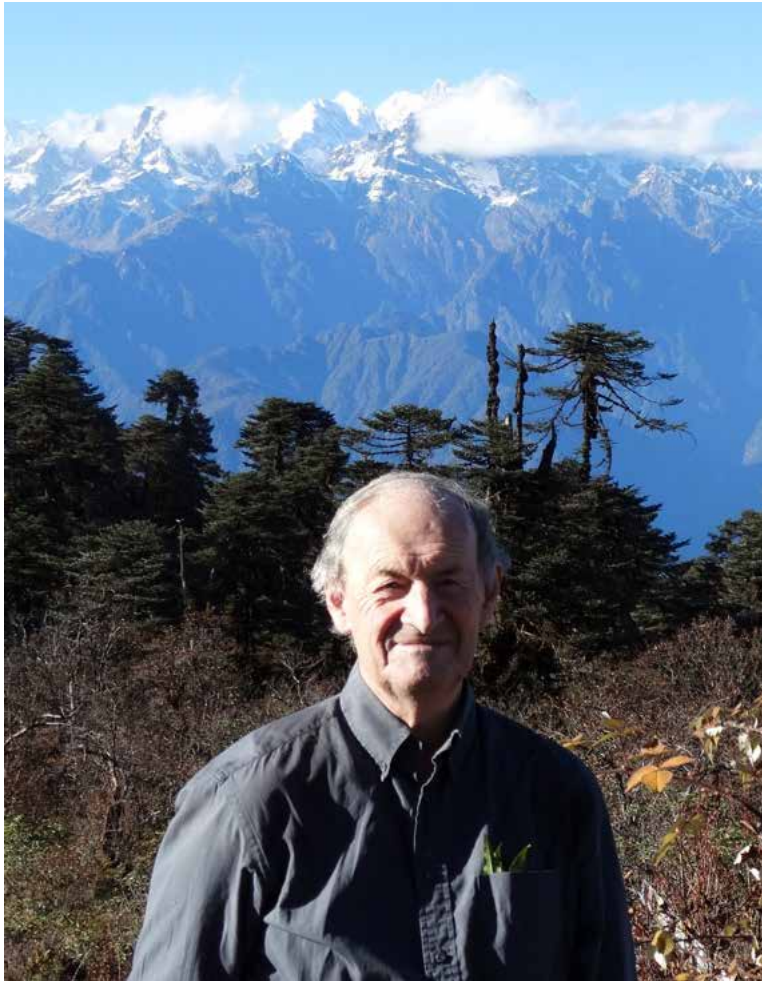
£30



Thomas Pakenham's record on writing best-sellers about trees is well established and further enhanced by his latest venture *The Company of Trees, A Year in a Lifetime's Quest*. A fascinating arboreal love story, told by a man with a passion for trees, plants and exploration, it is a pleasure to read.

Written in the form of a memoir, the book recounts the author's quest to establish an arboretum at Tullynally, just west of Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath, his numerous hazardous seed and plant searching expeditions and his efforts to preserve old trees and historic woodlands. Structured in the form of a travel diary and focusing in particular on 2013, he reflects on travels to far off places in Argentina, China, India and Tibet in search of interesting specimens. Following the footsteps of the renowned plant hunter, Joseph Hooker, he goes in search of the great *Magnolia campbellii* var *alba* in the Himalayas, climbing mountains, including the Nyima La Pass in India, and scrambles through dense forests in all kinds of weather. This forms the agenda for someone so inclined and is all aptly and amusingly described. The author also recounts visits to eastern Patagonia, giving impressions of the remaining Southern beech (*Nothofagus* spp.) forests and the last of the of the giant Monkey Puzzle trees, "a species the Victorians loved and the Edwardians hated". Accounts of these journeys, and the winners and losers in terms of plant survival at Tullynally, add substance to the story with practical lessons for those planting trees. Arising

from his time in the Chilean Andes, the jewel in the crown at Tullyally is now a young attractive specimen of *Fitzroya cupressoides* (Alerce) grown from a cutting, the parent of which is more than two thousand years old. An expedition to Tibet's amazing Tsangpo Gorge, leads to a fruitful exploration of the Rongchu Valley, yielding more than 100 bags of seeds, including the Tibetan golden oak, the Tsangpo cypress and blue-stemmed maples. Seeds from south west China are used to create a Chinese garden following the irregular Sharawadgi design fashionable there in the seventeenth century.



*Thomas Pakenham in Sikkim state in India, with a Himalayan backdrop to enchant any classical plant hunter. The Orion Publishing Group kindly granted permission to use selected pictures from The Company of Trees.*

The ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba* L.) is the author's favourite and there is particular focus on its evolution and history. Referred to in China as a "Duck's foot", or more romantically as the "Grandfather-grandchild tree", its impressive growth rate at Tullyally, as well as that of the Dawn redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* (Hu and W.C. Cheng), are attributed to our warming climate.

Pakenham has great respect for sycamore, "the king of European maples" and is critical of "the ethnic cleansing campaigns" of the "Taliban purists" who seek to denude Ireland's landscape of "alien" plants and trees, including sycamore and beech. In suggesting sycamore may have been introduced in or around the year 1500 or perhaps as far back as one thousand years ago, he disagrees with the policy that species can only be deemed native if they reached the island before the most recent ice age.

The decline of the great demesnes, such as Carton, is lamented. While acknowledging that society and fashions change, their demise and conversion to building sites and golf courses represent an opportunity to learn from the past. Tullyally is to be commended for addressing the challenge of managing the change needed to ensure sustainability. From a forestry viewpoint, this includes an interest in commercial coniferous plantations and a realisation that they form an integral part of the package, affecting the bottom line in a positive manner, thereby enabling essential work to be carried out. The impact of storm damage, climate change, the arrival of pests and diseases, and an almost devastating fire in July 2013 (in which the author almost perished), have all presented considerable challenges and threats to keeping Tullyally. It is heartening to read about how such difficulties are being addressed and surmounted, including even the maintenance of the ancient walls.

Two chapters on determining the age of yew trees and the famous oak woodlands near Shillelagh in Co. Wicklow make interesting reading. Despite visits to a multitude of ancient yews in Britain and Ireland, determining their age remains a problem to be resolved. At Shillelagh, the conservation of the oak woodland at Coolattin caused a political storm in the late 1980's. Thanks to the efforts of the Irish Tree Society and others, part of the woodland at Tomnafinnoge was purchased by Wicklow County Council and set aside for conservation. Uncertainty continues over its age, provenance and timber quality. Nonetheless, a walk through and along the banks of the Derry River, is an excellent way to ponder and wonder.

The book has a good bibliography and index and of course, some colourful and hauntingly beautiful pictures.

*Michael Carey*

Michael Carey is a Forestry and Management Consultant and the author of *If Trees Could Talk - Wicklow's Trees and Woodlands over Four Centuries*.



*An 18<sup>th</sup> century beech in the parkland at Tullynally.*