

The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees

Robert Penn

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Penn, born on the Isle of Man in 1967, says he grew up “under the influence of an ash tree” for there was one at the gate leading from his childhood garden to the fields beyond, where he and his brother played out their fantasies as children. He now lives in a small wood on the edge of the Black Mountains in south Wales.

Before he embarked on writing this book, Robert Penn cut down an ash tree to see how many things could be made from a single tree. After all, he says “ash is the tree we have made the greatest and most varied use of over the course of human history”. Journeying from Wales, across Europe and Ireland, to the USA, Robert finds that the ancient skills and knowledge of the properties of ash, which were developed over millennia making wheels and arrows, furniture and baseball bats, are far from dead. The book chronicles how the urge to understand and appreciate trees still runs through us all “like grain through wood”.

This book was originally published in 2015 by the Particular Book’s Company and it is a testimony to its success that it’s now being published by Penguin

Books. One can only speculate if the publicity surrounding ash die back disease was a factor in its rejuvenation. The author, who developed a love of ash as a child, predicts that all the ash on these islands will have disappeared in 50 years' time. In the meantime, the pathogen that causes ash dieback has been renamed *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (previously known as *Chalara fraxinea*). Hopefully his prognosis is unduly pessimistic as many of the predictions are based on the demise of elm which was largely clonal and thus lacked the genetic diversity of ash. Potentially more damaging to the survival of ash is the emerald ash borer, a beetle that has wreaked havoc on American ash populations and is now beginning to do the same in the UK.

Penn visited Ireland in 2013 and attended the epic All Ireland Hurling Semi Final match between Cork and Dublin. He found the game electric from the throw in and while in Ireland he visited hurley makers and marvelled at their craftsmanship.

He lists the many items made from a single ash tree – desk, toboggan, six axe handles, six maul handles, ten spatulas, canoe paddle, coffee table, chair, two landing net frames, ten three-legged stools, charcoal, and a meat chopping board. The frame of a coracle was also crafted and the list goes on. Even then, it had more to give, including parts of the roof of a 16-foot yurt, a portable, round tent, porridge spoons and bowls, coat hooks, animal bedding, and kindling.

Then there were the felloes (for younger readers, felloes were the outer rim of a wooden cart wheel; they were usually made of ash, the spokes of oak and the central box which housed the axel was of elm). There are plenty of other delightful words from the woodworking lexicon that sound as reliable as the sturdy wood itself: a flitch (a stack of boards cut from the same log), quarrels (a crossbow's projectile), a bloomery (a furnace for roasting iron ore) and fiddleback (a decorative feature in maple wood). In all, he managed to make 44 items from that one tree. Penn doesn't go into the details of every item, but the items he chooses to highlight give the story impetus and energy, and readers are sure to come away with a greater appreciation of trees and of the artisans who craft with wood. Penn spends time with many resolute craftsmen, collecting words and the beautiful products they create for him, but also eloquently making the case for wood as a sustainable material not just of the past, but for the future. Penn says that "part of the attraction of ash is that it was always workman's timber, in contrast to the oak beloved of the aristocracy". Many people believe that the ash should be Ireland's National Tree rather than the sessile oak.

This enthusiastic tale of nature, human ingenuity and the pleasure of making things by hand records how the urge to understand and appreciate trees still runs deeply through us all like "grain through wood".

Robert Penn is an author, journalist and TV presenter. Robert wrote and presented *Tales from the Wild Wood*, a TV series about British woodlands. In 2011 he wrote *It's all about the Bike – The Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels*, which has since been translated into thirteen languages. He writes for the *Financial Times*, *Observer* and *Condé Nast Traveller*, as well as a host of cycling publications.

John Mc Loughlin