

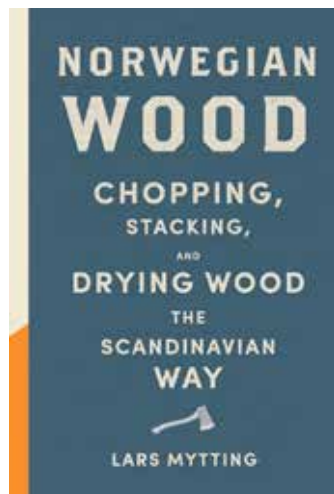
## **Norwegian Wood – Chopping, Stacking and Drying Wood the Scandinavian Way**

Lars Mytting

MacLehose Press. 2016

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£20



It's hard to believe that a book on firewood could end up as Non-Fiction Book of the Year in 2016. It is written by a Norwegian, Lars Mytting, who previously worked as a journalist and non-fiction editor before turning to writing. He shares a Scandinavian passion for wood harvesting, stacking, storing and burning, combining cultural history and folklore with modern science. Entertaining and instructive, *Norwegian Wood* delivers a wealth of advice and technical know-how for the armchair reader and for those outdoors. He provides some fascinating facts, for example Norwegians use 1.5 million tonnes of logs annually. Assuming each log is a foot long and the pile is 6.5 feet high, it would stretch for 4,474 miles i.e. from Oslo to the Congo.

In Norway this book sold over 300,000 copies. It has been translated into ten languages and it is now widely available in most book shops here and in Britain. It was featured on Chris Evans's Breakfast Show on BBC Radio 2 and was BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week. What could have brought about such a degree of enthusiasm for wood chopping? Is it a return to nature or is it a response to climate change? I'm afraid the answer is not to be found in the book, apart from telling us that our relationship to fire is so ancient, so universal, that it seems that in learning

about wood, one can also learn about life.

Irish visitors to the Nordic countries and Central Europe marvel at the neat stacks of woods at every house. The author tells us that in the past, single women eyed-up these stacks to see if the man would make a good husband! Lars tells us the late spring is the time to gather and bring in firewood for the following winter. It seems in these very organised societies everybody does the same thing at the same time. Here we tend to be a “just in time” society, oblivious to the damage wet logs do in the long term to our chimneys.

Mytting claims that chopping and stacking wood is a pastime where the world makes sense once more. The book gives us a definitive answer on a topic so often discussed at Irish firesides, namely which timber burns best? He quotes from none other than the Norwegian Forest and Landscape Institute and the following is a list of the top ten in ascending order; beech, oak, ash, elm, rowan, birch, pine, willow, aspen and spruce. He prefers to leave alder for the beavers “to play with”! And who better to impart this wisdom than an expert from Scandinavia, where the extreme climate has obliged generations to hone and share their skills with tools, wood working and heat production. It is not surprising that people who live in cold climates are organised and disciplined because it has been a necessity to ensure survival. People in warmer climates do not have to plan for extremes and with them it’s every-day-as-it-comes. Lars Mytting has distilled the wisdom of enthusiasts, from experienced lifelong growers, stackers and burners, to researchers and professionals of combustion and silviculture.

Part guide to the best practice in every aspect of working with this renewable energy source, part meditation on the human instinct for survival, this definitive handbook on the art of chopping, stacking and drying wood in the Scandinavian way has resonated across the world. There is advice on coppicing, the best species, best axes and best chainsaws -even the best chopping blocks. Needless to say there’s a chapter on stoves with advice on the best Nordic makes and models.

Apparently in 2013 Norwegian Television, obviously prompted by the success of the book, ran 12 hours of programming on various aspects of wood as part of its experiments in “slow television”. They produced a similar television programme with a camera mounted on the front of a train which ran for hours. I just hope the phenomenon doesn’t catch on here!

At the beginning of the book there are some evocative lines from a famous Norwegian poet, who was also a lumberjack.

The scent of fresh wood  
is among the last things you will forget  
when the veil falls.  
The scent of fresh white wood  
in the spring sap time:  
as though life itself walked by you,  
with dew in its hair.  
That sweet and naked smell  
kneeling woman-soft and blond  
in the silence inside you,  
using your bones for  
a willow flute.  
With the hard frost beneath your tongue  
you look for the fire to light a word,  
and know, mild as southern wind in the mind,  
there is still one thing in the world  
you can trust.

Hans Børli

I think I should leave the last word to Einstein who was alleged to have said “People love chopping wood. In this activity one immediately sees results” and it’s hard to disagree with him. Norwegian Wood is the perfect fireside read.

*John Mc Loughlin*  
*Business Editor, Society of Irish Foresters &*  
*Chairman, Tree Register of Ireland*