

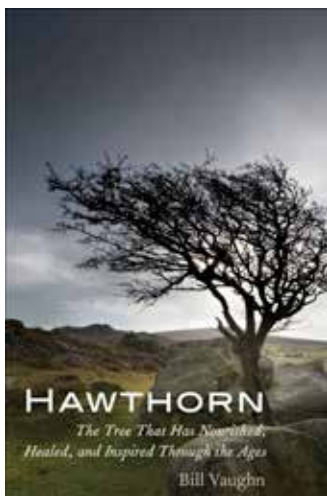
Hawthorn – The Tree That Has Nourished, Healed and Inspired throughout the Ages

Bill Vaughan

Yale University Press. 2016

272 pages. Paperback. ISBN: 9780300203493

£14.99



As a forester I have taken little interest in the hawthorn apart from admiring its profusion of white flowers at the beginning of summer, especially in the drumlin region. Since my youth I have been aware of the superstitions attached to the cutting-down of a lone hawthorn. Indeed, I recall the late Peter Danaher, Chief Archaeologist in the then OPW, stating that the widely held fear of cutting down or destroying hawthorn bushes saved huge numbers of ring forts from destruction when mechanised land reclamation became prevalent in Ireland. Even in recent years, the route of a major dual carriageway in Co. Clare was altered to avoid a “fairy hawthorn” which stood in the path of the original design. Indeed, it is alleged that the removal of hawthorn to accommodate the DeLorean car factory at Dunmurry near Belfast hastened the demise of the project. Ironically that facility was designed by the firm of Brodie and Hawthorn Architects, Belfast.

Possibly the most surprising thing about this book is that it was written at all. Few would believe that a full 272 pages could be devoted to this single species. In this book the author, Bill Vaughan, has cleverly juxtaposed his family’s history in Ireland and in America with the species. His great grandfather, Thomas Moran, was born near Rathgormack, Co. Waterford in 1838. Like many thousands of his

contemporaries, he was forced to emigrate to America, where he became the owner of a large farm in the state of Montana which had a profusion of hawthorn. His narrative has a broad embrace which encompasses interesting detail on the Great Famine, the Irish land tenure system and emigration. The book is a hugely original work, which isn't surprising since it was penned by an author who writes for many publications on topics as wide-ranging as sport, the paper industry, fashion and the cattle business.

Bill Vaughan mentions the presence of hawthorn in Europe, America, India, Australia and New Zealand. In his fine book entitled *Trees of Britain and Northern Europe* Alan Mitchell unravels the almost global nature of the species. He explains that our hawthorn is native to Europe and extends as far east as Afghanistan. North America, he tells us, has almost 1,000 species of hawthorn (including one named after the famous plant hunter, David Douglas) and there are 90 species in Europe and Asia. They are generally shrubs but our native species has aspirations to a tree form. The red-flowered varieties of hawthorn, often seen in towns and urban parks, are American varieties and hybrids.

Ireland is rightly famed for its hedgerows; it is estimated that there are 250,000 miles of hedgerows in Ireland with hawthorn being the predominant species. Many of these hedgerows are ancient and some form townland boundaries. However, without continuous maintenance they quickly degenerate becoming ragged and incapable of the purpose for which they were planted, namely to control the movements of large animals and also to keep them sheltered and secure. Many Irish hedgerows are currently in a state of advanced disrepair, but as always with nature, they can be restored with judicious shaping, pruning and layering - a technique that had virtually died out but is now coming back into vogue. Until the arrival of barbed wire, which emulates the thorns of the hawthorn, a living hedge was an agricultural necessity - as essential as a horse and plough.

In northern France, the hedges of Normandy (brocage in French) proved an impenetrable barrier to the Allied forces in 1944 until the Americans developed a blade at the front of tanks that allowed them to drive through them. These hedges are much wider than hedges on these islands as they were originally planted for firewood. They were known as "peasants' forests" and hawthorn became an important element of their understory.

It is said of George Washington, America's first president, that his real ambition was not to lead a great country, but to become a farmer. On his estate at Mount Vernon, Virginia he devoted much of his time to developing hedgerows including the importation of 5,000 saplings of *Cretagus monogyna* from England. Thomas Jefferson also worked on developing hedging on his estate at Monticello, Virginia. However, neither Washington nor Jefferson enjoyed great success with *Cretagus monogyna* because of the persistent summer droughts but it does grow well in other states of the Union.

Hawthorn species from Europe were transported across the globe by imperialist nations. The author points out “as the English colonised the world that was new to them, they brought along with them their love of gin, their contempt for the natives, and their diseases”. This goes some way to explaining how the European hawthorn ended up in Tasmania where it was used to create hedges. Similarly it was introduced to Australia and New Zealand where it is now regarded as a noxious weed in some parts of these states. In the 19th Century, the British planted 2,500 miles of impenetrable hedge across India and patrolled it with 14,000 enlisted men to ensure collection of the notorious “salt tax”. Indeed, this hated tax was not repealed until 1946.

Vaughan’s book gives a wonderful insight into a species that has received scant attention heretofore despite its exerting a far reaching impact on the course of history. Just consider the tree, which was once an icon of paganism, but later became an object of veneration by Christianity as it sought to eclipse the “old” religion. This tree is a mass of paradoxes, perhaps best illustrated by the old Irish saying “when all fruits fail, welcome haw”.

John Mc Loughlin