

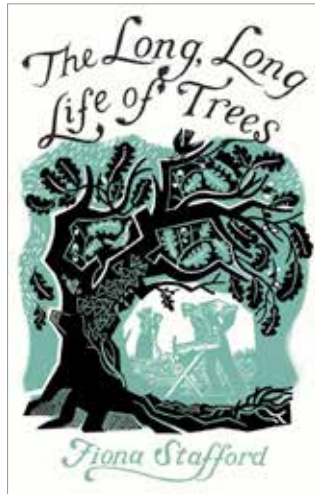
The Long, Long Life of Trees

Fiona Stafford

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In this volume, with 60 black and white illustrations, Fiona Stafford offers intimate, detailed explorations of seventeen common trees from ash and apple to pine, oak, cypress and willow. It is not just about the bucolic aspects of trees but it discusses past and present practical uses of wood, tree diseases and the environmental threats. She discusses trees' potential contributions toward slowing global climate change.

The book is a personal commentary of the author's love and appreciation of trees, coupled with fascinating examples of how trees have featured in history, art, commerce, culture and folklore. The author, Fiona Stafford is professor of English at the University of Oxford where she teaches literature. She is the author and presenter of the highly acclaimed *The Meaning of Trees* for BBC Radio 3's The Essay.

She creates a delightful palimpsest with poets, prose writers and painters and she includes quotes from Coleridge, Dante, Robert Frost, Thomas Gray, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Shelly, Tennyson, and Sylvia Plath among others. She introduces painters too into her narrative with Cezanne, van Gogh and Monet. Liberal references from the Greek and Roman legends also abound in the work.

In her chapter on cypress she discusses the problem in Britain with Leyland cypress and how it has caused neighbours to fight and end-up in court. She illustrates

this with an example of the behaviour of a Lincolnshire pensioner who decided to deal with his neighbour's bushy row of Leylands by secretly relieving himself underneath at night time. It was a slow, rather smelly death and would have been the perfect murder if only it hadn't been caught on camera! Unfortunately she doesn't say what happened next!

From her chapter on oak I learned that it is the national tree of Britain, as it is here. What I didn't know is that it is also the national tree of Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia and the USA and we thought we were being original!

In her chapter on ash she quotes from the great botanist Oliver Rackham who in his last book, completed before his death in 2014, said "he casts a cold eye over the panic reports of the likely effects of ash dieback, observing that by the time people have noticed the presence of the deadly plant disease it is too late to take action; the latest year to react to Chalara was 1995". In an effort to cheer us up we learn that the next threat is likely to be the emerald ash borer beetle which has already devastated ash across the US and Siberia. In an era of globalisation, its arrival here is almost unavoidable. Hurling fans will be bemused to find that there is not a single reference to the cumán in the entire chapter!

In the chapter on apples her knowledge of pomology is astounding and in the poplar chapter she tells us that in 2006 the Californian poplar *Populus trichocarpa* was the first tree to have its entire DNA mapped, which will provide information about the gene structure of trees leading to more practical experiments on tree breeding.

On the holly she has a nice piece on the misnaming of different varieties, "Golden Queen" and "Silver Queen" are male whereas "Golden King" and "Silver Milkboy" are female. She reminds us that mature hollies do not take well to transplanting and she points out that hollies are happiest when they have space to grow outwards.

On the chapter on sycamore, which may well be a replacement for ash, she sings the praises of the species which has suffered a bad press, with gardeners often accusing the tree of being a profusion of too much sap and too many leaves. At every turn the rude health and vigour of this species seems to count against it!

On the chapter on birch she says that its therapeutic benefits are enjoying a revival. Even as far back as John Evelyn's time when he praises a birch concoction (pardon the expression) as "a great opener" and recommended it for pulmonary complaints and piles.

On the horse chestnut she tells a very poignant tale from Ann Frank's diary, about how she wrote of the greenness of the leaves and the presence of the flowers of a particular tree and then within three months, the Frank family were betrayed to the Nazis and died in Bergen-Belsen only weeks before the war ended. That chestnut became a shrine, but in 2007 the city fathers in Amsterdam decided to issue a felling

notice. There was such a public outcry that it got a reprieve and remedial action was taken, however it succumbed to a severe gale in 2010 and cuttings of the Ann Frank chestnut have gone all over the world. The horse chestnut is another species heading for trouble with a plethora of diseases and insects threatening on the horizon.

In the pine chapter she deals with our fear of dark woods, when young we had tales of *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Vast pine forests feature in many of these tales and even though the story ends happily, it leaves a dim sense of some terrible menace lurking within the evergreens. Add to this concoction the presence of bears and wolves and it's easy to understand how people seem to fear conifer plantations.

There are niggly mistakes in the text, like *craoibh*, which she says is the Irish for tree, it is of course the Irish for a branch of a tree. The Irish for tree is *crann*, a quick Google-translate would have sorted that out. Nor will the Icelandic Forestry Service be too pleased when she says "Inspired by old Norse literature, I travelled to Iceland and found not a single tree in the entire country". She has a reference to Tim Robinson's account of Connemara but there is no sign of the source in the reference list.

Her reference list for Ireland is very sparse on woodland literature although there are literary references. However, she does manage one gem, apparently a royal medal was struck with Oliver Cromwell on one side and an olive branch on the other and she comments "for many in Ireland Cromwell's olive branch seemed grotesquely distorted"!

Overall this book has a very different and erudite way of looking at the trees that we come across every day and is a charming read.

John Mc Loughlin