

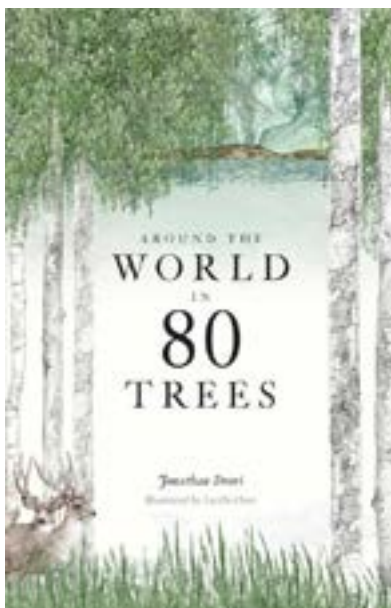
Around the World in 80 Trees

Jonathan Drori. Illustrations by Lucille Clerc

Laurence King. 2018

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This book, written by former BBC documentary filmmaker Jonathan Drori with illustrations by French artist Lucille Clerc, takes us around the world on a fascinating journey of discovery in which we meet trees of every variety. A lifelong nature lover who grew up close to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, Drori says he chose the 80 trees he profiles “for their interest and their diversity”. In the course of this global odyssey, the reader is continually surprised, and sometimes shocked, by the quirky rationale which governs his selection of arboreal national representatives.

Let us begin in Ireland, and here we get our first surprise. The tree which represents our country is the strawberry tree. It was chosen for its unique natural range in Co. Kerry where it presides “exotic and glamorous”. On our neighbouring island he nominates the London plane, “a tree of pomp and circumstance” to represent England. There it was planted throughout the capital during the 19th century to complement its “imposing squares and thoroughfares” and now it is as much part of London’s architecture as its buildings. Brief and accessible chapters, usually no more than one or

two pages each, focus on such trees as the Leyland cypress – slim, upright and planted primarily to create privacy – few other trees have created so much controversy. Today there are more than 55 million Leyland cypress trees in Britain, making it is likely to outnumber humans early in the coming decade!

While you might expect Scots pine to represent Scotland, he has chosen the rowan tree instead. In fact, Scots pine is absent from his list. Equally, one might expect Norway spruce to represent Norway but it represents Italy because the makers of Stradivari and Guarneri violins used Norway spruce grown slowly on the Italian Alps, a daytrip from their workshops in Cremona. Italy also has alder and he describes how Venice is built on alder piles. Surprisingly, the heavily forested Nordic countries, apart from Finland which is represented by silver birch, do not feature at all.

France is represented by European box and sweet chestnut, Portugal gets cork oak, Spain gets holm oak, Germany beech and lime while Ukraine is given the horse chestnut. Kazakhstan is represented by wild apple and Siberia by Siberian larch.

Journeying onwards to the Middle East we meet the cedar for Lebanon and *Cupressus sempervirens* for Cyprus which is named after the tree. The fig is the tree for Turkey and quince for Crete - even though Turkey produces most of the world's quince. The olive he presents to Israel, although several Mediterranean countries could take the honour. Moving further east there is pomegranate for Iran, a delicious fruit which is difficult to extract from its shell. Yemen has dragon's blood *Dracaena cinnabari*.

For Africa we have the baobab in Botswana and frankincense in Somalia. Frankincense and myrrh (another local tree resin) were valuable trading commodities since earliest times. These resins were scraped from trees for at least five millennia.

Moving across to Asia, Szechuan pepper *Zanthoxylum simulans* and white mulberry *Morus alba* represent China while the sacred fig *Ficus religiosa* represents India. As expected, Japan is accorded the cherry. Rubber *Hevea brasiliensis* represents Thailand - even though it is a native of the Amazon region of Brazil. Rubber is now big business and almost half of all the rubber produced globally still comes from trees. However, it comes at a huge price as the plantations impact on the fragile ecosystems. On the other hand, the factories that manufacture synthetic rubber rely on highly polluting raw materials. Either route consumes a lot of energy and water but the market continues to cry out for car tyres and a myriad of other rubber products.

For Australia we are introduced to eucalyptus and the recently discovered Wollemi pine, *Wollemi nobilis*. For New Zealand we get kauri, *Agathis australis*. The antipodean counterpart of the Californian coastal redwood, this tree is confined to the north-eastern tip of New Zealand where it routinely grows to a height of 45 metres.

Journeying onwards to South America, he nominates the monkey puzzle to represent Chile and jacaranda *Jacaranda mimosifolia* for Argentina, a magnificent tree

which now grows in subtropical and warmer temperate cities. For almost two months each year, this tree is blanketed with clusters of lavender blue trumpets which, as the author says, “compels the gaze and lifts the spirits”. It is also found in Mediterranean countries and abundantly in South Africa. Quinine is the national tree of Peru and Ecuador. Its claim to fame is the effectiveness of its bark in the treatment of malaria. The early Jesuit missionaries in South America was credited with introducing the fabled medicinal qualities of its bark to Europe, where it was known as “Jesuit bark”. However, because of its association with the Jesuits this powerful remedy was regarded with suspicion by Protestants. Oliver Cromwell is reputed to have died from malaria rather than take “the power of the devil”!

Moving on to Central America we come upon *Lignum vitae* from The Bahamas and *Persea americana* (avocado) from Mexico. Although one of the most nutritious and widely known fruits today, the avocado was a recent introduction to many palates as it did not make its way to California and Florida until the late 19th century. Central American Indians referred to it as the “testicle tree” possibly because the fruits hung in pairs. In 1672, William Hughes, an English horticultural writer, enthused that “it nourishes and strengthens the body....procuring lust exceedingly”. Spanish monks apparently came to the same conclusion and banned it from their monastery gardens. In a stroke of marketing genius, growers denied the rumours of lust-inducing qualities thereby stoking rampant desire, at least for the fruit!

Finally, we arrive in North America where the trees become familiar again with lodgepole pine, maple and western hemlock for Canada while coast redwood, aspen, black walnut, eastern white pine and swamp cypress represent the USAand not a Sitka spruce in sight!

In summary, our knowledgeable guide leads us on a fascinating journey through all the continents save Antarctica. Complementing Drori’s easily readable text, Lucille Clerc’s meticulous drawings provide a level of detail which surpasses many photographs. Overflowing with arcane details and interesting anecdotes, this book deserves to fly off the shelves in the annual scramble for Christmas presents.

John Mc Loughlin