

**See the Wood from the Trees  
The Story of Storm-felled Timber Gifted  
to GMIT Letterfrack from Áras an Úachtaráin**

Marion McGarry and Dermot O'Donovan

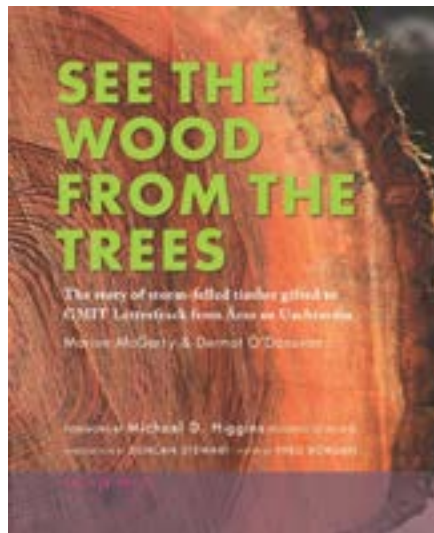
Artisan House. 2018

160 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-912465-02-6

€30

(special limited edition €75)

(deluxe collector's limited edition with slipcase €250)



Serious storm damage to woodland and individual trees is well documented in Ireland especially since the Night of the Big Wind (*Oíche na Gaoithe Móire*) in 1839 and the storm of 1903 which wreaked havoc on the few remaining woodlands dotted around the Irish countryside. The 1903 storm left a lasting impression on W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. Yeats wrote about the destruction of Coole Park woodland, the inspiration for his series of poems *The Shadowy Waters* and *In the Seven Woods*, while Joyce recalled the storm from Trieste when writing *Ulysses*. He refers to the damage caused to trees in the Phoenix Park as “the big wind of last February a year that did havoc the land so pitifully.”

More recently, tree damage was caused in winter storms beginning in 2013 and culminating in Storm Darwin on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014. Unlike the 1903 storm when little

more than one percent of the land was under trees, Ireland now has 11% forest cover and while damage caused by wind has environmental and economic ramifications, the forestry and forest products sector can withstand intermittent windthrow. The market is sufficiently robust to cater for the extra material from productive commercial, mainly coniferous forests. The marketplace in Ireland for non-commercial forests such as small woodlands and individual trees is fragmented and as a result, much of the material ends up as firewood.

Over a century after the storm of 1903, a number of trees suffered windthrow again in the Phoenix Park, including trees dating to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the trees that were probably planted after the 1903 storm. When President Michael D. Higgins surveyed the damage caused to trees in the grounds of Áras an Úachtaráin in 2013, while saddened by their loss, he instinctively believed that they had much greater value than firewood. His frequent visits to GMIT Letterfrack, the National Centre for Excellence in Furniture Design and Technology, convinced him that the new wave of designers could turn these blown trees into “functional and imaginative furniture.” So began a creative partnership between Áras an Úachtaráin and GMIT Letterfrack, which is documented by Marion McGarry and Dermot O’Donovan in *See the Wood from the Trees: The Story of Storm-felled Timber Gifted to GMIT Letterfrack from Áras and Úachtaráin*.

Mature oak, ash and beech were transported from the Áras to Letterfrack, where innovative students and graduates provided a new lease of life to the windblown trees. The authors, with glorious free rein, have used the opportunity to explore wood as a functional, creative and artistic medium.

The key actors are the Letterfrack woodworkers and designers who turn the wood into furniture, artefacts, sculpture and other items. This creative process inspires not only the authors but three other contributors to provide their own unique contributions. The authors chose a president, poet and an environmentalist to provide their own insights. President Higgins, who explores the project in his essay and foreword “Innovation and Artistic Freedom” is clearly proud of the collaboration which has served Letterfrack and the Áras well. Items created from the damaged trees have been presented by President Higgins to Heads of State, including Pope Francis and Prince Charles, while prominent Letterfrack furniture in the Áras includes the Presidential Inauguration Chair and lecterns. President Higgins describes these pieces as “portals of the past” and:

...objects which speak of how the best art is that which is shaped by circumstance and context; that which survives and lives on, occupying new spaces and enabling reinterpretation, while remaining profoundly connected to a common and shared heritage.

McGarry and O’Donovan provide space for Duncan Stewart, architect and environmentalist to explore the importance of trees in the environment and their role

in climate change mitigation, while a connection is made with forests past through the eyes of the poet Theo Dorgan. His 18-quatrain poem assigns a tree or plant to represent letters of the Irish Gaelic alphabet. While some scholars claim that as few as eight letters were associated with tree names, Dorgan has poetry and heritage on his side. “The Farmleigh Tree Alphabet” echoes Sweeney’s sylvan roll-call in *Buile Suibhne* and the Old Irish Tree List from *Bretha Comaithchesa* (Laws of the Neighbourhood).

McGarry and O’Donovan provide context through a series of interlinked chapters including, a brief history of forestry in Ireland, the heritage trees in Áras an Uachtaráin and the act of converting blown trees to sawn kiln-dried planks before being transformed into an exciting range of functional and sculptural objects (Figure 1). This is where innovation and creativity meet hard-won craft and commerciality. While the authors place strong emphasis on the heritage, craft, design and aesthetics of wood, they remind us that the making of diverse pieces requires great skill and expertise to ensure that the woodworker and designer are at one in the process of creating and making, and ultimately the marketing and selling of the finished product.

While the authors and contributors deserve accolades for capturing a story of renewal with flair, *See the Wood from the Trees* is also beautifully illustrated and designed by the team at Artisan House Publishing. Along with their photographers and illustrators, they have provided the text and imagery to showcase trees and wood as sources of inspiration and as President Higgins writes “...great symbol[s] of endurance.”

*Donal Magner*



**Figure 1:** *Bench 72*, by Conor Sweeney, GMT Letterfrack. Traditional telephone seat made from home-grown oak with upholstered seat. Photograph Aoife Herriott.