

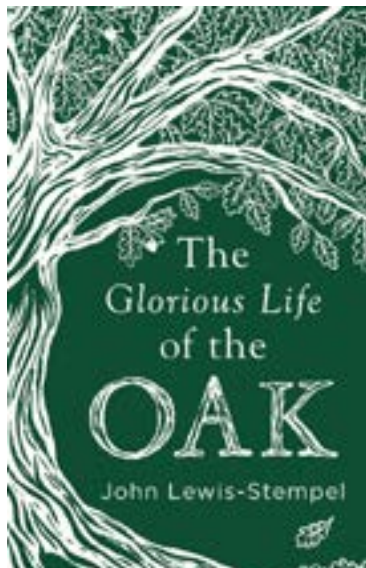
## **The Glorious Life of the Oak**

John Lewis-Stempel

Doubleday. 2018

88 pages. Hard back. ISBN 978-085-752-5819

€10.99



The second book by John Lewis-Stempel to be reviewed in this issue of *Irish Forestry*, *The Glorious Life of the Oak* as the title suggests deals exclusively with the oak - Britain's most beloved and most common tree. While the oak features prominently in all major European cultures, it is in Britain that it reigns supreme. In fact, Britain has more ancient oaks than all other European countries combined and more than half the ancient oaks on the planet are found in Britain. The author points out that the British believe oak is special to them and to them alone. This may upset the United States whose Congress passed legislation in 2004 nominating the oak as America's national tree. Indeed, the oak is the national tree of several European countries, including Ireland.

Our ancestors – the Angles, Saxons and Norse – came to these islands in longships made of oak. For centuries the oak touched every part of a Briton's life - from the cradle to the coffin. It was the oak that formed the sturdy “wooden walls” of Nelson's navy – a navy that once allowed Britain to rule the world. Even in the digital age, oak carries real resonance for the word itself speaks of fortitude, antiquity and pastoralism.

*The Glorious Life of the Oak* explores England's long relationship with this iconic tree; it considers the life-cycle of the oak, the flora and fauna which depend on it, the oak as a provider of medicine, food and drink, the location of Britain's mightiest oaks and concludes with several stories of the oak from folklore, myth and legend.

This informative book features several poems about the oak. Even our own George Bernard Shaw was inspired to write a poem about the oak tree.

I took an acorn and put it in a pot.  
I covered it with earth, not a lot.  
Great pleasure was mine watching it grow  
The first budding green was ever so slow.....

The Welsh poet and writer, W.H. Davies, who passed much of his life as a tramp wandering through Britain and the United States, gave us this hauntingly beautiful poem entitled "Leisure."

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

He also penned "The Old Oak tree."

I sit beneath your leaves, old oak,  
You mighty one of all the trees;  
Within whose hollow trunk a man  
Could stable his horse with ease.

Moving on, it is small wonder that oak decreased so rapidly on these islands as the author estimates that the construction of a typical Elizabethan farmhouse required 330 oak trees. At least 700 oak trees were used in making the roof of Norwich Cathedral and 600 oak trees on the roof of Westminster Hall. But it was England's warships that really devoured oak trees - the author estimates that at least 3,000 trees were required to build each vessel.

John Lewis-Stempel presents the life cycle of the oak tree and deals with the many threats from new diseases and insects. He suggests that most acorns never get a chance to germinate as they are eaten by mice, squirrels, pheasants, wild duck (surprisingly), voles, deer, rooks and wood-pigeon who can consume 100 in a day. The handsome jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) is particularly partial to acorns; hence the second part of the birds' scientific name *glandarius*, which translates as "eating acorns". However, ending on a positive note, he contends the oak still remains easy to grow from acorns.

There is a particularly informative chapter in this book which deals with the use of oak for food and medicine. He gives the example of Germany during World War II where acorns were ground to make ersatz coffee. There is even a recipe in the book

for oak leaf wine! He also includes an interesting chapter on oak in folklore, myth and legend and a timeline on oak since 7000 BC.

Although beautifully presented in an impressive cover, for a tree which is of such deep cultural significance to Britain, it is a pity that this book is so short – a mere 88 pages.

I will leave the final words of this review to John Evelyn, the great English writer, gardener and diarist, who in his celebrated book *Sylva* (1664) states: “as long as the lion holds his place as king of beasts, and the eagle as king of birds, the sovereignty of British trees must remain with the oak”. Sovereignty remains a potent rallying call for Britons today – 354 years later.

*John Mc Loughlin*