

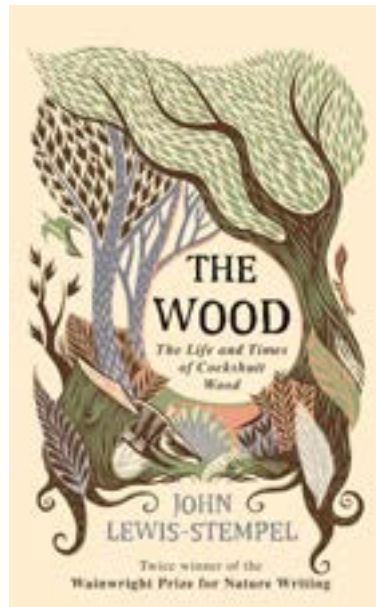
The Wood **The Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood**

John Lewis-Stempel

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This book featured on BBC Radio 4's *Book of the Week* earlier this year, an interesting reflection of the times we live in. When I began my forestry career fifty years ago, one could not imagine that a book on woods and trees would ever be considered so mainstream. In those days the only books about trees and woodlands were serious (and often dull) text books.

This book, which was written by John Lewis-Stempel, twice a winner of the Wainwright Prize for Nature, is essentially the story of managing a wood in the old style. John coppiced the trees and let his cattle and pigs run free. It is a keenly observed and delightfully recorded diary of the woodland's annual cycle, beginning in December. Known by its ancient name of Cockshutt Wood, the author has acquired an intimate acquaintance with his woodland, from the bottom of its beech roots to the tip of its oaks. His familiarity with this wood extended even to the animals which sought refuge and sustenance therein. For many flora and fauna, woods similar to Cockshutt

Wood are their last remaining refuge. In essence, *The Wood* is the story of English woodlands as they change with the seasons. Lyrical and informative, steeped in poetry and folklore, *The Wood* inhabits the mind and touches the soul.

In our contented traipsing through its pages we encounter an impressive array of terminology relating to woods and forests. Just like the flora and fauna of Cockshutt Wood, many of the quaint terms used are themselves in grave danger of extinction. The author says he came late to woods although his paternal great grandfather was a “reeve”, an ancient appellation meaning manager, of woodland for Barts Hospital Estate.

Of particular interest is his list of the collective nouns for trees which are used in Britain:

Bake - a clump of shrubs;

Coombe - the head of a wood in a valley;

Coppice - an area cut regularly for wood or fodder;

Copse - an area of woodland half an acre or less;

Covert - a dense group of trees connected with game rearing;

Dingle - a deep wooded valley;

Grove - group of trees *without undergrowth*;

Hagg - a small group of trees;

Hanger - a wood at the top of a rise;

Plantation - an area of artificially regenerated woodland, composed mainly of conifers;

Spinney - a copse of mainly thorny shrubs;

Thicket - a dense growth of shrubs and briars;

Wood - this is used interchangeably with woodland to describe an area larger than a copse but smaller than a forest.

He includes a note on woodland terminology in which he remarks that in modern English, the words “wood” and “forest” are used interchangeably, and he bemoans the loss of any clear definition of forest in the English language. In Ireland, on the other hand, we are not burdened with such difficulties. Instead, we use a much more straightforward way of describing forested land; it is simply called forestry or more commonly “the forestry”. I recently heard a radio interview with a Wicklow farmer who lamented that deer damage was terrible in his area because there were “five forestries” close by.

Like the French *forêt*, the English word forest has its roots in the Medieval Latin *foresta*, which means outside ordinary jurisdiction and subject to a separate “forest law”. The entire body of forest law was primarily designed to protect the forest so that it could provide game for the king’s table.

In a hugely informative section of this book, John Lewis-Stempel explains several of our “old sayings”, for example “by hook or by crook” comes to us from the Middle

Ages when villagers were allowed to take only deadwood from the king's forest, i.e. only that amount of fallen timber which could be pulled out or extracted with a shepherd's crook or with a weeding hook.

The author also treats us to some interesting folklore on weather, as in, "oak before ash, in for a splash" and "ash before oak, in for a soak." There is also a verse about personal safety during thunderstorms:

Beware of the oak, as it draws the stroke,
And avoid the ash, as it counts the flash,
Best creep neath the thorn, as it will keep you from all harm.

To read *The Wood* is to meander amongst its trees as the seasons change, following an easy path until suddenly the view is broken by a screen of leaves, or your foot catches on a root, or a bird startles overhead. Without doubt, this is a wood you will never want to leave.

John Mc Loughlin