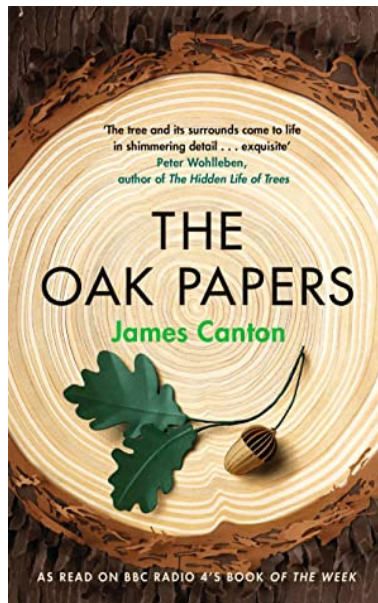


## The Oak Papers

James Canton  
Canongate Books Ltd. 2020.  
237 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978 1 83885 150 7.  
€15



This book is a very quirky read. When the author's relationship breaks down, he spends much time during the following two years in the company of an 800-year-old oak (The Honywood Oak) which grows on the Marks Hall Estate, near his home in north Essex. The book was recently selected as BBC Radio 4's "Book of the Week". The author, Dr James Canton, has thought the MA in Wild Writing at the University of Essex since its inception in 2009, exploring the ties between literature, landscape and the environment. He is the author of *Ancient Wonderings: Journeys into Prehistoric Britain and Out of Essex: Re-Imagining a Literary Landscape*, which was inspired by his rural wanderings in East Anglia. Dr. Canton has reviewed for the Times Literary Supplement, Caught by the River and Earthlines, he has appeared on radio and television and regularly presents talks and workshops throughout the UK.

He spent two years sitting with and studying the Honywood Oak, contemplating humanity's connection to this mighty tree. He treats the tree like a close friend, not alone does he observe the tree, but also all the flora and fauna associated with it. He is worried that the tree, the only one of several thousand in the area, will be hit by sudden oak death

*Phytophthora ramorum*. He spends some time focusing on the moths associated with oaks, delighting in the glory of their titles, names such as: gypsy, black arches, scarce dagger, sprawler, clouded drab, twin spotted Quaker, lobster, lesser satin, vapourer, pale tussock, grey shoulder-knot, dark crimson, underwing, light crimson underwing. Now a colossus of a tree, the Honeywood Oak was just a sapling when the *Magna Carta* was signed in June 1215. Inevitably, he needs to slow down in order to appreciate it fully, to tune in to its gentler time frame, to connect with the ecosystem that lives around, inside and beneath it.

He considers in depth our long-standing dependency on oak trees and how that has developed and morphed into myth and legend. We no longer build our houses and ships from oak, rely on it to fuel our fires or grind acorns into flour in times of famine: we don't need them in the same way now. Yet on another level we still lean on oak trees. In ways we do not fully understand, we need them nowadays more than ever.

The text is interspersed with poetry and prose from many well-known writers, including Louis Mac Niece's poem "Woods"

"They are not like the wilds of Mayo, they are assured  
Of their place by men; reprieved from the Neolithic night"

There are quotes from Shakespeare, Kipling, Robert Graves, D.H. Laurence, W.H. Davies, Spencer, Thomas Hardy and Daniel Defoe.

Wherever oak trees grow on this planet, people have developed a special connection with them, he argues. Throughout human history particular oak trees have been favoured – for their setting, for their age and size. Ancient oaks have always been special, drawing people to gather beneath their spreading boughs. He argues that while we humans are creatures of movement, oaks are static beings, they do not shift. They are born and die on the same small patch of earth. Perhaps it is this surefootedness that is so appealing to us in our hectic, constantly changing world. Ancient oaks exude an impressive sense of longevity, security and calmness, of attachment to a place across time and this enchants and attracts us.

This book is a marvel and one must admire the skill of an author who manages to script 237 pages on a single tree species. The book is very philosophical and focused on that special relationship that humans have with trees, whether it's their longevity that affects humankind as we contemplate our own mortality or perhaps it is something more atavistic. *The Oak Papers* is a meditative and restorative book full of the lessons we can learn from the natural world, if only we slow down enough to listen.

Human beings and oaks have lived together as neighbours since the earliest times and we continue to do so. We made the sessile oak, *Quercus petraea*, our national tree in the 1980s, underpinning the central importance of this tree to our culture.

*John Mc Loughlin*