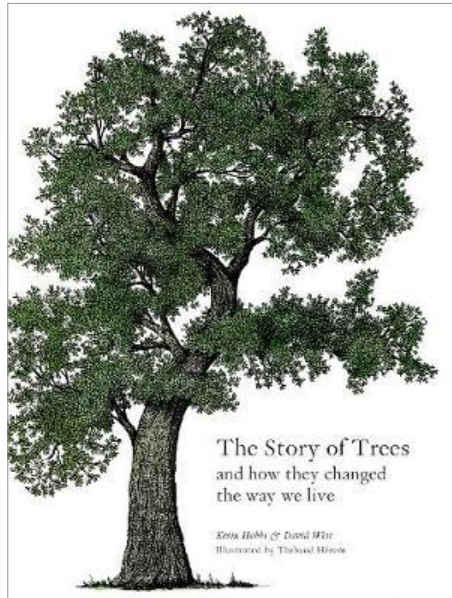


## The Story of Trees and how they changed the way we live

Kevin Hobbs and David West. Illustrated by Thibaud Hérem  
Laurence King Publishing. 2020  
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This book fits comfortably in the same genre as *Around the World in 80 Trees* (reviewed in *Irish Forestry*, Vol 75, 2018) and even shares the same publisher. Irish foresters will be pleased to find Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine in the same exalted company as teak, mahogany, myrrh, (one of the gifts brought by the “Three Wise Men”) and ebony. Incidentally, they point out that ebony is now so valuable that it is sold by the kilogramme. In India and Sri Lanka it is now illegal to sell ebony on the international market. The authors, Kevin Hobbs and David West, both worked with Hilliard Nurseries in the UK and have clocked up many years of experience of trees and plants between them.

*The Story of Trees* brings the reader on a hugely educational journey from the earliest known tree species on our planet right up to the latest fruit cultivars. The chosen 100 trees have all had a profound effect on the planet and humankind. Beginning with the *Ginkgo biloba* (fossils of which date back 270 million years), we learn how trees are integral to the development of our species, and how

specific trees have become important religious, political, and cultural symbols.

Enhanced with beautiful illustrations by Thibaud Hérem and a treasure trove of fascinating botanical facts and figures, this book will appeal to tree lovers everywhere. The aim of the book is to inform and inspire those who already have a love of trees, as well as those who may have taken them for granted. *The Story of Trees* is primarily our story, but it is also that of our distant ancestors. It is about our relationship with many of the world's most important trees, both on a local and global scale. With a vast range of trees to choose from, the authors have endeavoured to feature those that have been, and in most cases continue to be, of cultural and practical value to humankind.

There are interesting snippets of information on species that one does not find in many tree books, for example they say the bristlecone pine because of its great age has proved to be a huge benefit to modern scientific research on our fluctuating climate (in happy agreement with the author of *Tree Story*, Valerie Trouet). Many of the trees of the *Prunus* genus are included in the text, including cherry itself, peach, almond, Chinese plum (*Prunus nume*), American plum (*Prunus americana*) and damson. To emphasise the slow growth of the damson tree they include the old rhyme "He who plants plums, plants for his children. But he who plants damsons, plants for his grand-children". Hazel is included in the book because of its importance as a food source in the past. The ash is included - but there is no mention of its importance for hurley making. However, they do warn that the ash dieback disease is so serious that the tree is in danger of extinction in Europe. They remind us that the once extensive forests of cedars of Lebanon were destroyed by thousands of years of demand for timber for shipbuilding; the seafaring Egyptians had no native tree of appropriate size so they coveted their neighbour's trees! Cinnamon, nutmeg and rubber trees are discussed because they were and continue to be sources of commercially important commodities.

The authors argue that it would take a very good lawyer to put an end to the rumour that the biblical forbidden fruit was an apple. One possible explanation is that the word "*malum*" meaning "evil" was confused with "*malus*", the Latin word for apple.

They discuss the development of the citrus tree over time from its origins in China to the development of the orangery to becoming a huge industry today for grapefruit, oranges, lemons and limes.

The authors tell us that 600 years ago the coffee tree, *Coffea arabica* was merely an understory species in Ethiopia's mountain forests. Today it and other coffee species are the world's most economically important trees, second only to crude oil in international, plant-based products.

Scots pine is the most widespread pine species. John Evelyn in *Sylva* said the species was planted by wealthy landowners, while Hobbs and West contend that Jacobite supporters are reputed to have planted Scots pine to show loyalty to their cause.

The authors tell us that Douglas fir is one the most important timber species in the US while it has also become the most popular Christmas tree over the last 90 years.

They also include recently discovered trees such as the dawn redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, which was discovered in 1941, before which it was known only as a fossil tree. Similarly the Wollemi pine, *Wollemia nobilis*, discovered in 1994, a mere 150 km from Sydney. And finally *Incaddedron esseri*, Esser's tree of the Inca, discovered in 2017 hiding in the cloud-shrouded forests of the High Andes in Peru. All of which suggests there may be much more waiting out there for today's plant hunters to uncover about the uniquely fascinating history of trees.

Hobbs and West point out that our insatiable demand for timber and timber products sets commerce at odds with care of the environment and sustainable forest management. However, they also point out that there are many examples of success in managing biodiversity, bringing with it sustainable income, especially in regions where enterprise is limited.

Unfortunately, this otherwise excellent book suffers from a strange nomenclature in the English language names of trees, for example the walnut tree *Juglans regia* is described as English walnut even though it is an introduction from south east Europe and Asia; *Ulmus minor* is called English elm despite Alan Mitchell's classification as being a member of the Dutch Elm Group and reports it as introduced in 1680. Pedunculate oak is referred to as English oak although it is native throughout most of Europe. The ultimate chaos comes when it describes common juniper as being native to North Africa, Asia, North America and Europe (*including the UK*). Where else is the UK if not in Europe? Thank goodness for the Linnean classification, otherwise we'd be in constant chaos.

Aside from the foregoing, this is an extremely useful and interesting book packed with countless little-known nuggets of information about trees that are familiar to us all. If you are drafting your Christmas gift list, I'd definitely include this book.

*John Mc Loughlin*