

## ***Trees, Woods and Literature—5***

### ***Binsey Poplars***

*felled 1879*

*My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
 All felled, felled, are all felled;  
     Of a fresh and following folded rank  
         Not spared, not one  
         That dandled a sandalled  
         Shadow that swam or sank  
 On meadow and river and wind-wandering  
     weed-winding bank.*

*O if we but knew what we do  
     When we delve or hew—  
 Hack and rack the growing green !  
     Since country is so tender  
 To touch, her being só slender,  
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
 But a prick will make no eye at all,  
 Where we, even where we mean  
     To mend her we end her,  
     When we hew or delve :  
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.  
 Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
     Strokes of havoc únselve  
     The sweet especial scene,  
 Rural scene, a rural scene,  
     Sweet especial rural scene.*

From *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Edited by Robert Bridges) reprinted by permission of the Oxford University Press.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in Essex in 1844. He changed his religion in 1866 and was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1877. In 1884 he was appointed Professor of Classics in University College, Dublin, but was unhappy there, being out of sympathy with Irish nationalist aspirations. He died

in Dublin, of typhoid fever, in 1889, and is buried in Glasnevin.

This poem is more apposite now than when it was written nearly a century ago: the environment is so vulnerable that "even where we mean to mend her we end her." The poet leans towards the popular fallacy that the felling of a tree is an act of finality, whereas we know that trees can be re-created without any distinguishable differences from previous generations, while buildings can not.

The last three lines of the poem give an onomatopoeic representation of the sound of a cross-cut saw, now (unfortunately but necessarily) replaced by the apoplectic roar of the chain saw.

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