

Trees, Woods and Literature, 16¹

¹The last previous item in this series appeared in *Irish Forestry*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1976.

Next morning, at daybreak, Serioga took an axe and made his way to the woods. A chilly, dense, continuous mist, as yet unilluminated by the sun, brooded over everything. A light was gradually dawning in the east, and its pale glow was reflected in the vault overhead, veiled by light clouds. Not a blade of grass on the ground, not a leaf in the air above stirred. occasionally a flapping of wings might be heard in the thickets, or some furtive noise on the ground, breaking the silence of the forest.

Suddenly a strange, unaccustomed sound re-echoed and died away on its outskirts. Again it was repeated recurring at regular intervals, at the foot of the trunk of one of the motionless trees. One of the tree tops began to sway strangely. A murmur arose amid the leaves, which were full of sap; a warbler, which had been perched on one of the branches, fluttered and piped twice, then spread its little tail and took refuge on another tree.

The strokes of the axe still resounded, growing more and more hollow; white splinters glistening with sap fell on the green sward, and a faint crack could be heard between each stroke. The entire trunk of the tree was quivering now; it swayed, and then suddenly rose erect again, vibrating terribly on its roots, as if with fright. Silence ensued. Then the tree tottered again; the trunk split across, and fell prostrate on the damp earth, snapping its branches and bringing down the long boughs in its fall.

The sounds of the axe and of the woodsman's footsteps ceased. The warbler piped and flew to a higher bough. One of the twigs brushed by its wings fluttered for a moment, and then all its leaves remained motionless like the rest. The trees spread their quiet branches over the vacant space, and looked even more radiant than before. The sun's first rays at last pierced through the clouds, broke forth in the blue sky, and darted over earth and heaven. The mist then floated away in wreaths, an iridescent vapour hovered over the verdant foliage, and thin white clouds sailed rapidly across the azure vault. Birds fluttered in the shade, singing wild paeans of delight. High overhead leaves full of sap were murmuring joyously, while boughs of living trees waved slowly and majestically above their fellow, cut down and dead.

From *Three Deaths*, (1858) a story by Leo Tolstoy. The translators name is not known.

The purpose of this tree-felling was to procure wood to erect a cross over the grave of an old coachman. When dying he had given his boots to a young colleague, Serioaga, the axe-man in this passage, in exchange for a promise to buy a stone to mark the old man's grave.

The fact that the trees "spread their branches over the vacant space" and looked "even more radiant than before" might imply that a thinning was badly needed.

The species of ash in question is probably common European ash, *Fraxinus excelsior*.

Leo Tolstoy was born in Yasnaya Polyana, about 220 kilometres south of Moscow, in 1828. The estate – the name is translated as Ash Grove – came into the family on the marriage of his father, a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, and was his home all his life.

After his father's death Tolstoy entered the University of Kazan but dropped out without completing a degree course. He returned home, managed the estate, read extensively and sowed wild oats in various forms. After some hesitation he joined the army and served actively in the Crimean War. He married in 1862, entering into a relationship which was long-lasting but never entirely smooth.

Tolstoy had a long literary career, beginning with *Childhood*, an account of his own early years, in 1852. His most famous books are the two long novels *War and Peace* (1865) and *Anna Karenina* (1875). The latter includes, in Part 2, Chapter 16, a diverting account of a discussion between a townsman and a farmer about the assessment and valuation of a wood which the townsman is selling. The farmer believes a rip-off is in progress.

A critic once suggested, perhaps simplistically, that anyone who thought that life in Russia was nasty under Communism should read Tolstoy's late novel, *Resurrection* (1899) and learn what it had been like earlier under the Tsars.

In 1910, aged 82, irritated by his wife's surveillance and frustrated by the contradictions in his own life, Tolstoy stole away from Yasnaya Polyana, taking with him only his personal physician. He left by train, not fully decided on his ultimate destination, but some days later, becoming seriously ill, he was taken in by the station master in a remote village. While there his wife travelled to visit him but was denied entry to the house where he lay. He died there, nine days after leaving home, and such was his fame that his final days were widely publicised. Among his last recorded words were "So this is the end!. . . and it's nothing. . ."

Readers may be interested to know that one of Tolstoy's friends was "Kern, the forestry inspector".

(Selection and note by Wood Kerne)