

Trees, woods and literature – 18

Every morning he would leave the house, and scramble under the post and rail fence into the wood, lured by the sound of the axes ringing and the scent of an oak fire in the spring morning. There was a sudden silence; the music of the saw, the language of the axes, was gone, then for a moment came the sound of chopping as the little boy stood listening in the undergrowth. By the time he reached them the woodmen were having their breakfast, a blackened cocoa tin, with a wire handle threaded through holes punched in the edges, hung from a bent hazel wand above a little fire; the men sat side by side in a row on the ground with their backs against a stack of faggots, their legs stretched out and their boots soiling the first primroses. They blinked in the bright sunshine and ate with their knives. Benedict sat down on a stump and talked to them about their work. "When are you going to strip the bark from the tree you cut yesterday? Will you build a little tent with it?"

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The trunks of the felled trees were all stained a rough brown with the drying sap; beside each of them stood a little tent of brown bark. Benedict was fascinated; at odd times he gathered up handfuls of sawdust and let it run through his fingers; there was a grindstone too with a can of dripping water. When they were finished breakfast a lad turned the handle while one of the woodmen sharpened his axe. Benedict

watched so critically that he got called an inspector. "Inspector? That's a funny thing to call me. Why do you call me an inspector?" he asked, but later he accepted the name with pride and spoke of himself as the inspector. "Are you going to make that tree fall down this way or over there?" he asked, and when he had been told, stood a little apart with his hands behind his back, watching the men sawing with the great crosscut, and the tree trembling. There came a few strokes with the axe, they took up the saw again, with each cut the fibres cracked, the sawcut gaped, and suddenly, with shouts from all the men, and the sound of a volley from a firing party, the great tree hurled itself headlong to the earth. "Which tree will you cut next?" asked Benedict imperturbably.

In a few days other men were already in the clearing taking measurements and driving in pegs where the woodmen had been, and in another week, the woodmen's work being done, a waggon came for the faggots, and for the oak bark, and on succeeding days the team came with two pairs of wheels on which the oak trunks were separately jacked up and bound with chains.

The waggon made a new cart-track winding between the stumps where one had never been before. Where did it lead?

From *No Love* (1929) by David Garnett, reprinted by kind permission of A. P. Watt Ltd. on behalf of the executors of the estate of David Garnett. David Garnett (1892-1981) was born in Sussex, son of Edward Garnett, notably helpful to Irish writers as a publisher's reader in London, and Constance Garnett, famous as a translator of major Russian writers.

Garnett studied botany at University, became a conscientious objector during 1914-18 war, and was later a prominent member of the famous Bloomsbury Group of writers and artists. His best known novels are *Lady into Fox* (1922) and *A Man in the Zoo* (1924). He also published three volumes of autobiography.

The tree-felling exercise described in the passage from *No Love* is set in 1898. The location is "a low hill of gravel, which owing to its sterile nature had been abandoned to woodland". The clearance is in order to build a house.

The procedure described is now superseded, but there are still those among us who remember axes and crosscut saws, and even those who once used them. The whole sequence is illustrated in *Forest Images: Father Browne's Woodland Photographs* (Society of Irish Foresters, 1992).

Inspectors, of course, are still a feature of Irish forestry.

(Selection and note by Wood-Kerne)



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By the time
he reached
them, the
woodmen
were having
their
breakfast . . .
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Forest workers at
Emo from *Forest
Images: Father
Browne's
Woodland
Photographs* by
E. E. O'Donnell,
SJ (Society of
Irish Foresters)