

## Trees, Woods and Literature – 25

*A thin, blue haze hung in the valley, but as they began to climb up among the bracken, the sun struck through, revealing behind them the lake where the cattle stood meditating and swinging their tails gently in the shade of overhanging branches. It promised fierce heat later in the morning, by the still air and the unruffled surface of the water. The sun beat hotly on the bracken, raising its sharp scent as it dried, and encouraging the swarm of flies which followed them, buzzing and hovering about their heads. They skirted a plantation of firs, set among the rocks.*

*'How discouraged they look, don't they Mick?' said the girl.*

*'No wonder,' he said, with a glance at the poor, thin trees, huddled miserably together. 'They're only grown to make into pit-props.'*

*'Pit-props!' she exclaimed. 'How awful.' No wonder, indeed. After the sky and the sun, to be condemned to the darkness for ever.*

From the short story 'Ill Wind' by John Ward, published in *The Penguin New Writing* 29, (1947) edited by John Lehmann. The Penguin Group (UK) has disavowed rights on the text and it has not been possible to find out anything about the author.

John Lehmann (1907-1989), editor, set up as a publisher in 1946 having learned the trade at the Woolfs' Hogarth Press in London. He published three volumes of autobiography in one of which he recounts an anecdote about the Irish architectural historian Maurice Craig, who, when asked to provide details of Irish wartime naval defence capability 'proudly declared: "There's that gunboat we bought from Britain the other day, a ship to strike terror into the enemy's breast when manned by Irish boys"'.

The voracious demand for pit-props, to support the roofs and walls of coalmines, was probably the main outlet for forest thinnings from the heyday of the British mining industry in the later part of the nineteenth century, until the more recent development of particle-board manufacturing facilities, and round pit-props were exported from Ireland until the 1960s. They are now sawn to precise size specifications. With the continuing decline of coal-mining in Britain pit-props represent a diminishing market

*(Selection and note by Wood Kerne)*