

Trees, Woods and Literature – 27

Cutting Firewood, October

*South wind drives
a forest fire of fog
against the Sitka spruce, fans
the autumn flames of fern,
skunk cabbage, Devil's
club, and berry bushes
snapping at the green;
distant fog horns
like fire-engine ships
groping to the rescue.*

From *Frames of Reference*, Poems by Richard Dauenhauer, published by the Black Current Press, Haines, Alaska, 1987. Reprinted by kind permission of the author.

Richard Dauenhauer was born in 1942 and was raised in Syracuse, New York. He has lived in Alaska since 1969. From 1981 to 1988 he served as the 7th Poet Laureate of Alaska. He is widely recognized as a translator, and several hundred of his translations of poetry from German, Russian, Classical Greek, Swedish, Finnish, and other languages have appeared in a range of journals and magazines since 1963. Since his move to Alaska, much of his professional work has focused on applied folklore and linguistics. He has taught at Alaska Methodist University and Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage, and teaches part time at the University of Alaska-Southeast in Juneau. From August 1983 to March 1997 he was Director of Language and Cultural Studies at Sealaska Heritage Foundation, Juneau. He lives in Juneau and works as a free-lance writer and consultant.

References to the “forest fire of fog” and “distant fog horns” well describe and connote the coastal, ‘temperate rain forest’ location of Sitka spruce in its native habitat along the shores of western North America. Further south from Alaska, where Sitka’s range extends along coastal Washington and Oregon, climatic conditions are more similar to Ireland.

In the poem Dauenhauer extends the fire metaphor to the flames of the autumnal colours of “skunk cabbage, Devil’s club, and berry bushes / snapping at the green.” These images also have an ecological association; skunk cabbage (*Lysichitum americanum*) and devil’s club (*Oplopanax horridum*) have a generally coastal range from Alaska to northern California and occur on moist to wet soils. Sitka spruce, of course, has a natural preference for moist soils which occur not infrequently in Ireland.

(Selection and note by *Lia coille*)