

Book reviews

Woodlands. Oliver Rackham. Collins. 609 pp. 172 illus., 26 tabs. £45 (sterling) hardcover (also available in paperback). ISBN 0-00-720243-1.

'I am not a forester' are Oliver Rackham's words on the second page of his Author's Forward to the book *Woodlands*. That is an item of information which any reader might deduce from even a casual perusal of the book. In fact his attitude to 'forestry', as it is usually understood by foresters, can be described as distinctly unsympathetic.

This book is volume 100 in the Collins New Naturalist Library begun in 1945. Many foresters will be familiar with H.L. Edlin's *Trees, Woods and Man* (1956), which was volume 32 in the series and some may have read W.H. Pearsall's excellent *Mountains and Moorlands* (Volume 11, 1950).

Rackham qualified as a botanist from the University of Cambridge in 1961 and has remained there in an academic capacity. He is highly regarded as an expert on the British countryside and its woodlands, and on other countries' ecology. That is in itself a worthwhile pursuit. The publisher's blurb declares that this book 'explains how trees and woods behave, for example how they coppice and pollard, how they are affected by storms and fire, the function of tree roots, the life and growth of trees and how and why they decay. Rackham reconstructs British woodland through the ages, from the evolution of wildwood, through man's effect on the landscape, modern forestry and its legacy, and recent conservation efforts and their effects.' Fair enough if you are of a purely naturalistic turn of mind, irrespective of practical utility. But his disparagement of 'forestry' betrays the botanist/ecologist/academic outlook in an extreme form. He appears not to accept that forestry is an activity whose primary purpose is to produce an industrial raw material, although almost in the same breath he complains of Japan, Britain and Ireland 'going through a phase of plundering other countries' wildwood'. He fails to mention that John Evelyn in his famous book *Sylva or a Discourse of Forest-Trees* (1664) recommends Ireland as 'better' for iron-smelting as that would help to conserve England's woodlands, at the expense of Ireland's.

He even writes disrespectfully about certain oak plantations from the 1830s, asserting that these 'monotonous, even-aged stands of rather poor-quality oak became somewhat of an embarrassment'. The question, an embarrassment to whom? Is left hanging in the air.

In a chapter on woodland history the years 1950-1975 are referred to as the locust years, a reference to the passage in the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Joel which, in the King James Version reads: 'And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.' He develops this as follows: 'The chief agent of destruction was modern forestry: woods were felled and poisoned, and plantations made on the site. Usually the plantations were of conifers; foresters were obsessed with fast growth and had forgotten what woodland was for.' So that settles the

Forestry Commission! And the question ‘what was woodland for?’ also remains unanswered, unless we advert to the passage headed ‘Replacing wild with planted oaks’ where it is stated that ‘Wild-type oaks are part of a wood’s integrity, appearance and value as a habitat. It is part of the meaning of oak that oaks should not all be the same. It is irregularities that make oak such an excellent habitat for other wildlife.’ That is not a view likely to be entertained by the managements of some of the famous oak forests of Germany and France.

Rackham is clearly not an enthusiast for economic calculations. He accuses W.E. Hiley, erroneously, of having depended solely on records from Indian plantations to illustrate the use of the Faustmann formula, which he does not identify by name, and gives an Irish source reference for this. In fact that Irish source has no detailed treatment of forest economics and does not mention either Hiley or Faustmann.

It may be a shooting-in-foot lapse when he describes conservation as having ‘grown into a middle sized industry...with no well-defined enemy’.

Any forester reading this expensive book would need to maintain a critical attitude throughout.

Niall OCarroll

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