

## The Long, Long Life of Trees

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This is a collection of essays on a list of trees, namely the Yew, Cherry, Rowan, Olive, Cypress, Oak, Ash, Poplar, Holly, Sycamore, Birch, Horse Chestnut, Elm, Willow, Hawthorn, Pine and Apple, all in all seventeen different varieties. Each essay about 15 pages long, pages generously sprinkled with illustrations, old and new woodcuts, photographs. The tone is light and deft, the perspective is unabashedly the English one, with only an intermittent excursion beyond the confines of the isles. It is not written from the point of view of a naturalist, what botanical information delivered is usually relayed as rumor, this makes for dissatisfaction, but on the other hand, this is not the kind of book the author had in mind, and no doubt would have been both unqualified as well as uninterested to write. She is in fact a professor of English, teaching at Oxford, and her point of view is the literary one. How do those various tree fare in our literary collective (un)consciousness, and poets unsurprisingly play an important role. You do not necessarily learn how to recognize trees from the accounts, although all chapters start on odd-numbered pages, with an illustration of their leaves on the corresponding facing pages on the left. I know trees in Swedish and English of course, and through years of reading and osmosis I have learned to make up a one-to-one correspondence between the two languages, but still there are some which would stymie my efforts. I had never come across the name 'Rowan' before and reading through the account I realized that it must refer to the Swedish 'Rönn' whose bright red berries I never thought were edible, but rather suspected were poisonous, keeping in mind the Swedish version of sour grapes, amounting to a fox trying in vain to get hold of some berries of the tree, concluding that they were sour. But the Swedish equivalent of a Sycamore I cannot make out, the family seems to include both figs and plane trees, the latter of which I only was alerted to as a typical urban tree in my mid-forties. I have never been particularly attentive to trees, apart from an early awareness of pines, spruces and birches, making up the majority of trees you find in Swedish forests. The maple I was only made aware of when residing in New England in my youth, and I would still be hard-pressed to identify an ash and an elm. Fruit trees I only know by their fruits, and do not really think of them as trees, as they tend to be rather small, and never making up natural forests, instead confined to gardens. There is one exception though, when I was eight I attended a small school close to the lakeshore in the small town I grew up in. It was an old school building with a big gravel yard, enclosed by a hedge, so different from the basement location inside a residential council house, where I had spent my first year. Along the street by the school grew horse chestnuts, the long characteristic leaves I learned to identify. The nuts themselves fell down in profusion but we were told that being horse chestnuts they were inedible, suggesting that there existed an edible variant, and the chestnut trees lining the road were indeed useless and a Northern Ersatz for the real desirable thing. Many years later spending a month in Bucharest in April, I recall fondly how the early cold days of the month with intermittent

snow flakes were followed at the end of the stay by the flowering of the chestnut trees. But I have just learned, not through the book though, that the horse chestnut is only distantly related to the chestnut, but I suspect few people would be able to tell them apart. Anne Frank during her confinement prior to the betrayal of the hiding place used to glimpse a horse chestnut in the garden through a window, a tree which when flowering gave her courage. The tree, alas, blew down during a storm in 2010, not an uncommon fate for may old (and not so old) trees.

Trees otherwise get to be old, very old, much older than mere humans, several thousand years in fact, and this does not only hold for the majestic Sequias and tall red woods, but also less grandiose specimen such as yew trees. In fact some regular pines can reach far back into antiquity. Now admittedly very old trees are usually sorry spectacles, hollowed out and consisting of much dead wood. What is really alive? True it may still sprout green leaves and vigorous branches, but new trees can be grown from saplings, parts of the tree that can regenerate into full ones themselves, as if copies of a human could develop into full-fledged genetically identical off-springs (but a part of a tree, looks much more like the tree itself, than a part of an animal is a representative of the animal as whole). Where in time does an old tree die and where does a new one take over? The identity of a tree is not as clear cut as that of a higher animal. Some trees such apples barely grow from seeds, although they still produce them in their fruits, but are planted as saplings, often drafted on old trunks which can support a variety of forms. Identities of trees are rather fluid, as most denizens of the vegetarian kingdom. Still old trees take on distinct personalities, being rather unique in their individuality, and thus liable to be named. In recent years there seems to be a tradition sprouting of identifying particularly old and unique trees, usually quite large, and put them on the map as suggested destination of pilgrimage and sight-seeing, just as interesting as many human landmarks. Where can you look at a real giant pine tree in Sweden say, used as you are to the regular variety harvested every forty years or so in Southern Sweden to be pulped, every hundred years or so in the North to serve as timber. There are almost no vestiges of pristine forests in the whole of Sweden, whose modern late 19th and early 20th century economy was based on forests.

The lack of hard biological data as well as of a systematic and methodological treatment makes of course the essays more readable and pleasant, but also makes it harder to remember, as there will be little on which to chew. For one thing all trees are presented as exceptional, so exception becomes the norm. Direct comparisons would be far more instructive. Which trees do really get to be old? Not the oaks, apparently in spite of their serving as symbols for solidity and old age, and the apple tree typically succumbs after a few decades (but the one of Newton at Woolsthorpe manor supposedly survived into the early 19th century, this is confusing). Which trees have the strongest and hardest wood, or the most pliable, least susceptible to rot. We learn about the special uses each type of tree provides when it comes to woodworking, but like typical symptoms of typical afflictions, they all appear so tediously similar.

The most intriguing story which is touched upon is the ravaging effect of the Dutch Elm disease on the elms of the British Isles. Apart from a minor outbreak of the 20's, it was more or less unknown until 1970. Since then it has claimed some twenty-five million trees, and a typical landmark in the British landscape has silently been erased. A tree

celebrated in the paintings of Constable, which provide the epitome of a vanishing way of life, nostalgically recalled. Unlike the extinction of wild animals, most people never come across anyway, trees are there to be seen, as they cannot escape. Why are people not upset? Because trees are trees and most people cannot see the difference between say ashes and elms, or maybe even maples, which incidentally is missing from the list, but surely should have earned its place there. The disease, the origins of which was discovered by Dutch scientists, hence the name, is caused by fungi, to which most European and North American Elms have no resistance. The fungi are carried by a certain brand of beetles (the elm bark beetle), which play the same role as the mosquito to the malaria. The disease attacks mature specimens, younger ones are unaffected, and as it does not kill the roots, new shoots are produced, so elms survive in hedges. Some pockets of still unaffected elms, due to isolated locations, survive in Britain, notable in Brighton, where aggressive measures have been taken to protect them, and most solidly on the Isle of Man, where they still can be counted in hundred of thousands. In pre-historic times the prevalence of elms has fluctuated widely in Europe, and there are speculations to the effect that those could have been due to similar diseases.

Pleasant to read and well-written it nevertheless leave, as noted, few distinctive marks in memory. What distinctiveness have I learned from most of the trees. What makes an oak stand out, I am familiar with since childhood; but what about ash, what should be known of it? I fear I would not recognize one, even would I bump my head into it, nor the elm for that matter, the only thing I really know about being its disappearance. As noted some hard botanical facts would have changed that. Incidentally can you recognize a tree by the way its branches spread. This would be very handy in wintertime, when there are no leaves, but the structure of the branching stands out clearly. For some you can do (even in summer), such as birches and the weeping willow, the latter we are told was not present at the time of Shakespeare, but was a recent import in the 18th century to Britain, the poet and keen gardener Alexander Pope often being mentioned in the connection. But if so, how come there are so many varieties, they can hardly have evolved in such limited time, was there a steady importation? What is ancient is often not so. The typical English rural landscape with fields delineated by hawthorn hedges is of a rather recent vintage, although it is revered as quintessential. Human life is short, and hence so is its memory.

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