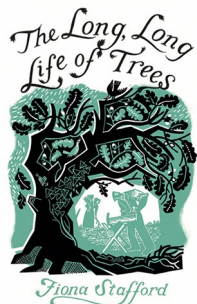


Wood from the Heart



The Long Long Life of Trees

By Fiona Stafford

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS: 2017.
296 PP. £10.99

That Fiona Stafford loves trees is clear from every page of this deeply evocative book, the paperback version of which was published earlier this year. She not only loves trees but knows them on a personal level. Each of the book's thirteen chapters is devoted to a different tree, almost all of which are found in the British countryside either as natives such as the oak and ash, or as imports gone native such as the apple and cypress. All are subject to Stafford's kindly scrutiny as she describes the trees themselves and examines how their

particular characters have been taken up by folklore, artists and common culture. Why, for instance in Canova's statue of Napoleon posing as Mars has he hung his sword on an olive stump? Why did the eighteenth century ceramicist Thomas Minton so prominently feature willow in his faux-Chinese willow pattern crockery? And what tree links hockey sticks, the Morris traveller motor car and the Mosquito bomber?

The greatest strength of Stafford's writing is in the personal. All the chapters begin with anecdotes from her life in which trees have played a part. Whenever possible she talks about individual trees and her excursions to meet them, as if checking up on old friends to find out how the years have been treating them. The book is filled with images of specific trees and sometimes photographs but more often paintings and illustrations from artists stretching back through the centuries.

If there is a fault in this book it is in the unquestioning acceptance of each tree's particular characters. Another writer might have looked at the poplar tree and wondered

how a tree so tall could ever provide water to its uppermost branches. Or, when discussing the yew or willow, given more than a passing mention to their medicinal properties and from there uncovered the fascinating biochemistry of their secondary metabolism. A different book could easily have been written using the very same trees to illustrate some of the many aspects of biology that shaped them to be as they are, the problems encountered when living for millennia, how to fight disease without antibodies, symbiosis and the creation of a supportive ecosystem, or how to be both strong and flexible enough to remain standing through a gale.

This may be exactly what Stafford would want of her book. Not to satisfy the reader's appetite for tree lore, but to inspire them to pay more attention to the trees around them and ask what knowledge their experiences can provide from their long, long lives. □

Reviewed by Chris Surridge

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