

*Sprout Lands: Tending the Endless Gift of Trees*

by William Bryant Logan

Review by Robin Walter (Feb 2020)

The title of this book comes from Henry David Thoreau, quoted on the opening page, and refers to the regeneration of trees after land clearance by burning. He admires the fresh new growth and asks “Shall man then despair? Is he not a sproutland too...?”

So the scene is set for a fascinating exploration of the cutting and re-sprouting of trees, alongside the cultural history of societies worldwide who have sprouted their own distinct ways of living with trees, to the benefit of both.

This story reminds us that our very culture was founded on trees, that the tending of trees has been practised by humans for the last 10,000 years, and we were largely dependent on the bounty of trees until about 200 years ago. The author also makes the startling claim that without the ‘sprouts’ of trees, ‘human beings would not have made it past the Neolithic’.

The author is a practising arborist in New York and this direct experience gives his narrative an engaging authenticity and immediacy as he wrestles with the practical problems of saving a moribund hollow willow, or pollarding groups of Plane trees outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Pollarding has fallen out of common practice in North America and he is concerned that this seemingly brutal pruning will kill the trees in his care. Much of the book is a quest to research the tending of trees by coppicing and pollarding, so as to inform his own practice at home – an admirable ambition.

The journey brings him to Westonbirt Arboretum, Burnham Beeches, Bradfield Woods and the Somerset Levels, where he marvels at the long traditions of cutting and resprouting evident in the fantastical tree forms – familiar practices to the average RFS member.

More interesting are his journeys to the Basque country to see how trees are shaped over decades to make boat timbers, how ash is pollarded for sheep fodder and how land is still managed under the commons system. Drawing on the many and varied examples he visits, he advocates using ‘head and heart and hand’ to develop his craft, in constant dialogue with the trees, noting each response from the living world and honing his work in turn.

The author also makes an extended tour of coppiced woods in Japan, shifting cultivators in Sierra Leone, and grazing techniques in Norway. Particularly interesting are the native American Indians of California, whose woven baskets were water-tight and used for cooking. Their hunter-gatherer culture tended the forest over centuries, bending it gently and respectfully to support their modest needs.

Indeed, this is a recurrent theme of the book – how our interaction with trees has benefitted both us and the trees. We have gained because we have reaped, over millenia, a constant harvest of food, materials, fuel and shelter from trees; trees have gained from our tending by extending their lifespans considerably as pollards or coppice stools. Whilst this may be the case for individual trees, forests as a whole have suffered catastrophic loss through their encounters with humans!

I recommend this book as a timely study of the central role that tending trees has played in our cultural history and how we can continue our active engagement in the living world through our relationship with trees.