
THE BIG ISSUE
EVERY MONDAY £2.50
Who are we without our trees?
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SCOTLAND
November 13-19, 2012 No.913
A HAND UP NOT A HANDOUT

When The Big Issue asked me to write about trees and the threat to our native ash, it suddenly grabbed me that my son Adam lives in a huge ash tree growing out of a Scottish clifftop. I emailed Adam the other day about ash dieback disease. "You'd better watch your tree," I said. "We don't want you and all your little friends turning into fungus."

He turns 30 next month. He built his first treehouse on the Craigencalt organic farm in Fife when he was 14. One night he and his friends went out and when they got back he saw that the stove had burnt through and his house was on fire. He called the fire brigade. They came and put it out before there was too much damage to the tree, but that was bye-bye to Sycamore Mansions. The fire brigade were really kind. No tellings off. Just help and sympathy, and they managed to salvage a jar of chocolate spread.

His current house rests on the grey trunk of a huge ash tree growing out of a cliff. It stretches up through the middle of the house, reaching for the skies. It even pushes out shoots indoors, so there's always fresh greenery and his cat loves climbing it. There's a wood-burning stove, running water, a bath beneath the stars heated by burning sticks underneath, and he even has the internet. There are always friends and music and craftwork going on. That's just one little example of what a tree can mean to one human being. A whole community of people is held together by Adam's ash tree. Then suddenly ash dieback disease turns up. Let's hope his tree proves immune.

Goodness knows where the fungus came from. The government's failure to ban the imports of saplings is being blamed, but it could just have blown in on the wind like fungus tends to do. Like it or not, we've now got the disease in Britain – and the fears are that we'll see a repeat of what happened with Dutch elm disease. A whole culture could wither.

It leaves me with a gutted feeling, like back in the 1980s when I suddenly woke up to what HIV was going to mean for the younger generation and the poor. It's like science fiction coming true. I'm all for the global village, but this is another downside of globalisation. When so much meaning can revolve around even a single tree like Adam's, never mind a whole species, it leaves you feeling icky. On the plus side, you realise more how precious and vulnerable life is; how much of what's left needs tender care, and the need to truly value biodiversity.

Biodiversity is like human diversity. It means finding strength and resilience in variety. A plantation all of one kind of tree can be very good for economics. But it's bad for the wholeness of life. It creates a breeding ground for predators and disease.

We live in a world where nature has been reduced to monocultures. People, too, are cloned like apple trees in a row, and that reduces our resilience. That's why the social and environmental agendas need to come together. I admire all those little eco groups up and down the country that plant mixed woodlands just for beauty's sake. If one species of tree gets hit by a new disease or pest, then there's plenty to keep alive what feeds the soul. The ecological movement, at its most radical level – and radical means 'rooted' – seeks to free up the flow of life. Human life and that of all life.

'A whole culture could wither'

One of my favourite Shakespeare quotes goes: 'And this our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.'

When Adam was just hitting his teens I took him to the conference of a wonderful group called Reforesting Scotland. There he learned about treehouse design. I also took him to the Pollok Free State, a protest about the M77 motorway tearing up part of Glasgow's extensive woodland. There the activists had built tree houses and we talked about the meaning of the word 'respect', which was draped on a banner down a huge beech tree. Respect has the same word origin as the Sanskrit verb for seeing. To respect is to 'see again' – to take a deeper look – to discern what is really there. For me, when something that shouldn't die does die in nature, and it's linked to human impact, it's a crisis of respect.

It all leaves me thinking of the black American poet, Alice Walker. In her poem *Torture* she says when they torture your mother, 'plant a tree'. When they torture everyone you love, 'plant a tree'.

'When they torture you too bad to talk – plant a tree.'

And when they cut down the forest, when the forest starts to die? 'Start another.' ●

Alastair McIntosh is the author of Soil and Soul, and Hell and High Water. See Adam's treehouse at adammcintosh.com

TREES OF LIFE

Fresh reports of new outbreaks of the potentially devastating ash dieback disease have been appearing around the country almost daily. Incidences have been recorded in forests from the south of England up into Scotland. It's no longer a small, controllable thing.

The government has convened special meetings of its Cobra action committee amid fears that not only the ash could succumb but that some strains of oak may also be facing attack from disease.

As forests loom large in our culture – through the dark woods of our fairytales to the myths of King Arthur, folk tales of Robin Hood, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Milton's tree of life – losing vast numbers of trees will undoubtedly have a deep effect.

"We might be looking at the biggest impact on the British landscape since the enclosures in the 17th and 18th centuries. For anyone who is passionate about the British landscape that is a major concern," says writer and broadcaster Rob Penn, an amateur woodsman who cares for his own forest in Monmouthshire.

Penn compares the ash dieback outbreak with Dutch elm disease, which struck in the 1970s.

"There would be these big holes where you knew an elm had stood and the sense that death was all around. That is why the Dutch elm disease went to the heart of the British public – and why ash dieback can do the same," he recalls.

Despite industrialisation and urbanisation, forests have remained with us: through AA Milne's Hundred Acre Wood, Enid Blyton's Faraway Tree and JK Rowling's Forbidden Forest. Trees inform who we are, defining our connection with nature, the past and humanity itself.

"If you go into a wood and you lean against an ancient tree, the past is at your back. I think that is very significant, something we recognise but don't really understand," Penn says. "We are just on the edge of the Black Mountains.

"The forest here has never been cleared for agriculture: it has always been covered in trees. So its nature has not been changed for 8,000 years.

"So when you stand in it you have a connection with the human matrix that simply isn't available in any other aspect of the British landscape – because all of it has changed except the woodland.

"I think that is at the heart of why we find woods so enticing. Why our fairytales come from them. Why so many of our children's stories come from them. They are an extraordinarily powerful connection to the entire human matrix." ●

Rob Penn's Tales from the Wildwood is on Wednesdays at 8.30pm on BBC Four