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Tree cultures and the arboreal humanities

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REVIEWS

Of the Oak ©RBG Kew

'Of the Oak' is an immersive outdoor visual and sound installation by Marshmallow Laser Feast. Commissioned by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for 2025, it celebrates the network and rhythms of ecological relationships around an individual tree - the Lucombe Oak at Kew Gardens - and its essential role in sustaining biodiversity. 'Of the Oak' was displayed next to the Lucombe Oak at Kew from 3 May to 28 September 2025.

For more information and to listen to associated meditations go to:
https://marshmallowlaserfeast.com/project/of-the-oak/
and https://oftheoak.co.uk

Caroline Cornish and Christina Hourigan

Introduction: Tree Cultures and the Arboreal Humanities

PLANT PERSPECTIVES 2/2 - 2025: 275–284
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he trees encountered on a country stroll
Reveal a lot about a country's soul.
…
A culture is no better than its woods.

(W.H. Auden, 'Woods', *Bucolics II*, 1952–53)

More than any other type of plant, trees 'speak' to humans in fundamental and deeply emotional ways. The outrage sparked in Britain alone in recent times by the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree on Hadrian's Wall; an ancient oak near a London car park in Enfield; over 100 trees on Plymouth's Armada Way; and the proposed destruction of locally significant trees such as the Darwin Oak in Shropshire, are just some recent examples of the extent and depth of human-arboreal relations. The reasons for these relations and how trees can act as emblems of wider issues with 'their aesthetic beauty and their shadowy meaningfulness', can be complex.[1] The agency of trees – their ability to react to both elemental and cultural stimuli; their ability to resist natural and human interventions; and the role they play in the making of place and memory – renders them 'figureheads for cultur[al study]'.[2] Their longevity, seasonal variation and 'rich materiality' offer us ways to connect to places we have known and experiences we have undergone.[3] In such ways, trees inhabit our many literatures, folklores, languages, philosophies, religions, arts and histories, and act as current and historic markers within landscapes. As biocultural actors that bridge the nature–culture divide, trees also offer fertile ground for the interdisciplinary researcher.

In 2002, Owain Jones and Paul Cloke published *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place*, and sought to consolidate and expand recent thinking on the entangled lives of people and trees, and how

1 Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), p. 2.

2 https://www.derby.ac.uk/blog/our-living-heritage/

3 Jones and Cloke, *Tree Cultures*, p. 86.

nature–society relations were integral to understandings of place.[4] This seminal work explored the complex relationship between places as makers of trees and trees as makers of places.[5] Alongside important studies into the cultural history of woods and forests and other arboreal landscapes by Charles Watkins,[6] Paul Elliott[7] and Stephen Daniels;[8] others including Tim Edensor on heritage entanglements;[9] and Dalia Nassar and Margaret Barbour on the embodied histories of trees,[10] for example, and sitting together with the vast literature on landscape studies, and plant and environmental histories, a new branch of environmental studies has grown – that of the 'arboreal humanities'. Eco-cultural thinking can allow us to appreciate the many connections across the biological and cultural worlds in which trees exist, just as recent papers in this journal attest.[11] The emergent area of arboreal humanities sits within the plant humanities – a field of research identified by Felix Driver, Caroline Cornish and Mark Nesbitt in their landmark report as 'an inherently interdisciplinary project, where arts and humanities researchers are often in dialogue with different ways of conceiving the relations

4 Ibid., p. 1.

5 Ibid., p. 73.

6 Including Charles Watkins, *Trees, Woods and Forests: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

7 Including Paul A. Elliott, Charles Watkins and Stephen Daniels, *The British Arboretum: Trees, Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Brookfield: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

8 Including Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (eds), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments: 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

9 Tim Edensor, 'Heritage assemblages, maintenance and futures: Stories of entanglement on Hampstead Heath, London', *Journal of Historical Geography* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2022.12.001

10 Dalia Nassar and Margaret Barbour, 'Tree stories, the embodied history of trees and environmental ethics', *Cultural Politics* **19** (1) (2023): 128–47. https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-10232530

11 Including Mykyta Peregrym, 'A birch memory web', *Plant Perspectives* **2** (1) (2025): 182–94. https://doi.org/10.3197/; Clare Hickman and Sarah Bell, 'Unlocking landscapes through Westonbirt's archive: Exploring the inclusive possibilities of entangled histories of plants, places and people'. *Plant Perspectives* **1** (1) (2024): 165–88. https://doi.org/10.3197/

between people and plants'.[12] In this issue we make the case for trees as a special category within the plant humanities.

The history of this special 'Tree Cultures' issue of *Plant Perspectives* can be traced back to September 2023 when we, as historical geographers with interests in the historical geographies of trees, convened a panel – 'Tree Stories: Trees and the making and unmaking of place' – at the annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society, London. Our aim was to form an interdisciplinary network of those interested in the cultural histories and geographies of trees. Articles in this issue by Heather Craddock, Melanie Ford and Christina Hourigan are based on papers presented at that conference. Our network quickly gathered interest and, as we had been unable to accept all the papers submitted for the RGS event, in February 2024 we collaborated with the Linnean Society of London to present the symposium 'Tree Cultures: Words, Woods and Well-Being'. Here, a full house and a plethora of good papers again proved to us that this was an area of new and significant interdisciplinary interest. The articles by Amanda Davis, Kate Teltscher and Maria Kennedy published here, were first given a public hearing at this event. The network took on its own momentum when, following this, two of our former speakers, literary scholars from the University of Derby, Amanda Davis and Anna Burton, were awarded funding for a further event which we held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in July that year. 'Tree Cultures @Kew' enrolled Shani Cadwallender into our network, and you can find her poem and commentary on Eliza Cook and the 'Slaugham Yew' in this issue. We would like to thank everyone who presented thought-provoking papers at these events.

Arboreal poetics – both poetry writing and writing on poetry – form a key component in this issue, in work by Amanda Davies, and poets Shani Cadwallender and Dean Brink. Davies explores the shared arboreal poetics of place in the work of the first- and second-generation Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley respectively. Whilst Wordsworth is widely acknowledged as 'the poet of nature', as Davies demonstrates, trees for Shelley equally 'branch' throughout his many forms of composition, from the hundreds of tree

12 *Plant Humanities: Where Arts, Humanities & Plants Meet, Where Next? Development Programme. Final Report to AHRC* (November 2022), p. 8. https://doi.org/10.34885/qn0z-es13

drawings in his manuscript notebooks, to trees as rhetorical figures in his poems and letters. Trees and the making of place represent a *leit-motiv* in Shelley's tree-writing, beginning in his early work in which place is shaped by arboreal, interspecies interconnections – or 'net-work' making – in biodiverse woodlands.[13] Indeed, Davies reminds us that the very root of the word 'poetry' – the Greek *poiesis* – means 'making'; and she traces a thread through the work of both Wordsworth and his erstwhile disciple, Shelley, linking trees fundamentally to the making of place. Citing Ryan,[14] Davies argues that human becoming is enhanced in the work of the two poets through their ability to harmonise with the poiesis of trees, otherwise understood as their 'dynamic transformation' over time and place.

Cadwallender on the other hand, in her poem and preambulatory commentary, turns her gaze towards the lesser known, 'relatively obscure' female poets of the nineteenth century. Foregrounding Eliza Cook, whose arboreal interests, like Wordsworth and Shelley before her, are both temporally and spatially situated in the era of the Anthropocene, is similarly moved by reflecting on trees as a means of reassessing the relationship between humans and non-humans. Cook's poetry echoes that of Wordsworth and Shelley in her praise of the beauty of trees, and of trees as anti-materialist forms of value; employed for their symbolic associations; and used as analogies for human relationships. And the ancient yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) which connects her poesis to that of Cadwallender is informed by earlier poems by Wordsworth and Tennyson; however, in other aspects – of gender, sexuality, class, time and politics – Cook's perspective is markedly different to that of the Romantics. Cadwallender's own poetic response to Cook's writing on the 'Slaugham Yew' is informed by shared experiences of illness and only made possible by the survival of both tree and Cook's text, emphasising the importance of tree longevity in processes of tree–human harmonisation.

Like Cadwallender's yew tree, in Dean Brink's poem, 'The Tree You Want', trees are storehouses of cultural memory, witnesses to, and

13 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude' (1816).

14 J.C. Ryan, 'Phytopoetics: Human-plant relations and the poiesis of vegetal life', in J. Fiedorczuk, M. Newell, B. Quetchenbach and O. Tierney (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics* (London: Routledge, 2023) p. 118.

agents in manifold human and non-human lives. Brink addresses the affordances of trees encountered in settings punctuating various stages of his life, affordances which, however, can only be enjoyed through an act of multi-species perception the poet describes as 'trying to feel what a tree feels tree-wise'. That perspective requires the decentring of the *Anthropos* in favour of 'tree-agential communing.' Rather than tree biography, Brink's poem then, can be understood as an experiential autobiography – a 'tree-centred worlding' told through his encounters with trees in the Pacific Northwest, Taiwan and Japan.

Brink's trees are not understood as individuals with their own life histories, whereas the yew loved by both Cook and Cadwallender is unique by virtue of its history which connects two poets writing generations apart. It exists in the lives of both women as a cultural object. As Christina Hourigan argues in her essay, and recalling Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall's theorisation on object biographies, trees change over the course of their existence in response to natural and cultural stimuli, accumulating histories as they do so, such that a tree's present significance 'derives from the persons and events to which it is connected'.[15] By exploring the approach of 'tree biographies' Hourigan aims to 'unlock fresh perspectives on trees as embodiments of cultural memory, allowing a deeper interrogation of them as sites of meaning'. This of course, also implies a form of agency on the part of the tree itself, allowing it to become a leading actor in the making of place. Her case study of a deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) in the arboretum landscape at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, demonstrates how botanical institutions like Kew, which hold linked collections of living plants, archives, publications, preserved specimens and cultural objects, are uniquely placed to enable explorations of the life, values and contexts of individual trees – notably, in this example, of the imperial context in which the deodar was mobilised from British India to southwest London.

Melanie Ford, too, reconstructs the biographies of a select group of trees in her article, 'Where on Earth are the Moon Trees?' Ford's trees, planted from seeds taken to the Moon on the *Apollo 14* mission in 1971, demonstrated resistance to the extreme conditions they experienced in space by taking root and flourishing when once returned to Earth. This

15 Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', *World Archaeology* **31** (2) (1999): 170.

agency enabled their adoption as symbols of American identity when, as seedlings, they were replanted in various towns as part of the 1976 American Bicentennial celebrations. However, Ford charts a trajectory of dynamic transformation for the trees as cultural objects. The trees lived on in public spaces, sometimes in a state of anonymity, sometimes becoming symbols of local identity, until their 'rediscovery' twenty years later when efforts were made to locate and map them in their entirety, and in some cases to save them from destruction. Ford's account shows how the Moon Trees function at a number of levels, not only as national symbols and local place-makers, but as repositories of personal and communal memory.

Tree agency takes on the form of resistance in two of the research articles in this 'Tree Cultures' special edition. In Heather Craddock's account of the ackee tree (*Blighia sapida*) translocated from West Africa to Jamaica on the bodies of enslaved Africans, the tree represents the resistance of those Africans and their Jamaican descendants to the plants favoured by colonial botanists and planters. But ackee's own agency is also defined by resistance: to the colonialists whose lack of knowledge rendered it potentially lethal; to the planters on whose land ackee flourished in slaves' provision grounds; to the metropolitan botanists whose ignorance of ackee led to 'archival absences' in Kew's records. Resistance, too, in the residual ackee trees which survive in new contexts: in botanic gardens and on university campuses, thus acting as sites of cultural memory, and imbuing ackee with primacy as a botanical symbol of Jamaica.

Plant resistance also permeates Maria Kennedy's account of 'feral' apples in America. The return to the wild of once-cultivated apple trees and their subsequent discovery, care, use and propagation by people in reforested areas of the American Northeast has been recognised as a process of 'un-cultivation'. As Kennedy explains, the apple trees' agency is best understood in terms of this wildness: 'they are wild in terms of their genetic evolution beyond the thousands of cloned cultivars that have been selected by humans over the centuries'. While such apples offer an attractive marketing opportunity to some cider makers, they offer another, more fundamental advantage to the environment: they are a means of increasing genetic diversity in *Malus* species, potentially affording some defence against particular pests and pathogens, and bolstering food security for those beings, including humans, who feed off

them. But Kennedy's wild apples are also cultural objects; they partake of a long-established yet paradoxical American attitude towards landscape and identity, which can be traced to American Romanticism: humans profitably transform landscape through agriculture whilst at the same time yearning for an unknown pre-human era of ecological purity.

Kate Teltscher's essay offers a cultural history of the *thawka-gyi* or *Amherstia nobilis* and its poesis from sacred Buddhist symbol to British 'hothouse showpiece' over the course of the nineteenth century. Her account decentres the 'great' botanist, Nathaniel Wallich, to consider the collective which mobilised the *Amherstia* from Burmese monastery gardens to British glasshouses including the Indians who helped collect and depict it, thus making it known to Europeans; the women who inspired its name; and the woman who first brought it to flower in Britain. Teltscher argues that the reception of *Amherstia* in Britain was not an act of cultural erasure, an accusation often levelled at plant translocations to Europe. Rather, its sacred status to Buddhists and its rarity imbued it with an exotic allure. *Amherstia* made reputations and shaped careers in Britain; it memorialised horticulturalist Louisa Lawrence under whose care it first flowered and who wisely bequeathed it to Kew Gardens from whence it was distributed around the world; and it was the material inspiration for Marianne North to voyage to 'the tropics' and become an acknowledged painter of natural history. *Amherstia* was first sighted by Wallich on a survey of Burmese teak forests and its story acts in stark contrast to that of the teak trees sought after and felled for their timber. Rather, it was, as Teltscher recounts, celebrated for its ornamentality, indeed, for its very uselessness. Rather than manage the Burmese teak forests sustainably, the British had largely exhausted them by the 1870s.

Amanda Burton's essay, 'Beatrix Potter and the "timber question": Arboreal stewardship in the English Lake District' transports us to rural England in the inter-war period (1918–1939) by which time, partly as a result of extractive practices at home and abroad, and particularly because of the demand for timber during World War I, Britain's timber supplies were severely threatened. The Forestry Commission had been formed in 1919 to combat this, and Burton observes that Potter's personal correspondence and fictional writing at this time demonstrate not only the importance of trees as memorials and in the making of the Lake District landscape but also a more modern emphasis on good

stewardship of the land and best arboricultural practice. She was both sentimental and practical, aesthete and landowner, environmentalist and arboriculturist.

We hope this anthology of research papers, poems and reflections will enable readers to see the affordances of trees understood as cultural actors and to understand tree cultures as a means of developing their own work. Focusing on trees and their embedded cultural histories allows fresh perspectives to be explored and deeper understandings of the contributions of trees to human cultures and landscapes.

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We would like to thank the editors of *Plant Perspectives* for inviting us to produce this special issue and for their help at every stage of the process. We wish to acknowledge the referees who have given freely of their time and expertise to offer constructive criticism to us and our contributors. And we are indebted to the Royal Geographical Society (and the Historical Geography Research Group which sponsored our panel), the Linnean Society of London and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (with additional support from the University of Derby) for hosting the events which brought this arboreal humanities network together.

Caroline Cornish is an historical geographer with interests in the history of landscapes, empires, science and collections. She has published extensively on the history of economic botany at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew where she is Humanities Research Coordinator. She was senior researcher on the 'Mobile Museum' research project (AHRC 2017–19) which configured Kew and its museum as a 'centre of circulation'. She was also a co-author of the report *Plant Humanities: Where Arts, Humanities & Plants Meet* (2022) funded by an AHRC 'Where next?' award, which scoped out the plant humanities as a disciplinary space meriting further research investment. Dr Cornish has also become a champion for greater diversity in the researching and writing of history, and in 2024 was awarded the President's Medal by the Society for the History of Natural History (SHNH) for contributions to promoting accessibility, inclusivity, and diversity in the study of natural history.

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Tree Biographies and the Cultural History of Place at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*

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ABSTRACT

Trees can be invested with, and accumulate, cultural history and meaning. In gardens they are often also markers of events, entangled relationships, journeys and ideas, and are central to the making of place. This article introduces and discusses the notion of 'tree biographies' developed from the object biography approach common in museum studies. Through this interdisciplinary process, the unique significance and cultural value of a tree can be fully recognised alongside a deeper understanding of its contribution to the landscape. An example of this approach, used at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is presented in discussion of the biography of a deodar cedar from India. This article concludes by addressing the opportunities this methodology can present and how, by exposing the fascinating histories of such potent objects, we can animate the story of our landscapes.

KEYWORDS

trees, tree cultures, embodied history, object biography, Kew Gardens, plant humanities

Over recent years, trees have been the subject of a large and growing popular literature concerned with the cultural meanings and uses of familiar species such as the oak, ash or hawthorn, as well as exploring the history of the relationship between people and plants in particular places and landscapes.[1] These works promise to restore a much-needed context and sense of appreciation for the trees that surround us, sentiments that have a powerful appeal in our nature-depleted societies. Our need for connection to, and understanding of, such long-lived and important life-forms, how they embody their space and tell their stories, has now extended into diverse disciplines.[2] The cultural histories of woods and

* Title page image reproduced by kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

1 For example: F. Stafford, *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (New Haven: Yale, 2016); nature writing such as J. Canton, *The Oak Papers* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2020); as well as sweeping novels such as A. Proulx, *Barkskins* (London: Fourth Estate, 2016).

2 See, for example, D. Nassar and M. Barbour, 'Tree stories, the embodied history of trees and environmental ethics', *Cultural Politics* **19** (1) (2023): 128–47; M. Battles,

forests have been considered by Charles Watkins and others including Oliver Rackham, while Owain Jones and Paul Cloke interrogated the agency of trees in the continuous unfolding of place and culture.[3] Building upon such work, here I focus on the challenge of telling stories about specific living trees, beyond simple narratives of non-human lives. Here, I consider the ways in which we can enrich the history of a landscape or garden by offering new perspectives on the cultural lives, value and significance of the trees that live there. Exploring the story of one tree *in situ* can reveal new layers of context regarding the place, people and practices that surround it. My formulation of these histories in terms of 'tree biographies' seeks to use and adapt an existing methodology, drawn from the field of museum studies, in a quite different context: a living garden.[4] The necessarily interdisciplinary nature of the research required to create such biographies places this methodology within the realm of the Plant Humanities, reflecting the unparalleled significance of plants to human culture.[5]

FROM OBJECT BIOGRAPHY TO TREE BIOGRAPHY

Objects have life stories. That is the contention of historians of material culture who seek to explore both the history of individual objects and how those objects have affected history. The approach of object biography has gathered pace over recent decades and is used to better understand our collective social and cultural history through the significance and relevance of individual objects (usually, though not exclusively, museum objects). What has become clear is that it is not just 'important' or well-known objects that best reveal such histories, but the 'everyday' and the overlooked too. This genre narrates the history

Tree (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

3 C. Watkins, *Trees, Woods and Forests: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); O. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2020); O. Jones and P. Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

4 Tree biographies form an integral part of C. Hourigan, The Making of a Global Arboretum: The Case of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Ph.D. thesis, forthcoming, Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London).

5 F. Driver, C. Cornish and M. Nesbitt, *Plant Humanities: Where Arts, Humanities & Plants Meet*, Final report to AHRC (2021), p. 4.

and context of an item, its cultural and social importance, but also its mutability.[6] Anne Gerritson's use of the history of a soya sauce bottle and its contents explored the history of food and dining, manufacturing and marketing in the early nineteenth century.[7] Others have focused on 'reanimating' museum objects and the processes of the making of a museum collection through the story of one preserved specimen – for example the examination of the life ecology and cultural perceptions of the hen harrier by Merle Patchett et al., and Caroline Cornish's use of economic botany objects to explore the importance and global connections within RBG Kew's Economic Botany Museum.[8] These diverse approaches of object biography all reveal hidden worlds and aid understanding of global connections by moving from the micro to the macro view. They seek to 'reconnect objects to the cultural aspects not only of the society where they originated … but also of the collecting, and specimen-making society'.[9] As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall have reflected:

> The notion of the biography of objects goes back to [Igor] Kopytoff (1986) who felt that things could not be fully understood at just one point in their existence and … had to be looked at as a whole. Not only do objects change through their existence, but they often have the capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected.[10]

If we can judge that museum objects have 'accumulated' life histories – each made unique by the individual journeys they have taken and

6 E. Lilje and J. Philip, 'The dancing trees: Objects, facts and ideas in museums', in *From Field to Museum – Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence*, ed. by J. Specht, V. Attenbrow and J. Allen, *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum (Online)* **34** (2021): 183–94.

7 A. Gerritsen, 'The global life of a soya bottle', inaugural lecture, University of Leiden (2014): https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A3140344/view

8 M. Patchett, K. Foster and H. Lorimer, 'The biogeographies of a hollow-eyed harrier', in *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 110–33; C. Cornish, Curating Science in an Age of Empire: Kew's Museum of Economic Botany. (Ph.D. thesis, Department of Geography. Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013).

9 Lilje and Philip, 'The dancing trees', p. 183.

10 C. Gosden and Y. Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', *World Archaeology* **31** (2) (1999): 170.

bearing the traces of the people who have encountered them – and if we accept that those objects can change in meaning and purpose as time progresses, then some trees – especially those in curated living collections or gardens – are obvious subjects for biographical treatment. Trees can have lifespans that cover centuries and can live and be present through several eras of human history. They fit within the Western concept of the 'life cycle' – or span – of birth, maturity, old age and, in so doing, also create many connections. Their 'journey' can involve not just the classic elements of an object biography: movement, trade, specimen-making, changing cultural context etc., but also, as organic beings with their own lives, they will have an innate physical mutability. They are part of the ecological and cultural tapestry of specific places. An individual tree can embody its own history of the events and encounters it has lived through. It can change in form and respond to the environment as it grows from a seed to a sapling and into maturity and thence through old age, death and decay. It can bear the marks (sometimes physically) of collectors, traders, growers, gardeners, visitors and other life – animals, plants and fungi – that interact with it. Each element of this mutability can affect how a tree is perceived, valued and treated, but each also reflects the significance of the tree in that place.

Just as Patchett et al. looked to renew the life of their hen harrier specimen through 'stories of human-animal encounter … to elicit different kinds of knowledge and viewpoints about them', looking at life, death and afterlife, so a tree's own unique story of multiple encounters can be gathered from a range of materials and viewed from different perspectives over its lifetime.[11] Caitlin DeSilvey describes such subjects as 'potent objects' that can radiate 'potential paths of inquiry … complex and mobile geographies' and that an 'artifact [can be] a process rather than a stable entity' or can come to be more symbolic than practical, a holder of cultural memory or the recording of the circulation of value.[12] And, as Cornish has revealed, applying object biography methods can reveal the global nature and inter-relatedness of many collections, while allowing for a better understanding of 'meaning-making' through

11 Patchett et al., 'The biogeographies of a hollow-eyed harrier', p. 112.

12 C. DeSilvey, 'Object lessons: From batholith to bookend', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 146–58.

objects.[13] Objects gain meaning and accumulate cultural histories through interaction with us as humans, and the focus of the authors above is on the social and cultural lives of 'things' in that context. These concepts align with the idea of living trees as 'objects' as people across diverse cultures encounter them, and invest distinct meanings, symbolism, narratives, and values onto them. Trees are central points of connection within a larger web of stories. They can grow and change to become cultural or sacred symbols, markers of horticultural activity or landscape change – 'meeting places of nature and human labour … designed to have value'.[14] They can also undergo what Setsu Tachibana and Charles Watkins have called, 'botanical transculturation' transforming from the 'exotic' to the 'culturally assimilated'.[15]

Adopting this 'tree biography' approach can unlock fresh perspectives on trees as embodiments of cultural memory, allowing a deeper interrogation of them as sites of meaning. Here, I focus on plant–people relationships to tell a life story of a tree, which then aids our understanding of the landscape it dwells within and the cultural history that shaped it. In my own research, I have used this methodology to address the life stories of trees curated within the arboretum of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, but hope that it may be of relevance to other types of arboreal landscapes.

TREE BIOGRAPHY AT THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW

Trees have long had both practical and cultural significance to us, but they are also 'skilled place makers'.[16] This is exemplified in living tree collections known as arboreta – 'living museums' of tree species and

13 C. Cornish, 'Curating global knowledge: The Museum of Economic Botany at Kew Gardens', in Diarmuid A. Finnegan and Jeffrey J Wright (eds), *Spaces of Global Knowledge: Exhibition, Encounter and Exchange in an Age of Empire* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 119–42.

14 C. Mukerji, 'The landscape garden as material culture: Lessons from France', in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 543.

15 S. Tachibana and C. Watkins, 'Botanical transculturation: Japanese and British knowledge and understanding of *Aucuba japonic*a and *Larix leptolepis* 1700–1920', *Environment and History* **16** (1) (2010): 43–71.

16 Jones and Cloke, *Tree Cultures*, p. 10.

cultivated varieties.[17] Just as a museum revolves around the diversity and importance of its objects, an arboretum is a collection of living artefacts which in themselves are a collection of individual stories, making not only each tree unique but each assemblage of trees unique. Today, around 12,000 trees of over 2,000 taxa grow in the arboretum at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, collected from a vast range of temperate habitats from around the world. Many have been collected as an exemplar of their species, or for a conservation purpose, and have arrived via a network of botanical actors to become living 'scientific specimens' within the arboretum. These trees have then continued to accumulate and embody new histories, values and meanings determined by the new environmental and social parameters under which they have been displayed. The majority of trees in this setting have been collected, transported, catalogued and curated over their lifetimes as 'living treasures'.

Tree biography as a methodology does not aim to create a straightforward narrative of a linear timeline but aims to explore and bring together archival, scientific, horticultural, illustrative and literary sources and objects in an exploration of the life, value and context of an individual tree. This is appropriate at an historic and well-archived institution such as Kew, where diverse research materials across different collections are available, and it is acknowledged that such institutions are rare. However, as Jones and Cloke consider, within any treescape trees will naturally 'play an active role, projecting themselves into political, cultural and economic fabrics' and that they are 'often emblematic of the wider environment' where their 'shadowy meaningfulness' has much to offer.[18] The unique lens of this approach at Kew can reveal both the significance and agency of an individual tree but also the voices and contributions of previously unseen individuals and their importance to the creation, management, successes and failures, and overall purpose of the tree collections. Not all trees are enfolded by records that can help us to tell their stories, but in certain cases they can embody and expose fascinating narratives, animating the history of the landscape. This is a method by which the past can speak to the present.

17 See P.A. Elliott, C. Watkins and S. Daniels, *The British Arboretum: Trees, Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

18 Jones and Cloke, *Tree Cultures*, pp. 7 and 2.

Understanding the individual and collective significance of trees in this way also relates to work undertaken in the museum sector on 'object significance' – a widely accepted curatorial approach.[19] This explores how by understanding 'significance' through defined criteria, it is possible to unlock the potential and connections of a collection, helping define both the tangible and intangible, 'creating opportunities for communities to access and enjoy collections and to understand [their] history'.[20] Including significance within tree biographies at Kew can inform and guide future curation within the arboretum and the interpretation of selected trees.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew has a complex past dating back to 1759. The arboretum has grown extensively over time and through the work of many different directors, designers, gardeners and collectors.[21] The main arboretum began to be planted in the late 1850s and has continued to evolve and change ever since as a living landscape. Kew as a place can be said to be completely made by the plants that grow there.[22] Each has been brought from a different place and time and has its own unique story. Many of Kew's mature trees today were planted over a hundred years ago, in an era of imperial botany, collecting and exchange. In the case of Kew's global and historic collections, we must consider how the collecting and study of trees became, as Miles Ogborn has described, tied into the political economy and geopolitics of European empires, global networks of trade, naval power and scientific enterprise.[23]

USING TREE BIOGRAPHY TO UNCOVER THE LIFE OF A DEODAR CEDAR

Halfway along the 300-metre-long Broad Walk at Kew stands a tall evergreen conifer, its elegant sweeping branches bedecked with fat upright

19 T. Ireland, S. Brown and J. Schofield, 'Situating (in)significance', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* **26** (9) (2020): 827.

20 R. Russell and K. Winkworth, *Significance 2.0. A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections* (Collections Council of Australia, 2009). p. 1.

21 R. Desmond, *The History of Kew*, second revised edition (London: Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2007).

22 Hourigan, The Making of a Global Arboretum.

23 M. Ogborn, 'Vegetable empire', in *Worlds of Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 271.

FIGURE 1.
The specimen of *Cedrus deodara* or Deodar cedar examined for this tree biography on the Broad Walk at RBG Kew. © Christina Hourigan

FIGURE 2.

This image of the Broad Walk by E.J. Wallis published in 1908 shows the deodar avenue and the tree under discussion on the right of the image.
Reproduced from W.J. Bean and William Thistleton-Dyer, *The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: Historical and Descriptive* (London: Cassell and Company, 1908).

grey cones dripping with sticky resin. This is a deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), one of three surviving specimens of an avenue planted here in 1845. Standing tall among the new ornamental flower beds, its forked large dark-grey trunks act as a foil to the delicate light-green foliage at the ends of its drooping branches (see Figure 1). This tree stands in one of the busiest parts of the Gardens, where millions of people stroll by each year. This was always the intention of the people who designed and planted this space – that the deodar avenue would welcome as many people as possible (see Figure 2). This tree represents a new era of Victorian landscaping and expansion at Kew from a time when it was transformed from a private royal landscape into a national public botanic garden in the 1840s. This individual was also one of the first trees planted outdoors at Kew from the temperate forests of India. It is therefore a potent symbol

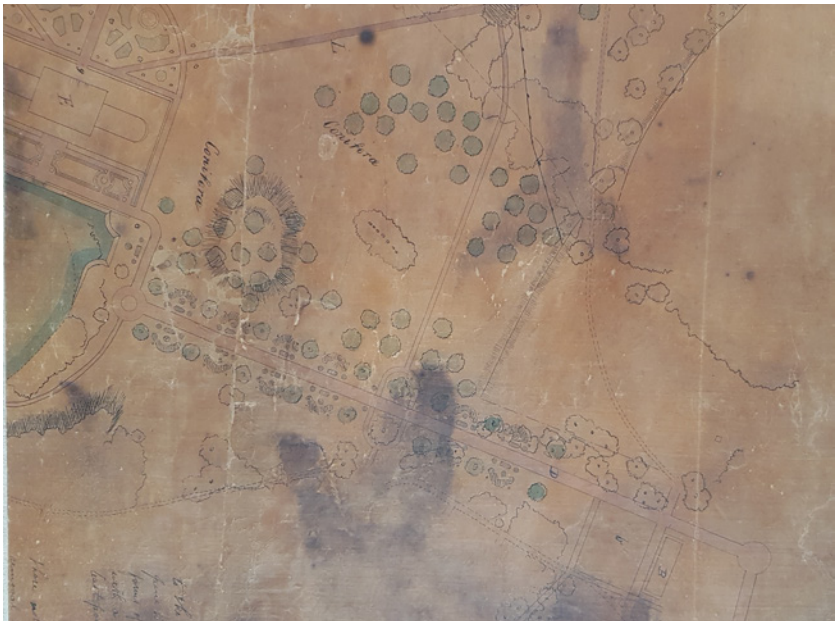

FIGURE 3.

Portion of a map showing the planned avenue of deodars and ornamental beds to be planted along Kew's Broad Walk.
Plan of the Pleasure Grounds, W.A. Nesfield, 1845. RBG Kew Archives. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew.

of landscape change, of new plant networks, and 'the botanical enterprise of empire', converging in the making of place.[24]

Research on this tree engaged with a wide range of archive materials and collections at Kew and beyond. Searching Kew's own plant database with the tree's 'accession number' (an individual number assigned to each tree), reveals it to be of 'wild origin', but with no details of how it was transported into the country from its native India or who collected or planted it. However, contextual research on the introduction of deodars to Britain and a review of Victorian Kew guidebooks, conifer

24 A phrase taken from a speech to the Colonial Society by Kew assistant director W. Thiselton-Dyer, 'The botanical enterprise of the Empire' (HMSO, 1880): www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/60229388

collection handbooks, Kew maps and archival materials including correspondence between directors, designers, and leading botanists of the day, as well as an unpublished history of Kew by the then curator John Smith (1798–1888), all revealed that this tree had played a significant part in the creation of the new aesthetic and symbolism of this innovative national botanic garden in the mid-nineteenth century.

It became clear that this tree had likely been grown from a shipment of deodar seed from northern India, imported by the East India Company via India House in London, as many tonnes of seed then were. Kew's 'Inwards Book' for 1842 records a shipment of deodar seed from the East India Company via a Dr Royle.[25] The tree was grown on site in a tree nursery (now the site of a tropical nursery) near to where it would be planted, and the work involved in growing it and then creating the avenue reflected the practices and hard labour of horticulture at that time, giving new insights into the often-invisible taskscape of Kew.

Research across the many maps in Kew's archives showed that the deodar was a key part of the new high-Victorian design by William Andrews Nesfield to transform the older royal Georgian landscape (see Figure 3). It was part of an impressive planting plan, including many fashionable conifers, creating a wide promenade leading up to the new Palm House. The deodars of the Broad Walk (or 'Deodara Walk' as Nesfield called it) were to set the stage for visitors entering this new garden – visitors who were, as A.J. Lustig describes, often obsessed with botany and horticulture, and the 'new aesthetic of connoisseurship and collecting'.[26] This physical reordering of the landscape and planting of new 'exotic' trees and shrubs along a bold new promenade was a statement of intent in a confident new era of bringing together and displaying the world's plants for both imperial science and visitor pleasure in these gardens.

Kew currently describes the native range of this species as 'NE. Afghanistan to W. Nepal and NW. India (Morni Hills)' growing at

25 *Plants Inwards 1828–1847* [1842], Library and Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Other shipments to Kew are referenced in several letters from Royle (superintendent of the East India Company gardens at Saharanpur, India) to W. Hooker from 1843 onwards. See for example: DC/54/409; DC/54/422; DC/55/254 (East Indian Letters, RBG Kew Archives). Also MCR/5/1/26 India Economic Products: D. ff164–187. Library and Archives, RBG, Kew.

26 A.J. Lustig, 'Cultivating Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century English Gardens', *Science in Context* **13** (2) (2000): 166.

elevations between 1,300 and 3,300 metres.[27] Connecting this deodar back to India allowed for a contextual study of the forests of India at this time, the uses of deodar timber for building, bridges and a vast new railway network, and highlighted the links between Kew, the British-Indian government and the Dehra Dun forestry school in India. The desire for Indian timber had led to large-scale deforestation (and social injustice and unrest) in many areas of northern forest that were once seen as 'inexhaustible', despite government-run forest preserves being set up elsewhere in India.[28] Indeed, the deodar had been initially introduced to Britain in 1832 as a potential timber tree.[29] However, they quickly became popular as ornamental trees, and strong saplings were changing hands in London for two guineas each in 1844.[30] Placing this tree in such a historic context allows consideration of its imperial symbolism in this space.

The mobilisation of this Indian tree across continents and oceans to Britain was indicative of the growing botanical networks of the age, as well as the commercialisation of plants found in Britain's colonies. At the time, Kew described itself as a botanical clearing-house as well as a living museum, of service to the colonies as well as the 'mother country', providing specimens, publishing Floras of all the then-known species in a region or country, sharing staff and expertise between colonial gardens.[31] Indeed, it prided itself on having a comprehensive herbarium of Indian flora 'more complete than anything which exists even in India itself'.[32] This deodar would have been growing well when Dr Dietrich Brandis, head of the Indian Forest Department, visited Kew for two years to use the herbarium and complete a *Forest Flora of North-West and Central India* in 1874, while *The Flora of British India* (1872–1897) was also being undertaken by Kew director Sir Joseph Hooker. Mentions of deodar abound

27 https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:676701-1

28 See G.A. Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); V. Damodaran and R. D'Souza (eds), *Commonwealth Forestry and Environmental History: Empire, Forests and Colonial Environments in Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia and New Zealand* (Delhi: Primus, 2020).

29 https://www.treesandshrubsonline.org/articles/cedrus/cedrus-deodara/

30 J.C. Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum,* second edition (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1844), Vol. 4, p. 2432.

31 Thiselton-Dyer, 'The botanical enterprise of Empire'.

32 Ibid. p. 11.

across Kew's Library and Archive materials – in correspondence, government memos, illustrations, photographs and books, as well as in Kew's Economic Botany Collection. These, along with the living display of a deodar at Kew in such a prominent position, reflect the Victorian fascination with Indian plants and products. Such trees can therefore easily tell histories of multiple places and reflect the complex politics of the time.

Examining the embodied history of a tree of course includes addressing the character of it as an individual, how it sits within the landscape, shapes its own environment, and bears the marks of its own interactions with its surrounding ecology, as well as the people who care for it. This tree's physical form and size shows clear marks of its survival over 180 years reacting to the less-than-ideal conditions of Kew's free-draining soils, cold, wet or frosty winters and plenty of Victorian air pollution, for this is by no means the finest example of its species. It has reacted over the years both to the angle of the sun and the compaction of many visitors' feet by growing far better on the side away from the Broad Walk. Seen from the lawned area away from the path it presents a different face with an abundance of sweeping branches and foliage where it has space to grow. Despite having large limbs pruned away in the past it has healed its wounds and continues to thrive even in the challenging soil and climate there.

It is lucky to have survived, as many horticultural writers of the time describe the immense failure rate of deodars, many dying off before they reached forty years of age.[33] Kew was no exception. Its second director Sir Joseph Hooker recorded the toll that severe frosts took on young deodars, killing their leader stems. In a letter of January 1854 in Kew's archives Hooker wrote to his American friend and botanist Asa Gray saying: 'As to our Deodar Avenue of Kew it is the seediest most ragged affair you ever saw … these were all seed raised; had we planted cuttings as nurserymen do, of the most weeping glaucous long leaved strips, what a different thing we should have had.'[34] Indeed, although deodars were planted on all the main vistas at Kew in the mid-nineteenth-century, nearly all of them failed. Photographs of Kew through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show the success and failure of individual trees along the

33 See H.J. Elwes and A. Henry, *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, priv. print 1906–1913). Vol. 3, pp. 479 and 481.

34 Letter from Joseph Hooker to Asa Gray, Jan. 1854. JDH/2/22/1/1. f.8. Library and Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Broad Walk as time progressed. It has been speculated that this failure may have been due to the seed having been collected from trees from too low an altitude in India making the cedars grown from them in Britain not hardy enough for British winters. The worst specimens on the Broad Walk were removed and replaced in 1913 by Atlantic cedars (*Cedrus atlantica*) and other species which were then considered to be better suited to the British climate. The fate of many of Kew's deodars reflects the constant changes and struggle of the early Victorian arboretum at Kew. Archive materials clearly record many tree failures and the re-workings of the arboretum planting plan under successive directors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To view the three remaining deodars on the Broad Walk and the handful on Pagoda Vista is therefore to witness the remnants a former layer of Kew's design and vision.

This now mature deodar is a fundamental part of the ornamental aesthetic of this area of the Gardens. Although prominent, it is now often overlooked – a piece of green theatre on a grand processional walkway towards the Palm House – but it is a holder of cultural memory and connections which need to be re-animated to give greater meaning to this site. Its meaning and value in this space as it has matured and survived have only grown. Remarkably, however, new scientific research in progress by Kew's current head of the tree collections, Kevin Martin, shows that climate change may bring a new era of success for the deodar at Kew and more may now be planted, possibly even from the seed of this very tree, offering it a new 'afterlife' in its progeny.[35]

Other individual trees of different species researched using this approach have revealed the embodied stories of the global nature of research and collecting at Kew, plant mobility, economic trade in tree parts, museum collection-building, a national and international network of horticultural expertise, and the hidden stories of little-known collectors and Kew gardeners whose contributions to the history of the collections and landscape have so far been underappreciated. They have also highlighted the absence of certain archival records, notably of indigenous collectors in a variety of countries. Each biography has added to the understanding of

35 S. Toomer, T.H. Freeth and K.W.E. Martin, *Planting for the Future: Kew's Landscape Succession Plan* (RBG Kew, 2024); H. Sjöman and A. Anderson, *The Essential Tree Selection Guide, for Climate Resilience, Carbon Storage, Species Diversity and Other Ecosystem Benefits* (Bath: Filbert Press, 2023). The full tree biography of this deodar is included in Hourigan, The Making of a Global Arboretum.

the contribution of trees to this landscape as a scientific and cultural living museum. These trees were planted at a time when botanical knowledge imbued many elements of a society steered towards 'improvement', and an era when science and horticulture worked closely together.[36]

As a tree is a living organic being, there are many nuances and distinct opportunities in using an object biography approach. At places such as Kew, trees can have multiple physical lives, in contrast to most inorganic museum objects. An accessioned tree can have had parts pressed into herbarium specimens, or used to make microscope slides, economic botany objects, or botanical art, as well as the fact that any tree will have created many living progeny (via seeds or genetically identical scions) and these will have been planted elsewhere at Kew or shared with other gardens. The creation of new lives from one accessioned tree can offer a wealth of opportunities for reflecting upon the value and significance of the mother tree. The connection points and paths of inquiry can be many and varied, with each tree a central node in its own web of interaction with places, people, other objects, events or experiments. As Kopytoff considered – in an object's life it is the new relationships that are formed, and how an object is used, adopted or redefined by different people or cultures that can reveal much about both culture and object.[37]

Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair remind us that 'the question of value has been central to the study of material culture' and trees can of course be valued in many ways – from economic to ornamental and for their rarity.[38] The weight of a value attached to an individual tree is increased if it has been given as a gift, planted by a notable person, collected by a famous 'plant hunter', or a renowned nurseryman, or it may be considered to have contributed to society or the advancement of science in a particular way. Different values placed upon a tree leave a lasting trace on how it continues to be perceived or used. How we then interpret that value and how we display such a tree – for researchers or for the public - can in itself also have meaning.[39]

36 A.J. Lustig, 'Cultivating knowledge', p. 169.

37 I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 67.

38 L. Hannan and S. Longair, *History through Material Culture*, IHR Research Guides (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 53.

39 Ibid., p. 55.

CONCLUSION

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the approach of 'tree biographies' can offer a new way to view the accumulated histories and lives of individual trees revealing their value, significance and legacy. Curated trees, such as those in botanic gardens, offer a specific opportunity to view them as makers of place as well as markers of time, as 'meeting places of nature and human labour', reanimating the historic layers of a landscape.[40] Trees are not only rooted embodiments of cultural history but gateways to a wider understanding of the web of global connections that exist within many of our gardens and treescapes. While the deodar at Kew was a potent symbol of an imperial scientific vision within a Victorian landscape, each tree can offer a different perspective on, and a deeper understanding of, the same place, if allowed to tell its story.

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40 Mukerji, 'The landscape garden as material culture', p. 543.

Anna Burton

Beatrix Potter and the 'Timber Question': Arboreal Stewardship in the English Lake District

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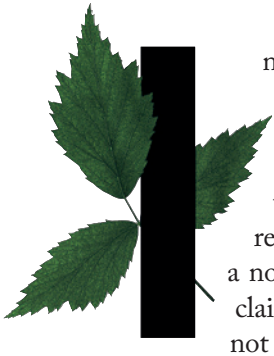
ABSTRACT

During Beatrix Potter's residency in the English Lake District, trees were vital to her vision for and understanding of this landscape; much more than this, for this author, arboreal stewardship was bound up with being a good landowner and citizen in this region. This article explores Potter's views regarding, and approaches to, tree planting, felling and the caretaking of timber on her land during the interwar period of the twentieth century, and at a particular time when the cultivation and conservation of this region's trees were of national importance. Building on this context, and through a close reading of Potter's tale, *The Fairy in the Oak* (1911), this study will explore how similar arboricultural impulses can be identified in the environmental ethics of the author's earlier, fictional, writings too.

KEYWORDS

timber, tree felling, planting, Lake District, Beatrix Potter



In an 1897 letter to Charles McIntosh, Beatrix Potter meditates on the connection between larch disease and the growth of *Peziza mycelium* on trees of this variety. Whilst Potter acknowledges that she has seen this fungi exist harmlessly in southern counties, she remarks that its prevalence in the Lake District has had a notable impact on the health of trees in that region and claims that 'it is so bad in Westmoreland [sic] that one does not find a straight stem in 500' specimens'.[1] In reasoning why this is the case, she notes that the 'woodmen think it is caused by replanting without cleaning up, & if the fungus *is* the cause they are right to some extent, because it breeds to an extraordinary extent on heaps of sticks'.[2] The disease proliferates, Potter writes, because of poor work. The woodsmen have not 'clean(ed) up' after their fellings, which in turn, has created an ideal environment for fungal spores to spread on that same site; a localised concern which has an echo in the region today, with the current proliferation of a fungus-like virus, *Phytophthora ramorum,*

1 Beatrix Potter, *Beatrix Potter's Letters*, ed. by Judy Taylor (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 40.

2 Ibid.

that continues to result in mass fellings of larch across Cumbria.[3] Whilst Potter's letter demonstrates a contemporary botanical knowledge, this last passage also reveals a familiarity with arboricultural practice (and practitioners) in this landscape, in her time. Several years later, Potter would purchase her own land in the Lake District and, as this article will highlight, her personal writings and correspondence from her Lakeland years show a continued interest in and an acute responsibility for the appropriate planting, felling and caretaking of trees, within and across her property. Trees were vital to Potter's vision for and understanding of this landscape; much more than this, for this author, arboreal stewardship was bound up with being a good landowner and citizen in this region.

Potter purchased her Sawrey homes, Hill-Top and Castle farms, in 1905 and 1909 respectively, then large tracts of land including Troutbeck Park in 1923 and the Monk Coniston estate from 1929, all of which were bequeathed to the National Trust in due course. In these spaces, Potter cultivated trees for a range of aims, for fruit and domestic produce, for aesthetic reasons and for economic purposes.[4] Respecting Potter's interest in timber during her Lakeland years, Linda Lear writes that Potter had a 'ready pen to write on the subject of timber culture [and] developed particularly strong opinions on afforestation' in the course of her farming endeavours;[5] more recently, Meg Sherval notes that 'protecting woodlands [became] particularly important to Potter … throughout her later years', as tree cover offered 'natural areas of protection' for sheep.[6] Potter was interested in planting and looking after tree spaces on her land, especially when it would be of benefit to her agricultural enterprise. Elsewhere, Matthew Kelly notes that, through work on her estates, 'she recognised the commercial value of … plantations', which, at the time

3 The National Trust, *Our Work at Tarn Hows and Coniston:* https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/lake-district/tarn-hows-and-coniston/our-work-at-tarn-hows-and-coniston (accessed February 2025).

4 The planting and caretaking of fruit trees was central to her homemaking at Sawrey. In a letter to Millie Warne in 1906, for example, she writes of 'a most interesting performance' of 'putting liquid manure on the [old] apple trees' at Hill-Top in the hope that they will continue to produce 'good cookers'. See Potter, *Letters,* p. 148.

5 Linda Lear, *Beatrix Potter: The Extraordinary Life of a Victorian Genius* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 279.

6 Meg Sherval, 'Nature's calling: Expanding the legacy of Beatrix Potter in the construction, contestation and contemporary preservation', *Literary Geographies* **10** (1) (2024): 125–42, at 134.

'stood in stark contrast to mainstream preservationism'.[7] For Kelly, and in contrast with many contemporaneous environmental thinkers, Potter appreciated the use of and place for plantation forestry in the region; in fact, it was an undertaking that was of financial benefit to the author and her estates. Though afforestation was not something that Potter wrote in direct public support of, this article will show that, in her private writings, she was particularly effusive about what she refers to as the 'timber question' and the nature of arboreal stewardship, more broadly.

Using her personal writings as evidence, this study will shed further light on the nuances within Potter's opinions on (and actions relating to) the caretaking and cultivation of timber trees in the Lakes. Building on this, the article will explore how an arboreal ethic might be identified in Potter's earlier letter stories to children, in the tale of *The Fairy in the Oak* (1911), in particular. In this fictionalised depiction of a felling, the reader might trace the author's attitudes towards arboreal husbandry, how and why it is undertaken and the ecological and sociological impacts of such work. Potter's interest in the stewardship of Lakeland trees and their caretaking pervades both her fictional writing and personal correspondences; much more than this, it was a concern from the beginning of her residency in the region. In order to better understand the arboreal resonances of her work in *The Fairy in the Oak*, however, a contextualisation of Potter's later timber work and associated principles follows here.

POTTER'S ARBORICULTURAL PRINCIPLES

In a letter to Louie Choyce in 1939, Potter alluded to her ideas about and engagement with the subject of timber:

> One job I am very interested in – is the timber question – also smothered with official red tape. There is a great shortage of pit props, partly owing to increased demand for the iron ore mines; and partly interruption of cargoes from northern Europe. It is a pity to see fine young larch go down, prematurely cut; but it is wanted.[8]

7 Matthew Kelly, *The Women Who Saved the English Countryside* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), p. 80.

8 Beatrix Potter, *The Choyce Letters: Beatrix Potter to Louie Choyce*, ed. by Judy Taylor (London: The Beatrix Potter Society, 1994), p. 67.

Potter acknowledges that 'the timber question' in the Lakes, at this point, was bound up with bureaucracy, 'smothered' in 'red tape' at the start of the Second World War. Whilst she mourns the premature felling of 'fine young larch' because it is not yet in its prime, she acknowledges that such timber is 'wanted' for and needed because of the war effort; pit props were needed for the mining of iron ore, which in turn, was wanted to produce ammunitions for the front. At the time Potter was writing, the debate over Britain's need for its own domestic timber supply was rumbling on, at a national and localised level. The Forestry Commission was attempting to develop extensive conifer plantations in the uplands of Eskdale and Dunnerdale during the 1930s; whilst Friends of the Lake District and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England protested against these plans and campaigned for a restriction in the types of planting in the region. One of the foremost figures of the campaign, H.H. Symonds, put forward in his public reply to the Commission's plans that '[the] Lake District pays its dividends already'; central to the protest was the concern that, whilst 'it is common opinion among civilized persons that trees are beautiful … not all trees are equally beautiful in all places'.[9] It was believed that trees were important to Lakeland culture, as perceived at local and national levels, and, much more than this, trees in the region were particularly valuable, simply because they existed in that landscape. Whilst Potter grieved impromptu felling in this letter, there is no attempt to intervene in this wider regional discourse and opposition to the Commission's plans during this decade; she was practical, rather than sentimental, when it came to felling trees for timber.

On her own land, Potter was keen to produce timber that would, in turn, contribute to the further development and maintenance of her estates. In a 1926 letter to S.H. Hamer, the National Trust secretary at the time, she writes that 'an estate should always have a stock of larch coming on, no matter what sentimentalists may say against the tree'.[10] Unlike earlier arborists, Potter values this tree as its benefits as a crop outweigh any indulgent perspectives that one may have of its beauty. In the same letter she notes that she has larch plantings at Sawrey that

9 H.H. Symonds, *Afforestation in the Lake District* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1936) pp. 8, 5.

10 Potter, *Letters*, p. 297.

will be 'ready to thin in about 10-12 years' and '[another] 5 acres of larch at the [Troutbeck Park] for replacing [the] pre-existing larch posts' on that land, too.[11] Potter was realistic about the usefulness of timber, with a mind to what amount an estate might need. She was also conversant with the economic value of such trees; when faced with any shortage, for instance, Potter was happy to sell larch stock for '£40 [or] £50', especially any 'inconspicuous trees that would not be missed'.[12] However, this is not to say that she planted trees simply for economic or utilitarian purposes; in the same letter to Hamer, for instance, she discussed a desire to plant Scotch firs and oaks on her land, to create 'a fairly large plantation' at Troutbeck especially, one which would be both 'ornamental & good shelter for [the] stock' of trees therein.[13] Potter's larch plantings served a valuable, if functional purpose; these trees were part of the maintenance planned for her estate, but they also allowed for the eventual planting and cultivation of more trees, for both ornamental and utilitarian aims. A similar sentiment finds an echo in Potter's magazine essay entitled, 'Of Timber', wherein she writes that 'there are two points of view in considering trees; the aesthetic, and the commercial'.[14] Whilst she is practical and mindful of the economic worth of trees, Potter advocates, in her personal and public writings, that trees should be viewed and valued for different purposes.

In moving on to discuss 'the general question of cutting down trees' in the aforementioned letter to Choyce, Potter continues to suggest that '1/3 of the trees in this district could be felled with positive advantage to the landscape, provided they were properly selected, and the remaining trees left in suitable groups'.[15] In these terms – and in notable contrast to Symonds's statements – felling might be a 'positive advantage' to the visual appearance of the Lakeland landscape, but such cropping should only take place when the trees are 'properly selected'. For Potter, felling required a form of specialist knowledge, and a felling decision might be determined by the tree (species and specimen) as much as the

11 Ibid.

12 Potter, *Letters*, p. 350.

13 Potter, *Letters*, p. 297.

14 Beatrix Potter, 'Of timber', in Leslie Linder (ed.) *A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter* (London: Frederick Warne, 1971), pp. 394–95, at p. 394.

15 Potter, *The Choyce Letters*, p. 67.

environment in which it exists. When contemplating the felling of oaks in a magazine essay, for example, Potter acknowledges that, whilst these trees can be a nuisance to farmers (like herself), any individual should 'think twice and thrice before [they] fell an oak. Generations of men and cattle will come and go before its like matures again'.[16] Here, historic value demands a specific kind of reverence that should suspend the woodman's axe. Potter warns that, though felling can be necessary, the worth of any tree should be weighed with a mind to other value systems, beyond the utility of the act itself.

Furthermore, Potter did not just dictate how others might plant or fell trees, but participated actively in the caretaking of trees on her land too. In the aforementioned letter to Choyce, Potter also tells her correspondent that 'on the few fine days' of weather, she 'go[es] about with a paint pot' marking trees that are to be felled and, at the same time, takes acorns around in her pocket to be 'dibbled in' the ground, where needed.[17] Elsewhere, William Reginald Mitchell records a second-hand anecdote, wherein Potter tells the children of a local family that she had marked out specific fruit trees that they might use on her property, stating that 'I have given you one apple and one plum tree. I have put a red band round them. You can have the fruit from those two trees'.[18] At once, Potter is mindful and self-assured in her own assessment of trees that should be felled for visual and/or economic reasons in the present, or marked out and used for communal produce; and she also plants seeds that will become established specimens in that landscape in the future. Not only does Potter prioritise cultivating and tending to the trees on her property (which she is confident in undertaking), but there is the sense that she also aligned her own successful arboriculture with being a proficient landowner.

For this reason, Potter was also highly critical when cutting and planting on her land was not carried out to her exacting standards. In a letter to the National Trust regarding their appointed agent, Bruce Thompson, for example, she writes '[he] seems to have no sense at all', 'wastes time & wages in the woods', does not undertake any 'new

16 Beatrix Potter, 'Acorns'. In Linder (ed.) *A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter*. pp. 393–94, at p. 394.

17 Potter, *The Choyce Letters*, p. 67.

18 William Reginald Mitchell, *Beatrix Potter: Her Lakeland Years* (Ilkley: Great Northern Books, 2010), p. 13.

plantings', and always ends up 'cutting down the wrong thing'.[19] Potter's writings and correspondence show that, from her perspective, planting and felling might be undertaken in a correct or incorrect manner. Tree cultivation requires skill and learning, the ability to comprehend whether a tree is of aesthetic or utilitarian value, and being cognisant of which has the most value in any given specimen and the environment in which it grows. This arboreal ethic and approach to caretaking can be identified in her letters, correspondence and essays from the 1920s–1930s, as her land ownership was expanding, but, as the second part of this article will illustrate through a close reading of *The Fairy in the Oak*, similar principles around timber and tree stewardship can also be identified at work, in her earlier Lakeland writings.

FICTIONAL FELLINGS

Potter first penned the story of *The Fairy in the Oak* in a letter to two young girls from New Zealand in 1911. The tale was subsequently adapted into a chapter for *The Fairy Caravan* collection and published for an American audience in 1929. Whilst this later version is perhaps most widely known – and though both versions of the narrative are alike in plot – as this discussion will demonstrate, the earlier letter-tale reveals a more place-specific attention to Lakeland tree cultures and cultivation. *The Fairy in the Oak* centres on a notable tree felling, as told by a narrator-version-of Potter and relayed by her friend, James, as he repairs her orchard wall. In this tale, James recalls when he 'helped to take down an enormous oak' near Coniston; but, as the narrator reveals and assures the reader, he 'did not know that there was any fairy [in the tree or tale] at all'.[20] James's account frames the narrative, but it is the narrator who then conveys the full scope and ramifications of this felling. This story appears to exist between Potter's personal and imaginary outlooks, within a fictionalised reality and an otherworldly domain, simultaneously. With Potter's later statements around arboreal stewardship and the treatment of timber in mind, in this story's depiction of a felling and those who participate in such an act, the reader might trace a

19 Potter, *Letters*, p. 410.

20 Beatrix Potter, *The Fairy in the Oak*, in Linder (ed.) *A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter*, pp. 351–56 at p. 352.

continuity between Potter's personal opinion(s) and the conceptualisation of her fictional environments.

In this tale, a fairy is displaced from her oak tree home by the Lake District council, who decide to cut down the ancient oak, 'to make the high road safe for motor cars'.[21] At the beginning of the narrative, the narrator emphasises the age and historic value of the 'north country' oak tree; whilst it is noted as being 'younger than the Doomsday Oak', it is a tree that was still notable for its number of 'rings', a tree that was 'in its prime in Queen Elizabeth's reign'.[22] The narrator here emphasises that the worth of this particular tree is in its mature state; it is to be venerated in its age which transcends human scales of space and time. Whilst the planter of this tree is unknown, the narrator notes that the 'man who plants and trains [such] an oak rears for himself a noble monument. Men may forget his name; but the tree grows clean and straight, through centuries, to thank him'.[23] To plant an oak and tend to its success during a lifetime, is to ensure a living 'monument' for the planter, and the presence of a tree in the landscape for generations to come. The oak in this story, though of historical value in itself, is made even more significant by the fact that 'the fairy of the oak' had coexisted with this particular tree 'for many hundred years'.[24] As a result of this co-dependency, the tree also thrived 'and grew straight and tall'.[25] The fairy and tree are bound up in a symbiotic relationship; this exchange, though unknown to the Lake District council or James in the story, is another form of arboreal value, invisible to most, but perceived by the narrator here.

In the letter-tale, the actual cutting down of the tree is described in particularly violent terms. The process is detailed at length, as 'the woodmen sawed [the tree's] branches off painfully' and with 'a roar' the tree is felled, '[the] arms of the tree were broken, and [the] fairy was stunned and lay still'.[26] Penny Bradshaw affirms that here, just as the fairy 'embodies' the physical existence of this tree in the tale, the suffering of the

21 Ibid., p. 353.
22 Ibid., p. 352.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 353.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 354.

tree is also articulated in forceful terms through the coeval experiences of this magical creature.[27] Moreover, the felling in Potter's tale is not only one of transcendent fairy magic; in the depiction of the felling process, the author also demonstrates a familiarity with the technicalities of this act in real-life terms. Alongside other surveying parties, Bruce Thompson – the aforementioned regional agent for the National Trust – appears in this earlier version of the tale, as a foremost figure in the planning process:

> There was Mr Thompson and two members of the Highway Board on bicycles; and the Surveyor in a trap; with poles, a tape, the chain links, and the theodolite on three legs. They clambered about the rocks, and measured, and squinted through the theodolite. Then they made marks in note books, and hammered in pegs; got on their bicycles and rode away.[28]

Just as she identified trees to be cut or used on her own property with paint and bands, Potter lingers over the materials and materiality of assessing, measuring and marking this tree, and how the impacts of the felling are mapped out on that terrain. The cropping of this tree is depicted as a planned, plotted and quantified endeavour, not an indiscriminate felling. Whilst Potter would go on to critique 'Mr Thompson' severely in later correspondence, it is the unnamed 'surveyor of the district council' who is the responsible authority in these circumstances, as they have 'no sentiment; and no respect either for fairies or for oak trees' in proceeding with this felling.[29] Blame is not laid at the feet of all timber workers equally; James, like most other men described here, is working under 'orders' from the district.[30] The woodsmen are not villainised, in part, because they are simply unaware of the full scope of their actions.

Aside from Potter's narrator, humans in these narratives cannot see the fae that are embedded within the natural world around them. In allowing the reader to move beyond what Laura Forsberg defines as

27 Penny Bradshaw, 'Trees and the development of ecological understanding in the work of Beatrix Potter', key-note paper presented at 'The Literary Arboretum' Symposium (Wordsworth Grasmere, July 2024). This key-note paper comprised research for Bradshaw's forthcoming book, *An A-Z of Beatrix Potter* (Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming 2025).

28 Potter, *Fairy in the Oak*, pp. 353–54.

29 Ibid., p. 353.

30 Ibid., p. 354.

the 'veil' of Victorian fairy literature, Potter allows her reader to see the 'limitations of human vision'.[31] The fairy is largely invisible, except that one of the woodsmen think they see 'a little creature like a green squirrel, sitting on the trunk'; or, as the narrator suggests, a witness might question how far 'all the noise in the wood was the grating noise of the saws' or whether it 'was the wind sighing in the pines, and the little tree fairies lamenting'.[32] Perception, of sight and sound, is more limited for the humans in this story. Though the fairy herself remains invisible, her anger manifests physically as the woodsmen's work progresses; as the men leave for the mill with the fallen tree, 'horse—oak—and waggon were overturned' by her influence, and though he cannot explain the 'strange[ness]' of the invisible threat enacting revenge on the workers, James notes that he was 'glad to get away alive'.[33] Whilst the narrator is not sympathetic towards this specific act of tree felling, and, as Marion Copeland argues, Potter's work 'posits that the loss of the "wild" drains the magic from the worlds of both human and nonhuman [beings]'; at the same time, the natural world in this tale remains a significant and lasting power that not all humans can (or do) fully recognise.[34] Much like the act of tree felling as described in Potter's letters, to perceive and acknowledge the complexity of such a value system attributed to trees in the landscape is a skill that needs to be cultivated by the humans in this story.

However, this tale is not a complete condemnation of human husbandry; in fact, Potter presents her reader with a compromise, for the humans and nonhumans in this environment. In the conclusion, it is made clear that, whilst the felling of a tree is a violent act, what is done with the arboreal remains of that tree, with its '[ ]* foot run of clean timber', must then make that act a worthwhile one.[35] After watching the

31 Laura Forsberg, 'Nature's invisibilia: The Victorian microscope and the miniature fairy'. *Victorian Studies* **57** (4) (2015): 638–66, at 648.

32 Potter, *Fairy in the Oak*, p. 354.

33 Ibid., p. 355.

34 Marion W. Copeland, 'The wild and wild animal characters in the ecofeminist novels of Beatrix Potter and Gene Stratton-Porter', in Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth (eds), *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), pp. 71–81, at p. 73.

35 Potter, *Fairy in the Oak*, p. 354. * Potter forgot to input an actual measurement in this instance – as Linder's footnote reveals, she 'left a space [in the letter] to put in

men take the tree away to 'Coniston Saw mill', the fairy is left homeless and isolated from the woodland environs around her, until the sounds of 'nails and hammers and saws' nearby 'stir [her] heart, and make [her] feet dance' and lead her across the meadow to a 'new bridge' which has been 'made of the fairy's oak'.[36] For the fairy, then, 'there comes comfort after trouble, and usefulness out of pain' in the creation of this bridge.[37] Furthermore, this 'usefulness' is envisioned in a verse that closes the story:

> Alike in summer and winter, the bridge stands firm and strong;
> over blue rippling shallows and pebbles—or brown floods racing along.
> The little toddling children, pass by to school, or play;
> the farm wife with her basket—all take that shortened way.
> The patient plodding horses, bend to the easier road;
> and Something leads them over, and helps them to lighten their load.
> It wears a duffle grey petticoat and a little russet-brown cloak;
> And that is the end of my story of
> The Fairy in the Oak.[38]

From the perspective of Potter-as-narrator, this specific oak tree should never have been cropped but, having been felled, it is important that such wood, 'well seasoned by trial and tears', is put to good use for communal purposes.[39] Through this, the tree becomes an arboreal revenant; it is no longer growing 'straight and tall', but it returns as a 'firm and strong' entity within these environs.[40] As Bradshaw argues, the denouement to this tale of suffering illustrates Potter's more 'pragmatic understanding' of the relationship between nature and culture, and encourages ecological perspectives on the part of her young readers which are underpinned by an awareness of the 'mutual reliance and connectivity' between all inhabitants in the landscape.[41] In these terms, the bridge

the length' – but the gap itself measures the author's desire to prioritise and define the tree's scale.

36 Potter, *Fairy in the Oak*, p. 356.

37 Ibid., p. 355.

38 Ibid., p. 356.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Bradshaw, 'Trees and the development of ecological understanding in the work of Beatrix Potter'.

that closes the story becomes a literal and notional crossing point for Potter's environmental and arboricultural ideals.

The bridging and crossing of boundaries, between species, spaces and beings, is a conceptual interest across Potter's tales for children. These crossings can be somewhat literal, for instance when Peter Rabbit escapes Mr McGregor's garden under a wooden fence; or they can have a magical quality, as exemplified when a young child opens a door into the Lakeland hillside which transports her into the Mrs Tiggywinkle's 'nice clean kitchen'.[42] In both of these anthropomorphic interactions, crossing over a physical threshold marks a human/non-human exchange (friendly or otherwise), and/or a blurring between wild and cultivated places. Moreover, Potter's crossings can be transient or permanent in nature; for example, in *The Tale of Pigling-Bland* (1913), the titular pig and his companion 'came to the bridge [that marked the county boundary]—they crossed it hand in hand—then [went] over the hills and far away', an action that, as Pigling's mother reminds him earlier in the tale, means somewhat inexplicably that 'you cannot come back'.[43] In contrast to the permanent rupture between two domains that occurs via the stone bridge here, the making of the wooden bridge – the felling and subsequent shaping of timber by human hands – in *The Fairy in the Oak* ends on a moment of vital and collaborative potential, which gestures to the continued occurrence of many future crossings, of further trans-species intimacies and sympathies. The continued co-existence of the fairy and the tree-as-bridge means that their previous unity persists in a new form, alongside human and non-human communities, and therefore becomes a model for mutual existence and companionship between species of all kinds.

In *When Species Meet,* Donna Haraway states that, across ecologies, 'we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down'.[44] For Haraway, perceiving the complex web of biological, environmental, cultural and historical interactions that take place in any encounter between species must be considered for future meetings, in order to better '[get] on together with

42 Beatrix Potter, *The Great Big Treasury of Beatrix Potter* (London: Random House, 1996), p.58.

43 Ibid., pp. 221, 207.

44 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 19.

some grace'.[45] This is not simply in human-animal-plant encounters but extends to all kinds of beings; to begin with, Haraway uses the example of a photograph of a tree stump in a forest, covered with moss, lichens and other organisms, that appears to look like a dog in a moment of imagined anthropomorphism. The author argues that this 'postarboreal life' is the product of 'naturalcultural contact zones';[46] amongst other things, these comprise 'practices of late nineteenth-century loggers who, without chain saws, cut the tree', the climate, as well as 'greenbelt policies' that protect that land.[47] This 'postarboreal life' is the result of an intermingling of natural and cultural elements, human and non-human influences, that in turn, co-shape it into something else. Just as Haraway sees a dog in a tree stump, the woodcutter in *The Fairy in the Oak* applies their own knowledge of the natural world (and what it contains) to explain their potential sighting of a 'green squirrel' during the felling. This is certainly another instance of Potter's interest in species crossing but, in light of Haraway's analysis, this blurring of 'naturalcultural contact' allows for further imaginative and ecological reflection on the part of the reader.

Whether it is a fairy or a squirrel, this creature is dislodged from their habitat; in the separation from its tree, this might be seen as an eco-spiritual loss of the 'soul' of the tree at the hands of commercial endeavour, or it can be read more literally as a loss of biodiversity in this woodland. The latter case here is especially striking, as the protection of upland oak woodlands in the Lakes – the 'temperate rainforest' of oak-dominated valleys in Borrowdale and Coniston – has recently been campaigned for by the Friends of the Lake District, amongst others, as a means to protect 'the abundance of distinctive plant and animal communities' therein.[48] In the homelessness and sorrow of the fairy or 'green squirrel', the reader might chart an implicit or explicit environmental commentary in these spatial and species crossings. However, in the destruction of the tree and creation of the bridge still inhabited by the fairy, Potter also envisions a bittersweet form of 'postarboreal life';

45 Ibid., p. 15.

46 Ibid., pp. 6, 7.

47 Ibid., p. 6.

48 Friends of the Lake District, *Upland Oak Woodlands* (2025): https://www.friendsofthelakedistrict.org.uk/faqs/upland-oak-woodlands-climate-change-facts (accessed Feb. 2025).

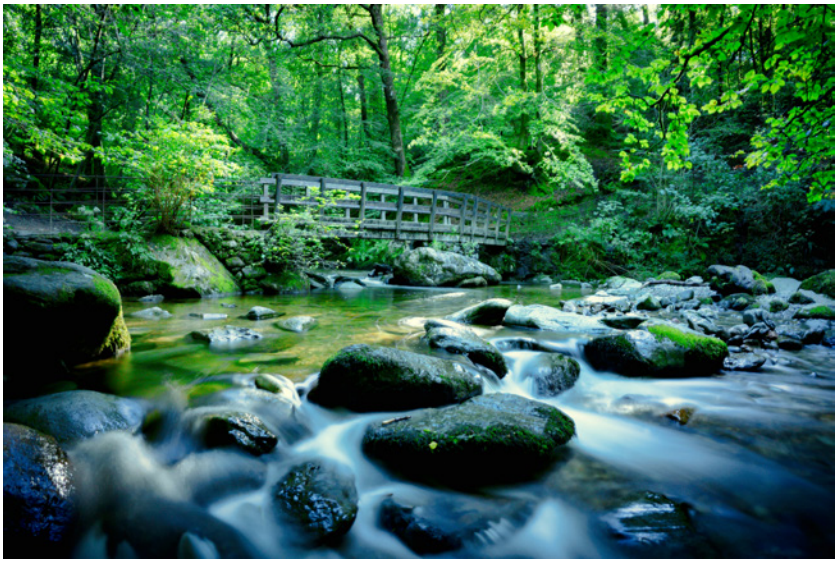


FIGURE 1.
Jonny Gios, *Stock Ghyll River.*
Source: Unsplash.

and, in this creation, the narrative offers amelioration for environmental degradation through mutual evolution. As well as being an object produced by commercial interests, this new form of co-existence is the product of suffering across creatures, humans and trees; this is a living narrative which might, in turn, also foster ecological thought (or as Haraway would have it, the desire to get on with other species, 'with some grace') in the reader.

Potter loved old oaks in their many forms and her interest in the 'postarboreal' also extended to her wider appreciation for objects made of timber, as can be seen in the material culture of wood products illustrated across her tales.[49] From a young age, Potter had an interest in having 'old furniture, oak in the dining room and Chippendale in the

49 See Elizabeth Jacklin,. '"Chippendale in the drawingroom": Beatrix Potter and furniture', *Furniture History* 54 (2018): 279–91.

drawing room';[50] whilst, as landlord of several properties in the Lakes, she wanted to 'collect any genuine pieces [of Lakeland oak furniture] to put back in the farmhouses'.[51] These respective ambitions were realised in the substantial collection of old oak and mahogany furniture acquired and situated across her estate. Once again, Potter aspired to be a considerate landlord in keeping Lakeland furniture close to the site of cultivation, but this interest did not extend to products from across the globe. The fact that Potter sent this tale of English deforestation to two girls from New Zealand is also noteworthy in this context. As G.A. Barton writes, until after the Second World War, Britain largely 'relied on its own colonies to supply such raw materials as timber'; it was only in 1913 – two years after Potter's letter – that, as Barton notes, a royal commission on forestry urged Parliament to create a forestry department in New Zealand that might allow for 'tight administrative control, and the planting of plantations to relieve the strain on indigenous forests and meet timber needs'.[52] In light of this, it is certainly unfair to assume that Potter might have corresponded with two young girls on the ethics of imperial interests in forestry, especially when the tale might foster interest in trans-species intimacy and ecological thought, regardless of geographical focus. However, the juxtaposition of these contexts also draws attention to the geographical limitations in her conceptualisation of arboreal care and timber use at this time.

Potter's interests in the ramifications of arboriculture and the 'timber question', in the treatment of actual trees and the shaping and maintenance of wood products, was expressly local. This is reaffirmed through a reading of *The Fairy in the Oak's* conclusion, wherein the act of creating a communal bridge from the timber of the native tree gestures explicitly to the work of a particular millocrat and Lakeland improver, James Garth Marshall. Contemporary with Potter's move to the Lakes, in his 1906 study, *The Book of Coniston*, W.G. Collingwood also makes explicit reference to the 'bridges … put up by Mr Marshall and kept in repair by the Lake District association'.[53] As Christopher Donaldson reveals in

50 Beatrix Potter, *The Journal Writings of Beatrix Potter, From 1881 to 1897: Transcribed from Her Code by Leslie Linder* (London: Frederick Warne, 1996), p. 90.

51 Potter, *Letters*, p. 370.

52 G.A. Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 94, 120.

53 W.G. Collingwood, *The Book of Coniston* (Kendal: Titus Wilson, 1906), p. 5.

FIGURE 2.
Jonny Gios, *Tarn Hows*.
Source: Unsplash.

his study of Marshall's improvements within the region, the landowner planted many trees and created dams at Tarn Hows, erected the sawmill at Far End in Coniston and made many changes for 'public benefit' within the Lakes, including the 'installation of bridges, footpaths, and pony drives' to expand access within the region.[54] Whilst Potter's story does not name Marshall as a figure, the sawmill at Coniston is named as the site of the oak's timber transformation. Equally, as the landowner was known at this time for incorporating bridges, paths and pony access, within and around Coniston, the implementation and utility of the bridge at the end of *The Fairy in the Oak* aligns with Marshall's improvements in this area specifically. This association is significant as

54 Christopher Donaldson, 'Authorial effects at work in the English Lakes: the curious case of Tarn Hows', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* **42** (4) (2020): 433–48, at 437.

it reveals that, from an early stage in her Lakeland years, Potter was conversant with localised arboricultural practices, how and where timber was treated and kept in the region, and the associated responsibility of these concerns as a landowner and landlord in the early twentieth century.

Tree cultivation, planting and felling would define and characterise Potter's approach to maintaining her Lakeland properties. In particular, the author's attitudes towards timber, whilst not particularly sentimental or global in nature, were informed by a spectrum of ideas about the caretaking of trees. With respect to felling trees in particular, for Potter, environmental, aesthetic and historical factors must be considered and balanced alongside economic and utilitarian concerns before any tree is cut down. This principle defines Potter's later arboricultural work and commentary, but is also present in the earlier environmental ethics of her children's tales set in the Lake District. In a subsequent letter-tale, *The Oakmen* (1918), written for the god-daughter of her husband, Potter conceptualised a further tale of timber cropping and arboreal relocation. In another narrative aimed at a child, the reader can trace Potter's earlier concerns and ideas relating to arboreal stewardship. In this letter, Potter-as-narrator relays the story of a gnome-like collective living in a 'big black wood' of larch, who, like the fairy in the previous tale, are displaced by a felling act.[55] Here, 'two wood fallers … with axes' reduce the Oakmen's homes to 'nothing but stumps, and chips, and trunks of trees', leaving a number of gnomes 'buried in chips'.[56] Whilst the timber workers are distanced from the full extent of the blame, as there is no indication that they are aware of the magical creatures in the first place – with Potter's earlier letter to Macintosh in mind – here the author is certainly critiquing the woodsmen's careless job of felling the trees. The tale concludes with the transference of the Oakmen to a wood of '1700 little larches and 500 little spruces, like little Christmas trees' that the author planted herself, next to Moss Eccles Tarn in Sawrey.[57] In this later instance, the imaginary worlds of Potter's writings are blended with her real-life plantings and cultivation, an endeavour that would

55 Beatrix Potter, *The Oakmen*, in Linder (ed.) *A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter*, pp. 240–42, at p. 242.

56 Ibid., pp. 241, 242.

57 Ibid., p. 242.

then shape the author's approach to landownership, beyond the pages of her correspondence, for subsequent decades.

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Shelley's Arboreal Poetics of Place and Wordsworth's 'Woodland State'

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ABSTRACT

William Wordsworth, deemed the 'Poet of Nature' by Percy Bysshe Shelley, is well known for his affinity with trees. This essay directs attention to Shelley's arboreal poetics of place through Wordsworthian allusions in *Alastor* and related compositions. Shelley's trees branch throughout his various forms of composition, from the drawings of trees in his manuscript notebooks, to rhetorical figures within his poems and descriptions of trees observed in letters. Contrary to Shelley's apparent rejection of Wordsworth in the Preface to *Alastor*, the 'woodland state' of a related poem, 'Verses Written on Receiving a Celandine in a Letter from England', underscores the persisting importance of Wordsworth's place in Shelley's arboreal poetics..

KEYWORDS

Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, Romantic Poetry, Poetics, Arboreal Humanities.

William Wordsworth, deemed the 'Poet of Nature' by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his sonnet, 'To Wordsworth', is well known for his affinity with trees.[1] The first-generation English Romantic poet memorialised in verse the 'Yew-tree, pride of Lorton Vale' and 'those fraternal Four of Borrowdale' in 'Yew-Trees'.[2] In the 1805 *Prelude* Wordsworth recalls, while a student at Cambridge, 'A single Tree': 'an Ash'

> With sinuous trunk, boughs exquisitely wreathed;
> Up from the ground and almost to the top
> The trunk and master branches everywhere
> Were green with ivy; and the lightsome twigs
> And outer spray profusely tipped with seeds
> That hung in yellow tassels and festoons,
> Moving or still, a Favorite[3]

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley's works are quoted from *The Major Works*, ed. by Z. Leader and M. O'Neill, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 William Wordsworth's poetry is quoted from *The Major Works*, ed. by S. Gill, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), unless stated otherwise. 'Yew-Trees', 1; 14.

3 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VI, 90–98.

FIGURE 1.
Antoine Chintreuil, *Landscape with an Ash Tree*, c. 1850–1857, oil on canvas, 26.7 x 34cm, Fitzwilliam Museum.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The poet recollects how 'Oft have I stood / Foot–bound, uplooking at this lovely Tree' (Book VI, 100–01). Perhaps more memorable still is the 'dark sycamore' of 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' under which the reminiscing poet reflects upon landscapes past and present.[4] Despite the diversity of tree species in his poetry, Wordsworth admitted to 'prefer[ring] [the Scots pine] to all others, except the Oak, taking into consideration its beauty in winter, and by moonlight and in the evening'.[5] Varieties of tree species populate Wordsworth's poetry,

4 Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', 10.

5 Quoted in P. Dale and B.C. Yen, *Versed in Living Nature: Wordsworth's Trees* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022), p. 79.

sometimes figured as symbols – such as the oak and national liberty – elsewhere reflecting the poet's interests in planting and botany, and often evocative of place.[6] As Alan G. Hill writes, 'from *An Evening Walk* onwards', and by implication, its companion piece, *Descriptive Sketches*, 'the "dance" of "stately trees" (in Milton's phrase) held a special place in [Wordsworth's] imagination'.[7] By contrast, the second-generation Romantic poet Shelley's arboreal affinities are less noticed.[8]

The polymathic poet Shelley's interests were wide-ranging, including '[g]eology, astronomy, chemistry, biology', as Marilyn Gaull notes.[9] Despite the absence of botany in this list, plants are abundant in Shelley's poetry, from the mimosa of 'The Sensitive-Plant' to the pumpkin of 'The Zucca'. As Cian Duffy affirms, 'Shelley's notebooks, correspondence, poetry, and prose all reveal a lifelong interest in plants as well as an awareness of and an engagement with botanical discourses and practices'.[10] The hundreds of drawings of trees in Shelley's manuscript notebooks, and the numerous arboreal figures in his poetry, reveal that, like Wordsworth, Shelley shared an especial affinity for trees.

6 On Wordsworth's symbolic and iconographic associations of trees, see in particular T. Fulford, 'Cowper, Wordsworth, Clare: The politics of trees', *The John Clare Society Journal* 14 (1995): 47–59; B.C. Yen, 'The political iconography of trees in *The Excursion*', *Textual Practice* **31** (7) (2017): 1253–75; and B.C. Yen, 'The political iconography of trees in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*', *The Explicator* **74** (1) (2016): 55–60. On Wordsworth's tree planting, see in particular A. Burton, 'Planting for "posterity": Wordsworthian tree planting in the English Lake District', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* **46** (4) (2024): 513–526.

7 A.G. Hill, 'The "poetry of trees" and Wordsworth's new vision of pastoral: An unrecorded letter', *Philological Quarterly* **81** (2) (2002): 235–45, here p. 235.

8 For recent attention to Shelley's trees, see A.B. Davis, '"—and so this tree— / O that such our death may be—": Shelley's last treescapes', *Romanticism* **30** (1) (2024): 56–67.

9 M. Gaull, 'Shelley's sciences', in M. O'Neill and A. Howe (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 588.

10 C. Duffy, 'Wild plants and wild passions in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems for Jane Williams', in M. Poetzsch and C. Falke (eds), *Wild Romanticism* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), p. 92. Duffy defines this genre as 'Shelley's *botanical poetry*: poems which not only have a plant as their ostensible subject, or which develop extended plant imagery, but which also engage, either explicitly or implicitly, with contemporary botanical discourses and practices', p. 91.

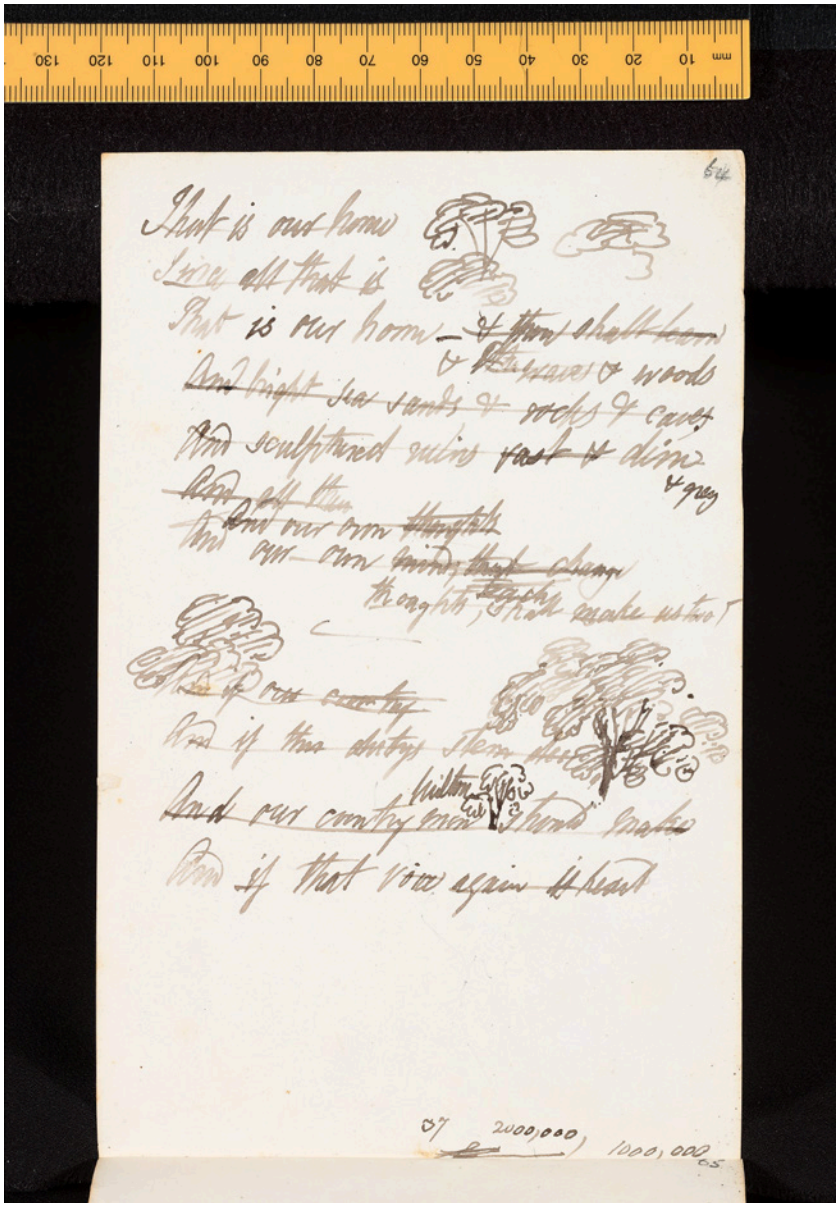

FIGURE 2.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 16 © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford < https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e0cec14b-3f7a-43da-9a21-54dfa0b10d1d/>

Shelley's fleeting, uprooted life contrasts with the long, grounded life of Wordsworth; indeed, Shelley was critical of the older poet's Tory turncoating and shift from radicalism to conservatism. The poet of poverty and 'common woes' celebrated in *Lyrical Ballads* falls away, in Shelley's estimation, with the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814, leaving the younger poet 'much disapointed' [*sic*] ('To Wordsworth', 5).[11] As G. Kim Blank has it, '*The Excursion* for Shelley represents Wordsworth's poetic failure'.[12] And yet, as the Romantic critic Leigh Hunt noted, Wordsworth and Shelley were 'two spirits who ought to have agreed'.[13] This statement seems especially true in the pair's proclivity for composing poems featuring trees, and particularly trees involved in the making of place.

In Shelley's first major work, *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, the young poet pictures a biodiverse treescape wherein place is shaped by arboreal interconnections.

> The oak,
> Expanding its immense and knotty arms,
> Embraces the light beech. The pyramids
> Of the tall cedar overarching, frame
> Most solemn domes within, and far below,
> Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,
> The ash and the acacia floating hang
> Tremulous and pale.
> (431–438)

'Few romantic poems convey as much in so small an enclosure of the poetic reach of botanical names', Theresa M. Kelley writes of this scene.[14] Together, the trees' 'woven leaves / Make net-work' (445–46), arboreally echoing the poem's substance as a 'woven … net-work' of allusions. Such Wordsworthian arboreal allusivity is especially evident in Shelley's evocation of the dying Poet – or 'wanderer's' – resting place: 'one silent

11 M. Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, P.R. Feldman and D. Scott-Kilvert (eds), 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 25.

12 G.K. Blank, *Wordsworth's Influence on Shelley: A Study of Poetic Authority* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 207.

13 L. Hunt, 'Review of *Rosalind and Helen, a Modern Eclogue; with other Poems*', *The Examiner*, 9 May 1819, p. 302.

14 T.M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 256.

nook' overseen by a 'solemn pine' (626; 572; 571). The Wanderer of Wordsworth's *Excursion* remarks,

> we die, my Friend,
> Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
> And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
> Dies with him, or is changed[15]

The *Alastor* Poet's deathly resting place seems to combine Wordsworth's Wanderer's 'peculiar nook of earth' with his Pastor's account of the 'tall Pine' that is both a place of living repose and the grave of 'a gentle Dalesman'.[16] Writing of the poet's pairing of 'ash' and 'acacia' in the lines of *Alastor* quoted above, Nora Crook and Derek Guiton note that Shelley 'almost never used an image until he was satisfied that it belonged to an authentic part of his own experience *and* that it was also to be found in myth and great writers of the past'. Thus, while both species of tree grew in 'Windsor Great Park, said by Mary [Shelley] to be the immediate inspiration of the passage', the pairing of these species also recalls 'a list of deciduous trees in *Nicholson's British Encyclopaedia*'s section on gardening'; there, Crook and Guiton note, 'the first two are "acacia, ash" which thus impart a taxonomic nuance to the line, in keeping with the eighteenth-century Miltonising evident in the poem at this point'.[17] Wordsworth, as a living poet who is yet 'morally dead', is numbered amongst such 'great writers of the past' in *Alastor*.[18] *Alastor*, like its companion piece 'To Wordsworth', directly addresses the older poet by way of its slightly misquoted epigraph from *The Excursion* – "'The good die first, / And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust, / Burn to the socket!'" – through numerous allusions and voicings of Wordsworth's earlier poetry, and by way of its quasi-allegorical Poet and Narrator figures.[19]

15 William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, qtd. in Jared Curtis, (ed.), *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth*, 3 vols (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2009; repr. 2011), vol. 2, Book I, 502–05.

16 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book VII, 413; 417.

17 N. Crook and D. Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 129–30.

18 Shelley, Preface to *Alastor*, p. 93.

19 The Wordsworthian import of both Poet and Narrator has been much discussed; see, for example, Y.M. Carothers, '*Alastor*: Shelley corrects Wordsworth', *Modern Language Quarterly* **42** (1) (1981): 21–47; P. Mueschke and E.L. Griggs,

In Shelley's dialogic lyric, 'Two Spirits: An Allegory', Shelley self-referentially alludes to *Alastor* by recalling the scene of the Poet's death, 'the grey precipice and solemn pine' (571) in the second spirit's utterance: 'Some say there is a precipice / Where one vast pine hangs frozen to ruin' (33–34). Within the margins of the manuscript, Shelley also alludes to *Alastor* and intellectually engages with Wordsworth by again writing the slightly misquoted lines from *The Excursion* used to close the earlier poem's preface at the top of the page: 'The good die first—'; 'Wordsworth was clearly in his thoughts', Michael O'Neill affirms.[20] The root of poetry, *poiesis*, itself means 'making'; trees, for Wordsworth as for Shelley, are integral to the making of place.[21] John C. Ryan, in describing the plant-human relations of 'phytopoetics', 'underscores the potential for human becoming to harmonize with the *poiesis* – the dynamic transformation – of vegetal life over time, through the seasons, and grounded in places'.[22] Such a harmonising of plants with place propels Shelley's poetic relationship with Wordsworth.

Shelley's most condensed evocation of Wordsworthian vegetal place occurs in the *Alastor* Poet's journey toward the biodiverse treescape and deathly nook. Approaching the place

> Where the embowering trees recede, and leave
> A little space of green expanse, the cove
> Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers
> Forever gaze on their own drooping eyes,
> Reflected in the crystal calm. The wave
> Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,
> Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,
> Or falling spear-grass, or their own decay

'Wordsworth as the prototype of the poet in Shelley's *Alastor*', *PMLA* **49** (1) (1934): 229–45; E.R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

20 M. O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 96.

21 'Both "poetics" and "poetry" derive from the classical Greek word *poiesis*, meaning "making"; the prefix "eco" goes back to "oikos," which means "household" or "family." "Ecopoetics" is therefore, as Jonathan Bate proposes in *The Song of the Earth*, the making of "a dwelling place"', 'Introduction' to J. Fiedorczuk, M. Newell, B. Quetchenbach and O. Tierney (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2024), p. 1.

22 J.C. Ryan, 'Phytopoetics: Human-plant relations and the *Poiesis* of vegetal life', in Fiedorczuk et al. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics*, p. 118.

> Had e'er disturbed before. The Poet longed
> To deck with their bright hues his withered hair
> (404–413)

The downward gazing yellow flowers are recognisably *Narcissus*; in this place-image, Shelley recalls Wordsworth's 'host of dancing Daffodils; / Along the Lake, beneath the trees' in whose company the poet 'gazed—and gazed'.[23] Shelley shifts Wordsworth's gazing from the act of the poet to the act of the yellow flowers, underscoring the mythological origins of Narcissus's fatal floral transformation.[24] Shelley's addition of 'falling spear-grass' to this scene conflates 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' with *The Excursion* by way of Wordsworthian allusion. Wordsworth's description of Margaret's ruined cottage in *The Excursion* emphasises the vitality of vegetal overgrowth: the 'plants, and weeds, and flowers, / And silent overgrowings' that 'still survived' Margaret's death.[25] Notably, 'high spear-grass' features amidst this vegetal overgrowth. Shelley's inclusion of daffodils and spear-grass in this scene's vegetal evocation of Wordsworthian place bespeaks the young poet's absorption in his older peer's poetry, despite his failings. Shelley's transformation of Wordsworth's 'high spear-grass' into 'falling spear-grass' may underscore his disappointment in *The Excursion* and the older poet's descent from his prior glory. Nonetheless, as Madeleine Callaghan notes, '[t]hat Shelley so frequently returned to *The Excursion* as a point of departure far beyond 1814 for his philosophical, poetic, and intellectual preoccupations suggests its centrality to his poetic thought'.[26]

Presaging his self-exile to Italy, Shelley's excursions to the continent in 1814 and 1816 – memorialised in Mary and Percy Shelley's collaborative travelogue, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland*, published in 1817 – may recall Wordsworth's 1790 tour of revolutionary France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, synthesised into the walking tour that is described in *Descriptive Sketches*, published in 1793. 'Through personification and

23 Wordsworth, 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud', 4–5; 11.

24 On the significance of the Narcissus and Echo myth to *Alastor*, see S. Fischman, "Like the sound of his own voice": Gender, audition, and echo in *Alastor*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 43 (1994): 141–69.

25 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book I, 964–65.

26 M. Callaghan, 'Shelley's Excursion', *Studies in English Literature* **60** (4) (2020): 717–37, here p. 733.

animism the poet makes a separate (visual) entity of everything his glance encounters', Geoffrey Hartman writes of Wordsworth's 'poem of "place"'.[27] '*Descriptive Sketches*, therefore, is not a portrait of nature, or the projection on nature of an idea, but the portrayal of the *action* of a mind in search (primarily through the eye) of a nature adequate to its idea', Hartman continues.[28] In this early poem, trees are concomitant in the *poiesis* of place as Wordsworth conjures the 'chestnut groves' of Como, and 'Locarno smiles / Embowered in walnut slopes and citron isles'.[29] Shelley's recollections of his own continental travels in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* also convey such senses of place through visual and verbal portraits of trees. '*Descriptive Sketches* evokes the visual immediacy of an artist's sketchbook', Fiona Stafford writes.[30] But, while Wordsworth in *Descriptive Sketches* paints his tree-adorned scenes solely through verse – heroic couplets – Shelley's manuscripts offer pictures of the poet's mind in action through hundreds of drawings of trees.

Writing to his friend, Thomas Love Peacock, from Geneva in 1816, Shelley reflects upon his impending return to England:

> —like Wordsworth he will never know what love subsisted between himself and [England], until absence shall have made its beauty heartfelt. Our Poets & our Philosophers our mountains & our lakes, the rural lanes & fields which are ours so especially, are ties which unless I become utterly senseless can never be broken asunder.[31]

Months later, Shelley again writes in mind of England: 'Tell me of the political state of England—its literature […] I trust entirely to your discretion on the subject of a house. Certainly the Forest engages my

27 I borrow this phrase, 'poem of "place"', and its contrast to 'landscape poem', from Fiona Stafford's description of 'Tintern Abbey'. Stafford reads the passage of five years in 'Tintern Abbey' alongside the five-year span since the publication of *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*, F. Stafford, 'Wordsworth's poetry of place' in R. Gravil and D. Robinson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 309–24, here pp. 310 and 311.

28 G.H. Hartman, 'Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* and the growth of a poet's mind', *PMLA* **76** (5) (1961): 519–27, here p. 522.

29 William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, qtd. in J. Curtis (ed.), *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth*, 3 vols, revised edition (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), vol. 1, 81; 176–77.

30 Stafford, 'Wordsworth's poetry of place', p. 315

31 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones (ed.), 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), vol. 1, p. 475.

preference, because of the sylvan nature of the place'.[32] The 'magnificent and unbounded forests' of the Alpine landscapes, 'to which England affords no parallel', nonetheless repeatedly return Shelley's thoughts to the scenes of his homeland, of which 'Our Poets & our Philosophers' – one might here substitute the words 'Wordsworth' and 'Coleridge' – are a vital part.[33] Musing on the Swiss forest as a site underwritten with literary associations, Shelley describes how 'the trees themselves were aged, but vigorous, and interspersed with younger ones, which are destined to be their successors, and in future years, when we are dead, to afford a shade to future worshippers of nature, who love the memory of that tenderness and peace of which this was the imaginary abode'.[34] Shelley subtly reads his relationship with Wordsworth in treescapes such as these. The shade of Wordsworth as 'A worshipper of Nature', as the older poet identifies himself in 'Tintern Abbey', is recast in Shelley's 'shade to future worshippers of nature', where the younger poet darkly numbers himself amongst Wordsworth's future 'successors'.[35]

Perhaps surprisingly, it is a flower, rather than a tree, that is outrightly symbolic of Wordsworth for Shelley.[36] 'We have bought some specimens of minerals and plants, and two or three crystal seals, at Mont Blanc, to preserve the remembrance of having approached it', Shelley writes to Peacock:

> There is a cabinet of *Historie Naturelle* at Chamouni, just as at Keswick, Matlock, and Clifton … The most interesting of my purchases is a large collection of all the seeds of rare alpine plants, with their names written upon the outside of the papers that contain them. These I mean to colonize in my garden in England, and to permit you to make what choice you please from them. They are companions which the Celandine—the classic Celandine, need not despise; they are as wild and more daring than he, and will tell him tales of things even as touching and sublime as the gaze of a vernal poet.[37]

32 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1, p. 490.

33 Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, Jonathan Wordsworth (ed.) (Oxford and New York, NY: Woodstock Books, 1991), pp. 119–20.

34 *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, p. 132.

35 Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', 153.

36 Wordsworth's arboreal, rather than floral, self-association appears in 'To a Butterfly' – 'My trees they are, my Sister's flowers', 11 – but elsewhere, as in 'To the Small Celandine', Wordsworth identifies with flowers.

37 *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, pp. 170–72.

FIGURE 3.

Edward Step, 'Lesser Celandine. Pilewort. Ranunculus ficaria' in *Wayside and Woodland Blossoms: A Pocket Guide to British Wild-flowers for the Country Rambler* (1895). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Shelley's gendering and personification of the Celandine recall Wordsworth's self-identification with the English Celandine in his 1807 collection, *Poems, In Two Volumes*, which featured poems on the namesake flower including 'To the Small Celandine' and 'To the same Flower'. In the former poem, Wordsworth declared: 'There's a flower that shall be mine, / 'Tis the little Celandine', forming a botanical self-association that Shelley alludes to in his letter.[38]

Shelley's letter, written to Peacock in Marlow, is linked to a poem left unpublished in Shelley's lifetime, 'Verses Written on Receiving a Celandine in a Letter from England'.

> I thought of thee, fair Celandine,
> As of a flower aery blue
> Yet small—thy leaves methought were wet
> With the light of morning dew.
> In the same glen thy star did shine
> As the primrose and the violet,
> And the wild briar bent over thee
> And the woodland brook danced under thee.
> (1–8)

Like his evocation of a distinctively Wordsworthian place in *Alastor* through the pairing of daffodils with spear-grass, here, Shelley alludes to Wordsworth's self-identification with the Celandine by drawing upon the older poet's own botanical descriptions. In 'To the Small Celandine', Wordsworth writes:

> Long as there's a sun that sets
> Primroses will have their glory;
> Long as there are Violets,
> They will have a place in story:
> There's a flower that shall be mine,
> 'Tis the little Celandine.[39]

Shelley's 'Verses' transplant Wordsworth's Celandine amidst its companions – the Primrose and the Violet – along with the flowers' luminosity. The letter and poem, both composed in the summer of 1816, seem to respond to a letter sent to Shelley on the continent by Peacock, apparently

38 Wordsworth, 'To the Small Celandine', 7–8.
39 Ibid.

containing a pressed celandine.[40] Both letter and poem share the image of Peacock as priest of Nature, where Shelley assigns 'the functions of a priest' to Peacock in the former, tasking him with finding the poet a house with a large garden in the 'sylvan nature' of the forest, and likens him to 'that priest of Nature's care / Who sent thee forth to wither', in the verses addressed to the Celandine (67–68).[41] The satirical tone of Shelley's verses condemn Wordsworth for being 'morally dead', for becoming a poet of profit: 'He is changed and withered now, / Fallen on a cold and evil time' (29–30).[42] Although Wordsworth is symbolically associated with the withered Celandine in Shelley's verses, the poets' arboreal affinities surface as Shelley yearns for his Wordsworth-as-Celandine to return to his 'woodland state' (34).

> Celandine! Thou art pale and dead,
> Changed from thy fresh and woodland state.
> Oh! that thy bard were cold, but he
> Has lived too long and late.
> (33–36)

'In many ways the terms woodlands and forests are interchangeable', Owain Jones and Paul Cloke write; 'But in other ways they do carry distinct resonances that vary across cultures'. For Jones and Cloke, '[t]he category of woodland suggests a more intimate, culturalized space than is the case with forest. This is particularly so in Britain'.[43] Shelley's yearning for Wordsworth-as-Celandine's return to a 'woodland state' contrasts with the plucked, pressed flower's current state, 'disunited'

40 See G.K. Blank, 'Shelley's Wordsworth: The desiccated celandine', *English Studies in Africa* **29** (2) (1986): 87–96 and M.A. Quinn, 'Shelley's "Verses on the Celandine": An elegiac parody of Wordsworth's early lyrics', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987): 88–109. On Shelley's colouring of his celandine blue, and not yellow, Michael O'Neill notes 'PBS's phrase "the classic celandine" in his above-quoted letter to Peacock, a Classical scholar, one might also observe that there is a blue-coloured celandine in Theocritus's *Idyll* XIII.41, and gloss the opening lines as follows: "When I received a withered specimen of a Celandine, I thought of an ideal Celandine—classically blue, and unwithered"', *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, N. Fraistat and N. Crook (eds), 4 vols to date (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), vol. 3, p. 535.

41 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1, p. 490.

42 Shelley, Preface to *Alastor*, p. 93.

43 O. Jones and P. Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in their Place*, revised edition (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), p. 26.

from the 'vernal poet' (65). Shelley's repeated choice of 'woodland' in 'Verses Written on Receiving a Celandine' seems to suggest such a sense of intimacy with Wordsworth as poet, and as a distinctively English poet. 'Trees span many lifetimes and have always been used as historical markers', Richard Hayman writes, 'bringing the past closer to the present'; the 'woodland state' of Shelley's Celandine fosters such a conflation – and yet, a bifurcation – of time and place.[44]

The list of Alpine plant seeds is a further accompaniment to this pairing of letter and poem, where the 'rare alpine plants' that Shelley intends to 'colonize' his garden in Marlow are described as companions to the Celandine.[45] On the final page of Shelley's list of Alpine plants, a drawing of a woodland scene appears, where a variety of trees and shrubs cluster into the margins. Shelley's trees branch throughout his various forms of composition, from the Gilpinesque landscape drawings of trees in his manuscript notebooks, to rhetorical figures within his poems, to descriptions of trees observed in letters and within the list of Alpine seeds that the poet intended to cultivate in his garden in Marlow. Shelley's 'woodland state' emphasises the persisting importance of Wordsworth's place in Shelley's arboreal poetics.

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44 R. Hayman, *Trees: Woodlands and Western Civilization* (London and New York, NY: Hambledon and London, 2003), p. 1.

45 As noted by Tatsuo Tokoo, 'this list might have had something to do with ideas for planting the garden of the new house at Marlow in spring 1817', *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts,* vol. XXIII, ed. by T. Tokoo and B.C. Barker-Benfield with D.H. Reiman (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 74.

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Kate Teltscher

Amherstia Nobilis: High priest of the Vegetable World

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ABSTRACT

The thawka-gyi or *Amherstia nobilis* ('Pride of Burma') was first encountered by Europeans in 1826, after the First Anglo-Burmese War. This article is the first full-length attempt to recover the European cultural and colonial history of *Amherstia nobilis.* This splendid tree was known only in cultivated form, planted in the vicinity of Buddhist temples. From the earliest sighting, Western botanists called it the world's most beautiful flowering tree. The tree's European reputation was established through narrative accounts and illustrations based on Indian botanical paintings. Wealthy British horticulturalists, attracted by the tree's beauty, rarity and sacred associations, competed to secure specimens and bring it to flower. Western women horticulturalists, writers and artists were particularly drawn to the plant. In tracing the cultural history of *Amherstia nobilis,* this article highlights the role of both Indian painters and British women in constructing scientific and horticultural knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Amherstia nobilis, Pride of Burma, Myanmar, Nathaniel Wallich, colonial botany, encounter narratives, Indian botanical art, women in horticulture

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the *thawka-gyi* or *Amherstia nobilis*, a magnificent flowering tree from Burma (now Myanmar), was transformed for Europeans from remote wonder to hothouse showpiece.[1] According to John Crawfurd, the British envoy who first encountered the *thawka-gyi* in 1826, it was 'too beautiful an object to be passed unobserved, even by the uninitiated in botany'.[2] With its hanging racemes of scarlet flowers, over a foot long, *Amherstia nobilis* became famous as the world's most beautiful flowering tree. It was also one of the rarest. The few known individuals were cultivated specimens, planted close to Buddhist temples, where the splendid flowers were

1 *Thawka-gyi* is written သော်ကြီး and pronounced 'thaw-kaar-jee'. It is also sometimes called *thawka* or *athawka.* My thanks to Christoph Emmrich for linguistic assistance.

2 J. Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), vol. 2, p. 77.

presented as offerings at shrines. The *thawka-gyi* rarely sets viable seeds so the main means of propagation was air layering. Today, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists the tree as Extinct in the Wild.[3]

This article is the first full-length attempt to recover the European cultural and colonial history of *Amherstia nobilis* (commonly known as the 'Pride of Burma' or 'Queen of Flowering Trees').[4] The tree's renown rests on Nathaniel Wallich's carefully crafted narrative in *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores* (1830–32), with its magnificent lithographs based on paintings by the Indian artist, Vishnuprasad. As Kapil Raj and Henry Noltie have demonstrated, Indian plant collectors and artists were integral to the production of botanical knowledge in South and South-East Asia.[5] Wallich's account of his early encounter with the plant 'not in a state of wildness, but of abandoned cultivation' in a ruined Buddhist monastery garden served to enhance the exotic allure of *Amherstia nobilis* with its sacred associations.[6]

In the nineteenth century, botany was one of the few scientific activities available to women, both in Britain and the colonies.[7] This

3 'Pride of Burma', International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, assessed 2023: https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/226776565/227965606 (accessed 15 December 2024).

4 Previous discussions include D. Arnold, 'Plant capitalism and company science: The Indian career of Nathaniel Wallich', *Modern Asian Studies* **42** (5) (2008): 899–928, at 921; S. Sivasundaram, 'The oils of Empire', in H. Curry, N. Jardine, J. Secord and E. Spary (eds), *Worlds of Natural History*, pp. 379–98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 387–88; K. Colquhoun, *The Busiest Man in England: A Life of Joseph Paxton* (Boston: David T. Godine, 2006), pp. 67, 70–72.

5 K. Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); H. Noltie *Robert Wight and the Botanical Drawings of Rungiah and Govindoo*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, 2007); Noltie, *Botanical Art from India: The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Collection* (Edinburgh: Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, 2017); Noltie, *Flora Indica: Recovering Lost Stories from Kew's Indian Drawings* (London: Kew Publishing, 2025).

6 G.E.B., 'The Amherstia nobilis in India', *The Garden* **9** (1876): 209.

7 See A. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); A. Shteir and B. Lightman (eds), *Figuring it Out: Science, Gender, and Visual Culture* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006); B. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999); Gates, '"Those who drew and those who wrote": Women and Victorian popular science illustration', in Shteir and Lightman

article foregrounds the contribution of women horticulturalists, artists and writers in the cultivation and European understanding of *Amherstia nobilis*. The pursuit of exotic horticulture was framed as patriotic and imperial service: Louisa Lawrence, who succeeded in bringing *Amherstia nobilis* to flower, presented the first raceme to Queen Victoria. Subsequent specimens were distributed by Kew Gardens to colonial botanic gardens across the globe.

The tree's rise to fame in Britain coincided with the East India Company's exploitation of Burmese teak forests. The history of *Amherstia nobilis* highlights the relationship between the pursuit of exotic specimens and deforestation. The celebration of *Amherstia nobilis* as the ultimate ornamental tree served to deflect attention away from the Company's later large-scale extraction of timber from Burma.

SOURCING TEAK

Like many nineteenth-century botanical novelties, *Amherstia nobilis* was first encountered in the aftermath of war.[8] In 1824, a border incursion by Burmese forces provided the British East India Company with a pretext for the expansion of Company influence in Burma. After two years of fighting and heavy loss of life, the Company managed to defeat the Burmese. Under the terms of the treaty of Yandabo, the Burmese were required to pay an impossibly large indemnity of £1 million in silver to the East India Company, cede Arakan and Tenasserim provinces, accept a British resident at the court of Ava (Inwa) and sign a commercial treaty.

The leader of the Company mission sent to negotiate the trade treaty was John Crawfurd, an experienced diplomat and administrator. Accompanying him was Nathaniel Wallich, the Danish superintendent of the Company's Botanic Garden at Calcutta. The East India Company,

(eds), *Figuring it Out*; S. Le-May Sheffield *Revealing New Worlds: Three Women Naturalists* (London: Routledge, 2001); N. Johnson, *Empire, Gender, and Biogeography: Charlotte Wheeler-Cuffe and Colonial Burma* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2024).

8 Nineteenth-century plant collection was even practised during military campaigns – see for example William Griffith's activities during First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–42): L. Fleetwood, 'Science and war at the limit of empire: William Griffith with the Army of the Indus', *Notes and Records* **75** (2021): 285–310.

which had already largely exhausted the teak forests in its Indian territories, was keen to identify Burmese sources of timber, particularly teak. To this end, Wallich was tasked with conducting a survey of teak forests on the trip. Since waterways were essential to convey felled timber, Wallich concentrated on areas along the Salween (Thanlwin) and Ataran rivers. The Company instructed Wallich to assess the suitability of the teak both for naval and military purposes (for instance, in the construction of gun carriages). The newly acquired Burmese forests were evaluated as an economic resource and means to strengthen East India Company power in Asia.

In his report, Wallich warned that no forest was inexhaustible. To guard against over-exploitation, he advised that the forests should be the exclusive property of the state, with strict regulations to ensure that only mature trees were felled, and that teak plantations should be established. Such plantations, he assured the Navy Board in 1831, would provide the British Navy with 'a permanent supply of the very best timber in the world'.[9] However, Wallich's advice went unheeded and, after two years, the forests were thrown open to private enterprise. As Wallich had predicted, within a couple of decades, the easily accessible teak forests were destroyed.[10] The dangers of deforestation were apparent from the very start of British involvement in Burma.

PUBLICISING *AMHERSTIA NOBILIS*

Newly accessible regions held a special allure for the botanist, providing the opportunity to collect and record species previously unknown to European science. Alongside his study of the forests, Wallich conducted a botanical survey of the area. Wallich employed a team of collectors attached to the Calcutta Botanic Garden to gather plant specimens, including Akkul Mahmud, William Gomez and Henry Bruce.[11] To re-

9 H. Falconer, *Report on the Teak Forests of the Tenasserim Provinces* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1852), p. 82.

10 R.L. Bryant, *The Political Ecology of Forestry in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 32–36.

11 H. Noltie and M. Watson, *The Collectors of the Wallich (or East India Company) Herbarium. Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh* (2021): https://stories.rbge.org.uk/archives/34728 (accessed 11 December 2024).

FIGURE 1.
Amherstia nobilis, Wallich Herbarium, K000789026, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

cord the plants, five Indian artists accompanied the party, among them the Botanic Garden's chief painter, Gorachand, who sadly died during the trip, and his successor, Vishnuprasad.

Wallich was delighted by the rich Burmese flora. The 'botanical treasures are most extensive', Wallich reported in a letter read out to London's Linnean Society in February 1828, 'the number of species having long ago surpassed 2,000'. But one plant was singled out for praise as the ultimate ornamental tree. Wallich had 'never seen any vegetable production equal to his *Amherstia nobilis* when in full bloom', the Linnean Society members were told. 'It surpasses all the Indian plants.' [12]

Wallich himself arrived in London later that year on a period of sick leave. He was accompanied by plant collector William Gomez and an extraordinary haul of dried plant specimens – thirty barrel-loads, weighing twenty tons – collected in India, Burma, Nepal and Singapore. Throughout his career, as David Arnold has argued, Wallich used plants 'as a form of personal and professional capital' to gain patronage and promote his social and scientific standing.[13] With the help of botanists across Europe, Wallich arranged the collection into sixty duplicate sets. Wallich presented the top set (the 'Wallich Herbarium') to the East India Company, which gave the collection to the Linnean Society which, in turn, donated it to Kew. (See Figure 1.)

Wallich also brought with him an extensive collection of drawings produced by Indian artists associated with the Calcutta botanic garden. A large part of the 'Royle, Carey and Others' collection, initially stored in the East India Company India Museum, now held at Kew, has recently been identified by Henry Noltie as the working drawings used as the basis for the lavish three-volume *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, with over 250 plates, which Wallich published between 1830 and 1832.[14] Vishnuprasad's original paintings remain remarkably vivid today. Probably produced *in situ* in Burma, the paintings capture the tree's cascading flowers with vitality and precision. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

12 'Linnaean Society', *The Philosophical Magazine* **3** (1828): 223.

13 D. Arnold, 'Plant capitalism and company science'.

14 Noltie, *Flora Indica.*

FIGURE 2
Amherstia nobiliis, drawing by Vishnuprasad, WRCO 357, RBG Kew.

FIGURE 3
Amherstia nobiliis, drawing by Vishnuprasad, WRCO 358, RBG Kew.

Wallich accorded Vishnuprasad's illustrations of *Amherstia nobilis* pride of place as the first two plates in the first volume of *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores* (1830–32). (See Figures 4 and 5.) The publication was the culmination of Wallich's botanical labours. Dedicated to the Chairman and Directors of the East India Company, the book had a long list of subscribers, headed by members of the royal family and aristocracy, Company servants, European botanists and booksellers and, notably, Indian members of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India.[15] Individual entries for species comprised botanical illustrations with Latin descriptions, followed by accounts of the plant's utilitarian or horticultural qualities. The accounts often included a tribute to (or dispute with) fellow botanists. The impressive hand-coloured lithographic plates which, unusually, credit the Indian artists by name, were prepared by the Maltese lithographer, Maxim Gauci, and were hailed in the *Gardeners' Magazine* in 1838 as heralding 'a new era in the art of pictorial illustration'.[16]

Spectacular in themselves, the impact of the images was enhanced by the accompanying narrative of Wallich's encounter with *Amherstia nobilis*. The account was not, in fact, of Wallich's first sight of the tree which, as he mentions in passing, had occurred in the port city of Martaban (Mottama). Rather than describe a mundane urban specimen, Wallich dwelt on two trees located in the far more romantic setting of a ruined monastery garden, near the Buddhist cave temple of Kogun (Kaw Gon). Wallich's account of the garden encounter heightened the tree's exotic appeal. So great was the attraction of the location that, in subsequent retellings of the *Amherstia nobilis* tale, the monastic garden became the site of first encounter. The trees, Wallich wrote,

> were profusely ornamented with pendulous racemes of large vermilion-coloured blossoms, forming superb objects, unequalled in the Flora of the East Indies and, I presume, not surpassed in magnificence and elegance in any part of the world.[17]

15 N. Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, 3 vols (London: Treuttel & Würtz, 1830–32), vol. 1, pp. 13–15. Indian subscribers included members of the Calcutta intellectual and merchant elite: Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), Ramkamal Sen (1783–1844), Prasanna Kumar Tagore (1801–86) and Radhacanta Deb (1784–1867).

16 H.R.H., 'The Botanical periodicals and their illustrations', *Gardeners' Magazine* **4** (1838): 171–76, at 172.

17 Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, vol. 1, p. 2.

FIGURE 4.

Amherstia nobilis, hand-coloured lithograph by Maxim Gauci, based on drawing by Vishnuprasad, Nathaniel Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores* 1 (1830): Pl. 1. RBG Kew.

FIGURE 5.
Amherstia nobilis, hand-coloured lithograph by Maxim Gauci, based on drawing by Vishnuprasad, Nathaniel Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores* 1 (1830): Pl. 2. RBG Kew.

Wallich's bold assertion of the tree's world-beating beauty was followed by an equally confident act of naming: 'I call this tree *Amherstia nobilis*'.[18] Wallich explained that the tree was named in honour of Countess Amherst and Lady Sarah Amherst, both enthusiastic botanists, the wife and daughter of Lord Amherst, the Governor-General of India who was responsible for declaring war on Burma (and who himself had a town and district in Burma named after him). Rather unusually, *Amherstia* was named after two individuals, both women, with the suggestion that the ladies' rank dignified the plant, for *Amherstia* was *nobilis*, noble.

Although Wallich claimed the right to name the tree (and reap the rewards of Amherst patronage), he noted the local name of *Thoka* (*thawka*). Wallich also acknowledged the devotional use of the blossoms, 'carried daily as offerings to the images in the adjoining caves'.[19] Wallich's account of the blossoms laid at the Kogun shrine linked the tree to the gilded and silver Buddhist statues which, as Sujit Sivasundaram has noted, were favourite items of loot during the Anglo-Burmese war. The tree, as Sivasundaram points out, was commodified as a form of 'natural historical plunder'.[20]

Wallich's attempts to gather information about the tree's wild origins were unsuccessful. 'Neither the people here nor at Martaban could give me any distinct account of its native place of growth', he complained. The tree was 'not even known by name at the capital of the Burma empire'. This lack of recognition he interpreted, not as evidence of the tree's limited range, but as 'a striking instance of the profound ignorance and indifference of that nation concerning all matters connected with the natural productions of their country, notwithstanding the unblushing pretensions of the higher classes'.[21] This outburst of contempt seems related to Wallich's sense of scientific frustration. Wallich was careful to record the geographical locality of plants collected in the wild – an important aspect both of colonial botanical surveys and emergent theories of biogeography. The reluctance to provide information might, of course, have been an act of political resistance on the part of the Ava

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Sivasundaram, 'The oils of Empire', p. 388.

21 Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, vol. 1, p. 2.

court. The Burmese monarch traditionally enjoyed rights of ownership over the forest and exercised a monopoly over forest products.[22] There would have been good reasons to withhold information about valuable natural resources from envoys of the East India Company.

Despite Wallich's dismissive view of the current state of Burmese plant knowledge, he did pay a (somewhat condescending) compliment to the past knowledge of Buddhist monks. Observing the pairing of *Amherstia nobilis* with *Saraca asoca* (*Ashoka*) in the monastery garden, Wallich reflected that it

> is not a little remarkable, that the priests in these parts should have manifested so good a taste as to select two sorts of trees as ornaments to their objects of worship, belonging to a small but well-marked and extremely beautiful group in the extensive family of Leguminous plants.[23]

Burmese monks, as Wallich conjectured, might well have considered the two trees as related. In the Burmese language, the same name *thawka* is used for *Amherstia nobilis* and *Saraca asoca* (and for a third species, *Saraca indica*). The word *thawka* derives from the Sanskrit *aśoka* or Pali *asoka* (the *Ashoka* tree), which means 'without sorrow'.[24] While both trees are considered as *Ashoka* trees, sometimes the species are differentiated: *Amherstia nobilis* is known as *thawka-gyi* (great *Ashoka*) and *Saraca asoca* as *thawka-bo* (male *Ashoka*).[25] *Ashoka* trees are regarded as sacred across a range of South Asian cultures. In both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, they are associated with female spirits or *yakshi*s which embody fertility and prosperity. In Buddhist tradition, Mayadevi gave birth to the Buddha while holding on to the branch of a tree often identified as the *Ashoka*.[26] These sacred associations likely account for

22 A. Khazeni, *The City and the Wilderness: Indo-Persian Encounters in Southeast Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), pp. 66–68.

23 Wallich *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, vol. 1, pp. 2–3.

24 *Thawka* is sometimes also called *athawka* – see A.M. Sawyer and D. Nyun, *A Classified List of the Plants of Burma* (Rangoon: Government Print and Stationery, 1927), p. 49; F. Mason, *The Natural Productions of Burmah* (Maulmain: American Mission Press, 1850), Preface.

25 'Sorting Saraca Names', Multilingual Multiscript Plant Name Database: https://www.plantnames.unimelb.edu.au/Sorting/Saraca.html (accessed 6 Feb. 2025); Mason, Natural Productions of Burmah, Preface.

26 B. Bidari, 'Forest and trees associated with Lord Buddha', *Ancient Nepal* **139** (1996): 11–24, at 15–16.

the joint planting of the two beautiful *thawka* trees – one regarded as male, the other female – in the vicinity of Buddhist temples.[27]

In the European context, the monastic setting and Wallich's assertion that *Amherstia nobilis* was the most beautiful flowering tree in the world boosted Wallich's status, flattered the Amherst ladies and enhanced the prestige of East India Company science. Hyperbolic as it was, the claim was often repeated and became accepted in European botanical and horticultural circles. It was swiftly endorsed by the prominent botanist John Lindley, who asserted that 'The beauty of Dr. Wallich's Amherstia nobilis … is unequalled in the vegetable kingdom'.[28] An anonymous review in *The Journal of the Royal Institution* (which might have also been authored by John Lindley since he lectured at the Royal Institution) singled out the *Amherstia* plate for praise, and extravagantly elaborated on the religious association:

> The Hindoos offer the flowers at the shrine of Buddha. For splendour of colouring and elegance of form, this plate is unrivalled. It is the high priest of the vegetable world, clothed in an investiture more splendid than that of the most gorgeous religion of mankind.[29]

With its confused references to both Hinduism and Buddhism, the plant here seems to embody Eastern religion, transformed into a flamboyant, orientalised 'high priest of the vegetable world'. Carelessly amalgamating Asian religions, the passage evokes the shared sacred associations of *Ashoka* trees in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In European popular scientific circles, the tree itself acquired semi-sacred status. In 1838, the *Gardeners' Magazine* called *Amherstia nobilis* 'that inconceivably splendid tree … to see which, growing in all its native luxuriance, is really almost worth a pilgrimage to the East'.[30]

Wallich's inability to locate the tree in the wild, for all that it frustrated the aims of the botanical survey, served to enhance both his own and the tree's reputation. *Amherstia nobilis* knew no other home than that of the temple garden. *Amherstia nobilis* was both sacred and

27 Mason, *Natural Productions of Burmah*, Preface.

28 J. Lindley, *Introduction to the Natural System of Botany* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1830), p. 90.

29 'On the Botany of India', *The Journal of the Royal Institution of Great Britain* **1** (1831): 360–67, at 364.

30 H.R.H., 'The Botanical periodicals', 173.

feminised. 'Its flowers adorn the altars of the god of the Birmans. Its name recalls the graces united with science [the two Amherst ladies]', declared the French botanist Jules Emile Planchon. 'Its whole history is in unison with the grandeur and beauty of its attractions.'[31] The narrative of the plant was as spectacular as the plant itself. The celebration of the tree's beauty – its ornamental *uselessness* – was in striking contrast to the British preoccupation with Burma's *useful* trees, notably teak, which were extracted on enormous scale. In a sense, *Amherstia nobilis* served as a dazzling distraction from the business of deforestation.

CULTIVATING *AMHERSTIA NOBILIS*

Wallich not only publicised *Amherstia nobilis* in print, but also cultivated a fine specimen at the Calcutta Botanic Garden. Since *Amherstia nobilis* rarely sets seeds, and those few are often not viable, Wallich obtained layers from the monastery tree. The process of air layering involved wounding the stem, wrapping it with damp moss to encourage rooting, then separating the layer from the plant. The Calcutta tree was the object of Wallich's particular care. In a later reminiscence celebrating the tree's incomparable beauty, a British horticultural journalist recalled visiting the tree in Wallich's company:

> well do we remember the sparkling eye and hilarity of Dr. Wallich as he brought us into the presence of his pet tree. He had had a wooden palisading formed round it to prevent visitors gathering its flowers, and well did the tree merit such care. It was in full bloom, and as the breeze from across the Ganges waved the light pendulous branches, the gentle motions and blendings of the crimson racemes and the long pinnate leaves, rendered it the most brilliant and graceful tree we have ever looked upon.[32]

Wallich, it was said, had marked out a plot under his pet tree, where he might be buried.[33]

Wallich brought a couple of young *Amherstia nobilis* plants with him on his London trip in 1828, but both died during the voyage. This

31 'Amherstia Nobilis', *Philadelphia Florist* (1853): 203–04, at 204.

32 'Scientific Meeting', *The Journal of Horticulture, Cottage Gardener and Country Gentleman* **35** (1866): 240–41, at 241.

33 Obituary Notice: 'Nathaniel Wallich', *The Cottage Gardener* **12** (1854): 91–92, at 91.

misfortune only served to sharpen the acquisitive urge of British horticulturalists. 'Ever since the publication of the plant in Dr Wallich's noble work, the Plantae Asiaticae Rariores', observed Sir William Hooker, first director of Kew Gardens, 'the greatest desire has been felt by cultivators to possess it'.[34] In 1836, the 6th Duke of Devonshire, the most lavish of horticultural patrons, and his famously talented gardener, Joseph Paxton, set their sights on a specimen for Chatsworth. *Amherstia nobilis* headed the list for the under-gardener, John Gibson, sent on an orchid-collecting trip to India and Burma. In the event, Gibson never reached Burma, but Wallich provided two *Amherstia nobilis* layers from his pet tree in Calcutta. Planted in a sealed glass Wardian case, one of the layers survived the voyage. At Chatsworth, Paxton lavished attention on the young tree. It was planted in a 'kyanized' tub (treated with a newly patented preservative) and grew well. But, for decades, the tree refused to flower. 'All the amateurs … are in agonies to see this plant bloom!' an American journalist who visited Chatsworth in 1847 exclaimed.[35]

For years, the Chatsworth tree was the only living specimen in Europe. The Duke guarded his prize jealously. On hearing that *Amherstia nobilis* was advertised for sale by a London nursery, the Duke requested that Lindley investigate. 'No, No, No, My Lord', Lindley jovially replied, 'there is no Amherstia in the King's Road'. The plant was *Brownea grandiceps*, an imposter with a far less elevated pedigree. 'Instead of deriving his origin from the Temple Gardens of Buddha', the *Brownea grandiceps* had 'no more dignified birthplace than the bush round a Demerara sugar plantation'.[36] By associating *Brownea grandiceps* with a sugar plantation and its formerly enslaved workforce, Lindley loaded the plant with racial and cultural contempt. By contrast, *Amhsertia nobilis* appeared ever more exotic, mystical and exalted.

It was Louisa Lawrence, skilled horticulturalist and wife of the surgeon William Lawrence, who was the first to flower *Amherstia nobilis* in Britain. Lawrence acquired a specimen from Henry Hardinge, the Governor-General of India, and placed it in her glasshouse at Ealing

34 'Amherstia nobilis', *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* **75** (1849): Tab 4453.

35 'Impressions of Chatsworth', *The Horticulturalist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste* 1 (1847): 297–302, at 301.

36 'A Great Gardener-Architect', *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* **59** (1934): 477–81, at 479.

FIGURE 6.

Amherstia nobilis, hand-coloured lithograph by Walter Hood Fitch, *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* **75** (1849). Tab 4453. RBG Kew.

Park (now in west London). Using fermenting tan-bark to heat the tub, Lawrence's gardeners coaxed the tree into bloom in 1849. Lawrence offered the first raceme to Queen Victoria; a patriotic and imperial gesture that evoked the Burmese presentation of flowers at Buddhist shrines. The second she sent to William Hooker at Kew, who had his resident artist Walter Hood Fitch make 'an atlas-folio drawing' of it, 'a size which can alone do justice to such a subject'.[37] This drawing of *Amherstia nobilis*, 'perhaps the most beautiful tree in nature', together with dried flowers and seed pod, was placed on display at Kew's Museum of Economic Botany.[38] Fitch also prepared a smaller lithograph for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. (See Figure 6.)

Lawrence won medals for *Amherstia nobilis* flowers at successive Horticultural Society shows. A wax model of the flower, made by Miss Tayspill, was shown at the Pharmaceutical Society in 1850 and another, created by Emily Temple, was displayed at the Great Exhibition the following year.[39] The gardening press described Lawrence's method of cultivation and bulletins tracked the progress of the blooms (on 15 April 1851, for instance, the fourteen-foot tree had been flowering since Christmas day, and had 43 flower spikes).[40] Lawrence's achievement, according to Planchon, was 'one of the greatest triumphs which Horticulture has for some years inscribed on her annals'.[41]

News of Lawrence's success even reached Burma. In the *Natural Productions of Burmah* (1850), the American Baptist missionary, translator and naturalist, the Rev. Francis Mason, commented wryly that in Britain 'every tree is said to be worth fifty pounds. When one flowers, it produces quite a sensation from the Thames to the Tweed'.[42] With

37 'Amherstia nobilis' (1849): Tab. 4453.

38 W.J. Hooker, *Museum of Economic Botany: Or, a Popular Guide to the Useful and Remarkable Vegetable Products of the Museum of the Royal Gardens of Kew* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 38.

39 'The Conversazione', *Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions* **9** (1849–50): 551–52, at 551; 'Official Illustrated Catalogue Advertiser', in *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition 1851*, vol 1. (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), p. 26.

40 'Garden Memoranda', *Gardeners' Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette* 231 (1851): 231.

41 'Amherstia Nobilis' (1853), 204.

42 Mason *Natural Productions of Burmah*, pp. 61–62.

his linguistic skills, Mason identified that *Amherstia nobilis* and *Saraca asoca* were both *thawka* trees, and that *Amherstia nobilis* was considered female and *Saraca asoca* male.[43] In an appended poem, Mason's wife, the missionary Ellen Huntley Bullard Mason, elaborated on the feminized *thwka-gyi* by personifying the tree as 'a beautiful bride', veiled in scarlet and gold, 'The Queen of proud Ava's wild bower', outshining the entire British flora: 'Nor all the rich flowers/ Of Albion's bowers/ Can vie with its purpling shade'.[44] Mason, who regarded natural history as part of his missionary work, concluded the account with the tree's name printed in Karen script.

In 1854, the year before her death, Louisa Lawrence donated the *Amherstia nobilis* specimen to Kew and William Hooker renamed one of the glasshouses, Amherstia House in its honour.[45] The fashion for *Amherstia nobilis* spread amongst wealthy horticulturalists in Britain. For instance, at Harewood House in Yorkshire, the seat of the Lascelles family whose wealth had derived from West Indian plantations worked by enslaved labour, the Earl of Harewood erected an Amherstia House and cultivated the tree from 1858.[46]

Through Kew's links with colonial botanic gardens, *Amherstia nobilis* plants were distributed around the globe – to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Singapore, Jamaica and Trinidad – where they flourished. Hooker considered *Amherstia nobilis* the arboreal counterpart to the other great botanical sensation of the period, *Victoria regia*, the giant waterlily, which was first flowered to huge acclaim by Joseph Paxton at Chatsworth in 1849 and later distributed by Kew to colonial gardens around the world. If the *Victoria regia* 'bears the most splendid flower of all *herbaceous plants*, so does this of a *Tree*', Hooker wrote in the 1849 edition of his guidebook to Kew Gardens.[47] The flowering of the *Amherstia nobilis* at Castleton Botanic Gardens in Jamaica was commemorated in the garden's annual report: 'One of the most superbly beautiful of trees …

43 Ibid.: Preface.

44 Ibid.: 62.

45 The tree was transferred to the Palm House after three years, but died following the move, R. Desmond *The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew*, 2nd ed. (Kew: Kew Publishing, 2007), p. 180.

46 Email communication from Trevor Nicholson and Henry Noltie, 15 May 2025.

47 Hooker, *Kew Gardens*, p. 32.

the *Amherstia nobilis*, was in magnificent flower this year, and was worth crossing the globe to see'.[48]

The year after *Amherstia nobilis* arrived at Kew, it bloomed. The artist Marianne North, then in her mid-twenties, was in the habit of visiting the Gardens with her father, the Liberal M.P. Frederick North, who was a friend of the director. As North recalled in her memoirs,

> once when there, Sir William Hooker gave me a hanging bunch of *Amherstia nobilis*, one of the grandest flowers in existence. It was the first that had bloomed in England, and made me long more and more to see the tropics.[49]

According to her autobiographical framing of the incident, the presentation of the exotic flower ignited the young Marianne North's desire to travel and sparked her subsequent career as botanical painter. Hooker had evidently given North a garbled account of the tree's religious significance. Travelling from Singapore years later, North encountered the Sanskrit scholar, Arthur Burnell, who 'contradicted' her 'flatly' when she 'talked of *Amhertstia nobilis* as a sacred plant of the Hindus', as Hooker had informed her.[50] Given the symbolic role assigned to *Amherstia nobilis* in North's autobiographical account, it is not surprising that the plant should feature in the extraordinary gallery of North's paintings at Kew. Among the 830 portraits of plants that line the walls of the gallery, no. 594 depicts the 'Foliage and Flowers of the Burmese Thaw-ka or Soka, painted at Singapore'.[51]

For the writer, Anne Isabella Thackeray, *Amherstia nobilis* also functioned as an emblem. It was not a personal symbol, as with North, but rather an allegorical device. 'The New Flower' (1866), first published anonymously in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, was a satirical fairy tale, perhaps modelled on *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) by her father, William Makepeace Thackeray. The plot of 'The New Flower' was based on an 1866 Royal Horticultural Society lecture delivered by the renowned orchid grower, James Bateman, on the unexpected flowering of the Chatsworth *Amherstia nobilis* after thirty years.

48 'Miscellaneous Notes', *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* 63 (1892): 71–76, at 74.

49 M. North, *Recollections of a Happy Life*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1894), vol. 1, p. 31.

50 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 252.

51 *Official Guide to the North Gallery*, 5th ed. (London: HMSO, 1892), p. 92.

FIGURE 7.
Marianne North, *Amherstia nobilis*, North Gallery, MN594. RBG Kew.

Like North, Bateman endowed *Amherstia nobilis* with autobiographical significance. He recalled, as a boy, reading a newspaper report that 'a wonderful flower had been discovered', then, as a student at Oxford, unexpectedly encountering the same plant as the first plate of *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*. 'Little did he then think that forty years afterwards he should have been called to speak of that very plant'.[52] The cause of the tree's non-flowering, Bateman declared, was the kyanized tub in which it had been planted. The mercuric chloride used as timber preservative had damaged the tree's health. Once re-potted, the tree flourished and finally flowered. The talk was illustrated with the lithographs from *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, Fitch's illustration and a splendid raceme from the plant itself. At the end of the meeting, in a reprise of the Burmese ritual, the members resolved to present the raceme to Lady Sarah Williams (née Amherst), the younger of the two Amherst ladies honoured by Wallich in the tree's botanical name.[53]

Thackeray refashioned Bateman's lecture as a fairytale about wealth and privilege. There 'was once a prince with a beautiful glass palace of his own', full of the loveliest plants, who was discontented because he had learnt from travellers of a tree 'more beautiful than anything he had in all his palace which it was almost impossible to procure'.[54] Eager to possess the fabled tree, the prince sent a mission to a faraway land to find a monastery garden and the tree whose flowers were offered to images of Buddha. A special tub was prepared which would never rot or decay. When the mission returned in triumph, the tree was planted with great pomp, but for many years, it never flowered. Finally, the expensive pot was identified as the problem. Once replanted in a common tub, the tree started to flourish.

At the end of the story, Thackeray slipped out of fairytale mode to name the protagonists and suggest a political reading of the parable. The day that the *Amherstia nobilis* had burst into flower was the very day that the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, introduced the first Reform Bill to extend the franchise to working men.[55] By couching the *Amherstia nobilis* narrative as a satirical fairytale, Thackeray identified the elements

52 'Scientific Meeting', 240.

53 Ibid., 240–41.

54 A. Thackeray, 'The New Flower', in *Toilers and Spinsters, and Other Essays*, pp. 230–35 (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1874), p. 230.

55 Ibid., p. 232.

that made the tree so desirable: its fabulous beauty, inaccessibility, mystical allure and difficulty of cultivation. At the same time, Thackeray skewered the aristocratic privilege, conceit and extravagance of elite horticulture.

THE MYSTERY OF *AMHERSTIA NOBILIS*

For botanists, one of the most tantalising aspects of *Amherstia nobilis* was the question of its origins. For nearly two centuries, naturalists tried to locate specimens growing in the wild. In 1830, Wallich had complained that he could not 'procure the slightest additional information concerning the tree'.[56] He surmised that the tree belonged to the forests of the province. In 1858, the Rev. Charles Parish, East India Company chaplain and botanist, returned to the site of Wallich's early encounter with *Amherstia nobilis*. He too asserted that the tree was 'not known to grow wild, nor can the Burmese themselves tell you whence it came originally. They only know that it has been cultivated for very many years by their Pongees or priests'.[57] Parish conjectured that the tree originated either in the western provinces of China or the more northern reaches of the river Salween, and that the seeds either floated or were transported downstream.

Six years later, Parish reported confirmation of his river hypothesis. On a boat trip down the river Yoonzalin (Yunzalin), a tributary of the Salween, Parish caught a fleeting glimpse of a single tree. It was in the heat of the day, and Parish had been lying down under cover, when he 'noticed unexpectedly, on the bank of the river, in one of the wildest spots, a fine *Amherstia* in full flower, about 30 feet high'.[58] Unfortunately for Parish, his sighting was uncorroborated by a fellow European. His military companion, Captain Harrison, was travelling in another boat far behind, and 'did not notice it, because, not caring for the character of the vegetation, he did not look out from the boat at all'.[59]

Despite the dream-like quality of the episode, Parish was convinced that he was the first Westerner to see *Amherstia nobilis* in the wild. It

56 Wallich, *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, vol. 1, p. 2.

57 'Extract from a Letter to Sir Wm. Hooker from C.S. Parish', *Gardeners' Chronicle* 174 (1858): 174.

58 C. Parish, 'Notes of a trip up the Salween', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* **34** (3) (1865): 135–46, at 145.

59 Ibid.

could not have been a cultivated specimen, Parish argued, because the tree was always found in the vicinity of Buddhist temples. This spot was distant from any signs of settlement, and the indigenous Karen people were not Buddhist. In making his assertion, Parish diminished Wallich's claim to botanical 'discovery'. In a footnote, Parish somewhat pointedly revised his choice of verb: 'Wallich discovered it, i.e. first saw it, at a place called *Pagât* some twenty or thirty miles up the Salween … The trees which he saw are still there … and are manifestly planted trees'.[60] To Parish alone fell the glory of having located the tree in the wild. But his fellow cleric, the Rev. Francis Mason, was unconvinced. In an 1876 article published in *The Garden*, two years after Mason's death, it was reported that the late Rev. Mason, 'the best authority on the subject', had disputed Parish's assertion. Given that neither the local Karen nor the Shan people recognised the tree, Mason maintained that 'the home of the Amherstia was still a mystery'.[61]

The tree continues to be enigmatic to this day. 'Clearly, this is one of those plants that will remain a mystery', reflected Benedict Lyte in a 2003 article in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. 'There have been no confirmed sightings in the wild since the reports by Reverend Parish'.[62] For Lyte, the narrative of *Amherstia nobilis* serves as a reminder of the importance of recording accurate information about plants and their precise location. In an encouraging recent development, however, a 2016 survey by the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) of the small Kelatha Wildlife Sanctuary in Mon State, Myanmar, found the *thawka-gyi* growing in a forest area.[63] The BANCA 2019 annual report listed 22 individual trees at the site.[64]

60 Ibid., 146.

61 G.E.B., 'The Amherstia nobilis in India'. *The Garden* **9** (1876): 209.

62 B. Lyte, 'Amherstia nobilis: Plants in Peril 28', *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* **20** (3) (2003): 172–76, at 174.

63 BANCA, 'A case study of ecosystem services rendered by Kelatha Wildlife Sanctuary for the local communities', Yangon: Biodiversity & Nature Conservation Association (2016), p. 19: https://cdn.digitalagencybangkok.com/file/client-cdn/banca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/a-case-study-of-ecosystem-services-rendered-by-kelatha-wildlife-sanctuary-for-the-local-communities.pdf (accessed 17 December 2024).

64 BANCA, 'Annual Report 2019, Yangon: Biodiversity & Nature Conservation Association (2019), p. 24: https://cdn.digitalagencybangkok.com/file/client-cdn/banca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/annual-report.pdf (accessed 17 December 2024).

In recent years, *thawka-gyi* has been the focus of projects in Myanmar to raise community awareness and encourage its cultivation. In 2008–2009, for instance, a community education campaign involved the planting of over 400 saplings around Yangon.[65] As David Sayers reported in 2014, trees are available for sale in nurseries.[66] In India, R.K. Roy published a 2009 article, 'Save these rare ornamental trees', which highlighted the plight of surviving specimens of *Amherstia nobilis* in Indian historic botanical gardens.[67] The tree continues to be cultivated in tropical gardens across the globe, and under glass in European botanic gardens, including Kew. Despite the 22 individual trees identified in the Kelatha report, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species currently still lists *Amherstia nobilis* as Extinct in the Wild.[68] Unusually, the plant's status appears essentially unchanged since the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

In tracing the cultural history of *thawka-gyi* or *Amherstia nobilis*, this article has recovered the nineteenth-century story of the ultimate ornamental tree. Its history is closely linked to that of British colonial expansion and extraction. From the earliest reports, *Amherstia nobilis* was claimed as the world's most beautiful flowering tree, a botanical prize worthy of Britain's imperial ambition. The tree's renown was built through spectacular lithographs based on Indian botanical painting and the work of British women in horticulture, literature and art. The nineteenth-century reputation of the tree is perpetuated to this day in the tree's English popular names: 'Pride of Burma' and 'Queen of Flowering Trees'. Initially sighted in the grounds of a Buddhist temple, the tree's

65 Rufford Foundation, 'Initiation of Community Conservation Efforts in Myanmar with focus on endemic Queen of Flowering Tree' (2008): https://www.rufford.org/projects/khun-bala/initiation-of-community-conservation-efforts-in-myanmar-with-focus-on-endemic-queen-of-flowering-tree-pride-of-myanmar/ (accessed 15 December 2024).

66 D. Sayers, 'Tree nurseries in Myanmar', *International Dendrology Society, Yearbook* 2014: 38–40, at p. 40: https://www.dendrology.org/publications/dendrology/tree-nurseries-in-myanmar/ (accessed 19 December 2024).

67 R.K. Roy, 'Save these rare ornamental trees', *Current Science* **97** (2009): 1536–38, at 1537.

68 'Pride of Burma', IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

wild origins remained obscure. The tree's rarity and sacred association heightened its appeal in Europe. But today, the history of *Amherstia nobilis* carries a particular resonance. The narrative of a tree known only in gardens foreshadows our current state of nature emergency where some species survive only in cultivated form. At the very moment of first encounter, *Amherstia* nobilis was already lost.

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The Absence of the Ackee Tree: Jamaican Botanical Resistance and Kew's Colonial Archive

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ABSTRACT

On a monument to the people enslaved on the grounds of the University of the West Indies campus in Kingston, Jamaica, groves of ackee trees are acknowledged as 'botanical markers' of former slave villages. This use of the ackee as a long-term memorial of enslavement exemplifies the role of trees as sites of cultural memory and demonstrates how ackee became the principal botanical symbol of Jamaican identity. However, there is scarcely any material about ackee in the archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, particularly in the Miscellaneous Reports, a collection of archival material about economic botany in the British empire. This article argues that this absence is the result of ackee's long association with resistance to colonial exploitation, as a tree bearing a potentially poisonous fruit, growing beyond the colonial spaces of the plantation and botanical garden.

KEYWORDS

Jamaica, botanic gardens, colonial botany, ackee

> oncealed within the fleshy yellow pouches which were edible was a sprinkling of red powder – 'deadly poison.' … Jamaicans were the only island people daring enough to eat the ackee.
>
> Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (1984)

[Note: Given the colonial context of many of Kew's archival records, there are examples of offensive language in this article.]

The University of the West Indies campus at Mona in Kingston, Jamaica, hosts monuments to the people enslaved on the Mona Estate. Based on evidence in survey maps and botanical and agricultural reference points, the monuments identify the areas where enslaved people lived which are now part of the university grounds and mark these otherwise invisible histories. A monument close to the entrance to the university, titled 'Mona Village' notes that the 'groves of ackee trees which have long

FIGURE 1.
Mona Memorial, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica.
Source: Author's image.

flourished in the area are an accepted botanical marker of a slave village.'[1] (Figure 1) This use of the ackee tree as a long-term memorial of the legacy of enslavement in a specific area exemplifies the role of plants as sites of cultural memory, and offers an example of how ackee attained its primacy amongst botanical symbols of Jamaican identity.

Ackee is now the national fruit of Jamaica and its dominance amongst Jamaican foods is evident in its selection as the cover image on Barry Higman's seminal work on the culinary uses of plants and animals on the island, *Jamaican Food* (2008), and frequent appearance in literature about Jamaica. However, few pages are devoted to the fruit in the Miscellaneous Reports, an archival collection focused on economic botany across the British empire from around 1850 to 1928, held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. These archival records are made up of administrative and scientific reports, along with correspondence, newspaper cuttings, photographs, illustrations, plant specimens and maps. They include volumes focused on the activities of the Jamaican Botanical Department, which formed a hub of botanical activity in the Caribbean as part of Kew's network of colonial botanic gardens.

At Mona, the memorial situates the ackee trees in close proximity to the botanical gardens at Hope, built on the former site of the neighbouring Hope Plantation. At Kew, the Jamaican volumes in the Miscellaneous Reports include only three items in the section entitled 'Akees': a cutting from the 19 February 1892 edition of the *Jamaica Post* entitled 'Akees as Food' by J.J. Bowrey; a section from the 15 December 1900 edition of the *Pharmaceutical Journal*, with an article entitled 'Notes on the Oil of Akee' by E.M. Holmes, alongside the article 'The Character of Oil of Akee' by W. Garsed; and a printed pamphlet by Holmes and Garsed containing the same information.[2] There is little consideration of ackee's popularity as an edible plant; nor of its cultivation in the botanical gardens of Jamaica; and only brief mentions of its

1 D.M. West, Slave Names Memorialized: A Historical-Linguistic Analysis of Monumented Slave Names in Jamaica. (MA Thesis, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, 2017), p. 12: 'The monuments were launched in 2007 as part of a Heritage tribute organized by the UWI and the Jamaica National Bicentenary Committee, in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade.'

2 MCR/15/3/8, 'Jamaica: Cultural Products A-F', Miscellaneous Reports Collection, RBG, Kew Archives, ff. 1–6.

introduction to the island, its minor presence in some of the gardens, and its sale as a timber or shade tree.

Ackee's popularity as a food is largely limited to Jamaica and to Jamaican diasporic communities; elsewhere in the Caribbean it has faced consistent rejection due to fears about its toxicity. Ackee's central role in the botanical landscape of Jamaica should clearly be addressed, yet there have been few studies of its cultural history.[3] This is surprising considering the direct role ackee plays in preserving the cultural memory and geographies of enslavement. A tree which, from its arrival in Jamaica, was closely associated with enslavement and the botanical agency of the marginalised, ackee has developed into a captivating Jamaican cultural symbol which has become pervasive in literature and travel writing about the island, yet remains underdiscussed in Kew's archival records. The central question here is why the discussion of ackee is so limited in the Miscellaneous Reports.

In this article I will seek to elicit a narrative from the scarce and disparate materials about ackee in the Miscellaneous Reports. By 'dwelling on the fragmentary', as Marisa Fuentes suggests – being attentive to the hints towards repressed voices and attitudes that can be found through the absences and oversights in the collection – I argue that this scarcity of sources is itself evidence of ackee's role as a food plant of resistance.[4] Beginning with the ambiguous origins of ackee in Jamaica and its role in the agency of enslaved people, I will then move to discuss ackee as a food associated with resistance against colonialism, before considering its toxicity and the impact this had on its reception in the nineteenth century. Moving beyond the Kew archive, the remainder of the article will examine the various symbolic resonances ackee acquired in Jamaican culture on its journey towards becoming the national fruit of the island.

This article situates the story of the ackee tree within the large body of work on silences in colonial archives. Much of this work addresses the difficulty of uncovering the experiences and practices of enslaved people in archives. A central question is whether it is 'possible to exceed

3 B. Higman, *Jamaican Food* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press: 2008), p. 155.

4 M. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 1.

or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive' in this context, as Saidiya Hartman suggests.[5] Stephanie Smallwood responds to this prompt with a call 'to tell the history that is accountable to the enslaved—the counter-history the archive tells only reluctantly'.[6] In the context of botanical archives, such silences can be seen in the absence of discussion of plants associated with marginalised, and particularly, enslaved people. Discussing the significance of oral transfer of botanical knowledge in Jamaica, Miles Ogborn notes that 'From the mid-eighteenth century, Africans, Asians and Amerindians were seen less and less as the holders of valuable botanical knowledge.'[7] This knowledge, when it reached the archive, often did so without recognition of the people who shared it with colonial scientists and collectors, and without its associated cultural significance. Londa Schiebinger argues for the erasure of such knowledge from the archival record – a practice she terms 'agnotology' – sometimes as a deliberate act, and often the result of colonial governmental practices that hinder the travel of this type of knowledge.[8]

Ackee provides a clear example of this, appearing in Kew's archive primarily in relation to its toxic scientific properties and the circulation of this information through the colonial administration. The archival focus of this article is on the records relating to ackee held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which were produced in a post-slavery context in the late nineteenth century. The Miscellaneous Reports were selected and structured into the current archival collection during the early twentieth century, and these acts of curation therefore reflect the colonial institutional aims and biases of the creators. Since discussion of ackee within the Kew archive is limited, this article also explores the 'archival' account of ackee in a broader sense; it incorporates literary accounts, travel writing, visual records and memorials, and other cultural representations of ackee.[9]

5 S.Hartman, 'Venus in two acts', *Small Axe* **12** (2008): 1–14 (p. 11).

6 S.E. Smallwood, 'The politics of the archive and history's accountability to the enslaved', *History of the Present* **6** (2016): 117–32 (p. 125).

7 M. Ogborn, 'Talking plants: Botany and speech in eighteenth-century Jamaica', *History of Science* 51 (2013): 251–82 (p. 253).

8 L.L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 226.

9 I discuss this approach to the Miscellaneous Reports in more detail in my Ph.D. research on the subject: H. Craddock, Kew's Colonial Archive: A Plant Humanities

CULTIVATION IN JAMAICA

Ackee's association with resistance is closely connected with the spaces in which it was grown. The inscription on the Mona monument also clarifies that '[t]he provision grounds where slaves grew much of their food are generally accepted to have been in the higher slopes of long mountain to the South East'.[10] This distinction between the provision ground, the plantation and the gardens of the slave village itself is important in situating ackee in its in its geo-historical space. These descriptions note that ackee trees were not grown in provision grounds, nor were they plantation crops, but instead formed part of the villages of enslaved workers in gardens close to their homes, a point which I will return to. A similar monument on the university grounds titled 'Papine Village' likewise acknowledges that 'botanical markers – primarily nearby groves of ackee and mango trees – corroborate' the location of the village inhabited by enslaved workers, while the Papine Estate's '"Negroe Grounds", where provisions would have been grown, appear to have been nearby, close to the boundary with Hope Estate, to the North'.[11] The Hope Estate, on which the botanic garden stands, bordered the Papine Estate, which in turn bordered the Mona estate, highlighting the proximity of Hope Botanic Garden to the ackee groves in question.

Some of the earliest discussions of ackee in Jamaica are in connection with the botanical gardens in the late eighteenth century, as the article included in the Miscellaneous Reports by E.M. Holmes reveals.[12] This article, published in the *Pharmaceutical Journal* in 1900, indicates that, alongside its primacy as a food plant to the enslaved (and later emancipated) population, Ackee's medicinal properties were of

Approach to the Caribbean Miscellaneous Reports, 1850–1928. (Ph.D. thesis, University of Roehampton, 2024). For further discussion of ideas about expanding what constitutes an 'archive' for research into the history of the enslaved, see S. Palmié, 'Slavery, historicism, and the poverty of memoralization', in S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (eds), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); M-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

10 'Mona Village' monument, 2007, University of the West Indies Mona, Kingston.

11 'Papine Village' monument, 2007, University of the West Indies Mona, Kingston.

12 MCR/15/3/8, f. 2.

particular interest to colonial scientists.[13] Holmes notes that botanist Arthur Broughton's *Hortus Eastensis* (1794) lists 'Akee' in a catalogue of plants growing in the botanic garden at Spring Garden near Gordon Town, but it appears to have been cultivated only in the botanic garden as Henry Barham's *Hortus Americanus* (1794) does not mention it. Broughton's catalogue lists the name 'The Akee' and suggests the source to be Dr Thomas Clarke, Botanist and Curator of Bath Gardens in Jamaica, in 1778.[14] Holmes does not record Thomas Dancer's 1792 reference to akee, '*Aka Africana*', in his *Catalogue of Plants,* which seems to be the first account of its presence in Jamaica, and offers a precise description of its arrival: 'Another African Fruit, introduced by Negroes in some of Mr. Hibbert's ships'.[15] Writing in 1897, William Fawcett, Director of the Jamaican botanic gardens, confirmed these accounts of ackee's introduction to the Jamaican botanic gardens in the eighteenth century, adding that it continued to be cultivated in the botanical gardens at Castleton.[16] The *Guide to Hope Gardens* also records the cultivation of ackee at Hope (Figure 2), so there is evidence that ackee was considered valuable enough to have been transferred between botanical gardens in Jamaica.[17]

The origins of ackee in Jamaica potentially demonstrate the agency of enslaved people in botanical transfers from Africa to the Caribbean. Broughton notes that '[t]his Plant was brought here in a Slave Ship from the Coast of Africa, and now grows here very luxuriant, producing every Year large Quantities of fruit; several Gentleman are encouraging the propagation of it.'[18] Holmes likewise writes that the 'ackee tree is a native of the coast of Guinea, in West Africa, not of Jamaica'.[19] The scientific

13 Ibid.

14 A. Broughton, *Hortus Eastensis: Or, a Catalogue of Exotic Plants Cultivated in the Botanic Garden, in the Mountains of Liguanea, in the Island of Jamaica* (Kingston: Alexander Aikman, 1794), p. 11.

15 T. Dancer, *Catalogue of Plants, Exotic and Indigenous, in the Botanical Garden, Jamaica* (St Jago de la Vega, Jamaica: A. Aikman, 1792), p. 4.

16 MCR/15/3/6, MR 663, Jamaica: Botanic Gardens, f. 97; William Fawcett, 'The Public Gardens and Plantations of Jamaica', *Botanical Gazette* **24** (1897): 345–69 (p. 346).

17 W. Jekyll, *Guide to Hope Gardens* (Kingston: Aston W. Gardner & Co., 1904), p. 2.

18 Broughton, *Hortus Eastensis,* p. 11.

19 MCR/15/3/8, f. 2.

FIGURE 2.
Plan of Hope Gardens, Walter Jekyll.
Source: *Guide to Hope Gardens,* (Kingston: Aston W. Gardner & Co., 1904), p. 2.

name *Blighia sapida* was given by Kew botanist Charles Konig in 1806 not because Captain William Bligh brought it to Jamaica, but because he brought it to Kew on the *Providence* in 1793, with the species name *sapida* referring to the ackee's savoury taste.[20] There is continued uncertainty around the journey of ackee to Jamaica, but it was likely grown for the first time in Jamaica in the 1770s. In his *Hortus Jamaicensis* (1814), John Lunan also claims that it 'was brought to Jamaica in a slave ship from the coast of Africa', and provides the description from Broughton's *Hortus Eastensis*, but adds that 'the delicacy of the white lobes of this fruit when fried or boiled, and eat as marrow, or sweet-breads, or in soups, renders it well worthy of cultivation'.[21] The argument for African

20 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 153.

21 J. Lunan, 'Hortus Jamaicensis, or A Botanical Description (According to the Linnean System) and an Account of the Virtues, &c., of Its Indigenous Plants

agency playing a role in intentionally transferring or smuggling seeds is, as Higman argues, 'plausible and carries more weight in the case of the ackee than it does in the root crops'.[22] The ackee tree was a curiosity, of ornamental value, impractical as food for voyagers, and thus unlikely to have been deliberately transferred by slave traders, which sets it apart from other staple crops transferred from Africa.[23]

The importation by Africans on slave ships of 'yam, ackee, gourds, and other staples into the Caribbean' created an 'alternative economy' to plantation monoculture.[24] These crops were often cultivated in provision grounds, which Judith Carney and Richard Rosomoff describe as 'botanical gardens of the dispossessed', arguing that in these spaces 'Africans realized an alternative botanical vision' to the plantation.[25] As spaces which enabled enslaved people to grow 'marketable surpluses' which presented the economic means to resist enslavement, provision grounds held both a practical and symbolic value.[26] However, growing in the gardens of slaves and later peasants near their homes, ackee occupied a space outside Sylvia Wynter's 'plantation-plot dichotomy' as the tree was neither grown purely for sustenance (in provision grounds) nor grown only for colonial profit (in plantations).[27] There is a sense that ackee inhabits an ambivalent space in terms of its function and value, at once a likely example of African agency and roots in the Caribbean and also a product of chance, a 'self-propagating' plant 'allowed to grow because of the ornamental beauty of the tree'.[28] But the absence of ackee in Kew's Miscellaneous Reports indicates that it did form part of an

Hitherto Known, as Also of the Most Useful Exotics. Jamaica', *St. Jago de la Vega Gazette* (1814), p. 9.

22 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 152.

23 Ibid.

24 E. DeLoughrey, R.K. Gosson and G.B. Handley, *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 10.

25 J. Carney and R.N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (L.A.: University of California Press, 2011), p. 135.

26 Ibid., p. 128; see also B.F. Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760–1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 62: 'Out of these gardens, slaves created economic opportunities that ultimately enabled them to resist some of the consequences of slavery and to make the successful transition from slave to peasant economy'.

27 S. Wynter, 'Novel and history, plot and plantation', *Savacou* **5** (1971): 95–102 (p. 99).

28 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 154.

'alternative' botanical and economic vision. As Sydney Mintz suggests, ackee can be positioned alongside a wider group of plants originating in Africa whose continued cultivation and consumption act as evidence of 'the will to endure, to resist' amongst enslaved people.[29] Particularly in light of its ornamental value, and limited nutritional value, the cultivation and ongoing popularity of ackee in Jamaica marks a sustained resistance to the set of requirements by which a plant was judged valuable or not by colonial botanists and planters.

TOXICITY

The discussion of ackee in the Miscellaneous Reports is entirely in relation to its toxicity. The newspaper article by Government Analytical Chemist, J.J. Bowrey, from an 1892 edition of *The Jamaica Post* offers a concise summary of the edibility of ackee according to a colonial 'expert'. Bowrey, who was responsible for experiments relating to food safety, explains that he is writing in response to 'the late sad deaths on the Long Mountain Road from eating poisonous ackees' and the fact that 'many persons are afraid to use this fruit at all, and others are anxious to know how wholesome Akees may be distinguished from dangerous fruit'.[30] He proceeds to offer a summary of the dangers of 'unripe' and 'decaying Akees', but emphasises the 'wholesome' nature of 'fresh ripe Akees … which can be known by its being open, the edible portion firm, and the red part bright in colour'.[31] This language of freshness and ripeness is particularly significant in relation to ackee due its poisonous qualities when unripe. It forms part of the distinctive set of terms used to describe ackee which mark its uniqueness in Jamaican botany and culture, as a fruit which requires consumers to understand and respect its threatening potential.[32]

29 S. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), pp. 228–29.

30 MCR/15/3/8, f. 1.

31 Ibid.

32 Bowrey's report was quoted elsewhere in an article entitled 'The Ackee' by John R. Jackson, Curator of Kew's Museum of Economic Botany, in *The Chemist and Druggist*, in which Jackson refers to it as the akee-apple: J.R. Jackson, 'The Ackee', *The Chemist and Druggist* **40** (21 May 1892): 749, included in *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* **64** (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, April 1892), p. 109.

Fears around the toxicity of ackee have led to interesting methods of sharing knowledge of how to consume it safely across Jamaican culture, as John Rashford emphasises: 'Tradition says before the fruit is harvested, it must open on the tree naturally, i.e., it must "smile" or "laugh".'[33] Ackee is so closely associated with Jamaican identity that Rashford states that 'to be Jamaican is to know how to enjoy ackee safely by distinguishing between those that smile and those that do not smile – those that do not smile will kill.'[34] The smiling or laughing ackee is anthropomorphised for human safety, just as the seeds of the ackee are compared to eyes, but this image also implies that the fruit is mocking those who fear its toxicity.[35] 'Vomiting sickness' in Jamaica was first noted in association with ackee around 1880, and this is caused by high levels of hypoglycin A in immature and overripe fruit. This amino acid can damage nerve cells, causing seizures, damage to the liver, severe vomiting and coma, and even death in extreme cases. Concerns around ackee's poisonous qualities persisted into the twentieth century, and Government bacteriologist and pathologist Henry Harold Scott sought to expand on Bowrey's earlier studies, producing a series of reports and publications connecting ackee to 'vomiting sickness', which received a mixed response from the Jamaican public.[36]

Consumption of ackee as food and fears about the toxicity of the plant formed part of a wider threat felt by planters that 'the enslaved would target their masters, other slaves, and animals with painful poisoning administered via food and drink'.[37] Though poisonings were not often detected, and shared the symptoms of common diseases of the time,

33 J. Rashford, 'Those that do not smile will kill me: The ethnobotany of the ackee in Jamaica', *Economic Botany* **55** (2001): 190.

34 Ibid., 206.

35 Ibid., 202.

36 H.H. Scott, *Report on Vomiting Sickness* (Kingston, Jamaica: Government Printing Office, 1915), in CO 137/710/25, The National Archives, Kew, ff. 187-201; GB 0809 Scott/01, 'Correspondence, publications, press cuttings and reports relating to vomiting sickness and ackee poisoning, 1886–1918', London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Archives: these documents include a selection of press cuttings recording responses to Scott's publications, some of which are supportive of his findings, but many are doubtful of his conclusion that cases of 'vomiting sickness' can be directly connected to ackee consumption.

37 C. Goucher, *Congotay! Congotay! A Global History of Caribbean Food* (Routledge, 2014), p. 130.

they remained, as Ogborn claims, 'at the heart of the planters' botanical fears', compounded by an awareness of the extensive knowledge of herbal medicines amongst enslaved people.[38] This fear was directed particularly towards women, as those preparing food, and practitioners of Obeah – magic and healing traditions in the Caribbean.[39] In light of the increasing denigration of spiritual practices associated with poisoning, the difficulty of finding this information in the archival record parallels the absence of ackee from the Miscellaneous Reports later in the nineteenth century.[40]

The threat of poisoning associated with ackee impacted its reception amongst white colonialists in Jamaica and encouraged the perpetuation of the mystique around it. Holmes's article offers the anecdotal account of a Mrs J. Seed Roberts 'who lived for some years in the island' as the basis for a discussion of the poisonous properties of the ackee fruit, particularly the 'aril' or seed covering: 'in Jamaica the arillus is believed to be poisonous if gathered before the fruit is fully open'.[41] Mrs Roberts also provides a basic recipe for ackee 'either boiled or fried in butter or oil' and 'states that the best picture of the plant she has ever seen is in Miss North's collection at Kew Gardens.'[42] Marianne North's depiction, housed in her own gallery at Kew Gardens, clearly shows the ackee in its 'open' state, ready to be picked and consumed, and demonstrates the striking and colourful appearance of the fruit, emphasising its beauty rather than the threat of the plant (Figure 3).[43]

The impact of this reception of ackee amongst colonial travellers and botanists in Jamaica is reflected in the limited attention to the fruit in Kew's Miscellaneous Reports, but also in other sources displaying the circulation of materials about ackee at Kew. Acknowledging how the information in his article came into his possession, Holmes notes that the specimen in question was 'handed to the Director of the Botanic Gardens in Jamaica [William Fawcett], who forwarded it to

38 Ogborn, 'Talking plants', 271.

39 Goucher, *Congotay!* p. 130.

40 Ogborn, 'Talking plants', 272.

41 MCR/15/3/8, f. 2.

42 Ibid. For another educational story about 'Achee-Poison' for school children, see C.E. Phillips, *Tropical Reading Books* (London: Griffith and Farran, 1880), pp. 82–84.

43 In contrast, see François-Richard de Tussac's earlier painting which shows only unripe ackee: F.-R. de Tussac, *Flore des Antilles*, vol. 1 (Paris: 1808), pl. 3.

FIGURE 3.
'Foliage and Fruit of the Akee, Jamaica', Marianne North, 1872.
Source: Marianne North Gallery, RBG, Kew, MN 137.

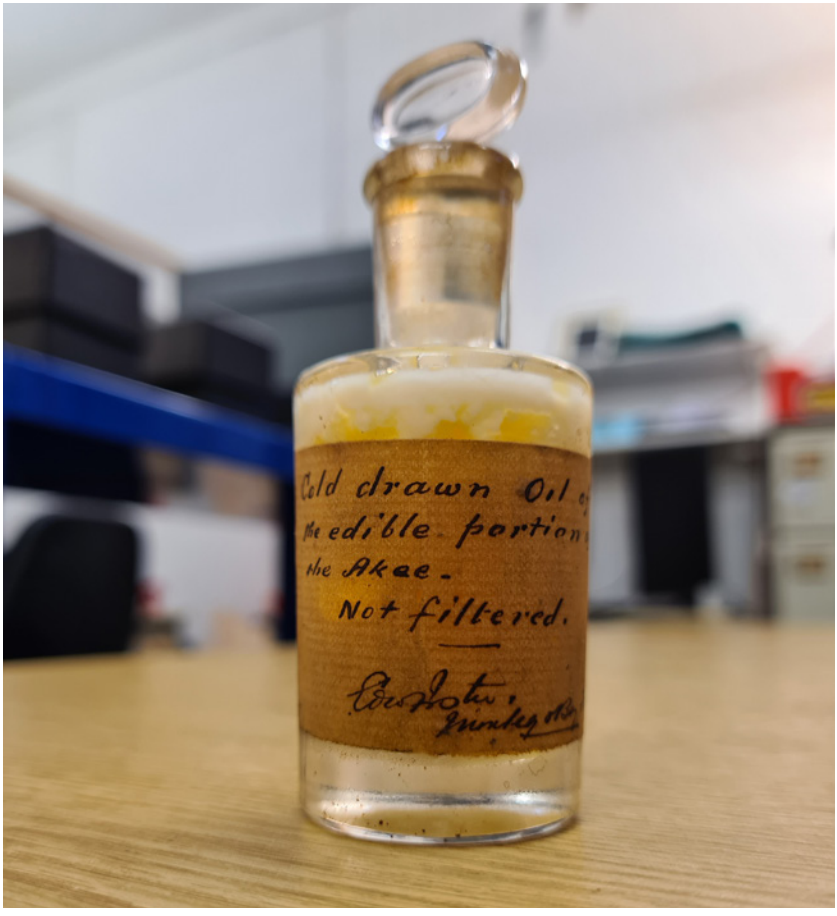

FIGURE 4.
'Akee Oil and Cake', Jamaica, EBC 53440, Economic Botany Collection, RBG, Kew.
Source: Author's Image.

the Museum of the [Pharmaceutical] Society, in the hope that some information concerning its physical properties, and its possible uses in commerce, might be obtained thereby'.[44] The specimen is now held in the Economic Botany Collection at Kew, having been passed on from the Museum of the Pharmaceutical Society in 1983, and consists of a

44 MCR/15/3/8, f. 2.

glass jar inside which is a small bottle holding the oil of the ackee and labelled 'Cold pressed drawn oil of the edible portion of the Akee. Not filtered' (Figure 4).[45] The relevant index card confirms that the specimen was presented by Fawcett, Director of Public Gardens and Plantations in Jamaica in 1900. Nonetheless, while the circulation of this specimen marks one attempt to disseminate knowledge about ackee's medicinal or culinary potential, it does not appear to have been taken any further, as there are few other records about ackee in the Miscellaneous Reports.

Ackee was, however, of interest to botanists, as its inclusion in other Kew correspondence and publications demonstrates, such as the January 1888 *Bulletin of the Botanical Department of Jamaica*, which lists ackee amongst trees on sale for timber or shade plants.[46] Various letters in Kew's Directors' Correspondence collection also refer to the transfer of seeds or knowledge about *Blighia sapida* across different countries, including St Kitts, Brazil, India, the USA and Mexico, revealing that some botanical enterprise was undertaken in relation to the plant. The director of Kew in 1924, Arthur Hill, received a letter from Michael Grabham, a doctor working in Jamaica, enclosing seeds including *Blighia sapida*, along with local reflections on why 'the "butter ackee" – is much esteemed':

> During protracted droughts the people on these arid plains are almost entirely dependent on it for food. It is a favourite article of food with the Indian coolies … I have myself eaten the fruit almost daily for 30 years. The tree is cultivated in Costa Rice and Haiti. Why not try and naturalise it in the famine districts of India?[47]

Grabham's personal assurances as to the safety of the plant and encouragement of its wider cultivation demonstrate that Kew was aware of ackee's possibilities as a food plant, but continuing uncertainties around ackee's safety hindered its development as an economic opportunity.

45 EBC 53440 Akee Oil and Cake, Jamaica; RBG, Kew, Economic Botany Collection, donated by Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain.

46 MCR/15/3/3, MR 660, Jamaica: Bulletin; *Bulletin of the Botanical Department of Jamaica*, No. 5 (Jan.1888): 2. For other minor mentions of ackee, see also MCR/15/3/3, *Bulletin*, No. 3 (Sept. 1887): 6; and MCR/15/3/3, *Bulletin*, No. 9 (Nov. 1888): 6.

47 DC/207/198, Letter from M. [Michael] Grabham to Sir Arthur William Hill, from Jamaica, 3 May 1924; see also DC/210/497 (Kew Archives, Directors' Correspondence).

ACKEE IN TRAVEL WRITING AND LITERATURE

Ackee features more frequently elsewhere in writings about Jamaica, particularly in literature and travel writing, in which it develops from the nineteenth century into a prominent cultural symbol in contemporary Jamaica. Ackee was consumed as early as 1811 by the wealthy class of white colonialists during the period of enslavement in Jamaica, as seen in botanist William Jowit Titford's claim that it 'tastes just like marrow, and is a delicious vegetable'. Higman also suggests that the dish ackee and saltfish was created by this white planter class because the fried dish required expensive oil or butter and saltfish.[48] Importantly, Higman asserts that 'no explicit reference to enslaved people eating ackee in any form has been found'.[49] Yet, as we have seen, ackee trees continue to grow in spaces which were formerly slave villages, so this absence is likely a reflection of the underrepresentation of enslaved people in archival evidence of food consumption. Matthew Gregory Lewis, author of *The Monk* and wealthy owner of plantations and enslaved people in Westmoreland in Jamaica, gives his impression of ackee in his 1816 account of visiting his property: 'The achie fruit is a kind of vegetable, which generally is fried in butter. Many people, I am told, are fond of it, but I could find no merit in it.'[50] The minimal presence of ackee in the Miscellaneous Reports suggests that this unenthusiastic assessment of the fruit was the one which prevailed among the planter classes throughout the nineteenth century.

Later in the nineteenth century, Reverend Charles Daniel Dance, a British Anglican missionary in Guyana, wrote in 1881 of ackee being 'generally eaten fried or boiled with saltfish or as a substitute for the egg in egg sauce', adding that '[i]f colonial epicures only knew the loss they sustain in the neglect of this plant' in Guyana it would be consumed

48 W.J. Titford, *Sketches Towards a Hortus Botanicus Americanus; Or Coloured Plates (with Concise and Familiar Descriptions) of New and Valuable Plants of the West Indies and North and South America, Etc.* (London: Sherwood, Nealy and Jones, 1811), p. xiv; Higman, *Jamaican Food*, pp. 157–58.

49 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 158.

50 M.G. Lewis, *Journal of a West-India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London: J. Murray, 1834), p. 152.

more frequently.[51] Annie Brassey, in her travel account *In the Trades, the Tropics, and the Roaring Forties* (1885), writes in detail of the 'peculiar and beautiful red ovate fruit':

> The akee, a large tree somewhat resembling a mango, bearing glossy green leaves and large pod-shaped fruit. The fruit that was ripe was of a brilliant scarlet or crimson … Its flavour is delicious; but it is not fit to be eaten until it bursts spontaneously, showing its soft, spongy, creamy centre.[52]

Brassey's detailed description encompasses not only the appearance and use of the fruit, 'excellent, either as a vegetable or a fruit', but also the potential threat of 'a deadly poison' after an English family 'died in less than twenty minutes after eating unripe akees only a few months ago'. Clearly, ackee was known to colonial planters, visitors and settlers in the broader Caribbean region, and appreciated by some, but it did not widely gain approval as a favoured fruit amongst this class. These texts indicate a sense of a struggle to situate the ackee, both in terms of how it was supposed to be consumed and categorised – as a fruit or a vegetable – and where its value lay.

These ambiguities extend from travel writing to literary accounts about ackee. Despite its long-standing prominence in Jamaican culture, ackee is a distinctly ambivalent symbol. In *Banana Bottom* (1933), Jamaican-American and Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay's novel about the return of Bita Plant to her hometown in Jamaica, a detailed and luxurious description of the ackee is offered through white missionary Priscilla Craig's impression of the fruit:

> The cream-lobed akee – a fruit that was eaten like a vegetable – with its burnished black seeds set in vermilion case, so like an antique flower-shaped brooch fashioned of jet, ivory and coral, and which had seemed so strange to her from her first coming to the colony and after long years still held its strangeness.[53]

As McKay exemplifies, the language used to describe ackee is varied and often conveys a sense of 'strangeness' stemming from confusion and the contradictions inherent in its qualities. Ackee is both fruit and

51 C.D. Dance, *Chapters from a Guianese Log-Book* (Georgetown, Demerara, 1881), pp. 49–50.

52 A. Brassey, *In the Trades, the Tropics and the Roaring Forties* (New York: H. Holt, 1885), p. 248.

53 C. McKay, *Banana Bottom* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 90.

vegetable, both natural and artificial in its jewel-like similarity to a 'brooch'. It is visually striking in colour and shape, and ambiguous in flavour, described variously as 'mild', 'bland', 'rich', 'delicate', 'nutty', 'silky' and like 'scrambled eggs' in texture, as well as avocado, butter and cheese.[54]

Such literary accounts of ackee demonstrate that it has become a distinctively Jamaican cultural symbol, with its consumption associated especially with a certain daring on the part of Jamaicans. In *Abeng* (1984), Michelle Cliff writes: 'Concealed within the fleshy yellow pouches which were edible was a sprinkling of red powder— "deadly poison". … Jamaicans were the only island people daring enough to eat the ackee.'[55] The connection that Cliff draws between the collective personality of Jamaicans and the consumption of a specific fruit offers another suggestion as to why ackee is scarcely discussed in the Miscellaneous Reports, as an example of a food plant acting as a distinctive cultural symbol, accessible only to Jamaicans. Writing similarly of cassava, the 'bitter' starchy root with 'poisonous juices' which are removed to make cassareep, a syrup used as the basis for Pepper Pot soup, Candice Goucher observes that 'from the poisonous beginnings of oppression came a resilience and resistance that flavored a distinctively Caribbean attitude'.[56] This association of a potentially poisonous plant with resistance parallels Cliff's representation of the ackee as a symbol of Jamaican daring, and explains why the tree fails to gain the interest of, or is consciously ignored by, the botanists of the Jamaican botanical gardens.

THE NATIONAL FRUIT

In honour of its long-term cultural significance, Ackee was enshrined as a symbol of Jamaican independence with its official installation as the national fruit of Jamaica in 1962, alongside other botanical emblems including the national tree the blue mahoe, and the national flower, that of the lignum vitae, which were recommended by the National Flower

54 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 155.

55 M. Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 1995), p. 94: Cliff also includes the folk song 'Linstead Market', which begins with the lines 'Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market / Not a quatty-wuth sell', p. 82.

56 Goucher, *Congotay!* p. 128.

Committee.[57] The committee reported that '[t]his fruit selected itself and whilst not indigenous to Jamaica, has remarkable historic associations. It was originally imported from West Africa, probably brought here in a slave ship, and now grows luxuriously producing each year large quantities of edible fruit'. This status not only recognises the cultural agency of the plant itself, but also its historic role in supporting the agency of enslaved people, and its particular association with Jamaica: 'Jamaica is the only place where the fruit is generally recognised as an edible crop.' *The Gleaner* reported the selection of these emblems in March 1962, before independence from Britain, and public opinion was also sought through flower shows.[58]

For the same reasons ackee was an unlikely plant to be transferred by slave traders, it was not a priority for planters or botanists to cultivate on its arrival in Jamaica. As a prominent fruit tree in Jamaica which was not exported during the colonial era, ackee is set apart from other fruits such as bananas and mangoes by its extremely limited discussion in Kew's archives. Thus, the argument for ackee's transfer to the Caribbean as a strong example of African botanical and culinary agency, is likewise one reason for its relative absence in Kew's Miscellaneous Reports. This absence is still more conspicuous on account of the ubiquity of ackee descriptions elsewhere in writings about Jamaica. But as a tree overlooked and undervalued in the colonial botanic gardens of the island, ackee was left to flourish as an ambivalent symbol of both beauty and threat, signifying the subversive foundations of Jamaican identity, the tree standing, in Suzanne Barr's memoir *My Ackee Tree*, 'like a Jamaican flag in front of our house'.[59]

57 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, p. 3; 'Jamaican national symbols', https://nlj.gov.jm/jamaican-national-symbols (accessed 16 July 2025).

58 Anon., 'The choice of national emblems', *The Gleaner*, 30 March 1962, p. 12.

59 S. Barr, *My Ackee Tree: A Chef's Memoir of Finding Home in the Kitchen* (Toronto: Penguin, 2022).

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Maria Kennedy

Exploring Un-cultivation in America: Discourses of Wild and Foraged Apples

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the existing popular culture discourse of foraging and wild fruit through examinations of orcharding history, longstanding American folk legend, contemporary mass media depictions and niche publications within the cider industry that were circulating within the social networks of cider makers during the time leading to our study. Taken together, these narratives indicate an active and evolving intellectual discourse of foraging within the cider community, a discourse which reveals a questioning and reframing of dominant cultural, social and economic paradigms, not only of contemporary agricultural and social economies, but also of the longer scope of American Romanticism as a foundational cultural imperative. Ideas of the landscape, its uses and its meanings, based in the opposition of wilderness and cultivated landscapes, are under revision in this foraging discourse.

KEYWORDS

Orchards, trees, foraging, apples, cider production, plant humanities, cultivated landscapes, folk legends

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, American cider maker and orchardist Andy Brennan published *Uncultivated: Wild Apples, Real Cider, and the Complicated Art of Making a Living*, in which he describes his ideology of 'un-cultivation'. He details the discovery, care, use and propagation of so-called 'wild' apples in reforested areas of the Catskill Mountain region of upstate New York as an alternative to conventional forms of cultivation and farm business management.[1] Brennan's ideas have contributed to a groundswell of enthusiasm for apple foraging in the region in recent years. His practice was an early example of a trend amongst producers in the emergent American cider industry who have begun searching for the remnant orchards of abandoned farms and the feral offspring of cultivated trees now scattered in second growth forests across the American Northeast. There is increasing interest in the significance of wild apples as sources of potential new

1 A. Brennan, *Uncultivated: Wild Apples, Real Cider, and the Complicated Art of Making a Living* (White River Junction Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019).

FIGURE 1.
Apple foragers at a location in upstate New York use tarps to catch the apples on the ground while shaking them off the trees.
Photo: Maria Kennedy.

cultivars that are disease-resistant, locally adapted to climate change and expansive in qualities of taste and use in cider. While the practice of foraging in contemporary cider production initially appeared economically marginal, it also seemed increasingly topical, as various craft cider companies began to tout the use of 'wild' apples on their labels and in marketing. Discussions of foraged fruit began to emerge in the media from 2013 and in a panel devoted to discussing and tasting foraged fruit ciders at the industry meeting Cider Con in 2018, culminating in the publication of Brennan's book in 2019.

On a practical, rather than literary, level, we also see the concept of 'wild' as a significant component of value in the contemporary cider industry, particularly in the widespread use of the word to describe products. Here, the cultural meanings of wild may be broad. Nevertheless, it is the ubiquity of the word that shows its power in characterising American imaginaries. A recent study of company website descriptions of ciders from New York, Vermont and Virginia using text-mining

analysis, documented the common use of the term 'wild' in several contexts, including 'wild apples', 'wild fermented' and 'wild yeasts'.[2] Further, the article states that:

> the mention of wild fermentation methods is becoming common in product descriptions, presumably as a way to differentiate products. Wild fermentation methods are also trending in wine-making and brewing … though the details of these processes are not well-understood nor is the use of process-oriented terms regulated by industry stakeholders or governmental organizations.[3]

Though the use of 'wild' in the above study references the fermentation method rather than the apple source, its use across various aspects of cider production reflects a widening arena of descriptive practice attached to this word. In contrast with industrial food products, the value attached to the term 'wild' indexes a plethora of meanings that highlight the artisanal value of beverages created with greater connection to nature and processes beyond the control of the maker. At the margins of economic productivity, the value of foraging for wild fruit by cider makers and consumers must be sought in outcomes other than profit.

What qualifies as wild with regards to the apples themselves may be interpreted by foragers in different ways. According to some usages, wild apples might refer to fruit sourced from previously cultivated orchards that have since been abandoned and overgrown with other vegetation and might now resemble a second growth forest. 'Wild' here indicates their location in presently uncultivated land. Alternatively, 'wild' or 'feral' might refer to characteristics of the plants themselves. The apples most commonly used for cider production are from cultivated varieties, meaning that people have selected a unique genotype for specific traits (such as environmental tolerance, disease resistance or fruit quality) and then asexually propagated or cloned that genotype. In this case, wild apples might be unique genotypes self-sown from the seeds of parent orchards rather than grafted. Some of these seedlings may be descended from cultivated apples with recognisable names and pedigrees, while others may be from closely related *Malus* species and hybrids. They are wild in terms of their genetic evolution

2 M. Calvert, E. Cole, C. Neill, A. Stewart, S. Whitehead and J. Lahne, 'Exploring cider website descriptions using a novel text mining approach', *Journal of Sensory Studies* **38** (5) (2023).

3 Ibid.

beyond the thousands of cloned cultivars that have been selected by humans over the centuries. In all these and many more cases, the critical discourse locates a boundary between 'wild' and 'cultivated' spaces that is diverse, changing and incompletely distinguished. Foragers are the people exploring these shifting boundaries of American landscape and its agricultural products.

This paper explores the evolution of discourses of foraging and wild fruit through examinations of orcharding history, literature, American folk legend, contemporary mass-media depictions and publications within the cider industry. Taken together, these narratives indicate active and evolving intellectual discussions on foraging in America which reveal a questioning and reframing of dominant cultural, social and economic paradigms, not only of contemporary agricultural and social economies, but of the longer scope of American Romanticism.

American Romanticism and its imaginations of landscape and identity have always been plagued by internal contradictions. Historian David Diamond describes 'America's perpetual ambiguity about nature, paradoxically enabling and profiting from its transformation while longing for its purity and preservation.'[4] Ideas of the landscape, its uses and its meanings, based in the opposition of wilderness and cultivated landscapes, are under revision in contemporary foraging discourses. In them, we can see both the consistency and continuity of this American conundrum, as well as the innovations the foragers and cider makers are adopting. Articles on wild apple foraging in particular, emerge from and contribute to this ongoing American paradox of landscape and identity, with each historical moment presenting new pragmatic challenges, from settlement and nation building in the nineteenth century, to climate change and globalisation in the twenty-first century. In their attempt to chart new paths through the evolving landscapes they have inherited, which they will themselves shape and hope to pass on to new generations, apple foragers today address contemporary issues of climate change, intellectual property, land access and changing agricultural economies in the twenty-first century.

4 D.H. Diamond, 'Origins of pioneer apple orchards in the American West: Random seeding versus artisan horticulture', *Agricultural History* **84** (4) (2010): 423–50, at 444.

THE FORAGED FRUIT PROJECT – ENGAGED AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY METHODS

The phenomenon of finding and using foraged fruit in the modern cider industry emerged in industry media during the period of rapid growth in the American market starting in 2013 and prompted the initiation of our investigation in 2021. I joined my colleague Dr Gregory Peck of Cornell University's School of Integrative Place Science to explore foraging as an indicator arena where both cultural and biological resources are in flux. Our research project, funded by a grant from the Cornell Einhorn Center for Community Engagement, highlights the diverse motivations of apple foragers, investigating the relationships people form in their social networks around trees, and the aesthetic, culinary and horticultural choices guiding their selection and propagation of specimens, culminating in chemical and genetic analysis of fruit specimens collected by study participants.

Our trans-disciplinary collaboration spanning sciences and humanities was structured around the collection of ethnographic interviews with foragers and the analysis of fruit samples collected from our research participants for fruit quality, chemical composition and genetic fingerprinting. Our research team included undergraduate students Victoria Broughton and Andrew James, lab technician Michael Brown and our community partner, The New York Cider Association, represented by executive director Scott Ramsey. The methods we adopted were aimed at encouraging multiple kinds of knowledge creation. Ethnographic methods included site visits and interviews, followed by laboratory-based analysis of the samples provided by research participants with whom, throughout the project, we have also convened panel discussions at cider industry conferences and public engagements at local events such as Cider Week.

This paper acts as a companion to the project, examining discourses of foraging through historical and contemporary texts that are foundational to the project's ethnographic and laboratory investigations. Through explorations of historical, literary and media texts, I focus on the iterations and evolutions of foraging discussions in scholarly and grey literature that act as significant nodes of meaning in the growth of larger social systems of belief. Grounded in an approach that recognises the importance of understanding semiotic flows of meaning between

texts, performances and practices in an integrated cultural field, analysis of these texts may illuminate our future analysis of the ethnographic data and may inform our reflection on the engaged research processes and fruit data generated by the laboratory studies.

WILD APPLES AND FOLK HEROES

The words 'apple' and 'wild' present compelling contradictions between the cultivated and the uncultivated, the domestic and the feral, the civilised and the savage. To understand how Brennan's idea of 'un-cultivation' emerges as a contemporary foraging discourse, we must first look at the Romantic iterations of 'wildness', beginning in the nineteenth century with publications of Thoreau's essay 'The Succession of Forest Trees, and Wild Apples' and the folk legend of Johnny Appleseed.[5] Henry David Thoreau famously explored the binaries of wildness and cultivation in his essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862. Musing on the history of the apple from its ancient homes in Asia and Europe to its appearance in North America, Thoreau compares the qualities of cultivated and uncultivated apples, noting the difference between crab apples native to North America and the cultivated varieties introduced from Europe. Additionally, however, he comments on the migration of the cultivated European variety out of the orchards and into fields and forests of the New World. Noting its capacity to escape cultivated spaces without human aid, he attributes an agency to the cultivated apple not unlike that of its fellow human migrants. Thoreau sees in the apple a capacity to move, adapt and thrive beyond the boundaries of cultivation and civilisation:

> Here on this rugged and woody hillside has grown an apple-tree, not planted by man, no relic of a former orchard, but a natural growth, like the pines and oaks. Most fruits which we prize and use depend entirely on our care. Corn and grain, potatoes, peaches, melons, etc., depend altogether on our planting; but the apple emulates man's independence and enterprise. It is not simply carried, as I have

5 H.D. Thoreau, *The Succession of Forest Trees, and Wild Apples / by Henry D. Thoreau. With a Biographical Sketch by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887).

> said, but, like him, to some extent, it has migrated to this New World, and is even, here and there, making its way amid the aboriginal trees.[6]

Thoreau's anthropomorphised wild apple, whether native crab or migrant European cultivar, becomes an avatar and often interlocutor of the human in search of knowledge of ecologies, landscapes and a wider range of sensory experiences. Thoreau's wild apples exist at these boundaries of understandings of cultivation, domesticity and society, suggesting that it is the migration of fruit and people that allows expansions not only in qualities of the fruit itself, but in the ability of humans to expand their sensory, and thus metaphysical, experiences:

> But it is remarkable that the wild apple, which I praise as so spirited and racy when eaten in the fields or woods, being brought into the house, has frequently a harsh and crabbed taste. The Saunterer's Apple not even the saunterer can eat in the house. The palate rejects it there, as it does haws and acorns, and demands a tamed one; for there you miss the November air, which is the sauce it is to be eaten with.[7]

The value that Thoreau attributes to wild apples, then, cannot properly be experienced in domestic spaces and circumstances. The movement of apples and humans into the wild changes them. And yet, it is not that this movement negates human senses or sensibilities; Thoreau also spends time in his essay exploring the aesthetics of the apple. He grounds us in the foundational Romantic idea – that humans are freed in nature, in the wild, to explore the beautiful more fully when escaping the dull restrictions, if not the materials, of civilisation.

Thoreau's publication of 'Wild Apples' in 1862 occurred almost a decade before the publication of a story that catapulted the evolving folk legend of Johnny Appleseed to a national audience. Romantic accounts in publications of the nineteenth century transformed the story of a real person, John Chapman, from an idiosyncratic frontiersman into a folk hero whose plantations of apple trees paved the way for westward American settlement. Historian William Kerrigan's book *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard* traces the real man – a canny land speculator, trader and trapper, as well as an iconoclastic loner and possible mystic or eccentric – in relation to the emergence of folk legend. John Chapman's great-great grandfather, Edward Chapman, arrived in

6 Ibid. p. 63.
7 Ibid. p. 75.

FIGURE 2.
Wild apples may have wildly differing qualities, and the only way for foragers to know what apples may suit their needs is to taste for sugars, tannins, acids, aromas and textures. Large beautifully coloured fruits may stand out visually, but only tasting will tell if they are useful for eating or cider making.
Photo: Maria Kennedy

New England in 1638 among the Puritan colonists. John was born in Leominster, Massachusetts in 1774 into a colonial landscape that was filling up with settlers. Like many at this time, he decided to seek his own fortune farther west, travelling across New England, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, planting seedlings and selling trees to settlers who followed afterward. He ended his days in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the region known as the Old Northwest, where he was also buried in 1845. His seedling orchards were part of the general process of westward migration of European Americans in North America. The settlers' primary concern in planting orchards was to establish land claims rather than sophisticated agricultural enterprises.[8]

8 W. Kerrigan, *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

At the time of Chapman's apple planting activities in the newly opening west, American orchard agriculture in the east was evolving towards a more complex horticultural practice, where specialised nurseries propagated and sold fruit trees that had been grafted to replicate particularly prized fruits. Though grafting was known and practised amongst an elite few in early America, it was not broadly implemented amongst farmers of more modest means, who tended to rely on trees grown from seedlings. As historian David Diamond describes, grafting was not always possible during the colonial period:

> If grafted apple trees were not immediately available, farmers took the preliminary step of planting seeds to provide future rootstocks to graft upon. Two things were needed to upgrade the seed saplings: live buds or scions from superior trees plus the skill to insert them onto the seedlings. The scarcity of both meant seedling trees pre-dominated throughout the colonial era.[9]

As grafting and horticultural practices spread in the early nineteenth century, named varieties and cultivars became a larger feature of American agriculture. Horticulturalists were producing grafted trees for sale in the Ohio Valley and the Old Northwest at the same time as John Chapman was planting his seedling nurseries in the more remote reaches of this region.

John Chapman, in this context, was far less influential in the eventual development of orchards and cultivated apple varieties as a profitable form of agriculture than other commercial nurserymen. In 1845, the same year as Chapman's death, Andrew Jackson Downing, owner of an influential plant nursery in Newburgh, New York, published the seminal work, *Fruits and Fruit Trees of North America.*[10] This book not only influenced the adoption of cultivating grafted fruit varieties amongst farmers, but popularised an ideal of agrarian landscapes integrated into urban and suburban settings as well as on the frontier. In 1848, the American Pomological Society was formed to support the growing trade of apple growers and nurserymen and in 1856, one of the Society's

9 Diamond, *Agricultural History*, p. 428.

10 A.J. Downing, *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America; or, The Culture, Propagation, and Management, in the Garden and Orchard, of Fruit Trees Generally; with Descriptions of All the Finest Varieties of Fruit, Native and Foreign, Cultivated in This Country* (New York): Wiley and Putnam, 1845).

founders, Charles Hovey, published *The Fruits of America.*[11] In this era of more sophisticated horticultural development, why did Chapman's legend proliferate?

According to Kerrigan, stories about Chapman circulated after his death in local and regional sources, but it was 26 years later that his story reached a national audience through the publication of 'Johnny Appleseed – A Pioneer Hero' by William D'Arcy Haley in *Harpers Monthly Magazine* in 1871. Haley described Johnny Appleseed as a foil to the typically vigilant and potentially violent frontiersman whose interactions with wilderness were characterised by dominance, control and opportunism. Rather, Appleseed was depicted in terms of his peaceful connection with the wilderness, his interaction with which was imbued with the same qualities as that of an artist:

> The frontiers-man, who felt himself sufficiently protected by his rifle against wild beasts and hostile Indians, found it necessary to guard against the attacks of the insidious enemies in the grass by wrapping bandages of dried grass around his buckskin leggings and moccasins; but Johnny would shoulder his bag of apple seeds, and with bare feet penetrate to some remote spot that combined picturesqueness and fertility of soil; and there he would plant his seeds, place a slight inclosure around the place, and leave them to grow until the trees were large enough to be transplanted by the settlers, who in the mean time would have made their clearings in the vicinity. The sites chosen by him are, many of them, well known and are such as an artist or a poet would select; open places on the loamy lands that border the creeks – rich, secluded spots, hemmed in by giant trees, picturesque now, but fifty years ago, with their wild surroundings and the primal silence, they must have been tenfold more so.[12]

Haley's description emphasises that trope of Romanticism that idealised nature as an environment for the genesis of beauty, self-knowledge and creative enterprise. This wilderness landscape was full of imaginative possibility. Johnny Appleseed's legend also noted him as a pacifist. His endeavour to plant trees in the wilderness was framed as unmarred by violence and helpful to the pioneer settlers who came after him. Surrounded by the wondrous trees of a primaeval forest, Appleseed's endeavours were closer to those of an artist than an entrepreneur.

11 C.M. Hovey, *The Fruits of America: Containing Richly Colored Figures, and Full Description of All the Choicest Varieties Cultivated in the United States* (Boston MA: C.C. Little and Jas. Brown, and Hovey & Co, 1856).

12 W.D. Haley, *Johnny Appleseed: A Pioneer Hero* (Fort Wayne, IN: Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County, 1955), p. 4.

Kerrigan's scholarship to uncover the historical man John Chapman in contrast to the legendary figure of Johnny Appleseed has explored in detail the multiple and shifting impositions of meaning piled onto the historically documented realities of Chapman's life. As Kerrigan argues, in this guise of romantic folk hero, Appleseed's primitive but pacifist lifestyle and generative tree planting became part of a narrative that extolled the beneficial and creative origins of expansionist, capitalist, agrarian nationalism. The romantic focus on pacifism and creativity also excused and obscured the destruction of forests, the displacement and genocide of Native peoples, and the imposition of a capitalist colonial economy on a so-called wilderness.

Chapman's legend, then, highlights this Romantic ambiguity between cultivation and wilderness, describing a nation ill at ease with the success of its agrarian expansionism and by extension its subsequent shift to industrialisation. Diamond writes:

> Chapman's wandering from seed plot to seed plot, camping out, and dropping in on settlers did not typify American agrarianism, and his horticultural bona fides are problematic. Yet rather than condemn him as an inauthentic farmer, consider his actual behaviors, the stuff that catalyzed his myth: sleeping in hollow logs, canoeing limpid streams, treading Indian trails, and venerating wildlife. In these, he epitomizes America's perpetual ambiguity about nature, paradoxically enabling and profiting from its transformation while longing for its purity and preservation.[13]

By this judgement, as agrarian settler, or frontiersman, Chapman was inconsequential. But as a man traversing these cultivated and wild spaces, he activated an imaginary world of possibility that questioned and critiqued these two foundational characters of the American story of westward settlement: the agrarian settler and the entrepreneurial frontiersman. By the time his story rose to the level of legend in the national media, westward settlement had moved beyond the Ohio Valley and the regions of the Old Northwest to the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains and the Pacific coast. The wilderness of Chapman's time and place had been domesticated. Far more successful orchards and nurseries had proliferated. In the midst of this success, Americans looked back for inspiration not to the practical nurserymen of their time, but to the figure whose unlikely persistence and creativity in the most inhospitable

13 Diamond, *Agricultural History*, p. 444.

conditions made the eventual domestication of the landscape appear even more dramatic in hindsight. It is perhaps Johnny Appleseed's position as an unlikely forefather of the frontier that makes him all the more appealing as a folk hero. Impractical, iconoclastic and individualistic, he becomes an embodiment of the unlikely experiment of westward settlement, throwing its eventual success into more dramatic relief.

As an iconoclastic hero, however, Johnny Appleseed's legend is open for reinterpretation by those who want to critique the arc of American development rather than celebrate him as an explanation for its genesis. Commenting on Appleseed's renewed significance in the twenty-first century, Kerrigan argues that this folklorisation process of Appleseed is ongoing, noting the contemporary issues which draw from the legend and re-animate it with fresh significance:

> But the apple and Johnny Appleseed are once again emerging as powerful symbols pushing back against the transformations global industrial capitalism continues to bring. The increasing distance of farms and orchards from urban and suburban American, the disappearance of the labor-inefficient but idolized family farm, the relentless outward sprawl of cities into once again agrarian hinterlands, and the dominance of a global agro-industry in the American kitchen face increasing resistance.[14]

The emergence of Appleseed as a folk hero in nineteenth-century American publications acts as an ever-present background for the emergence of popular discourses of foraging in the twenty-first century. Appleseed's Romantic qualities are both recapitulated and challenged in contemporary writing where the current appeal of apple foraging draws on and subverts foundational aspects of Appleseed's legend, especially its romantic characterisation of the wilderness as a site of creative renewal and generative possibility.

The legend of Johnny Appleseed elides many real histories of settlement, agriculture and horticulture, as well as the work of Native peoples who had been cultivating their own crops and orchards on the land that later would be characterised by white settlers as 'wild'.[15] In doing so, the legend simplified and compressed a set of desires and aspirations of

14 Kerrigan, *Johnny Appleseed.*

15 M.D. Abrams and G.J. Nowacki, 'Native Americans as active and passive promoters of mast and fruit trees in the Eastern USA', *Holocene* **18** (7) (2008): 1123–37; W. Kerrigan, 'Apples on the border: Orchards and the contest for the Great Lakes', *Michigan Historical Review* **34** (1) (2008): 25–41.

Americans in the midst of real agricultural, industrial and national expansion. The Appleseed legend signifies a first example of a Romantic discourse of uncultivated apples arising as a foil to an agrarian discourse of settlement.

Today's foragers, conversely, go out into the forest in search of the wild seedlings to bring back into domesticated settings. They seek fruit that has gone wild, fruit that has escaped the ruins of cultivation and joined the ecosystems of forests, fields and hedgerows, and which might bring some of its wild qualities to enliven the landscapes of rural America that are in agricultural, economic, or environmental decline. Like Johnny Appleseed, though, they cross between cultivated and wild spaces and, in so doing, spark a new discourse about the significance, utility, meaning and history of cultivated and wild spaces in America, and about the processes of selection, domestication and cultivation of fruits in the development of market economies.

A NEW CIDER MARKET AND CONTEMPORARY FORAGING DISCOURSES

In between the first rise of romantic discourses with the publication of Thoreau's 'Wild Apples' and the Johnny Appleseed legend in *Harper's,* and the emergence of a foraging practice amongst contemporary cider producers, America witnessed huge changes to agriculture, orcharding and the role of alcoholic beverages. Industrialisation and globalisation contributed to the decline in the diversity of cultivated apple varieties, as did the temporary imposition of Prohibition, rises in the uses of agricultural inputs and chemical controls, and dramatic changes in horticultural practice favouring high-density tree planting in orchards. The orchards of twenty-first-century America are designed to produce reliable fruit crops for the massive fresh-eating and processing markets, rather than to provide for agrarian self-sufficiency. Cider went from being a seasonally produced drink of colonial and westward settlers, to larger commercial production as applejack spirit, to being banned during Prohibition. The production of fresh cider apple juice has remained a seasonal tradition in many communities, and home fermentation continued during and after Prohibition, with a few national brands, such as Woodchuck, continuing as mainstays of the market throughout the twentieth century.

Contemporary discourses of foraging and wild fruit began to emerge in American media shortly after the sudden rise of cider as a renewed category of alcoholic beverage in the twenty-first century American market. They were heavily influenced by the founding in 2010 of Cider Week, a marketing event championing craft producers in New York, which was created and initially nurtured by food and farming non-profit Glynwood. Even more consequential was the nationwide launch of the Angry Orchard brand, owned by Boston Brewing Company, in 2012, which further propelled hard cider into ascendent media coverage and ubiquitous commercial presence on the shelves of many grocery and beverage outlets. In a few short years, cider became a rapidly growing industry, with hundreds of new producers entering the market.[16] Amidst a plethora of marketing narratives driving the popularity of this new industry, including historical references to the American founding fathers, Johnny Appleseed, and Prohibition, distinct narratives around wild fruit, wild fermentation and foraging also appeared. 'Wild' became a buzzword and 'foraged' a badge of authenticity for artisan brands in opposition to mass-market industrial products.

Several media texts illustrate the development of these discourses in North America over a period of seven years. In 2013, the food commentary site *Grub Street* published a profile of Andy Brennan, who had begun to build a following for his foraged ciders:

> Brennan gets his apples mostly via foraging trips. He and Polly scrounge around in the woods and collect the wild apples from branches or off the forest floor. Some are no larger than golf balls, and nearly all are ugly, bruised, bee-stung, and possibly home to worms or other varmints.[17]

Brennan, who would go on to publish the book *Uncultivated* in 2019, was a constant presence in the media coverage of the rise of cider as a new and hip beverage category and was often heralded for his foraging activities and his use of wild fruit.

Significant purely for its index of relevance to mainstream popular culture trends, *Vogue Magazine* featured foraging, wild apples and cider in a short piece in 2015 with this description of the quaintly

16 C.A. Miles et al., 'Growing apples for hard cider production in the United States – trends and research opportunities', *HortTechnology* **30** (2) (2020): 148–55.

17 G. Gray, *Wild Man: Meet New York's Hottest Cider Producer* (2013): https://www.grubstreet.com/2013/10/andy-brennan-best-cider-producer.html

old-fashioned seasonal beverage positioned next to a model leaning against a tree in a tweedy ensemble:

> Now the old guard of artisan and backyard cideries that have always crafted serious juice in (more often than not) bone-dry styles has started to garner the attention it deserves, and up-and-comers are seeking out forgotten and wild apple varieties to add to the diversity of cider expressions available on the market.[18]

Vogue's article was followed that same year by a much more substantial article by culinary author Rowan Jacobson on the digital platform *Tasting Table*. Entitled 'New American Ciders with the Feral Cider Society', the article extolled the uniquely American cider vintages to be made by finding fruit at the side of the road:

> It's a century-old tragedy with a happy ending. Sweet apples make boring booze. Making cider out of them is like trying to make wine with table grapes. Great cider requires special varieties, but Prohibition swept those from the American landscape. Now there's a scramble to find good fruit. Some cider makers have imported varieties from England and Normandy. But a few of us have realized that the most tantalizing fruit of all lines the dirt roads and abandoned cellar holes of rural America.[19]

Jacobson's article sought to elevate foraging and wild or 'feral' fruit through a more serious consideration of the survival of orchards and feral trees from historical landscapes and the significance of local terroirs, attempting to put cider in a larger conversation with European viniculture and carving out a claim for uniquely American culinary ingredients and tastes. Following his earlier book, *Apples of Uncommon Character*,[20] Jacobsen's article moved foraging and wild fruit beyond a merely hip new food fad and connected it with elite discourses of culinary culture and conceptions of human-landscape relationships that would find further expression in the writings of foragers themselves. If earlier twenty-first century media accounts indicated a bubbling

18 C. Demmond, 'Why hard cider is making a comeback'. *Vogue*, 10 Nov. 2015: https://www.vogue.com/article/hard-cider-fall-drink-cocktail-food.

19 R. Jacobsen, 'New American ciders with the Feral Cider Society'. *Tasting Table*, 9 Nov. 2015:https://www.tastingtable.com/691087/cider-bitter-apple-cider-aaron-burr-cidery-shacksbury-cider-finger-lakes-apple-tree-project/.

20 R. Jacobsen, *Apples of Uncommon Character: 123 Heirlooms, Modern Classics, & Little-Known Wonders* (First US edition. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

popular discourse on the topic of wild apples and foraging in relation to the growing cider industry, some foragers began to think more deeply and critically about the practice, resulting in the publication of works speaking to a more internal audience of foragers, orchardists and cider makers.

Self-published in 2017, Matt Kaminsky's book *The Wild Apple Forager's Guide* begins by describing the author's own fascination with the landscape in which wild apples exist. He writes:

> The trees which I have worked most closely with in my few seasons spent working with apples are those populations of wildings, whose independence and wherewithal to survive in society's unmanaged places presents them openly … We apple foragers exist as the naturalist, the orchardist, and as our inner animal selves simultaneously. In the neglected parts of our landscape, we watch the tree evolve through dormancy, to bloom, through fruit production, graduating with harvest. We get to know the tree inside of the home it has made for itself.[21]

Kaminsky is an orchardist and homestead farmer in Western Massachusetts and his narrative powerfully echoes the Romantic tropes that characterised the descriptions of Johnny Appleseed's relationship to wilderness in the *Harper's* article of 1871 and Thoreau's *Atlantic* essay on 'Wild Apples'. But Kaminsky's interaction with the trees is not only framed by this Romantic idea of union with a landscape characterised as unmanaged and sublime, but also one which is neglected. He also sees wild trees as a potential resource but notably as a potential hedge against climate change. In this, he echoes Thoreau's sense of the agency and possibility of the apple tree:

> Amid this childlike wonder of wild apples, I have come to personal conclusions about where we stand with apples today. Climate change is bringing more extreme types of weather into all regions of Planet Earth … The wide genetic variability in apples in easy to see. It affects all aspects of the fruit, as well as the growing conditions that the tree itself can tolerate.[22]

Kaminsky's identification of climate change as a motivating factor in his foraging practice catapults twenty-first-century foraging discourses into a new direction. Beyond Romantic creativity, or even culinary taste, his narrative highlights the view of a naturalist: observational, discerning

21 M. Kaminsky, *The Wild Apple Forager's Guide* (Massachusetts: Self-Published, 2017).

22 Ibid.

and practical, he sees trees within the context of their reaction to natural selection. Those that survive are worth attention. The genetic adaptability of the apple becomes not only a potential tool in staying ahead of climate change's effects on agriculture, but a model for humanity's own capacity to adapt. Once again, it is in the zone of the wild where creativity influences human ideas and exerts a parallel and intertwined agency. But in the twenty-first century, the wilderness as imagined in Johnny Appleseed's 'Old Northwest' is no longer such an obvious opposition to the domesticated landscape of a reforested Northeast, where agrarianism has given way to new landscapes of intensified urban, suburban and agricultural land, while unproductive old agricultural areas give way to second-growth forest. Kaminsky's connection with nature is forged in these feral boundaries: in zones of reforestation, with wild specimens of cultivated fruits colonising a new ecology.

While Kaminsky's volume emerged from grassroots practices of foraging and speaks largely to a grassroots audience, Andy Brennan's book *Uncultivated: Wild Apples, Real Cider, and the Complicated Art of Making a Living* (2019), reached a wider public. It is a manifesto and personal history of his journey into the forests of upstate New York, finding the feral apples with which he makes his cider. *Uncultivated* expands the scope of significance for foraging to a larger critique of capitalism:

> Land is limited, success is fleeting, seasons change, and multiplicity is a healthy adaptation for survival. These are all natural principles that conflict with Modern humanity's modus operandi: constant growth, limitless absorption, specialization, the need for certainty. My goal in writing this book is not to rebuke the business or farms that float Modern people (in fact they seem required); I simply want to remind myself and others that another way exists. I've been lured down that path and I've discovered personal success by emulating the apple trees along the road. They are becoming wild. [23]

Brennan is actively exploring the idea of 'un-cultivation' – the removal of oneself and one's environment from expansionist economies and biological interventions. Un-cultivation is not merely the state of the fruit he seeks, but a philosophy for living:

> Uncultivation is an action. To uncultivate is to encourage the transformation from one state to another, just like cultivation, except that it seeks its opposite horizon. It seeks to peel back the layers of cultivation … I have no delusions

23 Ibid., p.vi.

> of uncultivating my way back to the Garden of Eden, but I would like to see cultivation return to a place that I feel is healthier.[24]

Brennan's philosophy of un-cultivation in practice, beyond his sourcing of fruit, contributes to his complicated presence as an embodiment of foraging in the cider industry media, as well as an important practical mentor for many engaged in foraging today. Part of a network of avant-garde artists and food connoisseurs in the orbit of New York City, he has been able to transform the grassroots, vernacular practice of foraging shared by many people in rural communities in New York[25] into an artistic statement and powerful marketing narrative. He was certainly not the first contemporary commercial cider maker to incorporate foraging into his personal or business practice. But framing his activity as an act of art and ideology, rather than merely as a means of subsistence or production, has allowed him to appeal to urbane New York City consumers and to sell 500 ml bottles of cider made from foraged fruit for 45 dollars and more. Brennan's work in many ways set the tone for ongoing discourses of and practices of foraging. His book can be seen as a philosophical culmination of his media presence, public speaking, art projects and business philosophy and practice.

From a focus on philosophy to a detailed study of foraged fruit, the works devoted to foraging from within the community contributed and further complicated the foraging literary field. In 2020, Kaminsky published a new volume, the first of a planned series, *Proceedings from the First Annual Wild and Seedling Pomological Exhibition*, in which he expanded the scope of his own foraging work, inviting people to submit apples to his exhibition and publication. The result is a Pomona – an illustrated catalogue of apple varieties, and a genre which has a long history in the study and cultivation of fruit. Most works in the Pomona genre have featured cultivated fruits.[26] Kaminsky's volume focused on wild fruit discovered, named, used and sometimes cultivated by foragers

24 Ibid.

25 M.E. Kennedy, 'Fruit in the forest: Foraging apples and pressing cider in the Finger Lakes', *Voices* **43** (3/4) (2016): 17–22.

26 Two of the most significant Pomonae in England are T.A. Knight, *Pomona Herefordiensis: Containing Coloured Engravings of the Old Cider and Perry Fruits of Herefordshire. With Such New Fruits as Have Been Found to Possess Superior Excellence. Accompanied with a Descriptive Account of Each Variety* (Agricultural Society of Herefordshire, 1811); and R. Hogg and H.G Bull, *The Herefordshire*

from around North America.[27] The series has continued, with the fifth edition due to be released in 2025.

The zine *Malus,* a publication which shares short articles and creative works by people in the cider industry, acts as a venue for grassroots ideas, philosophy and experience narratives that track contemporary issues in the community of cider makers. Melissa Madden, a cider maker from the Finger Lakes region of New York, brought political dimensions to bear on the ideology and practice of foraging in her essay 'A Brief (and Potentially Erroneous) History of the Finger Lakes National Forest Apples Commons'. Madden brings our attention back to the circumstances in which apples first came to be cultivated on American land, through the displacement and theft of land and genocide of Indigenous peoples, the process in which John Chapman himself was complicit, and which his folk legend elides. Madden, writing about her foraging activities in the Finger Lakes region of New York and her growing consciousness around the history of the land where she forages, writes:

> We know that our colonial heritage includes the destruction of another people's place. We know we have inherited this earth by decimating the Haudenosaunee's ability to feed their families in their home places …. When I seek wild apples, I try to keep all this in mind. I consider my own role in the flow of history, the use of this site, and the displacement and disenfranchisement that exists even more strongly now for indigenous people who call this home … This is also a questioning of why I have had such access and what it means when others are deprived. It is a questioning of the wild foraging paradigm in our cider culture, of our reverence for the wild trees and our own uses of their abundance.[28]

Madden's article, among others, has highlighted growing interests in addressing issues of social justice and historical inequity in a community characterised by a white majority. Her discussion of foraging was one of the first to introduce a critical, reflexive and revisionist approach to published foraging discourses.

Pomona, Containing Original Figures and Descriptions of the Most Esteemed Kinds of Apples and Pears (Hereford: Jakeman and Carver, 1876).

27 M. Kaminsky, *Proceedings from the First Annual Wild & Seedling Pomological Exhibition* (Massachusetts: Self-Published, 2021).

28 M. Madden, 'A brief (and potentially erroneous) history of the Finger Lakes National Forest Apple Commons', *Malus* **9** (2020): https://www.maluszine.com/essays/an-apple-commons#/

In a break away from the Romantic paradigm, Madden actively subverts the very idea of the 'wilderness', reminding us that Native peoples inhabited and cultivated these spaces before white settlement, and that they are sites not only of inspiration, but also of painful memories of dispossession. Her work significantly complicates the discourses of foraging; perhaps it can be seen as finally puncturing some of the discomfort with American expansionism that nineteenth-century literature and legend attempted to stitch together. Madden's article shows us the Romantic imagination uncomfortably ripped open. Her trips into the forest in search of wild fruit are still imbued with creative power and communion with the natural world. However, that world is no longer empty, and its history is no longer peaceful. Her wild apples inspire a new agency, where her writing becomes a process of reckoning with an unquiet past and an uncertain future.

CONCLUSION

The discourses of foraging outlined here illustrate layers of stories told in American society about human interactions with nature. Contemporary foraging discourses confound simplistic binaries of cultivated and wild landscapes. Andy Brennan's term 'uncultivated' introduces the complex recursions of history, agency and innovation that have become a feature of twenty-first-century foraging discourses. In the shift from the Romantic wildness that characterised Thoreau's 'Wild Apples' and D'Arcy's legend of Johnny Appleseed towards the revisionist Romanticism that inflects the writings of contemporary foraging, we see a transformation of emphasis from a creativity residing primarily with humans, accessed through contact with nature, towards Thoreau's understanding of creativity and agency residing in nature itself. Current foraging literature is expanding this approach, suggesting humans must act responsively and responsibly in order to benefit from resources that are intrinsic to the natural world, while also recognising their place in a longer line of historical interactions between different peoples in changing environments.

Blurring the boundaries between wild and cultivated landscapes, between private property and the commons, between industry and ecosystem, the emergence of contemporary foraging discourses suggests

FIGURE 3.
Apple foragers at a location in upstate New York head out to their foraging locations with buckets and backpacks and will carry their harvest across fields to vehicles parked on a quiet gravel road.
Photo: Maria Kennedy.

that old polarities of meaning are in flux. These accounts illustrate the emergence of new or contested ideological models for expressing the value of relationships between people and nature in a changing American landscape, where climate change is imminent, inequities in access to land are increasingly scrutinised, and the resources of rural communities are stretched. Such narratives return to Thoreau's proposition that wild apples may be sources of economic, spiritual, social, environmental renewal, even as cider makers strive to make a living in the midst of landscapes impacted by colonisation, cultivation and industrialisation. Furthermore, this literature argues that 'uncultivated' or 'forest' areas where wild apples can be found today exist due to the agriculture labour and resources that have been introduced and abandoned in the wake of waves of European settlement. It is this encounter, between cultivated and uncultivated, between civilisation and wilderness, that creates a zone of tension, wonder, creativity, curiosity and desire with relation to

the American landscape, and where new generations find opportunities to reshape their own relationships to both the historical past and to the community, commerce and environment they wish to build today.

One might wonder if contemporary foraging discourses situate foragers as the heirs to Appleseed? Are they completing his creative task of generating a new American landscape by bringing apples back out of the wilderness to re-invigorate the depleted domesticated landscapes we have created in the last two centuries? Or, are foragers heirs to Thoreau? Thoreau certainly thought he would have no heirs to his celebration of and transformation through communion with wild apples[29] as he could not see beyond the transformations of landscape and economy occurring in his own time. Seeking an interpretation of contemporary foraging that casts foragers as successors to Appleseed and Thoreau would suggest an ongoing, revised Romanticism is still at work, correcting the flaws of manifest destiny, but still seeking an agrarian synthesis between the wild and the cultivated landscapes of America. In the current foraging literature, critiques of progress, productivity and individuality suggest that the old Romantic paradox between wilderness and domestication, between preservation and profit, is opening up new directions for what wild apples can be in the American imagination, and how foraging might lead us to new landscapes and ways of living in a more expansive relationship to the past and a more dynamic imagination of the future where 'un-cultivation' may be a discourse and a practice that is simultaneously creative, uncomfortable and responsive to needs for social, environmental and economic change.

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29 Thoreau, *The Succession of Forest Trees*, p. 83.

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Where on Earth are the Moon Trees?

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the history of 'Moon Trees' – trees that were grown from seeds that accompanied the NASA Apollo 14 mission to the Moon in 1971. During the mid-1970s, Moon Tree seedlings were planted in communities across the United States as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration. Here, I discuss how Moon Trees became symbols of pride in the scientific and technological advancements in the United States, and the various ways in which they have impacted the communities in which they were planted. I also chart the current efforts (including my own journey) to document and to tell their stories, and the ways in which such efforts emerge from the interweaving of technology and personal and collective memories.

KEYWORDS

Trees, Moon Trees, heritage trees, space exploration, Stuart Roosa, NASA, US National Forest Service, US Bicentennial, storytelling

Y MOON TREE ODYSSEY

Some children grow up on farms surrounded by open spaces, plants, and farm animals. Others grow up in the heart of bustling cities learning to navigate urban landscapes through subways and elevated public transportation systems. My childhood was shaped by a confluence of events in Huntsville, Alabama, a city in the US South that was the stage for important developments in the science of space exploration as well as the US Civil Rights Movement. My encounters with these seemingly disparate but consequential currents in twentieth-century history were supplemented by solitary explorations through Huntsville's Maple Hill Cemetery. These formative experiences fostered my affinity for history, place and landscapes and shaped my thought processes as an adult. The memory recall and association collided when I re-discovered the Moon Tree in Athens, Georgia.

Growing up in Huntsville during the 1960s and 1970s, home to the Marshall Space Flight Center and the Redstone Arsenal, I was surrounded by children whose parents, like my father, worked for an entity

associated with the space programme. Many of my high school friends followed in their parents' footsteps. Huntsville's civic centre is named for Wernher von Braun, a German-born scientist, who in 1942 launched the first rocket into space while still living in Germany and working for the German government. Following the end of World War Two, von Braun and his team of scientists fled Germany and surrendered themselves to the United States Army in 1945. Von Braun and his group of scientists were known as the 'Operation Paperclip Scientists' because their files were marked with paperclips.

In 1950, von Braun and his team were transferred to Huntsville, where they began developing rockets for the US space programme. Von Braun later remarked that Huntsville and its surrounding mountains reminded him of Wirsitz, Germany, his hometown.[1] In Huntsville, von Braun and his team continued their advancements in space exploration, contributing to the success of the Apollo programme, which culminated in Apollo 11's landing on the Moon in 1969. These events unfolded as I was beginning elementary school, growing up alongside the space programme as it matured and gained international recognition.

Many years later, my personal history with the space programme and my hometown – coupled with a sense of nostalgia – was reignited during the summer of 2020 in Athens, Georgia, where I now live, while taking a class entitled 'Plants and Pollinators' as part of my pursuit of a Master's degree in landscape architecture. Our final class project involved assessing the pollinator-friendliness of a public facility. I selected the 120 Dougherty Street Government Building as I work in construction management, and this is the home of the Athens-Clarke County Building Inspections Department, an entity I am familiar with through work. While researching the history of the building for context to write into my report, I came across a scanned newspaper article detailing the dedication of a 'Moon tree' in 1976 (Figure 1). The excitement I felt at that moment was undeniable – it was as if my childhood and the present had collided, bringing back memories of growing up in Huntsville amidst the space programme's breakthroughs.

The newspaper clipping revealed that the tree at 120 Dougherty Street was grown from one of the seeds taken to the Moon during the

1 New Mexico Museum of Space History: https://nmspacemuseum.org/ (accessed 11 Aug. 2023).

The 'Moon Tree' Arrives

Representatives of the Athens Sertoma Club and local dignitaries met recently to plant a "Moon Tree" on land adjacent to the Athens Regional Library.

Athens was one of four Georgia communities selected to receive a moon tree from the U.S. Forest Service, and the Sertoma Club made the tree planting a Bicentennial project.

The moon trees are plants which have been developed from seeds carried to the moon by astronauts on Apollo 14. The seeds were planted by the Forest Service and the resultant seedings are now being transplanted in communities around the nation.

Let's hope the Athens moon tree will grow strong and tall and serve as a continuing reminder of the nation's achievements in space and the teamwork and dedication that made space exploration possible and successful.

Athens already has some famous trees. There's the one Spec Towns got at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and, of course, the one that owns itself. The moon tree should feel right at home in our community, and we're glad to have it.

FIGURE 1.

Article published in the *Athens Banner Herald,* 16 May 1976 announcing the arrival of 'the Moon Tree' to Athens, Georgia.

Source: *Athens Banner Herald*

Apollo 14 mission in 1971. When I returned to the site with this newly found insight, I found the tree, an unassuming Loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*), quietly spreading its branches over a parking lot for the local planning and zoning commission (Figure 3). This discovery felt deeply personal, and the bond I felt with the tree was instant and powerful. It was a remarkable connection that drew on the history I had grown up with in Huntsville. The Moon Tree quickly became a symbol of this shared history. It struck me as sad that such a remarkable piece of history had remained largely unknown. My next thought was: 'Why didn't I know about this tree? Does anyone else know about it?' I decided then that it needed to be recognised. I also became curious about the whole Moon Tree phenomenon. Where are all these trees located? Do they have meaning to the communities in which they are planted and have they somehow impacted the landscape that surrounds them? I embarked upon a research project to answer these questions.

FIGURE 2.

The Moon Tree in Athens, Georgia, planted in 1976 (with no identifying sign) when I discovered it in 2020.

Source: Melanie J. Ford.

A SHORT HISTORY OF MOON TREES

The story of the Moon Trees begins in 1971 with the United States Apollo 14 space exploration mission. The crew consisted of Mission Commander Alan Shepard, Command Module Pilot Stuart Roosa and Lunar Module Pilot Edgar Mitchell.[2] Roosa, who had formerly worked for the United States Forest Service (USFS), was asked by his former employer to travel with 500 seeds from five tree species: loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*), coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*). While no documentation has yet revealed why these five species were chosen, there is speculation that they may have been selected because they would grow across a large cross-section of the United States, particularly at the USFS research stations located in Gulfport, Mississippi and Placerville, California. Each astronaut is allowed to carry a personal item into space, although the item has to weigh less than two pounds and fit into a relatively small space. The items carried often reflect some accomplishment on Earth, some progress made in technology or societal advances. There is typically a symbolic tie between the astronaut's history and the artefact, and this was the case with the seeds that Stuart Roosa (who had ties to the USFS) took.[3] The USFS intended to study the seeds and growth patterns of their seedlings in hopes of determining how, or whether, space travel would have any impact on them.

Following Apollo 14's successful mission to the Moon, the seeds were returned to NASA, who germinated some of the seeds and grew them as seedlings during a one-year experiment. NASA subsequently abandoned the project because the agency lacked suitable facilities to sustain the trees. They returned the remaining ungerminated seeds to the USFS, who successfully germinated and developed a significant number of the remaining seeds. Scientific experimentation with the seeds and seedlings began to conclude just as the United States Bicentennial Celebration was approaching in 1976. The USFS decided to disseminate these seedlings, which had become known within the agency as

2 NASA's History Division: www.history.nasa.gov (accessed 11 Aug. 2024).

3 NASA – Items Taken Into Space Reflect Accomplishments on Earth: https://history2.nasa.gov/items_carried.html (accessed 29 March 2025).

'Moon Trees' to differentiate them from other experimental plantings, to various states for planting in local communities. Newspaper articles that were written about the planting of these seedlings suggest they were planted as a tangible symbol of the bicentennial celebration, and that they were intended to instil pride in the nation's accomplishments, particularly as related to space exploration.

Community celebrations were held across the United States in honour of these trees. Public officials spoke, community colour guards presented the flag, community high schools performed patriotic songs and everyone present had an opportunity to revel in the celebration. Media documented the planting with photography and afforded everyone an opportunity to learn of the momentous occasion. While some trees found their way to obscure or unusual locations, most were planted on the grounds of a public institution, such as a government building, a public school or university or a building that had some association with the forest service. In some instances, plaques were placed next to the trees to identify and commemorate them.

Through the years, many of the Moon Trees and their known locations were slowly forgotten. Physical signs and other markers identifying their national significance disappeared. In other instances, the plaques became just another part of the 'landscaping,' often overlooked and unnoticed. Some deteriorated or were mowed down. From a physiological and visual standpoint, the Moon Trees themselves looked like any other local example of their species. They became 'just' trees. Years passed and many of these Moon Trees were forgotten entirely.

In 1996 one of these trees 'resurfaced', sparking what would eventually become a nationwide quest to recover their stories. A third-grade teacher, Joan Goble, was working with her students on a project about trees when one student mentioned that she knew of a Moon Tree near her Girl Scout camp, Camp Koch near Cannelton, Indiana. Curious to learn more, Goble visited the camp and discovered a sign verifying the student's story. Subsequently, she emailed NASA to learn more about the tree and its significance.[4] Goble was directed to David Williams, NASA Space Science Data Archivist, who also was unfamiliar with

4 David R. Williams, 'The Moon Trees', NASA Space Science Data Coordinated Archive: https://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/lunar/Moon_tree.html (accessed 24 Aug. 2023).

Moon Trees. However, this one email prompted him to research the NASA archives, where he eventually discovered newspaper clippings, letters and memos that attested to the trees' existence. Through discussions with USFS employees, Williams learned that no one possessed formal records or documentation regarding the seedlings' distribution and planting locations. Shortly thereafter, intrigued by the story of the Moon Tree and eager to learn more, Williams created a web page dedicated to Moon Trees, inviting people to submit images and information about them, including their whereabouts and their history.

Since Williams' creation of the web page, many people have written to Williams, eager to share their images and stories of the Moon Tree in their community. Several communities never 'lost' their Moon Tree, and have honoured them throughout the years with events held in their midst. Some communities have used their Moon Tree to foster education about space exploration and forestry, and many regularly host educational programmes that showcase their tree. However, there are still potentially many Moon Trees that have not yet resurfaced from the pages of history and are waiting quietly for rediscovery. The following case studies shed some light on the varied lives of the Moon Trees. They show how the individual lives of the trees have become intertwined with the lives of individual people and communities in ways that are sometimes revealed only through the passage of time.

ATHENS, GEORGIA

This tree launched the beginning of my Moon Tree odyssey. The morning after I discovered the newspaper clipping that recorded the tree's dedication ceremony in 1976, I contacted the Athens-Clarke County Grounds Manager, Andrew Saunders. I inquired if he was familiar with the Moon Tree and whether I could donate funds to erect a plaque to broaden public awareness of this historic landscape feature. Andrew responded apprehensively. He said he was aware of the tree and, that as the Grounds Manager, he could erect a sign, but he cautioned me that the tree was likely to be reduced to a pile of mulch in the near future. I was appalled and stated that I would make sure that didn't happen. I asked why the tree's days were numbered. Andrew said that discussions were currently ongoing to sell the building and its grounds as part of a large redevelopment project that

would involve several blocks in the area. Andrew directed me to contact the local mayor if I wished to discuss the issue.

I immediately placed a call to a friend who was also a former county commissioner. She was unfamiliar with the Moon Tree but was delighted to hear of such a treasure in our midst and eagerly contacted the mayor. She called me back to tell me that she was very disappointed in the mayor's response, which was that we should plan to gather seeds from the tree and be prepared to plant the 'son' of the Moon Tree. While I was aware that the mayor's response was likely based upon the idea that we have another famous tree in Athens, the Tree that Owns Itself, that is a 'son' of the original tree resulting from the original tree being destroyed by lightning, the response was not what I wanted to hear. Considering that the Moon Tree was not only alive, but also thriving and healthy, it seemed a shame not to protect it in its current location. So, as I hung up the phone, I simultaneously walked into a work meeting, grumbling loudly to one of my co-workers about the issue. My uttering the words 'Moon Tree' piqued the interest of those already present and they asked for an explanation. I finished the story with, 'so I just need to find someone who is working on that project so that I can make them aware of the existence of the Moon Tree'. At that point, Buck Bacon, the civil engineer in the room, raised his hand. He admitted that he was the site designer for the master plan that was currently underway for the proposed development. I retorted, 'Well, you just need to go ahead and draw yourself a courtyard around my Moon Tree!' He laughed and said that he would include it in the agenda for the next meeting.

Meanwhile, I continued to delve into the history of the Moon Tree. I learned from the former Director of the Building Inspection Department, Phillip Seagraves, that the Athens Sertoma Club, an organisation dedicated to improving the quality of life for those at risk or impacted by hearing loss through education and support,[5] had been the group that had requested the seedling from the Forestry Commission for planting in Athens. The Athens-Clarke County Government Building was formerly home to the Athens-Clarke County Public Library, and this was the facility originally selected for planting the Moon Tree. Later, as a result of the tree having been planted at this location, a fragrance garden was planted on the library grounds to allow those who were visually

5 Sertoma: www.sertoma.org (accessed 11 Sept. 2024).

FIGURE 3.
'Shoot for the Moon' sculpture erected in the fragrance garden of the Athens-Clarke County Government Building, formerly the Athens-Clarke County Library.
Source: Melanie J. Ford.

impaired to enjoy a garden. A sculpture was also installed in this garden entitled 'Shoot for the Moon' (Figure 3), which was erected to continue the space theme across the building campus.[6] The overarching theme of inspiration, education and inclusivity permeated the built environment at this location.

As the weeks following my conversation with Buck stretched out, he was unable to provide any real updates about the future of the tree. Despite numerous phone calls to the Athens-Clarke County Grounds Department for an update on the plaque, they never seemed to show any progress. I feared that I was being pacified and that I would soon see construction fencing appearing around the site. I grew concerned and contacted the local newspaper, the *Athens-Banner Herald.* I shared the original 1976 article that they had published identifying the Moon Tree and requested that they publicise the situation. They were happy to oblige with an article that appeared in the paper within the week, and thereafter I immediately began fielding phone calls from the local historical society and from interested citizens. The historical society offered to host a re-dedication when the new sign was installed, and they agreed to keep me informed of their plans.

Eventually, with additional clamour created by various citizens, the sign was produced and installed. A re-dedication event was held (Figures 4 and 5) and I spoke about the Moon Tree and its place in the history of the nation and our community. David Williams, NASA's archivist, and Rosemary Roosa, the astronaut Stuart Roosa's daughter, participated in a Zoom meeting following the re-dedication event. Overall, it was a very successful 'saving of the Athens Moon Tree'. The community created sufficient hype around its Moon Tree such that it will not soon be forgotten again.

The rediscovery of the Athens Moon Tree inspired me to fight for its survival. It seems to have channelled several personal passions: community, history, my childhood memories, solving mysteries. Learning that we had been granted the opportunity to care for such a seemingly important part of our country's history inspired me to make every effort to protect it. It also sparked my desire to learn the entire history of the Moon Trees, which led to a quest aimed at locating the remaining three forgotten Moon Trees in the state of Georgia. So far, my research

6 Phillip Seagraves, telephone conversation with the author, 2021.

FIGURE 4.

The Moon Tree located at the Athens-Clarke County Government Building with the new sign installed during the re-dedication in 2021, the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 14 mission.

Source: Jessica L. Ford.

FIGURE 5.
The commemorative sign installed during the re-dedication of the Moon Tree in Athens, Georgia, in 2021.
Source: Athens-Clarke County Landscape Management

adventures have led to the successful location of two of the missing Moon Trees: a loblolly pine located in Macon, Georgia, at the Georgia Forestry Commission's headquarters; and a sycamore planted on the State Capitol Grounds in Atlanta, Georgia. The details of one of these Moon Tree discoveries, the Moon Tree in Macon, Georgia, is the first of my two favourite Moon Tree stories that follow.

MACON, GEORGIA

I learned from reading the article, 'The "Moon Tree" Arrives,' published in the *Athens Banner Herald* on 16 May 1976, that Moon Trees had been planted at four locations in the state of Georgia.[7] I began an in-

7 'The Moon Tree Arrives', *Athens Banner Herald,* 16 May 1976.

ternet search for the locations of the other three, but the only other Moon Tree in Georgia that appeared in the search results was located in Waycross. I subsequently learned that just about anyone who has ever heard the words 'Moon Tree planted in Georgia' has likely heard of the Moon Tree located in Waycross. It has been described as 'the only Moon Tree in Georgia' for a long time (Figure 6). Even today, this is likely to be the case, since the rediscovery of the others is relatively recent. The Waycross specimen is the only Moon Tree in Georgia that was identified with an interpretive sign acknowledging its significance, and this likely is the reason why it is the one Moon Tree in Georgia that did not get lost to history. 'Two known, two to rediscover', I thought at the time, as I was then unaware that the Waycross tree is an outlier and not one of the original bicentennial four.

My ability to research historic periodicals was limited as I had no idea in which cities to search. However, I discovered a national periodical entitled the *Bicentennial Times* that had documented planned

FIGURE 6.

Facebook post by James Burchett, Georgia House District Representative, on May 20, 2019, erroneously identifying the Waycross Moon Tree as the only Moon Tree planted in Georgia.

Source: James Burchett Facebook page, screenshot by Melanie J. Ford.

▶A "Moon Tree", a loblolly pine seedling grown from a seed that journeyed to the moon and back aboard Apollo 14, was planted at the Georgia Forestry Center near Macon. Participating in the ceremonies were, standing, Ray Shirley, director, Georgia Forestry Commission; Mrs. Carolyn Crayton, Kinder-Care Kindergarten; and Don Johnson, chairman, Macon Beautification Committee. John Clarke, forester, Macon District, assists Ben Bradshaw and Danielle Allen, both five, with the planting. Ben is the son of Mrs. Marion Bradshaw. Danielle is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Allen. Similar "Moon Tree" plantings were held in Athens, Atlanta and Savannah.

FIGURE 7.

Article from the *Georgia Forestry Magazine* showing the planting of the Moon tree in Macon, Georgia, in 1976. The two children shown in the photo are Ben Bradshaw and Danielle Allen.

Source: Georgia Forestry Commission.

events in each state for the bicentennial celebrations. Unfortunately, I found no mention of the Georgia Moon Trees in any articles that I was able to access. Fortunately, a chance encounter on a construction site tour of mass timber framing construction with the Director of the Georgia Forestry Commission, Tim Lowrimore, resulted in the

eventual rediscovery and identification of the Moon Tree in Macon, Georgia. Lowrimore was unfamiliar with the Moon Trees. However, as I explained to him what they were, their significance and the US Forestry Commission's role in their inception and dissemination, he became interested enough to assume the cause. Upon his return to his office, he asked one of his employees to search through the Georgia Forestry Commission's archives for articles written in 1976. The employee, Aubrey Deane, located an article from a 1976 edition of *Georgia Forestry Magazine* that included an image of the planting and dedication of the Macon Moon Tree (Figure 7).

The article discovered by Deane clearly identified the locations of Georgia's four Bicentennial Moon Trees as Athens, Atlanta, Macon and Savannah. Waycross was conspicuously absent from the list. The article also provided the address of the Macon tree as the office of the Georgia Forestry Commission, Lowrimore's own place of employment. I later learned from an employee at the facility that rumours had circulated some time ago about a 'Moon Tree' that had been planted on the site. However, the employee admitted that no one was familiar with it, nor did anyone have any idea where it might have been planted.

Lowrimore set about trying to identify the tree. His expertise as a forester proved beneficial, as he was able to identify the loblolly pines on the site and to determine which were in the potential fifty-year-old age range. He was not, however, able to determine positively which one was the Moon Tree. I visited the site and spent several hours exploring the grounds and came to the same determination as Lowrimore: there were only two trees that could possibly be the Moon Tree. My conclusion was based upon the size and species of the trees as well as their proximity to the roadways, as shown in the historic photograph. To identify conclusively the real Moon Tree, we needed an eyewitness to its planting.

The article itself mentioned several names: four of these were the adults in the photograph and two were five-year-old children who participated in the event and assisted with the planting of the tree. The only adult in the photograph still living is Carolyn Crayton, who is a longtime resident of Macon, Georgia. Ms Crayton, now in her nineties, was a pre-school teacher at Kinder-Care Kindergarten, and it was two of her students who were pictured in the photograph. I contacted Ms Crayton, and while she originally agreed to meet me to assist with the

identification of the Moon Tree, she later recanted, unsure if she could identify the tree and concerned about providing inaccurate information.

Months went by, and a fortuitous encounter at a construction management conference afforded an introduction to Sam Macfie, a long-time resident of Macon. When I learned that he had lived in Macon his entire life, I showed him the image from the magazine, shared with him the tale of the Moon Trees and asked if he knew or recognised any of the children in the image. He did not, but throughout the course of the conference, he continued to search the internet for the whereabouts of the two children named in the article. When the main portion of the conference ended and everyone left for the construction jobsite tour, Sam said he was skipping the tour in favour of a trip to a house where he believed one of the now-grown children might live. He said he would return before the afternoon reception that followed the tour. I was surprised that this man, whom I had just met, was going to this extent to assist me in my research, but as a long-time Maconite, he was just as eager as I was to locate the child and excited to rediscover the tree.

While Sam's efforts that day were not fruitful, only a couple of weeks later I received a phone call from him in which he excitedly shared that he had located Ben Bradshaw, the little boy from the image. He said he had not yet spoken to Ben but had met his wife. Following up on leads that he had obtained from his previous excursion, Sam had located where Ben lived, and when he knocked on Ben's front door, his wife answered. Sam assured her that he was not selling anything. He asked whether the words 'Moon Tree' meant anything to her. She was very surprised, and at the same time very excited and said, 'Are you kidding me?' She then produced an electronic photograph on her cell phone of the image that I had shared with Sam from the *Georgia Forestry Magazine*. Hers was a photograph of the copy that Ben's grandmother had kept on her refrigerator from the time it had appeared in the periodical until she passed away several years ago. Ben later told us that the paper copy was disintegrating when he removed it from her refrigerator, so he took a picture of it to document it before throwing away the original.

Following that day's events, Sam and I both spoke to Ben on a three-way phone call and inquired about his memories of the Moon Tree. Only a few weeks later Sam also located Danielle Allen, the little girl also named in the article. Sam and I, thereafter, had a similar conversation with her. Ben and Danielle both commented on how the experience

of that day had impacted their perception of space and inspired in them an affinity for space travel. Danielle commented that she had begged her mother to send her to Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama, and Ben mentioned that he had developed an interest in astronomy stemming from that experience with the Moon Tree. They both mentioned how special they felt, beaming with pride at five years old, for having been selected to help plant this special tree.[8]

Despite all of this progress, the Moon Tree still had not been identified and was still essentially lost. While the number of potential candidates had been narrowed to two trees, there was no conclusive evidence to indicate which tree it was. Ben was eager to visit the site, having wondered often throughout the years just exactly where the tree had been planted. Although the original dedication article states quite plainly where the tree is planted, somehow Ben thought that it had been planted in the Ocmulgee Burial Grounds, which are located a short distance from the Georgia Forestry Commission headquarters facility.

I obtained permission from Tim Lowrimore to bring Ben onto the Georgia Forestry Commission Headquarters site, which is a gated, secure site. I took Ben first to the tree that I felt was most likely the correct tree based upon its proximity to the roadway, as well as the type and height of the fence line. I will add here that the profile of the roadway did not quite match up, but the fence line at the second tree didn't make sense to me either. Ben wandered around the tree but said that it didn't seem quite right to him. He didn't recall walking up the slight hill. He also recalled a building beyond the tree, and this didn't seem to fit his memory. We started walking towards the other potential tree (Figure 8) and before we had quite gotten there, he got very excited and said, 'this is it! I am positive! I remember walking from the bus this way and I remember that building and I remember we parked over there (as he pointed) and we walked this way!'

Ben recounted every memory from excitedly raising his hand to volunteer to plant the tree, to getting dressed that morning and their arrival and the planting. It all sounded great, but one thing still bothered me, and that was that the fence line wasn't quite right with the image in the photograph. The roadway profile and the tree aligned with the

8 Ed Grisamore, 'Nearly 50 Years Later, Macon Reconnects with its Moon Tree', *The Macon Melody*, 28 June 2024.

FIGURE 8.

Ben Bradshaw standing next to the Macon Moon tree, whose location he was able to identify and confirm.

Source: Melanie J. Ford.

photograph, but not the fence. I commented on that, and the facilities manager casually said, 'oh, we replaced that fence a few years ago'. I inquired what the height was previously, and he held his hand off the ground a few feet. That clarified the discrepancy, and we were able to solidify the location of another Georgia Moon Tree.

BRACEY, VIRGINIA

While most Moon Trees were planted in prominent public locations, NASA's Moon Tree website identified one individual situated on private property in Bracey, Virginia. The tree's street address indicated that it was located within the River Ridge Campground. A phone call to the campground revealed that it was a gated, residential community and that visitors were prohibited unless expressly invited by a resident. I implored the person on the other end of the phone, the office manager, to allow me to visit the site, explaining that I wished to photograph the tree and its surrounding landscape. The request was vehemently denied. I pondered how I could possibly convince the office manager to change her mind, and it occurred to me that, much like the Moon Trees, I needed to uncover a community connection with the tree. I recalled that the name of the person who planted the tree was Lavern Toone (Figure 9), so I asked if he was a resident. The manager's voice softened, and she stated that Lavern was a long-time former resident who had passed away only a couple of years ago. I said that the tree was a national monument of sorts, and I implored her to let me see it. She checked with her supervisor and confirmed that I could visit the tree.

Upon arrival, I was rather surprised to find that the community was not a well-to-do exclusive neighbourhood as I had assumed. What had been established in the 1970s as a summer season occupancy lakefront property and primitive campground, had subsequently grown into a collection of year-round residents who had placed permanent trailers or constructed ramshackle houses on their small lots. I met the facility manager at the entrance gate, introduced myself, and was surprised when the manager said, 'Okay, where do we go? Where is this tree located?' I indicated that I really didn't know. I only knew that Lavern had planted it. My daughter and I climbed into the manager's golf cart, and together we headed towards Lavern's former residence, assuming that perhaps it may have been planted there.

FIGURE 9.
Lavern Toone, the man who planted the Moon Tree in Bracey, Virginia.
Source: Donna Toone.

A quick walk around the premises revealed there was no Moon Tree on the site. The rear of the house was a patchwork quilt of cobbled-together materials, and the site was not much larger than the house itself. However, looking at the house from the roadway gave no evidence of what the rear of the house looked like, and Lavern seemed to take great care of the house and yard that was visible to passersby. The manager was puzzled as to the potential whereabouts of the Moon Tree, and my daughter suggested that she look at the image of the tree from NASA's website on my phone. The tree had a very distinctive tombstone-like, fully engraved granite marker at its trunk base that would seem to be difficult to overlook. The manager noticed that the picture indicated that the tree was in an open space. As all the houses in the campground were close together, she suggested there were only two open space areas where she thought it might be.

As we travelled to the first of the two open spaces the facility manager suggested, we met one of the facility maintenance crew members travelling in the opposite direction in a similar golf cart. The manager stopped to ask him if he knew the whereabouts of the Moon Tree. He was unfamiliar with it. As we arrived at the first open space, it became apparent that the tree was not there. Fortunately, we encountered another man in another golf cart travelling in the opposite direction, and he happened to be the former neighbour of Lavern Toone. No sooner did the manager inquire as to whether he knew of the Moon Tree than he exuberantly exclaimed, 'Oh yes! Of course! Lavern talked about it often. I will take you right to it'. Ironically, the tree was situated just near the entrance to the residential community (Figure 10). We had passed it on the way to Lavern's place without even noticing it.

After photographing the tree and its surroundings, I noted nothing about the site that was extraordinary, nor did anything about the tree's form and growth pattern seem unusual. As we left, the office manager mentioned that she had Lavern's daughter Donna's phone number and would have her call me, and, several days later, she did. She told me about her father's passion for the tree, how it had inspired him and energised him, given him purpose and provided him with something that he saw as extraordinary to share within the community that he lived in and loved.

FIGURE 10.

The Moon tree planted by Lavern Toone at the River Ridge Campground in Bracey, Virginia.

Source: Melanie J. Ford.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Twenty years after the Moon Trees were planted in communities across the US – many of which were, over time, forgotten – a simple lesson plan from an elementary school teacher brought their plight to the attention of NASA archivist Dave Williams. His inquiry into their story marked the beginning of their journey toward rediscovery. Since then, the quest to locate and identify these trees has become a shared passion for a small but growing community of enthusiasts across the United States. Among these is Rosemary Roosa, daughter of astronaut Stuart Roosa, who is also spearheading an effort to distribute second-generation Moon Trees across the world.

The website created by Williams, titled *The Moon Trees*, has become a central hub for this ongoing journey. People are invited to submit images and information about known Moon Trees, and Williams updates the website once he has verified the information's accuracy.[9] The site offers a brief history of the trees, a biography of Stuart Roosa (the astronaut who made it possible), and a table of known Moon Tree locations. This table not only distinguishes between surviving and lost trees but also highlights trees reported by the public but not yet verified, offering clickable links to images and media coverage related to each site. Through the website, the dedicated work of volunteers, and the growing network of 'arboreal detectives,' we are slowly answering the question: *Where on Earth are the Moon Trees?*

Currently, there are 66 living Moon Trees with known locations across the United States. Sadly, 45 have been lost due to natural disasters, site development or age, but the hope remains that there could be up to 389 more, their locations still undiscovered. As we reflect on the Moon Trees' survival, it is clear their existence depends on more than just soil and sunlight. The weaving of networks-of care-is essential. These networks span from the soil to the stories, from the trees themselves to the people who care for them. Some Moon Trees endure in landscapes that have remained largely unchanged since they were planted. Others stand out in highly curated environments, designed to make them symbols of significance. Neither approach is inherently better than the other; both reflect the different ways people connect to place.

9 David Williams, telephone conversation with the author, 2021.

The stories of these trees share a common thread: their growth and significance are deeply intertwined with the communities that tend to them. What began as a simple tree planted for a national celebration evolved into a deeper, more lasting relationship between people and the trees. There is an immeasurable amount of research and written documentation describing the historical and social significance of tree-planting. Tree plantings create a gathering point and foster a sense of place, a location to build connections, both with the community and with the tree. They are seen to symbolise growth, wisdom, longevity and a connection to the past.[10] Taking a lesson from history, these Moon Trees, symbols of 'sense of place', embody something far greater than their botanical makeup.

Each Moon Tree has a story to share, and it is through these stories that they persist. They rely on their networks of communities, caretakers and passionate individuals like Rosemary Roosa, Dave Williams and Lavern Toone (who in caring for his tree established a monument dedicated to its legacy). These are only a few of the many contributors to the Moon Trees' survival. Together, they demonstrate the agency of the trees, whose resilience and connection to the Moon continue to enrich the lives of the people around them.

So, is a tree that grew from a seed that traveled to the Moon and back 'just' a tree? The answer lies in the countless stories told and retold, in the landscapes transformed by their presence, and in the people who continue to care for them. The answer, ultimately, is no.

10 https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2024/may/the-historical-and-cultural-significance-of-trees (accessed 29 March 2025).

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Poetry

Shani Cadwallender

‘Let Us … Have a Look at the Glorious Old Yew Once Again’: Eliza Cook, Yew Trees and Intertemporal Legacies

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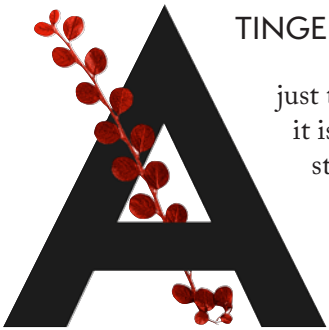


TINGE LESS BEAUTIFUL

just to reiterate:
it isn't yew but me
stands hollow-hearted in the churchyard
in shades of Eliza
mistaking common ground
inclined to bloat pot-bellied rot centuries in
the making a lyre of myself
singing the body sororal
where waxwings pluck the flesh from poison seeds discerning
in bright arils the fatality of greed

but you
gloomglorious indifferent spiderful alive
enduring endlessly surviving us know no worth in words
and even so
i'd spend my last participle
to stand you another
thousand years
of being still

Three years ago, intrigued by my now-supervisor's claim that doing a Ph.D. part-time while working would be 'like fun ... but more difficult,' I drafted a proposal for a creative-critical project, which became a study of the arboreal poetry of three relatively obscure women poets of the nineteenth century: Eliza Cook (1818–1889), Toru Dutt (1856–1877) and Amy Levy (1861–1889).

The nineteenth century, with its technological and industrial revolutions, is often conceived as the beginning of the period of human influence on our planet known as the Anthropocene – literally shaping our world as we know it; but, partly because of these transformations, it was also itself a period of reassessment of the relationship between humans and non-humans that continues to shape this relationship in the present.[1] All three of these writers depict trees with a complex blend

1 For an overview of recent scholarly works exploring this idea, see W. Parkins and P. Adkins, 'Introduction: Victorian ecology and the Anthropocene', *19: Interdisciplinary*

of identification and alterity, treating them as distinct entities, but also considering them as symbolic reflections of the poets' own outsider positionalities – whether because of class, race, religion, sexuality, gender or a combination of these – in their contexts.

My own eco-poetry, as well as being one of the project's final products, forms an important part of the research process; it responds to these nineteenth-century writers, exploring how their work's representative strategies might be adopted or adapted in arboreal poetry written in an era of ecological crisis by a working-class, mixed-race, queer woman poet who is both like and unlike them. Trees, with their longer-than-human lifespans, offer us a way of looking at the past as integral to ourselves – as a living feature of our literal and metaphorical landscapes; in this sense, the project has also become a search for my poetic roots – a means of reaching back, through the intertemporal figures of trees, for literary ancestors: 'like fun ... but more difficult'.

Eliza Cook, a working-class poet and journalist from Southwark, London, is one such ancestor. She is the focus of this piece because my research has recently revealed more connections between us than I bargained for – and all through a single tree. So it was that, in mid-September 2024, I found myself in a rainy churchyard in West Sussex, staring awestruck at an enormous yew tree estimated to be a thousand years old; the same tree which, almost two centuries previously, Cook revisited in a period of convalescence, reflecting on loss, death and her childhood.

Cook was born in London Road, Southwark but, when she was around nine years old, her father Joseph, a brazier, moved the family to a farm near St Leonard's Forest in West Sussex – a formative time in which, Cook writes, 'the woods and forests became [her] tutors'.[2] Another major influence on her writing at this time was her mother, who encouraged her to write but died when Cook was fifteen, just before the family returned to London – a loss which inspired the elegiac poem that made Cook famous in the 1840s, 'The Old Arm-Chair'.[3] She published her first collection, *Lays of a Wild Harp*, in 1835, followed by *Melaia and other Poems* in 1838 and *New Echoes and other Poems* in

Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century 26. https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.818

2 Eliza Cook, 'Preface to the new edition', *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook* (1853), p. xiii.

3 'Cook, Eliza', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:* https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6135 (accessed 28 June 2024).

FIGURE 1.
The Slaugham Yew – with author for scale.
All photos by the author.

1864, in the meantime writing and editing her weekly miscellany, *Eliza Cook's Journal,* from 1849 to 1854, a periodical which reflects Cook's Chartist politics in its aim to aid 'the gigantic struggle for intellectual elevation now going on'.[4] The work of scholars such as Alexis Easley and Fabienne Moine reclaims this radical reputation, as well as celebrating Cook's resourcefulness as a working-class woman who used 'opportunities that arose with the formation of new publishing media in order to establish [herself] in a male dominated literary marketplace' and her personal 'iconoclasm', especially in living as 'very much an out lesbian' in the celebrity culture of the 1840s.[5] Though she retired from public life in the 1860s due to declining health, living on a civil-list pension with her nephew at 23 Thornton Hill, Wimbledon until her death in 1889, collected editions of her works continued to appear in the 1870s and 1880s – an impressive literary lifespan. She is buried in Gap Road Cemetery, Wimbledon, though the gravestone is no longer identifiable – it is thought to have fallen over, obscuring her name.[6] The fate of Cook's gravestone seems symbolic of the obscurity into which her work has fallen since its mid-nineteenth century heyday – poignantly recalling her tribute to the poet Thomas Hood – 'In Life he dearly won his bread / In Death, he was not worth a stone'.[7] If Cook's grave site, too,

4 Eliza Cook, 'A word to my readers', *Eliza Cook's Journal* **1** (1) (5 May 1849), p. 1

5 Alexis Easley, 'Constructing the mass-market woman reader and writer: Eliza Cook and the *Weekly Dispatch*, 1836–1850', in Alexis Easley, Clare Gill and Beth Rodgers (eds), *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s–1900s: The Victorian Period* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2019; online edition, Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 23 Jan. 2020); Podcast: 'Eliza Cook and The Old Armchair', https://libguides.stthomas.edu/profpodcast/transcripts/alexis-easley-eliza-cook-and-the-old-armchair

6 For this discovery, my thanks go to Professor Alexis Easley, who later confirmed it, and to Mary Ann Turnbull, who deals with graveyard enquiries at St Mary's Church, Wimbledon. Mary Ann let me know that Cook was not buried at St Mary's, but in the newer cemetery at Gap Road – a location recorded, misleadingly, as 'in the parish'. Not only that, but Mary Ann took her grandson on a grave-finding expedition and located the plot; there, she found a stone lying face down next to that of Cook's nephew and suggests this might be Eliza Cook's (though I have not yet, as Mary Ann suggested, made the pilgrimage with enough 'hunky mates' to help me lift it).

7 *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook* (Frederick Warne & Co, London, 1870), pp. 37–38. This poem was written at Kensal Green Cemetery, part of a campaign to erect a memorial for the poet Thomas Hood.

FIGURE 2.
Eliza Cook, forgotten trailblazer, c. 1859.
Source: *The Drawing Room Portrait Gallery of Eminent Personages, 1859* (London: John Tallis, 1859); engraved by D.J. Pound.

is now obscure, I wondered where there might still be a site of physical connection to this forgotten trailblazer.

The answer, predictably for this project, was arboreal. I started with Cook's collections of poetry, which contain at least a hundred poems centring or featuring trees in a multitude of ways: they are celebrated literally for their beauty, as in 'The Bonnie, Green Bough' or their utility, as in 'The Forest Trees'; they are lauded for their anti-materialist forms of value, as in 'They All Belong to Me'; employed for their folkloric and symbolic associations , as in 'The Willow Tree'; and used as analogies for human relationships, as in 'Song of the Winter Tree'.[8] Several poems about trees even make direct reference to Cook's childhood experiences in West Sussex, such as 'The Green Hill-Side', in which the speaker is a 'town-born child' who moves to the countryside, gaining 'all [her] childish soul had ever hoped to find' in that 'distant sylvan land'.[9] But the poems, however apparently biographical, offered little indication of a precise location, and even the limited section of St Leonard's Forest which is still open to the public today measures 714 acres.

Finally, with the help of Maggie Weir-Wilson, a local historian of Horsham, I found an article in Cook's *Journal* from July 1852 entitled 'Our First Sweetheart', in which Cook, ill and prompted by her doctor to take 'a decided change of air', visits her 'first rural home, in one of the wildest parts of Sussex' and gives a description of the house and surrounding area.[10] Very few of the locations she mentions – such as 'Miller's Brook' and 'Dives's Farm' – are traceable, not appearing on maps of the time.[11] However, archivists at the West Sussex records office concluded from her references to 'The Chequers' pub and 'the glorious old yew' in the churchyard with a 'gothic porch' that Cook was likely describing the village of Slaugham.[12] The churchyard in question is that of St Mary's, and the yew, a designated Ancient Tree, is known by

8 These poems can all be found in Eliza Cook, *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook* (1853).

9 Eliza Cook, *Poems* (Routledge, 1861), p. 523.

10 Eliza Cook, 'Our First Sweetheart', *Eliza Cook's Journal, Volumes 7–8*, no. 167 (10 July 1852), p. 161.

11 Ibid., p. 162.

12 Ibid., p. 163.

FIGURE 3.
The tell-tale porch: gothic entrance at St Mary's Church, Slaugham.

tree-enthusiasts simply as the Slaugham Yew.[13] With thanks to a network of dedicated scholars and archivists, funding from the CHASE consortium, Birkbeck's Harkness Prize, and the conveyance and generosity of my partner, I planned a trip to Cook's 'glorious old yew'.[14]

The fact that a yew (*Taxus baccata*) was the lynchpin in my intertemporal Cook relic-hunt is fitting, given the tree's associations with death, time and immortality, explanations for which are as various as its long life, its fatal toxicity if eaten, its sacred status in Druidic rituals and Celtic beliefs, and the fact that many yews were planted in churchyards (or many churches planted near ancient yews, depending on who you believe).[15] More famous nineteenth- century examples of poetry about yews, such as William Wordsworth's 'Yew-Trees' (1815) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'In Memoriam A.H.H' (1864), make use of this deathly-yet-immortal reputation to point out the difference between human and tree timescales. Wordsworth's poem about the 'fraternal four' at Borrowdale is awestruck, describing the yew as 'a living thing / Produced too slowly ever to decay'; Tennyson's is more envious – the yew 'net[s] the dreamless head' of the elegiac subject, indifferent to 'the little lives of men' and the changes of time, which 'touch not [its] thousand years of gloom'.[16] Cook's poetic references to yews are similarly grave, literally and metaphorically – in all but one example, where she praises the 'tough and springy yew' which was made into bows for the Battle of Agincourt, 'the yew tree's shade' is entirely a site of gloom and death.[17]

In 'Our First Sweetheart', the 1852 article that brought me to the Slaugham Yew, Cook's description of the yew falls somewhere between

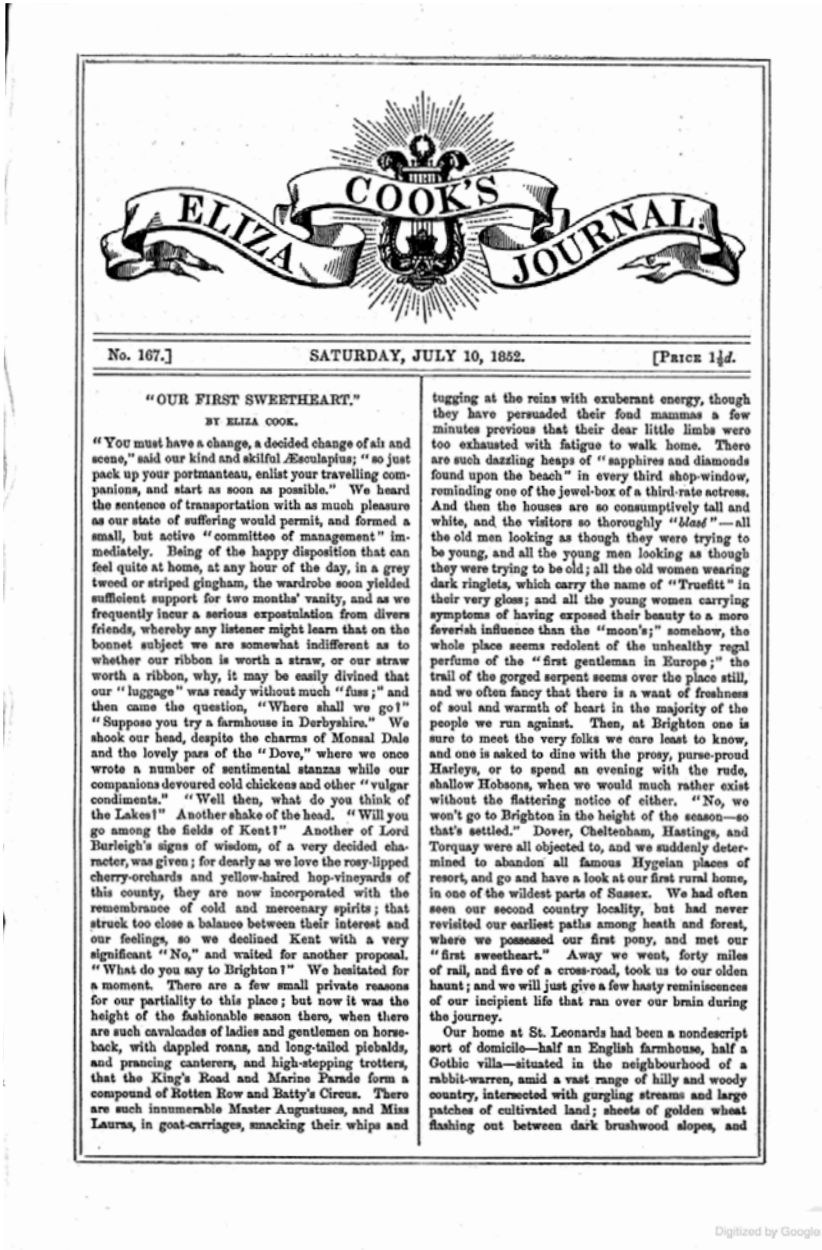
13 https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/tree-search/tree?treeid=4409&from=3523&v=26666890&ml=map&z=15&nwLat=51.044755787050505&nwLng=-0.23994423939208254&seLat=51.03161396162007&seLng=-0.17814614368895754#/ (accessed 31 Oct. 2024).

14 Eliza Cook, 'Our First Sweetheart, p. 163.

15 https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/a-z-of-british-trees/yew/#:~:text=Mythology%20and%20symbolism&text=Yew%20trees%20were%20used%20as,were%20made%20of%20yew%20staves (accessed 15 Oct. 2024).

16 William Wordsworth, 'Yew Trees', *The Major Works* ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 334; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, ed. Erik Gray (W.W. Norton & Co., London, 2004), p. 7.

17 Eliza Cook, 'The Bow', *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook* (Frederick Warne & Co., London, 1870).



ELIZA COOK'S JOURNAL.

No. 167.] SATURDAY, JULY 10, 1852. [PRICE 1½d.

"OUR FIRST SWEETHEART."

BY ELIZA COOK.

"You must have a change, a decided change of air and scene," said our kind and skilful Æsculapius; "so just pack up your portmanteau, enlist your travelling companions, and start as soon as possible." We heard the sentence of transportation with as much pleasure as our state of suffering would permit, and formed a small, but active "committee of management" immediately. Being of the happy disposition that can feel quite at home, at any hour of the day, in a grey tweed or striped gingham, the wardrobe soon yielded sufficient support for two months' vanity, and as we frequently incur a serious expostulation from divers friends, whereby any listener might learn that on the bonnet subject we are somewhat indifferent as to whether our ribbon is worth a straw, or our straw worth a ribbon, why, it may be easily divined that our "luggage" was ready without much "fuss;" and then came the question, "Where shall we go?" "Suppose you try a farmhouse in Derbyshire." We shook our head, despite the charms of Monsal Dale and the lovely pass of the "Dove," where we once wrote a number of sentimental stanzas while our companions devoured cold chickens and other "vulgar condiments." "Well then, what do you think of the Lakes?" Another shake of the head. "Will you go among the fields of Kent?" Another of Lord Burleigh's signs of wisdom, of a very decided character, was given; for dearly as we love the rosy-lipped cherry-orchards and yellow-haired hop-vineyards of this county, they are now incorporated with the remembrance of cold and mercenary spirits; that struck too close a balance between their interest and our feelings, so we declined Kent with a very significant "No," and waited for another proposal. "What do you say to Brighton?" We hesitated for a moment. There are a few small private reasons for our partiality to this place; but now it was the height of the fashionable season there, when there are such cavalcades of ladies and gentlemen on horseback, with dappled roans, and long-tailed piebalds, and prancing canterers, and high-stepping trotters, that the King's Road and Marine Parade form a compound of Rotten Row and Batty's Circus. There are such innumerable Master Augustuses, and Miss Lauras, in goat-carriages, smacking their whips and tugging at the reins with exuberant energy, though they have persuaded their fond mammas a few minutes previous that their dear little limbs were too exhausted with fatigue to walk home. There are such dazzling heaps of "sapphires and diamonds found upon the beach" in every third shop-window, reminding one of the jewel-box of a third-rate actress. And then the houses are so consumptively tall and white, and the visitors so thoroughly "*blasé*"—all the old men looking as though they were trying to be young, and all the young men looking as though they were trying to be old; all the old women wearing dark ringlets, which carry the name of "Truefitt" in their very gloss; and all the young women carrying symptoms of having exposed their beauty to a more feverish influence than the "moon's;" somehow, the whole place seems redolent of the unhealthy regal perfume of the "first gentleman in Europe;" the trail of the gorged serpent seems over the place still, and we often fancy that there is a want of freshness of soul and warmth of heart in the majority of the people we run against. Then, at Brighton one is sure to meet the very folks we care least to know, and one is asked to dine with the prosy, purse-proud Harleys, or to spend an evening with the rude, shallow Hobsons, when we would much rather exist without the flattering notice of either. "No, we won't go to Brighton in the height of the season—so that's settled." Dover, Cheltenham, Hastings, and Torquay were all objected to, and we suddenly determined to abandon all famous Hygeian places of resort, and go and have a look at our first rural home, in one of the wildest parts of Sussex. We had often seen our second country locality, but had never revisited our earliest paths among heath and forest, where we possessed our first pony, and met our "first sweetheart." Away we went, forty miles of rail, and five of a cross-road, took us to our olden haunt; and we will just give a few hasty reminiscences of our incipient life that ran over our brain during the journey.

Our home at St. Leonards had been a nondescript sort of domicile—half an English farmhouse, half a Gothic villa—situated in the neighbourhood of a rabbit-warren, amid a vast range of hilly and woody country, intersected with gurgling streams and large patches of cultivated land; sheets of golden wheat flashing out between dark brushwood slopes, and

FIGURE 4.
'Our First Sweetheart' in *Eliza Cook's Journal*, 10 July 1852.
Source: Google Books.

Wordsworth's and Tennyson's: a site of intertemporal meditation, the tree's seeming agelessness evokes former happy times as it contrasts them painfully with present realities. Revisiting the churchyard in the article, she finds herself looking at the tree and 'dreamily musing on days gone by' – in particular, as the title suggests, remembering her early 'sweetheart' Ben Hewitt, a 'kind, manly six-feet-high' local boy who paid the eight-year-old Cook a 'most devoted lover-like attention'. [18] She recalls resting under the yew with Ben in the summers of her childhood, noting that, at the time of her re-visit, the tree is as 'grand and gloomy as ever' and 'not a tinge less beautiful'.[19] In 1852, though, the yew's unchanged beauty also highlights sad change for the humans who used to sit in its shade. Cook's illness means that her visit only offers 'as much pleasure as our state of suffering would permit'; more tragically, she discovers from the Hewitt family grave that Ben's 'rest' is now eternal – in fact, his entire family, including the sister he returned from America to nurse, has died of tuberculosis, followed six weeks later by Ben himself.[20] The article concludes with a juxtaposition of past and present that almost amounts to an overlap, a haunting – 'we saw him standing before us in his holiday suit,— tall, handsome, active and intelligent; and then we looked down and saw the pile of green sward speckled with daisies'. [21]

Cook was in her mid-thirties when she wrote this article, and this period marked the beginning of a long decline in her health. The ways in which nature both offers and withholds solace are explored elsewhere in Cook's writing, such as the poem 'Not as I Used to Do', a further reflection on infirmity published in an 1861 collection. In it, the speaker finds herself still 'noting God's glory' in 'the lime tree flinging / its beautiful green arms out' but cannot love nature 'as [she] used to do' because 'worn and weary / With waiting for health and rest', she can 'no longer wander / Through woodlands loved and dear'.[22] Far from the stereotypical lone masculine wanderer of Romantic poetry, the speaker in Cook's poem has lived, aged and lost her vigour amid the natural world, which has changed her attitude to, and her mobility within it. When I found out

18 Eliza Cook, 'Our First Sweetheart', p. 163.
19 Ibid., p. 163.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Eliza Cook, *Poems* (Routledge, 1861), p. 402.

FIGURE 5.
We all need support – Slaugham Yew with metal reinforcements in upper branches.

about the Slaugham Yew, I was only a year older than Cook was when she revisited it and, strangely, it also marked a period in my life which was characterised by mysterious ongoing illness and unexpected change. Six months later, having been diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, my woodland wandering, like hers, faces an unpredictable future. Cook's article, reflecting in her mid-thirties on what would prove to be a long decline in her health, spoke to my dawning recognition of a changed and changing life last year; now, my presence under the same tree at the same juncture presents an uncanny parallel.

Standing in the churchyard at St Mary's, I marvelled that, though the Hewitt family stone was long since eroded or removed, the yew which had stood over Cook as a child, and again as a grown woman, now towered over me. It is hard for arboriculturists precisely to tell the age of a yew due to its tendency to hollow out from the centre, erasing the evidence of tree-rings, so that felling it reveals only an absence; in this sense, it is a symbol both of timelessness and inevitable decay, a metaphorical bridge and a physical link between Cook's world and my own. But, noticing the metal supports keeping its upper branches in balance, I recognised the Slaugham Yew not just as a vessel for thinking about the past, but as a creature in its own right, which, like the humans who have stood beneath it, is just as vulnerable to disease and harm as it is aided by support and care. Deemed very much still 'alive' by the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory, the Slaugham Yew is an Ancient Tree and a Tree of National Special Interest, designations related to its size, age, location and historical or cultural importance which give it some protection, though of limited legal extent. Later, from the records of the Ancient Yew Group, I found out that the tree is female; and, while I hope it never comes to this, I liked the thought that I could come to its aid, making a case for preserving the tree and the memory of Eliza Cook in an act of interspecies, intertemporal sorority. Such an intervention in the fate of one tree is hardly reparation for the destruction wrought by human acquisitiveness, but a view of humans and non-humans as interconnected beings is a step in the right direction in an environment of anthropogenic hostility like our own. The poem I wrote in response to the site attempts to capture this conflicted impulse, cognisant of human culpability and the tree's alterity, and founded in a recognition of both difference and interconnection only made possible by the survival of both tree and text. It alludes to Cook's article and to

the tree's botanical realities, questioning where a lyric speaker stands, literally and metaphorically, in relation to such an entity.

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Dean Anthony Brink

The Tree You Want

FIGURE 1.
Giant yellow bamboo (*Phyllostachys bambusoides*).
Image: © Board of Trustees, RBG, Kew.

In a windy day the trees sloshing in the sky snap-dangle, split-twist delivering firewood for winter west of the Cascades are Douglas firs.

The ones you want to see on hot subtropical days towering pillars pegging walks to support the eccentric spokes of their own colosseum feeding the crinkling of polished leaves as the grounds-keeper luxuriates in their sound are rubber trees.

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No, the trees you want to hear on a windy day are the giant yellow bamboo with green striations clattering high swaying high swinging in circles holding the air inside them safe.

The purple trees you see are not trees but vines riding them—morning glories climbing before school opens overcome a dim chapel of brambles, ferrying up pouches of hansa yellow pollen keeping bees busy until dusk.

The volunteers you don't want setting up deep in the loam or pretending to hold up your ad hoc rock retainer wall will really bring it down, tasty cherries tossed by satisfied squirrels, dropped by birds arriving from wintering far south.

The trees you want to see if you're a nesting stork grow tall and lanky with few branches, like telephone poles, any will do, if you can find one.

FIGURE 2.
Frangipani 'chicken-egg' flowers (*Plumeria rubra*).
Image: © Osbel López Francisco & Mariano Gorostiza Salazar.

The trees you want to breathe in the spring are the Plumeria or frangipani 'chicken-egg' flowers with bulbous branches in mini lotus-like closed irises of blossoms pastel gradient to pistils, bring joy with no need to turn to see—the scent!

Runner-up to get a whiff of—blooming all but winter—really a bush, the Osmanthus planted to mask the swirling ochre sheen of canals.

Dragon fruit climb high through the pine gyring apart culminating arcs concentrating black on overcast forms of gravity, hold; the tree calls uncle.

Some trees, so old and complicated, people tie red ribbons around, build small shrines kneeling at their roots and tiny garden islands for them, so traffic drives around them.

The tree you want to lean into to feel it lean back is the 'thousand-layered', weeping paperbark, palms out, dig fingers in to hold it soft, not budging, springing back damp, cool, alive.

The trickiest fruit to pick: Italian plums in late summer—be quick to catch the crisp yellow flesh while still green on the outside; gone yellow they'll be rolling like marmalade on bald spots of lawn sprouting maggots.

The tree my neighbors point to from the porch before passing me the binoculars downhill, a lone fir bald eagles prefer for a perch—watching the eagles raise their eaglet, awaiting its tumble into flight.

The tree you want between neighbors that makes for good and friendly neighbors though not too wide yet sidelines the path with its slow hardwood and thick trunk jutting prickly to the touch is the holly.

Banana trees gather in clumped dozens shredded threadbare by typhoons dangling to dry but no time—lush unfurling deep green

with drooping heavy blood-maroon flowers heavy, steady as bloated plumb-bobs.

The trees the Malayan night herons prefer sprawl leafy long enough for no one to see their nest inconspicuous in the sky but splattering guano on the path to the banana patch.

Best cone design goes to the Cypress, the way they hang like connect-the-dot Christmas lights burnt out, though children prefer pinecones, the big ones that check your blood when you pick them up.

The banyan is the tree to tie vines for children to swing standing or sitting, keeping clear of rocks and hard ditches, the tree of Tarzan screaming from one to the other.

No tree but pine—growing straight up through them—can grow in the interstices.

Their maze of stiletto roots claims nothing can survive but the dirt: from tiniest seeds birds deposit on rooftops and rolling anywhere under our feet sprouting terror

the banyan, monster of trees bores long lolling roots down pipes, thickening, breaking, rising to sunlight and rain tumbling open walls

and a first leaf over a wall overtakes the world that was and leaves shapes of new roofs and walls out of themselves

from every new center of direction a jungle canopy holds light to, the little tree done good.

FIGURE 3.
Rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*).
Image: © Dean Brink

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Book Reviews

Shruti Jain

Sumana Roy.
How I Became a Tree

Translated by Jon L. Pitt,
New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017.
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umana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* (2017) is a profoundly introspective meditation on the intersection of human existence and the natural world, wherein the author interweaves poetic sensibilities with a critique of modernity. Through an intricate narrative structure, Roy formulates what may be construed as a didactic project for environmental education, foregrounding an experiential re-engagement with the non-human realm. Her writing does not proffer definitive conclusions but instead fosters an intellectual and affective openness, evoking what Joan Retallack terms a 'self-imposed resistance to closure' (Retallack 2003: 13) thereby engendering a sustained engagement with the philosophical, ethical and phenomenological dimensions of ecological consciousness.

Modernity has engendered an epistemic rupture between human cognition and ecological awareness, severing the sensory and intellectual bonds that once tethered us to the natural world. Roy's book emerges from this very rupture, as she embarks upon an introspective journey to document what she terms her 'spiritual and emotional transformation into a tree' (p. 26), a process through which she interrogates the ontological and ethical stakes of arboreal existence.

This transformation is not to be understood in a literal sense but rather as a metaphorical elevation of human consciousness to the

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nuances of the arboreal realm. Her prose is suffused with evocative imagery, culminating in a moment of transcendental attunement: 'Not until a bird came and sat on my shoulder around sunset one day. I did not move. I do not know about the bird but I was certain that in the thinning margins of that forest in Baikunthapur I was, at last, ready to be a tree' (p. 222). By adopting a mode of being that resists anthropocentric temporalities, Roy engages in what she terms 'Tree Time', an alternative temporality unmoored from the inexorable acceleration of human existence: 'So, when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time' (p. 3).

Roy's engagement with time, language and the self's relationship to nature is profoundly philosophical. She questions whether it is possible to write as a tree might – an aspiration that entails relinquishing conventional grammatical structures, which she perceives as instruments of temporal regulation, losing her sense of grammar which is 'a linguistic baton with which to control time' (p. 62). Her reflections resonate with a mode of existence predicated on attentiveness, slowness and an immersion in the rhythms of nature. She observes the ways in which industrial societies have pathologised aging, treating it as a process of decline rather than an accrual of dignity: 'Our lives in the industrial age, lived bizarrely as an approximation of machines, had made us think of age as ugly – in the way machines rusted, wasted, and gradually became ugly before they fell apart' (p. 6). In contrast, she finds within trees an alternative paradigm of temporality, one that embraces the process of growth as an unfolding rather than a degradation.

Roy also examines the semiotics of abundance and excess in contemporary consumer societies, critiquing their detachment from inner life: 'Ours was an age of excess – more food and clothes and houses and things than we needed, an extravagant show of wealth and emotions without either being connected to the inner life' (p. 11). In juxtaposition, trees emerge as symbols of self-sufficiency, existing beyond the imperatives of accumulation and spectacle. Her meditation on tree care and human grooming practices further elucidates her concerns:

> Both the hairdresser and the gardener seemed to believe in the value of snips and cuts for a better future, and in this I began to see the kinship of my undisciplined hair with the wayward branches of trees. I had begun to feel the violence of seasonal pruning and cutting that was inflicted on plants and trees (p. 10).

Her exploration of trees also extends to their modes of resistance, both literal and metaphorical. She examines how trees respond to wind and sound, drawing an analogy between arboreal resilience and human acts of protest:

> My experiments with the sound recorder had brought about a new realization—that trees shared a natural sound with people. It is the sound of resistance—like protesters 'raising their voice,' trees produced a sound that held in it their fight against wind, water, rain, to tearing, cutting and breaking (p. 25).

This poetic rendering of resistance imbues her narrative with an ecological politics that underscores the urgent need for a reconfiguration of human-nature relations.

Beyond individual meditations, Roy highlights the broader sociopolitical dimensions of deforestation, aligning with Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's observations about forests and nationalism. In the forests, the categories of nation and identity dissolve: 'These forest dwellers—and this included all plant life resident inside it—did not know who or where Bharatvarsha was' (p. 155). Instead, the primary struggle within the forest is against trees themselves, as agriculture encroaches upon the wilderness. Here, Roy positions deforestation as a historical and ethical struggle, where trees are sacrificed to human expansionist agendas, reinforcing the moral charge attached to afforestation and deforestation as acts of sin and redemption.

Roy's arboreal reflections are not merely contemplative; they also offer a pedagogical model for environmental education that integrates artistic sensibilities with ecological awareness. She reminisces about her childhood encounters with art and literature, invoking O. Henry's short story 'The Last Leaf' as an exemplar of art's ability to mediate between human and non-human life. The performative act of embodying leaves within theatrical representation becomes, for Roy, a mode of kinaesthetic learning that fosters ecological empathy: 'The character from O. Henry's short story *The Last Leaf*—Johnsy—had begun to believe in her life—and death—being a mimicry of the life of leaves on the tree in winter' (p. 48). This intermedial approach to understanding nature gestures towards a broader environmental pedagogy, one that privileges embodied cognition and aesthetic engagement over mere didactic instruction.

Similarly, Roy's reflections on the painter Nandalal Bose further illuminate the ways in which artistic practice can function as an act of ecological becoming. She perceives the act of drawing leaves as a form of ontological transformation, wherein the human subject enters into a mimetic relationship with the non-human world: 'The tree-becoming human is also on the next page where the illustration of tree bark made me want to scratch a rough patch of skin on my knee, where so many scars of childhood games live' (p. 39). This dissolution of boundaries between self and nature underscores the radical potential of art to recalibrate human perception and affective engagement with the environment.

While modern education prioritises scientific understanding of nature, it does not necessarily foster empathy. What value does knowledge of trees hold if it does not prevent their destruction? Learning about trees should inspire inclusivity and respect for them. Arboreal humanities, emphasising artistic engagement, offer an alternative. Sumana Roy's reflections on trees provide a framework for creative education. Art classes can incorporate drawing, dance, theatre, and writing inspired by 'tree time', reinforcing trees as living beings integral to the ecosystem. Literature courses can move beyond conservation narratives to encourage personal reflection on students' connections with trees. Creating imaginative spaces for interaction can promote conservation and an environment-sensitive pedagogy that fosters 'becoming-other' or creative learning.

CONCLUSION

Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* presents trees as more than objects of study – they are epistemic interlocutors capable of transforming human consciousness. Her critique of modernity, engagement with alternative temporalities and artistic sensibility advocate for an ecological awareness that transcends instruction. Her work suggests an environmental pedagogy rooted in relational ethics and experiential learning. By integrating arboreal humanities, artistic expression and embodied practice, educators can deepen students' connection with nature, fostering empathy and responsibility. Through literature, art and interactive

activities, an environment-sensitive pedagogy can cultivate awareness and belonging within the ecosystem.

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Natasha Heller

Daniel Lewis. *Twelve Trees: And What They Tell Us About Our Past, Present and Future*

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ISBN 978-1398518841 (PB), 304 pp.

aniel Lewis's *Twelve Trees* takes the reader from the bristlecone pine to the baobab, from California to the Congo basin, from very old trees to very large ones. Covering twelve trees that Lewis says were picked as one picks one's friends (p. xii), this book is both an appreciation of trees and an argument for paying greater attention and care to them.

The human impact on trees provides an important backdrop to these stories. For the bristlecone pine and the longleaf pine, fires – both natural and those set by humans – shape their stories. The coast redwood, the longleaf pine, the bald cypress, the sandalwood and the forest ebony are all trees that have been harvested by humans, often in ways that come to threaten the very survival of their species. These trees, like the olive (Chapter 9), are entangled in human arts and cultures in deep ways: we build our houses from trees, play instruments made from them, enjoy their fruits and use their scents in religious rituals. The centrality of these trees to human culture can help them, as in the case of olive trees cultivated on small farms that encourage biodiversity, or harm them, as with the sandalwood, which is 'threatened with extinction across much of its range' due to overharvesting (p. 103).

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Trees are not only part of a general human story but also are interwoven into Lewis's own life story. He tells us about the tsunami that hit Hawai'i when he was a young boy, connecting this personal episode to the story of *Sophora toromiro* on the island of Rapa Nui (pp. 46–47). His search for *Ceiba pentandra*, a tree of great height found in Amazon forest takes place during a bachelor's trip for a close friend. Alongside the explorations of trees, we meet others whose lives have significant arboreal entanglements: for example, David Frank, who directs the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research in Tucson, Arizona (Chapter 1); Jesse Wimberley, who helps private landowners learn and practise prescribed burns (Chapter 5); and Scott Paul, the Director of Natural Resource Sustainability for Taylor Guitars (Chapter 7).

Lewis's work at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens also informs his inquiries. An important theme of *Twelve Trees* is the ability of wood and other parts of the tree to function as archives, and this emphasis is connected to Lewis's position as a curator at The Huntington. Through dendrochronology, we can better understand the history of droughts and fires. Through the amber of *Hymenaea protera* (Chapter 4) we gain insight into the plants and insects of times past. The afterword, titled 'In Praise of Recording, Reporting, and Remembering', lauds those who have created written records of trees and their environment, whether through fieldwork or the maintenance of libraries and collections. Lewis encourages the reader to 'be a documenter' and to 'keep track of the world' (p. 239).

Although entertaining and filled with interesting details, *Twelve Trees* often left me frustrated. To begin with, the trees themselves often retreat into the background. Take, for example, the chapter on the olive tree: early in the chapter we learn that olive trees grow to a mature height of between ten and forty feet, that they have 'lance-shaped leaves, dark green on one side and silvery on the other' and that they are often characterised by a 'gnarly trunk' (p. 162). In contrast to the brevity of this initial description, there are pages of delicious detail on olive oil grading and tasting. The olive tree itself returns in the closing pages, when Lewis turns to the threats posed by insects and fungi. Likewise, the chapter on Central African Forest Ebony treats the role of ebony in the music industry at great length. With the emphasis on how people have used trees, there is a decidedly anthropocentric tilt to *Twelve Trees*.

The throughline of the book is also difficult to discern. Why these twelve trees? The subtitle adds 'And What They Tell Us About Our Past, Present, and Future', but almost all trees could fit this description. The passage closest to an answer comes in the preface: 'I've chosen twelve trees that have been on long journeys, have many accomplices as well as enemies, and need our help to survive' (p. xii). That certain trees may need special human intervention to survive seems the most compelling candidate for selection, but it does not apply to all trees discussed. For example, *Hymenaea protera* is long extinct. For the other eleven trees, all facing various threats, the questions around how humans are intervening could usefully be emphasised to a greater degree. (And, writing from a state once covered with chestnut trees, a chapter on *Castanea dentata* would have fit very well with this theme.)

Daniel Lewis is a committed arboreal optimist. Many chapters end with a call to action based on what we learn from trees: 'Trees continue to school us, even as we help them. If the longleaf could speak, it would ask us to be patient, to accommodate, to value our communities' (p. 99). Like tech optimism – the view that technology always improves the world – Lewis's arboreal optimism may need more nuance than is found in these brief chapters. This is particularly clear in the chapter on blue gum eucalyptus. Lewis describes the controversies around the tree, which stem from its non-native status and its flammability. Following the 1991 Oakland fire, in which eucalyptus provided considerable fuel, many called for their removal. Lewis is clearly pro-eucalyptus, tying those in California who are against the Australian tree to other types of nativism. He scolds those 'outraged by the blue gum' to take a 'long look in the mirror' followed by a litany of figures related on environmental degradation to show that we, as an 'invasive species' ourselves, have little standing to argue against other invasives (p. 143). I do not think this follows: knowing how species from other places can alter complex ecosystems should at least mean reflecting on those changes. Lewis writes about the planting of eucalyptus trees as windbreaks and for aesthetic purposes, to ornament 'otherwise featureless landscapes'. He notes that before the eucalyptus the Central Valley of California was 'decidedly untreed, despite beautiful rivers and wetlands' (p. 144). However, these landscapes without trees were not barren; they were simply different types of ecosystems. When Lewis declares that 'all trees are good' (p. 158), it sounds like he is privileging certain kinds of plant life over

others. Lewis questions human ability to judge the integrity or health of ecosystems (p. 157) in the present, but Californians in the early twentieth century did not even get this far. Eucalyptus trees have been in California long enough that they are a part of new ecosystems – witness the monarch butterfly – but this does not erase the loss of earlier ones.

Lewis is clearly aware of the many relationships trees have with insects, fungi, birds and people. A significant disadvantage of trying to cover twelve trees with roughly twenty pages each is that the complexity of connections between trees and their environments cannot be fully addressed. *Twelve Trees* is a lively introduction, but will likely leave readers already familiar with our arboreal companions wishing for more.

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M.L. Herring. *Born of Fire and Rain: Journey into a Pacific Coastal Forest*

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.L. Herring's *Born of Fire and Rain* is a guided journey into the Pacific temperate forest. It is a kind of field trip in which the reader is directly asked to imagine themselves searching through the trees' branches and digging into the soil, questioning the lives and histories of the many organisms they encounter. A set of illustrations scattered throughout the work – drawn by Herring herself – supports these imaginative exercises, visualising parts of the ecosystem from the Juvenile coho salmon (p. 183) in a stream to the chanterelle mushrooms co-habituating with millipedes and beetles (p. 81). Meanwhile, Herring's continual use of the second person voice is a clear indicator of the book's instructive nature. She has crafted an invitation in which you, the reader, are continually called on to pay attention to the precarious and changing nature of this corner of the earth and to consider its uncertain future.

Having accepted this invitation, the reader is guided through the ancient history of the trees, into the soil of the forest's underworld, up to the tops of the canopies and down to wade through the complex water systems of the High Cascades Mountain range. In each chapter,

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Herring is insistent on placing the reader in situ. For example, in chapter two, 'you enter a land of big, old trees', while in chapters six and eight, 'you explore the forest underworld' and 'you float down the watershed'. At times, the pace of Herring's prose is almost dizzyingly fast. For example, in chapter two, she rapidly introduces her readers to a range of giant trees – the Sitka spruce, the redcedar, the Douglas fir and so on – at first hardly pausing to describe these magnificent species. But perhaps the rapid pace is part of the point. The forest can be a confusing place to enter at first, kind of 'kaleidoscope' (p. 9). Guidance and patience are needed.

And so, Herring slows down and begins to investigate the properties of such trees as well as their relationships with one another. An illustration of the Western Hemlock reveals the ways in which needles of different lengths point in all directions, while the accompanying description reveals how its seedlings take root on fallen logs or on mossy stumps. Next, Herring returns to the Pacific yew. Like the Western Hemlock, she explains, it grows slowly, but an illustration of the tree's pine needles and seeds also communicates the contrasts between them. And, in case a reader is struggling to comprehend the enormity of these trees – though Herring never shys away from emphasising their huge trunks and sprawling branches – illustrations of a small humans peeking out from behind the bottom of a large cedar or Douglas fir are potent reminders of the forest's scales. *Born of Fire and Rain* is not meant to be an ecology textbook, but these illustrations and descriptions are useful guides for activating a reader's environmental understanding and awareness.

Herring demands that that the reader closely attend to the forest's various features using all their senses. 'Your eyes might distinguish more than a million different colors', Herring notes as she guides the reader 'to the top of the canopy' in chapter seven. But 'your nose can distinguish more than a trillion different scents. Here in the forest, you breathe air perfumed with volatile hydrocarbons…lemony limonene and turpentine scented pinenes.' (p. 99) Here, the strength of Herring's writing comes to the forefront as she weaves together precise descriptions of scents such as the pineapple-like aromas emitted from the western Red Cedar together with a lucid explanation of their chemistry. Taking perception as a starting point, Herring guides the reader into reflecting on the how and why of this sensory experience. She does not let the reader

simply accept that there is a mineral scent in the atmosphere after rain, but instead explores the way in which the humidity in the atmosphere prompts the bacteria *Streptomyces* to produce a biochemical called geosmin. Rain then helps to distribute geosmin molecules alongside other plant volatiles to create that heavy post-rain smell. And, before one criticises Herring for being too human-centred, she notes that these geosmin molecules serve another purpose: to attract springtails to disperse *Streptomyces* spores. In this small detail, Herring provides a further insight into the systems behind the sights and smells of the forest.

Yet, ultimately, perhaps one of the greatest strengths in *Born of Fire and Rain* is Herring's historical and contemporary exploration of humans' complex relationships with the Pacific temperate forest. 'People have made their homes here, in the verdant space between volcano and ocean, for at least twelve thousand years' (pp. 160–61), Herring reminds us. And their long residency has impacted the landscapes. For thousands of years, fire has been used to clear undergrowth for deer hunting and fostering hazel. In the rivers, Pacific salmon were gathered up meals and trade as indigenous communities made use of their rich surroundings. But, according to Herring's history of the forest, a profound shift took place in the early modern period and the first contact with Europeans.

As Herring explores in chapter ten, 'You Find Human Fingerprints', before Europeans could even make their mark on the trees and rivers, they transported a myriad of diseases that profoundly threatened indigenous populations. From the 1700s, European explorers noticed the valuable timber of trees such as Douglas fir – a tree with which, by this point in the book, the reader has become intimately familiar. Logging would soon become a key industry in the region and, as Herring clearly demonstrates, its history is intimately interwoven with that of the story of the region's increasingly troubling wildfires. Fallen branches and smaller trees could easily catch fire from the cinders spewed by coal powered locomotives. Since the 1800s, efforts to manage such fires have highlighted the discrepancies between different knowledge systems and authorities. Indeed, Herring's discussion of wildfires is part of the book's broader concern with misunderstandings whereby the public's fears of wildfires and extreme weather patterns have been exploited by the logging industries and policymakers. So, Herring does not shy away from tracing the changes in environmental protection laws and policies. 'You, as part of the American public, own 60 per cent of Oregon's land and

42% of Washington's', she reminds us (p. 11). 'Understanding how complex natural systems *actually* work is essential' but, as her book shows, comprehending how policy and knowledge systems work is important too (p. 12).

Although much of *Born of Fire and Rain* is a detailed exploration of the forest's ecology, it would be wrong to overlook its autobiographical qualities. Herring is an ecologist and science writer living in Oregon. She is, as she acknowledges several times, intellectually born out of environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The influence of Rachel Carson's efforts to warn the public about the harms of pesticides and environmental disinformation in *Silent Spring* is clear. However, in the final chapter of the book, Herring reflects more explicitly on her intellectual journey as an ecology student working under the instruction of Bill Odum. Recounting how she first moved to Oregon in the 1970s as part of a 'wave of young professionals looking for an ecological life', Herring recounts her experiences with the institutions discussed in the book such as the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (p. 212) The intellectual journey is also, of course, ultimately intertwined with a personal journey. She was, after all, seeking an 'ecological life', not just ecological work.

Herring lives in a house built, '*in* and *of* the Douglas-fir Forest' (p. 8). Thus, the environments evoked and explored in her book are not only field sites, but her home. 'This is where I have spent most of my life', she acknowledges, 'writing about the landscape and the people who pursue its mysteries'. (p. 8) The book is riddled with anecdotes of her experiences of the landscape's precarity and challenges. In chapter nine, Herring vividly recounts her experience of a fire in Lake Waldo in which she and her family had to flee from the dense smoke that ravaged 10,000 acres of trees and understorey. But, as she reminds us, despite her own emotions during the incident, 'this is not a dramatic wildfire incident'. (p. 140)

Herring's personal anecdotes highlight how place-centred *Born of Fire and Rain* is. On the growing bookshelf of environmental literature, alongside recent works such as *The Light Eaters, Entangled Life, Otherlands,* and *Is a River Alive?*, to name just a handful, *Born of Fire and Rain* offers an in-depth guide not to trees or rivers or fungi around the world, but to an ecosystem in a particular place. Her care for the landscape seeps through every page. And, in this care, Herring builds

towards a broader argument and demand from the reader: to pay attention to environments, not just those of the Pacific temperate forest, but of anywhere around you. The book is a testament to the value of sustained, in-depth study of place and space in which we acknowledge our relationship with ever-shifting landscapes and ecosystems. It is possible to criticise Herring for failing to give much concrete practical advice about how to confront the climate crisis, but the work is ultimately a lyrically hopeful testament to the importance of education and communication in helping to construct a more sustainable local and global environment.

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