

A PASSION FOR TREES
The Legacy of John Evelyn



Maggie Campbell-Culver

About the Book

There can be no better place to begin a celebration of our trees than with John Evelyn. This luminary of the seventeenth century was not only one of the founders of The Royal Society, gardener, diarist and royal adviser, but he was also the author of a number of exceptional horticultural works. The greatest of these is *Sylva: a Discourse of the Forest Trees*, published in 1664. The product of the nation's urgent need for more timber, *Sylva* is also among the first books in English to show an appreciation of the decorative value of trees and benefits of planting trees to shape the landscape.

Maggie Campbell-Culver's book might be described as a stroll through the woods in the company of the great man, as between them they give us portraits of over thirty of our best-loved trees, their peculiar characteristics, history and uses. Evelyn's work speaks to us as much now as it did to his contemporaries; as his influence echoes down the centuries, he emerges as a precursor of the present-day environmental movement. While the practical and aesthetic uses of trees may have altered a little, our need to appreciate our trees and to preserve and manage our woodlands remains as crucial now as ever.

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A PASSION FOR TREES

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Maggie Campbell-Culver

To my grandchildren, Guy and Lorna Elizabeth. May they enjoy and plant trees as they grow from saplings into maturity.



PREFACE

‘In Tree is Soul of Life’

Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl.c.1220–40)

TREES HOLD A UNIQUE POSITION in the world, combining a spiritual and aesthetic role with practicality. Nothing in the natural world seems able to compete with the aura of benign authority that a tree exudes. Trees trickle slowly into our consciousness, their reassuring presence – a mixture of grandeur and stamina – seemingly unchanging. It is usually in our maturity that we realize that such stalwart giants are vulnerable, and not, as they appear, immortal. For a child, it is often the shape of a tree that is so endearing; and this can sometimes be recalled with that adult inward eye many years later. Trees can be record breakers: they can be one of the oldest living organisms in the world: Californian specimens of *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, the Wellingtonia or Big Tree, are believed to be at least 4,000 years old. They can also be the largest form of life: a Montezuma Cypress which grows in Santa Maria de Tule in Mexico – and which, incidentally, is about 2,000 years old – has a circumference measuring 54 metres (178ft) and is 40 metres (130ft) high. Its weight is estimated to be about 500 tons.

Trees’ spiritual influence encompasses the story of Adam and Eve and the ‘tree which brings knowledge of good and evil’. Tree worship may be discerned amongst the very first traces of religious development. As early as 4000 BC the Chaldaeans idealized a mystical tree as the abode of the gods. The World Tree of Buddha had attributes of wisdom, perfection and holiness, while the Great Tree of the early Iranians was immortalized with a life-giving juice. In China there was the ‘Tree of Immortality’, which grew in ‘a faraway land’. In North America most native Indian tribes held special sacred trees in awe, as did the

Aboriginal people of Australia. Most great cultures reserve a special place for trees in their worship.

The botanical definition of a tree is 'a large perennial plant with a single woody stem and an elevated crown of branches usually at some distance from the ground'. The word 'tree' has a lineage going back to the Sanskrit word of *daru* or *dru*; from that it evolved through Gothic to *tru* and the Old Norse *tré* to the Anglo-Saxon *treo*. The antecedents of the word wood are not as international as the word tree, being associated only with the early northern European languages. Branch, bough and trunk entered the language much later than wood or tree, with definitions not exclusively relating to trees.



PARADISI IN SOLE
Paradisus Terrestris.

A Garden of all sorts of pleasant flowers which our
English ayre will permitt to be noursed wth:

A Kitchen garden of all manner of herbes, rootes, & fruites,
for meate or sause wth sed with vs,

and
An Orchard of all sorte of fruitbearing Trees



Title page 'Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris', John Parkinson, 1629, illustrating an idealized landscape with Adam and Eve, a grove of trees, the flowing stream and clearly identified flowers.

Trees can be wonderfully aesthetic in the landscape, and with this ability they make an ideal subject for enhancing man's own surroundings. Their practical use – aided by the discovery of how to chop, cut, saw and carve wood – has been integral to the lives of man and animal alike. They provide shade, shelter and fuel; some are eaten or used in brewing; others are made into cloth and rope, or provide glue, resin or dye. Dead, the wood lasts several thousands of years and when used creatively, in buildings, carving or furniture-making, it again has the ability to give pleasure. Alive, they help clean the atmosphere and allow our planet to grow.

Man has been aware of the tree's diverse nature since the dawn of time, and has long recruited the arboreal world to enhance his own. He recognized that in their natural environment trees rarely show an aggressive or sinister character. In that respect, trees have a distinct advantage over the animal kingdom (including humans): when they are to be used, they do not need to be chased, captured, enclosed or tamed, and rather than roaming for miles in their search for food or a mate they stay growing in the same place. As the thirteenth-century Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus noted in his nineteen-volume *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (On the Properties of Things), 'trees move no wilfully from place to place as beestes do'; they require little or no intervention in the way of nurturing or feeding to survive. This characteristic makes the whole of the arboreal world highly exploitable to man and animals.

There are examples of trees being used both for decoration and for practical purposes from earliest times in the ancient world: palm trees being dug up in Ethiopia and taken to Egypt to decorate the Pharaoh's Palace; cedars being sent from the western Himalayas to China for growing in the Imperial Garden; fruit trees arriving from Asia for cultivation in Egypt. From ancient Iraq there is a poem, *Epic of Gilgamesh*,



Hornbeam leaves

written possibly during the third millennium BC, which describes Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, travelling to a mysterious cedar forest to fight a terrifying monster and, more prosaically, to collect wood and timber for use in his city. A thousand years earlier in Britain wood was used in the construction of footpaths and trackways across soggy peat-laden land in Somerset; one footway, dated to 4000 BC, was planked in oak and supported by a substructure of posts and stakes. Later, woven hurdles were used, and branches of birch, alder and any other timber that could be found were gathered to facilitate the wooden trackways.

Today Britain is unique in continental Europe, both in its silviculture and in the way it uses trees in the landscape. Whereas European woodland management is first and foremost utilitarian, aesthetic considerations being of secondary importance, in Britain trees are seen as mainly decorating the landscape and utility is almost incidental. The British countryside shows an eclectic mix of trees, with a dominating number of non-native species, whereas Continental silviculture consists mainly of native European material, although these differences also reflect the paucity of British native species and the larger number of European trees.

The beginnings of this fundamentally different approach can be traced to the eighteenth century and the landscape movement. This was inspired by an extraordinarily sophisticated philosophical idea that, in creating landscapes, the designer should consult the 'Genius of the Place', and by doing so, reproduce the sensations and emotional response in an audience that an artist might achieve with a painting. This resulted in a monumental physical change taking place across the British countryside. By contrast, the Europeans have never welcomed the wildness of the natural world within their boundaries – nature is tamed for practical rather than for any emotional gratification. Even today the differences may be seen in the management of the countryside, where trees are often lopped, chopped and shaved more earnestly than they are in Britain.

Commercially France has the largest proportion of managed forest and the highest number of managed oaks in Europe, with a thriving cooperage industry playing a significant part in its silviculture (England contains the largest number of aged oaks of any country in the European Union).

One hundred years before the advent of the landscape movement, there is a glimmer of similar ideas in the writing of John Evelyn. Described by Samuel Pepys as 'a man so much above others', Evelyn is well known as a diarist, whose writing tells us much about the life and times of the seventeenth century, but it is his interest in nature, gardens, horticulture and trees that concerns us in this book. He was highly knowledgeable about trees' practical value, especially as timber, but also deeply aware of their many nuances and appreciative of their aesthetic qualities. All this he expressed in his book *Sylva: A Discourse of Forest Trees and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesties Dominions*, published in 1664, a pivotal work that inspires us to consider trees and their history, and has arguably been one of the greatest influences on the English feeling for landscape and the place of trees in it.



Enlarged boxwood engraving, executed in 1958 by Reynolds Stone (1909–79).

John Evelyn: Chronology

1620–1706

- 1620** **September**
The *Mayflower* sails from Plymouth for New England with the Pilgrim Fathers aboard
- 1620** **31 October**
John Evelyn born at Wotton, Surrey
- 1622** **15 January**
Birth of Jean Molière, French dramatist (d.1673)
- 1625** **27 March**
Death of James I; accession of Charles I
- 1625** Death of Orlando Gibbons, English composer (b.1583)
- 1629–**
40 King Charles governs without summoning Parliament
- 1631** **9 August**
Birth of John Dryden, poet (d.1700)
- 1631** **31 March**
Death of John Donne, Anglican divine and poet (b.1572)
- 1633** Birth of Samuel Pepys, diarist (d.1703)
- 1638** Death of John Harvard, founder of Harvard University
(b.1607)
- 1640** Summoning of ‘Short’ then the ‘Long’ Parliaments
- 1641** **12 May**
Execution of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, the

King's principal advisor (b.1593)

- 1642 July**
Outbreak of Civil War between the King and Parliament;
Battle of Edgehill
- 1643**
Death of Claudio Montiverdi, Italian composer and creator of
opera (b.1567)
- 1643**
Louis XVI (1638–1715) becomes King of France
- 1644 January**
Birth of Sir John Vanbrugh, architect and playwright (d.1726)
- 1645 14 June**
Battle of Naseby; defeat of Royalist army by the
Parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell
- 1646 8 August**
Birth of Sir Godfrey Kneller, portrait painter (d.1723)
- 1647 27 June**
John Evelyn marries Mary Browne in Paris
- 1649 30 January**
Trial and execution of Charles I
- 1651 3 September**
Battle of Worcester; Royalist army defeated by
Parliamentarian army
- 1652 June**
John and Mary Evelyn take up residence at Sayes Court,
Deptford, Kent
- 1652 June**
Birth of William Dampier, explorer, hydrographer and pirate
(d.1715)

- 1652–
54 First Dutch War
- 1658 **3 September**
Death of Oliver Cromwell (b.1599)
- 1658 Completion of St Peter's Basilica, Rome
- 1659 Birth of Henry Purcell, composer (d.1695)
- 1660 **29 May**
Restoration of King Charles II (1660–85)
- 1662 The Royal Society receives its Charter
- 1663 *Paradise Lost* completed by John Milton (1608–74)
- 1665 **Summer**
Plague in London
- 1665 Death of Nicholas Poussin, French painter (b.1594)
- 1665–
67 Second Dutch War
- 1666 **September**
Great Fire of London
- 1669 Death of Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch painter (b.1606)
- 1672–
74 Third Dutch War
- 1676 **24 September**
Birth of Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first Prime Minister
(d.1745)
- 1678 Birth of Antonio Vivaldi, Italian composer (d.1741)
- 1680 Death of Sir Peter Lely, portrait painter (b.1618)
- 1681 Publication of *Absalom and Achitophel* by John Dryden
- 1683 **12 September**

- Turkish army repulsed from Vienna
- 1683** Death of Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler*
(b.1593)
- 1685** **6 February**
Death of Charles II and accession of James II; birth of Johann Sebastian Bach, German composer (d.1750); birth of George Frederick Handel, German composer (d.1759)
- 1687** Publication of *Principia* by Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727)
- 1688** Publication of Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan
(1628–88)
- 1688** **11 December**
Abdication of James II
- 1689** **13 February**
Accession of Mary II and William III
- 1689** First performance of *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell
- 1694** **4 May**
John and Mary Evelyn move to Wotton
- 1694** **28 December**
Death of Queen Mary
- 1697** Birth of Antonio Canaletto, Italian painter (d.1768)
- 1702** **8 March**
Death of William III and accession of Queen Anne
- 1702** Outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession with France
- 1704** **2–13 August**
Battle of Blenheim; French army defeated by the Duke of Marlborough
- 1706** **27 February**

Death of John Evelyn at Wotton



*John Evelyn at the age of twenty-eight, painted by Robert Walker (1607–60) in 1648,
the year following Evelyn's marriage to Mary.*





CHAPTER I

‘A Most Excellent Humoured Man, and Very Knowing’

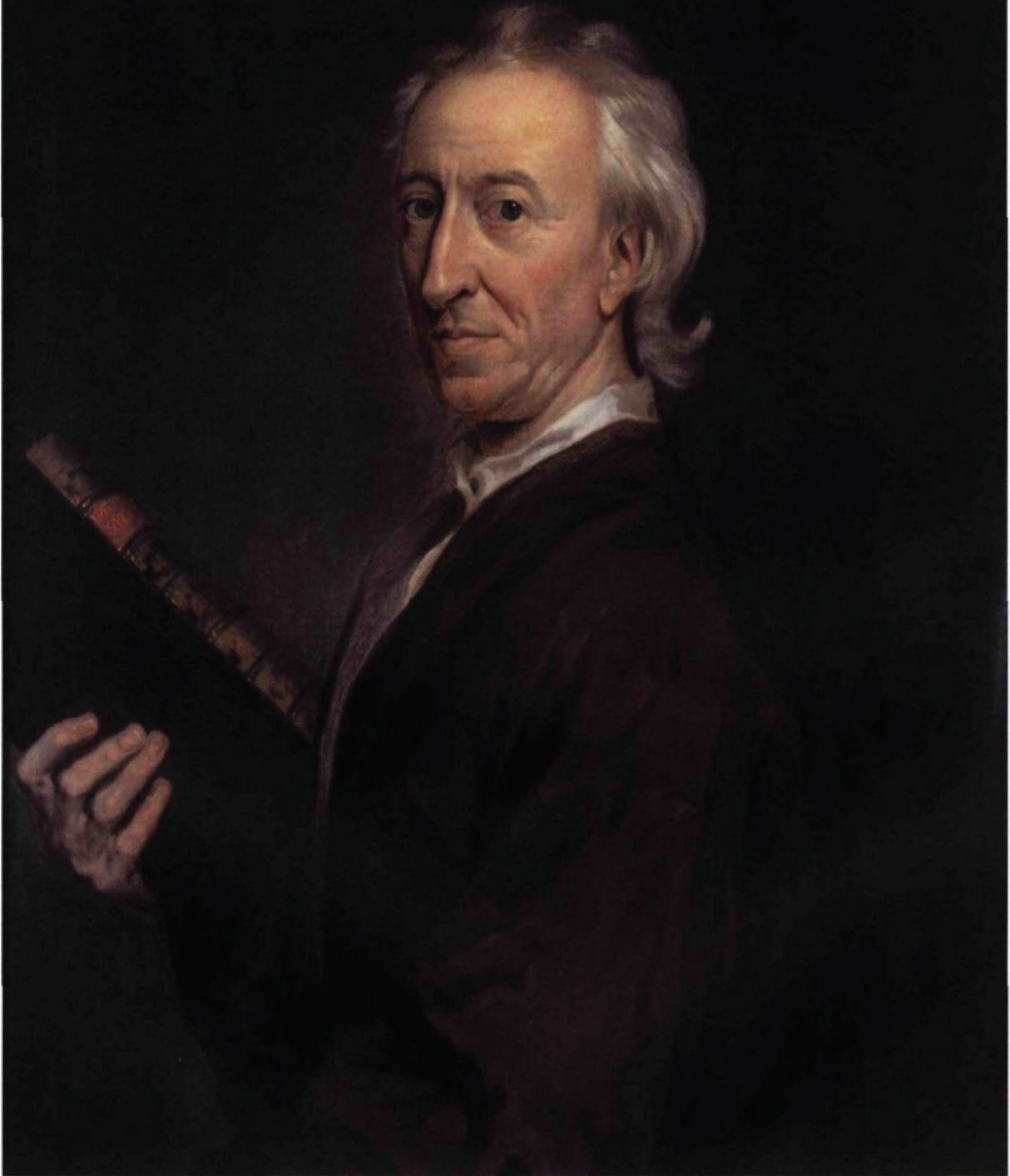
Samuel Pepys (1633–1703)

A VOLATILE MIXTURE OF RELIGION and politics bedevilled the seventeenth century, into which John Evelyn was born. The effects of the English Reformation and establishment of a national Church, combined with the burgeoning power of Parliament as it became determined to control the absolute monarchical ambitions of Charles I (1600–49; reigned from 1625), made for an extraordinarily explosive hundred years. With the Civil War, which began in 1642, the deposing and beheading of the King, the Interregnum, the Restoration of Charles II (1630–85) in 1660, the wars with Holland and France, the Plague followed by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the century seems to have been one of social and political disorder. Most of the population were either random participants or swept up in the momentous events. John Evelyn was no exception. His young adulthood was dominated by the havoc caused by the events that took place and as an ardent Royalist he chose to absent himself from England rather than participate in the upheavals.

Yet in spite of the volatility of the century, or even perhaps because of it, there seems to have been a plethora of great thinkers, philosophers, experimenters, artists and other individuals who pushed forward the boundaries of knowledge. Viewed in an historical perspective, Britain in the seventeenth century shows the rejection of the old order and the early stirrings of the modern age. In particular, scientific discovery began to be disentangled from the medieval hocus-pocus of fictional facts. It was as if the weight of the Middle Ages had been cast aside like some great crusader cloak, and people were confidently clothing themselves in knowledge instead. Learning,

intelligent conversation and experiments became part of civilized society, and suddenly science (from the Latin *scientia*, meaning knowledge) was a word much in vogue. Men – rarely women, I fear – held earnest discussions on subjects as diverse and avant garde as electricity (a word coined in the 1640s), blood transfusions and the usefulness of pollen to plants. In England this ‘new age’ of enquiry found expression in a group of ‘virtuosi’ (another new word), who formed a scientific club that by 1662 had evolved into The Royal Society.

JOANNES EVELYN ARMIG.
REG. SOCIETATIS SOC.



John Evelyn, painted at the age of sixty-nine by Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723) in 1689, holding a copy of Sylva.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY

Long before 1662, during the previous century, a tradition had grown up for groups of men to gather together and debate subjects of interest. One such association was centred around William Gilbert (1540–1603), physician to Elizabeth I. Solving navigational problems by applying mathematics was one of the fundamental questions of enquiry, as was the making of accurate instruments to be used for measurements. Gilbert was the first person to use the terms electricity and electric force when carrying out experiments at his laboratory. In 1598 Gresham College was founded when Sir Thomas Gresham (1519–79), the financier and founder of the Royal Exchange, made provision in his will for his house in Bishopsgate Street to become the centre for the new learning of arts and sciences. Seven professors were appointed, and under the terms of the will, each one had to lecture during the three-term year. All lectures were to be given in Latin, and the mathematical and astronomical lectures were to be repeated in English the same day. Gresham College prospered into the seventeenth century, when its members included the brilliant mathematician John Wallis (1616–1703), who had presaged the calculus and the binomial theorem. In about 1648 a number of members migrated – along with the Court of Charles I – to Oxford, and established the Oxford Philosophical Society, carrying on its scientific experiments. Two of its members were the young Christopher Wren (1632–1723), whom Evelyn called ‘that prodigious young scholar’, and the chemist and physicist Robert Hooke (1635–1703), who would also anticipate the invention of the steam engine, and who theorized on the mathematics of the arch and the balance spring of watches, and made important observations with his own designed microscope. In the summer of 1654, while John Evelyn and his wife Mary were on an extended tour

of England, they met the young men in Oxford and Evelyn attended a meeting of the Philosophical Society. Having experienced some of the intellectual activity going on in Europe during his travels, Evelyn was interested in associating with these 'virtuosi'.

Five years later some members had returned to London and resumed their meetings at Gresham College. At about this time several proposals were put forward, including suggestions by Evelyn, for the founding of a 'community of scientists', and on 28 November 1660, following a lecture given by Wren, twelve members remained behind to consider the establishment of a college for the promotion of 'Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning'. As well as Wren and Evelyn, among those present were William Petty (1623–87), who expounded on many ideas, including decimal coinage and a national health service, and later would experiment with designing a double-bottomed ship – Evelyn believed there was 'nothing impenetrable to him'; the Irishman and chemist Robert Boyle (1627–91), who in 1662 propounded the theory that has become known as Boyle's Law; John Wilkins (1614–72), who had written, at the age of fourteen, *Discovery of a World in the Moon*, in which he discussed the possibility of using flying machines to explore the unknown world, and in 1640 when he was twenty-six published *Discourse Concerning a New Planet*, in which he very plausibly argued that the earth was one of the planets; and Lord Brouncker (1620–84), Navy Commissioner, who would later become The Royal Society's first President. Their ideas were based on the Italian model of fostering academic and scientific ideals by forming academic foundations – the Accademia dei Lincei, founded in Rome in 1603; the Accademia del Cimento, founded by the Medici family in Florence in 1657; and the Neapolitan Accademia degli Investignati of 1665. Much earlier, during the 1540s, both Pisa and Padua Universities had formed the first botanic gardens.