



By: *Catriona M. Munro, TA Editor in Chief*

Why do we love trees?



Hmmm. Looking at the historical treatment of trees by the English, it is arguable that they have been unreasonably subject to the selfishness of a series of greedy, warring monarchs.

We can kick off with William I - OK he was technically French, but he hung around long enough to establish a lasting English dynasty - who introduced the "Forest Law". This designated England's woodlands as the "hunting grounds of kings".

The punishment for stealing a wood-inhabiting deer or boar was the gouging out of the thief's eyes, and possibly other body parts, arguably with worse physical consequences.

But the Forest Law was absorbed by the Magna Carta (1215), and royal ambitions for international supremacy increasingly grew into the realms of conquests and wars.

As an island nation preoccupied with conquering and maritime defensive needs, trees were required for purposes other than to provide a home for hunt-worthy animals. Timber is not only needed to build boats, it is readily available and transportable.

As England's navy grew, the need for timber began to seriously deplete the woodland: from an estimated land coverage of 15% in 1086, England's forests and woods had dwindled to just 5.2% by 1905.

The heydays of British bellicose maritime adventures were probably a tie between the eras of the Tudors and the Napoleonic Wars.

HMS Victory, captained by Admiral Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, required 6,000 trees for its construction. By the end of World War I, the UK government decided that the brakes should be put on the extensive use of boat timber.

Shipbuilding became more dependent on steel for cruise ships, until Margaret Thatcher decided it was too expensive, and even aircraft carriers were not so popular any more.

Was there a time when we decided we loved trees?

They are members of the plantae kingdom: their natural physical construction is awesome: they graduate vertically from a trunk, which begets a limb, which produces a branch, which splits into twigs.

We associate them with giving us healthy air; unlike us, they absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. We have picnics under them! They provide us with less wood than Nelson needed, but enough to keep us warm in our cold climate, give us paper and construction materials and beautify our surroundings.

Trees are also fun to climb. As a child, I was part of a 6-strong gang which used a massive local oak tree as a headquarters for our plots and secret enterprises.

The best time was spring and summer when you could hide among the foliage - we all had an individual branch, where we scrambled when non-gang members came passing by.

We knew less about the vicissitudes of life then than we do now, but it was far more interesting lurking among the oak leaves than stuck in a boring classroom.

The tree still exists but has somehow been incorporated into someone's garden. Its new owners constantly amputate its limbs, making it a bonsai of what it used to be, infuriating me.

Trees in art and music

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest

Against the earth's sweet flowing breast

I only came across the song version of Joyce Kilmer's poem, Trees, when a long time ago, I watched an episode of the Muppet Show

where Oscar Rasbach orchestrated the lyrics and made the poem into a song, so Miss Piggy could entertain us.

An angry tree took her to task, calling her a "pine in the neck" who, with a voice like that, would never be "poplar".

This week, I didn't sneer at Joyce Kilmer's words. Last Thursday, a tree that was nationally treasured in the UK, was pointlessly and cruelly felled at the dead of the night, for no apparent reason other than wilful destruction.

It was a huge, spectacular landmark, known as the "Sycamore Gap Tree", situated roughly on the site of the remnants of Hadrian's Wall, which equally roughly marks the border between England and Scotland. The tree was situated in the northernmost English area, Northumberland.

The National Park authority has confirmed that there were sufficient reasons to believe the tree had been deliberately felled, and regular news reports showed heartbreaking images of this majestic natural wonder lying on its side next to its sawn trunk. A 16-year old boy has been arrested.

It usually takes a death of someone close or to miss out yet again on any winnings from the National Lottery, but I really feel heartbroken. And appalled that anyone could think this was an act of sport or "fun".

I'll end by quoting Kilmer again:

"Poems are made by fools like me,

But only God can make a tree."