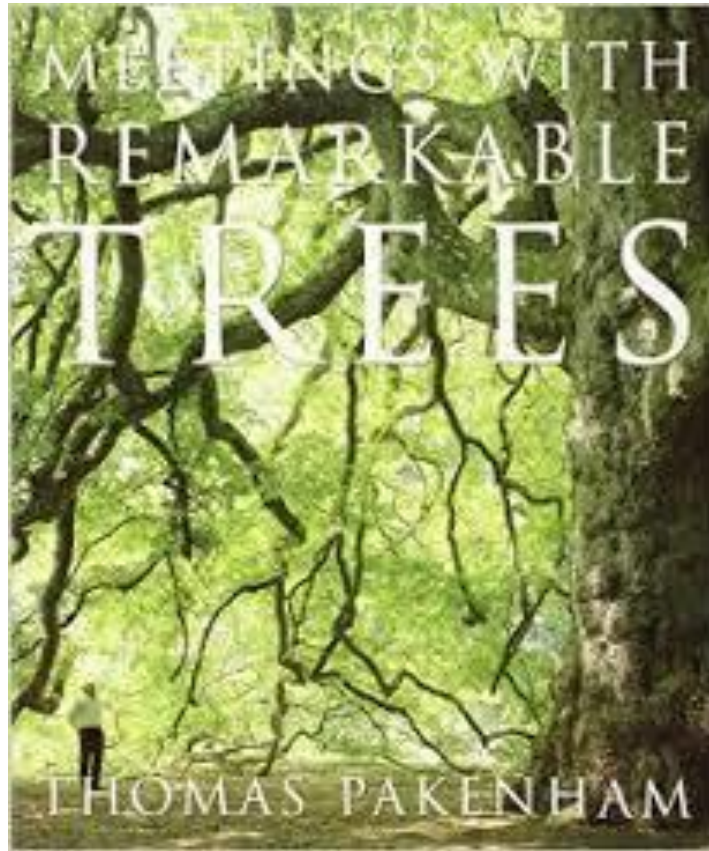


Meetings with Remarkable Trees



A Review by Garry Victor Hill

Meetings with Remarkable Trees by Thomas Pakenham.

London; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996. Illustrated 192 pages.

All photographs are in the public domain

Thomas Pakenham is best known as a writer on British imperialism in Africa, but here he writes on a very different topic, giving his readers biographies of the most remarkable sixty trees in Great Britain and Ireland. A biography of a tree? He traces each one as much as possible from its planting to its current state. We get statistics about girth and height, the characteristics of its species and how it copes with local conditions. Other assorted interesting information about the history of the tree usually comes in, including age; several started in in the Medieval era.

This sounds like a tree hugger's bible and a bore for the rest of us. Three things stop this book that from unfolding in that way: Pakenham's witty, often sardonic writing which marshals interesting facts into his text, unexpected interesting information and the amazing photography. The beauty, sensuality, unexpected images and panoramic views make for a visually astounding book. Even people not interested in trees but who like photography will be drawn into appreciating *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*.

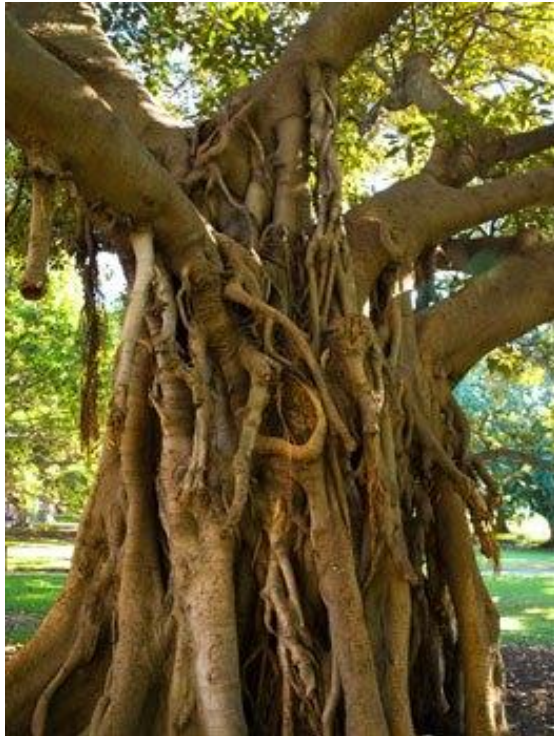
He can make prosaic events interesting. The story of how many species came to Britain and were developed goes beyond botanical statistics. It amazes that so many tree species we think of as English were imported and in botanical terms, not that long ago. Robin Hood did not hide in forests of maples, cypresses of Lebanon, chestnut oaks or douglas firs; if he did it was only in some Hollywood version of England. Some of the most common species of trees came into England rather late in the 1780s and soon after. Their origins were as varied as Greece and Turkey, Lebanon, China, Japan, Oregon and California.

Despite the beautiful images a sadness underlines this book. Trees now get this level of appreciation because they are becoming rarer as suburbs, pine plantations, roads and sheep, grain and cattle agribusinesses expand. Will forests become the reserve of the rich?

Fortunately Parkenham steers his text between being the outlooks of the glossy coffee table celebrations of life which ignore realities and the doomsday tracts of many environmentalists.



A Gallery of Trees



A fig tree in Sydney's domain Below: the oldest living thing a tree in Utah looks like this





An English forest Below: An angel oak





An avenue of Oaks Pantheism and druidism live!





Windswept trees, the pians and the tropical savannah shape them





Thomas Pakenham tree plantation owner



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