Worth Telling

*Heart of the Woods*, Wyl Menmuir (336pp, Aurum)

Having swum with mermaids, free dived, sailed and splashed about in a variety of ways in *The Draw of the Sea*, Wyl Menmuir now turns his attention to wood rather than water, once again offering up personal, intimate chapters on a wide-range of topics associated with forestry and trees. Or, in grander terms, about our historical, current and future relationship with trees, engaging with 'makers, crafters, bodgers, and woodsmen and women in order to better understand the woods they know so well.'

Although Wyl engages with ecology and natural history, plenty of this book is about how humans use and abuse this renewable material, explored in informed, down-to-earth, personal stories. When I asked him about curating and re-presenting other people’s stories, I suggested that he might be an editor, ventriloquist or collector as much as an author or writer, and asked him about his research and writing process.

*I purposefully set out to listen to other people’s stories and to attempt to do those stories and those people some justice in the book. I don’t see it as ventriloquism, but more a careful act of listening and re-presenting, of framing those stories in a way that connects with readers. It’s part of a conversation with the people involved that starts long before I meet them and continues long after any formal interview. It’s a process of listening, writing, re-representing, checking, seeking permission where I might have added information or interpreted a story in a particular way. It feels like an honest way to go about research, to me, to involve the people I’m talking to throughout the process.*

It's not only others who are in *Heart of the Woods*, much of the book involves the author and his family. I'm always interested in the clash of the confessional and authorial ego in poetry, not to mention characterisation, but Wyl carefully batted back my question about this in relation to creative non-fiction:

*I don’t have any concerns about using personal stories in my books, whether fiction or non fiction. If I didn’t have a personal connection to a subject, I’m sure it would be a very different book, but you’re right that I’m invested in story. My own interests and experiences are often the starting place for both fiction and non fiction – these stories matter to me. That said, I would hope ego isn’t an issue in the book, as my experience might be the starting point but it’s rarely the point in itself. I hope that I privilege and re-present the voices of other people far more than I do my own voice. As far as my experiences being special, I suppose yes, I consider them special in that people who have particularly strong relationships with trees, woodlands and wood have given their time and expertise, and I consider those experiences to be special and worth telling to readers. I wouldn’t include a story if I didn’t consider it to be worth telling. I wouldn’t want to waste the reader’s time with anything I didn’t consider worth telling.*

There are of course, authorial interruptions in the book, where Wyl's voice is even more prominent as he offers the reader summaries and wisdom about what has gone before. Again, this doesn't worry Wyl, who says that *As narrator, I see my job as being to contextualise, to give opinion, to link and connect the stories. Sometimes, that job is one of summary or of drawing what meaning I see from what I’ve seen, heard or experienced. It comes of a book that is part memoir, part social history, part nature writing, but perhaps doesn’t fit entirely into any one of those camps.*

The book also includes a wonderful array of photos. I was interested to know what Wyl thought they brought to the book, what the photos did that language can't. Wyl straightforwardly said that he *hope[s] they add richness. The shape of a branch or a leaf, the curve of a hand-carved netsuke, the way in which certain trees grow together or apart – all those things can be written about, though sometimes it takes a photograph to give a fuller picture. My hope is the text and images work together to give another layer of meaning*.

That combination of mutual and additive visuality, description and explanation, as components of meaning or possible meanings, is what Wyl excels at, sometimes sharing and directing attention to something specific, sometimes conjuring up a moment of stillness or offering a personal response, sometimes using a photograph to illustrate or contextualise the point he is making.

The book's title, of course, nods to Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic novel *Riddley Walker*, although Wyl sees it more as *an echo in the book’s title of Hoban’s phrase 'the hart of the wud'*, suggesting *it is an echo rather than anything more, an influence rather than something I explore in the book. I suppose, like Hoban was, I’m interested in interpolated stories and in particular, using them to get to the heart/hart of things*.

Accomplished authors like Wyl, are able to focus on both the particular and the universal

so that what exists at the heart of things, the essence, can also be useful when dealing with the more general world we live in Wyl notes that *I saw in my father’s woodland a microcosm of what is going on across the UK and Ireland, and it prompted me to investigate further afield to test those ideas*.

If, like me, you've always wondered why woods have to be 'managed' and can't just be left alone to grow, Menmuir has some answers and explanations, although he is of course aware of the different responses to the financial, social and ecological questions that farming and land management raises, the intersections of arts, crafts and business, and the stories and mythology produced in response to, and often set in, the woods.

Wyl is good at chatting to people, but even more importantly, listening. His conversations and relayed stories are nuanced and subtle, often set alongside episodes from other counties, other disciplines, and sometimes even further afield. In this book Wyl not only travels around Britain but out at sea in a handbuilt sailing boat, a reconstruction of a historical craft, and takes trips to Japan and Ireland. I was intrigued why he felt the need to travel as far as Japan to meet traditional woodworkers and enter a sacred forest (not to mention watch the bears there) as a lot of the book feels inescapably 'British', rooted in the mythology, ecology, rituals and society of the group of islands we live on. I wondered if there weren't there any traditional woodworkers nearer to home, and if the Japan chapter was out of place?

Wyl admits that *there are plenty of traditional woodworkers close to home,* but feels *that a lot of non fiction about place can be quite inward-looking. In this book, I saw a lot of parallels between woodworking cultures in the UK and Ireland with Japan – we are island nations, at roughly the same latitude, though with vastly different approaches to wood. Japan is very heavily wooded, compared to our sparse tree cover and, in Japan, certain forms of woodwork are very highly valued as cultural capital. I had read a lot about the wood culture of Takayama and thought it would add to the richness of the book, and perhaps put some of the UK and Ireland-focused chapters into relief, through offering something quite different.*

Parallels and looking outward are intriguing ideas, linking once again to the more general as exampled and evidenced by the specific, and although *Heart of the Woods* is no manual for eco-warriors or biology textbook, it does encourage us to pay attention to how we use, perceive and manage wood. As we slowly start to understand the mycorrhizal network and how it links together much of the natural world, we also need to pay attention to the whole body, the whole of nature, the whole of society. There are reasons we once thought the world was made of fire, earth, wood, stone, water and air, we still use all of them today.

Slowly, it seems, we are learning to re-engage with the natural world around us, perhaps in response to online overload or the effects of lockdown, perhaps because we have realised we are becoming disengaged from where we live, be that in local, national, worldwide or interplanetary terms. Wyl Menmuir is ahead of us, animated, informed, and hands-on. I look forward to whatever he chooses to write about next.

Rupert Loydell (with thanks to Wyl Menmuir)

(1445 words)