

the Forest of Forgetting

GUY HAND



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wild world and ourselves.*

When I first set eyes on the Highlands of Scotland only the sky seemed alive, animated by the brooding advance of storms. Through the mist I could find nothing else to focus on, not a house or a fence or a tree—just the rise and fall of vacant land. Rain collected in rivulets. It tumbled like tears from bare stone. At that moment I would have sworn it was the saddest place on earth.

I hadn't realized I'd stumbled into a kind of Highland fable, into a treeless land with a forest story. I could feel it in the wind as it blew over the thin, rock-strewn soil; smell it in the smoke of coal fires; and hear it in the wail of Highland pipes. Yet I couldn't make sense of the meaning until I saw it as a look in my Scottish wife's eyes.

For Mairi the Highlands are home. Her black hair, soft brogue, and dark eyes betray a long ancestry there, of the Picts, the ancient people who stopped the Roman armies' northern advance at Hadrian's Wall. Mairi still carries that fight in her eyes, and a fierce love for that land. We met there, and fell in love. She helped me to see her homeland through a native's eyes and when she gave that homeland up for mine, I had hoped to do the same. But then, there were the trees.

The instant we climbed out of Idaho sagebrush and into a dense stand of pine, in the Sawtooth Wilderness Area, I knew something was wrong. Mairi fell silent. Her pace slowed. I glanced over my shoulder to find the distance between us filled with shadow and half-light. She had hunched her shoulders and dropped her head. She moved with the wary posture of stalked prey. As she passed through a saber of light I could clearly see the fear in her eyes. I waited for her, but she walked past, pointed to a clearing, and by way of explanation, whispered, "too many trees." Neither of us had known, until that moment, that Mairi held a secret dread of wooded land.

I felt as if I'd failed her, unable to convey the closed-in sense of sanctuary I'd always felt in that forest, the way, even as a child, the thick mat of

pine needles and jigsaw bits of bark felt luxurious under my feet; the way the trees provided shelter against wind and mid-day glare; the way sounds were both softened and clarified; the way air held the sweet scent of pitch and the flutter of wings.

On the scree and boulder slopes above tree line, the tension drained from her face. She looked off into a landscape she could again understand: open country, treeless country, country filled with nothing more than grass, rock, and sky. It was only later, after peering more deeply into her Highland past, that we learned forests were part of her history, too, a forest lost to centuries of forgetting.

At first glance the Highlands and the Sawtooths have little in common below treeline, yet that landscape of heathered moors, shimmering lochs, and bare-rock mountains comes as close as it gets to a British version of wilderness. There are fewer people there and the land has suffered less recent development than anywhere in Europe. After a storm, when the air is crystalline, the sky Atlantic blue, and remnant clouds catch in the folds of far away peaks, the Highlands appear as primal, as unsullied as the granite ridges that loom over the little Sawtooth town of Stanley. Yet the Highlands are nothing of the kind.

When I stared across that vast, vacant land, I assumed that the truth of the place, the bedrock of Scottish history, lay exposed before me. I was wrong. A thick wilderness of trees once covered Highland bedrock, a forest as grand as any on earth.

Elm, ash, alder and oak shaded the low-lying coastal plains and inland valleys; aspen, hazel, birch, rowan, and willow covered the hills; and beautiful, red-barked Scots pine clung to the glacial moraines and steep granite slopes. The Romans called it the Forest of Caledonia, "the woods on heights," and it clung to Scottish soil for millennia.

People began weaving their lives among the trees soon after the forest claimed the land from Ice Age glaciers. Settlers built homes from oak and hazel, and furniture from elm and alder. They wove baskets from willow and built boats from pine. The Gaelic speaking Celts fashioned an alphabet connected, for mnemonic reasons, to the names of trees, and used it to write of the reverence they felt for them:

Birch, smooth, blessed,
proud, melodious,
lovely is each entangled branch
at the top of your crest

Like most indigenous cultures, theirs developed through a long and close connection to land. The early Scots saw the lives of trees interlocked with their own. Whether innate or hard-won, they perfected a balanced, reciprocal relationship with forest, and took from it knowing their own health depended on its preservation. Highland historian James Hunter believes their environmental awareness was unique, pre-dating any other in Europe by hundreds of years.

With the coming of the English and the Industrial Revolution everything changed. Sixteenth century England was hungry for wood. Empire building had depleted their forests, and as English woodsmen worked their way north, into the Highlands, they brought with them not only axes, but a profoundly different philosophy of nature—a view aggressively and breathtakingly anthropomorphic, a view that pictured everything on earth as intended for "the benefit and pleasure of man," and untamed woodland as something to be feared, exploited, and, if necessary, erased. Literature of the time bristled with references to "degenerated nature," the "deformed chaos" of woodland, and odes to trees far different from those of the Celts:



■ TIM COOPER PHOTO

lose even their thin veneer of green. They stood as straight and dead as a forest of last year's Christmas trees. All the plantations were sad, sickly substitutes for true forest. But that was *my* reaction, the reaction of someone with a memory of intact forest, someone lucky enough to have grown up near the largest wilderness areas in America. The average Scot might never see forest more real than this, may never get beyond the assumption that once-you've-seen-one-tree-you've-seen-them-all, may never understand that a true forest holds wonder as well as wood.

Along the banks of the Boise River, near where I grew up, a dense corridor of black cottonwood forest once stood. Captain Benjamin Bonneville and a group of French explorers spotted it in 1883. Having traveled an arid ocean of sage, Bonneville climbed a ridge, saw that wide, meandering swath of green, and called out "*Les bois! Les bois! Voyez les bois!*", "The trees! The trees! Look at the trees!"

I have no memory of that forest. By the time I was born it was in tatters, broken, and all but gone. I do remember, rooted along the banks of that river, overgrazed, weedy lots, filled not with trees, but cow shit and rusting car bodies, the breeze weighted with the sour stench of rendering plants and open sewers. Mine are *living* memories, memories thick with the sights, sounds and smells of direct contact to that place. They are also my *only* memories, and though grade school history lessons taught me that the river and this town were named for that missing forest, my memories superseded them, and carried the intimation that riverbanks, *all riverbanks*, by their nature, bred worthless ground.

Once primeval forests are cut, the land loses its ability to hold wonder, and as that wonder bleeds away so does human caring. I could see it draining from the banks of the Boise River and all but gone in the flayed, ruptured landscape of the Scottish Highlands.

Both are places whose forests are fading from memory, and ultimately it may be the forgetting, not the loss of forests, that breaks the connection between the wild world and ourselves. Once the look of mature woodland, the sweet resinous smells, the chirps and squeals, the sense of sanctuary fall from memory, we have no instrument of comparison, no place that we can confidently call uncorrupted, nowhere that hasn't been impoverished by our own limited grasp of the way the world works. And once forgotten, such wonders may be impossible to imagine back into being.

Boise has tried to imagine its riparian forest back, and although the "Greenbelt" riverbank restoration project has received much national praise, it has veered from a return to the original forest to that of an urban park, sprouting short-sighted commercial and residential floodplain developments where trees should be.

The Highlands of Scotland have seen attempts at restoration as well, yet a much longer time has elapsed since the forest fell. For most the Highlands are still a mistaken wilderness disguised by forgetting, a vast, devastated land, made beautiful by myth and melancholy light.

When I first gazed into that light, I never dreamed I was looking at the past and possible future of American forests. Hidden in the shadows was a forest story not yet finished. America is heir to that story, and the ragged woodland along the Boise River, the Cove Mallard timber fights in Central Idaho, the clear cuts on the Olympic Peninsula, the fallen redwoods of Northern California, and all the other American forest stories are chapters written in the same script. Our sylvan attitudes germinated in British forests, and in the barren Highlands you can track their evolution and see, in harsh terms, their ultimate result.

You might think I'm overreacting here, but first consider that the largest ponderosa pine in the world stands, not in a wilder-

ness areas, but sliced and cradled in a Boise park. Two ten-foot sections of that tree support a beamed roof under which the "butt cut flare" (the widest section of the tree) is displayed on its side, to show nearly four centuries of tree rings. A bronzed plaque above the tree declares this "THE WORLD'S LARGEST PONDEROSA," and two other plaques, nailed to each of the flanking upright sections, record statistics. One plaque explains that the tree, when cut, was 9 feet 4 inches wide, 126 feet high, and 376 years old. The other plaque lists important dates in human history, and the tree's rings are marked with numbers corresponding to each date: The 1620 landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, marked at the center of the tree; the 1644 English renaming of New York, four inches out; the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence, another two and a half feet from the center; the 1805 entering of Lewis and Clark into Idaho, a few more inches; and so on to the tree's outer bark.

This cross section seems, at first, an odd symbol for remembering (irony clings to any tree felled, sliced, and displayed to show proof of its longevity) and although it shows, in the exquisite precision of tree rings, that the lives of trees and the lives of humans have shared much history, and that trees have borne witness to the coming of European civilization to America, few forests have endured the results of that landing. When the first English colonists set foot in Massachusetts, they brought the British forest story to American shores. The vocabulary used to describe the American landscape echoed that of the Highlands, the Plymouth Colony calling the land they found a "hideous and desolate wilderness . . . full of woods and thickets." The problems faced "betwixt the American colonists and the aborigines of that country" were not very different from those faced with the Highlanders, nor was the rationale for occupying their land different, as "those who did not themselves subdue and cultivate the land had no right to prevent others from doing so."

Perhaps an ancient living tree standing in a ancient living forest would be a far brighter monument to the shared past of people and woodland, yet a disembodied slice of trunk displayed in a city park is a more truthful symbol of the culture that cut it. That a slice of ponderosa trunk is held so tenderly in its wood and granite cradle, honored with bronzed plaques, then marked with dates significant to human history—yet making no mention of the contributions and sacrifices made by forests to that history—speaks eloquently of the relationship to nature America has inherited from its European forbearers.

Perhaps a more equitable, if less revealing, display of our relationship to the natural world would be to instead mark at the center of that ponderosa the date on which English axes first entered the Caledonian Forest, then, a little further out, the date on which the last substantial stand of Scottish forest fell, then, following the ax westward and outward through the tree rings, the dates on which the first tree in New England and along the rivers of the Great Plains fell, and the first in the Rockies, the first along the Pacific shore, and then mark, somewhere out beyond the last ring and layer of bark—no more than a few inches into space perhaps—the date on which the last wild tree will likely fall to the ground and forever from human memory.

Still, there is hope. Mairi has learned, with nearly a decade of time with trees, to live among them, even to begin to enjoy shadowed places (I like to think that she is slowly recalling her own forest story.) I, in turn, have learned to see a singular beauty in the emptiness of the Highlands, a beauty that comes from finding truths, if not trees. I've learned, from that storm-tossed land, of the consequences of forgetting. I've learned that the Highlands are not barren, but crowded with a forest of forgetting, a forest as important, perhaps, in understanding human nature, as the forest that preceded it. Hope lies in holding them both in memory. ■

*By the beginning of
the twentieth century,
Britain supported the
lowest percentage of
woodland in all
of Europe . . .*