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Tom Williamson, Gerry Barnes and Toby Pillatt, *Trees in England: Management and disease since 1600* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2017. Pp. x+229. 61 figs. ISBN 9781909291966, Pbk., £16.99)

*Trees in England: Management and disease since 1600* is a critical historical study about how from the seventeenth century onwards management of trees affected the nature and appearance of the English landscape. It builds on the writings of Oliver Rackham and others on woodland and countryside, and provides some of the detail and nuances that they could not include or were unable to draw. It challenges current ecological narratives that promote rewilding, with Frans Vera's thesis of grazing ecology having shaped current understanding of the prehistoric landscape, not as dense continuous woodland, but as forest with large open spaces as a result of the presence of large herbivores, which he compares with a savannah. Williamson et al revise our understanding of trees and woodlands not as remnants of past ecological communities, but as cultural products, having been planted and managed by farming communities for centuries.

While the thesis is that the English landscape has always changed, lowland landscapes retained their characteristic features of fields enclosed by low hedges, well studded with individual trees, for centuries. These farmland trees were pollards and/or timber trees, depending on social, economic and technological circumstances, regarding need and fashion. There was a limited palette of trees, with oak, elm and ash being the most common species, which were useful for a wide range of purposes from timber to firewood. Pollards generally provided the majority of trees and they were managed according to need for the various purposes. Today though these farmland trees are often considered as a separate natural world which reflects their current unmanaged condition as a fragment of, or link to, the primeval forest. Yet as is shown here, this is a modern notion and the authors make a convincing argument of the countryside as a working landscape.

Management continues as the main theme throughout the book, and while disease is only discussed in a final chapter the treatment of it here addresses current concerns about the increase in infectious diseases introduced in the country as a result of globalisation of trade and climate change. While historically there were also pests and diseases that affected tree growth they would have been cut down and used as soon as this was a problem and able to spread to infect further tree populations. In addition, trees were generally cut down before they attained old age. The impact of diseases is particularly visible as it affects our common trees; elm mainly disappeared in England during the 1970s; oak has a number of pests and diseases and ash is struck by chalara. This book suggests that in order to reduce vulnerability this limited palette might be usefully extended and diversity increased, based on historic precedent with holly, alder, willows, rowan, crab, wild pear, whitebeam, wild service, scots pine, sweet chestnut, sycamore (already a common farmland tree in the North of England) cherry, apple, aspen, beech, maple, hornbeam; black poplar on damp sites, small leaved lime and willows. They warn against planting an indiscriminate conservation mix in all areas as this would tend to further erode the sense of regional distinctiveness and local character so important in the English countryside, but which is already much reduced by insensitive additions to the built environment and by widespread simplification- prairification- of the farming landscape.

This well written text is clearly set out with chapter headings that investigate how trees affected the landscape. By looking at this from the point of view of the trees and how they were managed rather than from the aspect of the landscape, this book provides a unique perspective of countryside economy that should be read not only by those interested in trees and local history, but also by landscape historians. The authors have given much data with percentages and numbers of tree cover, and of species, quoted, which at times are difficult to digest and interpret. This would have been more accessible if produced with additional visual aid to analysis, with appropriate infographics. This would also have aided more efficient comparison. As it stands however this book provides a tremendous resource with data that can be used and quoted by historians interested in the countryside, and is likely to remain one of the keystones in understanding the English landscape for some considerable time. It should of course be extended to further areas other than the main parts of England, of Scotland, Wales and Ireland to explore more regional differences.

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