



# **The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees: The Ash in Human Culture and History**

*Robert Penn*

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## **The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees: The Ash in Human Culture and History** Robert Penn

Out of all the trees in the world, the ash is most closely bound up with who we are: the tree we have made the greatest and most varied use of over the course of human history. One frigid winter morning, Robert Penn lovingly selected an ash tree and cut it down. He wanted to see how many beautiful, handmade objects could be made from it.

Thus begins an adventure of craftsmanship and discovery. Penn visits the shops of modern-day woodworkers—whose expertise has been handed down through generations—and finds that ancient woodworking techniques are far from dead. He introduces artisans who create a flawless axe handle, a rugged and true wagon wheel, a deadly bow and arrow, an Olympic-grade toboggan, and many other handmade objects using their knowledge of ash's unique properties. Penn connects our daily lives back to the natural woodlands that once dominated our landscapes.

Throughout his travels—from his home in Wales, across Europe, and America—Penn makes a case for the continued and better use of the ash tree as a sustainable resource and reveals some of the dire threats to our ash trees. The emerald ash borer, a voracious and destructive beetle, has killed tens of millions of ash trees across North America since 2002. Unless we are prepared to act now and better value our trees, Penn argues, the ash tree and its many magnificent contributions to mankind will become a thing of the past. This exuberant tale of nature, human ingenuity, and the pleasure of making things by hand chronicles how the urge to understand and appreciate trees still runs through us all like grain through wood.

## **The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees: The Ash in Human Culture and History** **Details**

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# From Reader Review The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees: The Ash in Human Culture and History for online ebook

## Laura says

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:*

*In 2012, Robert Penn felled (and replanted) a great ash from a Welsh wood. He set out to explore the true value of the tree of which we have made the greatest and most varied use in human history. How many things can be made from one tree?*

*Over the next two years he travelled across Britain, to Europe and the USA, to the workshops and barns of a generation of craftsmen committed to working in wood. He watched them make over 45 artefacts and tools that have been in continual use for centuries, if not millennia.*

*Today, he begins his search for the perfect tree in woodland near his South Wales home. It's a bitter, Elizabethan winter and snow lies on the forests. After a long hunt, he gets a call from a forester in Herefordshire.*

*This is a tale about the joy of making things in wood, of its touch and smell, its many uses and the resonant, calming effect of running our hands along a wooden surface. It is a celebration of man's close relationship with this greatest of natural materials and a reminder of the value of things made by hand and made to last.*

*Abridged by Jo Coombs*

*Produced by Hannah Marshall*

*A Loftus Media production for BBC Radio 4.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06s8716>

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## Jacob Lehman says

This was a quick read, and slightly misnamed; it's really about the many people who help the author make things out of a single ash tree that he has felled. Despite this flaw, the book is compellingly written, and nicely complements the biography of Vanderbilt The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt, who lived through some of the change from a society built on crafts and small-scale production to one in greater hurry and supporting the corporate form. Living in the woods as I do now, I appreciated learning more about the wood and its properties, particularly enjoying two quotes from craftspeople: "I like making bowls more than I like making money" and "There was less hurry back then."

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## Juliet Wilson says

Rob Penn felled a single ash tree and set out to make as many things as possible from the wood. He travelled widely to visit master crafters who took parts of his tree and made it into over 40 items including: a desk, kitchen worktops, spoons, a toboggan and axe handles.

In the process, Penn investigates many of the dying woodworking skills, such as wood-turning and arrow-making, spending time with the crafters and understanding their close relationship with the wood. He investigates the qualities of ash and how it is in many ways superior to other woods for making items such as baseball bats, though not often used for making desks. He looks at the history of ash in the British landscape, the history of ash as a material for specific items including toboggans, axe handles and chairs, the cultural significance of hurling (the national sport in Ireland, played with an ash stick) and the value of wood as a natural material superior in most ways to man-made materials. He makes a very good case for wood being a reliable, long lasting sustainable resource. Sustainable that is as long as it is sustainably grown and managed, which is an aspect that this book could have delved into in more detail.

This is a beautifully crafted book, full of fascinating insights and imbued with appreciation for a unique and very special material. There's a sad epilogue to the book though, as ash is threatened by diseases - ash die-back disease has spread throughout Europe, killing many trees while the emerald borer beetle has devastated ash forests in the USA. What is the future for this most valuable and beautiful of trees?

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## **Jim says**

Penn's love for trees, ash trees in particular, is wonderful to read about. This book is a series of adventures as he traces the uses of common English ash, *Fraxinus excelsior* throughout history & much of the western world. It is similar enough to American white ash, *Fraxinus americana* that it is also covered in some detail. That an entire book barely covers the subject is a testament to the wood; its historical & current importance. While Penn gets into some detail at various times, he still only brushes against many subjects. This makes it an easy read both for those both with & without knowledge on the subject. I certainly enjoyed it & I have a fair amount of experience. Actually, his love of the woods & insistence on proper environmental practices mirrored my own. I will admit to some frustration on him not getting into some areas a bit more deeply.

I've read something about European woodworking over the years since much of the American Colonial woodworking arises from those roots. He even mentions Roy Underhill. Quite a few of the International Wood Collector's Society articles have been about European woods & methods over the years. Even so, Penn wrote about items I hadn't thought about before, most notably his long discourse (too long?) on Irish hurling sticks, a perfect way to describe the variety within ash wood in the way it was grown. His practically perfect tree from the England/Wales border country was great for a lot of things, but not for hurling sticks. He then got into American baseball bats & where the best wood for them comes from. The relative differences in ash are huge depending on the region, soil, & conditions. He does a great job making this clear in practical terms.

I watched a clip of a hurling game here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgEMv...>

He discusses drying methods a little bit under each use with some general rules. It really is an important step that is surrounded by a lot of folklore & science where I'm not always sure which is correct. He takes the experts at their word, a good idea, IMO. While he discusses the need to air dry wood about a year per inch, he mentions a bit about kiln drying, although I would have liked to have heard more detail on the local methods since I know it varies by area & species.

Speaking of other areas, one of the major annoyances of this book was the mixing of units between SAE & metric. He gets boards cut to 1 inch thick, but their width & length are in cm! Not his fault, I'm sure. I wish we'd just switch, though. A mix like that is a headache, but we deal with it in the US, although generally only

with manufactured wood like plywood & then only the thickness is in metric & can vary a LOT - grrr!

He's not really a woodworker & I think that's why I found some of his explanations incomplete or spread out oddly. For instance, he missed a wonderful opportunity to get into the various properties of wood with a chair maker, although he later covered most of those points in other sections. Personally, I think a chair is the finest, most thorough example & test of wood properties. Some use half a dozen woods to their best advantage so that might not have made his point as well, but the comparisons are very educational. Still, he did mention the interlocking grain of elm without mentioning it makes a great chair seat due to this & really missed the point of splitting out chair rails for strength in the beginning of the book (He kind of talks around it.) & doesn't cover it properly until near the end with baseball bats. Then he does a great job. He finally got back to chair making in a bit more detail at the very end, but still didn't discuss other woods, save elm, properly.

He states that in the 1990s a pathogenic fungus was attacking ash trees in New York, but doesn't mention the name. Frustrating! Not until the very end does he mention the Emerald Ash Borer, an imported beetle that has wiped out almost all of the ash trees from New England through Kentucky & down to the Gulf coast. About 20-25% of my woods (Kentucky) was once ash & they are all dead. The sheer number of trees is many times that of even American Chestnut Blight which were almost completely wiped out in the wild.

There is some redundancy that was annoying. Structural & crushing strength of wood was one of these areas. He covered cell structure several times for the same reasons in arrows, tool handles, baseball bats.

He didn't mention the beauty of some of its grain patterns in different cuts well enough early on, although he did take his log to a sawmill. I found that section far too simplified & he never mentioned staining & finishing of ash compared to other woods. It does have large pores & that can be an issue with fine woodwork & writing surfaces. He mentions the grain patterns at the end, but doesn't get into staining at all, surprising since he wife should know.

He never mentioned the sex lives of the ash tree which is quite varied. They are bisexual, some in all senses of the word, while others are straight, though this can change as well with time as can their sex. They are not alone in this, but are perhaps one of the best documented.

Still, he summed it all up with a true love of trees, especially his ash. At the end of the book he revisits the stump & ticks off all the different items made. That's wonderful. He did a fine job for anyone interested in, but not terribly familiar with, the wood & processing a tree from seedling to finished product. I found a lot to interest me & that's quite an accomplishment for a book of this sort. Just be aware (warned?) that there is plenty he didn't cover & more that was beyond the scope of this book. It's fascinating & sort of like eating chips, especially if you actually get to working with this wonderful wood.

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## **Filjan says**

Well I read this in three days which says something good about it. Learnt a lot about the properties of ash wood.

It could be a so much better book. It needs proper illustrations, both line drawings and colour photographs. It needs an index. In places it is boringly technical yet the tone is generally too folksy. For example he says of a

chap making him a desk "Andy ran his hand across the wood. He looked boyish and animated." Pass the sick bucket! I like my non-fiction dry and simple.

One last comment. Somewhere (without an index I can't find it again) the author mentions that he saw in a dictionary that ash is an obsolete English word for a spear. What he doesn't seem to realise it's that aesc, pronounced ash, is actually the Anglo-Saxon word for spear and for the tree too of course.

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## **Owain says**

This should be called The Man Who Didn't Make Things Out of Trees, or perhaps, The Man Who Got Other People to Make Things Out of Trees For Him. Robert Penn, as far as I can tell doesn't take part in any significant part of the process of making useful items from the tree he gets other people to select, fell, mill and process the timber for him.

That's being a bit harsh. It was OK. I just got far less from it than I had wished being misled by the cover and title. I should say this book was bought for me though. I was hoping to get some cool whittling or woodworking tips from the book but the author doesn't actually know any of the crafts he discusses. Nevertheless he has skill as a wordsmith.

I was annoyed at the first bit of the book as Penn discusses woodland management and tree surgery. Topics which I know a lot about and he just seemed like a standard 'tourist' wanted to play around on the edges of something cool, manly and dangerous. You come across these types when working as a tree surgeon. People who think they know shit about tree work because they own a shit chainsaw. As the book progressed however I did warm to it more as I learned bits about crafts I didn't know about. Penn has managed to talk to some cool, knowledgeable people. Incidentally I think I know someone who knows one of the wheelwrights from West Lancashire who the author goes to see. The chapter on hurley making was interesting too as well as the one where he gets the fletcher to make him a bodkin arrow.

Read it if you know nothing about the subject and it'll be an interesting book. Read it if you know stuff and it'll annoy you.

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## **Robdguk says**

excellent read, which covered the history, science, craft and emotion behind the authors love of woodlands, ash and the artisan crafts that made use of the timber. each object created uncovered the history of the craft, science behind the properties of the common ash tree and the sensual pleasure of own handcrafted item.

I would give the book 4.5 stars for the same reasons that other readers have reduced their scores. A few more photographs of the processes involved from the locating a suitable tree through to the end products would have really added the finishing touch to an otherwise outstanding book. Even without added illustrations and photos, still a 5 star read.

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## **James says**

A narrative history of a single tree and the 44 item types that it was made into along with some information on the ongoing ash die back. The craftsmen stories are all fun read once for us wooden heads, not so much fun for the general public.

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## **David Potter says**

### **A sort of madness?**

I sometimes wonder if a sort of madness grips people who work with wood. At the least opportunity they will launch into eulogies about texture, tactile qualities and much else. If they really are unhinged then Robert Penn is badly affected. As a woodpecker myself I recognise the symptoms! To some Penn may seem to enthuse too much but I loved the rhythm of his writing, the sometimes near sentimental beauty of his appreciation of trees and woods and wood itself. And what a fascinating and creative story he weaves. If this really is madness would that the insanity could spread.

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## **Ian Brydon says**

This is a gem of a book. Rob Penn has had a lifelong love of trees and wooden artefacts. In 2014 he selected a mature ash tree in a forest and, with the aid of local experts, cut it down with a view to seeing how many useful items he could make, or have made for him, from the wood it yielded. The list of items is astounding. The book is, however, so much more than a simple catalogue of artefacts.

Penn encounters some amazing artisans, all of whom share a deep love for working with wood, and take an immense pride in working to historic methods. Ash is one of our most prevalent trees, and archaeological evidence from around the world suggests that its wood has been used by humans for at least five thousand years. Among its many attractive qualities are its simple abundance, augmented by the fact that it grows very quickly, usually with a very even grain structure. When properly seasoned it also loses more of its natural moisture content than most similar woods, making it lighter than them.

Penn travels the country to visit the specialist workers who make the various items for him. He offers a loving description of their workmanship, and the care and attention that they bring to their respective crafts. He also goes in to the history of the various items he commissions, which allows him to go off at tangents, for example explaining the history of the Irish game of hurling or chronicling the development of the toboggan. One chapter (The Crack of the Bat) sees him visiting America where he has a baseball bat made for him. This is a cue for a potted history of the baseball bat. I can imagine my friends rolling their eyes and smirking as they read that, feeling that a history of the baseball bat was just what they needed to make their lives complete, though I can assure them that this little adjunct was riveting, just as all his other sidebars are.

Penn writes with great clarity but tremendous enthusiasm, and I was left feeling very envious of the various objects he amassed from his single felled tree.



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## Bettie? says

BOTW

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06s8716>

Description: *In 2012, Robert Penn felled (and replanted) a great ash from a Welsh wood. He set out to explore the true value of the tree of which we have made the greatest and most varied use in human history. How many things can be made from one tree?*

*Over the next two years he travelled across Britain, to Europe and the USA, to the workshops and barns of a generation of craftsmen committed to working in wood. He watched them make over 45 artefacts and tools that have been in continual use for centuries, if not millennia.*

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*This is a tale about the joy of making things in wood, of its touch and smell, its many uses and the resonant, calming effect of running our hands along a wooden surface. It is a celebration of man's close relationship with this greatest of natural materials and a reminder of the value of things made by hand and made to last.*

1: A search for the perfect tree in woodland in South Wales

2: Robert fells an ash and begins to make things from it

3: A piece of the ash is taken to the best of wood-turners

4: A sledge is made in Austria

5: After a year, Robert finally has his new writing desk

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## Wilfred Godfrey says

This book spoke to a part of me that I rarely touch, but which pushes at my seams from the inside. I'm now one step closer to bursting entirely and moving to a forest.

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## **James says**

I'm not a woodworker. I mean-I've taken two classes at the local Woodcraft, one on turning basics and the other to turn a pen. I've enjoyed exploring a rural specialty wood dealer. I've even created studio images of furniture pieces to be juried for a woodworking guild for another craftsman. Outside of that, I possess no woodworking skills or special knowledge. That said, this book for me was a meditative delight. Robert Penn carries us through the experiences of being in the woods, recognizing the intimacy that is possible in selecting a tree, respecting its uniqueness, and having it crafted into a myriad of objects both contemporary and functional as well as historical and perhaps anachronistic. Although not perfect (there a few moments where he repeats himself in a way that displays some imperfect fusion of these experiences) he places the reader in the forest, in the wood shop, and in the office where, as he puts it, the wooden artifacts will live a life probably much longer than the life they had as a tree.

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## **Carol says**

This is a FIVE star read for me but I don't expect everyone to be as enamored of trees as I am nor do I expect everyone to be as worried about the ash tree in particular (think elm). That said, this is a literary read about the ash tree and it is a quick read in which you will learn many interesting bits about things British and American, about trees, and things made from trees (including war). If, like me, you are not clear on the word 'bespoke/bespoken', do not wait as long as I did to look it up.

"I now believe that this feeling is the spirit of all the people who have ever known the woods; it's a force representing the continuity in the intense and mutually beneficial relationship between people and trees over the ages; it's a siren song to one of the oldest and deepest connections to the land, and nature, that humans have."

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## **Paul says**

When people think of making things from wood, the one that springs to mind is oak. But as magnificent as that tree is for buildings, ships and furniture, through the ages people have relied on another tree for tools, household objects, paddles and bats. That tree is ash.

This tree is under threat now from a microscopic fungus that has come from the far east. Penn sets about a challenge of making, or having made as many objects made from a single ash tree. Partly to raise awareness of the trees plight, but also for the satisfaction of seeing a tree made into elegant and beautiful things for him to use. But first he had to find his tree. The genus Fraxinus is common in the northern hemisphere so it shouldn't be too difficult. He is lucky enough to lease a small woodland, but there was no tree there suitable; fortunately he was to locate a tree with a strong straight trunk and a decent canopy from another local wood. Having felled it, it was taken to the saw mill to be cut into a number of planks of different dimensions, prior to a period of seasoning. This natural drying process is essential to turn a tree into useful timber.

One of the most common uses for ash is tool handles. The experts are a little hazy about putting absolute date on when ash was first used, but it is safe to say that it has been used for several thousand years. The properties of ash make it the perfect material, it is tough, strong and flexible, not too heavy and the very act of handling the wood adds a patina to it making it nicer to handle. One of the last tool manufacturers in UK

offer to turn some of his planks into axe handles, and he pays them a visit. In no time at all they are cut to shape, and sanded to the ideal shape. His first objects from that tree.

Ash has numerous uses, and has been used in all forms of transport for years, including cars, buses, aircraft and of course carts. More wood is taken to a wheelwright where he sees flat wood turned into a perfect wheel, that if looked after will long outlive the original tree. Another hunk was taken to be made into bowls, that are now used daily for his breakfast. He visits Austria to have a toboggan made, America to see ash turned into a baseball bat and Ireland to have a hurley created. He commissions a desk to be made, and ends up with chopping boards, tent pegs, spoons, bookmarks, paddles, arrow, dominoes and even a catapult. In total he had seen 45 different objects created and had a total of 126 items. All from one tree. The sawdust and shaving kept him warm too, as nothing was wasted.

More importantly as this tree was coppiced properly when he returned to the stump it was growing again and will produce again.

This is a lovely book to read. Not only does his boundless enthusiasm come across on every page, but he is reminding us of the timeless quality of wood as a material. We learn that these crafts are not completely gone, but there are still a few talented individuals out there with the necessary skills to create practical and beautiful things. It is also a call to everyone to see what the benefits of having a properly managed woods can bring. He has not only got a collection of items that he will use for many years to come, but each time he uses them he has a direct link to the landscape around him.

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