



## *To Speak for the Trees: My Life's Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest*

Review by Tim Beatley

I first encountered Diana Beresford-Kroeger, Irish-Canadian botanist and conservation scientist, on a medicine walk that she was leading through High Park in Toronto. I was not planning to attend; it was something I heard about at the last minute. I am very glad that I did, as it was an initial introduction to the wonders of trees as seen through the eyes of an unusually passionate and knowledgeable lover of trees. I learned many things I did not know about trees on that short walk and it left me wanting to learn more about both the science and ancient wisdom of trees she has been collecting and sharing. Much of this wisdom is here in her beautifully written memoir of a remarkable life's journey of studying and loving trees.

Beresford-Kroeger recounts with eloquence the progression of her discovery of trees and nature, and of her remarkable and diverse career of

research, writing and advocacy on behalf of trees and the natural world. Beresford-Kroeger's story is one of personal growth and discovery, as she learns from her elders the ancient wisdom of trees and the natural world, spending formative summers in her ancestral homeland of the Lisheens Valley (County Cork, Ireland).

The book recounts with emotion her moves from Ireland to America (briefly) and then later to Canada where she ultimately settled and has spent the last four decades. Her work on behalf of trees is remarkable and multifaceted. She and her husband transformed a 160-acre farm into a conservation arboretum and hands-on research station. Her research and advocacy take many different forms from writing books to filmmaking (the latest of which is the film *Call of the Forest*) to activism, especially on behalf of indigenous

landowners who she greatly admires and respects for their committed stewardship.

There is much joy and delight here, especially around the magic of trees. But there is also sadness. Beresford-Kroeger's is a bittersweet life journey, born into British aristocracy, she lost both her parents at the age of thirteen, ending up sent by the courts to live with her uncle. Thus began a "wardship" that would shape the rest of her life and help ignite a passion for trees and the natural world. Spending her summers in Lisheens Valley, County Cork Ireland, her relatives teach her about the ancient wisdom of plants and trees.

Another sadness arises from the realization that few trees and forests remain in Ireland. She finds herself learning the story of an ancient woodlands culture that essentially no longer exists. The reasons extend back in time to the 500-year British occupation and genocide: active deforestation became, she tells us, a weapon to control and subjugate. As she later navigates university and academic life (eventually obtaining a PhD in Biology from Carleton University in 2019), she also realizes how little value modern science places

on the ancient knowledge of her ancestors. She also confronts the reality that she may be the last generation to have obtained this ancient learning.

Nevertheless, she works to find ways to merge and blend ancient knowledge with modern science, and the book itself is evidence of the success of this. It is at once a celebration of the ancient ways and history of a largely extinct woodlands culture (Ireland), and a modern story of her discovery and work on behalf on a very-much alive Canadian forest ecology and culture.

A dispassionate scientist or cataloger of trees she is not. She is an unabashed lover of trees, and, as I recall from the medicine walk I attended, she is a more than occasional hugger of trees!) She urges that we need to engage in "loving trees as people," something consistent with the ancient Druid view of the intrinsic value of all things in nature. "It's not hard to love something so huge and magical," she says. And as is true for many of us, she notes, "trees were some of my oldest friends."

A focus of the book, and of her life, is understanding the healing power of trees and

forests. She recounts, throughout the book, the many uses of trees used to treat various ailments and to promote health among ancient people. The woodlands she says are “our collective medicine cabinet.” This traditional knowledge is increasingly confirmed and validated by science she says. She argues persuasively in the book (and through the example of her life and advocacy) that it is indeed possible and necessary to productively merge these perspectives.

This is also one of the recurring tensions in the book; a tension between the modern scientific view of trees and nature that she encounters in the academic setting and the ancient knowledge and more spiritual view of trees. In academia she finds plenty of sexism but also a discounting of the spiritual: “among academics, a scientist



was expected to know better than to trust the knowledge of Indigenous woodland cultures.”

She tells of experiencing her own first medicine walk, led by her great-aunt Nellie. Picking out plants here and there, Nellie would tell of their medicinal uses: “she highlighted species after species; she had a cure for diseases I have never heard of -- mental illnesses, digestive upsets, heart problems and skin troubles.” She tells the story of her own personal confirmation of the benefits of this plant knowledge as she sees firsthand how an ancient cure for warts works. Such ancient knowledge about trees and nature is not to be thought of as superstition but rather as practical learned insights, borne of intense observation over time and often provable through the methods of science. Beresford-Kroeger’s is a story about the handing down of this ancient knowledge and about the affirmation of the importance of this learned wisdom in a modern world.

The latter third of the book (Part Two) presents a remarkable catalog of the ancient benefits, largely medicinal, of different trees. In a testament to the importance of trees to ancient Irish culture, this catalog is organized around the Ogham alphabet with each letter of the Celtic alphabet named after a tree. Here we learn, for instance that: wood from Pine trees is used as an antiseptic; Birch trees produce anticancer chemicals and pain relievers (and an ancient precursor to aspirin), as well as a treatment for urinary tract infections made from its leaves; Oaks produce tannins used to treat burns; Holly can be used to treat bronchitis and rheumatism; and groves of Willow are useful in treating depression and loneliness. Associated plants are no less potent: there is the healing honey from gorse and heather; a treatment for night blindness from eating elderberries; and the anticancer properties and immune system boosts derive from eating blackberries. It is hard not to be convinced of the medicinal values of trees and to wonder what other hidden antidotes, cures and generators of health and wellbeing might lie within our touch,

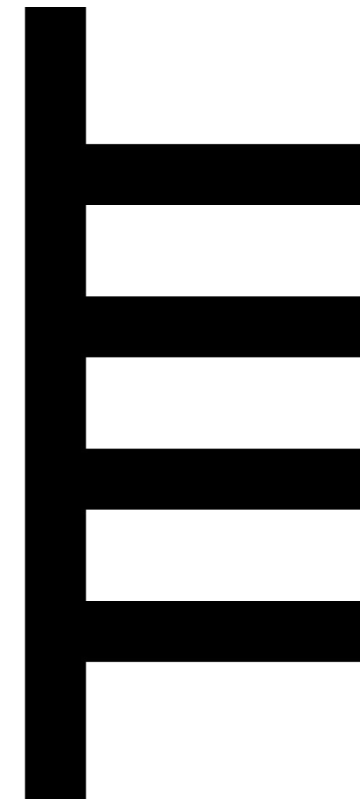
awaiting observation and discovery (or more likely have been discovered but have now been forgotten).

This is not a book about cities, though the lessons of care and love for trees, nature, and landscapes will find equal application there. If only we could treat urban ecosystems with the same reverence and attention she and her husband bestow on their organic farm. She sometimes describes the micro-ecology of trees using urban language. In describing the majestic older Oak, she notes that “each tree is a metropolis for insects, butterflies and pollinators.” Bio-cities of life within larger human designed bio-cities. She also speaks of efforts at bioplanning, working to create a bioplan for the Canadian capital of Ottawa, for example. There is little doubt that we need the kind of rigorous research and science she brings to bear

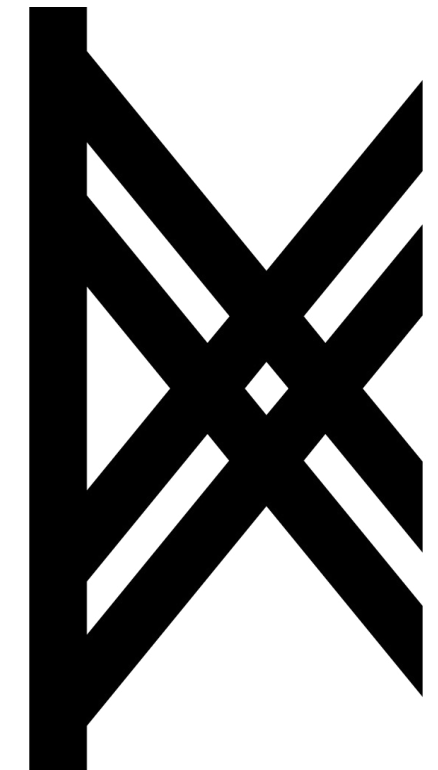
in talking of trees, and the many benefits they provide, but perhaps more than anything else we need some of the magic and mystery she conveys, and a sense of the loss we would all feel if they (an intentionally chosen pronoun) did not live among us.

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Diana Beresford-Kroeger (2019). *To Speak for the Trees: My Life’s Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest*. Random House. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/575305/to-speak-for-the-trees-by-diana-beresford-kroeger>.



Ogham letter sail for “willow-tree”



Ogham letter ifin for “pine”