

BOOK REVIEWS

Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter's Experience

Hélène Cyr

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“STAB, PUSH, TWIST, bury, backcut, kick.” This is the opening sentence on the back cover of Hélène Cyr’s *Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter’s Experience*, which, we are told, is the treeplanter’s tai chi. Through a winning combination of black-and-white photographs and moving text, it could also be described as the reader’s tai chi. I loved this book. It stabbed, pushed, twisted, buried, backcut, and kicked my heart around in honour of that enormous “camraderie of misery” and “rite-of-passage” for all my friends, cousins, students, and other young people who have created the treeplanting culture. *Handmade Forests* is a handmade book that is absolutely true to “the vibrant subculture” with “larger-than-life mythological aspects” that it describes. It is stark, raw, funny, poignant, elegant in the face of the savage monotony that is industrial forestry. Words and images are selected with the same mindful economy that treeplanters bring to the job to survive. Even the typeface is a sans serif without any dressing.

The book is divided into essays by Sioux Browning, Dave Wallinger, and John Cathro, along with a photo-essay by Hélène Cyr. Sioux Browning, a

poet/treeplanter, writes an evocative preface about this “bizarre world of putting trees back where they belong, where they had always been before, so they can eventually be taken out again.” She co-writes, with silviculture specialist Dave Wallinger (of the BC Forest Service), a history of how the renegade phenomenon of treeplanting emerged. This short essay sets the context for John Cathro’s “Field Guide to the Treeplanter’s Experience.” If John Cathro is the new style of naturalist-forester working his way up in the industry from the bottom ranks of the treeplanting subculture, then there is hope. People who have spent time walking in the forest, cleaned up after someone else’s mistakes, and “survived the vertical slash, horizontal rain, blinding sweat, deafening mosquitoes and maddening no-see-ums” (), have a humour, pragmatism, and broad perspective that is going to get us through this transitional time in BC forestry. He is a great writer to boot. What follows is an excerpt from the section that teaches you about “screefing”:

Screefing is the first thing learned, the last word spoken about treeplanting ... Screefing is all about removing the

organic layer above the soil, about gardening a microsite for the seedling. Screefing is the bones of the operation. In tough ground the ability to locate and prepare a plantable spot is what makes someone a highballer. In open dirt you can plant screef-free. In moderate ground there is just enough diversity to ensure that the brain must remain engaged. The mind expands into the zone, a blend of obscure lyrics, the faces of old lovers, the bodies of potential new ones, flashbacks from previous contracts, previous lives. Not so much a case of life passing before one's eyes as significant episodes played and replayed, from one tree to the next, the exertion squeezing the meaning through pounding veins to drip from the forehead to the ground.

Hélène Cyr's photographs follow. Of course they are in black and white, true to the treeplanting perspective. In her preface, Sioux Browning writes: "The photographs are honest. They are fair. They do what they have to do. Mostly they show us out there, planting trees under that great big sky, bending toward the earth, filling in the empty

spaces." Characteristically, what Browning doesn't say is that these are beautiful pictures that capture more than just a job; they capture what Merv Wilkinson, pioneer of eco-forestry, describes as "the hardships of working in a world of devastation left by the legal vandals of industry." The treeplanter's quotes that accompany the images will be reminiscent for every treeplanter. Ranging from "I don't miss it much except for an amazing cook named Mona, a few good parties and some pretty French girls" to a "a life beautiful in its lack of excess."

Treeplanting is changing as the move to unionize treeplanters and shift ex-loggers into the siviculture industry gathers steam. Browning and Wallinger predict that, if this happens, then "the renegade nature of the job [will] vanish" and the subculture that we experience so vividly between the pages of this book will disappear. Whatever emerges in the future, this book is a great tribute to this period of history and the motley crew of "students, foreigners, doctors, musicians, travelers, dreamers, outcasts, weirdos, the insane and the pure" who, at the end of the day, planted four billion trees in British Columbia alone and proved that "if you can plant trees you can do anything."