

# Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

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Volume 10  
Issue 1 *Landscapes: 'The Idea of North'*

Article 12

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December 2020

## Review: John Lewis-Stempel, *The Wood: the Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood*

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### Recommended Citation

Armstrong, P. (2020). Review: John Lewis-Stempel, *The Wood: the Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood*. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 10(1). Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol10/iss1/12>

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**Review of *The Wood: the Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood*, by John Lewis-Stempel, Published by Doubleday, 2018. Cover price (Hardback) UK £14.99.**

*Patrick Armstrong (Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia)*

John Lewis-Stempel has received several awards for 'Nature writing', including the prestigious Wainwright Prize, twice. But he describes himself as a 'countryside writer' and *The Wood* is very much of this genre.

Cockshutt Wood is a small area (about three acres) of mixed woodland in the hills of Herefordshire in the border country between England and Wales. The book is a beautifully written diary of a year in the life of this woodland, 'a place of ceaseless wonder', as the author describes it. A woodland landscape comprises the trees (of course), but also the ups and downs of the land, the soil, the insects, mammals and birds, and all these, and the manner in which they interact as the seasons pass, the author describes well. But woodland has a language that 'locks on' to that landscape, and is almost inseparable from it. The name of the wood itself is significant: 'cock' is from 'woodcock', traditionally a small game bird: 'shutt' is mediaeval English for 'trapped' (as in 'shut in'), so Cockshutt Wood is the wood where, long ago, woodcock were netted. Woodland management has its own phraseology: trees are (or were) 'coppiced' or 'pollarded'. Lewis-Stempel's great-grandfather, he tells us, was a 'reeve' or manager of woodland. A 'copse' is a small woodland, of half an acre or less, a 'covert' is a dense group of trees and shrubs used for game rearing or shooting, a 'hanger' is a wood on the summit of a rise, while a 'dingle' is a wooded valley. 'Pannage' is the traditional practice of releasing pigs to feed in woodland, often on beech 'mast' – the nuts from beech trees. The author explains how he attempted to resurrect this practice. Some of the species of tree have a host of evocative local names: crab apple (the wild apple tree) is referred to as: sour grabs, scarb, scrab, bittergall, gribble or scrogg.

Of these matters, and the butterflies, the plants of the undergrowth, the spiders, the foxes, of 'Old Brown' the tawny owl and the fungi of his woodland, the author writes perceptively and economically: sometimes he uses an unusual word that the reader may need to look up: the bluebells of the wood are describes as a British 'quiddity'. He gives his current favourite word as 'psithurism' meaning the sound of rustling leaves on trees. And he has occasionally an elegant turn of phrase; late in the autumn, he notes, there remain

... a few leaves still on the fallow wands, quite like pennants on a cavalrman's lance, shredded in the wars of the winds.

And in high summer:

The aniseed aroma of ground elder fills the air. Purple loosestrife bows in the heat. The peace is heavenly.

As if to emphasize the way in which humanity has depended on woodland for centuries, the text is lighted here and there by a recipe for utilizing of wood's produce – crab apples, chestnuts, elderberries, and even acorns.

But the author knows his poets as well as his plants and animals. Tennyson and Kipling, Shakespeare and the Browning are quoted in an entirely apposite manner. So too John Clare. Music is not forgotten: 'Elgar made music of England's landscape' he declaims: 'The trees are singing my music – or have I sung theirs?' Elgar is quoted as saying. A longish poem by Edward Elgar is quoted, and a list of 'Wood music' is appended to the 'Woodland Reading List' at the end of the work.

John Lewis-Stempel also clearly understands the notion and the language of sustainability – the idea that a landscape or ecosystem can, if properly managed, provide a yield or crop indefinitely. He describes how he uses his few acres of woodland to provide a supply of timber, of game, of pig-meat (through the pannage), of berries and wild fruits in a sustainable manner. He several times refers back to John Evelyn (1620–

1706), the English landscape architect and author, who warned that even in his day, in his book *Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest Trees*, continued growth of industry would have dramatic consequences for timber resources. Evelyn argued for the establishment and conservation of forests and woodlands in England: his writings reflected the sense of responsibility he had for future generations, and he is now understood to have been one of the antecedents of the doctrine of sustainability.

In his discussion of the natural history, ecology and conservation of a tiny area of woodland landscape in Herefordshire, John Lewis-Stempel provides an elegant example of the essential unity of landscape and the language that describes it. And he does with real panache.