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HAWTHORN: The Tree That Has Nourished, Healed, and Inspired Through the Ages. By Bill Vaughn. (Yale, 2015). 258 pp; illus. £17.99.

An English gardener wishing to discover a few simple facts about a hawthorn tree–say, how to plant one, or when to expect it to bloom, the sort of thing you might pick up from Wikipedia–probably ought to avoid this book. It contains such a torrent of information (on hawthorns and practically everything else from Irish fairies to the origins of life on earth to the Turn Shroud.) that the result of reading it could be intellectual paralysis. On the other hand, if you are willing to engage in an obsessive and entertaining ramble through a couple hundred pages about a subject that fascinates the author and may well fascinate you, then Hawthorn is a book to consider.

Bill Vaughn is an America. His hawthorn is *Crataegus douglasii*, a denizen of the Pacific Northwest, quite different from the *C. monogyna* most common in Britain and Europe. (But then there are dozens of *Crataegus* species, all of them hawthorns and most sharing the familiar features of spines and clusters of May flowers. Their feckless tendency go cross-breed, moreover, means that their taxonomy is something of a war zone.) Vaughn was first drawn into investigating hawthorns a few years ago when he found that a good part of his acreage in western Montana was occupied by a more or less impenetrable grove of the trees, alive with birds and animals, including bears. He began reading. 'Here was the Crown of thorns and the burning bush. Here was the most famous tree in Britain, and the dearest tree in Christianity."

To detail all of what he found is clearly impossible, but here are

a few samples:

Haws are hawthorn fruit; the word “haw” is Middle English for hedge.

Hawthorn wood is hard but useless as timber (too contorted, too many knots).

Thomas Jefferson tried to make a hawthorn hedge but failed because of the weeds. Then he tried privet. Ended up with a wooden fence. George Washington did no better.

The Normandy landings in the Second World War almost failed because the hawthorn hedges were too thick to get through.

Native Americans, Chinese, Indians and modern complementary practitioners all used hawthorn extracts to treat disease (Vaughn, who eats hawthorn leaves (fresh and dried) regularly, is among the believers.

Hawthorns can reproduce asexually.

The famous Glastonbury Thorn was a hawthorn until vandals chopped it down.

In 1946 England had between 300,000 and 500,000 miles of largely hawthorn hedgerows. Upwards of a quarter are gone now.

Nine thousand years ago the Chinese were making liquor out of haws, honey and wild grapes. Vaughn’s favourite tipple is a kind of slow gin made by steeping hawthorn leaves in vodka and adding lime juice.

The author’s assiduous information gathering, however, does not represent the sole charm of this book. What you have to appreciate is the slightly zany enthusiasm with which he launches into his subject, and occasionally out of it. On one occasion, for example, inspired by a visit to his ancestral Ireland and what he learned about the iron-smelting practices of the ancient Celts, he undertakes to produce a sword from scratch on the strength of using hawthorn charcoal (which he makes.). The process, described in detail, involves building a Celtic-style furnace, smelting ore, and beating the resulting steel into a blade capable of felling a row of Colorado blue spruce–invaders that he had unwisely planted before developing his hawthorn fixation. On another occasion he demonstrates, with the help of some excellent illustrations, just how to lay a hawthorn hedge. As someone who has tried doing this himself (though not

with hawthorn), I am full of admiration for the fact that he makes it look so easy.

While I hesitate to do so, it could be argued that the spiritual or legendary aspect of the genus has somewhat got the best of Bill Vaughn, deep in his Montana hawthorn woods. Towards the end of the book he tells us about a big old seven-truncked tree that he has named Maeve after a mythical Irish queen. It seems to him to possess some magical qualities, which he supplicates by tying rags, bits of paper and ribbons, photographs "in baggies" to its branches ('. . . as a form of hedging my bets. After all, this hawthorn is considerable bigger than I am'). Then he carefully measures the tree and submits its dimensions to the National Register of Big Trees. Maeve may or may not have had any supernatural attributes, but she turned out to be the largest *C. douglasii* ever recorded.

–CHARLES ELLIOTT