LIKE millions of other Americans I have no great liking for wilderness and forest, but like the majority of Americans I am fond of trees: individual trees, trees in rows along the street or in orchards, trees in parks. I continue to plant them when and where I can—to such an extent that when their leaves start to fall I look forward to many months of raking and transplanting in preparation for the spring.

The value of trees is not only that they can be beautiful and that they give us shade and privacy and coolness in the summer; they also demand our attention and care. We are constantly interacting with trees: some of them give us fruit, others give us firewood, and all have to be thought about and even worried about when we consider the future. In brief, trees give us a sense of responsibility and sometimes a kind of parental pride; each domesticated tree calls for an individual response, a response far richer, far more rewarding than a strictly passive—aesthetic or ecological—response to the forest.

What geographers call the Atlantic landscape stretches across northwestern Europe—England, France, the Lowlands, Germany, and Scandinavia; and in the course of the last three centuries it has been transplanted to Canada and the United States. It can be thought of as the gradual creation of those Indo-European migrants who came out of Asia some seven thousand years ago with their livestock and who eventually occupied all of Europe. In addition to the Atlantic landscape north of the Alps, they also produced the Mediterranean landscape—equally varied and beautiful, but adjusted to a mountainous terrain, hot dry summers, and no great abundance of moisture. By contrast, the Atlantic landscape—both in America and in the Old World—is characterized by a green, rolling topography with many rivers and plenty of rainfall. Mexico has a version of the Mediterranean countryside, and so have parts of New Mexico and California.

Century after century the early Indo-Europeans wandered from the Ukraine to Greece and Norway and even Ireland. When they occasionally settled down, their livestock grazed in the surrounding forests and grasslands, and families raised small crops of wheat or rye or barley. They brought with them out of Asia certain fruit trees. Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, means “father of apples,” for the mountains in that part of Central Asia once contained immense forests of nothing but apple trees, as well as forests of pear trees and apricot trees. Those fruit trees, as well as certain nut trees, were greatly prized by the migrants, for
they provided sugar and oil, as well as calories, and when planted (or transplanted) they symbolized the permanent home and family.

The forest was, of course, the dominant element in that prehistoric landscape—even the landscape of what we used to call the Dark Ages: the period between the fall of Rome in the fifth century A.D. and the Norman Conquest of England six hundred years later. It was a frightening and inhospitable place, extending from Poland on the east all the way (with numerous breaks, to be sure) to Holland—which, paradoxically enough, means "land of woods." We hear much about the density and extent of the Amazonian rainforest, but one of the largest and most impenetrable forests in the world is in northern Russia, of which it is said no one knows what fear is who has not been within its dark and tangled precincts. Nowhere was the early forest looked upon with anything but awe. Legend depicted it as the habitat of giants and elves and mythical creatures, a refuge for outlaws and dangerous spirits; and some of that legend persists in familiar fairy tales.

Nevertheless, the forest played an important role in peasant economy. It provided firewood, wood for building, and a variety of herbs and wild fruits; cattle from the village grazed in the grass-grown clearings, and under the many oak trees herds of pigs ate acorns and mast. Cultivation in the forest was forbidden, and the small stockman, the small farmer was largely dependent on the garden, the common grazing land, and on the trees planted by the family or the village.

One of the attractive features of the Atlantic landscape in the Middle Ages was its popular culture based on wood: the planting and care of trees which produced fruit or provided material for a great number of crafts. The forest still contained much oak, the most prestigious of trees; but the open landscape, the landscape of fields and meadows and houses and gardens, contained an increasing variety of fruit trees imported from elsewhere; trees whose wood could be used for household needs and for wagons and plows; trees which, because of their everyday importance, eventually acquired symbolic value.

In the book *Sylva*, the seventeenth-century Englishman John Evelyn mentions an old German law which stipulated that "a young farmer must produce a certificate of his having set a number of walnut trees before he have leave to marry." Since the smelting of iron threatened in the seventeenth century to destroy many English forests, Evelyn suggested that what he called "iron mills" be established in New England. "'Twere far better," he wrote, "to purchase all of our iron out of America than to exhaust our woods here at home."

*Sylva*, originally in four volumes, is an encyclopedia of arboriculture as practiced in pre-industrial Europe. Evelyn tells how to collect and plant the seed of numerous "useful" trees, when and where to plant, how to protect, trim, and feed them, and how finally to cut them and process the wood. Though the oak remained the king of trees—Evelyn devotes twenty pages to describing and praising it—he has much to say about each of the others:

Elm is a timber of most singular use, especially where it may be continually dry, or wet, in extremes; therefore proper for water works, mills, the ladles and soles of the wheel, pipes, pumps, aqueducts, ship planks below the water line . . . also for wheel-
wrights, handles for the single handsaw, rails and gates. Elm is not so apt to rive [split]
... and is used for chopping blocks, blocks for the hat maker, trunks and boxes to be
covered with leather; coffins and dressers and shovelboard tables of great length; also
for the carver and those curious workers of fruitages, foliage, shields, statues and most
of the ornaments appertaining to the orders of architecture . . . And finally (which I
must not omit) the use of the very leaves of this tree, especially of the female, is not to
be despised . . . for they will provide a great relief to cattle in the winter and scorching
summers when hay and fodder is dear. . . . The green leaf of the elms contused [crushed]
heals a green wound or cut, and boiled with the bark, consolidates fractured bones.
In reading Evelyn, we discover two kinds of pleasure. One comes from reading a wonderfully idiomatic English, clear and unaffected, emphasizing the visible, tangible everyday aspects of his topic. The second comes from many glimpses of a vernacular, country way of life based on the skillful exploitation of a local resource: the growing and cultivation and processing of trees used for making houses and furniture, in home remedies, in food and liquor and cooking; trees planted in farm gardens, in orchards, along country roads, in clusters to provide shade for cattle, trees in stately double rows to mark the avenue leading to a noble mansion, or to a town; each with its own traditional value to the craftsman, the artist, the housewife, the builder. Many retained from the remote past a powerful symbolism. The linden or lime tree was the tree of justice, local courts being held in its shade; the yew and the cypress symbolized immortality, and the apple tree stood for domesticity: so much so that a French geographer suggests that the apple tree is a prime symbol of the Atlantic landscape, just as the olive tree symbolizes the landscape of Mediterranean Europe.3

Evelyn wrote his book because of his concern over the increasing scarcity of certain essential types of wood. The king's navy and the growth of transatlantic commerce threatened the English supply of oak. Foundries and mills and furnaces consumed more and more forest wood, and the needs of a growing urban population for fuel, as well as the destruction of many forests in wartime, all threatened the existing stands. Sylva was accordingly addressed to the great landowners of England, urging them to plant as many trees as possible in a wholesale manner. It should be noted that Evelyn nowhere recommends the traditional forest of mixed woods, the hunters' forest. What he advised, not only for England but also for the Continent, was the creation of systematic, commercial forestry; and that was the type of forestry which evolved in the eighteenth century.

It was in the English colonies in North America that the old vernacular culture of trees was given a fresh lease on life. The early settlers lost little time before destroying (for commercial use as well as for clearing land for farming) immense areas of virgin forest. That, in fact, is what had happened to the forests of medieval Europe, but in America—again as in Europe—the planting and cultivation of trees flourished as never before. For that is a distinction we must always make: the forest as a massive collection of trees of all varieties is seen as a resource, not as an environment. Whereas the single or planted tree is seen by most of us as a permanent, carefully tended element of the human landscape, valued as an object both of beauty and of sustainable exploitation.

In any case, colonial America found several new ways of using trees. We developed an improved type of ax, the water-powered sawmill, and learned to build houses and bridges and dams and even roads entirely out of wood. Following the example of the native Indians, colonists extracted sugar from maple trees. Early in colonial history, we undertook to plant trees along our streets and roads, for shade and shelter, and when independence came, many towns and villages celebrated the event by erecting liberty trees. When the Midwest was settled
in the early nineteenth century, immigrant handbooks and other periodicals advised the settlers to plant orchards first of all, even postponing the planting of a vegetable garden.

We soon had plenty of food on the market, and plenty of wood was still available in the forests. So the culture of trees in America took a new turn: trees were planted chiefly for their beauty and symbolism. Starting in New England in the 1850s, where women's organizations were dedicated to the beautifying of towns and cities, a national enthusiasm for ornamental trees everywhere transformed the village square, the college campus, many country roads and graveyards. The landscaped cemetery composed of winding roads, groups of trees, and expanses of lawn was in a sense the reconstruction of the old pre-industrial landscape of legend. On the treeless prairie the farmhouse was surrounded by a grove of trees, and their bright autumn colors gave certain trees an almost symbolic value, unique to America.

This widespread cult of ornamental trees brought about an immense increase in the number of nurseries and tree farms. At the same time, the nation as a whole became increasingly aware of deforestation in many regions. Beginning more than sixty years ago, at the time of the Great Depression, state and federal government agencies launched vast programs of tree planting. Hundreds of thousands of saplings were planted to check erosion, to break the force of the wind, to provide habitats for wildlife, to control flood waters, to modify the climate. Millions of trees, whole forests, were planted for ecological reasons.

Two generations ago the word ecology was rarely heard, and to most Americans the very notion that forests—natural or artificial—could serve other than human needs was a revelation. I am old enough to have lived through those first large-scale ecological experiments, and in retrospect I think we generally approved of them—though there still lingers among Americans the ancient belief that the forest is there for us to exploit in the meeting of daily needs: for fuel, for food, for grazing, for hunting, and for escape from social restrictions. The national park or forest is still thought of in terms of recreation and camping, and to be reminded of the many ecological benefits of the forest simply confirmed the reality of that prehistoric prototype. As a result, those numerous planted groves and belts and forests were quickly assimilated into the landscape and their recent origin forgotten. In fact, many of the windbreaks have been destroyed—or harvested—by farmers totally unaware of their original purpose.

It could be said that the reforestation or tree-planting programs of the Depression years helped inaugurate the environmental movement in this country. In that sense they were part of a worldwide shift in attitude toward the natural environment. Here for the first time on an extensive scale, the landscape, or part of it, was being deliberately altered not to serve immediate human needs but to preserve the natural order. It is quite true that in the course of planting and reforestation many highways were landscaped, many rest areas and recreational facilities came into being. It is also true that our national parks, even when overrun with visitors,
try to make us feel that as citizens we are inspecting one sample of our national estate. Nevertheless, our national and state parks actually provide us with only the faintest reminders of our earlier forest or wilderness experience.

The contemporary forest experience emphasizes the visual aspect, the scenic, the ecological, the photogenic. We are not to touch, much less pick up and carry away, any object we find of interest. We are tactfully told that we are not at home but in a museum; a museum, moreover, which is increasingly concentrated on ecological or geological or botanical phenomena. The risk of vandalism and destruction helps justify this hands-off policy, though the influence of current environmentalist policy—the determination to preserve nature totally undisturbed by man—has had its effect. For the fact of the matter is, humanity's closest and most productive relationship with nature derives from personal, physical contact, and from a desire to appropriate whatever attracts us. "Leave nothing behind, not even footprints," the environmentalists advise those of us who go into the wilderness. "Take nothing except photographs." The visual experience, the spectator experience, is the only one permitted.

Our true feeling for trees derives from an ancient source—from centuries of domesticating, improving, protecting, and loving those other forms of life which are part of our daily existence. Looking back over more than half a century, I am struck by our growing desire for trees in our domestic environment, by our desire to plant trees, regardless of their economic value, in order to express a variety of basic emotions: the need to celebrate the home, the need for beauty, the need for some living thing to protect and transform, the need to pass on to the future some sign of our existence. Ecologists encourage us in this enthusiasm, assuring us that the tree we plant will help cleanse the atmosphere, moderate the climate, and close the gap in the ozone layer. But John Evelyn, nearly 350 years ago, provided us with a better justification: "Men seldom plant trees until they begin to be wise; that is, till they grow old and find by experience the prudence and necessity of it . . . 'Tis observed that such planters are often blessed with health and old age." He added, in a passage I take very much to heart, "I am writing as an octogenarian, and shall, if God protract my years, and continued health, be continually planting till it shall please him to transplant me to those glorious regions above, the celestial paradise—for such is the tree of life, which those who do his commandments have right to."

Notes

1 John Evelyn, Sylva: or a Discourse of Forest Trees (1664; London, 1679), 118.
2 Ibid., 114, 20.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909–1996), a geographer by training, was a pioneer in the field of landscape studies. He founded Landscape magazine and taught the history of the vernacular American landscape at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley.