

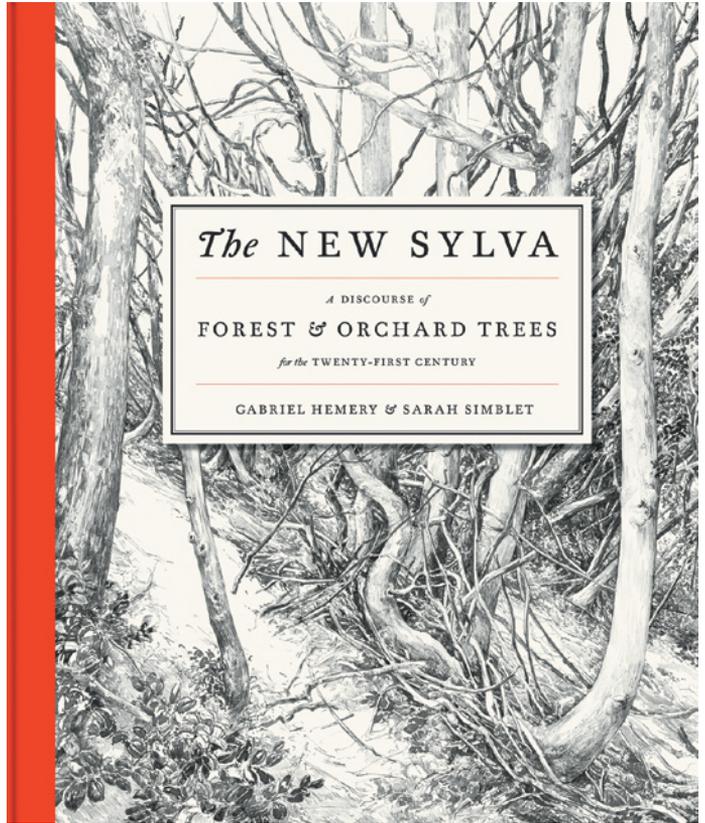
## BOOK REVIEW *The New Sylva: A Discourse of Forest and Orchard Trees for the Twenty-First Century*

Phyllis Andersen

*The New Sylva: A Discourse of Forest and Orchard Trees for the Twenty-First Century*  
Gabriel Hemery and Sarah Simblet  
Bloomsbury, 2014. 390 pages.  
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In 1664 the Royal Society in London published *Sylva, or A Discourse of Forest Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in His Majestie's Dominions*. The author, John Evelyn (1620–1706), was a founding member of the Society. Landowner, scholar, world traveler, Evelyn was a polymath whose concerns ranged from the causes of London's smog to the proper way to roll a gravel walk (use a marble roller obtained from "old Columns of diminished Antiquities preferably those from the Levant"). He was a colleague of Samuel Pepys, and like Pepys an accomplished diarist. He created a much admired garden at Sayres Court in southeast London where he wrote extensively on the art of garden making. Gabriel Hemery, a forest scientist and self-described silvologist, and Sarah Simblet, an artist and instructor at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, have produced *The New Sylva* to honor Evelyn's achievement on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of its publication.

Evelyn's title reveals that his *Sylva* was not written to document native species or to propose forest planting and protection as part of greater environmental awareness, but as a call to replant trees and to protect the royal forests for the production of timber for ship building by the Royal Navy and for the building of defensive fortifications for cities and towns. His motive was economic, a prescription for increasing an inventory and for managing it with the latest forest management techniques. A careful courtier, Evelyn dedicated his *Sylva* to Charles II, stating that it was written not to instruct the King but to advise.

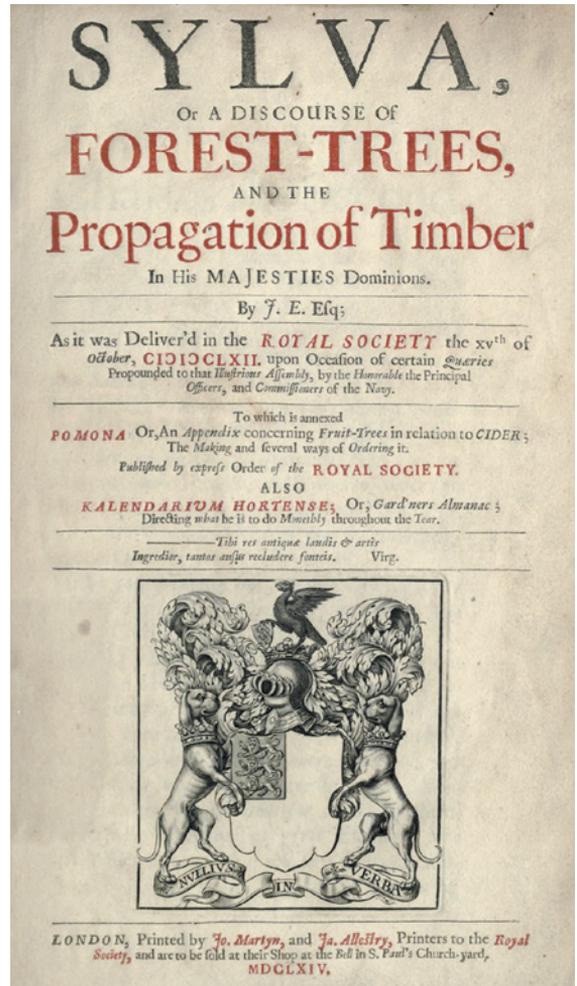


Whether or not Evelyn's *Sylva* actually increased timber production for ship building is in some dispute but he did inspire estate owners to increase and refine their tree planting practices. In fact, they may have been his intended audience. Evelyn unabashedly invoked class privilege by stating that his *Sylva* was "not altogether ... for the sake of ordinary rusticks, meer foresters and woodmen, but for the benefit and diversion of Gentlemen and persons of quality." With full display of his knowledge of classical texts he quoted writers of the ancient world (Cato, Cicero, Pliny) to highlight the depth of the historical value of trees: "Even the Garden of Eden had to be dressed and kept." He integrated myths and ritual and bits of poetry into his tree descriptions following the long tradition of viewing trees as imbued with mystery and power.

Evelyn developed four categories of trees in his *Sylva*: solid and dry timber (oak, beech, ash, chestnut, and walnut), light timber (maple, lime [linden], birch, and hazel), aquatical (poplar, alder, and willow), and fir trees and pines. Reflecting the structure of the British countryside, he added a section on fences, hedges, and coppices. His tree descriptions included details of form, growth characteristics, geographic distribution, cultural requirements, and value as timber. He added a section on “infirmities of trees,” a manual of tree ailments. A last chapter reflects on “Sacredness and the use of standing groves” that describes the significance of trees to societies across the world. But it was the oak that Evelyn deemed most valuable. He devoted over fifty pages of his text to this species so beloved by the British people for its strength, its economic value, and its visual distinction. Most notably, Evelyn’s 1664 *Sylva* did not include illustrations, reflecting its origins as a report to the King. It went through four editions in his lifetime and numerous editions after his death.

*Sylva* (now more often spelled “silva”) in its Latinate form refers to a place: a wood, a plantation, a grove. The word evolved in later usage to mean a particular form of botanical literature that describes trees of a particular region. Before the electronic age, silvas joined other forms of plant documentation with specific boundaries: floras, which were detailed descriptions of all the plants of a region both woody and herbaceous, and pomonas, which described fruit trees. Floras and pomonas were often sumptuous productions on fine paper with illustrations by well-known artists.

The exploration of the territories of North America provoked a heightened interest in new plant species including timber producing trees. François André Michaux (1770–1855), son of the French botanist André Michaux, produced *Histoire des arbres forestiers de l’Amérique septentrionale*, an account of his explorations of the United States north of Mexico and east of the Rocky Mountains. It was published in three volumes from 1810 to 1813 and later translated by Augustus Lucas Hillhouse into English as *The North American Sylva*. Michaux’s work was enhanced by illustrations by the renowned French flower painter Pierre-Joseph



The title page from John Evelyn’s *Sylva*, published in 1664.

Redouté and the botanical illustrator Pancrace Bessa. Thomas Nuttall (1786–1859), the British-born naturalist who spent much of his life exploring the United States documenting plants both known and unknown, produced a three volume appendix to Michaux’s work published from 1842 to 1849. It was not incidental that Michaux’s *North American Sylva* explored the timber potential of the United States for a French audience.

In 1882, Spencer Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, approached Charles Sprague Sargent (1841–1927), director of the Arnold Arboretum, and offered him financial support to create the *Silva of North America*. Baird was aware of Sargent’s first major publication, his 1884 *Report on the Forests of North*



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Illustration of white oak (*Quercus alba*) by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, from Michaux's *Histoire des arbres forestiers de l'Amérique septentrionale* (later published in English as *The North American Sylva*).



Charles S. Sargent at work on his *Silva of North America* in 1904.

*America exclusive of Mexico*, prepared for the 1880 Census. Sargent also received a strong recommendation from the eminent botanist, Harvard's Asa Gray. Sargent agreed to the project with the stipulation that accurate illustrations be a critical part of the publication. Sargent immediately engaged Charles Faxon (1846–1918), then in charge of the Arboretum's library and herbarium, to produce the drawings for the *Silva*, working primarily from herbarium specimens. Sargent and the Smithsonian soon parted ways as Sargent calculated that the institution's meager funding would extend the project to 55 years. He sought and received private funding of his own. Like Evelyn, Sargent travelled widely

both to create the Census report, to enlarge his investigations for the *Silva* and, not incidentally, to add herbarium specimens for the Arboretum's growing collection.

Sargent worked on the *Silva* for over twenty years and eventually produced fourteen volumes, published from 1891 to 1902. He covered 585 trees, supplemented by 740 illustrations by Faxon. He discussed individual growing conditions, geographic importance, and details of structure and flower. He often deviated from his usual dry, direct prose to include descriptions of scenery in more literary terms and odd bits of what might be called cultural information. His biographer S. B. Sutton noted that



SARAH SIMBLET, FROM THE NEW SYLVA, WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER

Sarah Simblet's detailed illustration of an English (or pedunculata) oak (*Quercus robur*) seedling from *The New Sylva*.

in his *Silva* he “delighted in offering morsels of curious information as though they were pieces of candy.”

The thread that connects these silvas is the need to integrate scientific and horticultural information with political, economic, and social history—a record of national pride and economic resources. All include a seasoning of tree myth and legend, from druids to the healing properties of individual plants. All have an underlying message of tree planting advocacy and responsible management practices for optimum yield.

Gabriel Hemery's *New Sylva* is both homage to Evelyn, who is liberally quoted throughout the text, and a summary of the current state of the forests of Britain—their composition, growing conditions, and national value. He includes a useful overview of 44 species, including the mechanics of their growth and structure. He offers introductory chapters on the influence of Evelyn's original publication as well as an overview of tree biology. Like all silvas, Evelyn's publication is a picture of British tree population at a point in time, subject to constant revision. Hemery's goal is to respect Evelyn's findings but to update his publication with a revised list that features new species unknown to Evelyn and revised findings on issues of nativity. For example, Evelyn was convinced that the sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) was native to Great Britain. Subsequent research, including pollen analysis, concludes that it is native to the Mediterranean region, migrating very early to the British Isles. Hemery offers a sensible and refreshing view of the idea of nativity. He is not a hardliner on the introduction of “exotics,” noting that conservative thinkers today call them “aliens.” Evelyn called them “outlandish, rare and choice.”

Hemery tackles the description of oak culture as a scientist rather than the poetic and personalized rendering by Evelyn. He describes the biology, distribution, and habitat of the two species of oak native to Great Britain: the sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) and the English (or pedunculate) oak (*Quercus robur*). He addresses their continued economic importance as a building material based on strength and durability.

Hemery's perspective is profoundly different than Evelyn's, viewing forest trees as part of biological communities including human intervention. He sees forest management as increasing the diversity of wildlife, protecting unstable soil conditions on hillsides, mitigating flood conditions and the heat island effect in cities, and offering recreation and aesthetic experience. He documents the link between diminishing forest land and global warming and the effect a warming atmosphere could have on timber strength. He describes forest management beyond Great Britain, such as shelterwood systems in Denmark, France, and Germany. Shelterwood plantings allows targeted extractions of mature trees while maintaining the best conditions for continued growth of younger trees.

Sarah Simblet's drawings, originally done in pen and ink, have great vitality. She captures individual species on both a micro and macro scale, moving from details of leaf and fruit to full winter form displaying branching patterns. In many cases she captures forest views with species shown in association with one another, often in historic British estate settings. *The New Sylva* combines an intelligent and graceful text with drawings on a varied scale: detail, tree form, and landscape setting. The design of the book enhances both the text and the drawings—a rare feat in an age of overproduced volumes where clever design diminishes both text and illustration. In a world of electronic databases, satellite images, GIS, unlimited apps, is there a role for a printed description of trees of a nation, with images drawn from life models to document the components of a national tree population? While the book has a reflective tone, like all silvas it has an underlying intent: “to rekindle a wood culture” with the exhortation “Let's celebrate the sound of a chainsaw in a forest, rather than hearing it as death or destruction.” With this challenge, even in this electronic age, the traditional form of a silva may be more effective than an app.

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