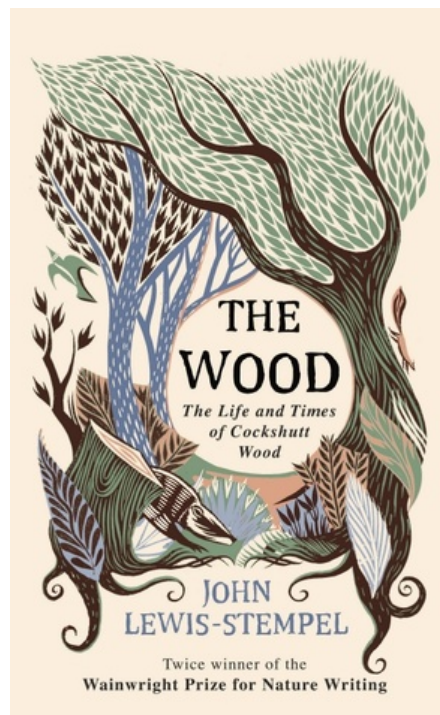




The Wood: The Life & Times of Cockshutt Wood

John Lewis-Stempel

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'Indisputably, one of the best nature-writers of his generation' (*Country Life*)

BBC Radio 4 'Book of the Week'

Written in diary format, *The Wood* is the story of English woodlands as they change with the seasons. Lyrical and informative, steeped in poetry and folklore, *The Wood* inhabits the mind and touches the soul. For four years John Lewis-Stempel managed Cockshutt wood, a particular wood - three and half acres of mixed woodland in south west Herefordshire - that stands as exemplar for all the small woods of England. John coppiced the trees and raised cows and pigs who roamed free there. This is the diary of the last year, by which time he had come to know it from the bottom of its beech roots to the tip of its oaks, and to know all the animals that lived there - the fox, the pheasants, the wood mice, the tawny owl - and where the best bluebells grew. For many fauna and flora, woods like Cockshutt are the last refuge. It proves a sanctuary for John too.

To read *The Wood* is to be amongst its trees as the seasons change, following an easy path until, suddenly the view is broken by a screen of leaves, or your foot catches on a root, or a bird startles overhead. This is a wood you will never want to leave.

The Wood: The Life & Times of Cockshutt Wood Details

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From Reader Review The Wood: The Life & Times of Cockshutt Wood for online ebook

Nathalie (keepreadingbooks) says

"Once more with meaning: in the health of woods lies our own health."?

I have finished my first read of the year. Despite being a relatively short and easy read, I took 10 days to finish it. This is not a bad thing – I have found that I generally take longer to read nature books. I don't gobble them up in a few days, rather I slow down and savour them, ease into the rhythm of nature in them (if they are well-written, of course). Nature is not fast-moving, it is slow and steady, change will come when change comes, and not a minute sooner. The nature books I have loved so far are the same: they slow down, and they slow **me** down. And I mean this in the best of ways.

Lewis-Stempel is poetic as always, yet also delightfully simple in his observations. I always enjoy his awed but straight-to-the-point accounts of the nature surrounding him. Through his eyes, the wood is majestic and otherworldly – but also everyday and common. It is apart from us and a part of us. What I find most fascinating and admirable is that he is not strictly conservationist in his views. Despite his love for nature, he lets his cows graze in the wood, he cuts the trees to make room for certain growth, he shoots squirrels when they are on the verge of taking over – and I'm going to correct myself straight away and not say 'despite' but 'because of' his love for nature. There is no doubt that he has the wood's best interests at heart and that he seems to have found a golden middle way, where humans and nature can co-exist and **both** benefit from it.

I have read two longer and two shorter books (one a pamphlet, really) by Lewis-Stempel so far, and I am definitely not finished. The Running Hare has been high on my list for some time, and he also has a new book coming out this March that I'm excited for!

/NK

Rebecca says

Lewis-Stempel has become one of the foremost nature writers in the UK. His *Meadowland* is stellar, but I've been disappointed by a few of his most recent books. This is a fragmentary diary of a year in the Shropshire wood for which he used to act as caretaker. It's something like an old-fashioned commonplace book that incorporates history, culture, folklore, folk wisdom, and long poems and quotations from other writers, in addition to personal observations and events. There are even recipes! Read it for the occasional utterly unique description – "The male catkins on the alder have expanded from hard chipolatas to soft lengths of pipe cleaner" – but read it sparingly if at all possible, because if you read too many entries in a row they get very repetitive. (Thus me skimming the book. It was also requested after me at the library.) I find writing like this ever so slightly lazy, like the author couldn't be bothered to tidy everything up into proper paragraphs and thought streams. I most liked his interactions with his pigs. ("Running pigs are not gainly. They galumph. Neither are they quiet. There is grunting, and as they near me there is the flesh-slap of Dumbo ears.")

Another favorite passage: "People claim they enjoy winter, but what they really mean is they enjoy winter as a livener, a cobweb-blower-away, a quick flirt with the elements before resorting to their real love, central heating."

A neat thing I learned: how to estimate the age of a tree without cutting it down and counting its rings. Measure the circumference in feet with a tape measure and divide it by π to get the diameter. Multiply that by the growth factor (5 for alder, birch, cherry and oak; 4 for ash and elm).

Margaret says

A lovely little book on the year in the life of a small woodland.

Gentle and whimsical, it paints a beautiful picture of English woodlands.

The addition of a few recipes and poems only adds to the whimsicality of it all.

Delightful.

Fern Adams says

This book follows changes in a wood over one year going through the weather, trees, plants and wildlife month by month. Filled with anecdotes, recipes, folklore and history it's amazing how much information Lewis-Stempel squeezes into each page. Very interesting and well written.

The last word review says

The standard of nature writing over recent years has just got better and better, we are so fortunate to have so many great nature writers in the UK and twice winner of the Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing. (2015 & 2017) John Lewis-Stempel returns with his best book to date. *The Wood: The Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood* is an intimate account of John's last year managing this three and half acres of mixed woodland in Herefordshire.

Lewis-Stempel's latest has been written in a diary format and takes us through the four seasons and the changing face of Cockshutt Wood, the flora and fauna of this working wood comes to life through the poetic words of a nature writer at his very best. We meet the Tawny Owl who is affectionately known as 'Old Brown' the various animals from pigs to sheep who made the wood their home to keep the dreaded bramble at bay.

The book starts in December when the days are at their shortest but even now when the trees are dormant there is still life in John's working wood. The sheer beauty of this book is how John brings the history, poetry and even recipes (some of which I will be trying through the course of the year) There are recipes ranging from Acorn Coffee, Chestnut Soup and Elderflower Champagne.

John comes from a farming family that dates back to the 13th Century and is ideally placed to write about countryside as he sees it, his passion for everything in the countryside and its history and future. As the season moves from Winter to Spring, Cockshutt Wood awakens from its deep winter sleep, animals and amphibians that have slept through the cold and dark winter months now feel the warmth of Spring and waken from their slumber. The mixed woodland now starts to come to life, the sap is rising with the temperature.

The poetry is just wonderful and carefully selected and really works to bring the wood alive. The sights and

sounds and even the smell of the wood just seep from every page not to mention the recipes. John ends his tenure managing the wood in the month of November with the words “I though the trees belonged to me, but I now realise I belonged to them” As he left the wood there is a sense of pain at leaving the wood and its inhabitants behind. The writer at one with the countryside and a book that deserves the plaudits. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

304 Pages.

Laura says

From BBC radio 4 - Book of the week:

Over twelve months, this is the story of Cockshutt Wood in Shropshire, representative of all the small woods in our landscape and the sanctuary they provide.

From January through to December, John Lewis-Stempel records the passage of the seasons in exquisite prose, as the cuckoo flits through the green shade in the silence and the wind of winter. He explores from the roots of the oak to its tips, under the black, spicy leaf mould of the woodland floor and up into the mysterious canopy.

It's a unique account of the animals that inhabit this refuge - the fox, the pheasant, the wood mouse and the tawny owl, among others - with the stories of their births, lives and deaths threaded through the book.

Read by Greg Wise

Produced by David Roper

A Heavy Entertainment production for BBC Radio 4.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09v...>

Ivan Monckton says

Another book from the prolific Lewis-Stempel, this time a diary of his activities in a 4a wood he leased in Eastern Herefordshire from November to November. At times it reads like an exact transcription of his field notes, which can make it a little ‘bitty’, and the occasional lapse into cookbook is odd, but this man is a very gifted writer with great insight and observational skills. The long-sighted work he did in the wood, including the planting of acorns just before he gave up the lease, is an example to us all.

My one question : why on Earth would anyone give up a Farm and wood on the Welsh Border to move to a hop farm in Ledbury? Still, I look forward to an informative book on hop farming in the future to counterbalance all the nostalgia for hop picking I have read in the past!

Harsha Priolkar says

This is probably my first non-fiction book of the year. I’m not a huge fan of non-fiction and this one was largely a cover buy, although the fact that it had to do with a British Wood made it intriguing.

The book is basically John Lewis-Stempel’s diary, that he kept for the last year that he was living and

managing Cockshutt Wood, in Herefordshire. I didn't realise places like Cockshutt needed managing before I read this book! His 'management' of the Wood - coppicing trees, tree-haying, culling birds and animals to sustainable numbers, grazing pigs and cattle at certain times and places to boost soil and tree health - made for a fascinating read.

This book is full of interesting nuggets of information ranging from how to calculate the age of a tree without cutting it down to recipes, from ancient folklore to modern facts. Stempel also brings Cockshutt to life in all seasons - from the sparse beauty of its winter to the green density of high summer - his descriptions are detailed and masterfully observed. And yet, it took me a long while to read this not so long book!

Although the diary styled narrative should have made for an easy read, the entries became rather repetitive. His staccato sentence structure didn't help improve my reading experience either. I enjoyed some of the poems he chose to include while others I skipped over because they were too long and disrupted the flow. I put this book down often, for long lengths of time without feeling compelled to pick it up again. And yet it is an interesting book, accurately observed and on occasion almost lyrical in its beautifully evocative descriptions.

What comes through is Stempel's deep love for Nature and his desire to preserve places like Cockshutt as places of sanctuary - not only for the flora and fauna that make it their home but also for future generations of frazzled humans, so they might find peace and solace in its verdant embrace.

Viola says

Piękna opowieść o lesie, przyrodzie. Ta książka to czyta przyjemnie we wszystkich wymiarach zmysłów. Utrzymana w tonie pamiętnika daje nam odczucia bycia obserwatorem, współmieszkańcem lasu w ciągu jego rocznego cyklu życia. Zimą, wiosną, latem i jesienią tyle zmian, kolorów, zapachów. Jeśli kochacie przyrodę i szukacie książki w rytmie 'slow' ta pozycja powinna przypaść Wam do gustu. To nie tylko książka dla amatorów przyrodników, każde słowo jest pięknie wyważone i przemyślane. Niemal pachnie runem leśnym lub unosi w sobie zapach tajemnicy z ukrytej leśnej polany. Piękna powieść nie tylko na jesień

Melanie (Mel's Bookland Adventures) says

Book 175: some times you read a book by an author whose work you previously enjoyed and you realise that you would not like the person. This is a diary of a year tending a wood in Herefordshire. I learned a lot of new things. Some very interesting stuff, but it is the personal elements that left me reeling a bit at times. I guess it is unfair of me to judge him, who lives in nature, on how he relates to it, but I - the suburban dweller - did, instinctively. It is a good, lyrical book, although one too many puns.

Domhnall says

A biologist, Edward O Wilson, is famed for his studies of ants around the world and the wider implications of his research, not all of which I actually agree with. In his autobiography, he claims that he could have produced research of equivalent value and complexity without leaving his own back garden. This book strikes me as evidence that he was right. It is nicely written but a slow read for me, because so many seemingly simple terms describing the natural world were strange to me. I therefore worked closely with my

internet guides, exploring all sorts of strange and unexpected topics. I discovered that plants described in this book were present as weeds in my own garden. I found video guides to foraging as I explored the curious variants of mushrooms. I was invited at least to appreciate that killing is intrinsic to nature - if we want song birds to thrive, it may be that we have to eliminate their predators, not least grey squirrels. I found myself reading about collections of gin traps and their unpleasant modes of operation; not least to cleverly spike moles as they scurry along their underground tunnels. I read about the way livestock can radically transform the undergrowth, grazing away invasive plants that would otherwise smother the area. The varieties of thrush made sense to me for the first time. Not all of this is actually inside the covers of the book of course but the clues are there, the sparkles that suggest much more.

The book also opens out to a much wider vista. While concentrating on the life and management of a small area of woodland, it explores the many unexpected ways by which human intervention shapes and transforms the physical environment. The countryside, on a local or a regional scale, is to a large extent artificial, and quite unlike anything that Nature would have made.

Snoakes says

John Lewis-Stempel writes the most gorgeous prose. The Wood is the diary of a year in the life of Cockshutt Wood - the final year that he is the custodian of this small patch of woodland. It starts in December at the beginning of winter. Some entries are brief such as the entry for May 2nd: "There is a new sound in the wood, that of rain on full-fledged leaves; it is the shield-beating of Saxon warriors". Others are longer; as on the 14th April where he ruminates on ramsons, culminating in a recipe for wild garlic dolmades. Many entries describe the practicalities of managing the woodland using traditional methods - for example coppicing (28th January) and tree hay (15th June). Others include poetry - Shakespeare and Kipling both get a look-in as do some traditional country songs.

In The Wood, Lewis-Stempel does what he does best - he observes the countryside with the understanding of a man of the land, a farmer. He turns his attention to a set perimeter and then describes it in exquisite detail. Everything is worthy of notice, from the smallest insect or fungus, to the cattle that graze in the wood. The result is this beautiful and evocative book that brings Cockshutt Wood, its flora and fauna to glorious life.

Sublime.

Penny says

I thought the trees and birds belonged to me. But now I realise that I belonged to them.

The Wood is a diary of Cockshutt Wood, just over 3 acres of mixed woodland in Herefordshire. Lewis-Stempel managed the woodland for 4 years and the book is really a love letter to that time and place.

Lewis-Stempel is a truly wonderful writer. I was going to call him a nature writer, but that's a term he balks at. In his words he's a countryside writer -

"I give the view of the countryside from someone who works there."

The book is a wonderful mixture of keen observation, history, poetry, meditations and even some recipes from the wood's products.

Lewis-Stempel, a very busy farmer, always took time out to sit in a cheap plastic picnic chair by the pond in the woods and allow himself to become immersed in his surroundings.
He sees and hears things that the majority of us would be completely oblivious to.

Returning home from a holiday or business trip, the first thing he does is enter the wood to note the changes and to let it work its usual magic on him.
I don't give a lot of 5 stars but this book deserves nothing less.

Paul says

Until recently woodlands were essential to our survival, we used them for food, fuel and livelihoods. Even though very few make their living from them now, they are places that hold a special place in the hearts of people in the UK, as the government found out when they tried to sell off the Forestry Commission, a decision that was quickly reversed given the outcry. Just taking a walk through a wood helps nature seep back into your soul and are a sanctuary from the madness of modern life.

Sadly I don't own my own woodland, but John Lewis-Stempel does, and his three and a half acres of mixed species in Herefordshire is a typical small wood. He has managed Cockshutt Wood now for four years, watching the way it changes through the seasons, tracing the paths that animals have made through the understory and taking time to stay still, observe as the lives of the birds and animals play out around him. He lets his cattle and pigs root around in the woods too, a method of farming that harks back centuries. Lots of these woodlands are under threat, but not this one; this is a cherished patch, a place of refuge, a place that he visits every day, just because. Woodlands show the daily march of time through the seasons and yet when you are within one, time seems to stand still.

This is another sublime book from Lewis-Stempel to add to his raft of award-winning books. I really liked the diary format and the way that it is interspersed with folklore, poems, history, recipes and personal thoughts. The longer entries reflect when he has had time to pause and absorb the sights and smells of his wood, and brief entries when he was charging off elsewhere, even the shortest of visits would be sufficient to recharge his soul. 4.5 stars

Lucy says

I read one of John's earlier books 'Meadowland' a few years ago and just loved it. Whilst reading it I discovered we shared a favourite (now sadly) little known author Denys Watkins-Pitchford aka 'B.B.' whom I read as a child. He was from Lamport, a village I grew up just two miles away from. After reading that book I had a brief chat with John on Twitter about B.B.

So it was a great delight to stumble upon his latest book 'The Wood' in Waterstones on Saturday. I have devoured the book all over Easter and thoroughly enjoyed every moment, it is as though one is ambling through the wood with John on a daily basis as he takes us through a year in the life of Cockshutt Wood and its many inhabitants, some welcome some less so. Not only that but we get poems, songs and recipes as well... it really is a delightful read and as if that weren't enough at the back there is a play list of music featuring Woods. Once again I popped over to say hi on Twitter and suggested one song that could be added to the next list 'The Beach Boys' A day in the life of a tree' John replied saying he will include it in the paperback! How I do love social media and of course this book! Thanks John.

