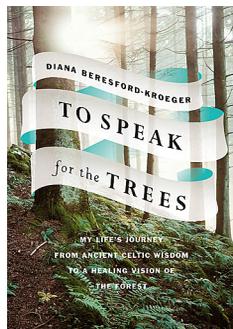


OTHER

To Speak for the Trees: My Life's Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest

By Diana Beresford-Kroeger. 2019. Random House Canada. 289 pages, 32.00 CAD, Paper.

Diana Beresford-Kroeger is a name that has become increasingly well-known in recent years. Awareness and acceptance of her work has been a long time coming. Various described as a classical botanist, medical biochemist, and protector of forests, Fellow of The Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and—in a de-



lightful poke at the conservative elements that resist her message—“an enemy of the people” (<https://www.insideottawavalley.com/news-story/5463236-diana-beresford-kroeger-is-now-an-enemy-of-the-public/>; accessed 10 September 2019), she is at once grounded in local activities and at home in world-wide travels through various media. She has published some 300 scientific papers, but the public has come to know her through her previous half-dozen books (or more, depending how you count the editions), published over the past 20 years, and more recently the film *Call of the Forest*, now streaming on the Internet

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0asL2LFPfk>). Not bad for someone who echews email and social media as taking too much time from her real work (D. Beresford-Kroeger pers. comm. 13 August 2019)!

Trees have been at the centre of her explorations and writings, and she combines in her study and advocacy two broad and apparently disparate streams, the scientific fields of botany and biochemistry and the esoteric realm of ancient Celtic beliefs and practices regarding nature. Now, in her latest book, she relates the personal story behind this double expertise. *To Speak for the Trees* doesn't begin with the *Ancient Celtic Wisdom* noted in the subtitle; rather, it begins with an account of the difficult life of a misplaced soul whose journey began in trauma and tragedy. These hard beginnings contain the roots of the dual streams noted above. Her father's family came from a long lineage of wealth and status, her mother's from an even longer lineage dating back to the Celtic/Druidic world, based in Lisheens Valley, County Cork, Ireland. The former was the source of the trauma; tragedy—the deaths of her parents within months of each other when Diana was 12—propelled her initially into the world of science as shared with an uncle who took her in. The serendipitous discovery of her capacious intellect, revealed through her photographic memory, lifted her into deeper studies, at university but also while under the care of her Celtic relations with whom she spent her summers. That aging community decided she would be the ideal exponent of their traditional knowledge and proceeded to teach her everything they knew. Thus, her increasingly happier world came to be divided, productively, between science and indigenous Celtic lore.

The first six chapters cover all this and more. In Chapter 7, “But Where are the Trees?”, the book moves on to its central substance, her love of, and life-long relationship with, trees and her increasing awareness of their absolute essentiality to the survival of other forms of life on earth. The title question for this chapter relates to her realization that the ancient forests of Ireland had largely disappeared. Thus began her quest to understand what happened and why, a quest that ultimately took her around the world, inspired a great deal of original research, and led to the insight—and she is marvellous at gaining insights—that if the trees disappear, we disappear, the dependency is that tight (p. 114). This fundamental principle is at the core of a life of activism and the development of her “global bioplan” (p. 159) for addressing climate change, the gravest single problem faced by humanity today. Her research results coalesced into this practical plan, one she lives,

with her husband, Christian Kroeger, on 160 acres (64.75 hectares) of land they call Carriglaith, near Merrickville, south of Ottawa. Chapter 11, “My Own Work in My Own Way”, recounts the story of developing this land into what amounts to a gene bank of trees hardy enough to live in northern climes as temperatures rise.

The paragraph above compresses the second half of Part One of the book. As her work progressed, she came to understand that she “could serve as a bridge between these two worlds, the ancient and the scientific” (p. 98). Her account is bravely personal, for she is frank about how the suppression she experienced growing up and into early adulthood continued through misogynistic workplaces and the reluctance of the scientific community to accept the esoteric and spiritual elements her research revealed. She took strength from these experiences, however, coming to realize that her background was essential to her ability to think for herself, to refuse to suffer fools gladly, to stand firm for her growing beliefs in the power of trees, and to bring this into form through her actions, from the land she and Christian manage to promoting her hard-won knowledge through the books and documentary noted above, to advising many groups and governments. Examples of her efforts are described in the final chapters of Part One, which concludes with her “Philanthropy of the Mind”, the combination of her “scientific knowledge and ... energy” (p. 76) that drives her and, she hopes, will inspire all of us to act.

In Part Two, she returns to her roots to provide us with “one more gift ... my annotation of the Ogham script, ... the first alphabet of Europe, in which every letter is named for a tree or an important companion plant of trees” (p. 189). There are 20 letters, each receiving an account that mingles poetically scientific knowledge of the trees with ancient Celtic lore, starting with A/Ailm, Pine, and ending with Z/ Straif, Blackthorn. Old uses, now largely lost, medicinal properties, and notes on the alphabet itself are melded into each of these brief notes.

This is a courageous, highly readable book, yielding insights of value and leaving us—field naturalists, researchers, nature lovers—with much to think about. The discoveries Diane Beresford-Kroeger has made are at last entering the mainstream, as a source of knowledge and inspiration for the increasing numbers of people concerned with the physical and future state of the planet.

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