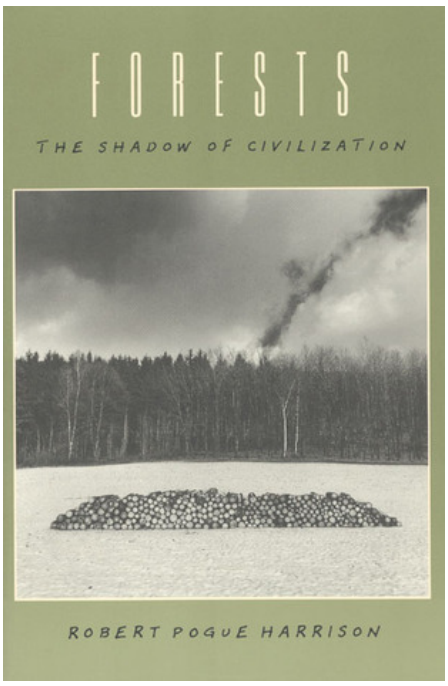

Forests: The Shadow of Civilization

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In this wide-ranging exploration of the role of forests in Western thought, Robert Pogue Harrison enriches our understanding not only of the forest's place in the cultural imagination of the West, but also of the ecological dilemmas that now confront us so urgently. Consistently insightful and beautifully written, this work is especially compelling at a time when the forest, as a source of wonder, respect, and meaning, disappears daily from the earth.

"*Forests* is one of the most remarkable essays on the human place in nature I have ever read, and belongs on the small shelf that includes Raymond Williams' masterpiece, *The Country and the City*. Elegantly conceived, beautifully written, and powerfully argued, [*Forests*] is a model of scholarship at its passionate best. No one who cares about cultural history, about the human place in nature, or about the future of our earthly home, should miss it.—William Cronon, *Yale Review*

"*Forests* is, among other things, a work of scholarship, and one of immense value . . . one that we have needed. It can be read and reread, added to and commented on for some time to come."—John Haines, *The New York Times Book Review*

Forests: The Shadow of Civilization Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 1993 by University of Chicago Press (first published 1992)
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From Reader Review Forests: The Shadow of Civilization for online ebook

Michael says

I am glad I read this, as it helped me see how my own personal confusion and aspirations with regard to nature are aligned with larger historical trends. Although the book is often delightful and inspiring, it sometimes felt like a slog in cases where he follows an overly academic path into the branches of his argument. His quest is to explore the themes that forest plays in the Western cultural imagination and organize it in a manner that reveals the terrible predicament we are in and prospects for a path out of the woods. He succeeds wonderfully in this goal, distilling centuries of historical, artistic, and philosophical thought on the subject into a coherent set of conclusions.

Starting with the oldest Western literature, such Gilgamesh and Homer and classical Greek and Roman mythologies, philosophies, and dramas, Harrison covers early conceptions of forest as a site for dangerous quests, of refuge, or spiritual transformation. He spends quite a bit of effort digesting conceptions of “nature” gods such as Artemis and Dionysus for clues to the dialectic between human society in the civilized towns and agricultural clearings versus the more spiritual or ecstatic human activities in the wild of the forests. With Dante’s “Divine Comedy”, we get a bit of a circle, as the pathway beyond the dark wood and up the mountain is achieved by passing down through Purgatory, then back up into different, more Edenic, type of woods. With the pervasive success of Christianity, the gods of nature are banished, and the place which humans strive to reach is beyond the earth.

Since the Enlightenment, when rationality gained ascendancy, we have been left with a pervasive sense of alienation and nihilism due to consideration of forests and nature predominantly from the perspective of utilitarian and economic value. From the time of the Norman conquest, the concept of forest emerged as a nature preserve for the exclusive use of royalty for their pleasure and ritualistic hunts. By the period of Charlemagne, the word ‘forest’ emerges for the first time as a judicial term extending the Latin meaning of ‘foris’ as ‘outside’ with ‘forestare’ meaning ‘to place off limits’. Whereas this institutionalization of wild spaces included both plants and animals (“vert and venison”), the “enlightened” view of forests in Diderot’s Encyclopedia considers only efficient production of usable wood in fulfillment of man’s rights of mastery and possession of nature.

For the intervening centuries since then, Harrison captures in the cultural record of the arts the themes of nostalgia and the struggle to advance a promising way for humans to live in relation with nature (the meaning of the word ‘ecology’ in his analysis). Favorite figures include Rousseau, the poets John Claire and Wordsworth, Joseph Conrad, Thoreau, Constable, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The journey of this book represents a profound accomplishment, all leading to the current situation: “We can say today that a war is being waged in the United States between … two fundamentally opposed concepts of forest. One is the concept of forest as resource; the other of the forest as sanctuary.” Near the end he points out the unfortunate situation of conservationists having to speak the language of resource managers, such as valuing biodiversity for its prospects of human medicines. An advance of ecology since this was written in the early 90’s is our current knowledge of the “value” of biodiversity as genetic reservoir for adaptations of species to environmental change.

With apologies for the length of this review, I end with a few eloquent quotes:
“Humanity begins to appear in a new light: as a species caught in the delicate and diverse web of a forestlike planetary environment. More precisely, we are beginning to appear to ourselves as a species of parasite

which threatens to destroy the hosting organism as a whole."

"The entire history we have recounted so far could be seen as the history of human outsideness. Because we exist foremost outside of ourselves, forests become like an ancient and enduring correlate of our transcendence. And because our imagination is a measure of our ecstasies, the history of forests in the Western imagination turns into the story of our self-dispossession."

"Somewhere we still sense—who knows for how much longer?—that we make ourselves at home only in our estrangement, or in the logos of the finite. In the cultural memory of the West forests 'correspond' to the exteriority of the logos. The outlaws, the heroes, the wanderers, the lovers, the saints, the persecuted, the outcasts, the bewildered, the ecstatic—these are among those who have sought out the forest's asylum in the history we have followed throughout this book. Without such outside domains, there is no inside in which to dwell."

Alison says

The first half of this book is great (up to chapter 4). Lots of fascinating analysis of the way in which the perception of forests changed throughout the centurites. Then the second half happens.

Ryan Eshleman says

A delightful read.

Personal factors that enhanced the experience: the real possibility of a thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail in 2015, a December stay in Haiti (a country that suffers from some of the most devastating deforestation and fallout from it in the world), a last name that has arboreal roots, and a constant struggle with what it means to "dwell" on Earth.

Recommended to any and all.

Martin Rowe says

As anyone who's read my reviews will know, I very rarely give five stars to any book. Nothing is perfect, and this book is no exception. However, what makes this book the ultimate in my estimation is the fact that its ideas and sensibilities have resonated for me beyond the final pages and massively influenced my own thought and writing since I came across a segment of the book (about Gilgamesh) twenty years ago in Roger Gottlieb's expertly edited anthology for Routledge, THIS SACRED EARTH. Harrison's deeply sympathetic readings—which, I should add, constitute critical appreciation of the highest order—of the way the Western imagination has used and abused the notion of the forest from ancient times to the present are marvelously suggestive. What's more, he has read widely in non-Anglophone literature (his particular expertise is Italian poetry) and that allows him to range across the European and eventually the American continents. He shows how the forest has not only been a place of refuge but fear, of ownership and freedom from ownership, a place of madness and sanity, of kingship and commonweal, and where humankind has steadily denuded the wild of what is magical and mystical and replaced it with what is tame, material, and exploitable. The book

is full of surprise readings and continuous echoes throughout the ages, as efforts are made to reclaim and conserve what is threatened from without by those who would destroy the ecology of the spirit and the human imagination as embedded within and represented by the forest. A wonderful, wonderful read.

Cameron says

Forests is one of the first ecocritical works I ever encountered. I devoured it the June prior to arriving in Nevada to begin my graduate study, reading it more or less in one sitting in a very long car trip to Oklahoma and back. Few, if any, works by scholars have stuck with me as resolutely and stubbornly as Harrison's. While his central premise—the exploration of the cultural meaning and uses of forests through several centuries of Western thinking and literature—seems distantly removed from much of my current reading, I often return to Forests for its luminous, brilliant, and dense prose. It is a book that makes me think hard about my own writing. It is often Harrison's voice that I hear in my head when I attempt to craft my own readings, and the book has been extremely influential on the way I work formally. While written in a formal register (Harrison rarely veers from the plural first person), the book is simultaneously warm, friendly, dense, and philosophically engaging. I admire how he is able to construct critical leitmotifs and create apt metaphors that illuminate the works he reads, which cover an astonishing array of genres and literary periods. Harrison also articulates a savvy mode of thinking about the culture/nature dialectic in his gorgeous exploration of Thoreau's sense of "dwelling" at Walden: "Nature is the setting of this [Thoreau's:] exteriority, if only because it is that to which we remain external. It is only in our relationship to what we are not that what we are may finally become the ground of our dwelling. Nature is where we go to get lost, so that we find again that which in us is irrevocable" (227).

Tim says

A sophisticated and insightful look at the role of forests in human culture, literature, and imagination. Academic at times, and poetic at others, the sections I read were enlightening and thought-provoking.

Karen says

Why do we associate forests with magic, myths, transformations? This book is a meditation and a critical study of forests and man's relationship to them -- their natural form (botannical and animal), the property and ownership rights associated with them, and their role in literature and the human imagination -- from the early Greeks through the present day. Robert Pogue Harrison (the author) is a Stanford professor in the Italian studies department, but he is also a polyglot poetic spirit and philosopher, who reaches into shadows and pulls out light.

Sherry Chandler says

Two people whose intelligence I admire suggested I read this book and so, after dragging my feet for about a year, I searched it out, no doubt much to my family's chagrin because I've been quoting it for a month now. Pogue traces fear of the wild (forests) through the whole sweep of western letters from Gilgamesh to Frank

Lloyd Wright. He finds his heroes in Wright, Constable, John Claire, Emerson. I'm not sure I followed him to his conclusions -- and it is probably irrelevant that no women feature in his discussion, though I did notice it -- but I really enjoyed the insights and notions he introduces on the way to those conclusions. I'll never be quite so complaisant about considering myself a humanist again.

Graychin says

The first hundred pages are worth the price of admission, a truly fascinating examination of the ways that forests have figured in the Western imagination from the prehistorical to the medieval periods. As a Pacific Northwesterner who hikes a lot, I spend a lot of time in the woods, and some of Harrison's work here is going to ring in my ears for years to come. Unfortunately, the remainder of the book struggles by comparison. It begins to feel more like an academic paper, the presentation slips out of unified focus and wanders. But those first hundred pages – fantastic.

Kobe Bryant says

Wow this guy is really into forests

Stephanie Wasek says

Like a forest, this book is elegant and sprawling, but also I'd rather experience the texts/art assembled inside than be told about them (however well-written).

Michael says

A philosophical walk through the forests of Western thought, ranging from ancient to modern visions of forests in the mind of mankind.

Megan says

A dense, thoroughly thought-through account that inclusively ponders myth, literature, law, and philosophy in order to discover why we, humans, are such damn bastards when it comes to relating to the world on-in which we live. We're all selfish jerkfaces and the problem is so endemic that we don't even know it exists. (I think the prevalence of critical media reviews about Mitt Romney is influencing my joy-taking in slinging casual 'disses'.) The great thing about this book is that Harrison doesn't only tell us how our thinking is wrong-headed; he doesn't just rail against the insensitivity of humanity, its prejudices, and its destructiveness (although he certainly does do that); but in addition to all that, he proposes ways to apprehend the world and our environment more consciously, and with a changed perspective, so as to exist alongside all the other living things on the planet. It's a keeper. I'll be looking for his two other books as well, about gardens, and where we bury our dead. The dude teaches at Stanford. Maybe, while I worked there, we passed in the

library! Maybe we touched the same ancient books! NEAR-BRUSHES WITH HISTORY!

Lesliemae says

This is one of two books that currently inspire my research. I keep it in my bag, by my bed, in my mind as I move forward into the second inspiring book that seems naturally suggested in the epilogue of *Forests*: "Every now and then the poet's word still bring logos (which Harrison translates as "gathering, binding" to language, yet we lose the ability toe reappropirate it. Why? Perhaps because such language does not "communicate" anything" (249). Onward into David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

Erika Schoeps says

3.5

A fairly good book, although I grew tired of the format around chapter 4 (a little over halfway through). Basically, this book talks about the cultural function of forests in different time periods. Harrison uses historical and poetic evidence as proof. This novel was mind-blowing at first, but eventually, I got tired of reading the same thing, just about a different time.

I think you would love this if you were really into mythology, or, obviously, forests. It's just a little too long on something so specific for me.
