OAK: THE FRAME OF CIVILIZATION

Their limbs arch over my back deck, black and gnarled against the March sky, occasionally with ravens, like illustrations from a Poe short story. Then they diminish toward the horizon, black dancers, their tops faintly pink with swelling buds: my oaks. Before I had even opened William Bryant Logan's *Oak: The Frame of Civilization* (336pp., W.W. Norton, 2005) I'd begun to read their story.

For Logan it's a love story, of acorn cultures, wonderfully flexible sailing ships, woodcrafts opening minds to inner and outer worlds, all ending at mid-nineteenth century, when iron, coal and oil made oak superfluous. Since the glaciers retreated, he reminds us, humans lived for 15,000 years in a world of wood, and, so far, for 250 years in a world of coal and oil.

Oaks began their journey about 65 million years ago, in Thailand, and now occupy a broad band circling the northern hemisphere. Wind pollinated, they thrive where insects are scarce or nonexistent. Deciduous and evergreen, they tolerate a wide temperature range. Their allies, the jays, each burying as many as 4500 acorns every autumn, help them to spread as if racing. Add one- and two-year maturing acorns (the latter able to wait for favorable growing conditions), a wide variety of leaf shapes and sizes, the ability to re-grow strongly from cut points, and large root-to-shoot ratios – imagine "a cloud of hundreds of millions of root tips swimming through the soil," and you'll begin to see why oaks succeed so well.

Once humans appeared, their destiny quickly became interlocked with oaks, whose distribution coincided with

the great centers of human culture -- from Beijing to Oslo to New York – because for thousands of years, acorns were the staff of life. “Golden ages,” featured in mythologies worldwide, may have represented hardworking folks’ nostalgia for the lost ease of acorn gathering. One such oak culture, the many tribes of California, persisted into the time of European settlement, having lasted for 5,000 years.

Besides feeding us, Logan says, “The material necessities for settled human life can all be made from an oak tree.” These include roadways, doors, palisades, barrels, coffins, boats, tanning and ink. Oak charcoal ended the Stone Age, since we could now smelt bronze and iron. Without charcoal, no swords, cannons or ships, no bells, glass, iron pots, beer, gunpowder, coins, plowshares, rings, necklaces or crowns.

Growing limbs at exactly the proper angles for boat frames, oak was perfect for shipbuilding -- tough, flexible, strong, not too heavy and water resistant. Sailing ships yielded possibility – ways into the unknown. By the 19th century, “Oak ships had made the world a single, but unequal community.”

Carpenters were honored above all other craftsmen because so much was at stake in the erecting of big buildings, including soaring cathedrals. They learned to cut and join pieces of oak so as to transfer the forces of gravity, pulling at high walls and roofs, harmlessly to the ground. The greatest art, Logan insists, is not painting, music or poetry, but structures. “The mind made making possible, but making opened the mind.”

Easily split and worked, bearing rich food, ubiquitous, oaks became the tree of the gods. The Buddha is “the sage of the oak tree people.” The many henges in Britain (besides Stonehenge), Logan tells us, are made of oak palisades and celebrate the growth of the human mind. They say to us, there *is* an interior.

Oaks support more than 5,000 species, myself among them – for I am fed by the seasonal sights and sounds of my own little grove, and by books like Logan’s.