

Tree Sense

Tree Sense

Ways of
thinking
about trees

Edited by
**Susette
Goldsmith**



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Introduction

Susette
Goldsmith



Some time ago now, a curious event occurred right outside my window. My neighbour fired up his chainsaw and proceeded to trim a young, self-sown pōhutukawa that was growing on the edge of the footpath outside his house and leaning towards nearby power lines. It was, he believed, impeding the performance of his computer by brushing against the wires. Another neighbour, passing by, called out to the tree trimmer, urging him to ‘cut the whole thing down’ as it was spoiling his otherwise unrestricted view.

Alarmed, I leaned out of the window and spoke up in defence of the tree, which, I reasoned, had a right to live and, besides, provided a welcome green frame for my own view. The tree trimmer, somewhat bemused by the interference of his neighbours but keen to satisfy everyone, opted for a compromise — the branches closest to the wires were cut and the others were left alone. The other neighbour had a view with less greenery, I had a view with a ragged frame, the tree trimmer had newly liberated power wires and the tree was still alive.

That might have been an end to it. However, a few weeks later notices from the local council appeared in our letter boxes, reprimanding whoever was responsible for ‘illegally pruning’ vegetation on public land under Part 17 of the Public Places bylaw. Once more, that might have concluded the affair. But, no. After several

more weeks, a council truck arrived at the scene, and several men equipped with a chainsaw and brooms got out. They proceeded to cut down most of what was left of the tree, picked up the branches, stowed them on the truck, swept the footpath around the remaining tree stump and drove away.

In view of the fact that we had *all* been told off for vandalising the tree, and because I was intensely interested in matters arboreal, I emailed the signatory of the infringement notice asking for the reasoning behind the council's action. A month went by before I received a reply from the customer liaison arborist, who apologised for the delay in responding. She explained that it was council policy to remove all trees on public property whose roots threatened the structure of nearby crib walls, and thanked me for my interest in public trees.

A little later, I reported all of this to another of my neighbours, who had been away at the time of the events. She was not at all surprised that the council had cut down the tree, she said, because it was threatening the power lines and, anyway, it wasn't a 'real tree', which I took to mean that it hadn't been planted with human intent. Real tree or not, the pōhutukawa has proved to be resilient. A few years on, the fuss has died down and the stocky little stump has put out many very healthy branches.

The point of this story is not to cast blame:

none of the parties — including the tree — was at fault. My interest in the proceedings stems from the fact that each of the protagonists in our small suburban drama — including the tree — was acting from a vastly different viewpoint. All were, as American environmental historian William Cronon puts it, ‘defending their corner of Eden’.¹ The differences in our opinions about the fate of the single pōhutukawa clearly show that there was more than one tree at work here, and that the various trees subscribed to were measured by individual people according to idiosyncratic and anthropocentric values. If, as Cronon argues, our views of nature are important factors in defining who we think we are and the kind of lives we wish to lead, this episode was not just about the tree, but was, in fact, also about us — what we individually believe in and stand for.

That is what this book is about. Although only one tree may be visible in the ground, there may be many invisible trees at work within its drip line, all of which are constructed in the minds of observers according to the meanings and values they hold, and consequently impose, upon the blameless tree. We see trees differently. Some of us affectionately consider them to be sentient beings, while others prioritise their practical attributes of shade and shelter, carbon sequestration, timber production, botanical collection and food. Where some people

stand back in awe of the beauty of their autumnal colour changes, others grumble at their leaf-fall. While some champion our indigenous trees, others find superior beauty in exotics, and while some work to protect trees, others labour to fell them.

We may regard trees through any one or any combination of these various lenses, and if this book has a predominant purpose it is to demonstrate to you, the reader, that there are other ways of thinking about trees. Of course, the other way recommended by each of this book's contributors is the manner in which they individually appraise trees. And although we may come from a variety of disciplines and experiences, collectively we are biased; each of us has a deep respect for trees.

Probably, you feel the same way. If you were not interested in the environment and its trees, why else would you select this volume from the bookshop table, library shelf or a friend's desk? To a certain extent this book will preach to the converted. But that's all right, because your thoughts, your opinions and your ways of thinking about trees are valuable. And as we all face up to climate change and the ongoing, alarming challenges to our natural world, we need to stick together, draw strength from one another and preach to the unconverted as well.

Each of the contributors to this book responded with enthusiasm to my invitation to take part, and I am exceedingly grateful for their commitment to the project and the wonderfully diverse, informative and eloquent chapters they have provided. From the beginning, I envisaged that the structure of the book would be in two parts. The first, ‘Needful Dependency’, would sing the praises of the various characteristics of trees and remind us of the supportive network that links people and the arboreal world. The second, ‘Greening the Anthropocene’, would, I hoped, take a lead from the past and provide some guidelines for the future.

Happily, the contributors produced essays and artworks that slipped effortlessly into the two sections. However, this is not a book that requires you to read chapters in the order in which they are presented. Each chapter tackles the topic of trees from a different — and often surprising — viewpoint. Some chapters might attract you more than others, but once you’ve devoured them I hope you will return for a taste of the rest and — enriched — reflect further on your own relationship with the trees of Aotearoa New Zealand.





Part One

Needful
Dependency





Tree breath and human



Elizabeth
Smither

Trees in the garden are expelling
the breath I need. It enters windows
and I breathe out what they breathe in.

How we should love them, never moving
from their posts, withstanding wind,
creaking sometimes, losing limbs

but aiding us with oxygen.
While we climb them to gulp in
the freshest air, the most pure

reason for their being here:
their breath and ours commingling
into needful dependencies.



W. M. ADAMS