

Acknowledgements

I was soaked to the skin and shivering in what I earnestly believe to have been the outskirts of hypothermia. I was in the middle of a peat bog in the west of Ireland and the freezing rain was sweeping across the landscape in great cloaking sheets. I might as well have been under water. We had been filming for hours, one of the cameras had already given up the ghost and I was asking myself, quite seriously, what on earth I was doing standing ankle-deep in mud, with rainwater running down my skin inside my clothes. But then I looked around at the crew – director, cameraman, sound recordist, researchers – and reminded myself of something important: my discomfort in the rain and wind would one day be seen by an audience; someone, somewhere would see that it had happened. But while my misery was being recorded for posterity, everyone else's would go unnoticed. And no one was complaining. Not a single word.

As often as possible – sometimes several times a day, in fact – I remind myself how lucky I am to have this job. Bad weather might be an occasional blight, but after all it's only an occupational hazard for folk who mostly work outside. I also try and bear in mind that my job is made possible only by the unstinting efforts of others.

This is the time therefore, long overdue, when I get to thank those who also stand miserable and drenched on sodden bogs (sometimes bearing flasks of hot tea), or on wind-blasted cliff tops, or in the wheelhouses of little boats wallowing in big seas. I have not forgotten!

Just like a television documentary, a book is the product of the hard work of many different people. One with a grand title like *A History of Ancient Britain* is dependent upon the efforts of a whole range of thoughtful and painstaking professionals.

A mountainous debt is owed to Michael Dover, my editor and publisher at Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Unless and until you have listened to his always calm, constantly reassuring and encouraging voice, you cannot begin to imagine what a steadying presence he provides for anyone struggling to face down the unforgiving stare of the blank page. Thank you, Michael.

Linden Lawson's brilliance as a copy-editor and proof-reader deserves nothing less than whole pages of appreciation. I am constantly stunned by her attention to detail and by her ability to fine-tune and fettle, so that the final version is as close as humanly possible to what I actually meant to say all along.

Grateful thanks are also due to editorial assistants Nicki Crossley and Jillian Young, and picture researcher Caroline Hotblack has shown great imagination and sensitivity in sourcing all of the illustrative material that enlivens the text. My experience of Weidenfeld & Nicolson over the past few years has been a real treat and the whole team there has my admiration.

It almost goes without saying that the book would never have happened without the BBC Television series of the same name. Cameron Balbirnie was the series producer and somewhere along the way he has become a good friend as well. No mortal could have given more of himself in pursuit of the creation of a series worthy of the name of *A History of Ancient Britain*. Not content with sweating blood to create the best television possible, Cameron also found time to read through the proofs of this book to help ensure we were all singing from the same hymn sheet. Executive producer Eamon Hardy was an ever-present champion of the series and grateful thanks are owed to him as well.

Also crucial were the five producer-directors – each of whom contributed hugely to the content of the book. So to Paul King,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

xv

Arif Nurmohamed, Dick Taylor, Jeff Wilkinson and Simon Winchcombe – a huge and heartfelt thank-you.

Series researchers Sarah Ager, Ellie James, Poonam Odedra and Mark Williams worked wonders – sourcing and checking information, finding contributors and fighting the forces of error and falsehood on a daily basis. I just hope I have the chance to work with them again.

Without the organisational genius of Dominic Bolton, Sarah Vickers, Alice Pattenden and Sue Ng, the wheels would have come off the *Ancient Britain* wagon long ago. Dominic in particular was and is a marvel to me. How he patiently stayed on top of the mountain of arrangements – and, more importantly, the re-arrangements he had to make day after day and week after week – is quite beyond my comprehension.

The epic look of the series was for the most part the work of the principal editor Martin Johnson. Thanks to him, the finished article had the feel, in my opinion, of a Hollywood blockbuster.

Camera operators and sound recordists are special breeds of human being. While the rest of the team struggles up mountains, through caves and tunnels and across rivers and streams, the camera and sound crew must cover the same terrain while lumbered with the heaviest and most cumbersome technical kit imaginable. Cameramen Patrick Acum, Toby Wilkinson, Neville Kidd, Ben Joiner, Justin Ingham, Michael Pitts and John McIntyre and sound men Sam Staples and Mike Williams would surely thrive in the SAS. And then, when they arrive in the desired spot, be it summit or seabed, they are required to be creative and adept, making everywhere look wonderful and me heroic! On top of all that they were possessed of senses of humour that didn't just make each hard day tolerable, but a positive pleasure. For all the laughs – almost more than anything else – a thousand thank-yous.

Sophie Laurimore, my television agent at Factual Management, and Eugenie Furniss, my literary agent at William Morris Entertainment, fight the good fight on my behalf every day. I honestly

don't know what I would do or where I would be without them. Lots of love to both, as always.

Finally, and most importantly, I must acknowledge the biggest debt of all, to my wife, Trudi – who soaks up all the strain, takes care of the family and runs the whole show at home while I waft around the world on the magic carpet of television. How she puts up with me and all of this, I really don't know. But she does, and I don't forget that either.

Introduction

There is a sequoia tree in the Sierra Nevada of California known as the Great Bonsai. The men and women of the US Forest Service are protective of their charge – as they are with all sequoias – and prefer its precise location to remain less than well known. Sequoias grow only in the Western Sierra Nevada and are therefore something of an endangered species. There are no sequoia forests as such – they occur only in ‘groves’ within forests of lesser, more plentiful species, a handful of giants standing here and there like members of an exclusive clique, surrounded by hoi polloi. Their apparent disdain for the fir trees crowded around their waists is almost palpable.

A handful of celebrity sequoias like General Sherman and the Grizzly Giant are on the tourist trail and get most of the attention – which means many others are left in relative peace. That is the way the rangers like it.

Despite having reached a height of over 200 feet, the Great Bonsai is a long way from claiming the title of tallest sequoia (the loftiest of them tower well over 300 feet high), but it is unusually immense in the sheer volume of wood it contains. Many of its individual branches are themselves larger than full-grown trees of other species. In terms of the mass and reach of its canopy, the Great Bonsai is one of the largest trees on Earth.

More impressive than its size, however, is its great age. Tree scientists estimate the Great Bonsai has been occupying its perch, on a rocky summit overlooking deep valleys, for at least 2,000 years. That much would already be newsworthy: a tree as old as

Christianity itself, alive in California before the Romans conquered Britannia.

There is only one way even to try to calculate the age of such an ancient specimen and that is to cut it down and count the rings. No one is proposing to go to such lengths to total the years of a character as precious as the Great Bonsai, though; and even if they did, experience suggests they might find the inner section so rotten that ring-counting would, anyway, be impossible at worst and inconclusive at best.

Those scientists familiar with the greatest sentinels of the sequoia species will quietly confess another possibility: that the elder specimens may be much older than 2,000 years. Some will even allow that the Great Bonsai may be over 4,000 years old. There is simply no way to be certain.

But just consider the suggestion that some of those sequoias might have been living and growing for the last four millennia and more. It would mean that while people in Britain were still making and using bronze axes, and while the finishing touches were being put to monuments like Avebury and Stonehenge, the Great Bonsai was taking root in the high sierras of California.

The story of humankind – at least the comparatively recent chapters – may therefore have unfolded in the shadow of those trees. It might well be the case that 200 generations of people have come and gone while a handful of sequoias reached steadily skywards, oblivious to the rise and fall of kingdoms, empires and entire civilisations. The existence of giants like the Great Bonsai makes our species the very epitome of ephemeral. Millions of us have certainly been born, lived out our three score and ten and returned to the soil while a single tree drew water, made oxygen and starch from sunlight and carbon dioxide, and grew.

The Scottish conservationist John Muir, who emigrated to the US with his family when he was 11 years old and spent much of his life championing and defending the wild places of the world, was among the first to stand up for the sequoias. When he first encountered them, in the middle years of the nineteenth century,

INTRODUCTION

xix

they were being felled for lumber – a pointless exercise as it turned out, because the timber shatters into matchwood when the trees hit the ground. He was thereafter in the vanguard of those seeking to protect the remaining giants for posterity; that any survive today is due in no small part to the efforts of one stubborn Scotsman.

For much of the twentieth century the US Forest Service battled valiantly to protect the sequoia groves from what they considered the greatest threat to the species' continuing existence: wild fire. They were very successful, and kept the flames away from the giants for many years – until someone realised the trees actually depended upon fire as a key element of their reproductive cycle. Sequoia wood is naturally saturated with a chemical the foresters call tannin – which, as well as repelling insects and other parasites, also makes it virtually fireproof. Blazes that will clear away all other species like so much tinder generally leave little more than a few patches of charring on the lower parts of the sequoias. The heat also serves to encourage the tiny sequoia seeds to pop from the otherwise tightly clenched fists of their pine cones; these then fall into freshly cleared soil that is newly bathed in life-giving sunlight and free from any competing plants. Some people call the sequoias 'fire trees'.

A person could be forgiven for thinking all the advantages are stacked in favour of that one species – a species that has evolved to thrive in conditions that destroy the competition.

One other characteristic of sequoias, however, is worth bearing in mind: despite their massive girth and great height, they have extremely shallow root systems, and the prime cause of death among them is simply falling over. Their huge bulk actually works against them whenever a high wind blows through the sierras – and when one giant falls it usually takes a neighbour or two down with it.

Within the story of the Giant Sequoias, therefore, lies a warning for humankind. For long we believed we too had grown high and mighty – that our own long, long history was proof of our

invincibility. We had come through it all. Some or other ancestor of the mammals had emerged from the shadow of the dinosaurs, evolving and learning for millions of years until an ancient, distant relative straightened its spine and stood up on two legs. Thereafter a series of trials and errors laid a path leading all the way to the first people, and beyond.

It seemed to many that our seeds had been sown by the fires of creation itself and that we had grown and grown until we were head and shoulders above all others. Masters of nature, we were therefore beyond its reach, we thought – fireproof, so to speak.

But the truth is altogether different and far less reassuring. *Homo sapiens sapiens* has been alive and conscious on Earth for no more than 200,000 years. Born and bred in Africa, we found the need to leave that continent's warmth just a few tens of thousands of years ago. We spread north first, and then east into Asia. Some of those adventurous souls crafted boats and made the sea crossing from the land that would be south-eastern Asia to the continent that would be Australia, something like 50,000 years ago. While all that was happening, yet more made inroads into Europe; others continued into north-eastern Asia and from there found their way to the continent of North America. Sea levels were lower and what is now the Bering Strait was then a land bridge – indeed an entire landmass – known to geologists as Beringia. Between perhaps 40,000 and 20,000 years ago those farthest-flung of the pioneers penetrated all the way down into South America and on to Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire at the ends of the Earth.

A person might be forgiven for thinking that if we were a plant we would be some sort of smothering ivy, crawling across the face of the planet until our tendrils threatened to throttle the very life out of the place. When astronauts take pictures of the globe from space, after all, the artificial lights conjured by humankind are seen glowing from every nook and cranny.

But Earth is four and a half billion years old – and for all the miles we have travelled as a species during the last 60,000 years or so, we are effectively as new to the place as this year's swarms of

INTRODUCTION

xxi

mosquitos. Our spread has certainly been astonishing – in terms of its speed if nothing else. There are more than six billion of us now – more people alive at once than at any other time in history. But for all that we are more numerous than before and reaching levels of population density that may one day bring about our own extinction, in some respects we are of no more consequence than a sprinkling of dust. The truth is that every last one of us – all six billion and more – would fit, neatly stacked like lumber, into the space currently occupied by Windermere, England's largest lake.

While the sequoias – and the rest of the Redwood family to which they belong – are nowadays restricted to the Western Sierra Nevada, they are relics of another time entirely. It was during the Jurassic period, which began 200 million years ago, that the first of them put down their roots. Once upon a time they were represented on every continent on Earth and it is only in the relatively recent past that their territory has become restricted to one small part of California.

So while we human beings have been tenants of the Earth for 200 millennia, those giant trees have been here a thousand times as long. In terms of the history of the planet we squat upon, our roots are shallower by far than those of any sequoia. We need not look for a John Muir to save us either. The next big gust of wind – global warming, climate change, sea level rise or whatever – might bring about our downfall.

In *The World Without Us* American journalist Alan Weisman wrote about what would happen in a world suddenly devoid of human beings. Plants quickly sprout through roads and motorways, turning them from grey to green within years. River water flows unchecked through the tunnels beneath the cities, undermining foundations so that homes and buildings are toppled. Within decades, or a few centuries at most, towns and neighbourhoods are swallowed up by forests. Time sees to it all, until even the bundled copper wires of our telecommunications networks and the lead, steel and iron pipes that carried everything

else, are crushed by geology – turned back into metallic veins running through rocks. Our radioactive waste and our plastic bags may well last longest of all – but eventually the world will quietly deal with that mess too.

Long before then the books, CDs, DVDs – as well as every last hard drive of every last computer server – will be dust in the wind. Our recorded history will not outlive us. To all intents and purposes it will be gone in the same instant the last of us closes our eyes.

And if our species falls, deep in the forest of years, not one of the other creatures that walk or crawl, swim or fly will care a jot.

We matter only to ourselves and that is no bad thing; this is why our history must be central to our understanding of the world and our time upon it. Its dependence upon our attention, and ours alone, should remind us that our past is something immediate, fragile and fleeting as a flash of inspiration – and as potent. We must pay it heed now – not because it has been long but because in the scheme of things it has been the stuff of moments. The accomplishment of many years is this way turned into an hour glass, as the Bard said. We must watch the play.