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ISABELLA TREE

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'Scholarly, wise, funny, charming
and thrilling, I adored it'

JOANNA LUMLEY

Reviving a Family,
a Farm and Britain's
Ancient Rainforests

Our Oaken Bones

Merlin Hanbury-Tenison

'Brave, thoughtful... a remarkable
spiritual and environmental vision'

RORY STEWART



An extraordinarily courageous, urgent and powerful book. A patch of ancient rainforest in Cornwall, reviving under the care of Merlin Hanbury-Tenison, is restoring broken lives – his own, his family's and many others who have suffered unimaginable things. We need to listen, too. What Merlin has learnt from the healing power of nature will help us all, in turn, heal the devastating wounds we've collectively inflicted on nature.

Isabella Tree, author of *Wilding*

Our Oaken Bones is utterly brilliant. It weaves the author's own remarkable story in with the history of that ancient forested landscape, punctuated with visits of guest characters from everywhere; and reflections on the past mirrored in hopes for the future. It is an ecological autobiography . . . scholarly, wise, funny, charming, terrifying and thrilling, and I adored it all, every page.

Joanna Lumley

This book is a brilliant piece of work . . . deeply compelling. As a reader this is a grand journey; emotional, informative, pleasurable. I believe that this is an important work with planet-sized dreams and ambitions. Perhaps the greatest philosophy or teachable lesson that came to me off the page is that dominion comes with responsibility.

Russell Crowe

Powerfully enchanting, written with verve and imbued with hope. Merlin's journey from suffering with PTSD to finding solace in the rainforests of the Westcountry mirrors that of the Fisher King of Arthurian legend: by healing the land, we heal ourselves. When confronting the ecological crisis, it's easy to despair; but reading Our Oaken Bones, you'll feel that the mend of the world is nigh.

Guy Shrubsole, author of *The Lost Rainforests of Britain* and *The Lie of the Land*

I'm lucky enough to have filmed in the wood about which Our Oaken Bones is based, and had the same feelings about the importance of such places for our psyche – I love this book.

Rick Stein

An enormously moving and inspiring story about war, trauma, nature and rebirth, written with infectious passion and unsparing honesty. I loved it.

Dominic Sandbrook, author and historian

Weaving folklore with science, heartbreak with hope, this beautiful book is at once a personal journey of grief and recovery, an account of ancient woods and their mysteries, and a powerful call to arms. It shows us not just that our precious woods can heal the planet, but that they can heal us too. Inspiring.

Sarah Langford, author of *Rooted*

A truly inspiring read. This book will shift your sense of place and time - and of what it means to live a healthy life.

Henry Mance, Chief Features Editor at FT and author

This wonderful book is that rare thing, a love letter to a magical place infused with a sense of possibility that here, on Bodmin Moor, may lie the answer to a new story of enlightenment.

Sir Tim Smit, founder of the Eden Project

Our Oaken Bones is aching and hopeful in equal measure: from the horrors and trauma of war, to the quiet intimate grieving of a hidden family loss, there are perhaps no greater tests of the healing power of Britain's lost rainforest habitats. Like a generous host and dependable guide, Hanbury-Tenison keeps the reader close, through thick and thin, offering views of a world we would otherwise miss. Abundant with everyday wonder and a bold one-thousand-year vision of a future Agro-Rainforest Britain.

Gillian Burke, natural history presenter and producer

A remarkable story of healing and growth, Our Oaken Bones is a moving and uplifting discourse on the power of nature to revive body and soul. Merlin Hanbury-Tenison takes the reader on a bracing and unexpected journey from the deserts of Afghanistan to the ancient rainforests of Britain. A terrific debut.

Justin Marozzi, historian and author

If we are going to help nature help us, we need to cultivate the long view – and it is Merlin's deep time framing of this incredibly inspiring personal story that shows us how to do just that.

Rene Olivieri, Chairman of the National Trust

It's rare to find a book that is both charming and punchy at the same time, both specific to one special place and universal in its reach, both spiritually evocative and bang-on-the-money in terms of policy directions. Such is Merlin Hanbury-Tenison's Our Oaken Bones. As you might imagine, I loved it.

Jonathon Porritt CBE, environmentalist and author

A beautifully written, people-focused tale with many stories of the healing of troubled human souls brought about by the rainforest's health-giving powers. I absolutely loved it.

Charles Clover, author of *Rewilding the Sea*

A deeply moving and inspiring tale of overcoming personal and environmental struggles. This book beautifully intertwines the survival of people and rainforest alike, proving that healing begins with nature.

Levison Wood, explorer and author

Our Oaken Bones is a seismic, piercingly beautiful book. Who knew that Britain is a rainforest nation. Merlin Hanbury-Tenison presents a powerful case for restoring our lost rainforests, and for healing ourselves while we do it.

Ben Goldsmith, CEO of Menhaden

This is a beautiful, honest and enthralling book, which explores, discovers and celebrates the ecological, cultural and healing properties of Britain's temperate rainforests. Merlin Hanbury-Tenison takes us on a soulful journey into these unique, incredibly rare and precious habitats and, in so doing, makes a persuasive case for how they can restore humans, and how we must work to restore these magical places.

Craig Bennett, CEO of The Wildlife Trusts

An intimate account of one man's profound relationship with a piece of land on Cornwall's Bodmin Moor - its healing properties, its intricate ecosystems and the challenges it poses for responsible management.

A wonderfully invigorating and ultimately hopeful book.

Philip Marsden, author

A beautiful story of redemption and hope, tragedy and resilience, a father and a son, a mother and her child, one family's love of the land, and the power of an ancient forest to reach forward in time to reassure everyone that all will be well.

Wade Davis, explorer and author

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Our Oaken Bones

Reviving a Family, a Farm
and Britain's Ancient
Rainforests

MERLIN
HANBURY-TENISON



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For my father, Robin.

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1

Healing Rainforests



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The old explorer places his wizened hand on the trunk of the fallen tree in front of him. He draws breath and prepares to clamber to the area of open ground on the other side. Glancing up, he plans where to plant his feet and wipes sweat from his brow with his free hand. The path ahead is hard to discern through the tumble of twisted branches, vines and thorns that grow throughout the understory of this rainforest. Long tendrils of epiphytes snake down from the canopy high above where they festoon the upper reaches. Polypody ferns sprout from every available section of horizontal growth. Thick spongy moss covers the granite boulders that are scattered throughout this habitat and give these forests their distinctive, almost impenetrable personality. A gentle mist lies across the ground and a light drizzle is falling, slowly soaking us both. I wait patiently behind him, poised to lend assistance if the climb turns out to be too great.

The explorer is my father. The rainforest is in Cornwall.

I notice how the tanned, canyoned skin of the back of his hand blends almost perfectly with the wrinkled bark beneath him. As he applies pressure, the bark unexpectedly slips away from the tree. This trunk fell several years before and its outer layer is already beginning to rot and separate from the flesh, just as the skin of an animal might fall away from the muscles after a period of rigor mortis has passed. He rebalances surprisingly swiftly for a man in his mid-eighties, but not before his forearm has scraped along the exposed lignum, gathering woodlice, fungal spores and damp pulp all the way to his elbow. He stands,

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looking slightly sheepish, and wipes the muck from his arm, exposing a long shallow graze that gently oozes with the first flow of bright red blood. Fortunately he always carries a handkerchief and is able to stem the bleed quickly, no need for the younger generation's help, though I wince to see him in obvious pain. At his age he doesn't heal like he did as a young man and that scrape will last for months before his arm fully recovers. I vault the trunk behind him and we continue on our slow path up into the boulder scree that runs from the river towards the tor at the top of the forest, my arm through his for support.

We are looking for a hidden spring that nestles among the rocks and produces the clearest water in the valley. It is near impossible to find amid the jumbled undergrowth and riot of vegetation. He is the only person who knows its location.

My father's career was spent in rainforests, but he didn't know he was living in one back in the UK. His first expedition was launched in 1958 when he and his best friend, Richard Mason, decided to see if it was possible to drive across South America in an old Willys jeep at the widest point. This was back at a time when large swathes of the map were still terra incognita and the bulk of inland travel in South America was by small boat, using intricate waterways to traverse the dense pristine tropical rainforest on either bank. They made it from Recife on the western Atlantic coast of Brazil to Talara on the far east of Peru's Pacific coastline, covering 6,000 miles of broadly unknown terrain, and were the first people recorded in history to make such a crossing. Since then he has been on and led over 30 expeditions across the Amazon, Borneo, central Africa and even in northern Siberia. He received the Royal Geographical Society's Gold Medal and spent many years as

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their vice president. As a child I was lucky enough to accompany him whenever the school holidays would allow and I grew up passionate about the wild places and the native tribes that live far away from what we in the west term ‘civilisation’.

Throughout this time my father had balanced his vocation for exploration with farming on our upland hill farm in the middle of Bodmin Moor. This is where I was born and grew up. It was only later in his life that we learnt together that this farm held an incredible secret at its heart.

In the UK ancient woodland is classified as anything that hasn’t been logged, thinned or felled since 1600. Why this marker in the sand designates a forest as ‘ancient’ has always baffled me. It may seem like a vast amount of time for humans, but forests live to a different beat than our short mammalian lives. Incredibly we have cut down over 98 per cent of our ancient forests, meaning that only tiny fragments remain. Four hundred years is a small amount of time for a forest and a truly ancient environment, with all of the stunning plethora of biodiversity abundance that resides within, should be far older.

The foundation of these old forests is the mycelial network of fungus that grows beneath the soil and connects the roots of every tree and plant to each other. By creating a ‘wood wide web’ of interconnectivity that facilitates the sharing of resources, electrical signals, warning messages and even memories, these forests shift over time from being a collection of trees in one place to a single community of interdependent species that grow, live and thrive together. This mycelium is exceedingly slow growing and can take many centuries to fully establish. When one tree falls in an ancient forest, the whole forest feels it. Just as we humans are

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a single organism that is made up of and supported by the millions of different species of bacteria and micro-organisms in our gut, on our skin and throughout our biota, so in an ancient woodland the many species that live and interact there contribute to forming one single large entity: the forest.

When my father returned from his first expedition in 1959 he needed to find somewhere to live. An Irishman from Monaghan, he had no particular allegiance to any one region in the UK but knew that he wanted to live and farm in a place where he could drink from the river and couldn't hear traffic at night. Even in the late fifties this was becoming harder to find and with his modest deposit the land agent he had engaged kindly explained to him that most of the prime agricultural areas of the UK would be far outside of his budget. Eventually he was convinced to make the long journey to Bodmin Moor to see one rough farm which might be within his means, a bleak place clinging to the edge of a steep-sided valley with the moor always only a few inattentive seasons away from reclaiming the land as its own. Within five minutes of arriving he knew he had found a place for his soul, and in January 1960 he moved in.

The farm, called Cabilla, is just shy of 300 acres. An acre is the size of a football pitch so this is equivalent to 300 pitches, sewn together into an intricate patchwork, lain across the valley on the southern edge of the moor. There's a river that runs through the heart of the farm called the Bedalder, which is Cornish for 'sweet water', and either side of this flowing life force of the land an ancient tulgey wood creeps up the rocky sides until the workable grazing land begins. This land is what an agricultural expert would term 'poor' and isn't much good for anything other than sheep and cattle grazing. With a great

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deal of effort and input a few crops might survive, but it's tough land and farming it is hard work. Just as in modern day Brazil, where farmers are being forced out into pristine jungle to hack back the trees and either grow soy or graze cattle for McDonald's, so in Cornwall, over the last few thousand years, farmers have been pushed out into these upland forested areas to cut back the jungle and eke out a living from grazing sheep, a Mesopotamian import to these valleys.

Growing up on the farm I spent my childhood playing in what remained of this ancient forest, making camps among the boulders and chasing imaginary foes along the deer tracks that criss-crossed the flatter areas. The only reason that my father's farming predecessors, who stewarded this bleak environment before his arrival, hadn't cleared these last vestiges for more sheep grazing was the pure inaccessibility of the place. The topography is extreme, and even the hardiest of Orkney sheep would have found it challenging to find a foothold on the crags and precipices around the tor at the centre of the forest. Cornwall is steeped in mythology and folklore and I was certain from a young age that the infamous piskies still stalked these woods, scheming to confuse and bamboozle me, and that perhaps one of the last remaining unicorns might be spied if one were to camp out, rise at dawn and creep silently towards a glade being kissed by the first rays of sunlight.

We knew the forest was old, but neither my father nor I had ever researched quite how old it might be. In 2019 an eclectic group of passionate amateurs and seasoned experts from Ted Green's Ancient Tree Forum asked if they could come and study our valley. I was delighted and joined them on their research forays through the woods. They studied

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ancient mapping from the local Lanhydrock estate all the way back to the Domesday records in 1086 and were able to confirm that this section of woodland had been extant even then. We can still see the tumbled down field boundaries that demarked farm from forest almost 1,000 years ago. An archaeologist came with the group and he found six stone circles in the heart of the wood which he dated to 4,500 years ago. People had clearly been living in this place for a very long time.

After this I was determined to learn more, and over the following years have built partnerships with a number of universities who send researchers and students to the forest to unlock and decipher its secrets. Eden Project Learning, a part of the University of Plymouth, undertook a paleo-botanical survey that involved taking peat core samples across the farm and establishing the change in habitat from the evidence in the seed record. The young student writing the dissertation was extremely excited to discover that we have had unchanged forest cover in the valley for 3,664 years, give or take 29 years. The precise dating always makes me chuckle. There aren't many places left in the UK with this much uninterrupted birth, growth, death, rot and rebirth. It makes these woods even more special than we already knew they were.

At around the time that these discoveries were being made I started to hear a term being used more and more frequently in some of the ecological circles that I was beginning to mingle in. Atlantic temperate rainforest is a habitat that we have called many things over the preceding centuries. Wet woodland, native broadleaf oak forest, Atlantic oak woodland, even 'W17 woodland' under the Forestry Commission's designations. The fact that the British Isles has temperate rainforest

has been recently popularised by a number of books, including *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, by environmental campaigner Guy Shrubsole - who we'll meet again in a later chapter. This type of forest was once widespread across the western reaches of the United Kingdom, from the tip of Scotland to Land's End. At one time, probably about three to four thousand years ago, it may have constituted up to 20 per cent of our landmass. There is still some debate around how to accurately define a temperate rainforest, but it primarily comes down to the amount and seasonal regularity of rainfall, the abundance of epiphytes growing in the canopy and the native mix of the trees and plants. The paramount species growing in these habitats in the south-west of the UK is the sessile or Celtic oak which, due to our harsh Atlantic conditions and shallow poor soil in these upland areas, becomes a twisted and romantic creature, stunted yet striving from birth. Aside from their distinctive acorn stalks these Celtic oaks can be almost unrecognisable from their often larger and straighter English cousins. These oak trees are the most marvellous supporters of biodiversity and up to 600 species can be found living up their trunk and in their canopy. When you compare this to some species of tree that we have been busily planting across the UK, such as Sitka spruce or common beech, which might only hold 30 to 40 species living upon them, suddenly the importance of the oak as a bedrock of an abundant environment becomes clear.

Alongside this species mix, these rainforest areas tend to be older than much of the woodland in the UK, primarily because of the large-scale deforestation that we have wreaked upon our island. The average amount of tree cover by country across Europe is 33 per cent, but here in the UK we currently

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sit at 14 per cent. In 1917, as the First World War came to a close, tree cover in the UK had fallen as low as 4.5 per cent. This spurred the creation of the Forestry Commission, and we busily began planting fast-growing non-native trees to restore our timber stock and coppices. That means that a truly native woodland is likely to be older than this period and often falls into the ‘ancient’ category. It’s in these woodlands where the mycelium thrives and, while a high level of fungal growth connecting the trees together isn’t a part of the designation for a temperate rainforest, the two usually go hand in hand.

Whether or not we have always been familiar with the term ‘Atlantic temperate rainforest’, I can almost guarantee that, if you grew up in the UK, you will know these woodlands from the folklore and legend of your childhood. The early stories that formed the acorns of our cultural traditions are steeped in this habitat, which used to be far more prolific than it is today. As these stories grew and were told around fires, hearths and family tables, they have become intertwined with the strong arms of the oak forests in which they played out. The clashing of lances as Arthurian knights met to do battle in rainforest glades, the epic tales that Welsh poets captured in the *Mabinogion*, the whiffling of the Jabberwocky in tulgey woods at brillig or the gentle stride of giant Ents as they pass from rainforest glade to rainforest glade are all echoes of ancient stories that form the bedrock of British identity.

A favourite of mine growing up was always the tale of the Fisher King from the Arthurian traditions of the twelfth century. It’s thought that the origins of this tale may actually be even older and lie with Brân the Blessed and the ancient Celtic tales that morphed from spoken tradition and were co-opted and

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written down by early Norman chroniclers. The Fisher King lived in a forest deep in a mystical land and had been charged with guarding the Holy Grail. He carried a hideous wound and his recovery and health were inextricably tied to the health of the natural world around him. Many scholars have spent their working lives struggling with the origin and purpose of the Holy Grail. It isn't mentioned in the Bible and is often thought to be a metaphor for knowledge, a bloodline or a particular person. In the Fisher King tradition it is often interpreted as the forest that surrounds the king's castle and which he has been charged with protecting and restoring. As the forest recovers, so does his health and vitality. As it declines so does he. Could there be a better way of encapsulating our own absolute reliance on and relationship with the natural world? We depend upon this 'grail' for the survival of our own species. Could our rainforests provide the entry point into this parable and an elegiac answer to our own struggles in the twenty-first century?

From a starting point of 20 per cent of the UK as recently as 3,000 years ago, our Atlantic temperate rainforests now cover less than 0.4 per cent of our hills and valleys. This is a tragedy that, the more I have learnt about it, I have become increasingly certain must be prevented from dipping any lower. These rainforests are one of the best habitats that we have for a range of different purposes, what scientists and politicians like to call ecosystem services. The density of the growth of understory plants, mid-story (or ruderal) trees and top canopy trees already means that they are able, over long periods of time, to lock more carbon from the atmosphere than more sparsely planted forestry blocks. The organic matter and fungal network in the soil also locks in a great deal of carbon and

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then, as an added bonus, the abundant epiphyte growth up in the canopy is also busily sucking CO₂ out of the air. Not all of the 600 species that an oak tree can house are carbon sequestrers, but a good number of them are. This creates a tripling effect which means that when a temperate rainforest is compared to almost any other habitat in the UK, alongside possibly seagrass and peat bogs, it is contributing to the fight against climate change more effectively than any of its peers.

Carbon isn't the only factor at play though. There were so many gifts that Mother Nature used to provide for us for free that we have determinedly eroded over the last few centuries. Forests hold soil back from running off hillsides during heavy rain. They clean the water that passes through them so that it enters the river pure and fresh enough to drink. Their industrious photosynthesising not only produces oxygen but they also scrub air of polluting particulates and carcinogens. Many of the species that were once widespread through our rainforests, like beavers, wild cats and pine martens, also perform ecosystem services that we have now broadly lost in the UK. These included holding back floodwater, preventing droughts in the ever more frequent dry spells and hunting non-native species such as rabbits and grey squirrels. They are a habitat that serves us far more than we realise and pound for pound are more cost effective and cheaper to maintain than any human-made ecosystem control measure.

Of all of the many wonderful services that our rainforests can provide the most miraculous is their benefit to human mental health and wellbeing. Despite the indoctrination that we have all been put through as young children via Grimms' Fairy Tales and Roald Dahl's nursery rhymes, where forests

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are always the reside of a ravenous wolf, an evil witch or a perilous dragon, these are our most natural and welcoming environments. I loved these stories growing up but, as I re-read them, I have become increasingly aware that we are convincing our young that one of our most familiar habitats is an alien and dangerous one. The oldest hominid remains found in the UK are 900,000 years old. For nearly a million years we have been hunting, living, foraging, loving, procreating and dying within our temperate rainforests. They are as natural to us as breathing air and drinking water.

Increasingly, academic studies are demonstrating that there is a reason why we feel so at home in our rainforests and often feel that our physiological and psychological health is more robust after spending time in them. We all know that trees suck in CO₂ and pump out oxygen, but what is less well known is that the oxygen they produce is laced with volatile organic compounds called terpenes and phytoncides. These are complex aerosols that stay within the air for a short period and have a remarkable impact on the people wandering through these forests who breathe them in. Reduced cortisol levels, higher kidney function, improved immune system activity and a reset into our parasympathetic nervous state are just some of the myriad ways that these rainforests can be used as a powerful tool in the battle against the mental and physical health pandemics that have been sweeping the UK for many years and which have been compounded by Covid lockdowns and the cost of living crisis.

For me this has deeply personal relevance. After growing up in the rainforest at Cabilla I left to join the British Army. I was 16 when I watched on television as two aircraft slammed into the Twin Towers in New York. I will always remember

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that as the moment when I began to realise that some tragic global events require each of us to find a way to respond to them. As a young, and no doubt highly impressionable, schoolboy it immediately felt like my response should be as a soldier against the recently coined 'war on terror'. It has only been later in my life that I have realised that the war on man-made climate change is a far more important and epochal issue for each and every one of us to put our shoulder behind. Back in 2001 I was yet to have any awareness of this greater calamity, and so three years later I went to Sandhurst and was commissioned as a young officer in a reconnaissance regiment. It proved to be a busy time for the army and over the next few years I deployed to Afghanistan for three separate operational tours. Over these years I spent little time at home in the forest, but when lying awake at night in the deserts of Helmand Province I would often dream that I could plunge into the ice cold waters of the Bedalder, wash the mud and grime from my body and breathe deeply from the fresh rainforest air.

I was 21 years old when I deployed on my first tour of Afghanistan and I had no idea what an impact the events I would experience over the following few years would have on shaping me in later life or on how these incidents can return to us when we least expect them. Throughout my three tours there were frequent close shaves and even more times when I was called upon to do things which would later make me question my decisions of the moment. Just before deploying on my third and final tour I met Lizzie, fell in love and realised it would be selfish to continue putting myself in those situations when there was someone at home who might truly miss me if I was gone.

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We married the year after I returned and, as Lizzie's career and life were in London, we planned to spend a few years living in that city before returning to Cornwall and addressing the Gordian knot of making a living from a small upland hill farm. I fell into working for one of the larger corporate management consultancy firms and spent my time being sent around the UK and internationally to try and help their clients improve the way their businesses functioned. It was a strange job and I would often find myself leading teams of wonderfully bright but highly inexperienced young people as we navigated complex high-pressured organisational challenges that we were woefully ill-equipped to solve. The mental health burden was high and often my primary role was consoling a colleague in tears who found the expectations of the firm and the lack of guidance crushing. I even discovered from the HR department that the company had an 'acceptable percentage rate' of employees who would be absent with stress, burnout or anxiety at any one time. I was baffled that the acceptable rate wasn't zero, as surely no organisation should aspire to damage its own people. I have since learnt that this is quite common in many larger businesses. There is a troubling malaise at the heart of our working culture if it has become acceptable to burn people out and then expect them to find the means and the method to heal and repair themselves.

I had always been secretly proud that I had never suffered any adverse mental health conditions myself. After my experiences in Afghanistan and the working environment that I'd thrown myself into after the army, I should have known that there might be a reckoning on the horizon. It came in 2017. Troubling memories from my past had begun to return to me

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at unexpected times and the regularity, discomfort and volume of these recollections had been increasing for a number of months. I had just started a new project with work and it was the hardest of all scenarios, where I was embedded with a client whose industry and function I didn't fully understand and who were placing a great deal of pressure on me and my team to deliver the results they'd paid for. One day I felt the ground fall away from beneath me and I lost all sense of my ability to lead my team, perform my role or navigate my way through each day. Panic attacks, shakes and breathlessness began to plague me and I found myself becoming tearful for the first time since I was a child and confused in even the most basic meetings. I rapidly lost all sense of my value and of my identity. Darkness closed in on me every day.

The firm I worked for was run by a large number of partners. I hadn't worked with the partner who was overseeing the project I was leading before but he seemed like an approachable and engaged person. One day, when I was feeling at my lowest, I knew I had to escape the office. I asked, rather breathlessly, if I could meet with him outside. He could tell something was awry. Over a coffee at a nearby café I broke down in front of another person for the first time in my life. As I wept into my drink I explained that I couldn't cope any longer with the project that we were on. I tried to tell him about the historic traumas that were making my life difficult day to day and asked if there was any way he might be able to temporarily remove me from this current role. I needed to be allowed some time to understand what was happening to me and to seek help. I explained that I knew I was letting down our firm, my team and the client. This was a new experience of vulnerability and

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visceral honesty for me. I felt exposed and bare as I finished my petition, and his response will always stay with me.

He paused before looking me in the eye, smiling and telling me that he completely understood and knew exactly what I needed. He explained that this project was too important for me to leave it at this stage but that he had a great deal of experience with the kind of troubles I was facing and that he could recommend a solution. This conversation was happening on a Thursday morning. He told me to take the rest of the day off and to go and see my GP on the following day. I was to tell my GP about what I was going through and to request some medication to help calm my frayed nerves. He was confident that, given the weekend to adjust to the pills and get some decent sleep, I would be right as rain and ready to come back into the office first thing on Monday morning. This was all part of the job and, if I wanted to succeed, I needed to demonstrate resilience and carry on paddling. At this point he got up, ended our coffee abruptly and returned to the office for a more pressing meeting.

This advice is commonplace in the corporate world, and I've heard a similar story from many of my former colleagues. I chose not to follow this partner's guidance and handed my notice in soon after that conversation. I'm sure that many people in a similar situation may feel desperate enough to do exactly as he encouraged. I feel so grateful that for me there was another option.

I did go to my doctor, and I was referred to a mental health professional who diagnosed me with complex PTSD and prescribed over a year of counselling and treatment. I don't know what proportion of my diagnosis came from

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Afghanistan and what proportion came from working in high-pressured environments in London but I would predict that both played their own part in creating and then triggering the condition. During the following year I spent as much time as I was able to at home on the farm. I would walk for hours through the forest and began to take more of an interest in the species that proliferated in certain areas. I already knew that the beech trees were causing problems with oak regeneration and that the deer population was too high for any young saplings to survive. Fences needed repairing, pathways needed hacking back and gates needed rehanging. To spend time in and to work within a rainforest was as healing and restorative as any other treatment might have been for me. I would finish each day revitalised and feel increasingly like I was able to return to myself.

It was during one of these periods of forest rehabilitation that I began to realise how ridiculous it was that the only person benefitting from this sublime habitat was me. I knew plenty of other veterans and scores of people from the business world in London who, I was certain, would also find great succour from being able to bury their hands in the loam at the base of one of our old oaks, or rise from the cold waters of the river feeling renewed and clear-minded. Lizzie and I spent countless hours wandering the forest together discussing this. We had been trying to start a family and had been encountering problems that are all too common but far too little discussed. Lizzie had needed the seclusion and the enveloping embrace of the oaks during this time as much as I had. Our rainforest had become a place of consolation and healing for her too and she was determined to find a way to share it

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with other hopeful women who were finding the path to motherhood equally hard. We knew that all of this would have to work alongside protecting, restoring and expanding the rainforest and that the habitat would always need to be prioritised above the humans who would come to spend time in its shade. Our vision for the future of Cabilla and the Thousand Year Trust were born.

This book tells the story of the years that followed, our journey to create the first charity dedicated to the restoration of the UK's Atlantic temperate rainforests and the first retreat centre located in the heart of one of these rainforests. How we healed ourselves, found a new purpose for our failing farm and started a national movement that will run along our Celtic spine from northern Scotland to the tip of Cornwall. Just as walking along one of the more remote forest paths at Cabilla is beset by fallen trees, brambles and thorns, so this trail has been one of challenge, frustration, perseverance and eventual success.

This is a story of finding hope in a rainforest. Amid the cacophony of reports that we are all reading every day about habitat collapse, failing ecosystems and runaway climate change there is a faint beacon of optimism glowing across the western reaches of the British Isles. Our temperate rainforests have plummeted from 20 per cent of our island to less than 1 per cent, but this moment can be the bottom of that bell curve, the handbrake turn moment, where we reverse the decline and ensure that over the decades and centuries that follow we return this abundance to our hills and valleys and make our own dent in the climate change catastrophe. After well over a thousand years plunged into the long night of obscurity the dawn is finally breaking over our ancient Celtic

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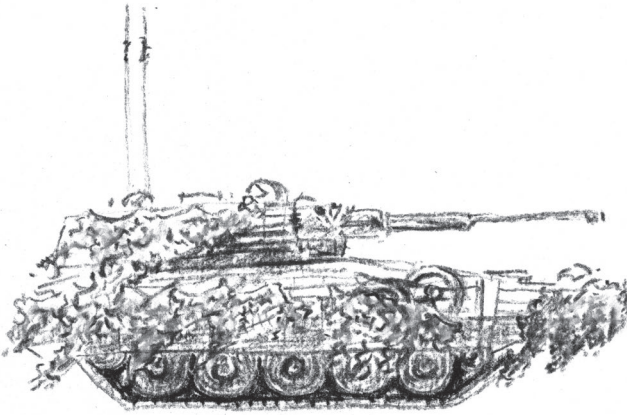
rainforests. In this darkness they have shrivelled, withered and many have perished, leaving their bones scattered across our western reaches. Those that remain are tiny, suffocating due to a range of man-made pressures and shrinking ever further. As the first warming rays of a rainforest dawn break through the canopy and light up the declining slumber of the sedge-strewn floor, a new chapter is beginning where these vanishing pockets of wonder have a final chance to be held, healed and helped back to their former strength and vitality.

I can feel that vitality returning as my father and I stumble up the rocky scree, arm in arm, searching for that hidden spring among the boulders. The blood seeping through his hastily handkerchiefed forearm has dried and slowed despite the mizzle that soaks through our old waxed jackets. After all of these years he still knows the forest more intimately than anyone else. His old explorer's instinct has never faded or dulled. We find the spring on that cool May morning and laugh together as we take turns lying face down in the mud and drinking the pure sweet water that bubbled up from within the rocks. My father has recently recovered from almost two months of being sedated in hospital with severe Covid. The doctors told us he would almost certainly die and his survival has been near miraculous. This foray into the forest is part of his healing and recuperation now that he is home. The strength is slowly returning to his old tempered muscles and bones at the same time that, as a family, we are working to re-energise the bones of the wise oaks that surround us throughout this rainforest. Whether young or old, sick or healthy, we can all find succour and peace under the Celtic oaks of our most ancient habitat.

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The Desert of Death



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