The Pioneer of Anti-Topping

Tree topping, like child abuse and animal cruelty, inflict harm on the helpless. All three also have outward signs that alert and anger people of good conscience. While some who observe the abuse remain silent, others speak out or take action.

Perhaps the first to speak out against topping was John Davey. Davey was an Englishman who as a boy was apprenticed to learn the trades of horticulture and landscape gardening. When he immigrated to America in 1875, the only work he could find was that of school janitor. Eventually he became the grounds keeper at a cemetery in Kent, Ohio. By 1890 he already had a local reputation as “the tree man of the town.” He and his son planted street trees and did tree work for grateful residents.

John was a hard worker, but he was also a thinker and crusader. After a long day outdoors, he would spend his evenings writing pamphlets about proper tree care and finally a book, _The Tree Doctor_. No publisher was interested but Davey believed enough in his cause to put up $7,000 to have the book printed. That was in 1901. It was a good investment, because he and his son soon had so much work to do they could not keep up with it. To train others, they established The Davey Institute of Tree Surgery and in 1909, The Davey Tree Expert Company. The rest, as they say, is history.

One reason why Davey’s book was so expensive to print was that there was a photo on almost every page. And on those pages, over a century ago, Davey railed against tree topping and he minced no words. There were pictures of mutilated trees and captions such as: “The Work of Ignorant Tree Men,” and “Tree Beauty is Forever Gone.” Davey taught the principles of proper tree care as he understood them at the time. As for topping, he summed up his feelings with “Nature does not form at the time. As for topping, he summed up his feelings with “Nature does not form sprouts and the entrance of decay fungi.”

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