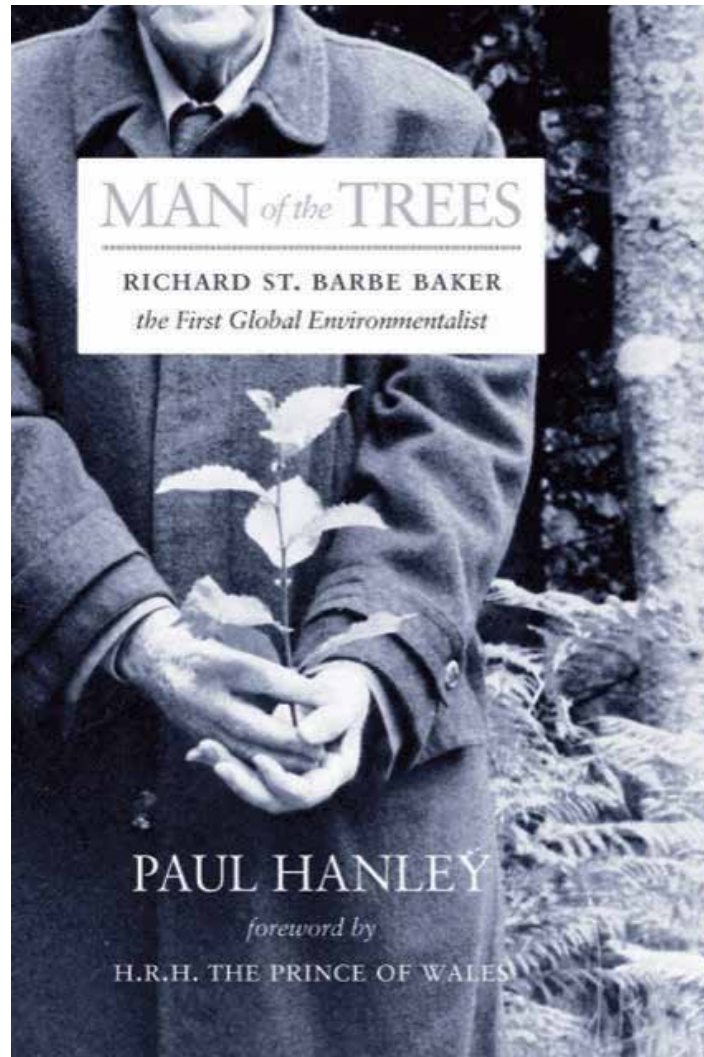


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Prologue

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I met Richard St. Barbe Baker in 1976. He was a vigorous eighty-five. To me, at twenty-four, he seemed the archetypal sage: snow-white hair and gentle face, worn by long years of travel; compassionate wisdom and utmost confidence; zeal undiminished after decades of relentless effort to save forests on six continents.

He even used a staff.

He had invited himself to the University of Regina, in my home-town, to lecture on trees. Apparently he was a world-renowned conservationist, yet none of my circle had heard of him. There was an aura about him, but who was he? People seemed a bit confused. Was it his name? Was he considered a saint? Someone called him *Sir* Richard.

I was part of the Earthcare Group, a university seminar on biodynamic agriculture. It seemed the place to send a 'Man of the Trees.' An impromptu talk was organized. Little did we know that Dr. Baker was well known in the biodynamic movement launched by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, whose ideas Baker had helped introduce to Britain; or that he was a close friend of Herbert Koepf, whose book was a course text; or that he was considered, along with Sir Albert Howard and Sir Robert McCarrison, among the founding fathers of organic agriculture in England. He never mentioned these credentials.

After studying his life I now see that his short visit to Regina was classic Baker. That night we met at an apartment he had 'commandeered.' The hosts seemed delighted, if a little surprised, when dozens squeezed in for a fireside chat. Baker was a storyteller par excellence. We were rapt as he told us of the first dance of the trees in Kenya, of the fight to save the redwoods, of his campaign to reforest the Sahara. His enthusiasm was infectious.

I also met Hugh Locke that night. Hugh's story is a good example of the influence Baker often had on people. Originally from small-town Saskatchewan, Hugh was about to move to London to take a second degree in architecture. As we walked home that night, he told me he had

decided to combine his studies with offering to be Baker's assistant. He did, and eventually this work morphed into a career in international development. Later, Hugh co-founded Haiti's Smallholder Farmers Alliance. Using social forestry methods pioneered by Baker in Africa, thousands of Haitian farmers are now planting over a million trees a year, overcoming poverty while restoring the landscape. Baker is still planting trees, through many proxies.

Also among the guests that night was the provincial minister of the environment, listening intently. Who invited him? Baker always courted government officials, the higher the better. He aimed to meet the top dog and had met dozens of heads of state, royals, aristocrats, chiefs, and ministers. His message was always the same: Plant Trees to Save the Planet!

Today, most environmentalists—most people, perhaps—have heard of Al Gore, Wangari Maathai, David Suzuki, Jane Goodall, and other world-renowned environmental activists. Though not so well known, Baker was arguably the first such 'global environmentalist' and most certainly a pioneer of the modern environmental movement.

Born in England in 1889, Baker had a long connection to Saskatchewan, where he had made a stab at homesteading in 1909. He later became conservator of forests in Kenya and Nigeria in the 1920s, an international forestry advisor, popular lecturer, and bestselling author. He was dubbed "Man of the Trees" by the famed American broadcaster Lowell Thomas, who predicted Baker would someday marry a tree. (Trees did figure prominently at his weddings.)

The day after our gathering at the University, I joined Baker at the Indian Head Tree Nursery. The nursery, opened in 1901 to produce trees for the treeless Canadian plains, was turning out millions of saplings a year for shelterbelts and wildlife habitat. As we toured the place, we noticed that herbicides were being used to control weeds. Baker mentioned that the last time he had visited the nursery they weren't using herbicides. When was that? our guides asked. 1910, he said. Without a hint of criticism, he simply noted he had never used a herbicide in any nursery or forestry situation in over eighty years as a tree planter. It really was eighty years: he planted his first trees in his father's nursery as a toddler. (No doubt, Paul Hanley, *Man of the Trees: Richard St. Barbe Baker, The First Global Conservationist*. University of Regina Press, 2018. <https://uofrpress.ca/Books/M/Man-of-the-Trees> Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Baker turned over in his grave when the Canadian government shut down the Indian Head Tree Nursery in 2013.)

Baker was well ahead of his time in advocating sustainable forestry. He predicted the local and global impacts of deforestation and desertification decades before these were widely acknowledged. In 1922 he started the first international ENGO (environmental non-governmental organization), The Men of the Trees, which in its heyday had members in 108 countries. In 1936 he launched *Trees*, which after eighty years is considered the oldest environmental journal still being published. In addition to kings and presidents, his extraordinary networks of contacts included leaders of thought, visionaries, eminent scientists, artists, eccentrics, crackpots, and ordinary people everywhere who loved trees. He had a particular affinity for Indigenous people, especially in Africa, where he was the first European inducted into the secret society of Kikuyu elders.

Like his uncle, the explorer Sir Samuel White Baker, St. Barbe (as friends called him) had a taste for adventure, which he indulged in every corner of the world. A cowboy and lumberjack in Saskatchewan, he was among the first one hundred students at its fledgling university. In the 1970s, his alma mater awarded him an honorary doctorate, presented by an old friend, John Diefenbaker, the university's chancellor and a former prime minister of Canada.

After recovering from wounds sustained in the First World War and completing his forestry training at the University of Cambridge, Baker began his career in Africa's tropical forests. At one point, the territory he administered was as large as France. An early advocate of racial equality, he was blacklisted by the colonial service for his interventions on behalf of Africans, after which he began his cease- less planet-wide travels to promote forest conservation.

In his twenties and thirties, he pioneered now familiar development concepts such as social forestry, permaculture, agroecology, fair trade, and ecotourism. In his forties, he succeeded in manoeuvring the warring factions in Palestine into a collaborative reforestation scheme. In his fifties, he campaigned to save California's redwoods. In his sixties, he crossed the Sahara on a ground-breaking ecological survey. In his seventies, he traveled the length of New Zealand—more than 1,500

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kilometres—on horseback. In his eighties, he took up the study of Chinese, intending to cross the Gobi Desert on a Mongolian pony. In his nineties, he finally made it to China.

His greatest obsession was the idea of reforesting the Sahara by way of a military-style campaign requiring an army of twenty-two million tree planters. Twice he traveled around that desert—and once through the middle of it—visiting every Saharan leader to promote the project. Queen Elizabeth recognized his efforts to save the world’s forests by awarding him the Order of the British Empire.

That’s it in a nutshell. But as you read about his life in detail, what emerges is a portrait of an indefatigable conservation hero full of paradox. Baker was a sylvan Don Quixote, a forester who rarely had a steady income, often surviving on the largesse of others. He was at once humble and self-aggrandizing; was equally at home in a thatched hut or a mansion; was by turns paternalistic and progressive, conventional and eccentric, soldier and peace activist.

By today’s norms, readers will find aspects of his early attitudes toward Africans antiquated, even offensive. No attempt is made to whitewash his comments from the 1920s. By 1966, in his book *Sahara Conquest*, we see he has rejected the “scramble for colonial power, which unfortunately characterized the latter part of the nineteenth century” and embraced the African liberation movement. As his story unfolds, we see the gradual transformation of his consciousness as he sets aside the Edwardian values of imperial Britain and becomes a world citizen and an ally of Indigenous people. Significantly, he recognized in the traditional cultures of Indigenous peoples he met in Canada, Africa, New Zealand, India, and elsewhere, keys to rectifying the dominant mechanistic worldview that sanctioned the systematic destruction of the ecosphere.

Serendipity was his currency. He had a way of being in the right place at the right time to nudge others, whether presidents or popes, to action.

Or did he? At times, his stories strain credulity. Did he really plant the seed that became Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps? Did he deliberately exaggerate his role? Did he consciously craft his own mythology?

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Clearly, he was a visionary, a charismatic speaker, an engaging writer, a great campaigner. In 2006, when the United Kingdom's Environment Agency proposed the one hundred greatest eco-heroes of all time, there is Baker. He is ranked below figures such as Rachel Carson and Al Gore, but, curiously, above the Dalai Lama, Charles Darwin, Mahatma Gandhi, and even Gautama Buddha!

Some things *are* certain: He started planting trees as a child and never stopped. He mobilized thousands to plant and protect billions of trees. And the thousands he inspired carry on his work.

Dr. Baker's epitaph can be distilled to the words of his favourite poet, Henry Van Dyke:

*He that planteth a tree is a servant of God,
He provideth a kindness for many generations,
And faces that he hath not seen shall bless him.*