



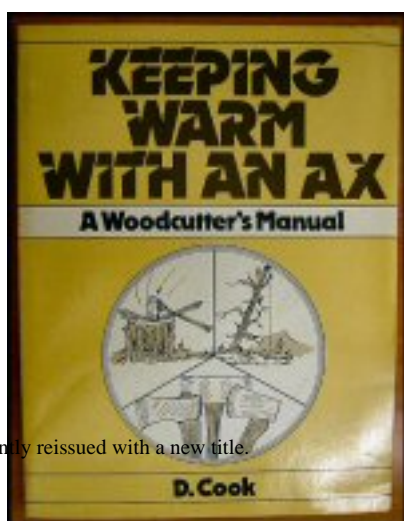
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Dudley Cook, The Ax Book and Keeping Warm with an Ax

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- Skills and guides - Library -



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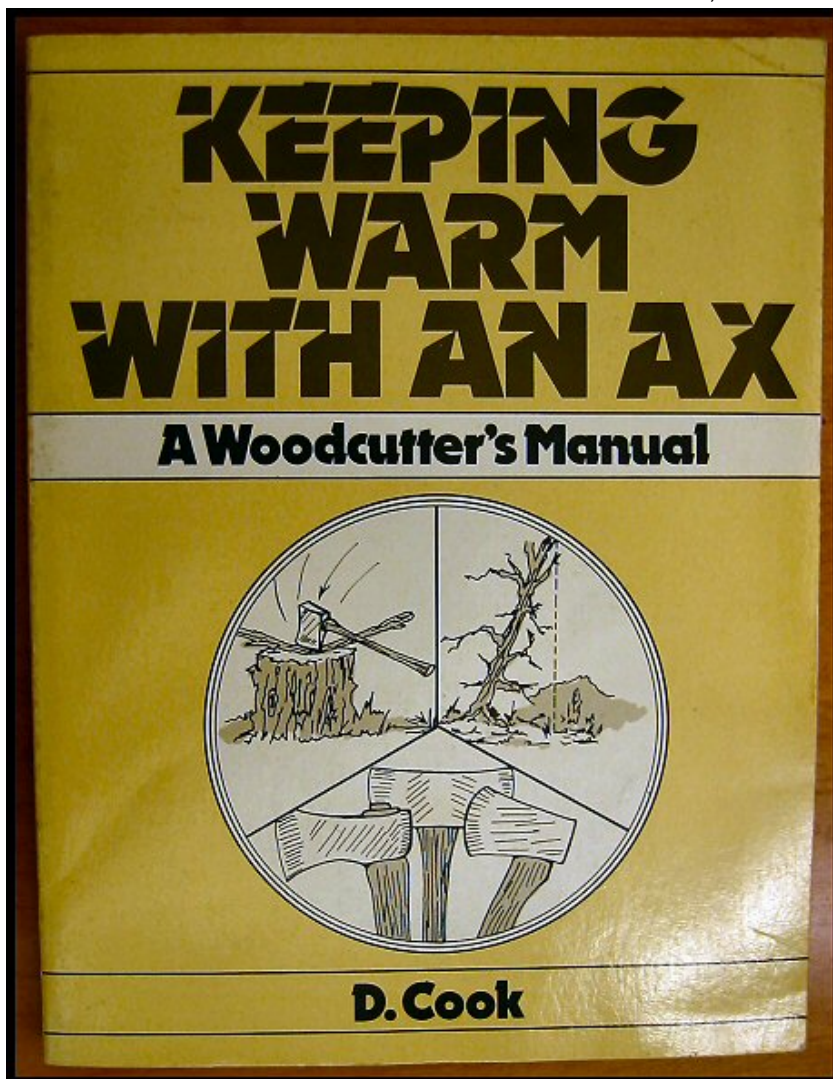
Description :

An excellent ax manual, recently reissued with a new title.

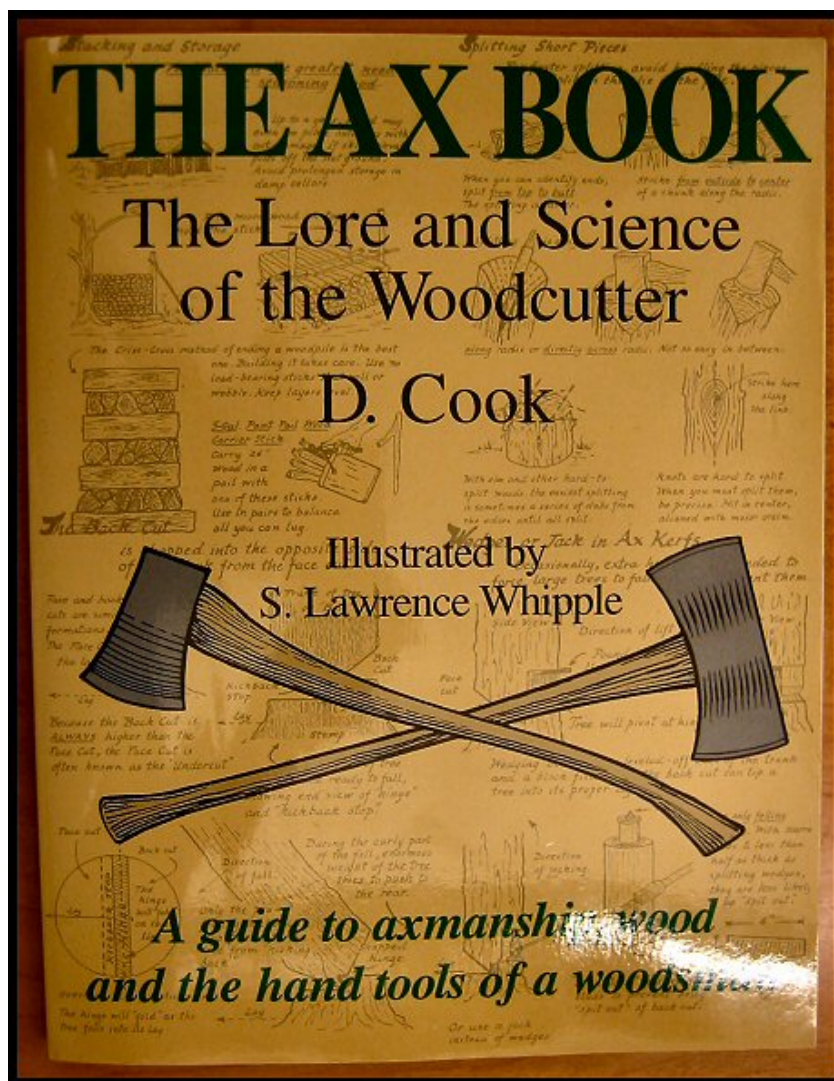
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Keeping Warm with an Ax A Woodcutters Manual D. Cook 1981 Universe Books, New York ISBN 0-87663-552-4



The Ax Book The Lore and Science of the Woodcutter A guide to the axmanship, wood and the hand tools of a woodsman D. Cook 1999 Alan C. Hood & Company, Chambersburg, PA ISBN 0-911469-16-8



Both Illustrated by S. Lawrence Whipple

Dudley Cook's excellent ax manual originally published in 1981 as **Keeping Warm with an Ax** was recently re-released in 1999 as **The Ax Book**. The new version is identical to the original save for a foreword by Castle Freeman Jr. who states:

If you know one thing well and set out to explain it clearly and completely, you may find yourself explaining many things. You may find the pamphlet you sat down to write has become an encyclopedia. Hence the old story of the simple cobbler who proposed to write on fixing shoes. Once fairly started, he found he couldn't write about fixing shoes without writing about hammer, benches, pegs, and awls; he had to touch on leather, as well, on tanning, on cattle, and on the anatomy of the human foot and leg. In the end, he had written a book about everything. The cobbler had become a philosopher.

There is something of this same feeling about The Ax Book, here revised and reissued following its original publication in 1981. It is a book about saws, fuel, wood, trees, forestry, steel, history, geography, morals, and much else. Its author, Dudley Cook, of Waterboro, Maine, tells the reader a certain amount about himself. He has evidently worked in the woods a great deal, having learned to use an ax and the other tools of the woodsman as a boy growing up in small New England town in the 1930s. He doesn't say whether, in writing The Ax Book, he found he had taken on a longer journey than he had expected; but if so, he was equal to the task, and his reader is the gainer by the bargain. p vii.

Chapters are illustrated by S. Lawrence Whipple with simple but efficient and clear line drawing. Cook covers a wide range of ax topics. Excellent stories of his mentor, Lloyd Warren Simpson, who taught him axmanship when Cook was employed as an assistant groundskeeper at the Wiswall Sanatorium in *The Hurricane of '38* and Cook's young experiences in *First Blood* are excellent introductory chapters. More technical chapters include discussion of ax efficiency, choosing an ax, double or single bit, and swinging an ax. These lead into discussions of felling and felling hazards, limbing, bucking and splitting, all with excellent illustrations.

And like Castle Freeman notes in the foreword, Cook does not stop with just these topics, but discusses wood, weather effects, handling and storing wood and burning wood. These chapters lead into ax maintenance...sharpening, choosing handles and hanging them. The remaining chapters cover saws, sharpening and using them, and even discussions of the health benefits of cutting your own wood and maintaining your woodlot. Nearly the woodcutters encyclopedia of Freeman's foreword.

Breaking somewhat from my traditional review format, I am going to quote bits from this manual at random to give some sense of the detail Cook presents, and convey the readable way he presents this information.

The Double-Bitted Ax *One bit is frequently reserved for felling and the other for limbing. The felling bit could be thinner so it could bite deeper into the clear, straight grain of the tree trunk. The limbing bit would routinely encounter the incredibly dense knots and would need a coarser bevel back away from the cutting edge to prevent the bit from chipping. p. 19*

A double-bitted ax may be 2 1/2 longer overall than an average single-bitted ax and nearly 3 1/2 longer than the efficient ax of Diagram 3. An ax of this additional length is certainly more cumbersome, yet in use, it is surprisingly accurate. Why? The question is interesting, because for a double ax, the distance from either bit to the axis of pivot is comparatively long, about 4 1/2 to 5. As noted in the last chapter, single axes with a long fore-end are less accurate. Does the same principle apply to a double?.....A major portion of the answer apparently lies in the similarity of the double ax on either side of the axis of pivot. It has no built in tendency to wobble, because both bits, both ends of the ax, are of equal weight. One end cannot pull the other out of the intended line of cut. A second factor may be less implausible than it seems. The broadside silhouette of the double ax is nearly half again as large as the outline of the comparable singles. This greater image is easier to be visually aware of during the descending stroke and therefore easier to guide on and to make continuing corrections by right up to the instant of impact....The third factor seeming to grant greater accuracy to the double ax is not a positive advantage of the double at all, but an inherent disadvantage of the single, and not in the axhead but in its gracefully curved handle. Simply stated, that design of handle promotes inaccuracy....For pure capacity to cut wood effectively, the double-bitted ax is superior to any single-bitted ax designed to date. p. 20

The Efficient Ax *For the efficient ax, the cutting edge should be only slightly curved from corner to corner. It should not be straight, either, but almost. Many axes are designed with a pronounced curvature of blade. Many older axes still cut even though their bits have been ground away until they almost half-round. Why then should an efficient ax need an edge that is almost straight? The principle reason is that any shearing action (as distinguished from sawing) that is not backed up with another blade as scissors are, is best done with a straight-edged cutter. Do you cut bread, sausage, or cheese with a half-moon knife? If you did, you would scarcely know where you started and where you stopped. The same principle applies to wood. p. 15*

Sharpening Axes *Sharpening an ax is seldom a job that you can do in fifteen seconds by zipping a stone a couple of swipes across each ax cheek. If you expect an ax to cut well, you usually will have to spend some time readying it. Almost customarily, a new ax will have a bit that is too thick. You must reduce it to have a bit that cuts well. Slimming down a tempered steel edge requires caution. If you overdo the job you can irretrievably spoil an ax. Slow as hand tool may be, it is safer to use them for sharpening unless you have a lot of experience in grinding fine*

tools.....To check your ax against Diagram 39 you will need an ordinary protractor and some device similar to large dividers to reproduce angles from you ax bit. Two old hacksaw blades screwed together at one end so they can just pivot will be excellent for copying the angles of the cutting edge and the cheek area. These two angles are the more important ones. p. 79

The chapters are both interesting to read, and convey detailed information in a readable and enjoyable way. The personal experience chapters and snippets from his life experiences add immeasurably to what could be a pretty dry subject. Some of the technical discussions of pivot angles and wrist deflection errors can be tough sledding but Cook attempts to make his points in as clear a manner as possible, and even if the discussion slides into murky engineering the point is quite clear in the conclusion.

Overall an excellent book and an excellent ax resource manual, and the fairly recent re-release can be easily found once again at decent prices. It would have been great to have had a new chapter discussing finding a decent ax in today's marketplace since most of the old line manufactures have slowly died away, but Cook's principles for ax selection and refurbishment are sound even if it is quite difficult to find a selection of ax patterns in the hardware stores. Just try asking for a Michigan swamping ax or a Puget Sound felling ax in the typical box store and see what sort of look you get. Better bets may be found in the back stock of your local old-style hardware or timber supply houses, along with vintage axes found on eBay and the new generation quality pieces such as the Swedish Gransfors Bruks.

Keeping Warm with an Ax or its reissued twin ***The Ax Book*** are highly recommended. Both are large format softcovers with reasonable quality paper. The original title can be found on Bookfinder at approximately the same selling prices as new copies of ***The Ax Book***, \$22.50.

Post-scriptum :

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