

Colin Simms

Colin Simms — selected bibliography

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OTTERS and MARTENS

Colin Simms

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OTTERS

“It is a few minutes only since we were looking at fresh otter seal almost at our doorsteps, and the thrill has not diminished since other occasions down this Tyne at Scotswood, up the Coquet and Allens and all manner of Northern waters up to seventy years ago. Colin Simms has a scientific treatise on otters being cautiously put together, but I hope this collection of his observational poems, pieces which first brought his work to my attention, will stand as a celebration of otters and their freedom, for the discerning. Long may the wild wanderer, and the unashamed poet, be at liberty to choose the way and where of living even to-day.”

Basil Bunting, Greystead 1983

Watter had vitalled
that wettens now
blood leif to leave
treasured and swelled
as taints in current
air over the river
so they grow green-ness
by the same stones marked
blood leased by leeches
long passion decides
length and strength

nourished, gi'en blood
wattles and muddied
of its pressure
smells . . . unhurried
spraints meshed and measured
arrested even stones
as his muzzle will, heedless
 where the flood reached the moon
stone-loaches the otter ett
where floodwater subsides
 and tides

Otter Dead in Water (Drowned by 'keeper) 1984

Aggregate melt-water remembered in him his territory this dog-otter
Scarlutra, Scargill Beck otter bigger, as hill fox is bigger
the same as only a few thousand years back to impermanent ice
may it be. Many a bitter winter since. This one skates ice like Skarp-Hedin
this otter - makes - water of grass
on land elements blend but in water this one braids and beads, surfs and lines
Swale to Tees defines and defies rain on the wind
nothing to litter eleven canoes in a wild weekend of one storm
the fastest rise in England after a storm these rivers his utter delight
repose displaced from the river's loads to avoid learns ditches
adapts raffishly leaf-beat, bits of stick, stranded fishes
ground slick froth white-grime of flood-debris
makes the water work for him some fish leap for him, all-found
leaves gleam sticking to everything, all around.

Bowes, 1970

Now that the rivers are bringing down some loam
of husbandman's love off these enlarged winter fields
not merely silt, which would quicken water meadows,
they've cleared the willows to speed the water's flow.
Ings, otters' homes, all else of alder-carr goes
a balance of centuries to the balance-sheet yields.

Floods will increase, and still they gripp
uplands, deep-plough for the new forests, let rip
earth-movers to straighten courses in places
they curse as stagnant, and drain out the bogs
had held the rain in, sphagnum, let it go slowly.
Nature reasserts with storms and man's span
is merely money washed out with dead moles and voles
more for the crows. Lost less slowly; frogs and otters' graces.

Vale of York floods 1968

for C.M.R. and M.E.B.

Poaching up North Tyne without a leistor
and in thin moonlight right-minded Oliver
heard a splashing coming, glinting lit-silver.
Oliver Davidson swung once, and gaffed an otter!
A heavy and long and fit and fussy dog-otter;
his follow-through such that the ruddery monster
landed up on the mossy bank above our Oliver –
the more surprised, whether exulting man or insulted otter
we'll never know! But Oliver toppled over into the water
laughing after the otter cantered away, with a chunter.
Laughed at bruises big as cobbles coming later, did Oliver
but got his fish in that pool, anyway, evening after;
“got a verra bad chest for weeks, thought'd have it forever”
You can hear such gathering-burns laughing their way to the river

from Oliver in Tarsset 1979

lochside silverschistsand disturbed-to-black-below distributed
pattern-padded pewter-grade velvet-hollows grains added otter pattern
wind off water levelling sibilant bevelling gritscreen bankscrie
whistle reminding you of distant wigeon whee-oo
lifting, see prints between bents-tail-race-slice-silt sift sting
still tracks slow upslope shorten portage not forage but for ages
we newcomers can begin to see pattern even from this little elevation
braids loosen elements-stream raise islands bruised-
petal-heartsease-violet trail wakes prospect of please not violence
increasing-in-confidence bolder heavier just before lost in boulders

when we were least aware the stiff log dogging windshore
sure-of-his-lie breaks cover sure-of-his-line leans lie of the land over
from under could not-have-hidden-him right-under-feet wonder
instead left-right losing-using his whole enters not-in-the-line-of-his-head
twisting quick long into the river's plaited-in on-itself longitudinal as time
otters were here before
might be but rivers were like that
if there is still any life in them

Loch Maree 1970

follow the otter my fellow
river my side-brother running where put
(and no other) and in own mind find
the land running through is rich re-instating
relating each meaning to each
each belonging to each, the bushes bending over
the river no more to be said to belong to any one
than anyone of its waterdrops in the circle, the cycle
through sea and sky than any one of its many flies
may-flies living mere hours with man the air shared
above the river surface mingling wind and water
quiet turning of willow leaves on its is
smile on the face of the fisherman's young daughter
caught in and made by the reflection, as of the leaves
have to be perceived together, alternative routes to the otter
are the roots of the otter and all other otters in their turn
take turn here, the dragonfly, even the sulky fish
it is for them only the beginning of their spontaneity

The River Derwent, Yorkshire, 1975

Green-bottle-blocks kelp-racks raise lumpily rubbing-slumping back
deeper than slurping the-word-for-it-waiting sit in the rockslit waisting
lenses swim perspective, help stack: cut-lawn; algae back-stoked raked
enlargement grates, grit-to-pebbles-to-boulders
cliffs round-off sky the same full tide overhead smooth grey west out-over
hull-low undulate us that; was-that-dog-seal head-up down-back-bob
nothing dents noting slabgrab at flab foam cream-off serpulid graffiti
gravestones denying any present even as same head rears reluctant ears nearer
defining otter: a feeling: not even a shape: agape; without form offer
firm man in the cleft of the sky closed anemones torn fronds away
midwinter turned the deep dive its pool debris brings the otter up again
all rudder and silver submarine steel nose tightlipped at the full quiver
little disturbed stones whisker to scale again the otter no matter of monster
but smaller than sea seal kelp, boulder wave braver keener denser than wind
that way.

near Peel, Isle of Man 1964

As you move across the room lines of a fault in the windowglass run
the two otters mist tipped together motes on pages
together-gathered guard-hairs grazed
short frost-lipped furred-grass run
must not touch the hush-hard through it seems it is not reel
anglers commute away complete with bags and boxes mutter a little steam
feel hear the warning like a slapping on water for otter soul
we are in a martial thing poles-pikes-advance
hair-up-at-back-of-neck dog-soldiers
tails up even at rear of ruck
leader strikes scent
everyone rises to something eskimo taut about every hunt hurt at heart
nothing like
fast toward black centre from grey sides somewhere past to the cave hides
from the sun

Northern Counties (Tees) hunt, 1960

tell me if you know where the heart of man goes
with no shallows to play in after he's stopped lunging for tiddlers and tadpoles
with no clay banks to slide down, for to chute the right way when he grows
committed to gun and cunt struggling upstream dislodging setstones as he slows
not after otter but not content with a blank day
shoots the one he watches playing on the way where I was watching on the other side
like at the asylum-landing at Rawcliffe, Harrison riverman studied their muddy ride
cubs and parents year after year York folk never harmed them until the turn of tide
after the war brought more steel back home
and you don't hear them bark or whistle near the busy boatyards any more
or they go linked-arm by the willows or lifting skirts to the flood-mud shore
and the island hover even the 'touched-in-the-head' kept-in-the-head where he saw
otters above ground in daylight, otters chasing moorhens,
so that boys only had been initiated to it when they were sure.

Cascades Oregon hunt 1973

Rank-tidestrandside neap
smooth furred skin coming away from sealscorpse stained by slurry
ships-oil-can and boxwood
piles of fish-with-the-best-bite-out rot, oiled guillemot
with difficulty recognised with salt slant eyes memorised
the old dog-otter one-foot-short reduced to a scold natter of bones and scavenge
with dog-fox one night and the dog the next, near sized
still had open eyes from the drifters' revenge
on the North Sea, the dump of damned sprats in heaps, neeps too many for market
moon threat over them
sun not needed
godwits receded after wet horizons reducing sluicing polluting slicing diffuse
place defused of one power cracked for oil lit up chemical underwear
detergents deproof otter underfoot.

Seal Sands, Teesmouth 1965, 1976

dibble out a mandible tight in stalactite
badger it loose carefully prized or might-be-otter
compare osteologically to be fair
the weasel-family share some structure

concerned to discover what-comes-up-from-a-place
hard impressions to put flesh on lines-to-a-face

but we don't know individual-behaviour-same-stricture
what river-otters were *doing*
to be interred in high-ridge caves even in human burial-cysts
an accidental en-fracture
what when these high-dry hills were not
high dry hills but
so "what does it tell you what is it worth"
decent-clearing-events of small patch of an old earth.

bonecave, North Pennines 1969