Colin Simms – poet, naturalist, and lifelong independent observer – was born in 1939, and lives as an author and freelance naturalist in the North of England, with journeys throughout the northern hemisphere, wherever his objectives live – his homes have been where the martens, otters, birds of prey and other enthusiasms are. He is not an orthodox conservationist, but insists on the privacy, ‘isness’, for wildlife which modern trends deny. He also demonstrates the poet-naturalist’s concern for precise observation, apposite language and cadence. North American wildlife and the Native American tribes, and their history, have been a life-long fascination of his; this volume brings together all of his long poems, and a large number of shorter poems on these themes.
Colin Simms — selected bibliography

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The American Poems

Colin Simms

Shearsman Books
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CONTENTS

Author’s Note 7

No North-Western Passage 9
Carcajou 35
Missouri River Songs 47
A Celebration of the Stones in a Water-Course 59
Parflèche 89
Rushmore Inhabitation 111
The Compression of the Bones of Crazy Horse 129

Shorter Poems: 139
  The Thieves’ Road 141
  Coming Off the Hills, Urra 142
  Rocky Mountain Locust Strewn 143
  April in 1622, High Plains 144
  ‘Allied Extermination’ 145
  Crossing Minnesota, West 146
  ‘Blue-blooded’ 147
  There is not difference, we are all offence 148
  Gray Alders 149
  Storm Crossing Texas 150
  ‘Giving is everything’, but only a hint 151
  Bear Skull 152
  Snake turns through the great trench of West Wyoming 153
  Fasting, to the Arapaho Sundance 154
  Thinking, Put in Mind of Kerouac 155
  At Pine Ridge, 1973 156
  Targs 157
  Sami in their tipis 158
  George Catlin artist from the early 1830’s 159
  ‘Medicine Deer’ Rock 161
  Equipment for Taxidermy 162
  Clark’s Nutcracker 163
  Ptarmigan 164
  Great Northern Diver (her Common Loon) 165
loon-call for all long shorelines . . . 166
Snowy Owl 167
MacKay’s Snow Bunting 168
Riding: The Platte, Nebraska 169
Fire Place 170
Padding Words Stalk Some Passing Cat 171
Mount Rainier 172
Aplomado Falcon 173
from Black Hambledon – Black Hills Songs
Black Hambledon 174
Sturgis 175
Topcliffe, Up the Escarpment 176
Bad River, Teton 177
We wanted to look at War Cloud’s paintings 178
Short Stack with Navaho 179
Bobcat 180
NNWP 181
Beaver-Lodge reality 182
Being in the Bin, or the Irrelevance of ‘Recycling’ 183
High Rockies, October 1997 185
‘American Marten, Replacing the Pine Marten in England’ 186
G.T.T. 1984 187
from ‘Climbing’: Book 5 of ‘Tea at 40’ 188
Hell Canyon, on Snake River, Idaho 1973 189
The Pine Ridge Gyrfalcon 190
Prairie 191
The Book of Nature 192
New Airframe 193
from Tea at 40 194
Quake, Communicate 195
The Cypress Hills, and Barrens 196
Agelaius phoeniceus 197
Mississippi Floods at Moline, April 1973 198
Smelt 199
The Place You Recommend 200
New Drift Country . . . 201
Passenger Pigeon, Extinct 1914 202
Mass Movement 203
From an Unfinished ‘American’ Long-Poem 204
Author’s Note

Acknowledgements must be attempted, and a few pointers to other realities. Readings given at a series of Quaker meetings and Methodist Missions gave many early contacts amongst The People. For encouragement at critical points in my involvements, ‘politics’ and ‘poetry’, many in North America and Britain and Eurasia are responsible and some I know don’t want mentioning here. A few names are in the text. Many remembered with gratitude and a few who are mostly dead now: Sid Chaplin, Basil Bunting, Benét Tvedten, Chris Grieve (‘Hugh MacDiarmid’), Marlon Brando, Bob Mitchum. Earlier publishers, especially Bob Cobbing, Peter Hodgkiss, Eric Mottram, Gary Greenup and John Welch were very supportive, as were a few journalists in Britain and America but not the *Sunday Times* who reneged on me at Wounded Knee II. Joy Ufford over thirty years, relatives of mine over there even longer, have made a lot of work possible, and for hospitality over thirty years’ of visits, 1967-97, on reservations, in camps, in homes of all sorts – hogans, tepees, trailers, log and tar shacks, ranches, ‘hotels’ . . . Hospitality here in return to several, with whom I’ve walked and ridden the Scottish Borders and West, Cumberland and Northumberland and the Durham Dales and Yorkshire Dales and North Riding moors.

Amerindian music was and is essential; texts from Frances Densmore on ‘Native American Ceremonial songs’ tapes †7702A and B (1977) (Leonard and Mary and Christine Crow Dog), Jerome Rothenberg’s ‘Horse Songs’ and “total translations” of Navaho songs originally sung by Frank Mitchell (7707A). These, and earlier versions, were transcribed and prepared from time to time by careful friends who have also proved critics in their different ways and persisted with me – including Mary Hider, Lesley Simms, Vivien Taylor, Bob Cobbing, Harry Gilonis, E. Kelly and Margaret Hartley. The Native Americans Paul War Cloud, Leonard Crow Dog, Gladys Bissonette are only a few of the many reservation and other men, women and children, from Manitoba to Arizona and Oklahoma, Alaska to Baja California and in cities – especially Seattle, St. Louis, San Francisco, Denver, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York – who helped, all sorts of ways, and provided good crack. Some of these pieces were written in their homes; as was ‘NNWP’ at Muirburn and Brownsbank‡ in Lanarkshire in the company of Chris Grieve and his wife Valda. My thanks to all. May my inadequacies spur on others . . .


† For instance: available also with Jackson MacLow, Charlie Morrow and other poets on 7711 A (1977) from the New Wilderness Foundation, Inc., 365 West End Avenue, New York N.Y. 10024.

‡ From a tape-recording of that meeting, following a reading of the poem:

C.S.— “. . . and that is surely too long?”

C.M.G.— “Oh, [laughing] – it is not long enough! Each of these American long-poems are remarkable . . . and powerful enough: ye ken ye hev a subject of muir importance than anything I’ve read for a long time. God! . . .”
The Compression of the Bones of Crazy Horse

(Wahtunka Witko) Oglala Sioux, 1842–77, leaving no known likeness no known resting place. Translated words, spoiled, bracketed, are his own and others’ of The People
Moor Grouse for the Big guns.

As the Cleveland Blackamore Hills do for North Yorkshire
so the Black Hills presentiment the westward mountains eastward
Blue Clouds piled loud as Harney’s Peak
spilled dark on their pediments
impediments to Ultimate Destiny
the heart-rest of Plains Indians extend
the West eastward biogeographically
withstand resistance to
the cars
a Horned Lark bare-place _Eremophila alpestris_ rings
the whole hemisphere only his decreasing circle sings day-stars
(I am of one mind
with the place I am) single syllables span
the broad dome, the Red ‘Valley’ girdle inset around it in trance
geomorphologists naming it the Race Track, Red Cinders
Sundance to Rapid City to Hot Springs and back north to Sundance
from the laccolithic ancient centre outward granitic, igneous
indigenous as its Indian, like them a Quaternary Development
crystalline schistose metamorphic like its people
unglaciated limestone-plateau sedimentary
parkland on this
the whole ringed by the Dakota Coteau and Hog-back
(if I were a rock I would he very old
and lie around all day)*
cheek by jowl with the Bad Land this rich heartland
the hearth of the sky’s teepee
(I am close to the Holy Hills and will always see
how happy
the mule-deer will be picking-up new scents:

they are like me and will hide me)
the bones of the land

scapula and sacrum

the comic and the leader in his body is the mime

BLACK HILLS HIDEAWAYS
(REAL ESTATE)

starkshirthsplitskirts

tourist twist eyes West tint windshields

feel the rhythm of the concrete rafts

will not get out of the car much under the sky riding

the arc of air

the anvil-cloud in tension like a coracle

Sans Arc they lined-up Minneconjou

skull and clavicle of a mink pulled out of river

Till between England and Scotland, 1976

Cheyenne, Brulé, Santée Yankstoné

Northumberland umbral understalks talk

along the Greasy Grass, the Little-Big Horn 1876

Blackfoot Sioux, Oglala, Hunkpapa closed the circle

a few Arapaho, Grosventres. Custer Died For Your Sins

the whole bow of that village bent in tension and the grass spins

Sprague’s Pipit the only endemic characteristic

diagnostic of the High Plains sings, spring in winter

(the winter is so wide, it fills the skies

does it reach your heart?)*

In the Pine Ridge Schoolroom

Chungkpi Opi Wahkpala — The Creek Called Wounded Knee

Big Foot Dead In the Snow With His Band and The End of Those Wars, 1890

warmth-being-what you bring into the morning pipits warning

‘sing-a-sting-a-stinging-sing’

towering, flushed out of short grass on the Hogback

hard-to-see

tingling to listen to

(The War Was For

The Black Hills)

territory being all twisted up

by metamorphosis

like this schist is

so that the lines in it cannot be recognised

they have been so separated
High-Plains inflection
A lonely tree speaks to an old telephone-pole
‘The snow has made me cold and weary
But that’s what winter is’
‘Some more is on its way’

on being released
the captive raptor
turns its claws on itself
and its own kind
not a wild thing any more!

subtended, displaced
bear no relation to the ground they are from
the poorest land: the Reservation
waits and had been waiting
clear for the cleaning of the land

Waiting for Blue Grama Grass
*Butelova gracilis*
and Buffalo Grass *Buchloé*

In Custer National Park today the apparently-wild animals play
blue skirted locust *Dissoteira*, fluttering Common Wood-nymphs and Satyrs
their apparently-idyllic, apparently-alpine way and the British in Arabia sprayed
their locusts and the sheep lost wool and died you know

U.S. SPRAYS whole States AGAINST RODENTS and Gooks Allah and Manitto

keep as-careful books.

And whatever happened to the Predator
when English banks closed-off the Open Range before 1910
and the Indian with bringing-them-in to the Agencies
Ironically for an arid land

Bad Land Topography has developed a Fine-Drainage Texture . . .
in one of these Beheaded Streams in Blind Valleys
the bayonetted heart and bones of Crazy Horse are buried
in White River Sands
with the carocoids of dinosaurs his coracle is clavicled
one grave that will not be robbed.

After The Winter They Didnt Come In Crazy Horse’s choice
when Little Big Man who had fought in the snow with him became a Police-man
reminds me of the subtlety those Americans come to England or Europe to find
they’ve left behind (Land is not on paper.
How can we sell what we walk upon) The State Experts
they thought Mustela nigripes was gone forever (Pispiza etopta sapa:
The Black-footed Ferret just because they had not seen it
If a Wasichu looks at you with malice — you will chew
his gut, hypnotise him to bad luck just as they do
the Prairie-Dog Cynomys) (never mind Old Nokomis)
there’s gold in them thar someone’s Going To Get It
Where did the Buffalo go

for a while birches lash each others’ faces
fray in the wind, strip leaves
and then the wind changes
and aspens take up the fray and chant
braes brant aslant the sperrit it is a widderin’ thing
like the willow-tree wind in a quiet wood
Or this circumscribed cottonwood’s skullridge
Whistling to us of an arrow struck on wood

it shakes confined in a radius rings sharp marks out a chord
sharp syntax awed, stood (we stuck to the land, quivered with it
As I ride through by B.M.W. and H-D Cheyenne to Laramie the old buffalo-trail
erosion pavement you can see thru a peneplain or a Wayland’s etch-plain
(the ambush I am in charge of because for me it is) I conspire with geography
(geology is under) like the Pronghorn Antelope walking this Gangplank over the High Plains
where they’ve laid their rails on the peneplain the buffalo made for them
(Earth doesn’t belong to anyone, but we are all part of it)
struggle only ever made warriors

or poets
‘Texas’ or ‘Dakota’ means ‘our people’
to come here
I will ask the Dakotas their permission
RIDERS BEWARE GOPHER-HOLES

to the Prairie-Dog Town the Burrowing Owl *Speotyto cunicularia* brings consternation there’s always life in a lower level specularisation
sun motes
to relaxing of concentration walking or riding I have felt some tension
a surprise
sudden through the legs with a stiffness in the thighs unrelated to any extra exercise
a suspension
the dregs of consciousness then
the drifting-off into a dream
like the twitch that comes on sudden near-to-sleep
in a sinking-soft sense of stream
with surprise remembered after years
those seeming-same sensations
reverse the accepted screen of given appropriations
the same extension
between the eyes
as I passed them, Herb Elliot and Frank Shorter
as the distant horse dance before the eyes their legs foreshortened
no mirage your quarter-horses. Crazy Horse
and your reported dream.

That stiffness in the thighs, long-distance eyes with the vision in, on stream is the Mixture As Before
for Jimmy Deans - Moves - Camp a century later
who only dreamed of quality with Equus equality
He was forever out on his own
no matter like El’Aurens
into the deserted space his place the pace of it nomad
c.f. Pamir
Hi-Ho’ing Kill-deer Charadrius vociferus
the Long Gun of the hunter and the long-drawn querulous call so that they all,
the tourists, think our Lapwing Plover must be a Bird of Prey
it’s no more that than, say, their
Western Meadowlark Sturnella neglecta
by the rancher as the Indian ‘just something that was there’
to sing in the spring, describe a circle limited, in the air
(Earth Doesn’t Belong to Anyone, But We Are Part Of It)*
(the snow flakes are talking too they say
Our Friends are on their way)*
when you’d have thought it needed most
it’s out there on its own.

DIVIDED HIGHWAY

The Winter They Didn’t Come In
he had to get rid of his friends to bring out his tactics make them
work over and above his love that is his measure.
Now the Promoters ‘of the wilderness’ are
‘ordering the mess’, out of greediness.
Forget the rhyme and we can begin to see rhythm
being is a place for hunting, standing out it
the Black Hills will be again
the Sun and its Dance, again
national sovereignty somewhere in this is
there is no absentee-landlordship of the spirit
The security of sun had dancing made
motes in it are Sprague’s Pipits retina’d
as green the Prairie Rattlesnake Crotalus viridis
just suppose it is as it is for a moment
The Black Hills and the Bad lands are juxtaposed
(the one is beside the other as sister and brother)
positive magic and negative desert in aspect
black-full with pine or yellow with empty light.
(I have asked the Lakota, expect their permission to fight)

at Wounded Knee battlefield, April 1973


The boxed words are:
1. a noticeboard on the North Yorkshire Moors, The ‘Blackamore’ of their best authors
2. & 3. sign beside I 90, S. Dakota
4. U.S. National Park sign
5. Road Sign, Wounded Knee, April 1973