

FINDHORN RIVER POEMS

A Collection of Poetry

by Courtenay Young

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THE SPIRIT OF THE FINDHORN RIVER

**I had a dream that rough tough folk tried to trap a wiry lad
and yoke his dancing feet.
He let them chase him through the woods, but had the power
to stop their play, if he did so desire.
If he revealed himself they would run scared when faced
with roaring river's foam all laced with wildfire.**

**In that dream, another soul was chased
by bands of louts through wooded slopes.
She, serene with power and knowledge hidden long ago,
slipped out from home amongst the trees,
Leaving but a trace for them to find, a name for him to hear;
banded upon their brutish shouts.**

**He was the River Count; his power the crash of water
and the endless pouring smooth momentum to the sea.
There, furthest from the source, he welcomes, plays with,
carries up and finally exhausts the prodigal fish.**

**She is the Keeper of the Valley Essence, buried long ago
and slowly, age by age, revealed.
Maturity, serene as waters flow. She is the cup, the dish,
the bowl that catches, turns and holds the streaming foam.
Her rounded parts are smoothed away to show
the stone is etched with ripple patterns of his passing.**

**Long ago had these two thrust apart.
He had cast her very rocks against her, ground her down relentlessly
and with added threat of awesome flashing power, held sway.
She had long contained his ravaging might with ever tighter bonds
and tortuous bends of canyon stone;
Or kept him gentle twixt the mossy banks, a source for lower herds;
then let him waste himself, impotently, meandering on open plain,
degenerating into reeds & marshes.**

**So now they met again through other people's strife & fighting.
Adversity could breach the gap of years.
The pain of being separate brought tears as they melded into rippling joy.
I watched the growing child; the River Sprite.**

CRUEL HILLS

The slow loops of leisured hawks
Start little from the empty fells.
The watcher soars above where,
Proudly, trees once reigned serene.
None are now seen amongst these rolling hills
For all were felled for logs so long ago.
The hawks swoops, kills, then lands to eat
Atop a lichened granite crag.
A feather tickles and is preened.

Below the outcrop, spongy peat
Is sweetened by the heather
In the bogs of Carn Dearg.
A nectured glistening drop
Swells, then slowly trickles
Flows and joins another ambered pearl

So the Divie rises at its source.
Listen to its trickling song;
The only sound in these sad hills
Since that cruel stoop of hawk
Stilled the plaintive curlew's
Long and whistling cry

ON A ROCK

When I sit and watch Life's flow
The endless torrent, crashing wave
and deadly undertow
Where the rock on which I sit
Vibrates and shakes as waters
break around it,
I am like a sack that fills and swells
Until I can't contain another drop.
I have to stop: and so I turn
and in that instant drain;
For now I watch the flow recede
And everything I have and need
flows out. The foam disperses.
Everything disintegrates.
The boiling aftermaths dispel
and eddies curl back slow and swell
And in an isolated clear brown pool
A flash of silver tells
of waiting salmon readying to take
The cataract
and leave me sitting in its wake
Alone upon this rock.

THE TASTE OF MORAY PAST

**As swallows congregate along the wires
And this year's fledglings,
Fat and innocently unprepared, aspire
To brave the lengthy sunwards flight,
The salmoners along the beach fold up their nets to store.**

**Soon geese will follow south in creaking skeins
That straggle cross the autumn sky,
Their haunting cries and sad refrain
Lament their leaving arctic sunlit nights
And local fishermen must shut their sheds and lock the door.**

**This summer's fluffy osprey chicks, now feathered clean,
Feel their strength as talons grip
The sides of twisting fish. They glean
The season's last and too will slip away in flight;
A natural choice, instead of being made to fish strange shores.**

**For all but one will come again once more
To live the round of birth and death. This year
An era ends as nets along the shore,
Strung up to dry, are banished from our sight
And the taste of local sea-fresh fish is gone for ever more.**

SALMON RUN

**The wind strokes
Purple water
Flecked with white
Exciting the heavy salmon
On it's homeward run
Until it leaps in ecstasy
Of death to clasp
The diving osprey's
Steely claws
That grasp it's final throws
And it is born aloft
By labouring wings
In champagne sunlight
Drowning in the sparking air.**

**The flurry of it's final leap
Was quickly lost
In wind-born spray.**

RANDOLPH'S LEAP

The watchers in the stones see the passing of the seasons
As the greyness of December changes slowly by and by
To a thousand shades of green, then the rushing river chuckles
Or swells with springtime showers as it journeys to the sea.

Their impassive grotesque faces, oh so ever slowly changing,
Watch the pilgrims come to view this natural beauty sight
Dimly seeing this sacred temple, carved in living stone, created
By the ceaseless pouring cataract and roaring river's might.

We cannot see them shaping as they re-arrange our landscape
With their power & thought and senses of the needs of life on earth
As waters rise, the seasons change, the ages turn to ashes
And the heavens wheel and, by compare, so brief our days from birth.

The guardians of the valley, of the gorge and of the river,
Watch the brown iced-velvet water in its endless pouring spate
They hardly see the moment when a man in flight took chances
And cast himself across the gorge to freedom or to fate.

These gods of stone and landscape, the spirits of the valley,
Just see their craggy features in the cliffs and rocks round there.
Acknowledge them as beings, lifespans slower, timeless, vaster,
And worship them a little with respect and love and fear.

WINTER SILENCE

I watch the silence of the trees
Quiescent in their winter dress
 of grey green moss
Delicately tracing
Interlacing twigs
In the misty air
So drooping dipping
 quietly dripping down
To carpets of wet brown leaves
As I watch their silence.
The rushing babble of the river
Sometimes chuckling
Sometimes crashing
Tumbling waves
 and cataractish rolling laughter
Foams and churning
Slowly swirling
Hypnotising
As I watch it's ever present sound
In silence

WATER OF LIFE

**Whilst taking pictures of the Findhorn River's beauty,
The waterfalls, majestic beech & pines that stately grow.
It's all quite so magnificent that it catches at my breath.**

**I hear a roaring noise; a spate comes rushing down the gorge.
Not a wall of water but a sudden massive increased flow.
The water rises as I turn to go, and suddenly I look at death.**

**One moment previous I was clear & standing near the stream.
The next the water rises all about me. The mighty undertow
Is tugging me away, inexorably away, down off the path.**

**The peace & serene beauty's contemplation all have gone.
The water's force is mastering. My balance is about to go.
I'm struggling for my life. Ironically, now that's a laugh !**

**For were I to choose to go; What better spot ! What better way !
Than suddenly, with icy numbing flow of winter's melt,
No further thoughts than being surrounded by such beauty.**

**So God, if you want me now to go, I go. I come your way.
The crashing water takes me down. My body panics so
And then grows numb. My mind is now serene for I am ready.**

**Then with a sudden shock and crashing blow, I hit a rock.
I'm tumbled by a wave, then thrown aside, rejected from the river's flow
To crawl & stagger, coughing, shaking to a safer place.**

**I look around. Barbara, my friend, a dear and ancient one's now gone.
I saw, whilst struggling in the spate, a flash that went to show
She might have thrown her own self in; as a rescue or a sacrifice. ?**

**But Why ? The shaking anguish of the whole event bursts out into a cry;
A rage against that God who took, not me, but her so suddenly
When I was ready too. I, sobbing deeply, search for her and help.**

**Two days later, she is found. Her battered form adrift down in the bay.
Her body's peaceful, shrunk and white. Her clothes all torn & sodden.
Her shoes and scarf are gone. Instead she's gently draped with kelp.**

**Intensity has left me now. Sense of right and wrong all flown away.
My feelings are all flat & numb. My plans get rearranged.
I cannot feel or act myself. I'm shaky still and filled with fear.**

**Her friends all gather. We talk throughout one day & share our grief & pain.
That's good. For now I can begin to feel again. The day my life changed
Touched by her, by chance? No. God took her that day into His care.**

I feel she's happy now in her new life and now I am glad that I was there.

GENTLE CHANGE

When the river rose one summer late into the year, and sent down such a flood that covered all the land round here, and boats from Findhorn were put out to rescue folk from where they clung to cottage roofs, and the bloated cattle drowned by spate were seen all flung around and floating on the once-green fields in which they'd grazed and local people all were much amazed at how their world had suddenly been rearranged, it is possible to understand how maybe racial memories can seem to view another time of change with hate or horror or with fear, that all that is precious might be swept away. A lovely gentle stream or river suddenly can rise torrentially and devastate one day.

Those Moray floods of 1829, now long ago, did coincide with the last great change from peaceful farms and slowly moving seasons to a modern time of commerce and increasing wealth; of clocks and cars and planes; of a world split by opposing power blocks; of ideologies and reason; of a health and welfare state with safer births and decreased child mortality; with modern science and complex new technologies; with world-wide knowledge, psychology and education and longer life-expectancy and a massive growth in population. We also started to pollute the earth.

There is now a slow wave rising, a newer swell or gently moving tide of change and growth, no dearth of new ideas. Affairs of men are re-arranging once again in a very different way. It's not that sudden spate or crashing wave that tends to devastate or sweep away, though those who cling to outworn forms in sloth may often fear it so. What newer changes come we cannot know but only guess at in our dreams.

Perhaps we'll see a planet where all peoples seem as one; where war is less and peace can grow and where we can learn to care for natural things again; where there's clean air and rain and life in cities does not move at such a pace; where we can dare to stop the race for more and more; where countries which are rich do not sustain themselves by exploitation of the poor; where energy produced from water, wind or sun is clean; where the quality of life is seen important and fun is given precedence to workaholic duties; where the riches of the earth are left, wholesome and green, instead as empty scars from mineral extractor's greed; where beauty can extend to touch our hearts and themes of friendship, love and fellowship 'mongst old and young, women and men, and those of different creeds becomes a song to sing to rule our natural lives. Perhaps we hope as well in dreams for a world where also Spirit thrives.

Is it so very wrong a thing to want this sort of gentle change? I do not feel that there's a gorge or raging chasm that divides adherents of the newer age from other people who desire a wider range of simple possibilities. We do not want to sweep away the old in flood. We only want to find the gold inside our hearts which is the part we know where God resides.

SCULPTURED WAVES

**The swift dark water flows &
Forms a powerful shape
As it pours
Between the rocks.
Curves and such surfaces
In constant motion that
An artist cannot capture
Until his despairing tears
Rival this torrent.
Ever moving
Ever changing
This river touches me so.**

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

**We're standing still I think.
Unless the earth I'm standing on
Should sink or creep some inches west
Towards the deep Atlantic pond**

**I stand atop a little ridge
With sedge and dunes below
That hedge the sandy shore.
I watch the tidal flow caress the stakes
Of an old pier, dismantled long ago.
It's a place I am very fond of.**

**Where the wary deer stalk through the forest edge,
Their fear of predators give prick to ear
And dart to eye.
What I like best
Is when a salmon breaks towards the sky
To clasp the diving osprey's grasp
As water flurries in the bay
Quiescent in the evening glow.**

**Where the wind blows behind me
Across a field of hay,
Towards the thunder of a plane
That so insanely cracks the peace
And meditation's link asunder.
I'll stay a while, I think.
You wonder and you ask, Where are we now ?
Why don't you know ?**

**A while ago this ridge lay far below
The breaking waves and the strake
Of war-like longships on their way to plunder
Pictish villages they saw as prey
And left a smouldering glow.**

**An aeon past this ridge was buried deep
Beneath a plain of glacial ice.
We hunted mammoth, wolf and bear
To keep us nice and warm.
To well it seems, for now
They are not here.
Museums put their bones on show.**

**A few years hence and we may be
Back in caves upon a mountain peak
The seas have risen, the planet's wrecked,
We've nothing learnt and still we do not know.**

**We're sitting still upon a fence,
We fools, lost in our dreams,
Of hunting, war and plunder.
Life is cruel, I know, yet there must be
Something more it seems, else there's no sense
To dreams that seek a better way to go.**

**For do you suppose, my friend,
That we might have to eat the reeking toadstools
Of an endless night, for there's no meat
Since the day that clouds like mushrooms rose
And blocked the light ? Now what can grow ?**

**Our future's in our hands it seems,
To make our Maker's dreams come true.
The tools we have, we'll have to shape anew.
The love is there. We face the fear
And the despair. We'll need our passion too.**

**And so what sight will greet our children's eyes ?
Will they still see the world we know,
 With greed forever growing,
 With species quickly going,
 With battle cries still flowing,
Don't ask, Where are we now ?
 Ask where we're going.**

THE MILITARY ROAD

**They made a road
They came from the south
and cut a road
Straight through our hills they came
with harsh voices & strange faces
Barbarians they were - and yet they call us that
They made a road that cut right through
our soft hills and forests - a hard road
The like of which we had not seen before
It slashed through our land like a sword
It cut past lochans - sweet silent water
still and quiet - across the peat
That makes our rivers soft and brown
the soft peat that feeds the grass
That feeds our shaggy beasts our goats & cows
the peat that feeds our fires
The peat we cut and stack and dry and store and use
to smoke our meat and keep us warm
They came and built this road across the moors
across the peat hags over the bogs
A hard straight road across the soft rolling fells**

**Our roads swell and dip they curve around the gentle earth
but this road ran straight and hard
It came from the south through the passes
past Lochindorb (and that's been a hard place in its time)
These men were different - strange and hard and harsh
for they beat the passes and conquered the soft peat bogs
Like they had beaten us and conquered the clans
And so they made a road not for us folk but for the mil-it-ary
A hard straight road that they could swagger along, eyeing us
our livestock our women our land
Which they came and took for themselves with swords and guns
and strange ways and harsh laws and hard roads
And this is how they took our land**

**They came lording it - Butcher's men and General Wade's men
to make a road of stone such as we had never seen
We'd seen them before though
butchering our men our boys down Culloden way
That day that saw the end of our way of life, our dreams
desires for sovereignty, our hopes of liberty
Now they trample our lives in the hard stone dust of their road
that leads so straight across the sweet heather
Over and round our singing hills - Aitnoch and the Knock of Braemoray
now bound in stone and across our rivers too
They matched themselves against the mighty rushing Findhorn
by the gorge at Dulsie - spanned in stone**

continued over

Triumphant flying arches of such power they built
with such contempt as well - a bridge that sneers down
Hard static power of immovable stone - such power though
as they wielded their armies of men here and there
Along the straight roads hard down through the woods of Cawdor
to ford the Muckle Burn to bridge the Alt Dearg
Then straight across the mighty Nairn by Clephanton
and all with their hard roads - and so hard by Loch Flemington
And straight across to Ardersier and the obscene promontory
that now pushes like a hard prick straight out into the Firth
Straight out towards the sweet and gentle vale of Rosemarkie

Their Fort "George" that thrusts forth into the sea with its straight lines
and banks and barracks and thrusting snouts of cannon
This ugly power that rapes and conquers and overkills and squats there
ready to rise and issue forth along these military roads to kill again
The fat and bloated Fort that "keeps the peace" and subjugates the land
and with its foreign presence rules these shores
- no wonder we rose and fought

And so our land was beaten down, conquered and bound
and held in chains of pounded stone
Our people robbed our peace abused our country ravaged
our culture curbed our land desecrated our homes despoiled
Our way-of-life devastated our bounty devoured our goods plundered
our folk evicted our villages sacked our farms pillaged
Our stocks and stores stripped our bodies scourged our women raped
our rights violated our men killed or conscripted into the english army
Our children forced into service our clans put under edict our law
despised
our names denied our dress proscribed our land taken by foreigners
Our religion changed our language despised our people divided
by the very same mil-it-ary men who walk this new hard road
So they made a road
So they came from the south and cut a road
So they came and took a country and made a sort of peace.

COLOURS OF INTIMACY

**Brown water ripples past a green meadow
Placid, ankle deep except in spate
Purple hills frown over the tangle of pale birch
Leaves turning yellow as the year grows late.**

**Six men stand around a dying fire
Growing closer, growing warmer for those who dare
To risk the warm rich colours of intimacy
By telling of their pain, which heals as they share.**

A passing salmon flashes silver in the morning air.

CHRONICLE OF A JOURNEY

Made down the Findhorn River in late August '92

By six of us from a Men's Group.

One of us was working too hard & one didn't want to walk.

One of us hurt his foot and couldn't come,

Which was a pity, as it was really his idea.

We walked away from the meadow where we had camped

And where one of us had written a poem

And where one of us had drawn and painted

And where we all had talked of intimate things

Around a slowly dying fire.

As we left, the lazy arc of a fisherman's rod

Waved goodbye in the distance down the river.

The sun shone on us and the day felt magic

With the scent of the blooming heather

Filling the morning air.

We waded across the swiftly flowing river.

Soft purple slopes with open scars of jagged scree

Ran down to the dazzling surface of the wind-blown water

And a soft-brown pool was stroked & crossed

By fishermen working together as a pair.

Where the river runs between these rolling hills

Patches of white shingle and river sand

Stand out bright against the banks of green bracken

And as we pass, the arc of a hooked salmon is seen

Showing darkly against the reflected light of the river.

Through an open grove of birch, there runs a little stream.

At one point it forces its way through a cleft of mossy rock

And creates a musical staircase of stones, a place of sheer mystery

Rowan trees ran aflame around the deep brown pools

And a waterfall led one of us up a little higher.

There was seen a natural gargoyle, a gnarled birch root

Waiting, watching, the guardian of the hidden pool.

After lunch one of us ascends, naked and without shame

He reverently immerses himself, his body tawny brown

In the holy laughing water.

Later the six of us stopped by a bridge and drank tea.

One of us skipped stones across the river.

One of us crossed the bridge and went over into the trees alone.

The others continued on, in gentle conversation

Down that side of the river.

continued over

The one walking alone climbed to the top of a sandy cliff
Where an iron age dwelling grows ever closer to the crumbling edge.
The view was magnificent, then as now, and time was passing.
He left it sadly and later disturbed a great grey heron
Gracefully fishing by the river.

The wind grew stronger, strong enough to blow his cap off.
He filled it to overflowing with field mushrooms
And carried them carefully in his crippled hand.
When he rejoined the others at the camp & before the rain really started
He ate them cooked lightly in butter.

Two of us left and then it rained harder still.
Two stood talking by the fire and two talked together in the tent.
Some of us were warm that night, and one was not.
Some were contentedly close and some cozily separate.
One of us dreamed of being in the water.

The morning was fine and the four of us set off across a bridge
Swaying high above the crashing foam and raging water.
Ripple patterned rocks raised a standing wave
And the river churned and tumbled through the gorge
Spanned by the art of our grandfathers.

Crossing a stream, using sticks and staffs
And wading kneedeep through the chilly water,
One of us lost a boot. Another watched it floating down.
Another decided to try and got it yards downstream, half-falling in.
His shirt got dried out later.

We skirted a magnificent gorge along a cliff & so we came to Dulsie.
One of us climbed down to the river to get water.
One person's pack-strap broke and he fixed it with string.
The rain came again briefly. We pressed on after lunch.
Our feet were getting tired.

We were pushing our way now through thick woods and ferns.
The slopes were much steeper. We found many types of mushrooms
In the deep woods and occasional meadows that we came to.
One of us knew nearly all their names and edibility
And the going was much slower.

At the Princess Stone, we stopped. The cups and roundels,
Arcs and moons and bows carved there that signified nothing now,
Though meaningful long ago, heralded the end of our journey.
We walked through a lush estate of walled gardens and clipped lawns
And thus we left the Findhorn river.

HOW DO I KEEP FROM SINGING ?

**How do I keep from writing poetry
As I live in sight of purple mountains
With the wild geese creaking across the autumn sky ?**

**How do I keep from feeling awe and wonder
As a dolphin leaps across the strake of our boat
Or the shy seal bobs her head as we drift by ?**

**How do I keep from feeling at one with nature
As the rainbow arches from behind a passing summer squall
Or a salmon twists and jumps against the bite of hook and fly ?**

**How do I keep my heart from opening to the fat little robin
Fearlessly pecking the earth at my feet as I dig
When other birds act so much more timid and shy ?**

**How do I keep my heart from melting into soft pools
When you put your arm around me or when I catch you unawares
And your eyes light up or when you smile as I pass by ?**

How do I keep from singing ?

SWALLOWS

**Swiftly dancing
Contour gliding
River skimming
Never landing
Turning swooping
Dark wings sweeping
Arrowlike amongst the trees**

**Insect hunting
Wings a-beating
Ever flying
Twisting darting
Curving looping
Babies cheeping
Underneath the eaves**

**Autumn coming
Rowans flaming
Leaves a' drooping
On wires roosting
Soon departing
Summer seeking
Far across the seas**

REQUIEM

The river's languished bends
Swell around the ivy covered piles
Of well-cut castle stone
And send the sweet brown water
Miles downstream to sea
To call the salmon home.
A fisherman of ninety-three,
A shadow of his former self
who fought in battles long ago
That laid a land to waste
And saw the meadow streams run red,
Knows too well the taste of fear and anguish,
The pain of steel embedded deep in flesh.
Yet every year, below cool wooded slopes that shelve
To edge the river here,
Became enmeshed in ritualistic battle with the fish
That runs upstream to mate.
Dreams are his only pleasure now.
In breathless sleep he so anticipates
The feathery tuft that drifts across the pool
Towards the waiting gleam of fish.
A flick of fin, as lethal fly swirls under.
The angler's wrist and rod strike deep
And steel barb sinks in.
The cool brown surface
Bursts asunder agonisingly
As pain sets fish afire
And a red shadow tints the stream.
A silvered arch soars up
That sparks desire and need in man again
To best this fish as he has done before.
Well now it's only dreams in which he feels the glory.
It seems that over time
The fields have leaked their toxic heritage,
Laid down in vain short-sighted greed,
Each season more; and so
They breed each season fewer fish
Than in his prime
To so engage in gory battle
With a wounded fisherman
By a ruined castle
In a wasted landscape.