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Fishing for Ted

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In September 2010, at the conference at Pembroke College, Cambridge which prompted many of this volume’s essays, Jonathan Bate looked beyond the *Collected* to offer an ambitious prospectus for his own forthcoming literary life of Ted Hughes. But his lecture, ‘The Complete Being of Ted Hughes’, carried its own wryly allusive warning against presuming to know too much, and Bate argued for a critically rigorous engagement with the daunting range of Hughes’ published work and archival resources. Thus a biographer might well find legitimate interest in the fishing diaries of a man known to be ‘a passionate fisherman’ and ‘passionate about fishing’. ‘The literary biographer says, by contrast, “we are only interested in the fishing diaries in so far as they impact upon the importance of fish and fishing in the poems”.’¹ A few minutes into his talk, this was the last time Bate mentioned fish, fishing or fishing diaries.

Few would dispute that decision. It follows the logic and predisposition of most of Hughes’ literary critics and the guardians of his literary reputation. Fishing, like marmite, divides tastes: intensely satisfying for the four million or so members of the British public who absorb themselves in it, but fair game and the butt of coarse jokes or sharper scepticism for the significant majority who don’t. Hughes knew that the float fishing to which he devoted hundreds and hundreds of hours in the canal, rivers and ponds of his Yorkshire youth was regarded as a ‘very drowzy pastime’ by those who thought they had grown up (*PM* 60); the salmon and sea trout fishing which obsessed him from the late 1970s exposed him to more vocal opponents, who he knew thought it a questionable bloodsport, an ‘elitist hobby pursued by rich snobs who want to keep the fishing to themselves’.² Hughes also knew, and cared, that by persistent accident the most eminent
and influential interpreters of his poetry could neither fathom nor condone his enthusiasm for it. The justification of his fishing in 1994 he sent to Terry Gifford ended: ‘This won’t help you to read my verses alas’ (LTH 660).

Fishing diaries themselves are ‘stuck with an image problem’, and are a taste rarely acquired. Roderick Haig-Brown, whose fishing stories the Hughes brothers read, rapt, in their youth, once lost a season’s diaries to a house fire, but his elegiac summary reveals the real problem. They were: ‘fine records, full of details of time and tide and light, of the condition of the fish, of the leads we used and the spoons, even of the angles of the casts that hooked fish – upstream, downstream or straight across’. Even if you know what a ‘spoon’ is, in this refracted linguistic milieu, and care how ‘leads’ (weights) might lead it to ‘swim’ differently in a river's current, no one but the writer can act on these details, which serve as mnemonics, lessons to absorb for the next trip. The pre-printed columns of landscape-format game records do have other uses: the catch returns they contain prove financially significant when fishing rights are sold. But their lines rarely sing.

Hughes confounds such preconceptions, about both fishing and its literary value. He did contribute to a game book, at least once: in his fishing friend and fellow campaigner for water quality Ian Cook’s, for instance, he wrote, of a salmon hooked on the Exe in July 1995, that it tore off line with ‘river-slicing speed’. A striking phrase in itself, it also provides an echo, 15 years on, of the evocation in ‘Earth-numb’ of the way the salmon, its fight about to turn to sheer ‘fright flow[ing] all one way down the line’, ‘slices thudding through me / As if I were the current’ (CP 541). In both published poem and later journal, which Ian Cook opened for me one March morning on his terrace above the pool it described, as in the experiences they recount, lines transmit their energy in both directions; both carry a linguistic, emotional and ethical charge.

This charge becomes the more electrifying when, in and after such moments, one realizes how clearly it represents a strong, enduring current that ran deep throughout Hughes’ literary and personal life, in and beyond his own beautiful and extensive fishing diaries, now in the British Library. A deft swift intervention, a poetic repayment of a friend’s generosity in welcoming him onto his private waters, might have one meaning for the owner of fishing and book who still treasures the words for their insight into a moment of shared excitement, another for the admirer of the published work who can thereby identify an allusion or source or analyse its forms. But to experience the