

‘Yet these small fish ov’rcome these watrie mountaines’

*Salmo salar*, Scottish Rivers, and Cultural Memory

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Campsie Linn on the river Tay north of Perth

There we admir'd to see the salmond leap  
And overreach the waters mightie heap,  
Which from a mountain falls, so high and steep,  
And tumbling down devals into the deep,  
Making the boyling waters to rebound,  
Like these great surges near by Greenland found.  
Yet these small fish ov'rcome these watrie mountains  
And kindly take them to their mother fountains. (Adamson 1638; 2Mu.145-52)

Throughout our region there is a supply of fish such as you will find nowhere else, salmon in particular. And so I shall have no reluctance about inserting into these pages what I have discovered about the nature of the salmon. (Boece [1527] 2010)

Of fische is mair plente in Scotland, speciallie of salmond, than is in ony uthir partis of the warld. And becaus the procreation and nature of salmond is uncouth and strange, we have inserit the maner thair of in this buke. (Bellenden 1540)

Because we of the salmonte have maid sa ofte mentione, it wil nocht offend the reidar heir to twoche sum things that we have leired of thame, or of our awne institutiounis, or be sum sure and certane experience, have knawen. (Leslie 1578)

Thir salmond in the tyme of hervist, cumis up throw the smal watteris, speciallie quhare the watter is maist schauld and loun, and spawnis with thair wamis plet to uthir. The hie fische spawnis his meltis, and the scho fische hir rounis, and incontinent coveris thaym ovir with sand in the reveir. (Bellenden 1540)

After this, when the males have spent their milk and the females their eggs, they are so lean and emaciated that they are reduced to skin and bone, and so are wholly unfit for eating. (Boece 1527)

And eftir thair spawning thay grow sa lene and small that na thing apperis on thaym bot skyn and bane, and hes sa warsche gust that thay ar unprofitable to eit. (Bellenden 1540)

Bot quhen thair young is now brocht furth, thay ar sa leane, the hie salmont haveng castne the meltis and the sche salmont the rounis, that mony doubtis gif thir be the verie rycht salmont that uses than to be takne, or another kynd of fyshe. (Leslie 1575)

From henceforth they are gant and slender, and in apparance so leane that thei appeare nought els but skin and bone, and therefore worthely sayd to be growne out of use and season. (Holinshed 1577)

It is said that they have this power, that whichever of their own kind they touch immediately becomes emaciated itself. (Boece 1527)

Sum men sayis all othir salmond that metis thaym eftir thair spawning growis lene on the same maner as thay ar, for sindry of thaym ar found lene on the ta syde, and fat on the tothir. (Bellenden 1540)

the hie salmont haveng castne the meltis and the sche salmont the rounis, that mony doubtis gif thir be the verie rycht salmont that uses than to be takne, or another kynd of fyshe ... Quhilkes amang thame ar sa leane, quhen thay twoche the fatter amang thame, thay ar alyke leane, in sa far that oft this hes bene fund, the fatt synde that hes bene twochet with the leane, hes through leinnes bene utirlye deformet, bot the uthir syde fatt and fair. (Leslie 1575)

And in the springtime out of these sand-covered eggs emerge little hatchlings, very soft and tender and, as they are no larger than a man's finger, they melt away like water if you touch them. (Boece 1527)

Forthir of thir rownis and meltis quhilkis ar hid (as said is) under the sandis, growis at the spring of the nixt yeir small tender fische na gretar than ane mannis thoume; and gyf thay be handillit, thay melt away like ane blob of watter. (Bellenden 1540)

Quickly seeking the ocean, within twenty days they grow to a large size. Afterwards they swim upstream to the places they were born, and this presents a wonderful spectacle for observers. (Boece 1527)

Always at the first streame of watter that risis thai discend to the see, and within .xx. dayis eftir thai grow to mervellus quantite, and with maist fervent desyre and appetite returnis to the samyn placis quhair thay wer generit. (Bellenden 1540)

Thair young, quhen now thay have castne, afor thay be a fingre gretter, thay swome to the sey, quhair in the space of ane moneth or twa, thay grow almaist til ane incredible gretnes. Bot incontinent, as gif thay war nocht content of al this felicitie, thay returne to the narrow boundes of the watiris quhair bred thay war, and in draves as it war, returnes to thair awne cuntrey. (Leslie 1575)

For some streams, compressed by narrow cliffs on both sides, flow with a swift current, and when the salmon begin to be swept downstream by its fast-running water, they are not immediately swept along by the river, but cast themselves out of the water and, sailing a certain space through the air with their curved bodies, fall to the ground with a loud noise. And so when they have come to such turbulent water they seek to overcome it by leaping, thus passing through the water with greater violence than they could by swimming. (Boece 1520)

Forthir, becaus mony of the watteris of Scotland ar full of lynnis, als sone as thir salmond cumis to the lyn, thay leip. And sa mony as ar wycht or lepis weil, thay get up throw the lyn, and returnis to the place quhair thay wer bred, and abidis thair quhil the season cum of thair generatioun. (Bellenden 1540)

There are many linnis or pooles, which being in some places among the rockes, very shallow above, and deepe beneath, with the fall of the water, and thereto the salmond not able to pierce through the channell, eyther for swiftnesse of the course, or depth of the discent, hee goeth so neare unto the side of the rocke or damme as he may, and there adventuring to leape over, and up into the linne. (Monipennie 1612; verbatim from Holinshed 1577)

Those equipped with less strength are cast back by the water or fall onto dry land. (Boece 1527)

And sa mony as ar wucht or lepis weil, thay get up throw the lyn, and returnis to the place quhair thay wer bred, and abidis thair quhil the season cum of thair generatioun. Utheris quhilkis lepis nocht cleirlye ovir the lyn, brekis thaym self be thair fall and growis mesall. (Bellenden 1540)

If he leape well at the first, he obtayneth his desire, if not, he assayleth eftsoones the second or third time, till he returne to his countrey. A great fish, able to swimme agaynst the streame: such as assay often to leape, and cannot get over, doe bruise themselues, and become meazelled (Monipennie 1612)

What this fish feeds upon, or indeed whet her it feeds on anything it all, is not known for sure, for when their bellies are cut open nothing is ever found but a thick liquid. (Boece 1527)

Na man knawis quhairon thir fische leiffis, for na thing is found in thair wambe quhen thay ar oppinnit, bot ane thik grosse humour. (Bellenden 1540)

that at utheris tymes, in thair bowelis thay ar nevir knawen to have ony thing bot a certane thik humour, quhairthrough mony takes the occasione to mervel, quhairof thay feid, quhen thay ar sa sappie and sa fatt, and gudlyke (Leslie 1575)

Than may be sene, how nocht onlie contrare the swofte and vehement surges of the sey thay wome through, quhen thay returne, bot through quick sandes, and narrow furdes, with sik force thay passe to the riveris that thay cam fra, that in a band and knot togither thay leip quhair thay find impediment, over a stay bank or high fal of water maid in a damm, sa gret desyr throuch the affectione of nature, thay have to be quhair thay war bred, quhairfor, ony lope thocht wondirful is compaired with the salmonte and commonlie called the salmont lope. Farthermair, is cum in a commone proverbe, that quha of us have amang strange natiouns beine welthie, and eftir returneng to thair awne cuntrie have falin in povertie, ar said to be nocht unlyke to the salmonte, quha tynes in smal watiris and riveris rycht narrow the gret fatnes that thay fand in the braid sey. (Leslie 1575)

First wee ar not achamed to confesse that we have had theise many yeiris a great and naturall longing to see our native soyle and place of our birth and breeding, and this salmonlyke instinct of ours hes restleslie, both when wee wer awake and manie tymes in our sleip, so stirred up our thoghtis and bended our desyris to make a jorney thither that wee can never rest satisfied till it sall pleas God that wee may accomplish it; and this we do upoun our honour declair to be the maine and principall motive of our intended jorney. (James VI and I to the Privy Council of Scotland, 15 December 1616)

Hence these desires fair Caledonias soile  
To view, when bravest stratagemms with toile  
Have acted beene, hence come these kindly wishes,  
To see these fields, even like these kindly fishes,  
Which we behold ov'rcome this mightie lin  
And seeke the fountaines where they did begin. (Adamson 1638; 2Mu.317–22)