

Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 7

January 2004

Tin

Anne Born

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Born, A. (2004). Tin. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 2(3).

Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/7>

This Poetry is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/7>

ANNE BORN

TIN

1895

Summer mornings on my way to school
Sun dips a finger in the O Brook,
Splashes me warm as I jump across
After dragon and damsel flies, scare grouse
That skirl away with a harridan cry,
And catch out buck rabbit throned on his tump.
Then run to where Tom waits by the pool.

We walk the five miles back from Holne
Over the moor past Horn's Cross.
Hot afternoons the moor shimmers, two ponies
Stand each with head to the cross-shaft, lazy,
Unmoving except for tail's swish, symmetry
We feel more than see, like the circles
Still staking shapes of the first moor homes.

A drought year, my tenth, cracks the peat blanket,
Bell heath sings hoarse at wind's light tug,
Grass and bracken turn dry-gold early.
The brook's low voice whispers quietly
And carrion crow discuss grave matters loudly.
Raven and buzzard fight for a lamb's leg
While I twist ferns from the woods for a sun-hat.

But cold comes soon enough, and dark nights;
There's one evening, though, bursts into flame,
The fifth of November when we light the bonfire:
A great tor of bracken, the crows' tree, dry heather
Make such a beacon as I know has never
Warned of armada or welcomed queen. Mam,
Royally high-windowed, gasps at flames' flight.

1898

Grandfather Pharaoh Orlando Grose,
Wind-blackened face and peaty eyes,
Takes us to Week Ford near the bridge
Where O meets West Dart among ferns,
Dwarf oaks haired with lichens,
Orchid meadows set with granite boulders.
'This was the Old Men's mill,' he says,
'five hundred years since their wheel turned here,

crazing ore their oxen carried
from the mine'. The roofless walls
are built of moorstones,
lintels, hearths, close by the blowing house;
an oak tree stout as Aaron Yeoman
where the furnace blazed. On the grass floor
among boughs and sheep-beds: mortar stones
with rounded hollows where ore was stamped
and hardened silver-white from the furnace.
Hands that could make metamorphosis
Were vulnerable,
Maimed by their metal.

In Pharaoh Orlando's cottage at Hexworthy
Gran shows us his books,
His mother's history of ancient Egypt
And Shakespeare. Mines for his names.
We hold a nugget of gold he found
In a tinstone, turn it in firelight.
Going home we take hands near Week Ford,
Remember the Old Men's oaths, hurts,
Their savage carapace of hardship,
Fierce allegiance to their metal.

One day we see a thousand young frogs
Slide from the wet bowls of mortar stones,
Struggle and hop from rocky O
Driven to find other streams and rivers,
Tricked to think the whole moor a lake.
To us they are like Old Men
Looking for new lodes across the moor;
Where adit timbers fell in on them
Or froze them to death in snowed-up huts,
Or failed their hearts in icy mid-stream;
having but 'bread the brownest; cheese
the hardest; drink the thinnest, only
the dew of heaven taken from their shovel
or in the hollow of their hand'.

Under skies that threw them rain and snow
Or hid the hills within a mask of fog
They dug and burrowed, tunnelled like
The rabbits they had chosen for emblem:
Three of them, hares more nearly,
Fecund creatures crazed by the moon.
Carved in wood and stone
In an endless ring-dance linked
By three ears that give to each its pair.
Set on roof-bosses in tinnerns' churches
At Chagford, Widecombe and Tavistock..

1900

The first time I hold it in my hand:
The black stone, heavy, glinting, rough.
Cassiterite, jobbers call our tinstone.
The weight of it,
Bending the backs of centuries,
Forced through granite worlds ago
By a punch of liquid fury.
We play with it, are tin streamers,
Pan rills and freshets, crush it with boulders.
But Father takes the best stones from us,
Home tired from the mine, blinking as he climbs to evening light
Or stumbles swinging a November lantern.
The steady tick of water-wheels, the wheel
That drives the pump to drain the adit,
And the launder wheel
Driving bellows in the blowing-house
Downstream, lulls me at home
Where tough granite walls hold off
Blizzard and equinoctial gale,
Warm to glitter-stone under the sun.
School ended, I wear work
Like a uniform of standard cut,
Fetch Mam's water from the brook,
Take pony to the turf tie for peat,
Fetch fuzz bundles for her cloam oven,
Gather hurts for July pies.

And the mine draws me daily, nightly.

1904

'Will, son, get to college,
learn the new engineering,
you'll see how to mine deeper,
find the bright lodes in your mind'.

1923

New machinery arrives on carts,
A generator starts up at Saddle Bridge,
A powder store stands away from the house,
The track widens, tin brings good sales – till 1939.
Then war breaks out and shuts down the mine,
New concrete ore-bays form shooting targets.

Later, following old discoverers
I sail westward to find
New mines, new ores.
I prospect for love and money, sink
My shaft deep, in Montana. There

1983

an unexpected letter in the mail
asks me to mine my memories.
Shaky at 95 I sit to write,
Then suddenly the moor takes over:
water-wheels, ravens, buzzards, dragonflies,
O Brook, small-scale model
Of all Dartmoor rivers that I know,
From head to toe running to West Dart,
Ammil icing each blade with crystal,
Summer sun creaming air that hums
With insects, thousands of bright creatures.
Spoil heaps, monuments to the Old Men,
Hut circles and stone rows signing mystery.
And mines, dark capacities,
Those gashes and trenches, wounds we made
As we stabbed the moor's heart. Clearest,
Flying November flames that scorched
Earth's bones as we raised a pyre
To those who'd seized fortunes from the fire.

NOTES

The O Brook is a small river on Dartmoor that rises in the Avon Head Mire and joins the West Dart at Week Ford.

The four ancient stannary towns of Devon (stannary < Latin *stannum*, tin, signifies a tin-mining district) that received the ingots produced in their districts for weighing, stamping, taxing and marketing, were Tavistock, Ashburton, Chagford and Plympton, close to the borders of Dartmoor. Tin and other minerals were formed when the igneous granite rock was cooling.

Crazing mill. A mill for crushing tin ore.

Moorstones. The natural unquarried stones lying on the surface of the ground.

Blowing house. Small granite building in which tin was smelted with the aid of bellows driven by a water-wheel.

Jobber. Merchant, broker.

Adit. Mine shaft.

Streamers. 'Stream' tin was the ore lying near ground level, often in or near the beds of rivers whose waters had long ago transported it, in veins of varying length and breadth, as opposed to lodes lying deeper underground for which an adit was often necessary. The men who worked

stream tin were known as streamers. The waste heaps of stones they left are still much in evidence alongside the streams.

'Pan rills and freshets'. To pan, i.e. wash ore to separate it from waste, in a pan. Rills and freshets – small streams.

Launder. Water from a leat diverting a natural stream was conducted through a wooden channel to a water wheel which powered the bellows for the smelting furnace in the blowing house. Water was also used in sorting and cleansing the ore. After smelting the molten ore was poured into mould stones and hardened into ingots.

Turf tie. Pit where peat was cut.

Fuzz bundles Faggots of furze for fuel..

Cloam oven. Clay oven, a method of baking dated back to the Iron Age and in use until recently.

Hurts. Whortleberries, still fairly plentiful on Dartmoor.

Ammil. In freezing conditions after rain a layer of clear ice forms on every twig and grass-blade. (Perhaps etymologically related to 'enamel'.)

I am indebted to Dr Tom Greeves for the outlines of this partially true story.

First published in the Transactions of the Devonshire Association, December 1989.

Anne Born