

River WITHAM.

OLD BONES

THE WHISTLING SOLDIER

RAINBOW TROUT AT THE FOSTON FORD

MAN OF THE FIELDS
NORTH END

FOSTON BECK

BONFIRE

VIKING RAMBLERS

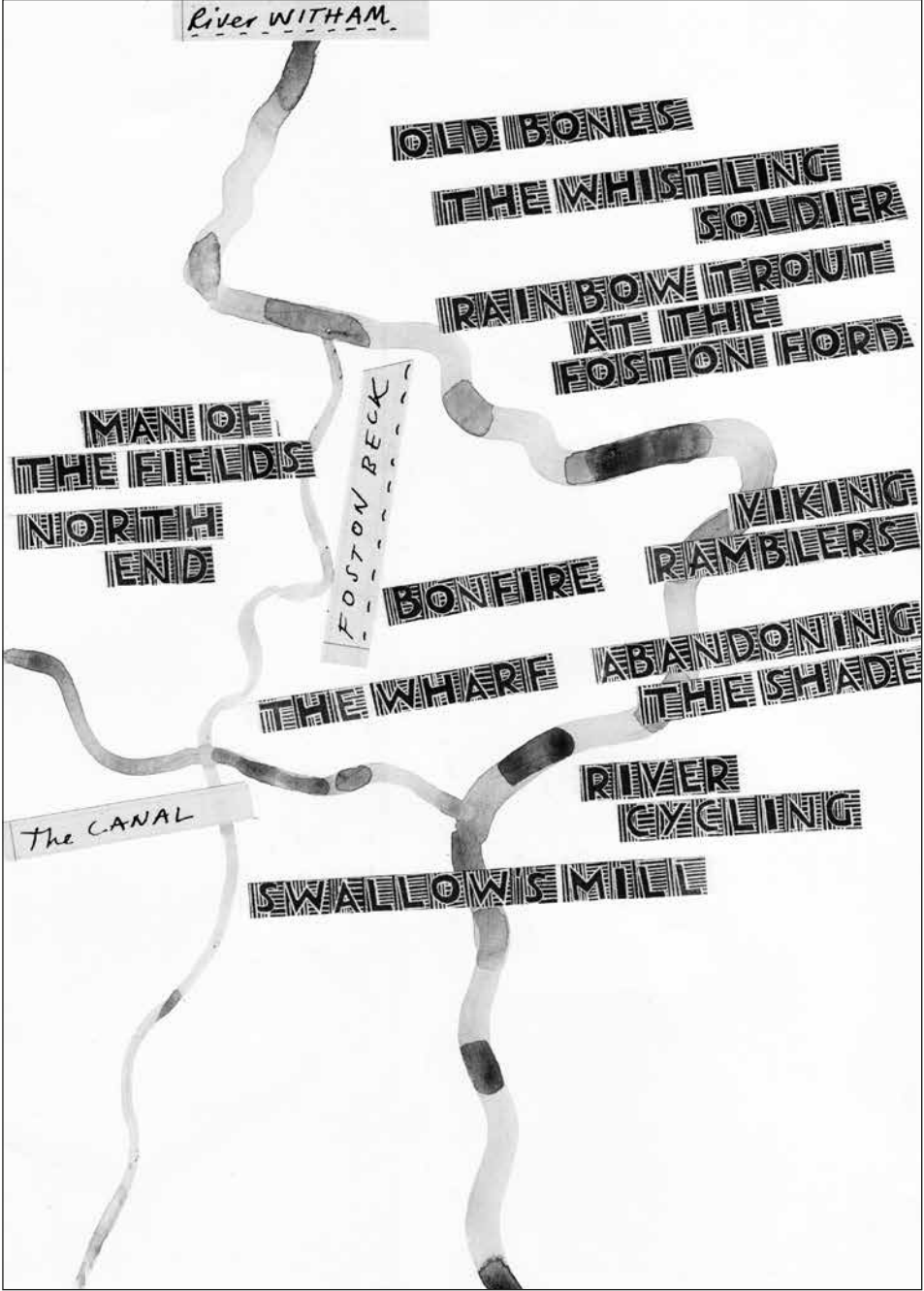
THE WHARE

ABANDONING THE SHADE

The CANAL

RIVER CYCLING

SWALLOW'S MILL



Foreword

Neil Sentance writes about his native Lincolnshire riverlands with the blend of toughness and tenderness that readers who know England's working country people will recognise as a defining characteristic. The combination is found in his worldview, in his lyric descriptions of landscape, and in the characters that he brings out from the backstage of history to address us from the River Witham's banks. It is there, for example, in the martins 'skimming over the water' with 'curvilinear wings the colour of sump oil', and in his tale of the paranoid grandfather who thinks he is being robbed when he is struck on the head by a can of beans. It is also there, heartbreakingly so, in the decision of his other grandfather to sell his farm when he realises that 'the old country attributes of hard work and patience were no longer enough in an era of paper mountains, aggressive marketing and diminishing returns'. Such cruel – and comic, and edifying – effects of passing time are everywhere in *Water and Sky*, and using his different keys Sentance employs them to communicate far more than conventional rural nostalgia.

In *Water and Sky* Sentance revisits the walks of his childhood, and tells a story of the land around the River Witham through memoir, biography, 'family lore' and what could be called psychogeographic drift. He evokes a sense of transition from a rural culture based on meaningful work to one of leisure and commodification, but rather than

lament a lost Golden Age, he celebrates the countryside's muddy reclamations of modernity. Anyone who grew up in or near a British market town, as I did, will recognise places like Swallow's Mill, the water mill that 'by the seventies had been converted into a nightclub, entered by the gates just past the tractor company' and whose revellers 'would row in small boats down from the Saltersford Bridge on Somerby Hill and row back again, sculling upstream, after a night of partying in their polyester finery'. On the dry, chalk Wolds it was tractors not boats, but it comes to the same thing; as with the children's play on the river, or the farmers using leisure trips to Holland to inspect their rivals' husbandry, this is the anti-chocolate box countryside, but distinct and even idyllic nonetheless.

Sentance's democracy and realism are of course – as he says of one of his stories – in the Thomas Hardy tradition of English writing about the countryside. However, when I first read his writing on the Caught by the River website, that 1970s nightclub brought to mind another reference, in Psalm 137, the main source of the Rivers of Babylon lyric: by the river where we sat down and wept when we remembered. The link might seem grandiose or superficial depending on whether you have the Bible, The Melodians or Boney M in mind, but to me those words seem relevant to the writing in the second half of this book, in which Neil recalls childhood summers on his grandfather's farm and then his final tour on the eve of the sale.

I have a particular interest in this because, as I wrote in *The Farm*, in my early 30s I had to help my father, brother and mother lay out and sell our family's farm when agricultural economics did for them, too. I had grown up on the slightly ramshackle, nineteenth-century farmstead that in some ways resembles Sentance's grandfather's, and many of the beautifully evoked details – the barns like ships 'anchored over swells of wheat and barley', the 'fantastical cobwebs

looped in high corners’, and the ‘ancient bulb hanging from a thin braided cord, rimed in straw dust and casting a buttery half-light’ – feel entirely familiar to me. Also familiar are his grandfather’s feelings of confused resignation and self-blame. Farmers like this have been encouraged to subject their personal, tender feelings to the tough realities of life and markets, which is one reason why the loss of more than 300,000 of these farms since 1939 has not been more acknowledged or mourned. Sentance’s writing is never explicitly political, but in his personal meditation and his depiction of the culture of which these businesses are part, he makes a strong case for their better treatment by people who make the laws that govern our so-called free markets.

In recent years an increasing number of people have begun to wonder if we might do something better with the countryside than turn it into a series of giant suburban leisure parks set among anonymous large-scale farms. Writing like this, as well as being compelling in its own right, should be part of that wondering. Tender and tough, ideal and real, past and present, do not have to be polarised; we are beginning to find that in some cases, blending them will work too. These voices from the riverside remind us of why it is worth trying. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a Strange Land? Like this, perhaps, among martins the colour of sump oil and men rowing boats to night clubs in water mills; like this, somewhere between the poetry and the prose, the water and the sky, the tender and tough.

Richard Benson
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