

Searching for a Picture

John Christian

The river's life began without sound, in the darkness of peat that was heather grown in ancient sunlight; but on the slope of the hill, among the green rushes, the river ran bright in spirit, finding the granite that made its first song.

Tarka the Otter, Henry Williamson, 1927

I am walking into Dartmoor, in the track of Tarka the Otter, searching for a picture. Over 60 years ago, Tarka travelled his river Taw to where 'in the fen five rivers began in peat darker than the otter that had followed one up to its source.' Now I too, walk into the high, wild landscape of northern Dartmoor to where 'by pools and waterfalls and rilletts, the river Taw grew, flowing under steep hills that towered high above.'

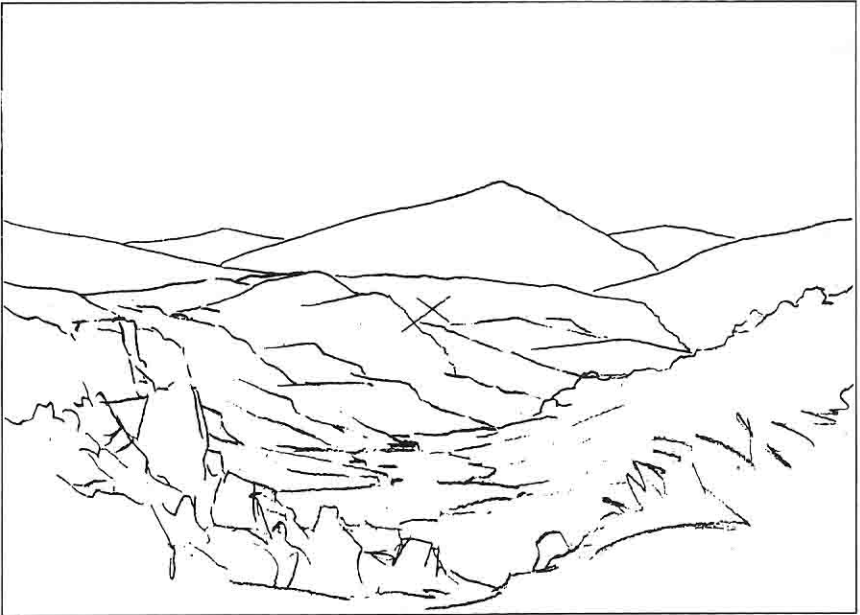
I like to finish my work, or much of it, on the spot, and consequently must carry everything necessary to produce one or more 14" × 10" watercolours, each taking some two hours to complete. Walking and climbing calls for free arms, therefore everything must go on my back. Furthermore, when I am ready to lay the first brush stroke, excitement is intense. I must start immediately, then work quickly (cold wind and approaching weather often do not dictate otherwise!).

I have therefore devised a small pack which, when easily carried on an ordinary, light alloy pack frame, contains and transports all my gear, including paper, boards, palettes, kitchen rolls, stretching tray, etc. When opened, it displays an array of paint tubes, bottles, brushes, pencils and two jars for water. The bag and frame travels into the field carrying everything for a day out, including sweater, waterproof coat, three pints of water, lunch, easel, stool, binoculars, groundsheet, a flask of coffee and, most important, dog biscuits.

Parkin, my black labrador, and I, one quiet Sunday in October last year, picked up Tarka's tracks where, some five miles from its source, 'the river hurried round the base of the cleave on whose slopes stunted trees grew amid rocks and scree that, in falling, had smashed the trunks and torn out the roots of willows, thorns and hollies'. Our plan was to follow the river from here for a mile where 'it ran strong and bright over its bed of granite gravel, everywhere glinting and singing. Over and under and past boulders of granite' . . . to where 'through a groove between hills it found a marsh where a green moss grew with rushes.' It was bright and clear under many clouds, a moorland clarity which presaged rain. Everywhere were my favourite colours of gold, russet and green framing the grey of granite. Mountain ash glowed scarlet with berries and there was the steady talk of the tumbling river. It was cold. As we walked, my eyes were repeatedly and irresistibly drawn to the conical hill which commanded the head of the valley. As I looked, cloud shadow turned it into a purple silhouette and, momentarily, the right-hand hillside was lit by a flash of bright light. This same light gilded the tops of hillocks thrown up by man long ago in his apparently frenetic search for precious ore, and turned the river to brimming light. Rapidly the light went and the colours changed, but the effect was locked in memory.

I looked, then, for composition and found it in a series of 'V' shapes (a shape which leads the human eye)—which would engender a thought process in the mind of the beholder, making him 'walk' up the valley, round the bends and into the distant hills, and draws the eye to the focal point, that conical hill called Steeperton.

I looked for foreground and found a narrow deep path, the now dry track of an old mining leat, a deep 'V' leading the eye round the first corner and down to the river; a 'V' which complemented the inverted 'V' of distant Steeperton. The leat, moreover,



Blocking the 'V' shapes



The Pencil sketch. 10" x 14"

gave me shelter from the wind. It was the 'otter path', 'Tarka was returning along a lynch, or rough trackway, to the river. The grasses, the heather, the lichens, the whortleberry bushes, the mosses, the boulders . . .' mood was strong; excitement was building up. I had found my picture and reached first for the sketchbook, 8" x 6", and a 6B pencil.

Then I set to work with palette and brushes. One and a half hours later the picture was finished, as far as outdoor work was concerned. Shadows were lengthening and cold vapours were drifting down the hills. There were spots of rain in the wind and we had a long scramble back over tumbled rocks. Parkin was glad to be moving.

Tarka and I parted company where the river 'wandered away from the Moor, a proper river, with bridges, brooks, islands and mills.' The clouds blew over, an owl called to the night in the dark cleave, and every paw mark held a star. Tarka returned to the immortality of Williamson's peerless prose. For Parkin and I, it was a return to the present, to the heteronomy of civilisation and the beaten track. Home to examine the result in the studio, to touch a little here and there with my favourite small, very old, super sable and to muse on the magic of the moor.

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Quotations from *Tarka the Otter 1927* are by permission of the Henry Williamson Literary Estate.

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We are grateful to *Leisure Painter* for permission to reproduce these extracts from an article entitled 'Beyond the beaten track' in their April 1990 issue. We regret that we are unable to reproduce for you the finished painting in colour.

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