

THE
RIVER RUNS
UPHILL

*A Story of
Success and Failure*

Robert Aickman

Tartarus Press

The River Runs Uphill

by Robert Aickman

First published by J.M. Pearson & Son Ltd, 1986

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The River Runs Uphill
is limited to 350 copies

Foreword

From the centre of the battle, I, the priest and the sacrifice,
cry out against the horror of the world...

‘Proem’, *The Attempted Rescue*, 1966

The River Runs Uphill was first published in 1986, five years after Robert Aickman’s death, and is Aickman’s second volume of autobiography, the first being *The Attempted Rescue* (1966). 1986 also saw the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Inland Waterways Association (I.W.A.), the campaigning organisation in which Aickman was so instrumental, and which formed an important part of his life for nearly twenty years. *The Attempted Rescue* deals mainly with Aickman’s childhood and youth, while *The River Runs Uphill* is largely an account of the first few years of the I.W.A. from its founding in 1946 up to the organisation of the Market Harborough Festival of Boats and Arts in 1950, and the publication of *We Are for the Dark*, his collaborative volume of ghost stories with Elizabeth Jane Howard, in 1951. Aickman had planned to write a third volume of autobiography, but this, alas, was not forthcoming.

With *We Are for the Dark*, Aickman tapped into ‘a world elsewhere’, a new realm of literary endeavour. His subsequent seven collections of ‘strange stories’—superbly artful and elegant renditions of the uncanny tale—have garnered him a steadily growing literary reputation (although they were not always well-received at the time). *The River Runs Uphill* shows another side to Aickman—who knew himself to have been ‘several different people’—a young man in search of an occupation, and a cause.

The River Runs Uphill

Aickman wrote *The River Runs Uphill* in 1967, after he had severed his ties with the I.W.A. It was finally published by the specialist waterways imprint, J.M. Pearson and Son Ltd, nearly twenty years later. In the intervening period, some material was pruned by Aickman from the book. With the kind permission of Robert Aickman's literary estate, we have been able to reinstate some missing pieces in the puzzle of Aickman's life, the most important being the original 'Chapter Ten: Kyogen', which deals with his theatre criticism for the journal *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 'a weighty monthly', and other episodes unrelated to the waterways campaign, but to 'life, death and the human heart'. Other reinstated passages mostly add colour and detail to the story of the struggle to save the British canal system from progressive abandonment and destruction, and this remains at the heart of the book.

It is a story of no little adventure and romance, with Aickman (who told friends he had been a conscientious objector during the war) casting himself in the role of the knight errant, fighting the noble cause by lecturing, organising protests, writing articles and newsletters, addressing meetings, persuading those in authority and with influence into action. In one of the passages reinstated in this edition, Aickman rues the time spent on writing 71 issues of *Bulletin*, the I.W.A.'s newsletter: 'I cannot help thinking at times how much more five novels might have achieved in the long run than those hundreds of thousands of words in the *Bulletin*, over which I took so much literary and dialectical care.' It seems, however, that Aickman's elegant and informative prose was very much appreciated by Members of the Association. It is also the case that *Bulletin* formed important source material for *The River Runs Uphill*.

Aickman was not alone in the battle; others of some note include L.T.C. and Angela Rolt, Elizabeth Jane Howard, and Sir Peter Scott. And, as Michael Pearson points out in his Publisher's Note to the first edition, Ray, Aickman's wife, who, for whatever reason, was excluded from *The River Runs Uphill*. Perhaps

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against the odds, the ‘race against time’ to save the waterways was won, and much of lasting value was achieved, with a canal system still extant and enjoyed by many today. That the I.W.A. has not received proper recognition for its role in this is as inexplicable as one of Aickman’s strange stories. For Aickman it was a cause on a human scale, fought against the powers of mechanisation and the deracination of the individual. The work could be time consuming and draining, perhaps made more so by some of the clashes in temperament which Aickman describes in the book. There can be little doubt that Aickman’s strongly held opinions, given a thorough airing in *The River Runs Uphill*, would have rubbed many up the wrong way. But he, in his own way, got things done, and we all have reason to be grateful for that.

Rosalie Parker
2014