

SELECTED READINGS FROM

Mod Strømmen

CAMILLA COLLETT

(1894)



Translated and annotated by
MARTIN ROE EIDHAMMER

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ORIGINAL TEXT IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

On Mod Strømmen

Mod Strømmen (1894) is a collection of essays written by Camilla Collett in the later part of her life. The title—“Against the Current”—reflects the position she adopted in relation to the social conventions of her time.

The essays are not arranged as a single argument, but as a series of reflections on society, drawn from observation and experience. They address questions of everyday life—family, custom, public conduct, and the expectations placed upon women—with a clarity that is both direct and measured.

While her earlier work, *Amtmandens Døtre*, presented these themes in narrative form, *Mod Strømmen* returns to them more explicitly. What is suggested in the novel is here examined and, at times, stated plainly. The essays may therefore be read as a reflective counterpart to the novel, illuminating its concerns rather than explaining them directly.

Unlike *Amtmandens Døtre*, which is available in English translation, *Mod Strømmen* does not exist in a published English translation. As a result, much of Collett’s later writing remains less accessible to readers outside Scandinavia. The selections presented here are intended, in a modest way, to make some of these reflections available to a wider audience.

The passages that follow are drawn from these essays and arranged thematically to make their concerns more readily accessible to the modern reader.

These selected readings accompany the series on Camilla Collett published on the blog [Norwegian Genealogy and Then Some.](#)

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The Silenced Voices

The following passages reflect on what is written, but not preserved. They point to a layer of experience that rarely enters the historical record.

On what is never preserved

“There exists, within many homes, a quiet and unseen life of thought, which never seeks the light of day. It is written down at times—in letters, in small books, in scattered reflections—but it is not intended for the world, and seldom survives it.

What is most inward, most carefully considered, is also that which is most easily set aside. After a lifetime, these papers pass into other hands, where they are judged not by their truth, but by their propriety. And so they are often concealed, or destroyed.

In this way, much that might have given a fuller understanding of life is lost—not because it did not exist, but because it was never allowed to remain.”

On the fate of private writings

“What is written in confidence rarely escapes the circle for which it was intended. And when that circle dissolves, the writing itself often follows. It is not always neglect that erases it, but a certain carefulness—a wish to protect, to withhold, to leave no trace of what might be misunderstood.”

On the absence in the record

“Thus it happens that entire lives pass with little mark beyond what was required to be recorded. The outward facts remain, but the inward life—its reflections, its struggles, its quiet conclusions—has left no lasting sign.”

Editorial note:

Taken together, these passages point to a form of historical loss that leaves little trace of itself. What is absent from the record is not necessarily what did not exist, but what was not preserved. Collett’s observation suggests that the silence surrounding women’s lives is, in part, the result of selection rather than absence.



Marriage and Constraint

Here, Collett turns to marriage as both expectation and structure. What appears as a personal choice is examined more closely.

On the limits of choice

“It is often said that a woman is free in the matter of marriage. She may accept, or she may refuse. In this, her freedom is acknowledged.

Yet this freedom is of a peculiar kind. She may refuse what is placed before her, but she cannot determine what shall be offered. The circle within which she must decide is drawn for her in advance, and what appears as choice is often no more than a selection among what has already been settled.

Thus, the decision is hers, and yet not hers. The conditions under which it is made lie beyond her influence.”

On marriage as expectation

“From an early age, a direction is given—so quietly that it is scarcely noticed. It is not commanded, but assumed. Life is understood as leading toward a single point, and all that does not serve this end gradually falls away.”

On unequal conditions

“The man enters marriage with a life already formed beyond it. The woman enters into it as her principal condition. What is for one a part, is for the other the whole.”

Editorial note:

Here, Collett presents marriage not simply as a personal union but as a structured condition shaped by expectations and limitations. The appearance of choice is preserved, while the range of possible outcomes remains constrained. What is described is not the absence of freedom, but its restriction in practice.



Public Life and Exclusion

The following passages describe the public sphere—its ceremonies, its gatherings, and the limits placed upon participation.

On presence without participation

“In our public gatherings, where matters of shared importance are brought forward, one may observe that women are present, and yet not included. They are permitted to attend, to listen, to adorn the occasion—but not to take part in it.

What concerns them is spoken of in their hearing, but not with their voice. They remain, as it were, at the edge of what is decided, belonging to the scene, yet not to its substance.

This arrangement is so familiar that it is seldom remarked upon. And yet, it reveals much about how participation is understood—and who is thought capable of it.”

On accepted exclusion

“What is long accepted comes to appear natural. And what appears natural is seldom questioned, even when it rests upon nothing more than habit.”

Editorial note:

These passages describe a form of participation that is outward rather than substantive. Inclusion is permitted in appearance, while influence remains elsewhere. The arrangement is sustained less by explicit rule than by long-established custom.

IV

The Inner Life

Collett here turns inward, considering how external limitations shape inner experience.

On the inward and the outward life

“There are lives which unfold almost entirely within the confines of the home, and yet contain a depth of feeling and reflection that would, under other conditions, find wider expression.

When such expression is not permitted, the inward life does not disappear—it turns back upon itself. Thought becomes more intense, feeling more concentrated, but without the means to take form beyond the private sphere.

This gives rise to a condition in which much is experienced, but little is recognized. The outer life appears quiet and uneventful, while the inner life remains unseen.”

On restrained expression

“Not all silence is imposed. Some of it is learned, gradually, through expectation. One comes to know what may be said, and what is better left unspoken.”

Editorial note:

Collett here turns from external structures to their inward effects. Limitation does not diminish experience, but alters its expression. What cannot be spoken publicly is instead retained, intensified, and often rendered invisible.

V

Love and Illusion

In these final passages, Collett reflects on expectation—how language and assumption shape experience.

On expectation and reality

“Around certain ideas, words gather easily. They are repeated, accepted, and passed along without examination. Among these is the idea of happiness in marriage.

It is spoken of as though it were assured, as though the mere entering into the state were enough to secure it. Yet experience does not always confirm what language promises.

When expectation is formed in this way, it is not surprising that reality should fall short—not because happiness is impossible, but because it has been too lightly assumed.”

On illusion

“It is not only reality that shapes life, but the ideas we attach to it. When these are not examined, they may mislead more than they guide.”

Editorial note:

In these passages, Collett questions not the possibility of happiness, but the assumptions that surround it. Language, when repeated without reflection, may obscure rather than clarify the conditions it describes.

Concluding Note

These selections offer only a limited glimpse into Camilla Collett’s work, yet they suggest something of its enduring significance.

Her observations belong to a particular time, yet they speak with a clarity that extends beyond it. They remind us that the past was not as silent as it may appear, but that much of what was thought, felt, and understood has not been preserved in the forms we most readily consult.

To read Collett is not only to encounter a voice from the nineteenth century, but also to become aware of those that remain unheard.

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“AGAINST THE CURRENT”

Mod Strømmen (1894) gathers essays in which Camilla Collett reflects on the conditions of life in the society of her time. Written with clarity and restraint, these texts consider what is expected, what is permitted—and what remains unspoken.

This selection presents five themes drawn from the essays: the silenced voices within the home, the limits of choice in marriage, exclusion from public life, the inner life of thought, and the nature of love and illusion. Collett does not argue for change in abstract terms; she observes, reflects, and allows the reader to see.

More than a century after its first publication, *Mod Strømmen* remains a calm and searching witness to a society in which many questions were not openly discussed.



ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Martin Roe Eidhammer is a writer and amateur researcher with a particular interest in Norwegian cultural history, genealogy, and the lives of the people who give voice to their generation.

This translation is part of an ongoing effort to make important historical texts more accessible to a wider audience.

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ISBN