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Arthur Ransome

Excerpt

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Introduction

THE Very Reverend Patrick Murray Smythe, who was born in 1860, kept a fishing diary from March 1872, when he recorded the capture of sixteen sticklebacks and a minnow (“I ate minnow”), to March 1935, his last entry being made only a few days before his death. In this delightful book, which has been edited by his son and is shortly to be published, he mentions a day on Loch Leven with “old Mr. Butters who spends his summers in fishing and his winters in thinking about it”. But that is what most fishermen do in winter when the clogging frivolities of business allow them freedom for their minds. Thinking about fishing in winter . . . the fisherman’s body may be sitting at a table in a lamp-lit room but he is far away, listening to the splash and tumble at the weir, noting the dimple of a trout on a smooth run between the weed-beds, feeling his heart quicken at the stir of a salmon not leaping into the air but rising modestly and quietly, sure sign of a taking fish, or maybe watching his float, long idle by the waterlilies, twitch suddenly to life. Thinking about fishing in winter . . . what is it but “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity”. But that is Wordsworth’s definition of poetry. What wonder is it that more good books have been written about fishing than about any other sport? What wonder that fishermen, when they cannot fish, enjoy reading those good books?

In fishing books instruction and reminiscence are inextricably plaited together. Even the books that purport to tell a

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simple story contrive to make or find themselves making pupils of their readers. And many of the books that set out merely to be instructive are lit by the glow of recollected emotion and turn to poetry without knowing it. This perhaps in part explains why there are so many estimable men who, pending their transfer to a well-watered heaven, buy every fishing book as soon as it is published. They admit that some fishing books are not very good. What they claim is that they can take pleasure even in a bad book, so long as it is about fishing. They enjoy agreeing with one man and enjoy disagreeing with another and in both may find that same authentic glow of poetry, without suspecting, generous fellows, that, in some cases, they may have put it there themselves.

The pedagogic instinct is widely spread among men. No sooner has man learnt a new trick than he looks for a pupil to whom to teach it. There are men who when they learn a very old trick are inclined to write a book about it and to believe that it is a discovery of their own. This instinct is the excuse for many books about fishing, but not the reason why so many of them are good. The teachers call upon their own experience to illustrate their lessons, and, once they do that, the emotions of the past come rushing back and all is incandescent. Now of all stimulants to the pedagogic instinct among fishermen the most successful is the discovery of some new method or of some new material that brings about the modification of an old. Men try it, catch fish with it, and buy a ream of paper and a fountain pen. A good example is the spate of books produced not by the modest inventor of the fixed spool reel but by others excited at finding what they could do with it. The invention of nylon casts and lines has loosed a flood of ink. But nothing has so stimulated the production of fishing books as the continual production of new flies. All fishing other than mere netting, snaring or base assault with spear or arrow, consists in deluding the fish into taking a natural or

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artificial bait. But whereas there is no end to the permutations and combinations of feathers and silk and hair there are narrow limits to the changes that can be rung on natural baits. It has been established once for all that gilt-tails are the worms for grayling, and lobs the best for most other fishes, though brandlings are preferred by some. Sheringham has written delightfully of lob-hunting with a torch after dark on a dew-moistened lawn. I have heard a party of match-fishers in a railway carriage arguing over the tinting of maggots, praising this one chrysoidine, that one anatta, and seen them, each to prove his point, set their big fatted gentles, in gorgeous colours, wriggling on the table between them. Cheese, plums, potatoes, brewer's grains, caddis-worms, macaroni, bread-crust, paste, hempseed, stewed wheat . . . it is possible to make a long list of natural baits but it is very short in comparison with the ever-lengthening roll call of artificial flies. Natural baits do not make a very deep demand on the imagination or observation of the angler. As a subject for argument they may serve for a railway journey, but not from one year's end to another. They give the fisherman less to talk about, less to write about. Yet, though the coarse fishermen do not so naturally and so continually run to ink, we owe them some of the very best of our books, beginning with Izaak Walton. The very simplicity, the comparative uniformity of his preparations leaves the float-fisher free to relish ecstatic immobility at the waterside, where the fly-fisher, creeping and crawling and keeping his balance, cannot in the same way surrender himself to the moment. The float-fishers produce fewer books, but among them are the best. I think of the chapters on fishing, chapters from which the very essence of angling pleasure seems to distil like the mist rising on a summer's morning from a placid river, that were written by a Russian, Sergei Aksakov (1791—1859), who said that trout-fishing was "too restless" and preferred to watch his float. No

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man has written as well as he of the ecstasy felt by a boy as he comes to the river and of the calm happiness felt by an old man fishing in the evening of his life the waters he knew as a boy.

All the same, I cannot imagine anybody writing a whole book about maggots, whereas many a man has spent much of his life in thinking and writing about the fisherman's flies. And how well some of these observers write, hurrying from the riverside to the fly-tying bench and then back to the river to have another look at the models they are trying to imitate with silk and feather. At the beginning was the revered Juliana with her dozen flies. And today there are men so interested in this kind of portraiture that they have little time to spare for fishing. J. W. Dunne, the philosopher, profited like Newton from a happy accident. He tied some flies with artificial silk and noticed that their bodies turned black. He then tied them on white-painted hooks and, oiling them before showing them to a fish, perceived that they became miraculously translucent. His flies are rather bothersome to tie, though one or two of them, notably his Black Gnats, are very rewarding, but his account of how he came to tie them as he did is such that nobody who has read his book would care afterwards to be without it, no matter what flies he himself may put on his cast. Listen to this, of the final descent of the "orange quills": "It was over in the twinkling of an eye. They appeared, a small cloud, flying swiftly from the shadows of a group of branching trees. For one instant they sparkled, flaming red, in the sunlight—and then they had gone to the water like a rush of little fireworks, and were extinguished by the rising trout." Those sentences are good observation, good natural history, and, touched by emotion recollected in tranquillity, are they not also close akin to poetry?

Writing is a form of living. Readers, overhearing as it were an author muttering to himself, share his experience in so far

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as they are capable, but, being different from him, modify it into an experience of their own. It is obvious that reader and author share in a book's success and that the character of that success depends on both of them. For that reason it is waste of time to try to make a list of the best dozen or even the best hundred books on fishing and to try to impose that list on others. The best hundred for me would not be the best hundred for somebody else, and even if they were he would arrange them in a different order. Further, read by him, they would each one of them be different from the same books read by me or by anybody else whomsoever. Yet, next to the pleasure of reading a favourite fishing book comes that of persuading a friend to read it too. Many is the book that I have lost by foolishly pressing a friend, whom I wished to convert, to borrow it and to take it away in his pocket. We are, all of us, inveterate propagandists. When the National Book League invited me to glance over the whole field of English books on fishing I at first rejoiced in what I thought would be the easy task of helping such a young man as once I was to choose the books that should form the nucleus of his fishing library, but presently despaired, remembering the great variety of young men and the incredible number of fishing books among which they have to choose. Once upon a time it would have been easy because there were but a handful of books on fishing. Since then the books have seeded and multiplied until what was once a mere grove has turned into a forest through which a newcomer may find it hard to pick his way. Where should he begin?

I propose to give no advice, but instead, to look along my own shelves and give a free rein to favouritism. Which are the books to which most often I return? I will not in that short list include the reference books that go with me on a fishing holiday, to be consulted perhaps half a dozen times a day. Yet some of these are good books in their own right. Even if

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they were not, I should still, having a bad memory, want them with me. But they go on the permanent list of fishing gear, not to be forgotten, thus: “Rods, reels, casts, flies, net, gaff, wading staff, waders, brogues, waterproof jacket and Colonel Maunsell.” Most so-called “Vade Mecums” are best left at home, but not so his (published by Philip Allan in 1933) and, thanks to the enormous improvement in nylon casts and lines and the slipperiness of nylon, which has made us all as interested as sailors in the tying of knots, Colonel Maunsell must be joined by Dr. Barnes whose *Anglers’ Knots in Gut and Nylon* (Cornish Bros.) solves all nodal difficulties, trains the clumsiest fingers and provides delightful entertainment for those hours (which occur even on a fishing holiday) when fishing would be a waste of time. Still, we do not read those books for their own sake. We turn their pages perhaps desperately with an urgent ulterior motive (because time, tide and rising fish wait for no man). Let me mention here a few books to be read for the simple pleasure of reading them and not with a view to the immediate acquiring of some technical skill, although, so important is the spirit in which we fish, that a book that puts us in the mood to enjoy our fishing is likely also by some happy miracle to put us in the way of catching more or bigger fish.

First of all must come Izaak Walton, who “studied to be quiet” in times almost as troubled as our own. I have him in several editions but I am sure that anyone who does not already know him should make a point of meeting him first in the World’s Classics where is John Buchan’s admirable introduction to Walton and Cotton together. There are plenty of other editions, but John Buchan makes this my favourite, though I should be sorry to be without the charming brown-leather-jerkined facsimile of the first edition of *The Compleat Angler* published (a noble act of piety) by A. and C. Black, to whom fishermen owe so much. Here it is, the little

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brown dumpling of a book just as it slipped modestly into existence, in St. Dunstan's churchyard in Fleet Street in 1653, that critical, stirring year of the Commonwealth, four years after Charles the First had been beheaded, the year of the dissolution of the Long Parliament, six years before the Restoration, and yet a year when Piscator could stretch his legs up Totnam Hill to go fishing by Ware "this fine pleasant fresh May day in the morning".

Here is another first edition, and no facsimile this time but the real thing, the actual first edition of Robert Nobbes's *The Compleat Troller*, "printed by T. James for Tho. Helder at the Angel in Little Britain" in 1682, a book on pike-fishing, the first of the many specialist books to be written by men devoted to one particular fish. That is a rare book, but here is one still rarer. It is "Arundo's" own copy of Robert Salter's *The Modern Angler*, printed at Oswestry and interleaved with paper on which "Arundo", John Beever of the Thwaite, Coniston, wrote the notes that were turned at last into his own *Practical Fly-fishing founded on nature*. John Beever's book was first published in 1849. The son of a Manchester merchant, who, on retirement, moved first to the banks of the Dove and then to Coniston, he was a brother of Miss Susanna Beever, the botanist who established a drinking fountain for horses on the steep hill up to High Cross, on which a grateful driver scratched the words "God bless Miss Beever!" He was an alert, observant fisherman. Long before Stewart he urged his pupils to "get below their fish, or, at any rate abreast of them". He makes critical notes on Salter's flies, and, tucked into his copy of Salter is an admirable ink drawing of "middle duns" drawn from life in April 1818. On another page he has written indignantly, "Mr. William Beever of Birdsgrove on the Dove (his father) has in attempting to stain red hackles sullied this part of my book. I hope his red was more brilliant than the stains indicate". His ghost, and

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perhaps his father's also, would be amused to observe that the stains have faded out of existence. He tells of a fisherman who taught him much, the Matlock coach-driver who, when some young men called his attention to some fish they had not been able to catch, caught them all one after another and looked up from the river to ask, "And now, gentlemen, can you show me any more?" That little scene is played before our eyes and a hundred years are gone as if by magic. At the same time, John Beever dates himself most accurately in the period when the stage coach was yielding to the railway. He complained that ferruled rods in short joints were made not for fishing but for portability. "When we had only small coaches to squeeze ourselves and our rods into, there was an excuse for this; but as travelling is now chiefly performed by steam . . . a few feet in the length of a parcel is no objection, either upon the roof of a railway carriage or the deck of a steamer."

I was doubtful about mentioning my dear John Beever, because like Salter, he is out of print. But why deprive a collector of the pleasures of the chase? After all, fishermen value most the fish that are hard to take and value least those that are offered to everybody on a fishmonger's slab. The young fisherman putting together a library for himself should by no means neglect the secondhand bookshops. But he will not always prefer a first edition to a later one. I prize an old edition of *Fly-fishing* by Sir Edward Grey, but I should hate to be without *Fly-fishing* by Viscount Grey of Fallodon, published thirty years later and enriched by the new chapters, "Spring Salmon Fishing—the Cassley" and "Retrospect", which I read and re-read, though never without turning back to his description of leaving London by Waterloo at about six o'clock in a summer morning on the way to Test or Itchen. "There are places where hansoms can be found even at these hours of the morning; they are not numerous, and they seem quite different from the hansoms that are abroad at more

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lively hours, but they can be found if you will look for them at certain places.” Like difficult fish or books out of print.

Then, going back a little earlier, there is Thomas Tod Stoddart’s *Angler’s Companion to the rivers and lochs of Scotland*, and his entertaining *Reminiscences* with the account of a day’s fishing with the Ettrick Shepherd. And, most lovable of all books on Tweedside fishing, there is *River Angling for Salmon and Trout* by John Younger the shoemaker of St. Boswell’s, who, proudly apologising for his style, said it was “the very best style the author can possibly afford from thirty shillings’ worth of scholastic education”. He was born in 1785, and, over a hundred years ago, suggested that when trout were feeding below the surface the angler should tie down the wings of his flies to near the tail, to give them an appearance “something like the maggot released from its first case on the bottom stone and on its ascent to the surface” and “as much as you can, let them sink low in the water”, an early foreshadowing of the present-day tying and fishing of nymphs.

Then here is an 1857 edition of W. C. Stewart’s *The Practical Angler* of which J. W. Hills, who wrote good books himself, said “Surely still of its kind the best book ever written”. Stewart, like Younger, urged upstream fishing for trout, whereas Cholmondeley Pennell in *The Modern Practical Angler* pooh-poohed it, perhaps from that same contrariness that made him declare that imitation of nature was needless and that three flies, red, green and yellow, were enough. Here they both are and also the little pamphlet *Caution to Anglers*, a pamphlet of embittered argument between the two of them in which there are accusations of plagiarism, of lying and even of bad fishing. Well, they have both long been dead and, I suppose, fish the Styx, one fishing up and one fishing down and pass each other without speaking. Stewart’s is the better book and the better advice but Pennell’s is also worth reading.

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Here is my father's copy of Pritt's *Yorkshire Trout Flies*, (1886) and in it an old hair cast with a "light partridge and yellow" still surviving. I remember as a small boy taking feathers from birds my father had shot to Pritt lying ill in bed. Pritt gives sixty two patterns, but my father's copy has a manuscript note, "An old fellow in Upper Wharfedale used following casts. (1) Little Black and Yellow, Waterhen, Woodcock, Snipe and purple till April 26 (i.e. arrival of swallows) when he changed to (2) March Brown, Iron Blue Dun, Light Snipe and Yellow Partridge, which he fished through the season and always did as well as anyone. T. E. Pritt". Then here is *Wet Fly-fishing* by E. M. Tod (another old friend of my family) with a picture of Mr. Tod himself landing a trout while using his ingenious dodge for slinging his net on his basket. Honest old man! He had to explain in a footnote that the "trout" being landed was no trout but a mackerel bought for the purpose. And here is the book of another friend long dead, *Fishing in Eden* by William Nelson of Appleby who when someone said that the Eden needed restocking went out to prove it did not, and came back with a basket of over sixty trout. His is a well loved and memorable book with its picture of long ago boyhood in the Eden valley, and the cobbler, old Bob, who taught the lads how to tie their flies and how to use them. Another old favourite is Stephen Oliver (*Scenes and Recollections of Flyfishing*, 1834) who over a hundred years ago knew well that books and fishing go together, travelling light through the Lake District, always with a volume of Wordsworth, sending the other volumes on ahead of him with a change of underlinen.

But I am rattling on too long. That is the trouble with a fisherman among his books. You have but to start him talking and he goes rattling on for ever. And I have said nothing of H.T. Sheringham, "Piscator Rotundus", "The All-round Fisherman", as he used smilingly to explain. His is a row of