

A Fire In My Head

By Lawrie Kingma

'I went out to the hazel wood
Because a fire was in my head
and cut and peeled a hazel wand
and hooked a berry to a thread.
And when white moths were on the wing
and moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
and caught a little silver trout.'

WB. Yeats, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'

In October 1943 I became a flyfisherman. If you think that was very sudden, so be it, most love affairs are very sudden, and sometimes devastating. If you think that my claim would be difficult to substantiate then I will reduce it to apprenticeship. But unlike many other affairs of the heart, this one has been more or less permanent. Perhaps, also, a fire has been in my head ever since.

I have been a fisherman since the age of five, fishing in the great richness of the sea, the mother of us all. I do not know why I turned my back on the sea and became a flyfisherman devoted to the rivers, but that I did, and very definitely. Moreover I have never regretted it.

I was serving in the navy at the time, stationed in Durban on a ship. I was granted two week's leave and decided to spend it at the Drakensberg Garden Hotel on the Umzimkulu River. Here the river ran through a rich, farming valley at 5 500 feet. To me it seemed to flow in beauty and graciousness, set like a jewel in the rolling, green countryside, with the mighty Drakensberg mountains all about it. An account of my fishing in that river was given in the second issue of *Piscator*. I realise now that the meeting with the Umzimkulu acted as catalyst, changing my life irrevocably. Two Cape rivers were to dominate my future life.

Was it the flyrod or the river that changed me? Probably the two together, the one in my mind suggested the other. I know that when I held the flyrod and was conscious of its flexibility and grace, I felt complete in myself and content. But the sight of the flowing river had a similar effect on me. It is my lasting regret that I did not discover both earlier in life.

For the river is the gift of the sea to the mountains and the land. It is only a temporary gift, for it must be returned to the sea immediately it is given. When one looks at a river, the water you see flowing today will be far downstream tomorrow. To me, clear, flowing water is an endless fascination. It is part of the magic of flyfishing. No still water, however beautiful, can compare with it. The forces the Umzimkulu set in motion changed me so much that I was never the same again once I began to consummate my love affair with the river and the flyrod. It was a love affair in which there was sometimes pain, sometimes frustration, often a fierce joy, always fascination.

I found the Eerste quite soon, but the sight of the meagre stream flowing through the Kramat area bitterly disappointed me. Yet there I was to experience some of my greatest fishing in a river. Actually my first fishing in a Cape river was done in the beautiful tributary of the Breede, the Witels. After I was demobilised in October 1945 I visited Ceres and saw the Breede for the first time. But I was not ready for the great rainbow trout then inhabiting the river. Instead, I made several three or four day camping trips up the Witels, penetrating as far as Happy Valley above the second swim. With my heavy casts and lack of experience, I found stalking its beautiful brown trout in very clear water extremely difficult, yet caught many trout from 13 to 16 inches.

But it came at the right time for me and helped me to become a flyfisher. It also prepared me for the very different fishing in the Eerste, whose rainbows were, in due time, to hold my imagination and mind in thrall for many years. For me, the fishing there was magical and satisfied me in a way nothing else has ever done. Over the course of time I wrote no less than eight articles describing my fishing there, which were published at various times in *Piscator*. But, in the early 60s, the stock of trout was destroyed.

Late in 1946 I did a 15 hour walk from a farm called Boschloof in the Witzenberg (Kouebokkeveld) down the Olifants River, from its source above the farm. I saw no brown trout, although there were plenty

of small ones in the pools on the farm, but the river was fantastic, cutting its narrow way through the living rock. I saw the pad marks of a leopard in the sand at the edge of the river. It was wild country and seemed completely uninhabited. At nine o'clock, in the dark, the search party the farmer had sent out found me and soon I could claim my lovely feather bed. For two days I had to rest my feet.

I never visited the headwaters of the Breede, which are quite near that of the Olifants but I realise today that they would be similar. Yet the experience was worth that stupendous walk.

I only found the Breede 25 years after the Eerste, but my compelling interest in it has made me acquaint myself with as much of its course as I could. I know the great plain of Elandia the other side of Worcester, and was entranced with its great flocks of duck and Egyptian geese, its occasional fish eagles and eagle owls. I found canoeing there greatly satisfying, and sometimes spent seven or eight hours ranging up and down the river. I caught many fat smallmouth bass there. There were no largemouth, but their cousins of 15 inches weighed more than two pounds, and gave a very good account of themselves.

Elandia is strange, lonely country, there are very few trees, and one can see for miles. I have been fortunate to have found it.

I know the rivers at Robertson, but have never fished there, which I regret today as they are very attractive. I have camped and fished between there and Drew, without much success. Drew is always in my mind, even though I caught 10 of my twelve four founders in the great pool 12 km down stream, and only two at Drew, although my companion got three up to four and a half pounds there. Yet Drew is so rich in experience for me, so much of the greatest fishing of my life happened there even after the discovery of the new water. I have explored much of the river downstream, fished both upstream and down at the bridge at Swellendam, and made a trip up river from the mouth intending to reach the ferry, but never did as two days of rain interrupted my journey.

When I found the Breede, I had hardly ever fished for bass with any rod save the flyrod, using flies and popping plugs. After all, the fly is particularly deadly for them, especially the streamer. But I found that I was unable to detect the take of the fly in the slow deep water of the middle reaches. Perhaps I was at fault here. Nevertheless, I fell from grace and made a baitcaster from a glass blank, which balanced with a first class Swedish multiplying reel, an instrument of precision. I used it with the Heddon Dying Flutter, and caught more bass over four pounds than with any other rod. This lure seemed to madden the big ones, for they usually seized it in a turmoil of water and foam, and sometimes snapped my line in palmiet reeds or sunken branches.

Eventually I made a spinning rod also from a glass blank, which I usually used with a tiny minnow, just heavy enough to take out the line. Later I used only the Rapala Minnow. This rivalled the delicacy of the fly rod, which was always my favourite method of fishing for bass. Because I used it more often, I caught more bass on it than on the other rods.

I was slow in realising the potency of the fly in thin water at the fading of the light, particularly at the base of rapids. I did not realise that the big fish, particularly the smallmouth, then ventured into very shallow water to forage. This was brought home to me when I caught two 3lb smallmouth on the flyrod when it was almost dark from extremely shallow water in the margins of a flooded river. The smallmouth is far more of a rover than his cousin, yet I caught a four pound largemouth at the bottom of fast rapids. I was also slow to realise the deadliness of the bullet nosed bug when cast from deep water into the weedy margins. On the flyrod I took five largemouth up to 2 3/4 pounds in one afternoon and the following morning from the same place, lost a sixth at the canoe. On the spinning rod at dusk I caught three largemouth in very shallow water at the run-in of the great pool downstream.

Searching, always searching I was, and sometime I found gold.

Angling, especially for bass, is not an easy sport. It needs all your application, of your thinking, of your understanding. We are creatures of habit, we repeat those actions that usually enable us to catch bass, being unwilling to innovate in case it is unsuccessful. Yet it is by experimenting, by trying new concepts, that we deepen our understanding. Most anglers like to catch big bass, for it is certainly satisfying. But I learnt much more by hooking those smallmouths in the flooded margins than catching a big one. Similarly, fishing the edges with a bullet bug, and succeeding, also gave me intense satisfaction, because I learnt a new skill, something I did not have before.

Another discovery, that one could catch big smallmouth on the bug when I got three averaging 3lb in one day. I caught a 3lb smallmouth near the run-in at Flip se Gat at dusk, and missed a very big largemouth there a few days later. I learnt also to try a bug at the edge of reefs, because there was often a big smallmouth waiting there. Again, one big clump of sunken branches gave me five bass averaging 4lbs, including a mag-

nificent smallmouth of 4lb 7oz, the biggest that I ever caught. In the early evening I learnt to fish the shallows next to deep water. The flyrod with its fly or bug, was ideal for this kind of work. I caught the "heavenly twins" – two smallmouth a couple of ounces over 3lbs – in the wonderful stone pool; one in the evening and another the following morning, because I experimented. When I tried something new, and it was successful, it gave me a deeper satisfaction and stayed in my memory.

After my regular fishing companion was no longer able to accompany me except occasionally, I tended to save the great pool for times when he could be present. This did not always benefit him, for on four successive visits, it was flooded by very heavy summer rains. But he was very successful on the fourth, catching four magnificent bass. Incidentally, as I fished at Drew more often I had some of the most wonderful fishing of my life, one trip being especially memorable as I shall describe.

All fishermen, I think, have their special days, where good fortune attends them through their fishing. I have had many good days, in between the rain, the discoloured river, the wind and the frustration. One particular day, however, I treasure above all others.

It was late March – normally the best time on the river – but a heavy thunderstorm had discoloured the water. I had intended to pay another visit to the great pool, but realised that the faster water at Drew would clear more quickly than the slow water downstream.

For two days I could do no good. But on the third day the river started to clear slowly. It was a still day, the sky overcast, an ideal day for the bass. But for two hours, although I fished very hard with spinning rod and minnow I never had an offer. Then I came to the great weedbed which lay just above the smallmouth place. I cast the minnow into the first channel, and was immediately taken. I hit him two or three times. There followed a very hard fight and my arm was sore when I landed him. It proved to be a 3lb 4oz bass, which showed its size in a tremendous jump. I was very happy with my catch, and went back to camp for a meal and rest.

In the late afternoon I was out again, my destination being the great clump of palmiet reeds above the smallmouth place. I took only the flyrod and a few popping bugs my companion had made for me. With one of them I caught a beautiful, fat largemouth of 2lb 10oz, at the island, glowing with a golden green sheen. A good start to the evening.

At the palmiet clump I cast the bug and it disappeared in a tremendous swirl and turmoil of water, the typical take of a big largemouth. A heavy jolt on my rod, and up he went in a high leap, flaring his gills. I put on a heavy side strain, my rod parallel with the surface of the water. But he ripped the line out my hand as he bolted for the weeds on the other side. Somehow everything held, and eventually I lifted a great largemouth, short and in wonderful condition, out of the water. He weighed 4 1/4 pounds. It had been an exceptional day, I was well content.

I made my way slowly back to camp. The light was fading fast, it was very quiet and still. A feeling of great peacefulness seemed to envelope the river and myself. So many years I had known the river, particularly this part of it, that I felt I was one with the river, the beautiful mountains surrounding it, and the flowering earth.

This flowing water, this palmiet rooted in the rock, the stiff standing reeds bedded in the margins, the great sunken reedbeds lying across the river, why, they were still a mystery to me, no matter how hard I tried to understand them. Yet how deeply they have stimulated my mind and imagination. But the river is greater than the sum of its parts. It sings its own song, its melody is sweet and clear.

And I LISTEN.

It sings of the tiny largemouth, harbouring in the weed beds – out of the flow. Of the tiny smallmouth lying in the faster water. Of the great golden carp filling the deep pools, where one sometimes disturbs a shoal which bolt like yellowtail. It sings of the eels which I have never seen. It sings of the springers, of which I have seen nine or 10 spring high in the air, when disturbed by the passage of the canoe on a dark night. Of the beautiful tench. Sadly never of the witvis – where have they gone? I remember the great congregation of them in the junction pool in Mitchells Pass one long ago Easter! For me it sings most eloquently of the great largemouth and smallmouth holding at their stations, waiting to give battle. Oh, it has sung for me for a long time. May it sing its song for a long time yet!

It sings also of the great cleansing floods during the winter, rising in some places eight metres above the summer level. It sings of beautiful still summer mornings. It sings of the magical edge of the dark, the most satisfying time to be out on the river. Yet I am also drawn strongly to full night, when the river is something else again. Why, to me the river is a living thing, full of delight and wonder.

And still I have a fire in my head.