

# INDIGENOUS SOUTH AFRICAN FLIES – A CHRONOLOGY

By Ed Herbst

While the Brown Trout (*Salmo Trutta*) is indigenous to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, trout elsewhere in Africa were introduced during the continent's colonial period. During the 1860s trout and salmon ova were transported to Australia and New Zealand in the refrigeration chambers of British ships trading with those countries. The success of this venture inspired South African anglers to approach the government for finance and by the late 1890s trout had been established in most of the mountain areas of the country.

With South Africa being a British colony, flyfishing at the turn of the century drew strongly on the British heritage and tradition. Turn of the century South African flyfishers used flies such as the Claret and Mallard, March Brown and even small versions of Salmon flies such as the Durham Ranger and the Thunder & Lightning.

Inevitably the difficulty of obtaining traditional British fly tying materials led South African anglers to use the fur and feathers of local animals and birds, but the local flies which evolved from the turn of the century until the early 1950s were all based on British winged wet

flies and they were usually fished with heavy (six and seven weight) sinking lines.

It was in the early 50s that South Africa's most famous fly, the Walker's Killer, was designed and tied. The "Killer" design – in which a series of feathers are tied vertically in a sequence on either side of the hook shank – had its origins in New Zealand. The most famous fly tied in this manner is the Mrs Simpson but New Zealand author Keith Draper, in his book *Trout Flies in New Zealand* (A. H. & A. W. Reed, Wellington 1971), says the first person to tie flies in this style was Frank Lord of Rotorua who developed the Lord's Killer about 1940.

Not surprisingly then, the Walker's Killer was the product of a New Zealander, Lionel Walker, who fished the Tongariro River and Lake Taupo. In the 1940s he met and married a South African woman who had gone to New Zealand as a teacher. He and his wife Isabelle returned to South Africa where he remained until he died in 1964.

What makes the fly unique is that it is made of 18 English partridge feathers tied in three vertical tiers of three feathers on each side of the hook shank – nine feathers on each side.

This gives it a most desirable characteristic – it feels soft, resilient, plump and succulent.

Since it was first introduced the Walker's Killer's has deceived tens of thousands of trout and its success is largely attributable to its resemblance to two of the staple constituents in the diet of South African trout – dragonfly nymphs and the freshwater crab. The crab, *Potamonautes*, which is not found in the Northern Hemisphere and also does not seem to occur in trout streams in South America, Australia and New Zealand, is an important constituent in the diet of trout and other freshwater fish in South Africa.

In a letter to the English fly tying firm, Veniards, in 1962 Walker described its dressing and how to fish it: "The fly should be made on a number 4 hook. The body is of red chenille, tail of black hackle fibres. Over the chenille body, eighteen tips of English Partridge hackles, either speckled or striped, are tied. These are put on in three layers of three feathers each, on each side of the body. The first layer is placed one third of the way up the hook shank and extends to the bend. The second layer, about two thirds up the shank, completely covers the first layer. The final layer is tied in at the head, covering all, but tied not too close to the eye of the hook, the idea being to give the head a torpedo shape appearance which helps to give the fly a good entry into the water. I chose red for the body and I believe that red body has more appeal to the trout than any other colour. I decided on chenille because it gives a good fat body and also soaks up a lot of water quickly, helping the fly to sink. The fly had to have a sleek appearance and keep its shape with the feathers sticking well down the sides when wet, hence the idea of three layers of feathers. If the feathers were tied in at the head only they would give the ordinary wet fly effect. However by tying it with layer upon layer, each layer sticks firmly to the other layers when wet and the fly maintains its shape, however much false casting may be done. For best results this fly should be fished rather deep, retrieving it with a fairly fast jerk action while at the same time aiding the movement with the tip of the rod."

In the mid 60s, while Lionel Walker's fly was being fished with heavy sinking lines on rivers and dams elsewhere in South Africa, a professional musician from the English county of Yorkshire was developing tactics on the fast, shallow and rocky crystal-clear mountain streams near Cape Town which would change the face of flyfishing in South Africa for ever.

His name was Mark Mackereth and he was a bass player with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra. He fished a Pezon & Michel split cane rod with silk lines and was largely instrumental in introducing the up-stream dead-drift, dry-fly technique – prior to his arrival the universal technique on rivers was to fish a sinking line downstream and jerk the wet fly back. He will best be remembered for the pattern he developed, the Caribou Spider, but his greatest contribution was the encouragement he gave to such young anglers as Tony Biggs and Tom Sutcliffe who went on to significantly advance the art of flyfishing and fly tying in South Africa.

The Caribou Spider, usually in size 14, had a hackle feather tail, a body of clipped Caribou hair and a parachute hackle tied in the stem-loop parachute method. In this method – first described in *Fly Tying Development and Progress* by John Veniard and Donald Downs in 1972 and more recently in *Fly Tying Methods* by Darrel Martin (David & Charles, London, 1978) – the base of the hackle feather is stripped of webbing, and tied in a loop on top of the hook shank. The feather is then wrapped, parachute-style around the loop using a Barlow Gallow Tool to hold the loop upright. After wrapping the parachute, the hackle tip is inserted into the looped hackle stalk

which is then pulled tight, securing the feather in place. (The method is described and illustrated on page 201 of Martin's book). The Caribou Spider, with its body of clipped caribou hair, proved ideal for the Cape streams, floating like a cork through the roughest waters and, with its white body, proved easy to follow. It floated low in the water giving the fish an easy-to-see silhouette and, over the years, has remained a constant favourite. Like all successful flies it is now being produced commercially and shop-bought versions have the parachute hackle wound round a post of red or yellow chenille which makes it more visible than the version tied by Mark.

It was in April 1965 that another classic South African pattern, the RAB, was named. The RAB is a large-hackled fly – what the British call a Variant and the Americans a Spider. The Variant, so-called because it had a hackle twice the normal size, was invented by Dr William Baigent in North Yorkshire, England, in the early 1900s. In America in the 60s, Art Flick made the Grey Fox Variant famous.

In his book, *The Practical Fly Fisherman* (Stoeger, 1975), the late Al McLane described the Variant as the “one fly that a beginner or expert can use with complete confidence on most fishing days.”

“If you were to fish every day during that period of the year when trout rise to floating flies – using a spider or variant – you would catch your daily share of trout and probably hook some of the largest ones that will ever come to any dry fly. I won't even make exceptions about where you do this fishing. Provided it is water with a normal fly-eating trout population, you are going to get a chance at every fish that wants to be caught and even a few who usually know better. Of all the trout flies, the one you can least afford to be without, is the spider. The spider is thought to imitate long-legged insects like the crane fly, spider or water strider. The fact that many, apparently selective trout will fall for a spider when nearly perfect imitations fail is important to remember”. (Stoeger Publishing Company, 1978).

The RAB was the product of one of Mark Mackereth's protégés, Tony Biggs. It is interesting from a structural point of view in that it has a herl body but, unlike the normal procedure when herl is used (ie, tied in by the tips and wound forward to give a gently tapered body), it is tied in by the butts and the tips are deliberately splayed all over the place to give the idea of a large insect such a dragonfly, damselfly or cicada sprawled helplessly in the water.

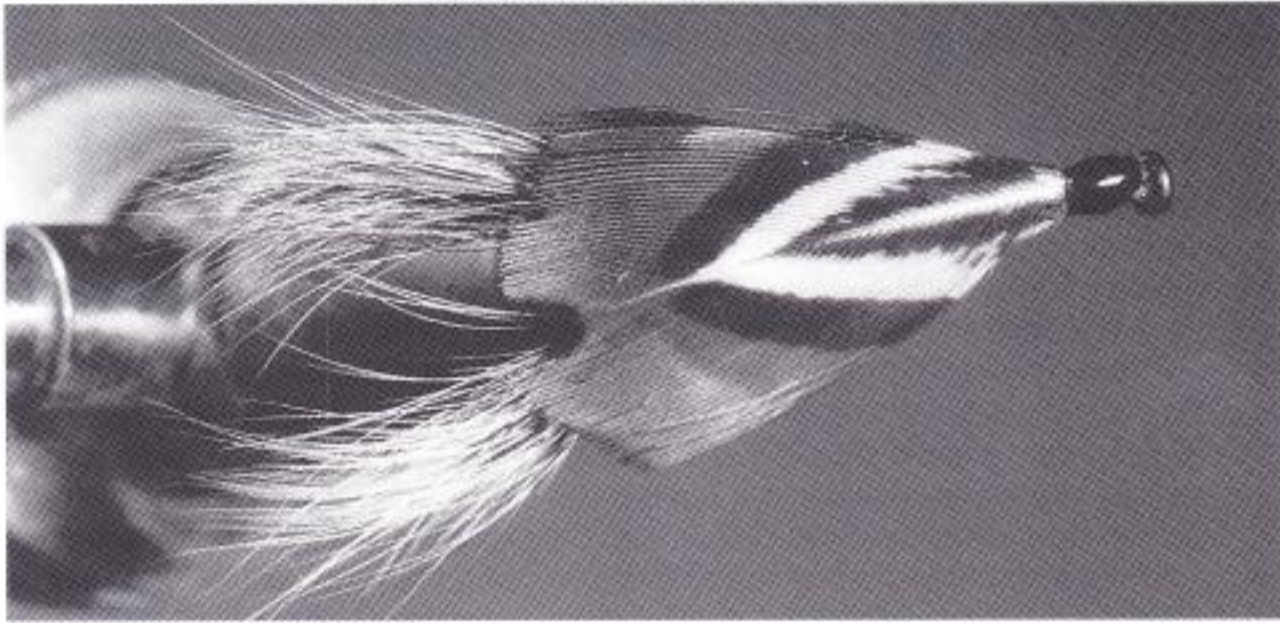
The herl used initially was from the glossy flight feathers of a wild goose which was chosen because it was shiny, tough and waterproof. In later years pheasant tail was also used.

For the rest the construction is basically that of a variant. Tony started evolving the RAB after he noticed that the more his Royal Coachman was torn apart by trout, the more he caught – so he decided to make the fly look like that from the start by deliberately tying it to look unkempt and untidy. The RAB is a variant in Coachman colours, having two large hackles, first brown and then, in the front, a white one. I sometimes tie a single turn of partridge hackle, barred teal or, better still, golden pheasant crest, in front of the white hackle following the French tradition of combining stiff hackle with soft. A recent addition to my RABs is one or two strands of Lite-Brite and nylon organza to add some twinkle and further movement.

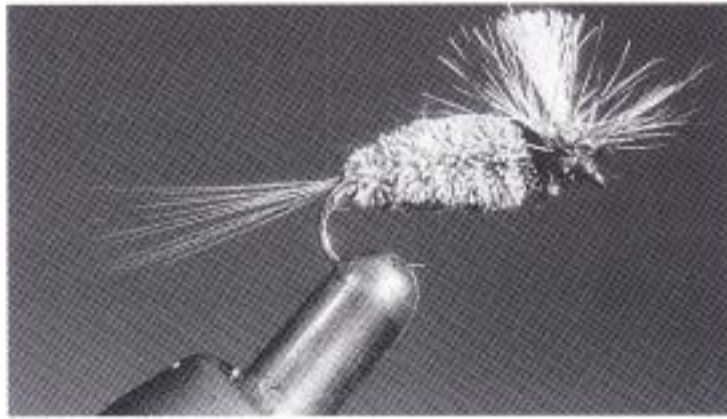
The white hackle-fibre tail is tied longer than usual to balance the bigger hackles. The herl “legs”, which have a similar iridescence to the Coachman's peacock herl body, are tied in by the butts, twirled round the red thread and taken forward in two wide turns to leave a little red colour showing through. The herl legs are then spread apart with the thread. Before wrapping the hackles I dub a bit of antron and one or two strands of lite-brite on at the eye of the hook and, after the whip finish, I tease the antron fibre and lite-brite fibres out to mingle with the hackle fibres creating a broken spectrum, impressionistic appearance.

A large-hackled fly tied on a small hook parachutes gently to the water surface and, if you see where the fly lands, it is easy to follow thereafter. What the RAB design provides more than any other dry fly is movement. It responds nervously to every tug and push of the current, every stray breeze sets its hackle fibres and “legs” quivering. Its other advantage, I believe, is that, with its large hackle and long feather-fibre “legs”, it comes into the trout's window a lot earlier than a fly of smaller dimensions would.

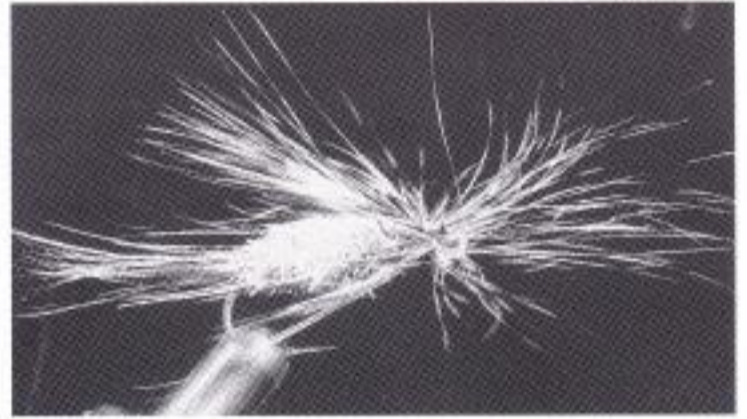
With an upstream wind the RAB is a delight to fish, responding beautifully to roll-casts. If the wind is blowing down-stream however it is best to try something else. Big-hackled flies can twist light tippets and the answer to this is to use the Surgeon's Swivel knot which is illustrated in Art Lee's book, *Fishing Dry Flies for Trout On Rivers and Streams* (Atheneum, New York 1982),



*The Trout Frog.*



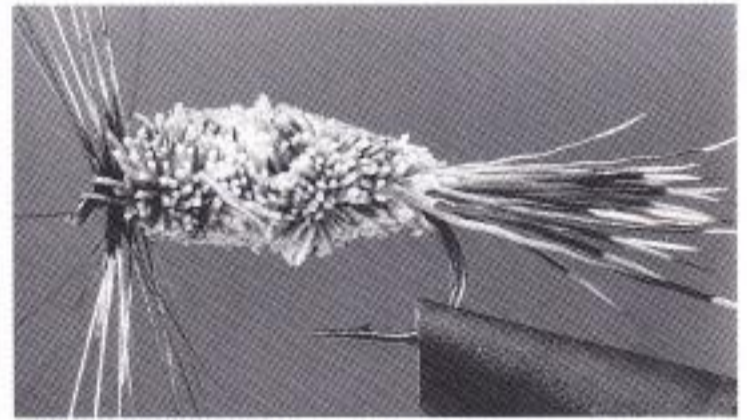
*The Bright Spot Caribou Spider.*



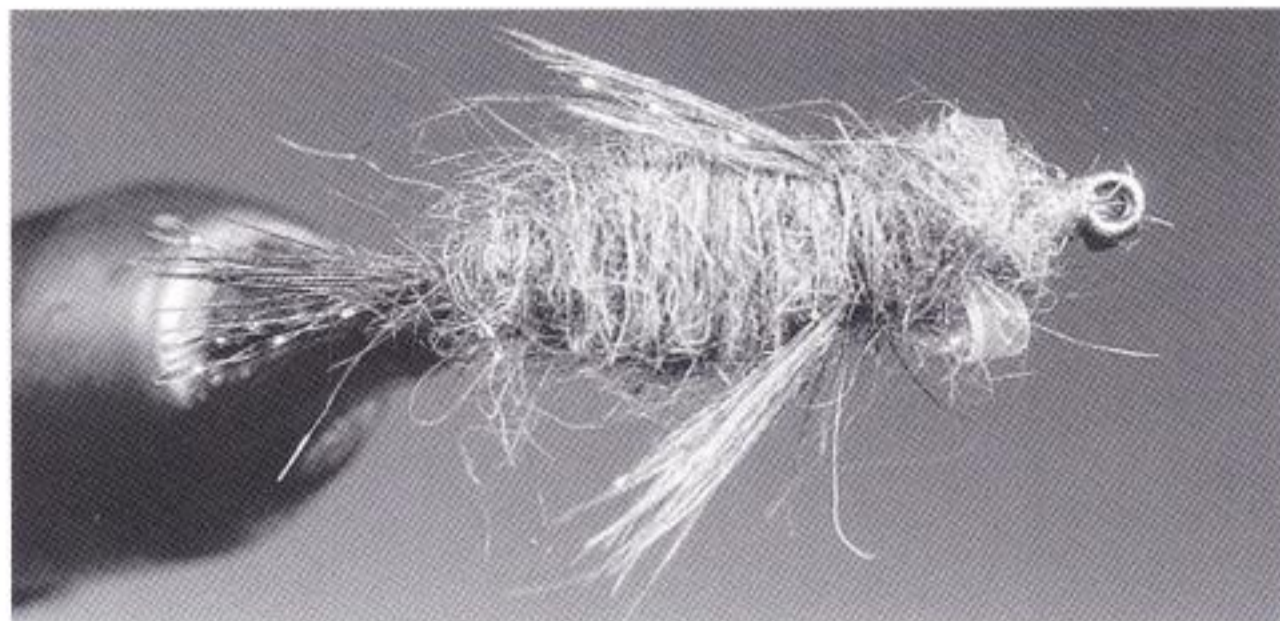
*Mark Mackereth's Caribou Spider.*



*The Walker's Killer – an old favourite*



*The DDD.*



*Roger Baert's Hover Dragon with Edge Brite eyes.*

a copy of which is in the CPS library. For the Surgeon's Swivel to function best, a small space immediately behind the hook eye should be left open.

The RAB got its name in April 1965 when Tony caught a lot more fish than Mark on the Smalblaar River near Cape Town. Mark demanded to see the fly which had been the cause of Tony's success and promptly named it the "Red-Arsed Bastard" which was quickly shortened to RAB.

The other original design to come from Tony was his Smalblaar Nymph, named after the Smalblaar River. It is very effective and a minimalist design if ever there was one. It has echoes of Stewart's Brown Spider in that it consists of but two materials – red thread and Golden Pheasant crest. The red thread is wound down to the bend, the pheasant crest is tied in at the bend, wound round the red thread and taken forward in one and a half wide turns to the eye where it is tied off.

The use of red thread, Tony told me, was inspired after reading Negley Farson's famous classic, *Gone Fishing*, which stressed the value of including red materials in the fly.

Another of Mark Mackereth's protégés was Tom Sutcliffe, South Africa's most famous flyfishing author. Tom moved from the Cape Province to the province of Natal in the late 60s to join his friend John Beams and fish the fertile stillwaters in the foothills of the Drakensberg mountain range. These dams were regularly producing fish of between seven to 10 pounds and the traditional way of fishing them was with a sinking line off the dam wall. Tom and John made floating lines and dry flies popular on local still-waters and John developed a local version of the Woolly Worm in that it had a seal's fur instead of a chenille body and the hackle was very sparse, with the fibres stripped from one side of the hackle feather.

But Tom is best-known for his famous DDD which was not unusual in its design but rather in its body material which was made from the clipped body fur of a Klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*), which is South Africa's only antelope with hollow hair. Tom first tied it in November 1996 as a beetle imitation on the Umgeni River but it really achieved fame as a still-water floater. He gave an example to his friend Bill Duckworth who regularly fished dams in the Dargle area of the Natal Province and started catching some huge fish on it. It was accordingly named the Duckworth Dargle Delight or DDD. It is tied on size 8-14 hooks and has a brown hackle, a tail of Klipsinger fur and a body of spun and clipped Klipspringer fur. Some tyers use the mottled tips of the Klipspringer hair as a hackle and patterns tied with Klipspringer hair dyed yellow have been particularly successful.

"What the trout take it for is anybody's guess, but if you want mine, I'd say it represents a large terrestrial insect of sorts, most likely a beetle, grasshopper or moth," Tom says

I tie a variation of the DDD using Lee Wulff's loop-wing style wings, in which a combination of Krystal-Flash and Zeelon are tied in at the bend of the hook and then swept forward on either side of the body in two oval-shaped loops before being tied in behind the hackle, the object being to imitate the spent wings of a moth or caddis lying flush with the water.

Another way of adding to the visibility and thus the attraction of the DDD is to mingle a few strands of Crystalflash or Flashabou with each clump of deer or klipspringer hair as it is spun on to the hook shank. Later, when the body is clipped to shape, the synthetic materials emit sparkles of light, attracting the fish from a greater distance.

In 1986 another significant step forward in the evolution of indigenous patterns occurred with the development by Pietermaritzburg flyfisher Hugh Huntley of the principle of using the eyes in a nymph as a "hotspot" to catch the attention of trout. For many years anglers in Natal had used tiny loops of black Tuff chenille to represent the large, bulbous eyes of one of the staple foods of trout in Natal dams – the dragonfly nymph. While tying flies one evening for the next day's fishing trip, Hugh ran out of black chenille and used red instead. The next day Tom had a blank day and Hugh caught 12 good trout – good in Natal terms being from three to seven pounds. This led to the development of what became known as "Hugh Huntley's Red-Eye Damsel" which is now tied and sold commercially in South Africa.

Although the first fly had a dubbed fur body, the fur was later replaced with chopped and dubbed marabou. It is normally tied on a 2-x long shank hook in sizes 8 to 14 and has only three materials – brown, black or olive tying thread, brown, black or olive dubbed marabou and red chenille eyes. Earlier Hugh had modified the Red Setter which, according to *Trout Flies In New Zealand* by Keith Draper (Reed, Wellington 1971), was first tied by Geoff Sanderson of

Turangi on the South Island. Hugh modified it by substituting Golden Pheasant tippet for the brown hackles in the middle and head of the fly and choosing an orange seals fur body instead of the original orange chenille. The Orangeade, as Hugh called it, was specifically tied for those hot days when there was a bit of an algae bloom and the fish were feeding hard on *Daphnia*.

A further development of this principle was Roger Baert's Hover Dragon, a dragonfly nymph which, instead of chenille for eyes, uses green or red "Edge-Bright", a plastic material which, when cut, glows along the cut edge. This material is now considered to be superior to chenille as a hot-spot eye material. A thin strip is tied at right-angles to the hook shank behind the hook eye and the ends are folded inwards to form two loops which represent the big, bulbous eyes of the dragonfly nymph.

Another indigenous fly developed in the early 80s was the G & B Low-Floater. It was developed on one of South Africa's most demanding Brown Trout streams, the Witte, about two hours drive from Cape Town. It was based on a well-established and similar pattern, the Cooper Bug, which was popularised by Gary Borger in his articles and books as The Devil Bug. To enable this fly to float better in the riffles of the fast, rocky, freestone streams of the Western Cape, two young Cape Town anglers, Gavin Grapes and Jimmy Baroutsos, utilised an old bass bug technique to make the head of the fly much more substantial by "stacking" deerhair, one layer on top of another, before clipping it into a cone shape. By flaring the single bunch of deer hair at the head and then adding further bunches of flared deer hair, a very effective dry fly was created. Unlike traditionally hackled dry flies, the G& B uses no hackle and does not ride above the water's surface. Instead the pattern floats low in the surface film, presenting the trout with an unbroken, life-like body silhouette. The umbrella-shaped head provides a wide surface area and traps lots of air in the pockets between the hair to float the fly through the roughest water. Like most successful patterns it consists of very few materials. It is usually tied on size 14 and 16 light wire hooks and consists of thread, deerhair and a dubbed synthetic fur body, usually orange or chartreuse, which seems particularly appealing to local brown trout. (PISCATOR 125, P42)

By mid-summer on South African dams, the tadpoles have developed their hind legs and a fly called the Trout Frog becomes a deadly imitation. Its origins are unknown. Roger Baert, proprietor of South Africa's leading flyfishing shop – the Flyfisherman – and the "father" of float tubing in this country, was the first to bring it to the attention of local anglers. Roger received his first copy of the fly about 12 years ago when he was offered a batch of flies by a Zimbabwe fly tying factory. The batch had been ordered but not paid for and the factory was happy to give them to Roger for a discount. The best of the batch by far was the Trout Frog. It is tied on a size 6 standard shank hook. The body is white floss and at the tail it has two squirrel tail legs the length of the hook shank and protruding outwards in a V shape to mimic the hind legs of a frog. Two ringneck pheasant church window feathers are laid, Walker's Killer style, on top of the hook shank and the front legs are imitated by speckled feathers, probably mallard breast, tied as a beard hackle.

No South African fly has more quickly won a reputation as a deadly deceiver of trout than Harry Stewart's Millionaire's Taddy. Harry, a Scot, used to run a fly tying factory in Zimbabwe but has now retired and lives in East London. He still ties flies for his mail-order customers and he says that, of late, for every order he gets for other patterns, he gets two for the Millionaire's Taddy.

Like most successful flies the Taddy consists of few materials. It is tied on a size eight standard shank, wet-fly hook. It has a sparse tail of black, brown or olive marabou, twice the length of the hook shank mixed, with two or three strands of flashabou. The body consists of a thin piece of mink fur on the skin tied in at the bend and wrapped forward and that's it. Like the Walker's Killer it feels good in the hand – chunky but soft. In the water it seems to breathe, having wonderful mobility. It is one of those multi-faceted flies which resembles a tadpole and a dragonfly nymph. The first Taddy was tied in 1988 for a young East London angler, Carl Krull, who had good success with it in the rivers of the North-Eastern Cape Drakensberg mountain range near the little town of Barkly East. He caught both trout and the indigenous Yellowfish of the *Barbus* genus. The first Taddy had a mink tail and body but when the mink tail was replaced with one of marabou mixed with flashabou, its success rate doubled and the development of the fly was complete. Its reputation was made a few years later when Harry's grandson, Keith Rose-Innes, then 15 years old, won the annual competition at Gubu Dam. The principle of wrap-

ping fur on the skin around a hook is not new – there is very little in fly tying that has not been tried before – and the well-known American angling author, the late Charles Brooks, tied a dragonfly imitation, the Assam Dragon, which had seal's fur on the skin wrapped around the hook. However Harry's combination of mink and marabou in the aptly-named Millionaire's Taddy is destined, I believe, to become one of South Africa's most successful trout flies.

Another of Harry's contributions to the lexicon of local patterns is his termite pattern. The termites, erroneously called "White Ants", belong to the genus *Isoptera* and the huge mud mounds which form their nests are a common sight throughout Africa. Just before the season's first rains, thousands of termites leave these nests to start new colonies and their arrival on the water prompts a feeding frenzy from the trout. Harry started working on this problem 30 years ago at the Trout Beck dam in Zimbabwe where he was estate manager and the current pattern, he says, is unerringly chosen by the trout in preference to the many real insects on the water! It is tied on a size twelve hook and has a clipped deerhair body, suitably coloured with a felt-tip marker, brown hackle and artfully-created feather wings. To create the wings Harry takes two partridge or francolin feathers and strips the fibres from one side of each feather. He then ties the two wings, which have been cut to shape, on top of the body with the stripped sides facing each other, quill to quill.

South African fly tyers, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have ceaselessly worked to solve the riddles created by their own circumstances and environment. In the process they have adapted indigenous materials and developed techniques which draw on the work of others but which also display a lot of original thinking. The work of the fly tyers mentioned here will surely be adapted and advanced by a new generation of anglers who, while acknowledging their debt to the past, will be anxious to make their own, enduring mark in a sport which has captivated so many enquiring minds down the ages.