

## REMEMBERING MARK MACKERETH

by Geoff Godley

Although as I write, he died some fifteen years ago I often think nostalgically of the days that Mark and I used to go fishing together and the times we spent in each other's homes.

When one reaches an age well past the biblical three score and ten one often regrets that one did not enquire more about the earlier life of a good friend who has passed on. Unfortunately I do not know much about the earlier life of my friend who was born Alfred Mark Mackereth on 25th December 1907. His place of birth was said to be Stillington, Yorkshire, but I believe he was brought up on a farm near Pickering not far away, and close to rivers where he had his early experience of trout and salmon fishing.

Although he loved the countryside it appears that by declining to be a farmer he disappointed his parents who eventually relented and allowed him to pursue a musical career. He took up the double bass and studied under George Martin, the principal double bass of the Hallé Orchestra. It was probably this turn in his life and his military experiences that brought him to South Africa. Mark also studied at the Royal Military School of Music under Claude Hobday and whilst a member of the Regimental Band of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, the Second World War broke out and his musical activities were disrupted. During the war he was twice mentioned in dispatches. He seldom would talk of these experiences but did describe to me some of the horrors of the retreat to the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, particularly when he turned to talk to a soldier friend on his right only to find that he had totally disappeared, probably hit by a shell. He said that when he woke up after his first night back in Britain his hair had turned white. Although war and fighting were essentially alien to his nature he resumed active service in France during the Normandy campaign.

Mark met his wife, Eileen Lilian Watkins, a South African girl, while he was doing guard duty at the Tower of London. Eileen was friendly with the family of the OC of the Tower and through them was introduced to Mark. In 1951 the couple left England for South Africa, Mark having been offered a position with the SABC National Orchestra in Johannesburg.

Ten years later they moved to Cape Town, Mark joining the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra as alternate principal double bass player. In July 1961 he joined the Cape Piscatorial Society, remaining a member for the rest of his life.

It was then that Mark discovered his favourite fishing place in the Cape. He himself described it in *Piscator* No. 53 as "the delightful little river – the Smalblaar". For those who are not acquainted with it, this name describes the upper to middle reaches of the river which runs eastwards down the Du Toitskloof Pass area and eventually (after a change of name to the Molenaars River) joins the large Breë River a little short of Worcester.

Mark was a magnificent trout fisherman but, perhaps because he insisted on using his beloved dry flies in heavy spring water he started off with a blank day, something that we, who learned to know him, realised was a rarity.

He made fly-fishing look easy in the most difficult circumstances and when his companions had a blank day and Mark came along with only one fish he would remark with strong Yorkshire nuances in his speech that all he had caught was "the village idiot" – the other fish were clever enough to know when to feed and when not to.

Through being a member of the Cape Piscatorial Society I made the acquaintance of a number of good friends and from time to time we would go fishing in small groups of two or more and this "togetherness" made excursions the more enjoyable, especially on days when the fish were not enthusiastic; but there was one whom I found to be the most rewarding companion – and I am sure others did too – and that was Mark. When he played in the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra their day off was Friday and I found that I could also take that day off from work and, because he could not drive a motor car, he was glad to find I and a few others who could give him a lift. I soon learned that in regard to trout fishing he had a deep knowledge of matters piscatorial. He knew many of the tales and verses associated with angling and once referred to that poem which commences "Behold the fisherman – he riseth early in the morning and disturbeth the whole household . . .". He used to say: "Come along to my flat at an early hour and I shall provide the breakfast". He often insisted on providing the lunch as well, because I was providing the transport; but as I have already indicated there was one skill he lacked, and that was driving a motor car. Fortunately before buying a car he was wise enough to take driving lessons. I heard that he gave up the idea and by then the hair of his driving instructor had nearly turned white!

Apart from his music and fishing there was another area where he was an expert. It was only after enjoying some superb meals at his flat that I discovered the person who produced all those tantalising and often piquant flavours was not Eileen but Mark. I also remember that upon he and I returning from Steenbras Dam with two 2 lb Tiger trout (for the uninitiated a hybrid cross between a male brook trout and a female brown trout) to my home where our wives awaited us, he did the cooking and I have never tasted better trout. Mark remarked with illustrative Yorkshire exaggeration that he had eaten hundreds of salmon and thousands of trout, but had never tasted anything as good as this. I must say that we all agreed that the flavour matched the beautiful rose colour (the most spectacular I have seen) of the flesh of the fish.

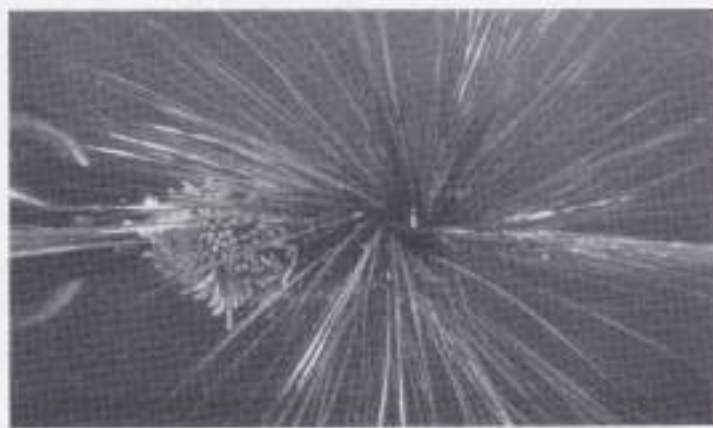
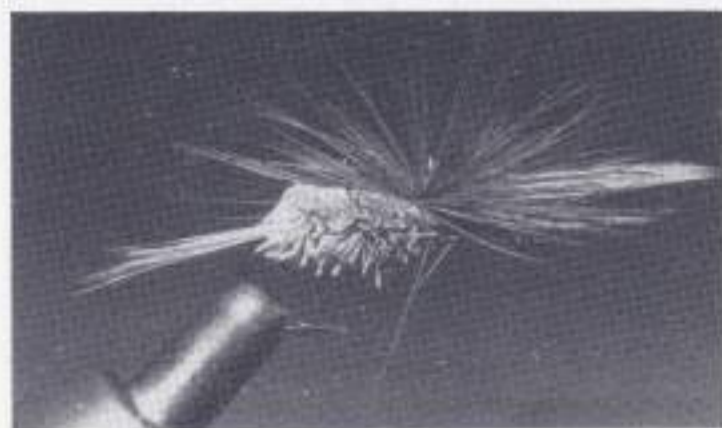
Basically Mark was a quiet man, exceptionally modest and most restful to be with, but that did not prevent his dry humour from effervescing through every now and again; but, more than that, there was an aura about him which had to be observed to be appreciated. People had remarked about this and I noticed it particularly when after a day's fishing we would share a room or a bungalow at a hotel to spend the night before the next day's fishing that on awakening the next morning one felt at peace. Animals seemed to notice it too. Cows and horses in a meadow would walk quietly up to Mark and nuzzle him and small animals such as dogs and cats were tremendously attracted to him. Jane, the bull terrier bitch, belonging to Barry and Helga Steyn who for some years managed the Du Toitskloof Hotel, was always nearly beside herself when Mark arrived there to fish (see Piscator No. 93, page 18). After an excited greeting she attached herself to him and followed him all day while he fished. When Mark hooked a trout Jane, standing on rock behind used to shiver with excitement as if Mark's own barely perceptible exaltation was infectious; but of course, Jane knew that if the trout was one of the over-abundant undersized fish, Mark when he unhooked the fish would throw it in her direction and she would swallow it whole. Jane would eventually follow Mark back to the hotel where he enjoyed his beer in the bar on a hot day, with Jane leaning against his legs, as if wanting to be near as possible to him. Eventually when she could contain herself no longer, Jane would jump up on the bar counter and Mark would give her her own beer.

Yes, he was an unforgettable character. At the time when I tried to absorb some fishing tips from him, he would demonstrate how he would find fish and where they would lie. Then his casting accuracy would become evident when he would point to two small stones 15 cm apart protruding out of the river about 15 to 20 metres upstream as a likely place. I could never have reached them against the strong downstream wind, but he would place his almost weightless dry fly delicately between the stones and up would come a trout to take the offer. Seeing this level of skill repeated again and again made me realise that I was watching fishing at its best. He was also one of those rare anglers who always saw the trout before it took a fly. His eyesight was truly remarkable.

Unlike many other fishermen he seemed to be totally unselfish. He would give way to other anglers and was always willing to teach the art of trout fishing and also fly-tying at which he was one of the best.

It was with great sadness that I accompanied Brian Key and Bob Watkins, Mark's brother-in-law, to scatter his ashes in his beloved Smalblaar after his untimely death from severe illness.

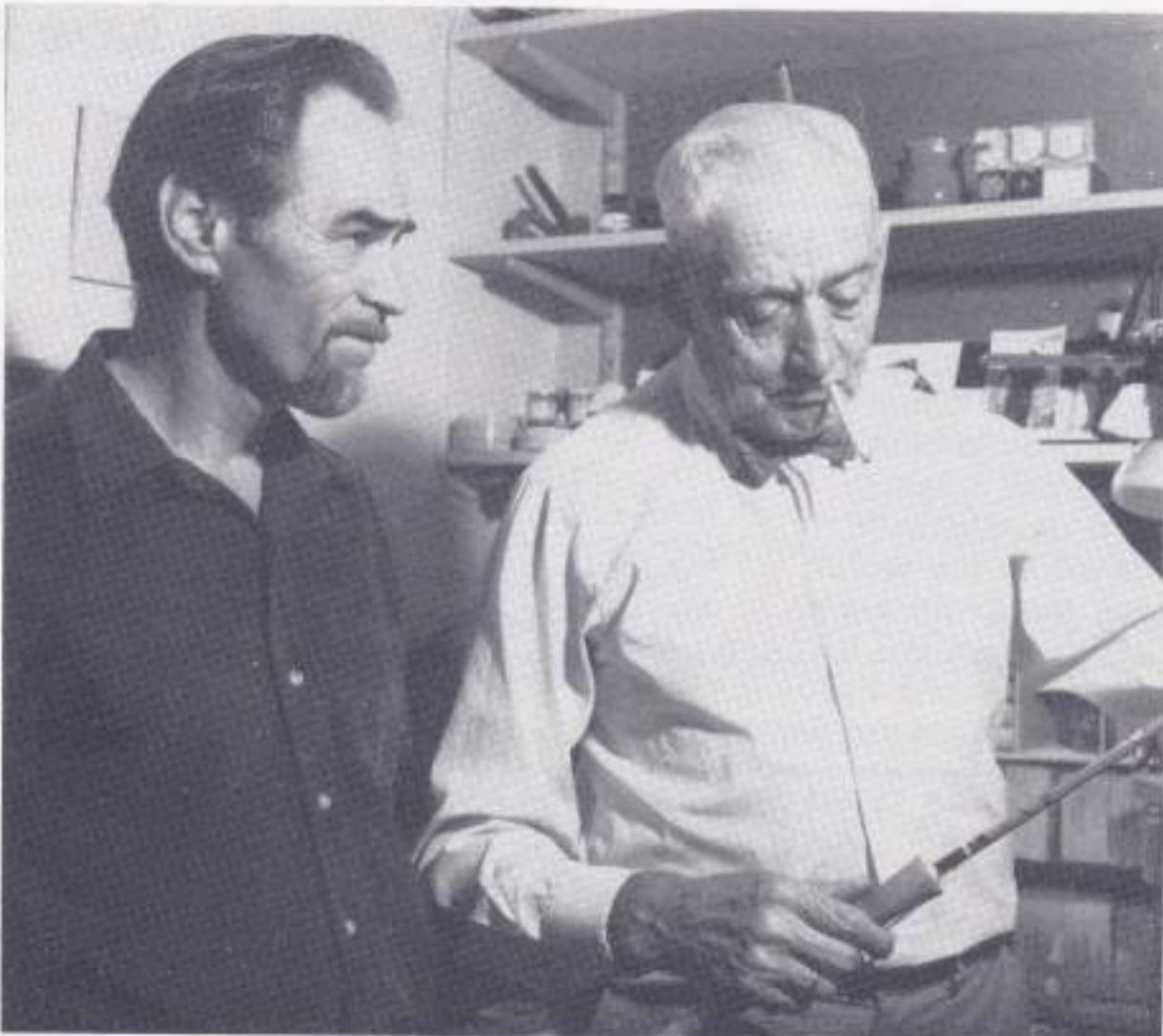
I think many like myself feel a sense of loss at Mark no longer being with us, and acknowledge that we were truly enriched for having known him.



Mackereth's Caribou Spider as tied by Jonathan Rogers.



**Mark Mackereth tying one of his deadly patterns.**



**John Beams (left) and Mark Mackereth discussing Mark's beloved Ritz Fario Club split-cane fly rod.**