

## REVIEW

**THE RAPTURE OF THE RIVER. The Autobiography of a South African Fisherman.**  
By S. A. Hey. A. A. Balkema, Cape Town. 1957.

**I**N his introduction to this book, Professor A. C. Cilliers says that "All South Africans are justly proud of the natural beauties of their country". Certainly none have more genuine appreciation of these delights than anglers whose sport draws them into the most beautiful places.

This book is in itself a thing of beauty. It is a fine production with splendid photographs in most generous measure. The writing is gripping and authoritative, by one whose lines have fallen in pleasant places and who has the knack of imparting his love of nature and the lure of the rivers to the most prosaic reader.

Sidney Hey has written articles on fish and angling for various periodicals for many years, and we agree with him that such contributions are transitory and that it was full time that he put his reminiscences into more permanent form. His book which has now appeared is an important addition to our sparse angling literature.

The chapters on estuary fishing will appeal to many, but under our terms of reference we will confine this review to the greater part of the book—dealing with rainbow trout fishing in the eastern Cape Province. The author had the good fortune to experience this when it was generally at its best in the earlier years of the century, and to have the enthusiasm, physical endurance and ability to profit by his opportunities and to become one of the leading trout angling experts and conservationists of his day.



(All rainbow trout fishing in South Africa commenced with the twentieth century. The Frontier Acclimatisation Society's Pirie Hatchery had a small but vigorous stock of rainbow trout, hatched from eggs imported from Armistead's Solway Hatchery in April 1899. This was augmented during the winter of 1899 by fry hatched from ova sent to them from the Jonkershoek Hatchery, Stellenbosch. These Jonkershoek ova were from the first rainbows stripped in South Africa, taken by John L. Scott in July 1899 from two-year-old fish, which had been hatched from imported eggs in 1897. A. N. Stenning took a good quantity of eggs from the two-year-old rainbows at the Pirie Hatchery in the winter of 1901. Thereafter rainbow eggs were available for stocking projects in the eastern Cape Province.)



This most readable book has value as a work of reference, as it covers a phase in our angling history soon after the introduction of rainbow trout to the virgin rivers of the eastern Cape and before the ruthless cultivation of the uplands resulted in soil erosion and the deterioration of the river habitats. The rivers of which he writes still provide excellent trout fishing at times, but they are more susceptible to the effects of flood and drought than when their beds were rocky, deep and clean. The deterioration in the general size of the rainbow population, due to gross overbreeding, which he mentions in connection with the upper parts of some rivers, is even more evident at the present day.

True to the tradition of the dyed-in-the-wool angler, Sidney Hey recalls his first instinct for fishing at an early age in the Peddie district, where he and his companions vied in the catching of gillieminkie minnows. When slightly older, a sergeant in his father's command of police initiated him into the art of "springer" fishing in the Begha River. This called for a special technique for taking these freshwater mullet with fine tackle and baiting with the grubs extracted from termite mounds; a useful step along the road towards eventual mastery of the fly rod.



He entered the postal service before he was in his middle teens, but long enough before the South African War to emerge as a trained telegraphist and to be transferred to King William's Town in 1899 to help to cope with the high-pressure traffic. In spite of the exacting regular and overtime service of those days, he managed on rare occasions to get a free Sunday and to undertake the 14-mile walk from King to the Amatole mountains, and after further exertions there, to walk back again to go to bed, to rise at 5.30 a.m. on the Monday! On one of these trips he saw his first trout at the Pirie Hatchery, including one of those monster, but useless, "Loch Levens", which weighed 12 lb.; and the Curator (this was in A. N. Stenning's period) regaled him with succulent bushbuck cutlets. He did not realise at the time that this was an introduction which was to lead him to a long and close association with trout culture and inland fisheries work, although his wartime sojourn at King William's Town was devoid of fishing.

He had a happy interlude at the Lovedale Missionary Institution, near Alice, in charge of the post office and as a telegraph instructor to Native students; and has recollections of Dr. James Stewart, who had been a contemporary of David Livingstone.

He was transferred to East London, where he had his first experience of estuary fishing, and underwent a general "toughening-up" process by cycle-touring. In 1910 he was moved to Umtata, and experienced life in many of the small towns in the Transkei, and knew the unspoilt attractions of the estuary of the Umzimvubu River at Port St. Johns before ruin came from soil erosion in its vast catchment area.



Sidney Hey's initiation as a trout angler began soon after the outbreak of the 1914-18 war, when he was sent to Keiskama Hoek with its streams from the Amatole mountains.

Here arrived at about the same time a new bank official, George Grant, a Scot who strangely enough had never fished for trout, and they proceeded to learn together. Fishing in the vicinity of the village was poor and there were few local anglers, so they proceeded to explore the tributaries of the Keiskama River on the native reserves within a radius of about 11 miles. The first season was sufficiently encouraging to ensure their permanent conversion, and they read all the books on trout they could raise, as well as the catalogues of famous tackle dealers.

By the next open season they were ready to start off both mentally equipped and provided with superior tackle, and Hey's accounts of their adventures and successes on the Wolf, Cata and Mnyameni rivers make first-class reading.

At Keiskama Hoek, Sidney Hey has his first practical experience of trout stocking, as it was considered that the pioneer work of Dr. MacArthur and G. A. Nettleton should be continued by further introductions. He had become very friendly with W. S. Richardson, Curator of the Pirie Hatchery, and spent weekends with him, walking the distance of 12 miles from Keiskama Hoek across the mountain slopes. He set up hatching boxes for rainbow ova in the mill furrow in the village, and transported the unfed fry to the various streams in bedroom jugs. It was strenuous work, usually done on foot, and he kept it up for six or seven years without a serious loss. On one occasion in the winter of 1923 he took 1,000 trout fry in two bedroom jugs to the unstocked headwaters of the Wolf River, on a plateau of the Hogsback above intervening falls, necessitating an arduous climb of 3,000 feet in 10 miles. Three years later he found trout swarming in the pools, ranging from 6 inches to 15 inches long; and he heard in 1955 that this upland stream still held numerous small rainbows, in poor condition from overbreeding and lack of fishing.

In their second season as trout fishermen, Hey and Grant tried the Little Kabusie River in the Stutterheim district, travelling by Cape cart. Here they found that some of the rainbows were in remarkably fine condition, one which Hey took on a March Brown being 14 inches long and weighing 1 lb. 12 oz. (Condition Factor 65). Two of



over three pounds were landed, but poor Grant suffered the tragedy of losing "the largest trout we had yet seen in any river", estimated at well over six pounds.

They also extended their activities to the Maden Dam on the upper Buffalo River near the Pirie Hatchery, of which he gives an interesting account.

When they learnt more of the possibilities of trout fishing in the eastern Cape, they spent a vacation in the Maclear district, accompanied by G. A. Nettleton, who had fished the Wildebeeste River during its "boom" years in the first decade of the century. They reached a farm between Ugie and Maclear, after a somewhat adventurous jaunt in Grant's open tourer to King William's Town, and by the Sterkstroom-Maclear branch railway. Hey was younger and more active than his companions, and he fished hard and was rewarded with a good number of rainbows from 2 to 4½ lb. The Wildebeeste was still living up to its reputation—for those who went out for their fish, and this chapter is full of angling meat.

Hey's diary recorded that in 1918 he took a number of good rainbows in the Keiskama tributaries, seven ranging from 2½ to 3½ lb., on Mallard and Green and Jock Scott flies. He also visited the Tyumie River near Alice: a memorable trip as he bagged a fine rainbow of 4 lb., and lost another by misadventure—the lunging attempt at netting by an excited helper.

George Grant had been transferred from Keiskama Hoek on bank inspection duties, but he managed to join Hey and his family for a vacation in the Maclear district in the autumn of 1918. They found an appalling drought and hopeless fishing conditions in the lower rivers; so they committed themselves to an ox-waggon journey to the upper water of the Mooi River, only to find it swarming with small trout in poor condition. After camping for some days in rather trying circumstances, they got a local team to haul the waggon back to Ugie; but Hey recalls subsequent experience in the same area, when sizeable trout were in abundance with good water.

The next chapter deals with an outing to the Mooi River, Maclear, in the autumn of 1920, a very interestingly written account, as his adventures were recorded at length in chatty letters to Grant, who was on leave in Scotland. The water was again on the low side, but good trout were plentiful and the company good, as the Richardsons from the Pirie Hatchery were of the party; although Hey was saddened by the loss of several big trout.

In the following autumn, Hey and Grant again visited the Mooi, and also the Big and Little Pot rivers. On their first morning, Grant took a lovely brace of rainbows, from 3½ to 4 lb., in the Maclear village water of the Mooi, and retired for a quiet smoke. Hey continued to fish near the creamery and took a rainbow of 4½ lb. after a long fight; and like a good official, checked its weight on the post office scales! After that they retired to the Royal Hotel for lunch. Later in the afternoon, they sallied out again to fish the river below its junction with the Mill Stream, and Hey caught another rainbow of 4½ lb. on a Dusty Miller fly. They bagged others, and as the trout were rising, Grant changed to a No. 10 Blue Dun dry fly and took a brace of two-pounders, when they were ignoring the large, wet, fancy patterns. It was truly a memorable day's fishing—achieved without leaving the village water.

It is interesting to note that at that time they found the fishing in the Little Pot River, above the Tentkop road, quite rewarding with occasional two-pounders; and no mention is made of a condition approaching the gross overstocking with small rainbows which occurred in subsequent years. In the lower Mooi River they had bags of good trout ranging from 1½ to 4 lb. Those were indeed the days!



S. A. Hey's reputation as a skilful and knowledgable trout fisherman and conservationist had become firmly established, and in 1923 he began to find that there was an official demand for his services in connection with publicity work. He was seconded from the Department of Posts and Telegraphs to serve on a Fisheries Committee



appointed to prepare exhibits for the Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. This included the taking of photographs and films and the collection of specimen fish for preservation, and the quest took him to the Drakensberg rivers in Natal and the Cape. At Maclear the fishing was excellent, and he killed 30 rainbows of 3 lb. and over in the first six days. They prepared a number of rainbow skins for the taxidermist and took numerous photos. Alas! when he returned to Cape Town, he found that the taxidermist had no idea of how a trout should look and many of the skins were ruined; and another bitter disappointment was that none of the exposures would bear enlargement. A new method of mounting the remaining skins was devised, and with the artistic help of Donald Swan the final product was a great success.

His next publicity project was the preparation of a guide to trout fishing in South Africa for the South African Railways, in which B. Bennion in the Transvaal, and J. Barclay Lloyd in Natal collaborated. This was published in 1924, during the time when Sir William Hoy was General Manager of Railways.

In 1925, following the raising of the matter in the House of Assembly, a Fisheries Survey Committee was appointed under the chairmanship of H. Warrington Smyth (Secretary of the Department of Mines and Industries), who was a keen angler. On F. G. Chaplin's recommendation, S. A. Hey was again seconded to carry out "a preliminary flying survey of the whole Union". The records of his very extensive visits to the inland waters of the Union were published in Reports Nos. 1, 2 and 3 in 1925, 1926 and 1928, by the Department of Mines and Industries. However, in the present book he summarises his survey work, with suitable embellishments, in two very interesting chapters.



Sidney Hey continues to tell the story of his trout fishing life by quoting from a second series of letters to George Grant written when he was Postmaster at Maclear. These commenced in May 1929, and, as before, his narratives are full of interesting details. Amongst other matters of note, he had the satisfaction of finding good trout, up to 3½ lb., in the upper Tsitsa River, where he had planted ova and transported adult fish from the Mooi River two years before. Particularly entertaining is an account of the fishing in the famous Gemfana section of the Tsitsa river basin on Tsolo native reserve, down below the Ntywnka Pass from Tsolo to Maclear, where large rainbows from 4 lb. to 6 lb. were taken on the fly when water conditions were favourable, and by the less law-abiding on spinners and worms.



He breaks away from his accounts of fishing adventures at this stage to discuss the vexed question—the fly or the driver? He says that on rare occasions when he has found trout rising madly to fly on the water, he has tried to match it and found something that they would take out of half-a-dozen patterns. It was apparently an Iron Blue Dun. He cites other instances, but concludes that "the man who confines his fishing solely to the dry fly on South African waters will have little to show for his efforts compared with the wet-fly fisherman".

He lists a number of patterns, mostly well known, which he has used; but finds from his diaries that most of his rainbows of 4 lb. and over were caught on the Dusty Miller, with Thunder and Lightning, Dunkeld and Invicta as close runners-up. He has a success-inspiring confidence in any of these, and the size of the hook used was mostly No. 6 Limerick. There is much in this chapter to promote thought.



After he had tested the fishing in the upper Tsitsa, it was opened for general fishing in 1929, and he followed the results carefully "in order to see how many years would elapse before the fishing deteriorated as it had done on most of the streams in this area".

The excellence of the upper Tsitsa then, and for some years afterwards, exceeded



his most sanguine expectations. An outstanding bag to another rod in 1929 was twelve fish from 2½ to 4 lb. When conditions were favourable, he says that he seldom went there without getting his limit of twelve, but he feared that there were not enough anglers to keep the trout population in check.

On one occasion he won a great battle with a rainbow of 5 lb. 4 oz.—the largest and most shapely he had caught. Although he renewed his cast, this success was followed immediately by the losses of a fish which looked even bigger, and of another big one. He gives an account of an unpleasant experience of partial emersion in the icy and turbid water rushing down the Tsitsa after a sudden hail storm; which perhaps may have helped to reduce the excess rainbow population. His friend Brian Sheldon suffered a shattering loss when fishing this river. He fought his monster for the best part of an hour and then tried to get it into a landing net which was too small to enmesh it. It fell out and broke the cast. From the measurement of the net, this fish must have been at least 28 inches in length, and as it was thick in girth, probably 10 lb. in weight. The fishing continued to be good in the upper Tsitsa when Hey left Maclear in 1934. But by 1937 the effects of overpopulation began to be evident. He considers that it was inevitable that history should repeat itself here, as in all the rivers of the Maclear district.

On one of his former visits to Maclear, Sidney Hey got his best basket of rainbows, from the Big Pot River, and his account of that day is one of the gems of the book. He had been prepared to be satisfied with a female of 4 lb. 1 oz. taken early in the day; but when proceeding downstream, he underwent the baffling experience of having at least a dozen large trout come short, like phantoms, at his Dusty Miller, although they were not interested in other patterns. How he came to find some sheet lead in his pocket is quite a story, as it was not his usual practice to weight his fly in the local manner. However he decided to try it in this case, and caught five more rainbows over 4 lb.—the total weight of the six being over 25 lb.! Was it the sinking of the fly which brought about the change, or some other circumstance? Let him argue it out with you when you read this epic.



In reviewing the history of the introduction of rainbow trout to the Maclear district, he cites the first stocking of the Wildebeeste at Ugie about 1902, which in a few years gave astounding results, and this river "for some years afforded as good trout fishing as any river in Europe or America". However, from about 1917, the fishing in the upper and middle reaches of the Wildebeeste had deteriorated and there was an enormous number of undersize rainbows. This was followed by a period when practically all the trout in the river seemed to have disappeared. He advised that the water be rested for three years before restocking, to allow the food supply to improve. He obtained a large grant of ova from the Cape Provincial Administration, and in due course the fishing began to come back, but never to the standards of the earlier days.

Some of the Maclear rivers were originally stocked with hatchery ova and with fingerlings transferred from the Wildebeeste. Hey's persistent efforts, when he was living at Maclear, resulted in the stocking of many of the upper waters and tributaries, and he records the details in a very useful chapter.

Philosophizing on the matter of "luck", to which the success of a fisherman is often attributed, he believes that "the fisherman whose catches are consistently better than the average is possessed of a proportionately greater amount of the skill which is necessary to make a successful angler".

Finally, in the chapters referring to trout, he summarizes the information gleaned from his diaries on the effects of weather on fishing.



It is a great book, a worthy recording from a wide experience for the benefit of posterity.

A.C.H.