

# The history of the Cape Piscatorial Society

By Ed Herbst



*Arthur Cecil Harrison (1890 – 1980), a founder member of the Cape Piscatorial Society in 1931 and its secretary and editor of its journal Piscator for almost half a century thereafter. Our most prolific mayfly species is named after him – Baetis harrisoni.*

The credo of the Cape Piscatorial Society is "Extending and encouraging the culture and protection of Trout and other desirable freshwater fish in the Cape" and, although the CPS was constituted several decades after the arrival of trout in the Cape, its history is inextricably entwined with this "Prince of Fish".

During the 1860's, trout and salmon ova were transported to Australia in the refrigeration chambers of vessels plying that run. The success of those efforts stimulated local interest.

Act No 10 of 1867 was passed by the Cape Government. The purpose of the Act was: "for encouraging the introduction into the waters of this Colony of fishes not native to such waters".

Early attempts to introduce trout to the Cape were unsuccessful and in 1890 the Western Districts Game Protection Association was formed and assumed responsibility for the introduction of trout to the Western Cape. In that year the Association successfully persuaded the Cape Government to finance further importation of trout ova.

In October 1891 the Colonial Secretary, the Hon J. W. Sauer, appointed a "Fisheries Committee" to supervise this work.

The Committee ordered 30 000 Loch Leven ova and 70 000 brown trout ova from Andrews of Guildford. A professional pisciculturalist, Ernest Latour, was employed by the Cape Government and arrived in Cape Town from England on March, 18, 1892. By the end of the month the third consignment of ova which had arrived from Britain had been successfully hatched at a hatchery in a cellar of the Anneberg Brewery at Newlands (the present Ohlsson's brewery).

By 1893 the Newlands facility was inadequate and the Government rented land at Jonkershoek on the banks of the Eerste River outside Stellenbosch. The hatchery built then is now part of the research station of Cape Nature Conservation.

By 1902 the Western Districts Game Protection Association amended its title to include "Trout". The Western Districts Game and Trout Protection Association represented angling interests in the Western Cape until 1931, when it was reconstituted as the Cape Piscatorial Society.

Guiding the destinies of the Society from 1931 until he died in 1980 was Arthur Cecil Harrison. "A.C." as he was known was born in London in 1890 and came to South Africa with his father in 1917. During World War 1 he was one of the few to survive the Battle of Dellsville Wood where he had served as platoon commander in the Cape of Good Hope Regiment.

Such was his contribution to conservation generally and freshwater limnology in particular that he was awarded an honorary Master of Science degree by the University of Cape Town in June 1960. In his citation the University Orator, Professor D. V. Cowan, Dean of the Faculty of Law said: "Calmly, industriously, unostentatiously for more than 50 years Mr. Harrison has enriched the world of learning as a freshwater biologist and piscatorial expert. His list of scholarly publications on trout, bass, eels, the kurper and many exotic fishes is long and impressive. He has found time to serve as honorary secretary of the Cape Piscatorial Society since its inception in 1931, and is the editor of its excellent journal. For more than 20 years he has been the Advisory Officer for Cape Inland Fisheries.

“Mr Harrison has deserved well of his country in other fields. He served in the South African forces in World War I and was wounded at Dellville Wood.

Throughout his professional life he has striven to conserve and safeguard the living beauty of nature from man's destructiveness; and since 1952 he has been secretary to the Advisory Committee for Nature Conservation. Such men, Mr. Chancellor, who seek to keep alive our awareness of nature in an industrialised world, are rare”.

In March 1947 the first issue of Piscator, the Society's journal appeared. A. C. Harrison was its editor and, in a tribute to AC in December 1977 when the 100th edition of Piscator was published, the then CPS President, the late Dr. Frank Bradlow, wrote: "There can be few people who have met "AC" whose lives have not been enriched; his direct courteous manner, his dry sense of humour, his encyclopaedic knowledge of nature and fishing, and his human and humane wisdom are but a few of the qualities which make those who know him realise they have been in the company of a very unusual individual; one of those rare human beings whose personality makes an indelible impression on one's memory”.

AC died in 1980 and, in his obituary, Dr. Bradlow wrote: "All our lives are richer in every way for having known him. Even those who did not know him well could say the same for he was a totally unjealous man, forever promoting the cause of angling and helping other people. From the first time we met I enjoyed his company and his complete honesty. There was never anything devious or shabby in his attitudes to other people and his extraordinary enthusiasm and unceasing work for the Society never clouded his judgment”.

Editorship of Piscator then passed to another outstanding individual, C. Ross-Munro who, after his retirement from UCT came into the CPS offices every day to carry out his duties as librarian and editor: "Ross", as he liked to be called, also served his country on the battle field and was wounded in action against the Germans while fighting for the Transvaal Scottish. He died three weeks before his eighty-eighth birthday and, true to tradition, called in at the CPS offices on the day that he died.

Ross edited sixteen issues of Piscator and, at the time, Dr. Bradlow, paid tribute to

him in a function held in his honour a year before Ross died.

Pointing out the Piscator had only two editors since its inception, Dr. Bradlow said that Ross had performed an enormous service to the Society by stepping into a breach when AC died. "He was at that time the only person who could have done so and we were immensely lucky that he was willing to do it. Editing Piscator is no easy task. It involves the selection of material, page layouts, proof-reading and liaison with advertisers. All this he did on his own and, moreover, his service was given voluntarily and without pay.

"In many ways Ross was the ideal editor. He is a keen angler, well-read not only in angling but in general literature as well. He is a literary stylist, quick to spot grammatical errors and, in addition, he is conscientious almost to a fault".

With the death of C. Ross-Munro in July 1989 the editorship was taken over by Ed Herbst, then a television reporter with the South African Broadcasting Corporation in Cape Town and then passed to Graham Avery an archaeologist and former chairman of the Society's committee.

The costs of printing Piscator became prohibitive and the final issue appeared in 2012.

Ed Herbst, with the assistance of Sunet van Antwerpen of [Virtual 24-7](#) then undertook the task of scanning the best of the articles in the magazine and placing them on the CPS website to make them available to an internet audience.

Few young fly fishers realise the seminal role the CPS played in the evolution in this country of the tactics which today they regard as routine and commonplace and use so successfully. Methods such as the upstream dry fly and nymph and the use of the dry fly on still waters had their South African genesis within the CPS. Making a significant contribution in this process was expatriate Yorkshireman, Mark MacKereth, a professional musician who came to this country in 1951 and took up a position as a bass player with the Cape Town symphony orchestra in 1961.

In those days fly fishers routinely fished downstream using sinking lines and large, gaudy wet flies based on salmon patterns such as the Thunder and Lightning.

Mark's success with the small upstream dry fly and his articles in Piscator soon made him mentor to a group of enthusiastic young anglers such as Tom Sutcliffe, John Beams and Tony Biggs. Mark's Caribou Spider is an enduring tribute to his fly tying skills and he also had a hand in the invention and development of Tony Biggs' devastatingly effective Variant pattern, the RAB.

When Tom, Tony and John subsequently moved to Natal they found that the normal stillwater tactic was to fish from the dam wall with large attractor wet fly patterns and a heavy sinking line. They did the opposite, moving to the shallows and using small imitative patterns, including dry flies, on light, floating lines and long leaders. The success of these methods on both still and running water and the articles and books they wrote, introduced a host of fly fishers to a more poetic, more effective and more enjoyable form of fishing. Soon the use of the sinking line was relegated to a minor tactic. It was within the CPS however that this more delicate approach, which significantly accelerated the progress of local fly fishing and tying, was formulated and refined.

Perhaps the greatest contribution the CPS has made is in the field of conservation. It is ideally placed to monitor our ecologically sensitive mountain catchment areas where its members fish and, since its inception, it has played an outstanding role in this regard.

In the late nineteen eighties it played a pivotal role in having plans for a multi-million rand resort in an ecologically sensitive area of Du Toits Kloof vetoed by the then Administrator of the Cape, Mr. Gene Louw.

The Society campaigned intensively against the resort, liaising with local farmers and a variety of organisations such as the Botanical Society of South Africa, the Wildlife Society and environmental scientists from the University of Cape Town.

All the hard work paid off on March 16, 1988 when Mr. Louw announced that the application for the development of the resort had been turned down. In his press release citing the organisations which had played a role in the protest against the resort, Mr. Louw mentioned the Cape Piscatorial Society - the only angling Society so cited.

Subsequent environmental abuses which the Society discovered, raised with the relevant authorities and had publicised in the media were the bulldozing of the upper Witte River in Bains Kloof by farmers who were given permission to do so by the Department of Water Affairs and the temporary halting of a project to build a second pipeline from the Stetynskloof Dam near Rawsonville to Worcester.

In the latter case bulldozing of the bed of the Holsloot River occurred without the relevant permission being sought from the authorities or granted.

The CPS brought this to the attention of Cape Nature Conservation who forbade the continuation of the project until the damage had been remedied and it was only allowed to continue under strict supervision in which the Society was involved.

The Society's long heritage of looking after the delicate riverine ecosystems which its members fish was further acknowledged in 1992. Hill Kaplan Scott, the consultants appointed by the Department of Transport to advise it on how best to reduce the impact on the Smalblaar stream in Du Toits Kloof while extensions to the N1 highway linking Cape Town and Johannesburg were being planned and constructed liaised with the Society in this regard.

In 1993 the Society brought to the attention of the Department of Water Affairs its concern about the pollution of our most pristine mountain rivers including that from trout hatcheries which discharge unfiltered effluent into these rivers.

The Department responded by appointing a University of Cape Town scientist, Ms. Cate Brown, to investigate the situation and to draw up guidelines for the South African aquaculture industry. The Society was part of the working group that assisted her and provided funding. As a result of the concerns expressed by the CPS and the pressures it brought to bear on the authorities, both the environment and the industry benefitted.

More recently, the Society has taken an active interest in CapeNature's river rehabilitation project involving alien fish eradication in priority rivers for fish conservation. The Society wanted to ensure that methods used for alien fish eradication were acceptable, would not harm the river ecosystem over the long-

term and also that prime angling waters with trout would not be targeted. During this time it also worked closely with the South Africa Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity and CapeNature to ensure that the prime angling waters for brown and rainbow trout were zoned under regulations that are being developed as part of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act of 2004.

The CPS is unique among South African angling clubs in that it has full-time, salaried staff and does not function solely for the benefit of its members but provides a service to the public as well.

The title page of Piscator carries the statement, "Enquiries are welcomed from visiting anglers, to whom all possible help will be given".

It must be stressed that the Society does not own any water to which its members have exclusive access and to which it would deny access to members of the public. Any visiting fly fisher is welcome to fish the water under our jurisdiction on a first-come, first-served basis and the Society will be only too happy to assist in the acquisition of licences and forestry permits and give advice on where the best fishing can be found.

Furthermore the CPS makes its facilities available to the public and, in fact, runs its offices in the Cape Town CBD as a free information service. Many of the telephone calls received and visits to our club premises are from non-members. While the CPS does not have the funds to post out written material, members of the public are welcome to visit our club rooms for reference purposes. Our angling library is probably the finest in Africa and contains books dating from the late eighteenth century. This service is gratefully acknowledged, albeit not in any financial way, by government tourist organisations and private travel companies which refer visiting anglers to us for assistance.

The Society's offices are on the fourth floor in the City Guns building in Hout Street. Details of membership fees for ordinary, junior, country and overseas members can be found on the membership page of this website.

Other than the membership fee there is, and has never been, any restriction on becoming a member of the CPS. Indeed I venture to suggest that there is no more egalitarian fly fishing club in the country. While in no way wishing to question or

pass judgment on the operating procedures of other clubs, it must be stressed that the CPS does not restrict membership in terms of numbers, insist on elaborate joining procedures and membership requirements or attach complex conditions to those wishing to fish the waters it administers.

The role played by the Cape Piscatorial Society over many decades in serving its members and the angling public was affirmed in 1998 with the decision by Cape Nature Conservation to transfer administrative control of angling in the Bains Kloof, Du Toits Kloof and Stettyns Kloof Mountain catchment areas to the Society.

It must be stressed that the mandate thus transferred to the CPS is one which is recognised and acknowledged by the broad spectrum of freshwater anglers in the Western Cape. At a Freshwater Forum meeting, chaired by Cape Nature Conservation and held at the Jonkershoek research station in Stellenbosch, executives of all freshwater angling clubs in the region unanimously accepted and confirmed that the CPS was the most suitable organisation to administer the traditional trout streams of the Western Cape and the only one possessing the necessary facilities and full-time, salaried staff to adequately fulfil this task.

Over the years and from time to time there have been suggestions from some CPS members that their angling interests would be better served if the Society closed its offices, retrenched its full-time staff and ploughed the resulting savings into the acquisition of members-only water and the stocking thereof.

The CPS committee has always resisted such suggestions believing that through its service to the public the Society obtains goodwill, credibility and influence which are in the broad and best interests of fly fishers and fly fishing as a whole.

In accepting the responsibility conferred on it by Cape Nature Conservation to administer angling on the Witte, Elandspad, Smalblaar and Holsloot Rivers, the Society upholds the legacy of men like A.C. Harrison and C. Ross-Munro, rededicates itself to its credo and maintains an 83-year tradition of conservation and maintains a tradition of conservation and public service which has endured for more than a century.

Down the years its members have given freely of their time in contributing at committee level, in attending meetings with authorities on matters of common

concern, in stocking and in cleaning up the banks on streams which see heavy hiking and other recreational traffic such as beat six of the Smalblaar near the Worcester exit of the Huguenot Tunnel on the N1 national road.

The AGM, normally held in the first week of September in the clubrooms, gives members the opportunity to select office bearers but matters of concern can be raised at any time by emailing the secretary.

Since its inception in 1931 the Society's Presidents have been, Justice E F Watermeyer, an eminent jurist of his time, A C Harrison, Frank Bradlow an eminent historian, Geoff Godley, (all deceased) Tony Biggs and myself.