

DRY FLY ON FAST WATER

By TOM SUTCLIFFE

It was December 1964. University and its exams were behind me. I was fishing the

Smalblaar River that runs alongside the road from Worcester to Paarl in the Du Toit's Kloof mountains. Its waters were fast and quite clear and its rainbow trout had steadfastly eluded my dry fly all morning, mainly I suppose because I was inexperienced and a ham caster.

I lay down on a convenient boulder under the shade of some Port Jackson willows and watched the river run by on the section known as Dry Fly Run. I thought that if this was fly-fishing you could keep it. Not a touch in more than a mile of water, the sun beating down mercilessly, my legs aching from hours of wading and nothing to show for it.

Then I spied an old man. He was tall and walked with a stoop. A cigarette dangled from his lips and every now and again a cloud of blue smoke blew from his head, making him look more like an advancing locomotive than an angler.

QUICK CASTS

He was downstream of me, in the river, working up the runs with quick casts that sent his fly searching all the likely holding water. He was using a long split-cane rod, and a huge net, that served also as a wading staff, hung at his side. While I watched he hooked and netted two trout which he smartly deposited in an old canvas creel.

Alongside me he stopped, and in a broad Yorkshire accent asked after my luck. I told him and he shook his head in disbelief. He invited me to spend the next hour fishing with him and I accepted gladly.

We fished on till lunch and then all that afternoon while he taught me the elements of high-speed/high-line casting, free drift, river craft, you name it.

As things ended up, I fished with him on almost every river in the Western Cape, until he died suddenly in 1975, and during that time he became the best friend any young man could have had. His name was Mark Makereth.

Makereth was a legend in his time. He perfected the art of dry fly on fast water and was the finest exponent of casting I have seen. He was also a marvellous teacher with a magnificent sense of humour, a man blessed also with wisdom and humility.

After his tuition I fished at every opportunity on virtually all the beautiful rivers of the Western Cape, from the crystal Hex River near Worcester to the high and lonely Witte in Bains Kloof, and never once have I tired of them or found them a disappointment.

DRY FLY PARADISE

In fact this part of the world is a dry-fly fisherman's paradise. Even in the heart of Cape Town, running through the suburbs of Rondebosch and Newlands, there is a trout stream. But the best of the fishing is in the Du Toit's Kloof area near Paarl and Wellington.

You have rivers like the Smalblaar, the Molenaars, the Witels and, at Rawsonville high in the Steynskloof Mountains, the Holsloot River.

And there are countless others, some not so famous like the Little Dwars in the Banhoek above the town of Stellenbosch, but all of them as pretty as a picture post-card.

Classically the Cape rivers are generally clear and fast flowing. More accurately I suppose I should describe them as being the colour of a well-watered whisky, a sort of transparent amber colour.

Because the nutrient make-up and consequently the food chain is not as strong as it is in Natal streams the fish seldom get very big, but they are plentiful and, even more important, will rise freely to a dry fly all day. And with the water as clear as it is you can often enjoy that magical extra dimension in fly-fishing, actually watching the take.

The banks are tightly overgrown with scrub bush, bracken and Port Jackson (a sort of willow in polite circles, a curse anywhere else), so you have to pick the odd gaps and then thread your way into the water. Once in the river you wade upstream, fishing as you go in water that seldom gets much over your knees. Nobody wears waders, just an old pair of felt-soled boots over a pair of thick Norwegian socks to stop your feet from blistering.

The fishing is hard going if you haven't got yourself fit for it. It's the constant boulder-hopping, catching your balance as you wade over the slippery rocks and walking against the current that takes it out of you. But I guess the exercise is important in this age where most of us are sedentary for too long, too often.

And the rewards are great. A good day on a Cape stream is as good as the fishing I've had anywhere else in the world.

In Cape Town, just off Greenmarket Square in Longmarket Street, is Westminster House. On the third floor of this ageing building are the offices of one of the oldest and most respected trout clubs in South Africa, the Cape Piscatorial Society, an organisation that can trace its beginnings back to the turn of the century.

The club rooms to me are like the holy shrine of South African fly-fishing, housing old photographs and memorabilia, stuffed trout, bits of old tackle, magazines on fishing (you name it, it's there), and the biggest library of angling books, ancient and modern, under one roof, anywhere in the country. It is the single repository of all that is history in South African fly-fishing, the meeting place for countless people of like persuasion since 1932.



Hugh Huntly looking over the quarry.

Photograph by Tom Sutcliffe.

RIVER MAPS

And if you visit the Cape and decide to try the waters this is where you must go to pick up your licence and day tickets and, if you need them, pool by pool maps of the rivers you want to fish.

Incidentally, while you're in the club have a look at the flies mounted in clear plastic containers near the door. They are marked simply "Dry flies—Mark Makereth".



And Bob Mollenz of the Barkly East Angling Club bringing it to net.

Photograph by Tom Sutcliffe.

These, I believe, are just about all that is left to remind us of an old friend and mentor, a person considered by many to have been the father of dry-fly fishing in South Africa.

Not so long ago I wrote about a very sharp fly-fisherman now living in Highflats. Happily I met him again this week after many years' absence. His name is Leo Rosenstein. He's now 73 but still the same infectious enthusiasm for fishing is there, and eventually the talk, as it will between us, turned to trout.

"Did you ever know," he asked, "a fellow called Makereth, a wizard with a dry fly?"

I told Leo I did and that, what was more, I was half-way through an article about him (this one) right then!

FEATHERS NEEDED

It seems that one evening Makereth decided to teach Leo to tie trout flies at his home in Johannesburg. There was a need for feathers that night and an old cock bantam that roosted in the branches was selected as a donor. So after a few drinks, in order, so Leo tells me, to give the bird plenty of time to settle in, the two of them stalked it silently, caught it and clipped some feathers off its neck.

The following night, in need of a little practice and a few more feathers, Leo once again crept up under the bantam. But this time the bird was not where it should have been. It seems that the previous night's haircut had left more than just a mark on its cape, because it was now roosting well out of harm's way in the topmost branches of the tree, from which point it looked down on Leo with contempt.

And that, says Leo, is why he never quite got the tying of dry flies right. Be that as it may—chance, fate, call it what you will—it's a good excuse to bring these two great fly-fishermen together again.

(This article is published with the permission of Dr. Tom Sutcliffe and the Natal Mercury. For those newer members who are not aware of it, the late Mark Makereth's ashes were, at his request, put to rest in the Smalblaar River just below Picnic Pool.)