

HISTORY AND HORSE-HAIR

By R. JOHNSTON

IT is an astonishing thing how few anglers know much about the history of their craft, shall I call it? In a recent issue of *The Field* a correspondent asked when fly-fishing was first introduced into England. Perhaps he was surprised at the answer. The footnote was that the earliest record was of Dame Juliana Berners' *Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (I spell this title in the modern fashion), part of *The Boke of St. Albans*, printed in 1496. That was four years after Columbus discovered the West Indies, so that this is some considerable time ago, and perhaps shatters the ideas of some who assumed that fly-fishing began with Walton in the 17th century.

Actually Walton, although he mentions the famous "jury" of flies in his book, was no fly fisherman. Charles Cotton, his so-called "son", which was only a title of affection, who fished in Dovedale at the same period, was the real father of fly-fishing. But Dame Juliana also mentions a list of 12 flies in her book, so that Cotton was not the first.

The history of angling from the earliest days has been recorded by William Radcliffe in *Fishing from the Earliest Times* (John Murray, 1921)—a monumental work involving research going back to ancient Greece and China. He brought the story up to some 500 years ago. The tale was continued by A. Courtney-Williams, who writes up to the time of Edward VII. Those who would read the story of angling can find it in the pages of these two authors.

In my own reading from these sources it is a constant astonishment to find references from Homer, Aristotle, Plato (who considered fishing a degenerate pastime for young men), and Pliny the Younger, who writes of being able to fish from his bedroom window, and to lower his hook "almost from your very bed—just as from a little boat" into Lake Como. Shakespeare records, on the authority of Plutarch, that Cleopatra fished, and recounts the immortal joke she played on Antony when she bribed a diver to put a salted fish on his hook!

The first mention of an artificial fly was 1,400 years before Dame Juliana's day. Aelian, who wrote in Greek, although he was a Roman, somewhere about 200 A.D., gave this description of an artificial fly:—

"They fasten red (crimson red) wool round the hook, and fix on to the wool two feathers which grow under a cock's wattles, and which in colour are like wax. Their rod is six feet long, and their line is the same length. Then they throw their snare, and the fish, attracted and maddened by the colour, comes straight at it, thinking from the pretty sight to get a dainty mouthful; when, however, it opens its jaws, it is caught by the hook and enjoys a bitter repast, a captive." (O. Lambert's translation, 1881.)

Fish were probably not so educated then as they are now, but it is still the purpose of the fly dresser to present to the fish "a pretty sight".

However, 2,000 years before Christ people in Egypt and China knew the pleasures of rod fishing. We have pictorial records of these, and in one Egyptian mural a fly, presumably artificial, is depicted with amazing wings and a tail like the forceps of an earwig, or a male May-fly would perhaps be more piscatorial.

Our pastime, therefore, is of ancient lineage. What the hooks were made of I do not know—possibly of bone. The earliest forms of which we have a record were bait gorges, made of a bone tapered at each end and suspended from the middle, which jammed in the fish's mouth. These were pre-historical. Plato mentions the hook, which penetrates—"and which from the nature of the operation is denoted Angling or drawing up". So that to fish in Tudor and Elizabethan times "with an angle" would seem to denote fishing not with a worm, but with a hook, an angle, from the Aryan root ANK – to bend.

On this point it is interesting that Homer mentions an ox-horn as part of the fishing gear, but no one has been able to identify the article with certainty. There was considerable controversy about 20 years ago on the point between the Radcliffe school and a group led by a bad-tempered German named Rauser, and like so many verbally bloody controversies it ended as an indecisive affair. But it is interesting that from time immemorial the Indians of British Columbia and the North-West have used spears for catching fish which have detachable barbs made of curved horn which were attached to the spear by a short length of cord. The spear penetrated, the barb detached, and the fish was landed by the cord.

This may be some relative of Homer's ox-horn. If so, when did the Indians get the idea? They had no knowledge of Homer's Greek fishermen. The Norsemen, who penetrated far into the United States hundreds of years before the time of Columbus, were not fishermen. There is no mention of angling in any of their sagas, as far as I know. Here, then, may have been a technique that existed contemporaneously among highly civilised Greeks and barbarous Indians on the other side of the world.

It is also interesting as an instance of what one may call the universality of ideas that, according to a letter from Theodore Gordon, the great American dry-fly fisherman and fly-tier, when the first settlers from England arrived in America they found the Indians fishing with a type of hook dressed with a large red feather. This was the age of Walton and Cotton in England.

But it was from Charles Cotton, that rare soul, that the great race of fly fishermen have stemmed. He laid down the principles of fly-fishing. He was a downstream fisherman with his fine hooks, made, I suspect, by Kirby of London, probably the oldest hook forger in Britain. Cotton, like Walton, tied them on horse-hair. Up to three strands, or hairs, were used. Lines were also of plaited horse-hair, tied to the end of the rod, or pole. If a very big fish was hooked, pole and everything was thrown into the water, and recovered later when the fish exhausted itself towing the pole about! That was Walton's way. I don't think Cotton used that method.

Theodore Gordon also records that in the Middle West about 100 years ago men fished for catfish (barbel) with poles to the end of which the line was fixed. The balance of the line was taken down and wound round the middle of the rod. When a fish was hooked the pole (or rod) was dropped into the crook of the left arm, and the fish played by hand. The technique was probably a survival of the methods brought to America by the Founding Fathers.

The plaited horse-hair line survives to-day. In my early days my father used one. I handled one in England about 10 years ago. It was of white and black horse-hair. Martin's of Glasgow make casts (leaders) of white and black horse-hair, or did until recently, and even to-day in Yorkshire and the Borders horse-hair collars are in common use. Horse-hair has wonderful stretching qualities, and never kinks or gets tied up in knots. It lies flat and falls lightly. I have droppers and collars now which I made of plaited surgical horse-hair, and I have never known a horse-hair dropper get wound round the cast. A horse-hair line is useless for casting, however, except down wind. My father was a worm fisherman.

From the early days of the Greeks and Egyptians who used rod and line, there is therefore not such a gigantic step in equipment as there was, for instance, between the bow and arrow and the modern rifle. The advance has been in refinement and improvement of gear and method, rather than in any essential change. Possibly the most revolutionary advance, I am inclined to think, was the running line with the invention of the reel. They were primitive little things, placed half-way up a rod extending to about 17 feet in length. But the possibilities of the running line made men look at the quality of the line, and with the evolution of the silk line and the development of casting came the tapered line. That took centuries, but it was the reel that inspired this development, and even Walton recognised its advantages.

The rod, or pole, of Cotton's time, or of the Greeks, is basically similar to the highly developed split bamboo or steel or plastic instrument of to-day. Dame Juliana wrote of a rod with a hollow butt in which two top pieces could be fitted for carrying. The bent bone and the modern steel hook are basically the same. The fly dressed by Cotton was basically the same as that dressed by W. C. Stewart, who gave the impetus to up-stream fishing. The eyed hook of Hall was only a development, and a very convenient one, which made Halford's job simpler, because a fisherman could change a fly quickly. But the eyed fly is not as good as a snelled one. It is heavier, and does not fish as well. Nylon, which has none of the drawbacks of gut, may give a new life to the snelled fly for discriminating anglers.

We who have been born at the back-end of centuries of improvement in fishing gear and technique and of decades of research into freshwater problems, take a deal for granted. We are the inheritors of all the knowledge of the ages. I wonder if we get any keener pleasure out of our sport, with our zestful search for perfection, than did the Ancients with their primitive jute lines, reed or bamboo rods, and bone angles?