



CHAPTER 2

Lilliput Water*

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By Peter Turnbull-Kemp

Most of us know a Lilliput Water. It may be a highland burn or a drowsy summer brook shrunk to a string of shaded pools. Lilliput can be a tiny tarn or a lochan set deep in the mist-swept heather. For others, it may be an unruly cascade, slicing through golden gorse, or a dark and secret woodland lake. It might be a miniature effervescence, framed in a massive moor, or simply dew-dear depths of utter upland silence. In contrast it can be a slender sliver of green-girt limestone riches or a bright torrent swollen by spates from midday melting snows. Lilliput can be a lonely thing among cluttered rocks, desolate and sear with only the wind for it to chatter to for company.

Whatever its nature, Lilliput in any form offers the fly fisher one constant thing. This is its store of bright and somehow cheerful little trout as wild as the midget creatures on which they prey. Sadly, few of us pay lasting tribute to the Lilliputs we know forgetting our debts to such waters for our earliest tuition or shrugging the miniscule away as now beneath our notice.

Certainly, waters of this kind are not for bragging fishermen's plunder once the excitement of the novice has gone. Lilliput is no place for much killing. It may be possible to measure success, if measure it you must, by numerical means; but the real rewards are almost intangible. To be sure, the occasional prize may be won. For those fortunate enough to fish tiny waters harbouring briefly the wild wanderers back from the sea, there will sometimes be the cataclysmic eruption of inappropriate sea-trout bulk and silver. Even where the sea-trout do not come there may still be the comparative monster dark with the concealment and the years that gave it time to grow plucking the heart with excitement when it rises unexpectedly.

Yet, for the most part, the fun and the joy of Lilliput will come from its regular sprite-like inhabitants, and the wise fisher will match his tackle to what he may reasonably expect rather than to wishful thinking. Much of the food of the typical lilliputian trout is taken underwater, but surface offerings will seldom be spurned for very long. Indeed, the normal floating diet of the little fish will generally be both habitual and catholic. An angry, bee may figure now, a struggling ant provoke the next snatching rise, and a beetle then vary the fare. No doubt this will be dull for the angler who is a strict imitationist, but Lilliput can provide its own sophistication. This will be found in the use of the floating artificial, presented with the most delicate of equipment.

A hairlike leader and a wisp of rod seem all that is truly fitting for waters such as these. Thin terminal tackle for tiny barbless flies and a rod delicate enough to handle both with sympathy. Somehow the irreplaceable aesthetic appeal of a good split cane rod, with its varnish and silk, seems to fit the fairy-tale world of Lilliput better than synthetic rod materials. On practical grounds, few of the rods manufactured in synthetics can handle truly delicate terminal tackle, and one should perhaps search

among the products of the shrinking band of master rod-builders.

The childish jingle. *One, Two, Three*, can describe the finest of tackle for minor magical waters. With apologies to metric purists, the simple phrase stands for 1 oz. of rod, 2 oz. of reel, and a No. 3 line or lighter. I use a six-foot two-piece cane by Leonard of New York, rated for a No. 2 line, and weighing 1 oz. This is balanced perfectly by an Orvis reel exactly twice the rod weight. The rod was originally designed for 8X leaders and No. 28 flies and its slender responsiveness makes all but the very smallest of trout a captive well worth recollection. With a total weight of less than 4 oz. for rod, reel, line, backing leader and fly there is little to blunt the sense of contact with a game opponent of any size.

To some of us it will be logical that surface imitations for Lilliput ought to be small and have impeccable floating qualities. Furthermore, that they should be resistant to being pounced upon by numerous hungry little trout. The traditionalists will be content to use conventional fly patterns, possibly palmer-hackled or having the buoyancy of clipped deer-hair bodies. I have had success with the North American designs rejoicing in such exotic names as the Natural Irresistible and Rat Face McDougall, although the hair bodies of these cannot be tied on hooks much smaller than No. 16. Once equipped with wings, hackles and tails these have, however, excited a proportion of the splashy rises most of us associate with slight alarm. One suspects they may be a bit too bulky for the Oliver Twists of the world of trout.

Those who are a little less shackled by the orthodox may prefer tiny unhackled and cork-bodied terrestrials, ideally tied on nothing larger than a short-shanked (5-XS) No. 16 hook. On the water they are approximately the same in size as a No. 22 of traditional design, while retaining the better gape and bite of the larger hook size. To me they look in every way beguiling propositions for elfin trout. Slipped from the mouth of a captive they require only a quick rinse to be set bobbing through rough water as cheerfully as before.

Tactics, where stream conditions are involved, need not be a blind searching of the water with the upstream fly. Instead, the imitation should be placed where experience hints a trout could lie. One of the smaller excitements of this brand of angling is the unmistakable fishy confirmation that your intuition was exactly right.

If Lilliput is for you a little lake, then the correct tackle will also prove to be that elusive item—authentic gear for fishing the tiniest midges. When the evening calm is a network of overlapping sunset rings, the delicate equipment will come into another version of its own.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to believe that man's present abuse of his surroundings-may drive those who seek for only wild trout to Lilliput. If that time comes, then might it not well be that the tackle described will then become the commonplace? I, for one, will not mind. For even when the longest day is gone and the fisher looks across the tumbled miles to home, the featherweight equipment still remains the good companion it has been throughout the well-imprinted day.

*** Author's footnote:** The charming phrase 'the waters of lilliput' was first used by the British writer Arnold Scott, writing in *The Field* of 15th November 1973.

The Field of 5.9.74 said that it was now sadly in order to unmask a pseudonym. "Arnold Scott" was W. H. Lawrie, who had died recently. He had been a regular correspondent and a writer of a number of books on English, Scottish and Welsh trout flies. W. H. Lawrie's books in the C.P.S. Library include his latest work, *International Trout Flies*. 1969.

Ed Herbst writes: In an email to me, Ted Simroe, former vice-president, and bamboo rod builder for the H.L. Leonard Rod Co. from 1967-1978, described the lengths to which he went to get the Baby Catskill down to one ounce:

"The rod you asked about was initially labelled the Leonard 37L. That was changed to the 36L in the mid-seventies when the model numbering was changed for all the Leonard rods. The 6-foot, 1 oz. rod was developed in the early 1950s, and was supposed to have been developed to accommodate

CHAPTER 2

a special membership group of the famous Anglers Club of New York. To be a member of this group, which was called the '28-8-18 Club,' one had to land an 18-inch trout on a size 28 fly using an 8X tippet. I personally have never been able to confirm this requirement or its relationship to the 37L. However, it has always been a good 'story,' even if just a rumour! By the way, the rod was designed to be used with a level silk line, size 1.

There were several issues with getting the weight down to 1 oz. or less, although the idea of a 1 oz. rod was not the starting point. The ferrules on that rod were 7/64ths of an inch, which had to be specially made. The tip tops were actually # 2.5/64ths. The Perfection Company made a special # 3/64ths tip top for Leonard but did not have the tubing necessary to fashion anything smaller. Also, the 'swelled butt' section, which was a Leonard characteristic, was eliminated. If you have ever seen one of these rods, I am sure you would be amazed at the delicacy of the sections, especially of the tip sections. No one else ever came close to making a cane rod that light. We used a beveller that incorporated 3/4" diameter carbide saws, and I am still amazed when I think what I accomplished with that machine! I can remember that when I planned to cut the tip sections, I would plan on starting early on Saturday AM, when no one was around. I would start with enough cane to make 24 tip sections.

Because each of the six strips were so small, some would fracture in just being picked up. Others would break coming out of the saws. I always considered myself lucky if I could end up with 12 complete tips. We would then lose 3 or 4 more when gluing the six strips together, and another 1 or 2 in the assembly process! From all this, we felt good if we could end up with 3 complete rods.

As far as the reel seat was concerned, the Leonard Fairy Reel was developed for this rod. It was a raised pillar design, like all the Leonard reels, but the side plates were all hard rubber, with no aluminium castings around the edges. The reel foot was shorter and narrower than normal, and the wood reel seat was only 2 3/4" long, rather than the standard 3 1/2" long. The butt cap and ring were about 1/2 the size of the standard Catskill hardware, and the nickel silver winding and cork checks were also eliminated. The wood used was either white pine, butternut or basswood. Balsa was never used as far as I know. I do remember making one rod with an all-cork cut-out reel seat. I eliminated the stripping guide and used a # 1 snake guide instead. We only put one coat of varnish on that rod instead of the normal 2 or 3. The finished rod weighed in at 7/8 oz. exactly.

As I mentioned earlier, # 1 level silk line was originally used on these rods. When silk gave way to the plastic-coated lines, a 3-weight was the smallest available, and most used that line since it was all that was available. Actually, I fished one of these rods using greased 30-pound Dacron squidding line, and it worked better than anything else!"

Peter Turnbull-Kemp coupled his Leonard Baby Catskill with an appropriate reel, the Hardy Featherweight. Born in Scotland, Peter fought in the Scots Guards in World War II and, thereafter, worked for the then Southern Rhodesia's Department of National Parks. He established a trout hatchery in the Nyanga National Park and developed Africa's first pellet diet for hatchery trout. A copy of his 1994 book *The Flyfisher's Nyanga* is in the library of the Cape Piscatorial Society. I believe his Leonard Baby Catskill is now owned by a Capetonian. It would be interesting to know how it got from modern-day Zimbabwe to the southern tip of Africa where, as Turnbull-Kemp well knew, 'cheerful little trout' can be found in the Lilliput water that he so loved.

NB: This and other articles on small stream fly fishing equipment can be found in the 'Tackle' folder on the website of the Cape Piscatorial Society - <https://www.piscator.co.za/CPS2/articles/>

