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Memories and in Memoriam

One of the most evocative titles among the fly-fishing books in my collection is *The Bright Stream of Memory* by Geoffrey Bucknall, a collection of articles from *The Fishing Gazette*, Britain's foremost angling magazine from 1879 to 1937.

"The bright stream of memory is all we, as fly anglers, have left when we enter the twilight of our lives and no longer have the physical strength to wade slippery riverbeds and fight turbulent currents. They are the recollections that sustain us and provide some comfort as a counter to vague, poignant regrets that we started fly fishing much later than we should have and did not get to fish nearly often enough."

One of the most golden memories I have was a day spent on the Swith stream near the summit of the Naude's Nek Pass, the gravel road that connects Maclear with Rhodes in the north-eastern Cape Drakensberg.

Where it flows beneath the road it is an unprepossessing little stream that Tom Sutcliffe and I had driven across several times during our annual pilgrimages to what is the centre of our fly-fishing universe. It was a halfway stage between visits to friends Ron and Robin Moore and Ginger and Ebbie Jenkins at the foot of the pass on the Maclear side, Donie and Juan Marie Naude at that famed stillwater venue, Vrederus, near the summit, and friends on the Rhodes and Barkly East side such as David Walker and Basie and Carien Vosloo.

A probable reason for the scant interest we had shown the Swith was that there are a lot of crack willow trees at the bridge, which prevent one seeing the water and, on either side of the bridge, the stream is hidden by folds in the hills.

Something prompted us to stop, however, on what was probably the sixth time we had crossed the bridge. Scrambling down the bank and into the cool of the shade thrown by the willows we were surprised to see a good trout dart upstream. Buoyed by the discovery we walked a short distance both upstream and down of the bridge, finding a good flow of clean water and a lot of promising holding lies.

On our next trip a year later, Donie took us to meet the owner of the farm, John Jordaan and his wife Amanda. Their son, Pieter, was overseas, working in the USA to raise money for his own farming ambitions. Sitting in their lounge we pored over maps of the area, discovering that the Swith was a tributary of the Luzie, a stream much loved by Sydney Hey and mentioned in his book, *Rapture of the River*. It finally flowed into the Kraai River.

Later, John drove us downstream to show us some magnificent San paintings, but the afternoon shadows were lengthening and there was no time to fish.

The next day Donie took us to a magnificent valley a few kilometres downstream of John's house. The fishing was good, the scenery spectacular and I was elated to discover an overhang next to a deep run which was full of otter droppings indicating a good supply of crabs. I recalled Sydney Hey's son, Dr Douglas Hey, later to become head of Cape Nature Conservation, telling me of how many of the trout he had cleaned for his father on boyhood trips to the region fifty years previously, had contained crabs.

I vowed to return and return I did, two years later. In the interim, Pieter had returned from the USA and now lived close to the Naudes.

I was on my own this time, the pressure of work keeping Tom in Cape Town. I invited Pieter to accompany me, telling him I would be happy to pay for his services. He was not a guide in the sense that Rhodes residents Fred Steynberg and Tony Kietzman are, more of a ghillie – but he knew every shadowed coppice, every sun-dappled verge in the most remote river valleys, having visited them on horseback in a lifetime spent in the area.

Once he grasped what made the intimacy of small, tree-cloistered streams meaningful to Tom and I, he was enthused, suddenly sensing the potential of a host of hidden kloofs where he knew the entrance and exit points.

It was a day out of heaven, made all the better by the fact that he shouldered the load I always carry, cameras, lenses, food and drink and rain gear. What is more, I had the stream to myself - no leapfrogging a companion or waiting in line. I caught fish after fish and he was there to capture the moment on my camera. When the strike indicator slowed and dipped in that thrilling cadence that you almost sense before it happens, slowed and dipped in the run next to the otter overhang, the day had provided more than I could have hoped for. I went and sat in amongst the otter droppings and insisted he take a photograph of me there in that tranquil place that they normally enjoyed alone.

But something more meaningful was to occur when, in the late afternoon, distant rumblings and an intermittently-lit sky indicated that it would be wise to leave the valley. As we walked up the steep slope to where the vehicle was parked Pieter mentioned that his father had spoken of outstanding San paintings in this valley. My thoughts, still in the day's fishing, still immersed in the joy of it all, I absent-mindedly said that the sites the San preferred for such paintings were overhangs that provided not only protection from the elements for the paintings but also a panoramic view that would enable both game and potential attackers to be spotted early and in safety.

We both stopped, suddenly struck by the same thought, and then almost rushed forward. Just such an overhang was situated where the steep path reached the plateau, the magnificent valley a vista below us, the stream a tiny, silver sliver amongst green trees and verdant meadows. We both simultaneously drew breath because looking at us – through us – was an eland, that most holy of San deities. Wherever we moved its gaze seemed to gravely follow us in a way that was almost eerie but not threatening, the long-dead artist, in capturing the serenity of the animal, creating a tribute to it – and himself – on the rock face that, to the San artists, was the gateway to the spirit world. Deeper within the recess was another vignette of San life and what once was, a hippo, its back bristling with arrows, its open-jawed agony palpable.

Moved, we drove in silence back to the welcoming kitchen hearth at Vrederus. Pieter promised to take me to similar places in a future and the potential of a whole new world of discovery held me in pleasant thrall as I slipped into sleep later that night.

It was not to be. Terse, grieving and aggrieved, Juan Marie's short, clipped sentences, echoing in the hollow void of a long-distance telephone call, told a chilling but familiar tale of a region where farmers are ever under threat. She, Donie and Pieter had driven to Maclear to watch a concert at the local school hall. At the interval, Pieter had gone to fetch something from their truck. He found someone breaking into it and, in the ensuing confrontation, was surrounded and shot in the chest. He succumbed an hour later in the Maclear hospital.

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Tom phoned. His sister and her husband, avid birdwatchers, had been guided by Pieter the week before to a valley where wattled cranes lived. They were indebted to him and held in prospect his promise of future visits to other outstanding birding places. Tom said he had spent half an hour on the phone to John. I told him I would not be phoning, lacking the courage, but promised I would write a tribute to Pieter.

To John and Amanda, to Donie and Juan Marie and to all who loved this shy and unassuming young man whose short life was full of joyous but unfulfilled prospect - this is my fulfilment of that pledge.

