

A tribute to my friend

by Tom Sutcliffe

Hugh Bailey Huntley 23/4/1927 - 18/5/2006

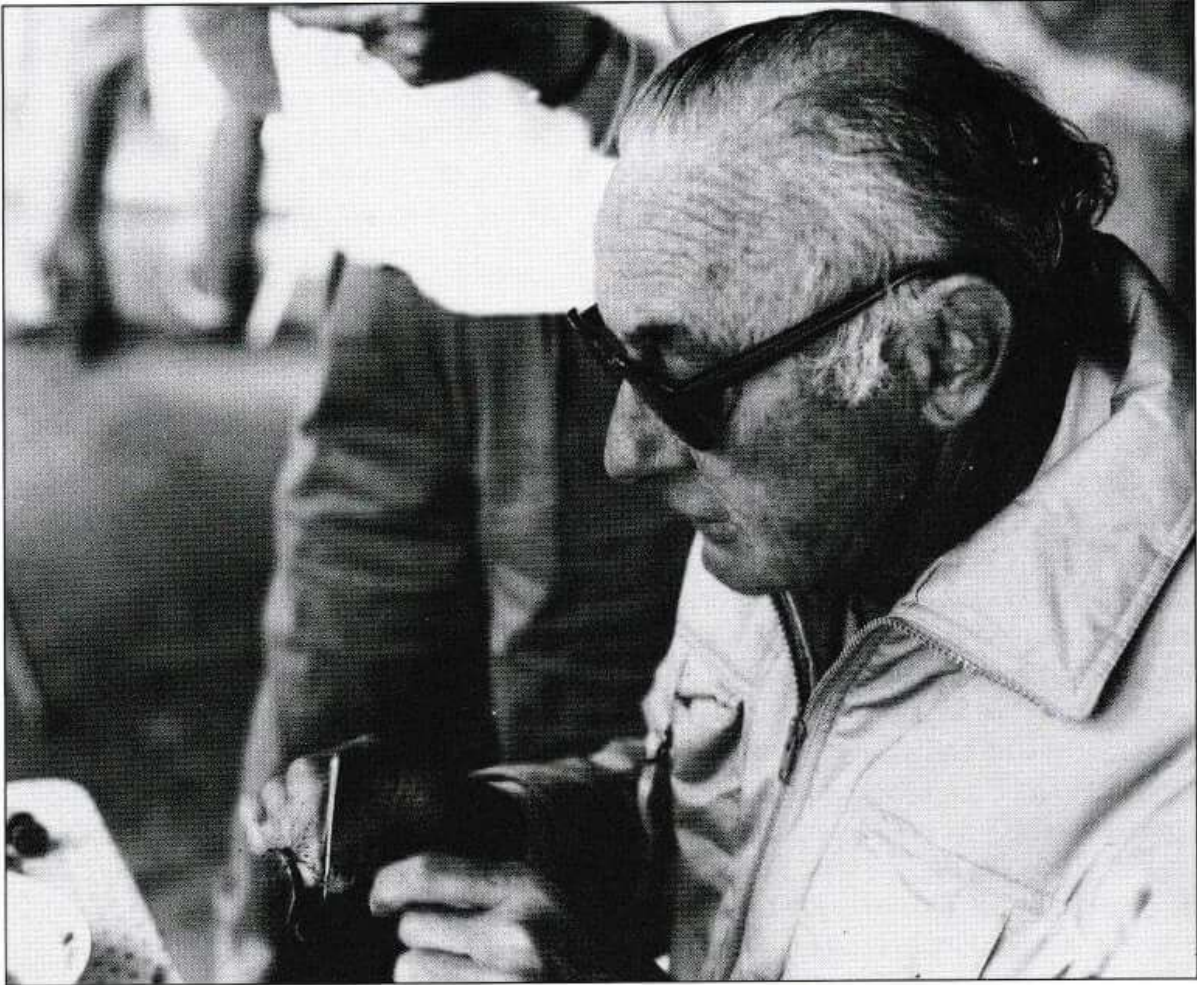
I am indebted to the Huntley family and Hugh's friends for allowing me the opportunity to express my thoughts on the passing of my dear friend, for giving me the chance to put into words the nature and meaning of our friendship and to express the sentiments I feel around his considerable influence on my life. Also, because I can't be with you today, this opportunity is in itself a great comfort to me; as if in the writing of these words I provide myself with something of a personal closure on Hugh's death, the sort of closure we all seek when we come face to face with the sudden phantom of bereavement.

Hugh and I shared a common love of hunting and fishing, but were it not for that, I suspect we would still have been good friends. I base this assumption on my understanding of the man, an understanding that grew out of the warmth of near on 40 years of comradeship. I suppose God furnishes each of us with special talents and a few extraordinary gifts. God was generous to Hugh. He provided him with a deep understanding of nature, that in the veld, or along a riverbank, made him one of the most perceptive naturalists I have ever known. But he also provided Hugh with a large slice of integrity that bred a deep, silent respect in the minds of all of us who got to know him. God gave Hugh much more, but to me these were his two most precious talents, his most singular attributes – deep perception and unshakable integrity.

But whatever I learned about Hugh as a talented man, I also quickly learned that in his life his family came first, after that his friends and then his hunting and his fishing. I think this order is relevant because it expresses a lot about Hugh as a person and about the unshakable sincerity of the man. The well-being of his immediate family, Erna, Sharon and Roy, and then later his expanded family, were simply non-negotiable. You didn't discuss it. That was just the way it was. The nine-pounders could be sipping dry flies all over the Old Dam, but if Erna happened not to be well, you just didn't go. There was never any debate about it.

I always think of my first meeting with Hugh as one of those serendipitous blessings we enjoy from time to time, but always rarely. I knocked at his door in Roberts Road one evening years back, 1969 to be exact, uninvited, unannounced, unknown, carrying with me only the credentials of youth and a patently pervasive passion for fly fishing. He welcomed me into his home that night readily and unconditionally, and exactly these two attributes – readiness and unconditionality – characterised our friendship the entire time we shared together on the planet Earth.

It was a hugely productive friendship for me because, in his quietly modest way, Hugh was right then helping to reshape the course of fly fishing in South Africa. I saw this as something like an unfolding renaissance happening before my eyes with Hugh leading the way back in the early seventies and eighties. I was present in Kimber's cottage the very night



Hugh Huntley was a founder member of the Natal Fly Tyer's Guild.

his ubiquitous Red-eyed Damsel fly was first tied, probably now this country's most universal stillwater pattern; watched him transform the application and science of dry fly fishing on stillwater and unlock the secrets of fishing for trout in the shallows of lakes, I could go on. Those were halcyon days, times when no angler on earth could have hoped for a better buddy than I had in Hugh right then. I was privileged. I learned from him not only plenty about the art and science of fly fishing, but as much, if not more, about its poetry and its serenely metaphysical side. And if in this eulogy to my friend it sounds strange to you that I harp on something as mundane as fly fishing, it's only because if life and fly fishing run any sort of parallel, then it's that you can tell a lot about a man from the way he fishes. Hugh was patient, thoughtful, enquiring, determined and precise in all that he did with a fly rod. I guess you could say much the same about all the other aspects of his rich and varied life. Fly fishing, for me, just carries the message across more simply, but the message remains as true, and as profound, whatever aspect of Hugh's existence you might care to examine.

The day I heard about Hugh's passing was a deeply sad and moving one for me. I had just got in from a river high in the mountains above the village of Rhodes and I wondered whether to feel guilty about the fact that I was up there fishing when he was dying, then thought better of it. I had been enjoying the weight and pull of the river's currents, the electric thrill of its trout, the joy you feel at your odd perfect presentation, the heaviness

you feel with your more common bad ones, doing exactly the things he and I had done a thousand times together before, would have done together that very same day had he been with me, step by step, cast by cast. And I also knew that given the nature of his illness, the quality of his life at the time, that Hugh would have preferred to slip the anchor and quietly depart. That much I understood about the true nature of the man. He used to say to me, 'There comes a time.' We both knew what we meant, even if we didn't dwell on it too long, or too often.

I'm no mystic, but at times I get dangerously close to it. I have fished in a snow storm only three times in my 40 year-long career in fly fishing. The first two occasions were in the company of Hugh, the last was the very day he died.

If I can offer Erna, Sharon and Roy, or any of Hugh's larger family, or his many close friends, any smidgeon of comfort at this sad moment, it's this. Because I shared a large part of my life with Hugh I got to know him pretty well. In fact, if you care to add up the days he and I hunted, fished rivers or floated lakes together, then you'd find that I shared more of them with Hugh than with any other friend I have had. What I read between the lines over those many years was that in Hugh I was dealing with someone who had appreciated that he'd been blessed in his own life, who had grabbed every opportunity abundantly, who had living life to the full pretty well sewn up, had got the art of enjoying the moment to a 'T', who was delighted with his family, who when finally he went, would be someone who you could salute and say, 'He had a good life.' Hugh was not made for hospital beds, for illness, for vegetation. He was a man who wished only two things. That his family was cared for and that he had the occasional opportunity to enjoy life in his hunting, his cricket, his fishing and later his bowls. I think God granted him all this. He would want us all now to get on with, just as stoically as I know he would do himself if circumstances were reversed.

So I salute you my great friend, my mentor, my philosopher. If your passing brings me pain, and it does, my respite is not far off. I will rather turn my back on your death, turn my mind to my memories of you, memories mainly crowded with images of you standing waist deep in cold water, rod bent, shouting above the wind in Zulu, "*nant sogé*" as you hooked yet another deep fish. I will see you forever striding long-limbed across the rolling hills of Natal picking October's fresh mushrooms, around the log fires in our mountain cabins, whisky in hand, or under gaslight, head bent over your vice producing those impeccable trout flies of yours. You have left me with the richest largesse of memories any man has the right to claim and you have left me also with a fine example of how to embrace living, how to understand man's precarious grip on life, how to manage the sinister spectre of death.

Rest in peace my friend.

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