

Reading the water/Fishing the margins

A South African fly fishing bibliography

by Paul Curtis

Editor's note: We are privileged to have been given the opportunity to print a portion of the opening chapter of this historically important new book that will be published later this year. This is fitting because, as the author points out, his inspiration for the book came from an article in this magazine by a former CPS President, that great bibliophile and angling researcher, the late Dr Frank Bradlow – see Piscator 132, November 2000.

Introduction

“Some of the best fishing is not done in water but in print.” *Sparse Grey Hackle*

This is a book about books. Books about South African flyfishing and trout fishing in particular. The motivation behind it is simple – to provide a comprehensive record of the 70 plus written since the first in 1908 – *Trout Fishing in the Cape Colony*. At least a record as comprehensive as twenty-five years or so of collecting (primarily) South African fly fishing books could make it.

My collection started, as most do, with a few “how to” books and an ever-increasing pile of various fishing magazines. It then began to grow with the addition of “where to fish” and “the catching of gigantic fish” fishing books - and then, more philosophically, a couple of “why to fish” books were added – the most notable probably being a dog-eared copy of Sidney Hey’s famous book, *Rapture of the River*.

My mania for collecting South African fly-fishing books however, really took off when I read an article in *Piscator*, the Journal of the Cape Piscatorial Society entitled; *The Nine Earliest South African Books on Trout Fishing* by the late Dr Frank Bradlow. The article, which I read sometime in the 1980’s was written in 1973 and is a pretty thorough and near accurate list and description of early South African writings on trout fishing. Now I never met Dr Bradlow, but I feel I knew him well through reading some of the many articles and books he wrote. Besides being a prominent businessman, Dr Bradlow was a highly regarded Africana expert, author, President of the Cape Piscatorial Society and, by his own admission, duffer of a trout fisherman. His book *Tales of a Trout-fishing Duffer* bears this out, as does his actual record as a catcher of trout – reading back issues of *Picador*, confirms that Dr Bradlow, whilst being a prolific writer on trout fishing, was not in fact a prolific killer of fish and indeed had minimal impact on the Society’s annual catch returns.

Duffer regardless, Dr Bradlow loved fishing and must have been a splendid person to fish with. I certainly, just by reading his books and articles, know a day out with him would

have been something special. But that's the magic of books, of writings on fishing in particular. They and their authors become friends you love and cherish, friends to fish with whenever you like, if only in your mind.

But to get back to Frank Bradlow's article – he'd whetted my appetite so much describing the "first nine books" that I just had to find them myself, if only to read them. It couldn't be difficult, I thought, a couple of calls to the book dealers, a visit or three to their shops. Twenty years later I'm still searching – for better, "cleaner", signed, copies of the nine books, the last of which I discovered in a bookshop in Wales just a few years ago. That book was The Reverend Pennington's book *Trout Fishing for South African Boys* and finding it and other equally rare early books, was as Dr Frank says in his article "almost equivalent to landing a 5 lb trout".

Chapter 1 – Not so small beginnings

"Where trouts the size of salmon throng the creeks
And worms the size of magistrates – the beaks."

Roy Campbell

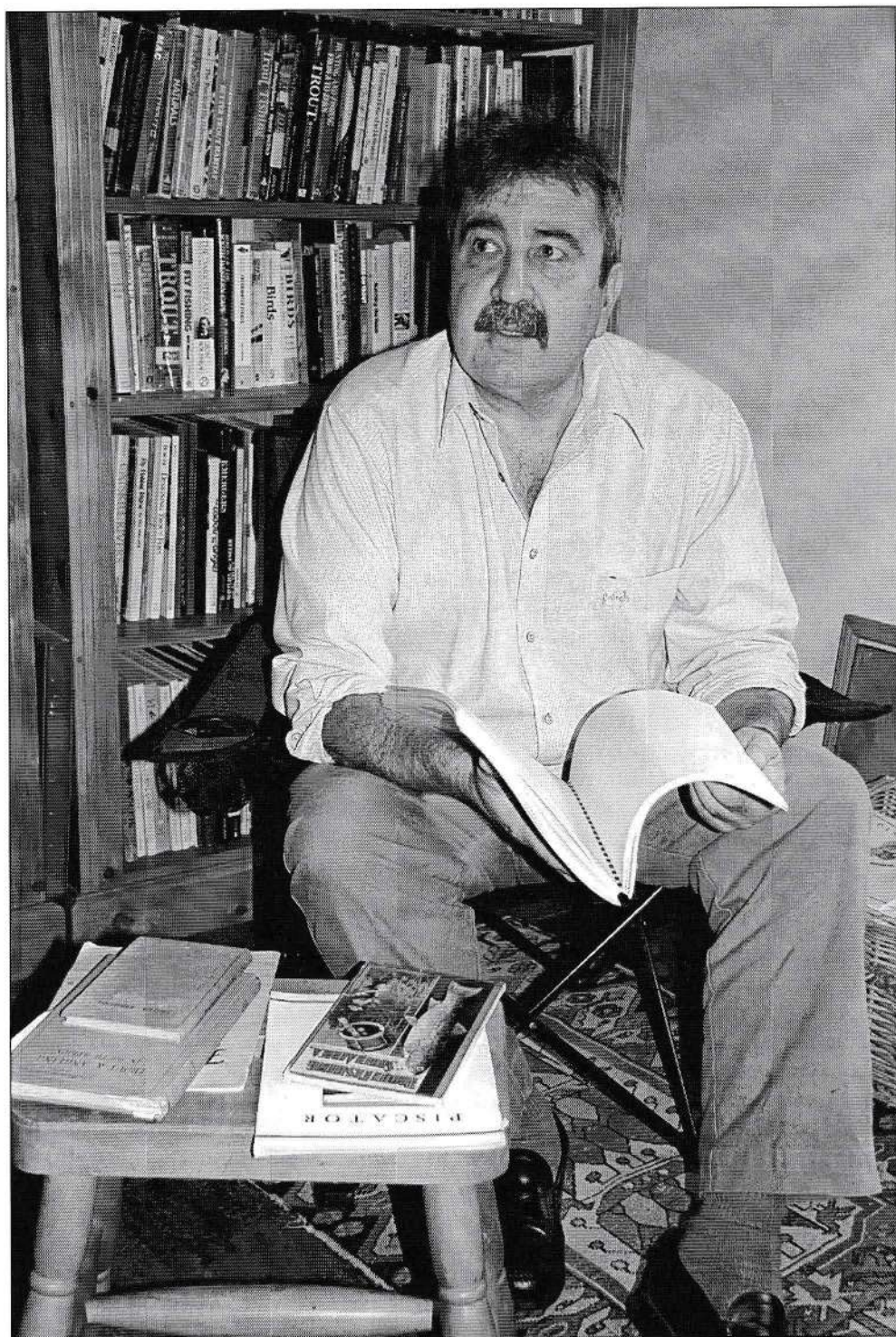
I got the Roy Campbell quotation from Bob Crass's excellent 1986 book, *Trout in South Africa* (No 45 in this book). Bob writes that the lines are from *The Wayzgoose*, Campbell's satirical poem about Natal and suggested that Campbell might have been suffering from a guilty conscience - that he had perhaps caught a trout on a worm and feared that he would be brought before the beak. Or maybe it was the magistrates themselves that were the guilty parties?

Whatever Campbell's motivations, the lines fit perfectly with the story of the early days of South African trout fishing. Virtually wherever trout were stocked, whichever river or stream, they flourished. Growing rapidly to an average size seldom seen today. They were golden times for the fly-fisherman who, whether fishing the Cape, Natal or Eastern Cape was assured of large bags of large fish - a bonanza that lasted through to the 1920s and 30s.

What was equally true of the early days was that trout were highly valued both by anglers and the powers-that-be, who expected trout to become of major economic significance especially in promoting fishing tourism. Trout were therefore strictly under the protection of the Crown - the Governors General of the provinces receiving annual reports in Parliament about the success or otherwise of acclimatization and stocking policies. Fly-fishing only was the law and bag limits strictly enforced. Poachers went to prison - worm dabbers could be hauled in front of the magistrates and fined as much as ten shillings! Just to be suspected of worming for trout could lead to years of unpleasantness - as Fred Bowker, famed as "Kingfisher," was to find out.

There was no debate either in nature conservation circles about the desirability of trout. Nature Conservation Officers were rather charged with the propagation and spreading of trout throughout Southern Africa. They did their jobs with gusto and great success – the following books bear testament to this.

1. Trout Fishing in the Cape Colony by Dumaesq W Manning - 1908.



*Paul Curtis, author of **Fishing the Margins**, with a pre-publication script. Photograph Tom Sutcliffe.*

Title Page: *Trout Fishing in the Cape Colony by Dumaresq W Manning JP, FRGS Cape Civil Service Issued with the approval of the Government of the Cape of Good Hope Printed and Published by the Argus Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd. Cape Town 1908.*

This extremely rare, first book written about trout and trout fishing in South Africa is a "paperback" measuring 155mm wide by 244mm high. It has 97 pages, with an appendix of 33 pages. There are 39 black and white photos (mainly of the Cape trout streams and bags of fish caught in them), five black and white sketches in the appendix (of trout hatching box construction, fish weirs and where to place hatching boxes in a stream), a large (880mm by 470mm) folding "*Map of South Africa shewing the Distribution of Trout in Cape Colony*", proclaimed streams and railway lines and a stunning frontispiece full-colour engraving of a brown trout by Werner and Winter of Frankfurt, Germany. This engraving is titled *Salmo Fario (the brown trout) being a reproduction of a painting of a trout taken in a "Trek Net", at Muizenberg, False Bay and showing the changing livery as a result of migration to the sea from the river in which it was bred.*

Now this engraving and inscription, was later to provide ammunition for the "pro" side of the later 1920's savage debate of whether Cape trout (in that case Rainbows), travelled to sea to feed. But more about that in the next chapter - what it does show or *shew* (if you prefer) is be careful what you write in fishing circles, strong opinions can lead to fly rods drawn at ten paces.

The map is of particular interest because it shows the distribution of trout in the "Cape" as being even wider than it is today – with well-known Western and Eastern Cape streams stocked from the Liesbeeck to the Wildebeeste plus many weird and wonderful places in between. Kimberley for one, Carnarvon, Britstown, Colesberg and Aliwal North! (Forget browns and rainbows, today you'd have to stock speckled dust trout in some of the streams stocked then).

The contents of the book are of great interest, with chapters on "the early history of trout acclimatization" (more about that later), "fishing results" "municipal reservoirs" (on Table Mountain), "the Western Province", "Eastern Province" and "Transkeian Territories"-plus chapters on trout species, rods and tackle and where to fish. The appendix talks about "how to obtain fishing", permits, trout breeding and stocking, legislation as well as the rules and regulations of the Worcester Angling Club.

In the preface of the book, Mr Manning writes; "the object of the author is, however, primarily to bring into prominence the fact that acclimatization in the Cape Colony is an accomplished fact, to encourage angling and ... to supplement the information contained in the illustrated manuals and guide books intended otherwise to instruct the visitor". Dr Bradlow felt that this meant there must have been even earlier books than Manning's. He did however say that "despite a diligent search" he was not successful in finding any. I've searched too and except for the "Jonker's Hoek" report at the front of this book and later similar hatchery reports, have also drawn a blank. But that is not to say those books are not out there! Waiting to be discovered by a more skilful or luckier fly fishing bibliophile. Perhaps even you!

There is also a chapter of particular interest today on catching indigenous fish, “the Wittevisch” on the fly, plus a photo of a large “bag” of “Wittevisch”. Manning wrote, *this fish, a species of Barbel, and very like a Chub in appearance, runs up to several pounds in weight, and is to be found in many of the rivers of the Cape, being particularly numerous in the Breede, which they ascend in packs during the spawning season, the latter part of November, and then rising freely to the fly.* Dean Impson, indigenous fish expert at Jonkershoek, confirms that they were *Barbus andrewi*, or witvis/white fish and although scarce through bass and (to a lesser extent) trout predation, they still occur in the Breede, where he has caught them on fly.

I fully concur with Dr Bradlow, when he writes of *Trout Fishing in the Cape Colony* as “A book that makes fascinating reading and leaves the reader with a feeling that we are missing a good deal today”.

Dr Bradlow ends his article by mentioning that Mr Manning had intended to publish another book, *The Golden Rivers of the Western Province, Union of South Africa and How to Fish for Trout in Them* through Maskew Miller Limited, but despite having issued an attractive brochure with order form, Mr Manning was not able to raise “sufficient subsidies” to print the book (Shades of today!).

I’ve tried to track down this brochure and the manuscript for the book - Dr Bradlow wondered whether it had survived - but with no luck. Mike Peacock, ex CEO of Maskew Miller, tells me that unfortunately the early records and archives of the company were lost or destroyed during one of their moves from their original central Cape Town headquarters to their current Pinelands location.

