

A C Harrison

By Stephen Boshoff

Arthur Cecil Harrison was born in Crouch End, London in 1890. He started fishing at the age of eight, taking roach and bream from ponds in Highgate and Hampstead, and the Welsh Harp Reservoir near Hendon. The late C. Ross Munro (editor of *Piscator* following the death of A.C.) who knew him well suggested that Harrison's love of the countryside and nature was nurtured on his uncle's farm in Dorset, where he recuperated from ill health. He attended school at the Stationers' Company's Foundation School in Hornsey, leaving at age sixteen. His father, a widower and teacher, emigrated to the Cape – accompanied by A.C. – to start a typewriter business in 1907. When he applied for a commission in the South African Overseas Contingent at the beginning of WWI, the young A.C., now in his twenties, stated that he has been in “commercial life” in Cape Town (probably working for his father's typewriting business).

The Summer 1968/ '69 issue of *Piscator* reports that A.C. Harrison, on arriving in the Cape, stayed in Durban Road, Mowbray (an “isolated house” at that stage). He learnt that the proximate Liesbeeck “was not nice to know ... and began a regular weekly addiction to rock angling on the False Bay coast.” Interestingly, the article refers to how little control there was over the importation of new species, even by individuals. Harrison came from a poultry farm in Sussex and brought a box of fertile eggs from the farm's Sussex fowls. “Nobody questioned the importation of sittings of eggs in those days, nor were the Customs at all interested. By prior arrangement, he [Harrison] was provided with broody hens and accommodated in an outside bedroom ... from which he distributed many sittings ...”

During WWI, A.C. served with the Duke of Edinburgh's Own rifles in the Southwest Africa campaign, and the Cape of Good Hope Regiment (1st SA Infantry Regiment in Potchefstroom) before becoming platoon commander of the 19th platoon in England, Egypt, and France until 1916. He was wounded at Delville Wood, Waterlot Farm, and Longueval. The rollcall of the South African Infantry Brigade on the 14th July 1916 contains A.C. as follows: Lieutenant A.C. Harrison, 1st SAI, C Coy – Wounded 17th July.¹

Ian Uys, in his book *Hold at All Costs! The Epic Battle of Delville Wood 1916* recounts this battle, the most famous battle ever fought by South Africans. He quotes from the 1917

¹ <http://www.delvillewood.com/rolcallh.htm> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

The Times of London: “No battlefield on all the Western Front was more bitterly contested than was ‘Devil’s Wood’... [where] South African forces won their imperishable fame – grimly hanging on against overwhelming odds and repulsing counter attacks by troops five and six times their number.”² In a prelude to Dellville Wood, The 1st SA Infantry brigade (comprising the 1st to 4th SA Infantry Regiments, 8th Brigade Machine Gun Company, SA Trench Mortar Battery, 64th Field Coy, Royal Engineers, and 1st SA Field Ambulance, SA Medical Corps) was attached to the 9th (Scottish) Division in May 1916. The 1st SAI was under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel F.S. Dawson. The Battle of Dellville Wood – focusing on the period to the 17th when A.C. was wounded is described as follows:³

“The 9th (Scottish) Division arrived in the Somme area in mid-June 1916 for the Great Push planned for the 1st July. The Division was not to take part in the first day of the battle and was placed in reserve in the XIII Corps at the right hand of the British front. It was instructed to be ready to do so when called upon ...

On the 1st July 1916, at 07.30 am, after a week's bombardment (more than 1500 guns and an expenditure of one million and a half shells), almost 60 000 British soldiers, followed later by 50 000 others, attacked the German positions in the North of the Somme river. The attack was a bitter and deadly failure. The British suffered over 54 000 casualties of whom 21 000 killed ...

The 9th (Scottish) Division relieved the remainder of the 30th Division in Montauban in the night of the 4th/ 5th July, the South Africans taking over the Glatz Redoubt sector and in junction with the French troops ... Its first week in the battle cost the Brigade 537 casualties. The strength of the Brigade was now 3 153 all ranks (121 officers and 3 032 other ranks) ...

² <https://www.scribd.com/book/355981509/Hold-at-All-Costs-The-Epic-Battle-of-Delville-Wood-1916> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

³ <http://www.delvillewood.com/bataille2.htm> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

[on 14th July] The 1st SAI was sent in the village to assist in clearing the South of Longueval and the three others South African regiments were to be ordered to penetrate the wood, but the advance was postponed for the following morning ...

All through the furious night of the 15th, South Africans were digging trenches to save their lives. At 2.35am, Lukin received orders from the Division that the portion held by enemy must be taken. Without artillery preparation, the attack, by the Royal Scots from the village and the 1st SAI from Prince Street, was a failure and the attacking troops fell back. Lieutenant Colonel Dawson, CO of the 1st Regiment, asked for a relief. But fresh troops could not yet be spared for the work. The Division ordered that the wood must be held at all cost. Moreover, another attack against the north-west corner was ordered for the next morning ...

[On 17th July] In spite of an artillery preparation, this attack, made shortly before dawn by the 1st and 2nd SAI, did not succeed. Germans were stubborn defenders. In the morning, General Lukin visited the wood and was worried about the fatigue of his men. He had now no troops which had not been in action for at least forty-eight hours. A fight in a wood was the most wearing kind of battle and the most of the South Africans had to wait under a continuous machine-gun and artillery fire. On his return at his headquarters, Lukin discussed the situation on the telephone with General Furse, CO of the 9th (Scottish) Division, but could get no hope of relief or reinforcements. Moreover, the instructions from the XIII Corps stood that the wood must be held at any cost. Delville wood became a death-trap ...

[On 20th July] Out of the 121 officers and 3 032 other ranks who formed the Brigade on 14th July ... only 29 officers and 751 other ranks were present at roll call when the unit was gathered some days after the battle ...”

A few years after the War, Colonel Donald MacLeod (commander of the South African Scottish Regiment who formed a large part of the 4th SAI) asked W.A. Beattie to write a poem

about Delville Wood. Beattie was a Lance Corporal in the 4th SAI as and was wounded.⁴ From his poem:

“Within that wood of epic fame for days and nights they fought.
And backward thrust the stubborn foe, through every step was bought
With tragic toll of vivid youth, that had but life to give.”

After Dellville Wood, A.C. was sent to the UK for hospitalisation and convalescence, boarded for light duty and seconded to the Military Advisers’ Staff, where he inspected government factories involved in explosives and gas warfare as well as coastal defences. At the country recuperation centre, and during his travels to inspect factories, he fished. After demobilisation and returning to the Cape, A.C. joined his father’s typewriting business, and became an agent for Smith Premier Typewriters (the American Smith was regarded as the most successful double keyboard typewriter of its time; the double keyboard required as each key had only one function, white keys for lowercase and black keys for uppercase and figures). In 1919 Harrison did his first Cape trout fishing in the lower Eerste, then “clean and productive.”

A.C. married Gabriella Charlotte Dubois on 17 December 1920 at Holy Trinity Church, Kalk Bay. Arthur’s occupation was given as “commission agent”.⁵ They had three children. One son, R.C. practiced as an architect in Australia, while Arthur Desmond followed his father’s science and freshwater research interests. An overview publication on research topics, key individuals, and the institutions of freshwater science in South Africa between 1900 and 2000 lists him as one of the “exceptional individuals of the past”.⁶ Harrison – at one time Professor of Zoology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg and Prof in Biology at the University of Waterloo in Canada – is described as “a limnological pioneer in Africa when the field was in its infancy. His breadth of knowledge of freshwater invertebrates was unrivalled, and his biogeographic insights have stood the test of time.”

⁴ <http://www.delvillewood.com/poems.htm#beattie> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

⁵ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6ZH5-QZNZ> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

⁶ *The Freshwater Science Landscape in South Africa, 1900-2010 Overview of Research Topics, Key Individuals, Institutional Change and Operating Culture*. Water Research Commission, Report No. TT 530/12 August 2012. <https://www.wrc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/mdocs/TT%20530-12.pdf> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

The death notice of Arthur's father, Arthur Harrison, completed by A.C, indicates that he died on 19 July 1941 at the age of 79 at the False Bay Hospital. His occupation was given as "pensioner (clerk)", living at the Olympia Hotel, Kalk Bay. He left "small personal effects only". Arthur senior's spouse is listed as Frances Maria Harrison, and her date of death as "about 1894".⁷

After forming the CPS – running the organisation from his typewriter business office for many years – A.C. volunteered when WWII broke out, joining the 24th Battalion of the SA Coastal Defence Corps in 1940, a part-time unit consisting of mostly older men of the National Volunteer Brigade. In later years – as the typewriting business declined because of equipment being serviced by suppliers – he became fully immersed in the business of the Society.

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On 24 June 1960, the University of Cape Town conferred the degree of Master of Science, *honoris causa*, on A.C. Harrison. The University Chancellor, The Hon. A. v.d. Centlivres presided over the ceremony and the citation was read by the University Orator, Prof D.V. Cowen (Dean of the Faculty of Law).⁸ I quote:⁹

"Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to present to you Arthur Cecil Harrison.

Mr Harrison is one of those piscatorial men dear to Izaak Walton's heart, of whom Walton once wrote: 'There be men of wisdom, learning and experience which love and practice this art, this pleasant curiosity of Fish and Fishing; for it is a rest to the mind, a cheerer of spirits, a diverter of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a moderator of passions; and begets habits of peace and patience in those that practice it.'

⁷ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QP7G-YQ1Y> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

⁸ Albert van der Sandt Centlivres was the Chief Justice of South Africa from 1950 to 1957. He is known for his judgments during the coloured vote constitutional crisis in the 1950s, when he rejected the Union government's attempts at disenfranchising non-white voters in the Cape Province.

⁹ The citation was published under "Honour conferred on A.C.H." by Alan Yates in *Piscator* No. 49 Spring 1960. It is interesting that Prof Cowen mentioned Harrison's publications on trout and bass together with that on eels and the kurper and separate from *exotic* fish.

Calmly, industriously, unostentatiously, for more than 50 years, Mr Harrison has enriched the world of learning as a freshwater biologist and piscatorial expert. His list of scholarly publications on trout, bass, eels, the kurper, and many exotic species, is long and impressive. He has found time to serve as honorary secretary of the Cape Piscatorial Society since its inception in 1931, and is editor of its excellent journal. For more than 20 years he has been the Advisory Officer for Cape Inland Fisheries.

Mr Harrison has also deserved well of his country in other fields. He served in the South African forces in World War I, and was wounded at Dellville Wood. Throughout his professional life he has striven to conserve and safeguard the living beauty of nature from man's destructiveness; and since 1952 he has been secretary to the Advisory Committee for Nature Conservation. Such men, Mr Chancellor, who seek to keep alive our awareness of nature in an industrialized world, are rare. It is, therefore, my privilege today to ask you to confer upon this outstanding public servant the degree of Master of Science, *honoris causa*."

What is interesting about the citation is that Cowen referred to trout and bass together with the kurper and eels – separate from exotic fish – almost as if the trout and bass were regarded as indigenous.

When he became ill in 1979, the CPS AGM decided that he should remain nominally as honorary secretary and editor of *Piscator*. A.C. spent his last months at the home of his daughter Joan Ive in Bramley, Johannesburg, where he died on 18 December 1979. Prior to staying with his daughter (from July 1979), his address was given as 23 Glen Alpine Way, Bergvliet. His occupation was given as "Secretary Cape Piscatorial Society". Arthur's father is listed as Arthur Harrison and his mother as Fanny Maria Harrison (born Craig).¹⁰ Arthur Cecil Harrison's estate was worth R2 134.13.¹¹

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Without A.C. Harrison, there would almost certainly have been no CPS, or at least, an organisation – and associated journal – of the same stature. If I can fault Harrison

¹⁰ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6DTK-V3J8> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

¹¹ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-99L3-FS7Z?i=476&cc=4319131> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

momentarily, it is for his role in introducing bass, or perhaps the unmanaged introduction of bass, not foreseeing the damage they will bring, or when that first manifested, stepping in. It was synonymous to casting a Rapala on the upper Eerste. I cannot, however, contemplate these men not feeling a little sorrow at seeing species like the Clanwilliam yellowfish – so loved by many of their contemporaries – the subject of beautiful stories, slowly displaced. This especially as they were often men displaced, or men that saw dear river friends die in times of war or trod down through periods of economic upheaval. They were also men exposed to fascism of different kinds. They were men of nature, some who pursued the wonder of understanding the nature and difference in insects and life which others passed by. Perhaps though, this combination of experience gives the answer; in the face of what they experienced, the introduction of a fish, and the solace it brought, was all.