

Major John Popkin Traherne (1826-1901)

"Of all the fish that fall victims to our skill, salmon are the most interesting by reason of their size, strength, and gameness, the difficulty of their capture, and the romantic scenery of the districts in which, during their periodic returns to fresh water, we have to seek them."

-Major John P. Traherne<sup>1</sup>

"Major Traherne is the master of infinite elaboration...<sup>2</sup> There are no salmon flies in creation requiring so much patient work to dress well as Major Traherne's."<sup>3</sup>

-George M. Kelson

"Major Traherne tied a beautiful fly, and it gave me great pleasure to watch him. He took the most extraordinary pains to dress them perfectly, and I am sure I have seen him taking an hour to get a feather to sit properly."

-Charles H. Akroyd<sup>4</sup>

George M. Kelson began his continuing series "On the Description of Salmon Flies" in the spring of 1884 in *The Fishing Gazette*.<sup>5</sup> The first eighteen patterns he discussed were a series of flies invented by Major John P. Traherne. Kelson tells us that he had not intended to proceed to publish salmon fly patterns until he had fulfilled the promise he had made the previous year<sup>6</sup> by bringing out "Standard Colours" of material which would permit everyone to dress their flies precisely in accordance with his prescriptions.

Kelson's promise to provide "Standard Colours" commercially was never to be fulfilled as originally stated. In reality, Kelson's knowledge of dyeing was that of a contemporary of Jones and Blacker, that of an era forty years gone. Chemistry and the technology of dyes had advanced rapidly in the second half of the 19th century, and Kelson found himself unable to compete on the same ground with commercial dyers of the 1880s. In the end, in the spring of 1886 after he had left *The Fishing Gazette* to become an editor at *Land and Water*, Kelson took advantage of the latter publication's tradition of supplemental illustration, and produced a series of chromolithographed cards illustrating salmon flies; which, the public was informed, were to be taken as the fulfillment of his long-standing promise to provide "Standard Colours."<sup>7</sup>

In the opening paragraph of the first article "On the Description of Salmon Flies," Kelson tells us he has decided to proceed with these articles, even in the absence of the "Standard Colours," as it is possible to discuss Major Traherne's flies which are characteristically tied using only natural material.

Kelson's decision to commence his lengthy series of essays on the salmon fly with Traherne's patterns was clearly based not only on that consideration. Undoubtedly, George Kelson found it desirable to begin with Traherne's patterns, because their complexity of design and artistic excellence would make the powerful impression on the *Gazette's* readership that he desired. These eighteen patterns would dazzle his readers, as they had the salmon in the Shannon and the Tay.

Kelson could appreciate the impact these patterns would have upon the angling public, as he was himself still under their spell. At the Berlin Exhibition of 1880 Kelson had been alone in exhibiting a case of twenty salmon flies tied by himself. He displayed the same case of twenty flies at the Great International Fisheries Exhibition at London in 1883. It was his dissent, as one of twelve jurors, with the disposition of awards at this Exhibition

that led to Kelson's friendship with Robert Bright Marston, editor of *The Fishing Gazette*, and (after Kelson's judicious cultivation of Marston) to Kelson's various series of articles in the *Gazette*.

At London, Kelson's case of salmon flies was not alone. Several of the tackle houses and commercial tyers exhibited salmon flies among their various wares, and another amateur also exhibited a case of salmon flies. The other amateur fly dresser was, of course, Major Traherne, and it seems probable that the contents of the case were the same eighteen patterns, which Kelson published in the *Gazette* in 1884 and 1885.

George M. Kelson and Major John P. Traherne probably met for the first time at the London Exhibition in 1883. It is possible to imagine that they might have encountered one another previously on the Welsh River Usk, not far from Traherne's home in Glamorganshire, and with which Kelson is much associated.<sup>8</sup> Their frequent mutual gestures of civility, however, directly following the International Fisheries Exhibition, fit the pattern of a courtship, and seem to evidence that their friendship was at that time in its formative stage.

The two men could not have been more unlike. Born in Kent, just outside of London (practically a Cockney), the son of a surgeon, a self-made man who had made his fortune as a London merchant, Kelson was a pushing, thrusting, get-ahead sort of fellow. Every detail of his life manifests the insecurity of the *nouveau riche*. A fiery, red-headed gamecock, a ruthless self-promoter and boundless egotist, Kelson made enemies and stirred up controversy everywhere. His ever-present bowler hat (proudly worn, no doubt, to bring to mind his achievements on the cricket field) infallibly marked him as a member of the mercantile/clerical class (gentlemen wore topers). Kelson fell as far short in his morals as his manners from the Victorian ideal of the English Gentleman, as Surtees's grocer of Great Coram Street, John Jorrocks, M.F.H.

In contrast, Major Traherne, nine years Kelson's senior, was born a member of the landed gentry. His family was armigerous, tracing its descent from an eponymous Welsh Prince who ruled Gwynedd in the eleventh century. For two hundred years before his birth his ancestors had been land owners and office holders. His grandfather had made a particularly advantageous marriage to one Frances Popkin, an heiress, who brought into his family her surname as well as the estate at Coytrahen.

John Popkin Traherne was born August 28, 1826. He was the eldest son, and therefore heir to the estate, which came to him in 1859. In 1845, he obtained a commission as Ensign in the 39th (Dorset) Regiment of Foot. He served with that regiment for nearly six years, and resigned by sale of his commission in 1851. He served, subsequently, as Major in the Glamorganshire Militia, retiring in 1865. As might be expected, Traherne occupied the sorts of County offices reserved for those principal landowners who were not of the peerage: Justice of the Peace, Deputy Lieutenant for the County, and finally High Sheriff in 1863.

In contrast to the fiery Kelson, Traherne was not only a gentleman by birth, but a genuinely gentle and kindly man. He alone of all the angling celebrities of his era was able to remain friends with the quarrelsome and contumacious Kelson right up to the time of his own death in 1901. In the photographs of Traherne that have come down to us, in Kelson's book, in *The Fishing Gazette*, or in the short-lived *Sporting Celebrities*, he looks out at us, past his muttonchop whiskers, the very picture of the decent, stalwart, phlegmatic, and reliable British gentleman of the old school - Dr. Watson, to the life! In his relationship with the volatile Kelson, Traherne's role was clearly that of the faithful Watson ministering to the all-consuming ego of the ebullient Holmes. Kelson's sins were many and scarlet, and when he was well and truly taken through the mill by Marston in the famous "Little Inky Boy" controversy of 1907-8,<sup>9</sup> the reader could not but feel that he had it all coming to him. Still one's heart goes out to poor Kelson when he writes *in extremis*, replying to Marston's latest and only too telling attack, how much he wishes Major Traherne were alive, to defend him, and rebuke the upstart Marston.<sup>10</sup>

Had Traherne still been alive in 1908, it is doubtful that even he could have rescued Kelson from all the limbs he had climbed out upon, but the Major might well have intervened to separate the combatants and still the *furor*

*Kelsonicus*. Traherne would probably have succeeded as peacemaker since his moral character and his tremendous knowledge and experience of salmon fishing commanded the respect of both combatants.

In 1886, in *The Fishing Gazette*,<sup>11</sup> Marston wrote a profile of Traherne's angling career, obviously informed on the details by Traherne himself. He caught his first salmon in 1850, and from then until the time of his death fished, throughout the long British season, most rivers in the United Kingdom. Major Traherne either himself held a lease on, or fished regularly as a guest: in Scotland: the Naver, Thurso, Helmsdale, the Aberdeenshire Dee, Spey, Cuve, Annan, and the Kirkcudbrightshire Dee; in Wales: the Conway, Usk, and Wye; and in Ireland: the Moy, the Galway Ballinahinch, Boyne, Shannon, Carah (Kerry), Laune, Lee, Suir, and the Blackwater (Cork). He had fished all of these, each for "several years in succession," by 1886. In addition, between 1862 and 1869, Major Traherne held leases on a number of the best salmon rivers in Norway, including the Lyngdal, the Maals, the Namsen, and the Alten.<sup>12</sup>

After 1886, the River Reports in *The Fishing Gazette* indicate that Traherne continued his lease for some years on the Stanley water on the Tay, and fished the Boyne and the Lee regularly. His principal salmon fishing locus in the last twenty years of his life, however, was certainly the three mile stretch of water which he leased at Killaloe on the River Shannon. It is depressing to contemplate the fact that it is no longer possible to fish Major Traherne's water, which was submerged beneath a hydroelectric project in 1929.

The Shannon possessed the peculiar characteristic that apparently no fly could be dressed too brightly for its salmon. In fact, the brighter the fly, the better it worked. The accumulated historical evidence is that the elaborate "gaudy" style of salmon fly dressing originated in the West of Ireland, and most particularly around the Shannon. As the premier Irish salmon fishery, its environs had long been a center of angling commercial enterprise and export. The world famous O'Shaughnessy hook, preferred above all others for salmon fly dressing, was the product of a Limerick maker.

Through the 19th century, the "gaudy" salmon fly supplanted in fashion and use the drab local favorites on river after river. Younger<sup>13</sup> tells us this development occurred early, circa 1830-40, on the Tweed, which rapidly itself became the leading site of salmon fly invention. On lesser, more provincial rivers, the process took place later. Taverner quotes John Waller Hills's account of the changeover on the Eden as late as the 1890's<sup>14</sup>. As "gaudy" flies became popular on every river, Shannon flies grew more gaudy still (cf. Ephemera's "Three Graces", circa 1850).

Major Traherne's patterns represent the pinnacle of achievement in the Victorian Era of the Shannon style of salmon fly dressing, and it was his role to act as the vehicle of transmission to angling posterity of the Shannon school of fly dressing, through Kelson's articles on his patterns and Kelson's emulation of his style in salmon fly design. When today's most talented and creative salmon fly dressers, individuals like Paul Schmookler and Ken Sawada, invent "exhibition" or "artistic" patterns utilizing the rarest and most valuable of materials and requiring the greatest command of tying technique, the Shannon tradition lives on.

Only slightly less gaudy flies were the standard on the Erne, where Michael Rogan achieved world-wide fame as a salmon fly dresser by the middle of the century. Rogan, like Traherne, was famous for avoiding dyed material. Evidently, the peat-stained highly acid waters of the Erne bleached out the dyes of the period. The Erne was Ireland's second finest fishery, and, sad to say, it, too, has been completely submerged by a hydroelectric scheme built between 1945 and 1950. The angler cannot but marvel that Ireland chose to destroy both of her finest salmon rivers.

Despite his love of the Shannon, Traherne seems to have departed from the usual local practice of "harling". Long, top-heavy-actioned Castle Connell rods, made by John Enright right next door, were employed to impart action to flies towed to and fro across the river in peculiar high-ended boats, called "cots," which somewhat resembled Venetian gondolas. Traherne preferred less passive forms of salmon fishing and employed a three

sectioned greenheart rod with a more even action, better suited to long casts and spey casts. He lent his favorite rod to Farlow's so that they could duplicate its action for a "Traherne" model to be offered to the public.

Traherne's taste in salmon rods was worth following, for at *The Fishing Gazette* Tournament in 1884, Traherne found himself, as one of the publication's favorite "experts," called upon to perform under weather conditions which Marston described at the time as "remarkably adverse," Major Traherne calmly proceeded to make what was for years the world's record cast of 45 yards and one inch. He used a spliced Farlow-made "Traherne" rod of 17 feet 4 inches. The cast was made July 26, 1884. How many of us today, I wonder, could equal that distance?

Traherne also held some of the records for fish catches, recorded without guilt back in that more generous age. On the Namsen, in August of 1864, Traherne caught 165 fish in fifteen days. On the best of those fifteen days, he caught 23 fish, 12 grilse and 11 salmon, the largest weighing 38 lbs. Writing in 1886, Kelson believed Traherne's Namsen score had never been equaled.<sup>15</sup> Fishing from March 10 to March 25, 1885, on the Boyne, Major Traherne caught fish weighing 33, 28, 24, 22, 17, 18, 19, 19, 27, 19, 19, 26, and 33 lbs. The total weight was 304 lbs, an enviable average of almost 23 and 1/2 lbs. per fish.

Regrettably, Major Traherne did not devote himself to the writing of articles for the sporting papers, as Kelson did. He did contribute frequently to the controversies which were ongoing in the letter column of *The Fishing Gazette*. *The Fishing Gazette*, the contemporary reader must be informed, had an editorial policy regarding letters from its readers, differing quite notably from any periodical we are familiar with today. The *Gazette* encouraged lengthy debate in its letter column, and on topics which called forth strong feelings on the part of its readership, the battle could rage for a year or even two, issue after issue. Traherne participated in many of the principal symposia of the '70s, '80s, and '90s. He played a particularly prominent role in the debate as to whether the parr is, in fact, a salmon (in the 1870's many were convinced it was a separate fish: Traherne was proved to be right), and the debate on the practice "of striking from the reel" (i.e. setting the hook on a taking salmon while not touching one's reel, thus allowing the drag to apply sufficient, but not too much force, in hooking the fish).

His only book, "The Habits of the Salmon," published in 1889, was a study of the natural history of the salmon, and though it was a valuable contribution to the understanding of Traherne's contemporaries, its conclusions were largely accepted universally so long ago, that the reader today will probably not be very interested. It is interesting that Traherne believed salmon did feed in fresh water, and disgorged their stomach contents upon being hooked. He is probably the originator of that frequently-quoted theory.

Of more interest to the contemporary student of salmon fishing and the salmon fly is his essay on "Salmon Fishing with the Fly", which he contributed to Henry Cholmondeley-Pennell's "Salmon and Trout" volume of *Fishing*, published in the Badminton Library series in 1885. It is typical of Traherne's modesty that he delegated the selection of salmon fly patterns at the conclusion of his essay to his friend, George Kelson. Traherne's observations on technique and fly selection are still pertinent today. It is particularly interesting to find that though Traherne believed the color of the fly and its size influenced the angler's success, he believed that more or less any pattern of the same color would produce the same result. Traherne did not subscribe to Kelson's pseudo-scientific theories which posited a guaranteed result from the use of a specific fly pattern under specific circumstances.

He clearly tied his complex and elaborate patterns simply for the pleasure of exercising the technique which he loved and at which he so excelled. He wrote: "Fly tying is a most interesting, and I might almost say exciting occupation, and many a dull rainy day, during the winter months especially, may be thus pleasantly, and as far as salmon fishing matters are concerned profitably, passed. Doubtless a man will feel much prouder when he

has landed a fish with a fly of his own making, than one he has bought, and I would recommend every fisherman who has the time to try his hand at it."<sup>16</sup>

But the Major did not dogmatically insist that tying one's own salmon flies was for everyone: "I have heard it said that a man cannot rank as a first class fisherman unless he can do so; but I think this is hardly fair. Many people's fingers are 'all thumbs,' and they could not tie a fly in a year of Sundays, as the saying goes; other salmon fishermen are professional men with no time to spare from their duties... It might just as soon be said that to rank in the first class a fisherman should be able to make his own rods and reels."<sup>17</sup>

It is also interesting to find that Traherne, despite his own remarkable accomplishments in pattern invention, writes: "With regard to patterns of flies, my favorite is the Jock Scott, and if I were told that I was only allowed to fish with one pattern that is the one I should choose."<sup>18</sup>

Major Traherne died Monday, January 28, 1901, from a stroke. He survived Queen Victoria by only six days. In the obituary in *Fishing Gazette*,<sup>19</sup> Marston wrote: "With the death of Major John P. Traherne has passed away one of the best of salmon anglers and most genial of men... his death has cast quite a gloom over Killaloe and Shannon salmon anglers, for during the many years he had visited the district he was as Mr. Hurley puts it, 'simply idolised and loved by everyone.'" Marston remembered Traherne carefully hand-tailing a kelt Marston caught on his first salmon fishing trip, on the Dee at Banchory in 1884, so that it could be released: "He hated the idea of using the gaff on a kelt". It was typical of Traherne's sportsmanship, at a time when most anglers simply slaughtered kelts indiscriminately.

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<sup>1</sup> Major John P. Traherne, "THE HABITS OF THE SALMON," Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1889, p. iii.

<sup>2</sup> George M. Kelson in *Land and Water*, Volume 41, May 1, 1886, p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> George M. Kelson in *The Fishing Gazette* Volume 8, May, 31, 1884, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Akroyd, "A VETERAN SPORTSMAN'S DIARY," Robert Carruthers & Sons, Inverness, 1926, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> *The Fishing Gazette*, Volume 7, October 27, 1883, p.525, and December 1, 1883, p. 590.

<sup>7</sup> *Land and Water*, Volume 41, April 10, 1886, p 337.

<sup>8</sup> Not many of Kelson's own salmon fly inventions ever succeeded in becoming adopted for general use. Among the few that did were several from a series of grub patterns he developed for the Usk. Kelson knew the Usk intimately, and described the river in detail in a series of six articles, titled "Salmon Fishing [or Angling] for Limited Incomes," which ran in *Land and Water*, Volume 41, February 13, 1886, p. 146; February 20, 1886, pp. 171-2; February 27, 1886, p. 195; March 13, 1886, p.243; March 27, 1886, p.288; April 3, 1886, p.313.

<sup>9</sup> This controversy which originated from inquiries about the correct dressing of George Kelson's most successful pattern "The Little Inky Boy," eventually proceeded to a refutation by Marston of Kelson's claims that he, or his father, had invented a number of well known patterns. It went on in various numbers of *The Fishing Gazette*, from Volume 55, September 28, 1907 to Volume 56, March 28, 1908.

<sup>10</sup> *The Fishing Gazette*, Vol. 56, March 14, 1908, p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> *The Fishing Gazette*, Vol.13, March 20, 1886, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> *The Fishing Gazette*, J. Preuthen, "Some British Salmon-Angling Pioneers in Norway, 1824 to 1874," Vol. 68, p. 575.

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<sup>13</sup> John Younger, "River Angling for Salmon and Trout," J & J.H. Rutherford, Kelso and William Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh, 1864, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Taverner, "SALMON FISHING," The Lonsdale Library, Volume 10, Seely Service & Co., London 1931, pp. 334-5; Hills subsequently published his recollections in John Waller Hills, "My Sporting Life," Philip Allan & Co., Ltd., London, 1936, pp. 42-3.

<sup>15</sup> *Land and Water*, Volume 41, January 30, 1886, p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> Major John P. Traherne, "Salmon Fishing With the Fly" in "FISHING", edited by Henry Chomondeley-Pennell, in the Badminton Library, Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1885, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>19</sup> *The Fishing Gazette*, Vol. 42, 2/9/1901, p. 92-3.