

Upstream & Down

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NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

TO MY BROTHER

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The courtesy of *The Sportsman* in permitting the reprinting of "Old Timer," "Places" and "Downstream after Dark" is hereby acknowledged.

PREFACE

THIS book is a distillation of the ideas I have had about trout fishing over a period which now totals—surprisingly—nearly thirty seasons. In that length of time a man should learn something about any sport he has loved and followed. But there are different kinds of learning: as a man fishes, year after year, he absorbs that kind which seems to him important. Such lore as I have acquired in these three decades of more or less intimate association with many rapids, pools and eddies is perhaps not lore at all. For it is concerned only in an incidental way with that technical virtuosity which adds an extra trout or two to your creel on a day when the fishing is difficult.

It is identified, rather, with something not so easily crystallized into words as are the mechanics of casting or the physical stream signs which betoken the presence

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of trout. It is a state of mind, perhaps, and a state of heart: a view of trout fishing which registers upon a subtler sense than that of sight and which abides with you longer than the thrill of landing a big fish. In the following pages I give you that as best I can, in some of my own experiences and thoughts when I have been up to my thighs in trout water and over my head in the technical problems imposed by the endless variety of currents and the infinite moods of trout. And this book will have succeeded if some residuum of its message lodges permanently in your angler's heart and becomes a neighbor there to those other fancies, memories and hopes which are associated with bright water, lithe rods and the feel of a big one going away.

HOWARD T. WALDEN, 2D.

Palisades, New York.

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I.

The Spark Is Kindled

THE exact date of my first trout fishing escapes me, but I would say that the year was 1910 or thereabouts, placing the experience within that magic time of life when all of one's perceptions have a heightened beauty, a freshness of form and color so exquisite and fragile that they cannot endure into later years.

The fishing itself was far from spectacular. It was worm fishing, in a small brook that meandered through woodland and meadow not more than two miles from home. The trout were not large: seven or eight inches was average; a fish of ten inches was considered a prize. Yet my first trout fishing on this stream will

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always remain with me as the most thrilling I have ever had.

The brook was typical of dozens of others in that part of New Jersey, yet to me, in that remote time, it was the most distinctively individual, the most promising and alluring of all water. I came to know it as I knew my own back yard. I could go on a straight line through dense woods, leaving a path that ran parallel to the stream a quarter of a mile away, and arrive directly upon any one of the brook's ten or twelve likelier pools. I knew where each spring rill fed the main stream, and where each slough of slack water backed away from it into the damp woods. Many fallen trees crossed it, the wreckage of some long-past cyclone. These made natural bridges to facilitate an angler's passage upstream or down; some of them partially dammed the current or diverted the channel, and many

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ideal trout holes were formed thereby. Most of these pools were difficult indeed to fish, and threatened the almost certain loss of a hook among the roots in their deep dusks; but they were the abiding places of *Fontinalis*, and a worm dropped carefully by a hidden angler would often evoke that incomparable, smashing strike of the native trout.

The stream took its source five miles north of our town, flowed south four miles and east two more, emptying into a broad tidal river. In the course of its journey it wandered through open meadow and deep woods, through a large farm-yard and two ice ponds, and, in its lower reaches, skirted the back yards of another town. In our pre-trout era the stretch between the two ice ponds was our favorite water for sunnies, roach and an occasional catfish. We did not fish the part opposite and below the town, for the water there

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had a perceptible murk of pollution and an environment decidedly unappealing by comparison with the sylvan surroundings upstream. Nor, though I have never quite known the reason, did we fish that part above the upper ice pond. It was farther from home, of course, but that scarcely would have deterred us. Perhaps, being smaller than the middle reaches, it seemed not worth our while. But I rather incline to the opinion that our long-postponed exploration of these parts was the natural result of boy nature. Boys are, I think, more eminently creatures of habit, more consistently the true conformers than grown men. Our activities were devoted to a certain area. We grew to know every foot of it, and its potentialities of fish and game, and it sufficed us. As if we were an Indian tribe, we marked for ourselves—subconsciously and without ever speaking of it—the established bounda-

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ries of our domain. To stray beyond these was a matter of such consequence that, when it occurred to one of us at last, it was not casually acted upon, alone, but placed before the entire clan as a project requiring a collective judgment.

The plan to fish the stream below the town was conceived in a mood of reluctant experimentation, induced by the failure of that usually reliable part of the brook which was "ours." We ventured down the strange lower waters to the "Railroad Pool," an abnormal widening of the stream below a railway trestle, where we made a catch of fifty or sixty roach and sunfish, taken on bits of dough mixed with cotton.

That exceptionally profitable enterprise had, for a while, a somewhat unedifying influence upon us and our fishing. We went back to the Railroad Pool again and again, fishing this unlovely lower

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stream to the neglect of the crystal water and virgin glades of the upper brook. We were a little ashamed of ourselves for this; our repeated sallies to the Railroad Pool seemed indicative of some preference in our natures for the grosser aspects of angling. At the Railroad Pool we could count on a mess of fish with a minimum of effort, but in the woodland and meadow stream above we had to proceed with some caution from hole to hole; and not only was the fishing harder work but the spoils were at best not nearly so rich as those yielded by the big water below the town. But this avidity for fish rather than fishing should not be characteristic, we were sure, of decent anglers. A reaction was inevitable.

There came a day when I knew I was surfeited with the Railroad Pool and its easily taken denizens. I would leave that place for good and all and head north for

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my fishing—not immediately north, in the water we knew so well, but far, far up, above the second ice pond where none of us ever had gone. This daring plan, broached as usual to the partners, was received with mingled expressions of amazement, skepticism and sympathy . . . I would get nothing up there. The brook was too small; no one ever fished it in those parts . . . In effect, no one ever bothered with that undersized rill, whose dark water came quietly out of the deep woods above the second ice pond, as if colored by the somber shade and mystery of the uncharted region through which it flowed.

That water's reputation of not being "bothered with" might have made it all the more alluring to me. But as a matter of fact I had heard—some time before and in so remote and vague a fashion that I had scarcely given the tale credence—

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that it *had* been bothered with. A boy I knew (he was not a fisherman) advised me that a boy he knew (also not a fisherman) had seen a man emerge late one afternoon from that wilderness above the upper ice pond. The man had carried a very slender rod in his hand and over his shoulder a willow creel in which three extraordinarily beautiful fish reposed on damp moss. These fish, it seemed, were larger than the average run of roach and sunnies, were without scales but were decorated with brilliant markings—bronze-green, mottled backs, brightly-spotted sides and yellow-orange underparts.

Although, up to that time, I had never seen a trout, I had seen pictures of them; and the description of these three fish, disjointed as it was as I received it, tallied with the pictures. Yet it was not conceivable that trout could inhabit our brook. One had to go to the storied fastnesses of

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Canada or Maine to catch trout. They were not a boy's fish, but a fish for mature anglers. One graduated to trout, eventually, from the sunfish and roach school. It was a man's business, like driving a car; there was something preposterous even in my serious consideration of it.

Thoughts like these almost battered down the small persistent hope that kept me on my way upstream after leaving my companions at the Railroad Pool. It was a long walk, and it led by all of that lower water I knew so well. The temptation to pause at some of these deep holes was strong, for fishing water never looks so inviting or so surely potential as when you are, from some necessity, passing it by unchallenged. The day was gusty and cool, past the first week of June, a day of alternate brilliance and shadow as the rent fabric of clouds hurried east across the sun. The water of my stream was by times

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sparkling and dark: in the lee of an old stump it was quiet as a summer dusk, but a long meadow stretch of the brook built up a respectable sea in the wind and was traversed incessantly by the hurrying dark tracks of the gusts.

I kept on like some crusader, armed against temptation. I crossed the brook above the lower ice pond, negotiated the boggy low length of a pasture, passed the swimming hole—deserted in this blustery chill—and headed north through a grove of hardwoods until I reached the upper ice pond.

An east-west road, little used in that remote year, crossed the upper end of the pond. Immediately north of the road the brook was rather aimless in a small area of lush meadow; and then, abruptly at the limits of this little lea was the wall of the woods. It confronted me like a challenge: for all we knew in those days that lofty