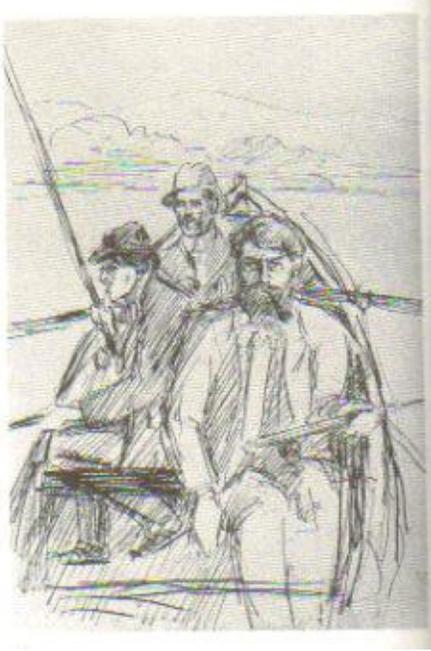


November 2010



Driftless Days . . .

Now and again we get lucky when we're fishing. That "luck" might entail landing a lot of trout, or landing a number of large trout, though quite possibly it might entail neither. Where "luck" comes from happens to be a very good question, a fit subject I suppose for philosophers, theologians and poets, not to speak of humble fishermen.

In "The Fisherman" from the book *The Wild Swans At Coole*, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats says

*Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream . . .*

The "audience" Yeats refers to are various malcontents the poet does not get along with or particularly respect, spoken of earlier in the poem. When Yeats turns his thoughts from them to someone he can respect and admire, he thinks of a fly fisherman. Fancy that.

An old drawing by the Irish artist Harold Oakley depicts Yeats fishing from a boat at Coole Park in the early part of the twentieth century. Yeats is holding a fly rod and is dressed in suit and tie, perhaps not so uncommon at that time as one might think. Yeats' fishing partners in the drawing are the Irish playwright John Synge and fellow-mystic George Russell. Sometimes I've thought

that Yeats, being so distracted a personality, was probably not a very good fisherman, though he fished rather often and wrote a number of interesting poems about fishing and fishermen in general. I don't think Yeats was as interested in catching fish as he was catching something much more elusive, and fishing was just one of the vehicles through which he sometimes sought it. We all have a bit of that in our fly boxes, whether we like to admit it or not.

Of course he may have been a much better fisherman than one might think. Considering the body of work he managed to compile betwixt his occasional fishing ventures, it might be safe to say he was good enough.

* * * * *

Recently a friend and I had been playing phone tag for two or three days, and I finally got in touch with him on a Sunday morning. I knew if I called early enough, I could catch him then. I also knew he wouldn't happen to have gone to church that morning. We traded fishing stories of the past few days, and as it turned out, we'd both done well enough on entirely different types of water fishing completely different patterns. That's always interesting and enlightening, and it took a fair amount of time to discuss enlightenment properly. At some point I mentioned I needed to drop something off to him soon, so he invited me out for coffee on my way out to wherever it was I'd thought about going fishing that day. When I got to his place, our discussion continued at greater length over coffee, the drive out being the slightest of interruptions. We looked at a cane fly rod or two, which couldn't be done on the phone, and talked about a few books as I recall. Neither of us seemed to have any definitive plans at all, and every now and then that seems to make good sense, sometimes especially on a Sunday.

Chris had plans with his father later in the afternoon and didn't think he could get away to fish, but when I finally took off, he'd spontaneously decided to follow me out in his own vehicle, which was already packed up and ready to go. It's packed up and ready to go all season long, so it didn't take him long to get ready. If I decided to fish until dark, he could leave when he needed to.

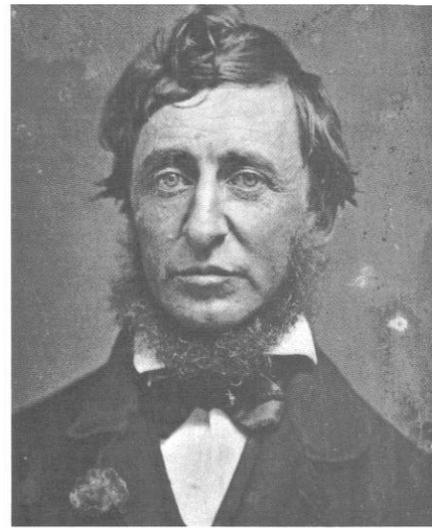
We arrived at a stretch of a little stream I'd only fished once earlier in the year. Chris had been to the same stretch only two or three times himself, and we both discovered we'd only fished it about the same number of times each for the past two or three years, so it wasn't exactly a spot we'd hammered. By the looks of the streambanks and terrain, it didn't look like anyone else had either. We geared up and walked downstream, and Chris decided to continue on down some distance before working his way back up. I decided to cut in at the fence and work my way back upstream from there, so we both had a reasonable section of water to fish alone. We were far enough apart to be completely out of sight from each other, which is a fair enough arrangement, assuming each party is happy enough with the water he or she gets to fish.

Even though it was just after the noon hour, the pasture and woods bordering the stream had that autumnal look which seems to give one the sensation that it's a bit later than it seems. Even at noon in September the sun is lower on the horizon than it is in June and July, and the shadows

are growing longer. The northeast Iowa light has a sharper quality to it in the fall, perhaps because the humidity in the air has gone with the summer season. Things look different, though it's difficult to say exactly why that might be. Sometimes when fishing a section of a stream that has stretches of still water, I'm startled by the reflections of the trees bordering the water, which appear as mirror images of those standing close by along the banks. The autumn leaves and changing colors make the apparition particularly beautiful and arresting, enough so to make one stop fishing for awhile and just take in the scenery.

After all, it actually *is* later than it seems.

When I was younger, autumn was my favorite season of the year by far, particularly after the first hard frosts of September and early October. I still love it dearly, though I don't quite look forward to the coming winter as much as I used to, and sometimes that rubs a bit of autumn's beauty away for me, be it ever so slightly. Over the years I've become quite enamored of spring, Henry David Thoreau's *modus operandi* in *Walden*, though that perplexed me endlessly when reading the book in my teens and twenties. Thoreau thought of spring as a time of rebirth and regeneration, which it certainly is, though fall and winter are important aspects of that same rebirth and regeneration. I used to think his long springtime description of sand oozing from snow banks along the railroad bed near his cabin was weird, but lately I find it much more interesting. It's still weird, but it's interestingly weird. Perhaps autumn represents that quiet, stately and dignified arena of our short lives on earth that looks more appealing when young, specifically because it seems as though it will be forever before we actually arrive there.



Among other things, I now think of spring as the time of the Hendricksons, and perhaps that is what ultimately turned my head from late fall and winter to April. Hell, that's when the fish *really* start biting.

* * * * *

I fished in bright sunlight for nearly an hour and a half and didn't get a single strike, covering a very few occasional rising trout without response. That rather confused me, as there were still a few grasshoppers in the fields bordering the stream and my hopper pattern had been fairly on the deadly side for a good two months. I approached a small bend pool and stood there watching it for awhile, not really knowing what to do. In the past week or so I'd seen a few Blue Wing Olives and *baetis* on northeast Iowa streams, but I hadn't seen any on the stream we were fishing that afternoon. I knew the hoppers weren't working, or at least they weren't working *yet*. With a

fairly stiff afternoon wind and dry conditions, it seemed chances were they weren't *going* to work, so I tied on a #16 Blue Wing pattern, more for the hell of it than anything else. Sometimes when I'm in doubt and decide to try a particular mayfly pattern, I'll tie on the largest reasonable (and seasonal) imitation available in my fly boxes under the assumption that trout have at least seen a *few* of them and might take one, even though the fly might not be hatching.

I stripped enough line from the reel to get the fly, leader and line in the air and shot it somewhere near the inside seam of the bend, not exactly noting where it landed. A fish rose immediately and I set up on what I'd guessed might be a strike at my fly, and I hooked the fish well. Of



course that was a piece of luck in itself. The fish was a good one and dove deeply into the larger rocks in the current, and I regretted having tied on a fly that had been bent the day before and straightened back up with a forceps. But I got lucky again and managed to land the trout in fairly short order. It turned out to be an eighteen inch brown.

I remember thinking that if I was only going to get one strike during the afternoon, I'd picked a good fish to get it on. I didn't have my camera with me and wondered where Chris was, as he had his camera along in his vest, but I couldn't see him anywhere

downstream, so I quickly released the fish. As soon as I stood up and looked downstream again, I saw his hat bobbing in the brush along the bank a hundred yards below me. A big fish with no picture is bad luck (or stupidity, depending on how you look at it), but that's the way it goes sometimes.

Chris had caught three or four nice trout downstream and had broken off in a big one with a streamer. I felt bad about reporting my catch after he'd just lost a good one, but he didn't seem too upset about it and listened good-heartedly. And then he had to leave to make his evening appointment, so I said my goodbyes and continued on upstream alone

In the course of the next hour or so, I got a total of eight more strikes and I landed each fish that struck, all with 5X tippet and the same bent fly I'd caught the eighteen inch trout on. The two smallest trout were twelve and thirteen inches respectively. Three trout were a good shade over sixteen inches, and another was just over seventeen. Directly after the first eighteen inch trout, I caught two more consecutive trout that were over fifteen inches but did not quite reach the sixteen inch marker on my rod.

After fishing an hour and a half with no strikes, I realized I had then landed nine trout on nine strikes, five of which were between sixteen and eighteen inches in length. The two fifteen inchers weren't exactly slouches, either.

On a northeast Iowa spring creek under a cloudless sky in the middle of the afternoon with no hatch, that might be described as *luck*.

Just after I'd released my ninth trout, I looked up and saw Chris walking towards me down the little hill from the road. I wondered what he was up to, as he didn't have his fishing gear with him. When he got to the bank, I said "You're not going to believe this."

He looked at me for a second and replied "Yeah, I will." After all, he's fished there a time or two himself.

Chris said his Dad had something come up during the day and couldn't make the evening fishing trip they'd planned, so he thought he'd come back down to find me. It was already four in the afternoon, but he wanted to go to another nearby river he'd recently had some luck in. We jumped in his vehicle and left mine behind in the dust.

And then we fished, nearly until dark, somewhere I'd never been before. We left in time to get back across the barb wire fence in the woods while we could still see, one of those really low-strung fences they set up for cows that are only a foot in height. You always have to watch out for those.



Be Vigilant!

*"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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