

A Glossary of Older Angling Terms

by Ken Cameron

Readers of old fishing books, such as Nobbes' "The Art of Trolling", often encounter unfamiliar terms. Since most of us do not keep the "Oxford Dictionary of the English Language" handy for such occasions, Ken Cameron has prepared this glossary. It should help us tell the "Utenfils" from the "Inftruments".



AS the technology and techniques of fishing have changed, so, too, has its language. Some of the words used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still clear; some are even still used. Others, however, have faded away or have so changed their meanings that reading them in their old contexts is confusing.

This list is not exhaustive, by far, but it may give some help in dealing with the more common terms found in the other books. As with most linguistic problems, reference to the *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* is suggested for words I have neglected, although the *O. E. D.* is occasionally stingy with language that has only a fishing usage.

Buzz. A fly "tied buzz" was often mentioned in nineteenth-century writing. In fly-fishing, it had one sense of *palmer-tied*, even of *palmer-tied* with two hackles back-to-back for greater flare. This meaning may have some connection with a fly that "buzzes" on the water, the flared hackle imitating frantic activity; however, the word was seemingly more appropriate to a *beetle*, as in the Marlow Buzz fly. Whether this meaning derives in turn from the buzzing sound of flying beetles, I am not sure; there are at least two other meanings of "buzz" that pre-date its angling sense, one meaning a *burr* or *teasel* (and hence a visual similarity to a heavily palmered fly), the other meaning a bushy or hairy wig (and hence the same visual identifi-

cation.)

Camlet. A glossy material, the thread spun from combed goat's fur; the material thus gave its name to flies using it for the body (e. g., Cotton's Camlet-Fly.) *O. E. D.* is incorrect in suggesting that Cotton meant "a fly with mottled wings," although his Camlet-fly did have such wings (see *Diapered wing*.) Marbury (*Favorite Flies*) is incorrect in suggesting that camlet was made from camel's hair. The material fell out of favor after the first part of the nineteenth century, but "camlet flies" as a type were probably flies with smooth, slim bodies like those now made of silk floss.

Cast. First, what would now be called a *leader* (that word being a Cockneyism until the middle of the nineteenth century.) Also *casting-line*, having the same meaning. (Scott, *Fishing in American Waters*, 1869, "The casting-line, rigged with stretcher and two drop flies . . .") Second, the leader with its flies, as "a cast of Coachman, Queen of the Waters and Professor." Third, the same as the modern sense, "a brace of trout would take them at almost every cast." (Norris, *American Angler's Book*, 1864.)

Castle Connell action. A mid-nineteenth-century term for a rod (especially salmon-rod) action from a comparatively heavy top and light mid, resulting in what Scott (1869) called "a kick in the butt [of the rod, not the angler] which nearly upsets a person when wading in a three-feet deep rapid water."

THE Compleat Troller, OR, THE ART OF TROLLING.

WITH
A Description of all the Utenfils,
Instruments, Tackling, and Mate-
rials requisite thereto: With Rules
and Directions how to use them.

AS ALSO
A Brief Account of most of the
Principal RIVERS in
ENGLAND.

By a Lover of the Sport.

— *Trahit sua quemq; voluptas.*

LONDON,
Printed by T. James for Tho. Helder at the
Angel in Little Britain, 1682.

Clearing-ring. A heavy metal ring, divided and hinged, so that it could be opened and clasped around the line when the hook was fouled underwater. In theory, the ring (attached to another line) could be allowed to slide down the line, where its weight would pull the hook free. "It may be well to observe here that in many cases this little apparatus should only be used with the oil of 'patience', so highly spoken of by Walton." (Brown, *Angler's Guide*, 1845.)



Clearing Ring

Coch-y-bonddu hackle. A cock's hackle with black center and red or reddish-brown edges; the feather gave its name to a popular nineteenth-century hackle fly. Often misspelled as Cocky-bandy, and so on.

Cock-tail. A fly with long, often elevated tail fibres; in Marbury (*Favorite Flies*, 1892) "owing to (the peculiar reversed and elevated position of the stylets) they are . . . known as cocktails and in Ireland as 'caughlans', meaning cock tails," but as Marbury suggests that the word ultimately derives from the way in which a male duck holds its tail, I suspect she is a bit off here. Hofland's Carshallton Cocktail (1839) and "Halcyon's" Cocktail (1861) both have tail fibres of white cock's hackle, so the material of the tails may explain the name. In that what Marbury called "drakes" (mayflies) were being imitated, however, the way in which the tails were set up may also be implied. *O. E. D.* accepts this last as the oldest sense of the word (as applied to horses with tails up). An imitation of the Cocktailed Beetle was *not* meant, nor was any sense of the modern drink of the same name.

Cad-bait, cod-bait. Caddis or stone-fly larvae, the two being generally confused before well into the nineteenth century. Brown (1845), in a footnote to Hofland, said "cad-baits . . . are not known amongst Anglers in this country . . ."

Cofflin. An imitation of the mayfly drake; also *coughlan* (see *Cock-tail*.) Also *coffin*, as in Sara J. McBride (1876), "The 'brown coffin' and its imago, the 'gray coffin' . . ."

Corked. Used of an early split-bamboo rod by Scott (1869), evidently meaning plugged at the ends and perhaps at intervals to provide support. It is barely possible that Scott used the word in the sense of caulked, i. e., with thin strips of hardwood between the strips or bamboo, but this seems contradicted by his saying that "the only part of the rod which is bamboo is the outside . . ."

Day fly. First, a general term for the may-fly; second, possibly a synonym for *journal fly* (which see).

Devil, also kill-devil. A rather general term for metal imitation spinning-minnows, usually loaded with many hooks. "Mister Blacker also has recently introduced a modification of the 'devil-bait', with the addition of a pair of Archimedian fins (i. e., to make it spin); this is said to spin well . . ." ("Stonehenge," *Encyclopedia of Rural Sports*, 1855.) The development of these early artificial lures apparently had to wait partly for the evolution of a reel from which they could be cast, although early baits were cast from a loop of



Kill-devil

line held in the free hand. They were first used mainly for pike, and seem not to have been popular much before the end of the eighteenth century.

Diapered wing. (Cotton, 1676.) "Diapered" referred to a fabric covered with a small pattern, as in the "diaper stuff" of Cotton's day (which was not used for what are now called diapers.) Specifically, in the case of Cotton's Camlet-fly, it referred to a wing made from mallard flank feather, hence one with an intricate, all-over, dark-light pattern ("double-grey," as Cotton put it.) Marbury (*Favorite Flies*) was incorrect in quoting Cotton as having written "diapered water-wings", which makes no sense; the correct words were "Diapered or water" wings, *water*, as in watered silk, having the same connotation of a pattern in fabric.

Dibbing, Dapping. Also *daping* and *dibbling*.

Double action (of a rod.) See *Castle Connell*.

Doweled ferrule. A ferrule with a tapered tenon below the male slide and a corresponding recess reamed out below the female cylinder. "I am well aware that fully ninety-five per cent. of the fly-rods in use are furnished with doweled ferrules." (Wells, *Fly-rods and Fly-tackle*, 1885.) Also *double ferrule* and *double brazing*. "I approve of double brazing, as this prevents trouble and danger in breaking the tongue in the socket . . ." (William Blacker, quoted in "Ephemera," *A Handbook of Angling*, 1847) although he seems here to be speaking specifically of a double ferrule with the dowel made of, or sheathed in brass, as opposed to one of wood. Also, apparently, *tongue fitting*: "Screw fittings are bad. They are far too heavy, and so get, deranged by hard work. Tongue fittings are the best . . ." The London rod maker Little, quoted in the same work.

Double guide. Two guides attached at the same point of the rod, one hundred and eighty degrees apart so that the line could be used on either side to minimize the chance of a set. (See, for example, Scott, *Fishing in American Waters*, 1869.) "It is a good plan to have our butt double-ringed, by which means we can turn and change our middle joint and top alternately, which keeps the rod straight from warping . . ." (An unnamed source, quoted in "Ephemera", *Handbook of Angling*, 1847.)



Double-guide

Double-tied. As used by Skues, this referred to dry flies tied with four wing slips, two to a side.

Dow-jack. Colloquial name for the early Heddon bass plugs (from Dowagiac.)

Drake. Mayfly. "All the Mayflies or Drakes." (Preston Jennings, *A Book of Trout Flies*, 1935.) *O. E. D.* derives this, on the basis of the usage in *Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (1496) from the male duck, apparently because of the feather used in the imitation; Marbury (*Favorite Flies*) discussed the fly "known under various names as 'May-flies', 'day-flies', but generally 'drakes' "but thought the word derived from "the peculiar reversed and elevated position of the stylets." (See *cofflin*.)

Drop, also droppers. As in modern usage, a fly on a short length of leader material (gut, horsehair) between the end of the leader and the attachment to the line.

Duffing. Dubbing.

Dun. A dull color, grayish; or the subimago stage of the mayflies.

Ferrule. In *The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (1496), a metal ring around the end of a rod's butt section, probably to prevent splitting; *O. E. D.* derives it from a word for *bracelet*. It had apparently taken on its angling meaning by the last quarter of the eighteenth century and was well established by the nineteenth. (See *doweled ferrule*.)

Flick. A vigorous false cast. "Some fishermen who use the dry-fly consider it is not properly dried without a little crack or "flick" taking place at the end of the spread; but this "flick", though doubtless very artistic, often whips off the fly." (Cholomondeley-Pennell, *The Modern Practical Angler*, 1870.)

Foot line, or foot-length. "The extreme portion of the line," ("Stonehenge", *Encyclopedia of Rural Sports*, 1855.) The leader.

Gentle. Maggot.

Gimp. Silk wound with wire for protection from the teeth of fish like pike.

Gorge hook. A weighted hook, usually double or triple, its shaft hidden by the body of a minnow bait. Normally for pike-fishing, they would be swallowed (gorged) with the dead minnow.



Greased-line fishing. Fishing for salmon with a floating (i. e., greased silk) line and sparsely-tied (low water) flies. (See *Greased Line fishing for Salmon*, "Jock Scott", n. d.)

Gut. Silkworm leader material, made by taking the gut sack before silk is spun and pulling it into a slender strand. Gut came into use early in the eighteenth century and was the principal leader material from the first third of the nineteenth until World War II.

Hand fly. The dropper nearest the rod and, therefore, the hand.

Hook sizes. Before the relative standardization of the last seventy or eighty years, hook designations varied from maker to maker. According to J. S. Heddon, "... hooks (of the early nineteenth century) were probably measured by the width of their gape and not their shank length ... early nineteenth century hooks were usually much finer in the wire than their modern counterparts." ("An Attempt to Reproduce Early Nineteenth Century Fly Dressings.") He quotes Stewart (*Practical Angler*, 1857), "Bartlet (Bartleet) numbers his hooks from 1½, the largest size, to 17, the smallest. Addlington's (Addlington's, of Kendal) numbers are from the largest trout size to 00, the smallest. "Kirkbride (*Northern Angler*, 1842) said, "In Carlisle, we ... speak of large salmon, middle, and small salmon hooks; large gilse (sic) middle and small gilse hooks; large worm, middle and small worm hooks; large cod-bait, middle and small cod-bait hooks; large, middle, and small fly; and midge hooks. We begin at the large worm-size, which we call No. 1, and number the small hooks downwards to No. 12, or small midge hooks.

"In Kendal, the hooks are numbered, from the smallest upwards to No. 15 — our large salmon hook. In London, they number from our large gilse hook, downwards, to No. 14, which is our No. 12." This latter Kendal scale is directly contrary to the Kendal scale quoted by Stewart in 1857, but it corresponds to what Heddon calls the "New Scale" and which he dates from about 1830; in an illustration of 1842, it shows hooks running from the smallest size, 00, to 10, the largest.

A Courtney Williams (*Trout Flies*, 1932) set up the following comparisons of several scales:

Redditch or

"Old" scale: 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

Pennell or

"New" scale: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 00 000 0000

Kendal scale: 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 00 000

"Model per-

fect" scale: 4 5 7 8 10 13 14 15 16 18 19 20 21

These, however, are more or less modern sizes and are for eyed hooks, which typically have standard shank lengths (Heddon's point is well taken that with an eyeless hook, the fly-tier could cut back the shank to the desired length, so that gape was the determinant of fly size.)

The plate of hooks shown in Brown's *Angler's Guide* (1845) shows yet another style, this time the Limerick. The trout hooks are numbered from 12, the smallest, to 1, the largest; the 12 is about a modern 16, the 7 about a modern 10, and the 1 about a modern 4.

Because of the many scales of hooks, all instructions for fly-dressing in older books must be read very carefully, and where the style or manufacturer of hook cannot be determined, it is often impossible to find the correct size of fly. By and large, what analysis of old hook size ranges suggests is that many flies before 1850 were smaller than we have often believed.

Joint. The section of a rod — butt joint, middle joint, top joint.

Journal fly. "A fly for general use," (Norris, 1864) specifically the Red Hackle as recommended by Conroy.

Leger tackle. Bottom-fishing tackle, with the leader or ground line run through the hole in a tubular sinker so that a nibbling fish would not feel any resistance; what is now called a "fish-finder rig" in the United States. (Sometimes used with a trimmer, which see.)

Loop. In conjunction with a rod, a piece of material (usually a thong) whipped on the tip for the line to pass through; used with a rod with no reel or guides.

Loose rings. Metal rings held to the rod by a thin strip of metal, usually brass, which was in turn held on the rod by turns of thread. The ring would ride in a U-shaped bend in the strip, allowing it to fall flat against the rod when no line was set up. Also known as *falling rings* or *rings and keepers*. They gave way to the snake guide after c. 1895, probably because they were more difficult to manufacture and wind on with thread than because of any real advantage for the average fisherman of the day. Loose rings do not allow as much line to be shot as snake guides, but few anglers would have worried about the distinction then.

Mohair. Uncombed goat's hair, a fuzzy material with a natural sheen. It was probably the most popular of fly body materials for commercial tiers between c. 1850 and the widespread introductions of the dry fly. It takes brilliant colors very well and is an easy dubbing material to use.

Needle-point hooks. Barbless hooks.

Ooping. Attaching gut to a hook with winds of thread. (Rennie, *Alphabet of Angling*, 1833.) More commonly *arming*, less so *whipping*.

Nottingham reel. In England, a reel with a freely-revolving wooden spool on a simple metal frame. "... four inches in diameter, and one disc revolving on a spindle with a hardened steel point. The barrel should be thick, to wind up quickly, and as being easier to start." (Hopkins, *Fishing Experiences of Half a Century*, 1893.) Called also by Hopkins the *fast reel*. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the best English reel for *spinning* (which see) and the one whose popularity probably convinced Henshall that the English had never had a multiplying casting reel.

Oswego bass. The Small-mouthed bass. A correspondent in Brown's *American Angler's Guide* (1845) distinguished between Oswego and black bass (largemouth and small-mouth).

Paternoster tackle. Bottom-fishing tackle with several hooks on snells above a sinker, the name coming either from a supposed resemblance to a rosary or from the cruciform pattern of the snells and the leader.

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Older Angling Terms (continued from page 9)

Point and point-fly, the fly at the end of the leader farthest from the rod.

Pyrn, a Scottish form of reel.

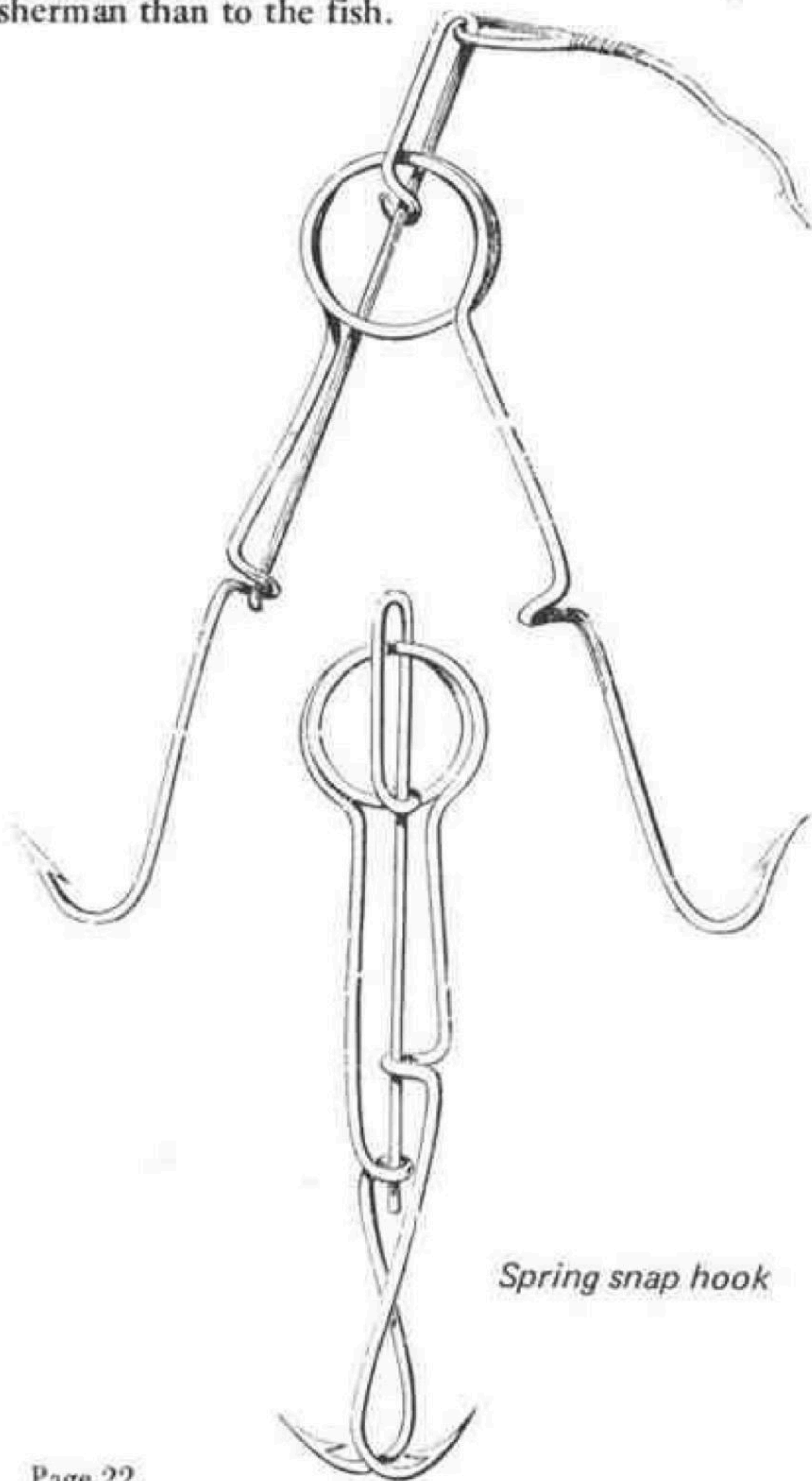
Reverse-tied. The wings of a fly that have been first tied in with the butts pointing toward the bend of the hook, and then pulled into position and tied again.

Rooster's regret. The name given to the earliest Maine feather streamer flies (c. 1905.) All white or red and white at first, they were tied with whole saddle hackles for wings, with wool or chenille bodies on regular-shank hooks. The idea of using whole hackles as wings was not at all new, however.

Saibling. Small sea trout; also *hirling*.

Salmon trout. A somewhat vague term used for red-fleshed trout, salmon and sea-trout. In the Northeast until the Civil War, the term was used most commonly for lake trout.

Snap hook. The static snap hook was made of several hooks whipped to the same snell, often two back-to-back and one or more above them; at least one hook would go into the bait (usually a minnow) and the others would be exposed. Used principally for pike fishing, the arrangement supposedly allowed the fisherman to strike (snap) at the first bite, in the belief that one hook or the other would catch in the fish. (To be compared with a *gorge hook*, which see.) The *spring snap hook* was spring-loaded. The idea was that the fish would run with the bait, "and in so doing he pulls the hooks down, and thus springs them, securing him more safely than could be done with a common hook." (Brown, *American Angler's Guide*, 1845.) The device may have been more dangerous to the fisherman than to the fish.



Spring snap hook

Snell. A length of leader attached to a hook, usually with a loop at the other end for attachment to the line.

Snood. A snell.

Spinning. In one sense, a method of fishing a dead minnow in order to make it spin. "Walton seems to have known nothing of the *swivel*, so necessary to us in spinning the bait." (Bethune, n. to *The Complete Angler*, 1847.) In another, and perhaps later sense, the whole technique of fishing with tackle like the *Nottingham reel* (which see) and the dead minnow or, more likely, such artificials as *Devons* and *devils* (which see) was meant. Cholmondeley-Pennell was somewhere between these meanings (*Modern Practical Angler*, 1870) in saying that "The only mode of snap-fishing with the dead-bait worth consideration is 'Spinning' — a branch of trolling . . ." By the nineties, Hopkins (*Fishing Experiences*) was talking of casting ninety feet with *spinning tackle* (from the reel). It evolved into its modern sense after the turn of the century and the development of the first fixed-spool reels.

Splice. Overlapping bevels of two adjacent rod joints, wrapped with thread; a generally earlier method of joining rod joints than the ferrule, although it persisted in Great Britain well into the twentieth century and can still occasionally be seen.

Spoon bait, spoon hook. "It is what is called a *spoon*, from its original resemblance to the bowl of a *table-spoon*. It is made about the length of a tablespoon, though not so wide in the middle, nor more curved than necessary to give it play in the water. The spoon is of silver color or brass, the latter the best, though some use the one side silver and the other brass . . . At the smaller end of the spoon two large hooks, diverging from each other, are soldered or riveted on . . . The line is held in *band* . . . It is, however, a most barbarous mode of fishing . . ." (Bethune, n. to *The Complete Angler*, 1847.)

Spread. False-casting. (See Cholmondeley-Pennell, 1870.)

Stretcher (fly). The *point fly*, the farthest from the rod and at the end of the leader.

Tail fly. The same as *stretcher* or *point fly*.

Thumb-stall. A cover for the thumb, to be worn for use as a drag on the reel, "knitted from heavy double and twisted woolen yarn, to be worn on each thumb, to prevent the friction of the line in checking the too swift revolving of the reel." (Scott, *Fishing in American Waters*, 1869.)

Top. The upper section of a rod; what is now called the tip.

Trimmer. Also *bank-trimmer*; a wooden reel not attached to a rod and either allowed to float, with the bait below it, or fastened with a stake to the bank somewhat like a set-line. Used especially for pike, the floating *trimmer* would defeat the fish much as the float does in modern jug-fishing, and would also serve as its own marker. "Two sorts of trimmer are described by Mr. Daniel (Daniel's *Rural Sports*, 1801 and after) — the first is made of flat cork, or light wood, painted, seven or eight inches in diameter, circular in shape, with a groove in the edge deep enough to receive fine whipcord or silk line twelve yards long . . . The second kind instead of being circular is made in the form of a wedge; and the line in place of being coiled round the edge, is wound in the form of a cross over the float . . ." ("Stonehenge", *Encyclopedia of Rural Sports*, 1855.)

Troll, trolling. Also *trailing*, although individual writers may have used the words in slightly different senses. Cholmondeley-Pennell uses it to mean simply "pike-fishing" on one occasion; in Nobbes' *The Complete Troller* (1682, but much reprinted throughout the eighteenth century) the sense is more that of bank-walking with a minnow bait. By

the time of Bethune's *Complete Angler* (1847) the word was established in America with its modern sense of pulling of bait behind a moving boat. *O. E. D.* suggests that all fishing senses of the word derive from an archaic use of "troll" to mean *reel*; i. e., it was (probably seventeenth century) any bait-fishing with a reel, ("A Trowling Rod, or a Trowler, hath a ring at the end of the Rod for the line to run through when it runs off a Reeel." Holme, 1688, cited in *O. E. D.*) but there may have been a cross-over from "trawl" (to pull a net behind a moving boat.) There may have been some influence from a sixteenth and seventeenth century sense of *troll*, to stroll or to walk around. From Nobbes onward, and perhaps even before him, it was applied to pike-fishing, and so Cholmondeley-Pennell's late use of it is justified. With much chronological overlap, then, the word has variously been used to mean (seventeenth century) "to fish with a reel", and then, by extension, "to cast a bait from the bank and cause it to move;" to trawl (eighteenth century, but only occasional); to fish for pike with a moving bait (seventeenth through nineteenth); to pull a lure or bait behind a boat (possibly late eighteenth, certainly nineteenth); and (second half of nineteenth) an overlap with *spinning* (which see.) *Trail*, largely an Americanism, meant to pull a bait or lure behind a boat.



Trolling

Twist. Ribbing, on a fly — "gold and red twist, black hackle legs, and wings from the heron's wing." (Brown, *Angler's Guide*, 1847.)

Vandyked. With scalloped edges (from the appearance of seventeenth century lace), hence, of a ferrule, with serrated ends. "It would be a good plan if the ends of the ferrules of salmon-rods were vandyked . . . as I think it would prevent the wood from snapping off short at the joint." (an anonymous correspondent in "Ephemeris's" *Handbook of Angling*, London, 1847.)

Walking-stick rod. A rod whose upper sections could be contained in a hollow butt, partly for convenience and partly for secretiveness, the whole no longer than a walking-stick. Something of the sort is recommended in *The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (1496) in a crude form. J. Check's catalog for 1839 lists several walking stick rods including "a variety that have not the least appearance of a Fishing-Rod" (*Great Fishing Tackle Catalogs of the Golden Age*.) Brown (*American Angler's Guide*, 1845) said, "The walking-cane rod, if well made, is also a very useful article for traveling or where the Angler does not wish his business or profession known." The use of such an article probably reflects that period when men of probity and substance — especially clergymen — were censured for indulging in such

frivolity as fishing. The walking-stick rod seems to have disappeared with this prejudice after the middle of the nineteenth century.



The Walking-stick rod — see also the illustration on page 15.

Whip. First, the act of attaching gut to a hook (see *ooping*), or any similar action (i. e., attaching part of a fly to the hook, or winding a spliced joint, etc.); *second*, the act of casting, "to whip the water", especially with a fly; *third*, the assembled leader and flies, "What shall my whip be? The water is full, I'll try a red hackle, its tail tipped with gold tinsel; for my dropper, I'll put on a good sized coachman with lead-colored wings . . ." (Norris, *American Angler's Book*, 1864.)

Whip taper. Said of a fly rod before the variations and scientific calculations of taper were ever thought of: " . . . uniform from the end of the first or butt joint to the end of the top . . . a perfectly *whip taper*." (Brown, *American Angler's Book*, 1845.)

Whisks. Tail fibres on a fly.

Winch. Reel.

Ken Cameron, a former Registrar of The Museum of American Fly Fishing, is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His article on Sara McBride appeared in Volume 5 Number 2. Ken is the author of several novels, a college theatre textbook, and numerous plays and articles. He often serves as a technical advisor to the Museum in matters of antique tackle identification.